Discernment Fosters Concentration

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The standard formula for the training is that virtue fosters concentration, and concentration fosters discernment. But the Buddha also points out that discernment comes back and it cleanses your concentration and your virtue. This is a theme that was picked up in the forest tradition, that each part of the body of the triple training helps the other two parts, which means that you don’t have to wait until your virtue is pure before you do concentration. It also means you don’t do concentration without discernment. You use what discernment you have in order to make the concentration right. Or in Ajahn Fung’s phrase, his interpretation of the words “samma” and “right concentration” is “just right,” because it is possible to get the mind still, but without any alertness, any discernment. And that’s not good. Sometimes your energy is too low. Sometimes your energy is too frenetic. You’ve got to learn how to bring things into balance. And that requires your discernment. Figure out what the problem is. If you know you have a tendency to drift off in the concentration, right from the very beginning you have to breathe in a way that’s energizing. This is why Ajahn Lee recommends that you start out with some good long, deep, in-and-out breaths. Raise the level of energy in your body. Then gradually let things calm down. But as they calm down, you’ve still got work to do. When there’s a sense of ease, you think of it going to different parts of the body. You make a survey, an active survey, of how things are going, how things can be connected. So when the mind finally does settle down, it has a sense of solidity to it. Its alertness is all around. If your energy level tends to be too high, that’s when you start out with calming breathing. In a case like that, you don’t do too much thinking. Just pose the question in your mind, “What kind of breathing would feel good now?” And let the body respond. That’s one way of dealing with too much energy. The other way is, as long as the mind is inclined to think, think first about a theme that gives rise to a sense of sanghvega. You can think about the different parts of the body. You can think about how inconstant things are. Anything that gives rise to a sense that the world outside is not that interesting. Your ordinary thoughts are not that interesting. And the mind will be more and more inclined to want to calm down. So you have to use your discernment to figure out what’s the point of balance and where you’re out of balance. It requires those two qualities that the Buddha recommended or said that he looked for in any student. That is, you be observant and that you be truthful. And “observant” here is not just observant in things in general. Specifically, it’s observant about your own actions and the results you’re getting from them. Think about those instructions he gave to Rahula. You look at your intentions before you act. You look at your action while you’re doing it to see what the results are. You look at your intentions first to see what results you anticipate, and then you look at the results that are actually coming out while you act, and then you look at the results that come out after the action is done. This is where you really have to be truthful. Because the mind does have a tendency to hide things from itself. As the jhanli said, if you see results but without knowing the actions they came from, that’s not discernment. Or if you see actions but you don’t know what results you’re getting, that’s not discernment either. You have to see the connection. When you see the connection, then you can learn from it and use that knowledge. For example, as the mind settles down and you’ve been doing your thinking, adjusting in the breath, there will come a point when you can put the thinking and adjusting down. Then you have to learn how to read the needs of the mind as they arise. And the needs of the body to know when that point is. Because sometimes if you put them down too quickly, the mind drifts off. If you hold onto them too long, the mind doesn’t get the full measure of rest that it needs. So remember that you have to use your discernment around your concentration to protect it. And then to move it to deeper levels. This is called discernment fostering concentration. Ideally, you want the two to be working together. So if you notice you have certain tendencies in your concentration that get it out of balance, take note of that fact. And then look for the causes. And look first for the causes in what you’re doing. If you’re focused on the breath and everything seems tense or tight in the body, what do you do subconsciously when you tell yourself you’re going to focus on the breath? Have you ever caught yourself? As you go from that moment where you’re not focused on the breath to you say, “Okay, focus on the breath,” what happens to the breath? Does your attention change the breath? Does it force it? See if you can sidle up to the breath. Think about something you find calming, some dharma theme you find calming, and then try to notice, when you’re thinking about that theme and things calm down, what’s the breath like? Can you give it your full attention and maintain that same quality of ease? This is why Chan Phuong added to the Buddha’s recommendations for a student being truthful and observant. He would say, “And also someone who can use his ingenuity or her ingenuity.” That’s the element of discernment that’s often glossed over, especially in vipassana techniques, which tell you simply, “Well, just do this, do this, do this, and don’t ask any questions and keep at it. We’re going to squeeze enlightenment out of you.” But the problem with foolproof methods is you can still be a fool. And do the method. The method the Buddha recommends is one where you notice what’s going on, ask questions. Insight comes from exploring, as Ajahn Mahaprabhu would say, asking questions, probing. We all know that the Buddha teaches that you want to see into the principles of inconstancy, stress, and not-self. But the forester Ajahn says, “To see those things clearly, you have to fight them.” You get the mind into concentration, you’re getting your mind more constant. Where there was a sense of dis-ease in the body, you create a sense of ease. And you get things more into your control. And you keep pushing it in that direction until you find you reach the point where things push back. You say, “Oh, this is the point that the Buddha’s talking about.” This theme comes up again and again in the forest masters. That there’s a side to things that is both inconstant, there’s another side that’s constant, there’s a side that’s stressful and a side that’s easeful, there’s a side that is not-self, and there’s a side that is something you’ve got under your control. Ultimately, you’re going to let go of both sides. But you can’t really make the discernment your own until you push, probe, ask questions. And that process begins with the concentration. We tend to think of concentration being the mind without any thoughts. But there, in the first jhana, you’ve got direct thought and evaluation. In the Buddha’s instructions on how to move the mind from one level of concentration to another where there’s less disturbance, you have to ask questions. In other words, you get the mind into concentration, then you step back a bit and evaluate it. Then, as you get used to evaluating what you’re doing, when you start asking the questions about inconstancy, stress, and not-self, you’re focused at the right spot. You’re looking at your intentions. You’re looking at the question of what’s worth doing. And then you use those three perceptions to ask yourself, “Which of my actions give better results, more long-term results?” The concentration and the discernment work together so that the insights, when they come, will also be just right.

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