Don’t Neglect Discernment (outdoors)

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We’re sometimes told that we should practice without desire. But the Buddha wasn’t one of the people who tells us that. As he says, every phenomenon that we experience is rooted in desire, whether it’s skillful or unskillful. The question is how to figure out which desires are skillful. And to encourage those, which desires are unskillful, those are the ones we abandon. When we look at the nature of desire, desires can go in all directions. Some of them can point forward, some of them point backwards, some to the right, some to the left. We have to figure out some way of getting some order into our desires so that the really important desires don’t get deflected by things that are less important. This is why the Buddha teaches that an important principle in the practice is to set a determination. In English we say, “Make a vow.” “I want to accomplish this.” For instance, while you’re sitting here meditating, you should be determined to get the mind still. Anything else that comes up right now, you’ve got to let go. It’s not in line with your original determination. It’s only when you have determination like that that you can get some order and set your priorities as to what’s important and what’s not important so that your good desires have a chance to succeed. Otherwise, every desire that comes up is like a weed. You’re trying to plant a crop, but then you’ve got weeds growing in those places as well. The weeds are going to chunk out the crop. So you’ve got to figure out which of the plants you really want and all the other plants you’ve got to get rid of. The fact that you see this necessity, that’s the beginning of discernment. Of course, the Buddha’s definition of what starts discernment is that question, “What will lead to my long-term welfare and happiness?” The wisdom and discernment there lies, one, in realizing that the happiness is going to come from your actions. It follows the principle of cause and effect, which means, of course, you’ve got to focus on the causes. As for the effects, the wisdom lies in realizing that some kinds of happiness are more worthwhile than others. The ones that last longer are more worthwhile than others. The ones that give you only a short happiness but then are followed by a lot of pain. So long-term is possible, and it’s better than short-term. This is the beginning of discernment. As the Buddha said, discernment is one of the things that’s involved in every determination. As he expresses it, he says, “You should not neglect discernment. You should safeguard the truth. You should be committed to renunciation or relinquishment, and you should train only for calm.” Those are the four instructions for every determination. Not neglecting discernment means that you always stick with that perspective that you want long-term, in terms of happiness. When you’re planning what to do, ask yourself, “What would be the best long-term consequences? What would be the best long-term consequences?” Always make sure that that’s part of the calculation. One of the reasons why we practice concentration is to put the mind in the right mood so it’s willing to wait for the long-term sometimes, if it requires waiting, by feeding the mind with a sense of goodwill, feeding the mind with a sense of well-being from the breath. That’s what gives you the strength in order to not be so hungry for quick pleasures. Once your discernment is firmly in place, seeing what’s worthwhile comes setting as a goal, and seeing what you have to do in order to reach that goal, then you focus on the causes. It’s going to involve three other qualities of a determination, safeguarding the truth, and protecting the path. Once you’ve made up your mind, you’re going to stick with a particular goal. Then you are true to that goal. You don’t abandon it. After all, you remind yourself that you chose that goal because you want true happiness. It’s a sign that you really love yourself. This is a kind of self-love that the Buddha doesn’t criticize. In fact, he actually praises it as one of the things that protects you on the path. So if you suddenly find yourself wanting to do something else that goes against that goal, you have to ask yourself, “Do you really love yourself? Do you really want happiness?” You’ve got to be true to your determination if it’s going to become true. It’s one of those things that’s true because you make it true. It’s not going to happen on its own. I was listening to someone the other day saying that when we practice, we have to tell ourselves, “We’re not doing the practice,” because if we have the idea that we’re doing the practice, that’s wrong view. You use your sense of self in a skillful way and it actually becomes part of the practice, part of your motivation. The other meaning of maintaining or safeguarding the truth is that you learn not to lie to yourself. Because when you set a goal, there’ll be voices in the mind that will whisper to you and say, “Let’s forget about the goal for right now, just for a little bit.” Just once, it doesn’t matter. That’s the mind lying to itself when it says, “It doesn’t matter.” It does matter. Because you get one moment that doesn’t matter, then there’ll be two, then there’ll be four, then there’ll be sixteen, then two hundred fifty-six. It keeps growing like that. All of a sudden, all your moments belong to the mind that doesn’t want to follow the determination. So you have to learn how to outwit those voices. Another way they come at you is, suppose you’ve made up your mind you’re going to be giving up something, like cigarettes or alcohol or something like that, and it comes in with a very strong desire to go back to your old habits. And there’ll be a voice in the mind that says, “Well, you know you’re going to give in in a few minutes anyhow, so why don’t you give in now and make it easier for both of us?” Again, the mind is lying to you. What you have to say is, “I don’t know about a few minutes from now, but what I do is right now I’m not going to give in.” And as long as you maintain “right now,” you can be more stubborn than your defilements and eventually win out over them. So make sure you don’t listen to the lies when they say, “It doesn’t matter” when you wander off the path a little bit. Because then you start wandering off more and more and more until there’s no path at all. The third quality, being committed to relinquishment, is when you make up your mind you want something very much, you have to realize there are going to be other things that you have to say no to. It’s like planting an orchard. You’ve got some mango trees, but then you also like eucalyptus trees. But then you realize if you plant eucalyptus trees in among the mangoes, it’s going to kill the mangoes. So you have to forget about the eucalyptus trees. Focus on keeping the mangoes healthy. Because it’s important that you realize when you’re relinquishing something, it’s not simply you’re giving up and being deprived. You’re making a trade. And if you’re wise, you make a trade up. The mangoes are worth a lot more than eucalyptus. They can give fruit; they give better shade. You can’t set fire to them so easily. So focus on the good things that you get from your determination and be willing to put aside the things that are of less value that you’re going to have to give up. This connects with the fourth quality, which is to train only for calm. Sometimes it’s all too easy to get worked up about the fact that this is a long path and there’s a lot of work that has to be done and a lot of things have to be given up. And you think in those terms and it weighs the mind down. You’re training the mind in disturbance. You’re not training it in calm. So you have to learn how to talk to yourself. That’s what the Buddha calls exerting a fabrication. In this case, it’s verbal fabrication, the way you talk to yourself, direct a thought and evaluation. Remind yourself of all the good things that come when you stick with your determination and how the things that you’re giving up are not really worth getting worked up about at all. When I came back from Thailand, people would ask me, “What was the hardest thing about being over there?” And I would think and think and think and couldn’t think of anything. And then I realized the fact that I couldn’t think of anything as being especially hard was probably one of the reasons why I found it easy to stay there. I mean, there were hardships. I had to do without a lot of things. But I was so much more interested in the skills I was learning in the meditation and the training that I was getting. I saw that it was a good training, that I never had time to sit down and think about what was the hardest thing to bear. When you’re not focusing on what’s hard to bear, it’s a lot easier to hold up with things. Focus on the things that are good about what you’re doing, the positive things that you’re learning about, as you stick with your determination. That’s what allows you to see it through. Now, you notice that these last three qualities—safeguarding the truth, being committed to relinquishment, and training for calm—depend on not neglecting discernment. And not neglecting discernment means, one, we focus on causes to get the effects we want, and two, we look for long-term results in terms of the effects we want. That’s always part of the equation. When there’s a question of what to do, ask yourself, “Well, what will give the best long-term results?” And always stick with whatever seems right. It’s all too easy to know that this will give good long-term results, but I’d rather do something else. So sometimes you stick with the long-term results, and sometimes you stick with the other side. And things don’t really develop. Your discernment doesn’t develop. But if you stick with what you see, it’s the best thing you can think of to do in terms of long-term good results. Then when bad results come, you say, “Okay, I’ve got to work more on my discernment. There was something there that I didn’t understand.” It’s always in pushing your discernment this way that your discernment grows. By being true to your discernment, that’s how your discernment grows. So think of these four qualities—discernment, truth, relinquishment, calm—as helping one another. They bring some order to your desires, so that the really skillful desires have a chance to grow and become powerful. They take charge in your mind. As John Lee used to say, “Don’t look down on your desires, because it’s your desire that brings you here to practice and sees you through to the end.” It’s simply a matter of training it well with these four qualities. So each time you sit down to practice, make a determination. You’re here to train the mind in calm. And you’re going to use your discernment and your truth and your ability to relinquish things. And grow stronger and stronger.

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