Metacognition

March 3, 2022

The text said that the first factor in the no-bladeful path that the Buddha discovered was right concentration. This was after his time of austerities. If he continued with the austerities, he was going to die without having attained anything. So he pulled back. He asked himself, “Was there another possible path?” Then he remembered the text. Last time, when he was a child, he’d entered into the first jhana spontaneously. Something inside him said, “Could this be the path?” And something else said, “Yes.” But he realized he was too weak. After all, his austerities had got the mind into that kind of concentration. So he went back to eating again, eating real food. But there was another step as well. There’s another passage where he says that before he got the mind into right concentration, he learned to step out of his thoughts. This is an important skill in getting the mind to settle down. If you can’t step out of your thoughts, you just plow into them, jump into them, and they’ll take you wherever they’re going to go. So the skill of stepping out of his thoughts was to divide his thoughts into two types. Those that were unskillful, imbued with sensuality, ill-will, harmfulness. And those that were more skillful, imbued with renunciation, non-ill-will, harmlessness. Any thoughts that belonged to the first group, he would beat them back, he said, the same way that a cowherd would beat back the cattle that he was looking after during the rainy season to make sure they didn’t get into the rice fields of his neighbors. That was because he saw that they came from a bad place and would lead to a bad place. In other words, they came from unskillful qualities in the mind, and they would bend the mind in the wrong direction, incline you to do something unskillful. Whereas thoughts in the second group, he allowed them free range. He could think those thoughts as much as he liked, until the mind was tired, and then it was ready to settle down. It was ready to settle down not only because it was tired of thinking, but also because he developed that skill of stepping back from his thoughts. In psychology nowadays they call it metacognition, metta with one t. There’s a part of the mind that observes another part of the mind. So before you plow into a thought, you ask yourself, “Where is this going to lead me?” And you learn how to hold yourself back from thoughts that would lead you to a bad place. You see your thoughts not in terms of what you like to think about or don’t like to think about, but in terms of cause and effect. What are the causes of this thought? What are the effects of the thought? And you judge it on those terms. This is creating a new rule of law in the mind, and it’s good to have that in place. Some people find they can get their mind into concentration pretty easily because they’ve had experience doing this. Other people need more experience in doing this first before they can get into concentration. In the Canon there’s a passage where the Buddha talks about people trying to understand the body in and of itself, say, with their breath. And they suffer from what he calls a “fever in the body” or a “fever in the mind.” In other words, it’s just not comfortable being there. So he says, “Incline the mind to an inspiring theme.” This could be recollection of the Buddha, recollection of the Dhamma, the Sangha. Nowadays, recollection of the Buddha has been reduced to just repeating the word “Buddho, Buddho.” But you can do it in the old-fashioned way. Think about the qualities of the Buddha in general terms. His discernment, his purity, his compassion. In more specific terms, in those passages that we chant, “A knower of the world, someone consummate in knowledge and conduct.” The same with the Dhamma. You can think about the Dhamma being well-taught, pertinent to what’s going on in your life right now. Any of the adjectives that are there in that chant or the Sangha is behaved well, practiced well, practiced straightforwardly, deserving of homage. Meaning that you want to listen carefully to what they have to say. Take it to heart. You can recollect the Devas, recollect your generosity, recollect your virtue. There are times when you’ve been generous simply out of the goodness of your heart, not because it was somebody’s birthday or because it was Christmas or whatever. You simply felt like giving a gift and found some joy in giving the gift or the virtue, realizing there were times when you could have done something that would take an unfair advantage of somebody else, but you didn’t. You could have broken the precepts and perhaps gotten away with it, but you didn’t. As for recollecting the Devas, that may seem strange. You don’t even know any Devas. But the Buddha says it means recollecting the qualities that lead people to be reborn as Devas, and you look at yourself and you realize you have those qualities too. Conviction, virtue, generosity, discernment, learning. So you can think about these thoughts as much as you like. Give the mind free range to think about these topics as a way of lifting up the mind, gladdening the mind. Lifting the mind comes in the description of right effort, cittambhaganati. It’s translated as “upholding one’s intent,” but it also means lifting up the mind. Think of that in two ways. One, lifting your spirits, getting you in a better mood. But also lifting your awareness up above the mind’s normal activity. So you can look down on it. Think of that image of the man getting up in a tower, looking down on the people below. In the same way, one part of your mind is looking at another part of the mind from above, seeing that there are thoughts coming in, but you’re not getting into them, you’re stepping aside from them, stepping above them, and watching them. Where do they come from? Where do they go? If they come from a bad place, lead to a bad place, then do your best to put a stop to them. Think thoughts that are more conducive to getting the mind to settle down. In the forest tradition, this principle is called “using discernment to foster concentration.” We talk about it in a couple of his books. In the Thai tradition, this is one of the distinctive features of the forest tradition. Instead of saying, “Well, first you’ve got to get your virtue pure, and then you can think about concentration, and then when your concentration is pure, you think about discernment.” And John Mun saw from very early on that you have to use your discernment in order to get your virtue pure and your concentration pure. Some people whose mind simply will not settle down until they’ve thought things through. You can look in the book Frames of Reverence, John Lee’s Explanation of the Establishings of Mindfulness, and there he lists, before he even talks about getting the mind into concentration, using the breath. He talks about contemplating the three characteristics, contemplating the foulness of the body, contemplating the thoughts in the body. In other words, thoughts that give rise to a sense of sanghvega. You can either use your thinking to give rise to thoughts that give rise to joy, so the mind will have a good mood for settling down, or sanghvega, so that when you’re trying to get the mind to settle down and other thoughts come in, you can ask yourself, “Where would those thoughts lead me?” Most of them would lead back into the world. And you’ve already thought about the world in the way that gives rise to sanghvega. It makes it easier to say no. In John Mahaprabhu’s images of a tree growing in a forest, if the tree were growing on its own out in the middle of a meadow and you wanted to cut it down, you wouldn’t have to think too much about how to cut it down. You’d just cut it and it would fall. But if it’s entangled with other trees, it’s got lots of branches entangled with the branches of other trees, you’ve really got to think which branches you’re going to cut off first before you can cut the tree. And even then, you have to think about, “Well, which direction can the tree go?” If you cut it and it just falls against other trees, you can’t use it. You’ve got to figure out how to get it to fall so that it falls down on the ground. That requires discernment. In the same way, some people have to really think things through a little bit. They develop this habit of metacognition, stepping up or stepping to the side of their thoughts, and learning how to exercise some right effort with regard to those thoughts. That way you develop the skills that you’re going to need for mindfulness and concentration. You come to the concentration prepared. The same sort of thing is going to happen as the mind settles down with the breath. There’ll be thoughts about the breath and there’ll be thoughts about something else. You have to be quick to recognize when thoughts about something else are coming in, welling up from within the mind, ready to show themselves, ready to take you someplace else. You have to be prepared. So you have this habit of lifting the mind in both senses, lifting it above its thoughts, and also lifting its spirits, thinking about things and putting it in a good mood. It’s strange sometimes, thoughts about the foulness of the body, the elements of the body, the three characteristics. Those can put the mind in a good mood, even though they’re designed to give rise to sanghviga, a better sense of being able to free yourself from your normal fascination with these things. That can be a source of joy as well. As the Buddha says in many places in the Canon, you start with conviction in the Buddha’s teachings and then you find some joy. Oftentimes those lists of what gives rise to what don’t give many explanations, but in a sense you have some conviction in the Buddha’s awakening. Think about that. Think about his dhamma, about the Sangha. Think about the perspective it gives you on the world, liberating you from a lot of delusion. And those thoughts can give rise to joy. Based on that joy, the mind can settle down.

<https://www.dhammatalks.org/Archive/y2022/220303_Metacognition.mp3>