Intelligence of the Heart

March 16, 2023

A lot of Thaians talk about using your mindfulness and your discernment to understand things. It’s good to know that the combination of mindfulness and discernment, when it’s put together as a compound in Thai, means intelligence. So you have to use your intelligence. But it’s also good to think about why that combination would mean intelligence. You can think of Aristotle’s definition of intelligence, the ability to see connections that haven’t been pointed out to you. A lot of that has to do with both mindfulness and discernment, mindfulness in remembering things that you’ve done, so that when something comes up in the present moment, you can think, “Oh, yes, that’s the result of this that I did back in the past.” The discernment is basically the ability to see distinctions and also see relationships between distinct things. Mindfulness provides a larger context, as you remember contexts for what you’re doing. And you remember things you’ve learned that you can apply. The definition of mindfulness in the Canon is the ability to remember things that were said and done a long time ago. The “said” there could be memorizing or remembering things that the Buddha said or that the Ajahns have said. Those things that were done could be things that you did, or you saw good examples from other people in their behavior, and you take that as a lesson. A lot of the old training for monks throughout South Asia and Southeast Asia involved a lot of memorization. You look at the books here in this cabinet over here. There are forty-five-some volumes of the Pali Canon. There are people who could memorize quite a few of the volumes. They even have a few people who were able to memorize the whole thing. You can imagine having that in your head to draw on if you have an efficient way of drawing on the material. It’s like a computer that can or cannot draw on its random memory. But the fact that you have that store of knowledge to draw on, and the more mindful you are, you begin to see, “Well, the Buddha said this, that, here, and he said that, there.” How do they connect? That would give you a good background for looking at what you’re doing. Then the discernment comes in and sees, “When I do this, what are the results I get right now?” And then you learn how to judge them. This is an important part of discernment that tends to get overlooked. The extent to which you’re making value judgments is important. In fact, I’ve heard some Dhamma talks by some Ajahns saying that you’re not supposed to judge anything at all, no value judgments at all. That’s what discernment is all about. What’s worth doing? What’s not worth doing? What, when I do, will lead to my long-term welfare and happiness? What, when I do, will lead to my long-term harm and suffering? That’s a value judgment. You want welfare and happiness. You want it long-term. And you realize that it comes from your actions. So you want to learn how to judge what actions really are worth doing. Because we have only so much energy, only so much time. So what do you want to do with your energy and do with your time? What’s the best thing to do with these things? The Buddha gives some advice. Nobody made full path. Then it’s a question of learning actually how to do that. You get some ideas. You read, you listen, you think. Then you try to decide which qualities do you have to develop, which ones do you have to abandon. And it’s the discernment that comes from putting these lessons into practice. That’s when the discernment becomes your own. And when it’s your own, that’s when it really goes to the heart. Otherwise, it’s just one more game that you play. So-and-so says this, well, let’s try that for a little while. So-and-so says that, well, let’s try it for a while. You’re not fully committed. But when you see that certain types of behavior give certain types of results, and you see it clearly in your own experience, that’s when you realize this is not a game. The Buddha talked from what he had experienced. Some people have expressed surprise that in a teaching that talks a lot about not-self, we have the Buddha’s autobiographies, his accounts of how he gained awakening. That may seem strange from that perspective, when you think that the real teaching is the basic teaching of the Buddha taught, which is karma. Then you realize why he talked about his autobiography. Because he was talking about what he did, the results he got, and how he was able to get the best possible results, and what it involved, as a lesson. So you can get some idea of what you have to do, and also lots of lessons about what not to do. So the intelligence we’re talking about here is not so much book intelligence, it’s the intelligence that comes from doing things and learning from your actions, and particularly doing things to develop good qualities in the mind. Because, notice, when the Buddha talks about discernment, it’s not just right view. It’s also right resolve. There’s an understanding, but there’s also an element of will, given the understanding that the Buddha gives you through the Four Noble Truths. The wise thing is to act on those truths and to develop good qualities. The making of resolution is not just a passing whim in the mind. You want to make it consistent. Each time the potential comes up to do something unskillfully, you say, “Nope, not going there.” Each time the potential for doing something skillful comes up, you say, “Yes, let’s give it a try.” Unless you can figure out something that’s more skillful. This is why, when Ajaan Leelas did the qualities for mindfulness practice, he pinpointed ardency as being the wisdom faculty of those three. In other words, given your understanding of what’s involved in the path, the wise response is to try to develop, as much as you can, the qualities that the Buddha lists as skillful and to abandon the ones that he lists as unskillful. That’s what ardency is all about. So, the intelligence we’re talking about here is intelligence in action. It’s pragmatic. It’s strategic. And the mindfulness part helps with the strategy because it helps remind you of the different tools that the Buddha gives you. For instance, at times, to develop goodwill, when the mind can’t do it, you can settle down with a breath. You look for other things to put the mind in the right mood, as he said. Try an inspiring theme. And think about goodwill in an inspiring way. Think about the fact that, as you’re practicing here, you’re observing the precepts. You’re living a harmless way, so your way of life doesn’t have to involve the suffering of anybody. Which means that your thoughts of goodwill are not just thoughts. They also inform your actions. When you can see that your actions and your thoughts are harmless, there’s a sense of well-being that should come. And it’s good to remember that. So when you extend thoughts of goodwill, it’s not a chore. Some of the later texts recommend that you spread thoughts of goodwill starting with yourself, then with people you love and like, and then people you’re neutral about, then people you don’t like. Sort of out and out that way. In the suttas, though, they talk about spreading goodwill to specific directions–east, west, north, south. You can think about that. You’re sitting here. And just think of a beam of light extending off to the east to all beings within that radius. You have goodwill for them. And then to the west, and to the north, and to the south. Is there anybody out there you can have goodwill for? And you probably think of some people who are hard. And it’s good to think about this. Because the whole point of goodwill is that it’s going to be expressed in your actions as well. So you’ve got to think about it. Is there anybody out there that I have a hard time feeling goodwill for? And I was just saying this morning, goodwill is not just a willingness to be nice to people. It’s the wish that everybody be happy. And then you think about that. What does it mean for people to be happy? Not necessarily on their terms or how they would define happiness. How would the Buddha define happiness for them? Of course, that would be everybody attaining nirvana, which is not very likely. But at least people can live their lives heading in that direction, which should involve observing the precepts, training the mind. For a lot of people, that would involve a huge change in the way they live. Can you imagine a world in which everybody observed the precepts? Newspapers would go out of business. So much of the news is about greedy politicians or greedy businessmen, or angry people doing this, angry people doing that, people killing, stealing, lying, having illicit sex, getting drunk, doing stupid things. A lot of our news is about people breaking the precepts. Can you imagine a world in which everybody could observe the precepts, and would want to observe the precepts, and would want to meditate? That’s what goodwill means. But this is why goodwill has to be backed up by equanimity, because you realize that a lot of people are not going to do that. But if you can engage with people on the assumption that you’re engaging engagement would be something that would push them in that direction or inspire them in that direction, then your engagement with other people is really useful. It’s something you can feel good about. Now, whether they respond or not, that’s their choice. But at least you’re not proposing that they go in another direction. And so when you can work it out that you can feel this type of goodwill for everybody, in the East, in the West, in the North, in the South, above and below, out to infinity, then it gets easier and easier to think thoughts of goodwill in a more general way. But you’ve got to work through the details first. It’s the same as when you work with the breath. In the beginning, it’s difficult trying to find ways of getting good breath energy to flow through the body. But as you get more and more used to it, how the breath channels are arranged in your body, and how you can allow the breath to spread, you get more and more efficient at that. It involves less and less effort, to the point where all you have to do is think comfortable breath, and it just spreads. So in both cases, there’s work to be done in the beginning to sort of clear things out. Then, as they get cleared out, the work gets easier. The results come more quickly. And then you remember that. But you also remember that if you get lazy about this, if you think, “Well, I can just tap into this anytime I want,” and then you stop tapping into it, some of your old habits begin to take over again. It’s like a road that you’ve cleared of vegetation. But then you stop cutting back the weeds, and they’re going to come back. So you have to be diligent. And part of the mind will say, “There are other things I’d like to do.” Then you have to ask yourself, “These other things, how many of them really are worth it?” There are some things that you have to do that require your full attention, so you give it your full attention. There are a lot of things you can do, though, that don’t require your full attention. In cases like that, then you can meditate either on the breath or on goodwill, sort of on the side. But you want to keep these skills going. Don’t let them get covered by weeds. So that’s it, a combination of mindfulness and discernment. It’s intelligence. You have a fund of knowledge, a fund of skills, that you can call on. And you want to be very careful to see what is the situation right now, and what does it require? And then you do that. That’s when you can see you’re really intelligent in your practice. And it’s in intelligence, not just of your thinking abilities. It’s in intelligence of the heart, heart and mind together, which is why it can be so satisfying. So be careful not to lose your perspective. We had that question today about how is it good in the beginning and good in the middle and good in the end when there are difficulties. Well, there are difficulties in doing things you can be proud to do. The fact that you’re trying to do something honorable, trying to do something noble. This is a noble path, after all. Whether you’re getting immediate results or not, the fact that you’re trying at something noble. Don’t forget that. Appreciate that. Because there are so many people in the world right now who are being forced to do things that are not noble at all. And you have the opportunity to get out of that situation and then have the desire that other people can get out too. That’s something that’s good in the beginning, good in the middle, and good in the end. Something that’s intelligent all the way through.

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