Discernment to Foster Concentration

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One of the distinctive teachings of the forest tradition is that the three parts of the triple training, virtue, concentration, and discernment, help one another along. Back in the days when the tradition was founded, it was typical of the scholarly positions in Bangkok that you had to get your virtue good first, then you would work on your concentration, and only then think about developing discernment. Although they had felt that they had pretty much figured out what discernment was all about. You read the books, you learn about the three characteristics, four noble truths. The idea that your discernment, when you finally developed your own, would simply ratify what you’d read in the books. But as Ajahn Mun pointed out, concentration can help your virtue. Discernment can help your virtue. Discernment can help your concentration. So you don’t practice these things in a row. You practice them all together. Because after all, you are training both the heart and the mind. The Pali word citta covers both. And sometimes to get the mind to settle down, you need to do some heart training. In other words, you have to think about the things that would ordinarily distract you, that would pull you out of concentration. Before you even start concentration, you think about them. So that the heart is willing to settle down. Otherwise you might be forcing your mind to stay with an object, and it just doesn’t want to stay. It’s got other issues, other concerns. Ajahn Mahābhūra gives an analogy. Sometimes your mind is like a tree out in the middle of a field. If you want to cut it down, it doesn’t take too much discernment. You figure out which direction you want the tree to go. You cut it, and it goes. No problem. Other times though, your mind is more like a tree in a forest. Its limbs are entangled with the limbs of the other trees. And there are only a few directions where you can actually get the tree to fall down to the ground. So you have to know which limbs to cut, which side of the tree to cut, so it falls in the right place. This isn’t just a teaching in the forest tradition. You look in the Canon, and you find many examples of the Buddha talking about things you could think about to get the mind in the right mood, get your heart in the right mood to meditate. You can contemplate the body, think about all the issues in the world, all your issues in life that center around just keeping this body going. And what does it do? It ages on you, it gets sick, it dies. And in the meantime, what is it made out of? Nothing really worth aspiring to. And the Buddha himself, in his different ways of laying out the path and the wings to awakening, sometimes he puts concentration in front of discernment, sometimes he puts discernment in front of concentration. And he’ll say that to get the mind into jhana requires both insight and tranquility. And if you want to develop insight, you have to develop jhana. In fact, there’s one verse in the Dhammapada who says, “There is no jhana without discernment, no discernment without jhana.” These qualities help each other along. So sometimes, before you focus on the breath, it’s good to think in terms of topics that give rise to a sense of sanguega. You look at the futility of life as is ordinarily lived. And you realize that if you don’t do something about it, you’re going to keep on pursuing futile things. This is why one of the chants we have before the meditation is a chant on the requisites - food, clothing, shelter, medicine. The monks are encouraged to contemplate these things every day. When you put on your robes, you remind yourself, “Why am I wearing this robe?” When you eat food, you ask yourself, “Why am I eating this food?” “What’s my purpose?” You use shelter, you use medicine, what’s your purpose in using these things? Now part of that is to make sure that you’re content with little and you know some moderation in your use. In other words, if your robe is good enough, you don’t have to go aspiring to fancy robes or new robes. If the food is good enough, there’s no reason to complain. If it’s enough to keep you going, that’s enough. The same with the shelter, same with medicine. You don’t make yourself burdensome in other people, at least more than is necessary. Because the more you reflect on these things, you realize that the fact that you were born with a human body means that you cannot live without these things. This is where you think more about the human condition in general. Take food for instance. There’s one passage where the Buddha says, “If you really understand food and the mind’s relationship to food, if you really comprehend it to the point of dispassion, it’s enough to get you to the level of non-return.” Just think about it. The food you eat. It requires suffering on the part of other beings. Even if you have a vegetarian diet, there are the farmers who have to farm the food, the workers who have to transport the food, people who work in the stores, people who have to fix the food. By the time it’s gotten to your bowl, gotten to your plate, there’s a lot of suffering that’s gone into that. So how can you think about just how good it is or how good it isn’t? To taste. Get your thinking. If you come back again, you’re going to be feeding more again. Beating off the suffering of others again. It’s a good contemplation to help think that it might be a good thing to get out of all this entirely. To focus on a topic that you find does give rise to that sense of sanguega, a sense of dismay. It can even be translated as terror, as you realize. If you don’t do something about your defilements, you’re going to keep on coming back, coming back, coming back, creating more suffering for yourself, creating more suffering for others. As long as this process of becoming keeps on going. In other words, the process by which you take on an identity in a world of experience. It’s going to be the suffering you create for yourself when it spreads around, because it needs to feed. There’s a catechism that young novices were supposed to memorize. A series of questions. What is one? What is two? What is three? And up to what is four? What is ten? In some cases, the answers are things you might expect. What is four? Affordable truths. What is five? The five hindrances. Six? The six and spheres. Eight? Noble Eightfold Path. Seven? The seven factors for awakening. The really interesting one is what is one? All beings obsessed on food. That’s how the Buddha introduces the topic of causality to young novices. Interconnectedness is basically inter-eating. We feed off of one another. Emotionally in terms of mental food, physically in terms of physical food. So it’s not an innocent process. We have to keep going. We have to keep taking things, taking things. How much longer do you want to do that? This is why, in response, the practice of Dharma begins with generosity. The act of giving a gift. In Asia, when children are introduced to Buddhism, one, they’re introduced by being taught how to show respect, and two, putting food in a monk’s bowl. That’s the beginning of their religious life. It’s good to think about how that applies to the rest of the practice. When you learn to take joy in giving, it shows you gain a sense of the fact that some pleasures are worth more than others. The pleasure you can get out of eating something is one thing. The pleasure you get out of giving in a way, voluntarily, that’s something with more value. And when you can appreciate that, then you’re on the path. And it develops the right attitude towards the precepts and the practice of meditation. When you take on the precepts, if you take them on with it, the attitude of generosity, you realize that you’re giving a gift of safety to others, and you have a part of that gift in safety for yourself, if you approach meditation with that generous attitude. In other words, you don’t sit here thinking, “How quickly can I get results? What’s the minimum amount of energy I put into this before I can get results?” That’s your attitude. It’s going to be an unpleasant experience. But if you come with an attitude of generosity, saying, “Well, I may have to give a lot of time and effort, but I’ve learned that giving and having this attitude of being generous pays off in the long term.” Then it’s easier to deal with things that come along, difficulties in the path, because you approach them with a generous spirit. So when you think about the human condition, how much it depends on taking, and how the path out of that miserable condition starts with generosity, a sense of inner wealth, then the mind is more and more inclined to want to give up the thoughts that it might think about for the next hour, and focus its attention on the breath, to develop some concentration, or at the very least to do your best to get your thoughts under control. You’ve learned to use your discernment to get the mind ready for concentration. There’s a sutta where the Buddha says there are times when insight comes before tranquility, other times when tranquility comes before insight, other times when they come together. The sutta says that people fall into different categories. What you’ll often find is that your own mind falls into one of these categories, and can change from one category to another. So on days when the mind is not ready to settle down, okay, use some discernment. And when it does settle down, allow it to enjoy its concentration. You don’t have to be in too great a hurry to move on to insight. Because the more solid your concentration, the more subtle your discernment will become. And when you learn how to enjoy the concentration, that puts the mind in the mood to learn some of the lessons that your discernment will have to teach you. Because what is it going to teach you? That a lot of things that you like to do are actually causing suffering. A lot of cases you know better, but you still do it. So you have to get the mind in the right mood to learn those lessons. So learn how to use your discernment to pave the way for concentration, and your concentration to pave the way for discernment. And that’s how the path develops.

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