

Catch It in the Act

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One of the basic tenets in the Buddha's teaching is the principle that discernment nurtured by concentration has great rewards, great benefits. When we hear that, we think we have to get a lot of concentration and only then can we work on discernment or wisdom. But that's not the case. All the basic elements of the path—virtue, concentration, and discernment—are things you already have to some extent. So if your virtue is weak, you can develop some concentration, not as much as when your virtue is strong, but still you can develop some. And you can develop some wisdom even when your concentration is weak. It won't be as good as it can be when the concentration is strong, but it's still there. And you still need to use it. You can't wait till you get really good concentration in order to develop insight, discernment, because things are happening all the time. The mind is constantly creating suffering through its unskillful ideas, its unskillful notions. You've got to stop it to whatever extent you can. You have to catch in the act.

It's like seeing a dog using your front lawn as a bathroom. If you throw a rock at it after it's done its business, it's going to keep coming back. If you throw a rock at it and hit it right while it's doing its business, it won't do it again. And the same with the mind: If you catch it in the act of creating stress and suffering for itself, you can see that it's not necessary, that it doesn't have to do that, then it's going to stop. If you catch it only afterwards, it'll come back and go to the bathroom on you again.

This is why you need concentration: to catch the mind in the act. So to whatever extent you can develop mindfulness, alertness, and concentration, it's all to the good. Put it to use as much you as can do in the course of your life. Now, it may be that the insights you gain are crude and will ultimately be replaced by more refined and more precise insights, but at least you can make use of what've got.

It's like exercising your body. You've got a weak body and you'd like it to be strong, but you don't sit around and wait for it to get strong and then go down to the gym. You go down to the gym, take the weak body you've got, and you exercise it. By exercising it, it develops strength.

The same with the concentration, the same with discernment: You exercise what you've got; you put to use what you've got. The more you put it to use, the stronger it grows. If it's something you work on only while you're sitting here with your eyes closed, it's not going to be nearly as strong as it would be if you actually

put it to use in the course of the day. After all, sometimes it's in your daily activities that you can catch sight of how you're creating suffering, especially when you're talking to people and dealing with other situations. Even in situations like that, part of you is still quiet and able to watch what's going on in the mind. You can see, "Oh, I do this. I think that way. I speak this way, and it causes stress and suffering." Another part of the mind will say, "Well, I have to do it that way. That's what's got to be done." But when you can learn to question that attitude, you're going to see the results of developing discernment, you're going to see the rewards and the benefits of developing discernment.

There tend to be two attitudes toward insights as you gain them. One is that once you gain an insight, you try to carry around with you. But you have to remind yourself, it's the state of concentration that allows you to question what you're doing: That's what produces the insights, and the insights are appropriate for that occasion. So instead of filling your mental notebook with all kinds of stale insights, you try to keep re-creating that state of mind that gives rise to fresh insights as they're needed.

It's like the goose that lays the golden egg. As in most gold in fairy tales, if you try keep the golden egg for long periods of time, it turns into coal, ashes, or feathers. But if you keep the goose healthy and well-fed, the goose keeps giving you golden eggs. And you use them right then and there while they're still gold.

If your insights are of a more general nature, it's like throwing a rock at the dog long after it's gone to the backyard. It's not going to connect its desire to go to the bathroom with the rock, so it's going to come back and defecate on your yard all over it.

So try to keep the mind still. It's like hiding out in the bushes. Then, when the dog comes, you've got the rocks, ready to throw at it.

This is why the Buddha divides insight into three types of understanding. There's the understanding you gain from listening and reading, and the understanding that comes from thinking. These types of understanding are useful; they help straighten out your views, help remind you that the big problem in life is not what other people are doing, it's what you're doing. It's how you think, it's how you understand things, and particularly how alert you are to what you're actually doing. Listening to these principles and thinking them through to the point where they seem to make sense is helpful, but it's not quite the same as putting the mind in a position where it can actually produce the insights it needs when it needs them.

That's what to do by developing your mindfulness, your alertness, your powers of concentration. You help to get the mind out of its ordinary normal discussions,

its ordinary inner dialogue—although dialogue is hardly the word, its more all the clamor that's going on inside. You get the mind with the breath, putting your awareness with at least a still spot someplace in the body so that it's not carried away by the drift of the discussion. Then you watch from that standpoint. It may not be a very strong still point, but hey, you work with what you've got. Every now and then you catch yourself acting on greed, acting on anger, acting on fear, acting on unskillful motivations, and you see that it's causing stress. That's when insight really does have an impact on the mind, really does make a change in the mind, makes a change in your habits. You hit the dog right at the right spot, and it will never come back to defecate in that particular spot ever again.

But there's not only one dog in your mind. There are lots of dogs. You're going to need lots of rocks here and you'll have to be very still. I don't know how far this analogy can go, but you get the basic idea. The more powerful your concentration, then the more refined the defilements you'll be able to see. You'll be able to see very clearly the connection between what you do and the stress that it causes.

Once you get the basic principle going, even on very basic levels of concentration, once you see that connection between a still spot in the mind and your ability to catch the mind in the act, so that you actually do change your habits: That's when you understand the third level of discernment, which is discernment that comes from developing the mind, developing the good qualities of mind, like mindfulness and alertness. It's simply a matter of strengthening the causes, and the results get more and more powerful.

So this is how you take the meditation into your daily life. Don't understand meditation simply as sitting here with your eyes closed. It's a habit that you develop of recognizing at least a spot someplace in your mind, and learning how to stay there to watch, to catch the mind in action, as it goes slipping out to cause itself trouble.

Luang Puu Dune once said that the cause of stress and suffering is the mind going out to its objects. When at least part of your mind is still, you can see the other parts going out, and then you can see the mischief they do. You can see the mess they make. And you get quicker and quicker noticing when there's an impulse to go out. You see why it goes out, what it's looking for, what prompts it. That way, you can keep cutting away, cutting away, cutting away the mind's unskillful habits, until ultimately there are no more skillful habits to cut away. You've got them all. None of the dogs in town will never come back to make a mess in your yard ever again.