

Clearing a Space

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Practice would be easy if the problems of the mind were neat and orderly, if they fit into nice categories and came in nice, graduated steps — starting first with the easier problems and moving up gradually to the harder ones. That way the practice could be neat and orderly, too: You'd start out with virtue, and when your virtue is perfected you could focus on concentration, and then when concentration is perfected you could focus on discernment. It would all be very nice and systematic.

The problem is that the mind is not systematic. It's chaotic. Now, we all know that chaos has its patterns, but the patterns are very complex. That means you have to be ready for anything at any time. Sometimes very difficult problems get thrown at you before you're really ready to handle the easy ones. So when you're working on virtue, concentration, and discernment, they all have to come together. You have to be ready to use whichever tools you need when they're needed. Often you find out that you have to start out with discernment, the faculty we're told comes at the end.

When I was staying in Thailand with Ajaan Fuang, I'd feel frustrated when he'd say, "Use your *pañña*." That's the Pali and Thai word for discernment. That was back in the days when the only translation I knew for *pañña* was wisdom, and I kept thinking, "How am I going to use my wisdom when I don't have any?" But he was talking about a faculty we all have. We all have discernment to one extent or another, and you have to put it to use all the time while you're practicing. You put it to use when you're observing the precepts, you put it to use when you're practicing concentration.

For example, in practicing the precepts, there are times when you're in a difficult position, when it's really hard to keep to the precepts you've promised yourself you're going to hold to. Sometimes you're asked a question and you don't want to answer it for one reason or another, and of course you can't lie. So, the question is, how are you going to use your discernment to get around that question? How are you going to use your discernment to maintain your precepts even when it gets difficult?

The same when practicing concentration. You have to use a certain amount of discernment just to get the mind to settle down. Figuring out which object you're going to focus on; how you're going to deal with the breath; figuring out which kinds of breath sensations you should focus on, which you should let go; which

are the ones you've got to change; and at what point you have to stop changing them and just let things be so the mind can really settle down: All of this requires a certain level of discernment.

Then there are other outside issues that come in as well, because as the mind settles down you start running into things—it's as if they're lying in wait for you. Sometimes the issues may be recent events, things that just happened today. Other times they may go back a long way. Sometimes you find issues from your childhood suddenly coming up to the surface of the mind. After all, there's less activity on the surface, which allows things that are deeper down in the water to come floating up.

The issue then is how to deal with those things in a way that doesn't destroy your concentration, doesn't get you off the path. Sometimes you can just remind yourself, "Okay, I'm not ready for that particular issue yet," and put it aside. Other times it just keeps coming back, coming back, coming back, and you've got to deal with it in some way or another, and you can't wait until your powers of concentration are fully developed before you can turn on it, because it's right there, breathing down your neck, blocking your attempts at concentration.

So, your first line of defense is to try to figure out how the four noble truths apply to this issue? These are the Buddha's basic terms of analysis for just about everything that comes into the mind. These are the terms of appropriate attention. When an issue comes up, try to figure out where it lies on that field. Is it an issue of suffering? An issue of craving? Those are usually where the issues lie. There's very rarely an issue of the cessation of suffering or the path leading to the cessation of suffering.

So when it's suffering, what's the proper approach? The proper approach is to analyze it. How do you analyze it? Not in terms of psychoanalysis, taking things back to your childhood. Just analyze what's happening right in the present. Where is the suffering right now? What kind of suffering is it? Where is the physical side? Where is the mental side? Sometimes you can deal with the physical side just by breathing through it. That makes it a lot easier to deal with the mental side.

Wherever there's suffering, there's bound to be craving as well. Look for that. There's bound to be clinging, too. Look for the clinging. The clinging is something you want to learn to analyze; the craving is something you want to learn to let go. You may not be able to get all the way through the problem in one session, but at least you've got the proper approach—you're learning to step back from the problem, not identify with it as "my problem" or with the "I'm suffering" in there. Just look at it in terms of, "Where's the suffering, where's the clinging, where's the craving?"

When you can see the issues from this point of view, they're a lot easier to deal with. Even though you may not be able to work totally through the issue, at least you're headed in the right direction. In other words, you take whatever discernment you've got and you put it to use. It's like going down to the gym. You want a nice strong body, but where are you going to get that nice strong body? You take the weak body you've got and you put it to work: that's where the strong body comes from. Now, you can't wait until you've completed your course at the gym and your body is really strong before you come out and use your strength to deal with work outside. You take whatever body you've got, whatever strength you've got, and apply it to the work at hand. Whether the work gets done totally and completely and with a lot of finesse, or just enough to pass by, the fact that you're using the strength you have is what builds the strength you'll need for the next time around.

The same principle applies to the mind. Often your distractions are going to come back again, but at least if you can learn how to deal with them enough to clear a little space in the mind for the time being, and that allows you to get back to your concentration. At the same time, you're preparing yourself to deal with them even more effectively the next time around. In other words, the issue may be a huge tangle of things, and you're able to untangle one little bit, but when you untangle that, things loosen up in the mind. When they loosen up, you've got your opportunity to get back to your concentration practice.

Now, when there are no apparent problems, you can't be complacent. Don't think as you're drifting along through the day and things are nice and easy that they're going to be nice and easy all the time. Sometimes huge issues suddenly come bubbling up into the mind. Remember the word "fermentation"? The *asavas* that lie down there can come bubbling up at any time. So when things are easy, when things are going well, make the most of the opportunity to practice concentration, to strengthen the mind. Strengthen your mindfulness, strengthen your alertness, so that when the issues finally do present themselves, you've got weapons to fight them with.

Discernment, on its own, can't deal with them. Discernment needs the strength that comes from concentration, that comes from mindfulness and alertness, that comes from your conviction in the principles of karma. All the five strengths—conviction, persistence, mindfulness, concentration, discernment—have to work together. Otherwise your discernment will just start analyzing things and get further and further away from what's actually happening in the mind. That's not the kind of analysis you want. You want to keep coming back to what's happening right here, right now, what you're experiencing right here, right now. Keep the present as your frame of reference.

Even though the issue may be dealing with something from the past, try to remember that your experience of that memory is happening in the present. Keep that point in mind as you're dealing with whatever comes up. Then you find it a lot easier to pull yourself out, to deal with the issue as you can, to create some space so that it's not hogging your whole attention, not consuming the mind.

This is very important, because as I said, we can't wait until the concentration is totally mastered before we have to deal with these issues. We're going to have to deal with these issues all along. Our purpose is to create some space so that we can continue our practicing. Don't get upset if the issue keeps coming back. The times between its visits are your times to practice straight concentration. When the issues come back, you take whatever concentration you've got, whatever discernment you can develop out of that concentration, and deal with them again.

Ultimately there will come a time when these issues get cut at the root. Up until that time, you just have to keep learning to live with them, learning how to keep them at bay. You know they're there. The trick is practicing so that they don't totally overwhelm you. After all, if you wanted to, you could think of all kinds of things to worry about. There's always something that could get in the way of your practice. There are a lot of issues to worry about in this world. You could spend your whole day, your whole life, worrying about this, worrying about that.

Death could come at any time: your death, the death of your family, the death of other people. It's there just waiting to happen. And yet, why are we able to live without being consumed by that fear? This shows that the mind has practice, at least to some extent, in being selective in what it focuses on. Well, learn to use that capacity for the sake of your concentration. Create a little compartment for your practice here. Learn how to protect that compartment. It's going to be one of the weakest parts of your mind for a while because it's new. Other concerns have gotten themselves entrenched in the mind. They're really good at screaming for your attention, demanding your attention, saying, "This has to be dealt with right now, do you hear?" As for the practice, getting the qualities that you need in the mind, that has to learn to be vocal, too. And it has to be strong as well so that it can make room for itself, push these less vital issues out of the way.

When you're practicing it's not neat and orderly like it is in the texts. The texts say that there's stage one, stage two, and then finally you come to the very end. It's like going to school: you go from 1st grade up to 12th grade, and then finally you go to college and then you're done. But the state of your mind as you're actually practicing goes up and down, up and down, all the time. You have to deal with all kinds of different problems, and you have to use whatever

virtue, concentration, and discernment you've got to deal with things as they come, to deal with things willy-nilly for the purpose of making more space for yourself to practice.

In the course of this—both doing the straight practice, and dealing with whatever distractions come up—learning how to sidestep some of them, learning where the jugular is on some of them so you can just get rid of them, other times saying, okay, I can't really deal with this one yet but I can push it out of the way for the time being: that develops your virtue, your concentration, and your discernment as well.

So, if you develop the right attitude, you find that these things distracting you are all part of the practice, too. They're coming to test you. That's one of the reasons why monks go out into the forest. They hear about mindfulness. They hear about heedfulness. They hear about concentration and discernment. Well, see what it's like when you go out to the forest with all those animals and all those potentials for danger—you might starve tomorrow, no one might put food in your bowl, all these things are outside your control. What do you have to hold on to? Your concentration and discernment. Get the mind into concentration so that it's not overwhelmed by worries. The dangers are still out there as they were before, but you learn how to turn them off. You begin to realize that the whole problem is not the dangers out there. It's that your mind is totally out of control. When you can bring it under control, you've developed a really important skill. Mindfulness takes on a whole new meaning. Concentration, heedfulness, discernment, these all take on a whole new meaning once you've learned to use them in this way.

So you see as you get into the practice that it's not like a textbook. You can learn all the words, but they don't have the same meaning as when you've learned to put them into practice, drawing on whatever resources you have when you really need them. When events come and you're not ready to deal with them, but you've got to deal with them, what are you going to do?

If you're up for that kind of challenge, then the practice really develops, really does become an adventure in the mind, something that makes you grow in ways you would have never imagined.