Present-Moment Intelligence

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I’ve been reading a book on visual intelligence, the way in which the eye and the brain bring in light waves and then make sense out of them, construct a whole world just by opening your eyes and looking. You create all kinds of things. You create a three-dimensional space and sometimes you create colors and lines where they don’t exist, but there are patterns that suggest these things to you. And that’s just your eyes. One of the Buddha’s most important discoveries was that causality doesn’t just happen over time, sometimes it’s instantaneous. You’ve got raw material coming in from your past karma, but you’re going to experience it because of your present karma. And not only that, you’re going to shape it in certain directions. One of the purposes of the meditation is to see how you do that. This is why it’s so important that the meditation focuses on the present moment. So you get more sensitive to what you’re doing. And particularly learn how to see where you’re adding unnecessary stress and unnecessary suffering. Because for the most part we tend to take it for granted, a certain level of stress, a certain level of dis-ease. They say that most people go through life with a certain level of dis-ease. Events will knock it out of that basic level every now and then. Something will make you very happy for a while, something will make you very sad. But after a while the mind tends to go back to its basic level, whatever that was. But it doesn’t have to be that way. If it had to be that way there would be no purpose in practicing the Dhamma, there would have been no purpose in the Buddha’s teaching anybody. But the way we put things together can make a huge difference and we can learn new skills in how we put them together and we can learn new sensitivity. So we can tell when we’re doing a better job. So the Buddha has you sensitive to three things. One, how you breathe. Two, how you talk to yourself. And then three, the perceptions and feelings that you focus on. A lot of times these things are underground. Most people go through life without paying much attention to their breath. As for the way they talk to themselves, they take it for granted. This is the conversation. This is how it tends to be. These are the voices that tend to have power in the mind. As for the perceptions, what we think is abstract thinking is often driven by underlying images, underlying similes, analogies. But the fact that they’re underlying means that we don’t see them. Buddha wants us to become sensitive to these things, so we focus on the breath and learn to manipulate the breath. One of the main misunderstandings about breath meditation is that whereas in yoga they manipulate the breath, in the Buddhist way of doing things you don’t manipulate the breath. Where that idea came from I have no idea. Because the Buddhist training is you breathe in certain ways, you breathe in ways that make you sensitive to pleasure. Sensitive to rapture. You calm bodily fabrication. You breathe in ways that gladden the mind, steady and concentrate the mind, release the mind. This doesn’t happen on its own. It’s a training. And in the course of the training you’re going to be talking to yourself as you give yourself directions. Do this, do that. And then you learn from what you’ve done. This is what the meditation is good for. Understanding actions and their results. Sometimes you hear people saying you’re going to understand some metaphysical truths. Some say that seeing that there is no self is going to be a major spiritual landmark in your practice. But what kind of meditative practice? Could teach you something like that? What would have to disappear for you to say, “Okay, there is no self”? Or what would have to appear? Those aren’t things you would learn through meditation. What you learn from meditation is this action leads to this result, that action leads to that result. Some actions lead to more suffering and stress than others. That you can see for yourself. And that’s what meditation is good for. And that’s what the meditation can teach you. Why the Buddha taught us to focus on the present moment. So we’re here to see patterns. To train ourselves and see what results come about. Look at the Four Noble Truths. They’re actions, either skillful or unskillful. The skillful actions would be following the path. The unskillful would be going for the three kinds of craving. And then there are results. That’s what the Buddha wants us to see. Not only that, how can we move from the three kinds of craving to doing the path? It’s going to require some desire. You’re learning to shift the focus of your desires away from sensual pleasures, sensual fantasizing, and more towards noticing which thoughts are skillful, which thoughts are unskillful, and getting a sense of the long-term consequences of your actions. That’s a shift in focus, but it requires desire as well. And then we see, acting on these desires, what happens? Then you commit yourself to doing the path. And then you reflect on the results. Again, you’re not reflecting to see things as they are, but you see things as they work, as they function. And you begin to get a sense of when you’re adding unnecessary stress. That’s the passage where the Buddha describes how you progress through the different levels of concentration. It’s basically noticing. When you get the mind to settle down, learn how to appreciate the fact that it is empty of the stress that comes from being with a lot of people, having to deal with the issues of people. Of course, then your issues fill up the space. It’s like that fruit they have in Thailand. It’s a little tiny, tiny thing about the size of a golf ball with a hard shell. You break the shell, and you put the little tiny fruit into a bucket full of water. And within a few minutes, it’s filled the whole bucket. It absorbs the water and expands. In the same way, when the issues of other people are taken away, you find that your issues expand to fill your whole awareness. Sometimes that can seem overwhelming. But again, all you have to do is ask yourself, “What am I doing right now? How am I putting this together?” Take it apart in terms of how you breathe, how you talk to yourself, the images you hold in mind. And ask yourself, “Exactly where am I adding unnecessary stress here? How can I stop?” And we listen to the Dhamma to give us alternative ways of talking to ourselves. There are so many people suffering as a result of lack of imagination. They think they have to think in certain ways and act in certain ways. And they have no idea that there are alternative ways that are much better. So this is why we listen to the Dhamma, to give us some ideas, and then try them out. We learn from the Divine Ajahns. We learn from the Buddha. And we have to learn how to use our own ingenuity as well. Once you’ve picked up some ideas from them, you begin to see that they have been of variations. It’s like getting a recipe. The recipe calls for one kind of ingredient, but you realize, “Oh, I could substitute another ingredient there.” Then you get an idea of how far the substitutions go, and what you can’t substitute. But a lot of it has to do with your imagination. So there’s no one way of counteracting your unskillful ways of thinking. You get ideas from other people, but then your own way of putting your ignorance together is going to be different from the way other people put their ignorance together. Some of the patterns are the same, but many of them are not. So you learn from trials. You learn from trial and error. Now that you get a better sense of how you can work variations on what you’ve learned, your repertoire grows. That becomes your repertoire. All this comes from being very sensitive to the fact that you’re putting things together right now, and you’re doing a bad job. But it is possible to learn. If you’re doing a good job, you wouldn’t be suffering. So you’re doing something here that’s adding unnecessary suffering in the mind. You will learn how to notice that, learn how to drop whatever it is that’s causing it, and the mind will go to deeper and deeper stages of concentration. That’s what emptiness meant. In the very beginning of the teachings, empty of disturbance. Where does the disturbance come from? It doesn’t come from the birds outside. It doesn’t come from the weather outside. It doesn’t come from the people around you. It comes from what the mind is doing as it’s putting the present moment together. In the same way that we hardly notice how the mind can construct all kinds of things out of visual images that are actually not there. In the same way we begin to realize that the mind can construct all kinds of suffering and stress in the present moment that don’t have to be there. And you learn that you can stop doing that. That’s what insight is. One, seeing that you’re causing stress, and two, seeing you don’t have to do it. In a case like that, you don’t have to tell the mind to let go. Let’s go on its own. And let’s go from insight and understanding, not from being told to let go. But from seeing there’s a much better way of doing things, and you know how to do it.

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