The Wisdom of Ardency

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When John Lee discusses frames of reference, the establishing of mindfulness, he focuses on three qualities. The qualities of mindfulness, alertness, urgency. Mindfulness means keeping something in mind. Like right now, you’re keeping the breath in mind. And keeping in mind the fact that you want to stay with the breath. Mindfulness also means remembering to recognize what’s coming up in the mind. In Thai, they use the same word to remember and to recognize, jham. When sensual desire comes up, you recognize it. This is sensual desire. You don’t go into it. You stand outside it. You recognize that it’s a hindrance. And you want to figure out how to get past it. That involves the other two qualities, alertness and urgency. Alertness is watching things as they arise. And particularly noticing what you’re doing. And the results that you’re getting. Whereas urgency wants to do this well. Mindfulness remembers what needs to be done. Urgency does it. It tries to do it well. That’s the important part. You’re trying to do this well. You’re not just going through the motions. You’re realizing this is important work that you’re doing here. And John Suat would talk about developing an attitude of confidence and conviction in what you’re doing. If you’re really convinced of the importance of what you’re doing, you’re going to give it your full attention. It’s only when you give it your full attention that you begin to notice things that are not in the texts. Not in the teachings of the Ajahns. Because the Buddha is telling you, “Look here.” He’s not telling you everything you’re going to see when you look here. He says, “Do this.” And doesn’t tell you what you’re going to see when you do this. He tells you some of the aspects, but not everything. A lot of the practice is seeing things that are not expected. Which is why when Ajahn Lee discusses those three qualities of mindfulness, alertness, ardency, he identifies ardency as the factor that is the discernment in what you’re doing. In other words, you discern that if you’re going to understand anything that the Buddha taught, you’re going to have to do it. And when you do it, you have to pay full attention to what you’re doing and the results you’re getting. This principle is so basic to the practice. This is what the Buddha taught to his son, Rahula. Very first thing. Before you do anything, think about the consequences of what you plan to do. You see they’re going to cause any harm, you don’t do it. You don’t foresee any harm, you go ahead and do it. While you’re doing it, you watch for what’s happening, what’s coming up as a result of the action you’re doing. While you’re doing it. Because it’s not the case you have to wait until your next lifetime to see the results of some of the things you’re doing. They come up right now. And if you see there’s any harm or affliction, you stop. If you don’t see any, you continue. And then when you’re done, you reflect again on the results. The long-term results. And if you see that you did any harm, you make up your mind not to repeat that mistake. And then you go talk it over with someone who’s more advanced in that path than you are. To get some ideas so you don’t have to keep on reinventing the dharma wheel over and over again. But if you don’t see that you caused any harm, take joy in that fact. But then remember the Buddhist principle that you don’t rest satisfied with what you’ve done. You realize there’s more to be done. So you take that joy and you reinvest it. Try to do it better. All this is an aspect of discernment. Realizing if you’re going to learn anything, you’re going to learn from your actions. This is also why when Ajahn Lee is talking about the factors for concentration, he puts evaluation as the discernment factor. You look at what you’re doing, you evaluate the results. And then if it’s not good enough, recognize that it’s not good enough. Discernment is a matter of passing judgment. You’re not passing judgment on people outside, you’re passing judgment on your own actions. Because that’s where the problem is, and that’s where the potential solution is, if you pay careful attention to what you’re doing. So the discernment comes in the doing, in being very observant about what you’re doing, learning to ask the right questions about what you’re doing, and the results that you’re getting. Like right now, as you focus on the breath, where are you focused? Is that the best place in the body to be focused? Have you tried other spots? How much pressure do you put on the focus? You want it to be steady enough so you don’t go wandering off. But if you clamp down on the breath, it gets very uncomfortable. And then you find that no matter where you focus, you can’t find a comfortable spot in the body at all. Actually there’s nothing wrong with the body, there’s a problem with your focus. It’s like wearing uncomfortable shoes. No matter where you step, you step on grass, you step on asphalt, you step on concrete, it’s all going to be uncomfortable. The problem is not with the grass or the asphalt or the concrete, the problem is with your shoes. So be careful how you focus, and try different strengths of focus to see what’s just right. When the breath does get comfortable, how do you allow that comfort to spread? If you push it around too much, it becomes uncomfortable. How do you allow it? These are some of the questions you can ask yourself. How do you do things? In this case, the questions are not idle questions, speculative questions. They’re practical questions. You’re trying to master a skill in dealing with whatever problems come up. I’m going over the transcript for the French retreat right now. I’m really struck by how many of the questions have to do with pains here, pains there. Problems of getting the breath to be comfortable problems, but once it’s comfortable, maintaining it as comfortable. The nuts and bolts of the practice, which is encouraging. If people don’t really do the practice, they don’t know where the nuts and bolts are. Or even that there are nuts and bolts. I remember one Dharma teacher saying, someone came to him with a question when he was focusing on his breath, and he was getting a headache. And the teacher was saying, “I don’t want to deal with questions like that.” If you don’t deal with questions like that, what are you dealing with? The effort lies in focusing on the details. And the wisdom and discernment lie in learning how to deal with those details. Recognize a problem. Try to come up with a solution. See what works. And if your first solution doesn’t work, try again. That’s where the persistence comes in. You don’t let yourself get defeated easily. The voice that says, “Well, I’ve worked on this X number of months, X number of years, and I don’t seem to be making any progress.” Put that into the context of samsara. How many aeons have you been wandering around? How many aeons have you been developing bad habits? Well, it’s going to take a while. That doesn’t mean it has to take aeons to get results. But a couple of months, a couple of years, is really not much in comparison. And also remind yourself that often you’re working on something, and you’re not really sure where you’re going. But you’re feeling your way, feeling your way, and all of a sudden things open up. That can happen, too. Think of the image of the continental shelf off of India. There’s a gradual slope, and then a sudden drop off. So it is possible that one little insight will open things up. Think of your mind as being like a tapestry. Lots of little threads. And you pick at this thread, and you pick at that thread, and nothing much happens. But it’s not the case that you can make things happen. You have to pick lots of threads all at once. Sometimes you pick on one thread, and it turns out that’s the one thread holding everything together. And everything falls apart. So satisfy yourself with doing the detailed work. And sharpen your discernment. With the detailed work. Because that’s where discernment grows. In the doing and the reflecting. Or as the Buddha would say, commitment and reflection. So even though you’re trying to get the mind still, there’s this questioning attitude you’ve got to take all the time. What is the best thing to do now? What is the best thing to do now? And don’t wear that question as a heavy burden. Just something gentle in the background. Because remember, that’s how the Buddha got through his knowledges on the night of his awakening. After he had gone for many years dealing with dead ends, he was able to get the mind in right concentration. From right concentration, he started applying his purified mind to questions. Like the question, “Is death the end?” Or, “Have there been births before, and is there the possibility of births afterwards?” He saw that there had been many births. His memory went back many, many aeons. Thousands of aeons. And he realized some people found satisfaction in that, in that knowledge. They could set themselves up as teachers, and live for the rest of their life off of that knowledge. But that didn’t solve the problem. He kept having that question, “Is there something deathless? Is there some way to get to the end of suffering?” So he applied his mind to other questions. What is it that causes all these different rebirths? He saw that it was karma. And again, he could have set himself up as a teacher teaching about karma. But he realized that still didn’t solve the problem. But learning about karma gave him some insight into where he could look next. Because he had seen that the karma was based on intention and views. He also saw that you could do a lot of good things in this life, but then have a change of heart. And that would pull you down. Even if it was just a change of heart at the moment of death, that could pull you down. Or you could do a lot of bad things in this life, and something as you arrive at death pulls you up. The right view pulls you up. So not everything is shaped by past karma. Present karma plays a role as well. In fact, it plays a very powerful and important role. So that’s where he looked next. What intentions was he focusing on in his own mind? What were they doing? That’s how he saw that the present moment is put together through your fabrications. What happens if you stop the present moment fabrications? Everything opens up. And that’s when he found the end of suffering. He found the deathless. So he kept asking the right questions and being persistent in asking the right questions as he observed what he was doing. Which means that when you make an effort in the practice, it’s not just brute effort. You make the effort and you watch. And sometimes you watch for the things you’re told to look for, and other times you’re going to notice things that you’re not told to look for. But if you learn how to use them well, it’s all dharma. Chandra Mahaprabhu talks about the question that finally unraveled everything for him. And it’s not a question that you find anywhere in the texts. But it worked. Now his question may not work for you, but there may be another question that you ask. An insight that you gain from watching what you’re doing and the results you’re getting. So try to have an all-around eye. You’re focused on the breath, but you’re also aware of the mind. And whatever you have to do, you try to do it well. That’s how you become wise. And how your wisdom, your discernment, really do make a positive change.

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