

Study & Practice

January 5, 2013

I was reading a while back about some professional taste testers and how part of their training was not only tasting lots of things, but also developing a vocabulary—lots of different words for lots of different tastes. Kind of like that Calvin and Hobbes cartoon where Calvin is saying, “Ah, the smell of the winter air; it’s really hard to describe.” And Hobbes says, “No, I’d say it’s snorky and brambish.”

If you have a refined sense of smell, you can make up your own words, but it requires a very precise vocabulary to sort all these things out. It’s not all you need, of course. You need to have a very sensitive nose as well. But it really does help to have a very precise vocabulary to make distinctions and to open your mind to possibilities.

That’s one of the reasons why we study as part of the practice: to have a set of concepts, a set of ideas, so that we can make distinctions when things happen in the mind.

That’s what the four noble truths are all about. You have to learn to distinguish between stress and suffering on the one hand, and its cause on the other. Then there’s the path, which does involve some stress and suffering. After all, it’s made out of aggregates, which are subject to conditions. But you have to use them, so you have to learn how to recognize which part of the meditation is involving stress that’s necessarily part of the path and which part is creating unnecessary stress—the pointless burdens that you place on the mind.

We have these concepts so we can sort these things out, and also to suggest possibilities—things that could happen in your meditation—followed by instructions. If this happens, this is what you do; if that happens, that’s what you do. That right there gives you the three aspects of discernment that we were talking about earlier today: first, learning how to make distinctions; second, learning how to detect what’s connected to what; and third, having some idea of what the possibilities are: If this happens, what could you possibly do?

In the beginning when you’re studying, it’s all possibilities. This *could* happen, but you can’t leave it there. In addition to study, there’s practice. We actually sit down, do the meditation and watch for things to come up. And they’re sure to come up— things both pleasant and unpleasant.

Some people get upset when they’re doing concentration or practicing restraint of the senses and notice that their defilements seem to be getting worse

for a while. That's simply because they're penned in. It's like taking a tiger that's used to roaming around, and then penning it in. Of course it's going to rebel. But that doesn't mean the pen is bad, or that the tiger's suddenly there because you penned it in, whereas it wasn't there before. It was there all along, but it was used to roaming around as it liked, so it could do what it wanted and never complained. But now that you've got it penned in, it's going to roar and bite. So the Buddha gives you the techniques of the meditation—things to contemplate, things to develop, things to abandon— as ways of dealing with tigers, if you can remember the techniques in time.

This is why mindfulness is such an important part of the path. It's not just being aware; it's primarily remembering. The alertness is what's aware of what's going on, and in particular, what you're doing. But you need mindfulness to remember: When this or that happens, what are you supposed to do? Then you can apply it. As you apply it, you begin to gain a sense of what works for your own particular defilements and what adjustments you have to make. It's in learning how to make the adjustments that you really develop your own discernment.

The concepts you hear about or read about are all things you've borrowed from somebody else; they're not really your own. It's when you use some of the Buddha's teachings to deal with your own greed, aversion, and delusion, and begin to gain a sense of what works: That's when the Dhamma becomes your own. That's when you really can say that you're discerning. Otherwise, you just have the names of discernment, the ideas of discernment. But when you actually encounter what's going on in your mind—both the good and the not-so-good things—and decide you're not just going to sit there and allow them to run rampant as they have in the past, you're going to pen them in and do something about them if they're the unskillful side, and you're going to encourage them if they're the skillful side and point them in the right direction: That's when you develop the practice. When you start getting results, that's the discernment of attainment.

So it's only in the actual application of right effort—in other words, noticing what's skillful and what's unskillful and doing your best to encourage what's skillful and discourage what's not—that the discernment really develops. This is why ardency is what Ajaan Lee identifies as the discernment element in mindfulness practice. You're not just sitting there, watching this thing arise and that thing go away, this arise and that go away. You're realizing that when this arises and actually causes trouble in the mind, what are you going to do so that it doesn't arise anymore? At the very least, what are you going to do so that it doesn't take over and influence your actions?

You get some ideas from the texts, but you also have to develop your own ingenuity: What else might work if your understanding of what's in the text doesn't work? After all, the understanding that you've gained from reading and listening may not be accurate. It's not the time to go back and say the texts weren't good. You've got to say, "Well, whatever it is I need to do right now, what are the possibilities?"

This is where you have to develop your own ingenuity, which is why those one-size-fits-all kinds of meditation techniques—meditation techniques that say, "Don't do any thinking; just note, note, note" or "scan, scan, scan," and somehow the technique is going to magically take care of everything—don't really give you the opportunity to develop the side of your discernment that involves ingenuity and seeing what the alternatives are. You try x and it doesn't work. Well, what y or z is out there that you might try? Where do you have to tweak an x to make it work? This element of ingenuity is what really makes a difference. It really expands the Dhamma; it expands your discernment and understanding of the Dhamma.

An important part of this ingenuity is getting a sense of time and place—what teaching needs to be applied at what time—because there are many different teachings, many different ways of looking at your experience. What's appropriate for the particular issue that you're dealing with? After all, not all the Buddha's answers were categorical. Some of them depended on the context, what he called analytical answers. To use them properly, you have to bring in your appreciation of the various factors that might be operating for you right now.

There was the case where a person asked a monk one time, "What are the results of action?" The monk said, "All action results in stress and suffering." The person asking him said, "I never heard that from any Buddhist monks before."

So the monk went and asked the Buddha, and the Buddha said, "You fool! That's not how you answer that question." Another monk chimed in, "Well, you know, maybe he was thinking about how all feelings are stressful." And the Buddha said, "Another fool! When you're asked about actions, you talk about skillful and unskillful actions. And you talk about the three kinds of feelings that come up from the actions. Because if you tell someone that all actions lead to suffering and stress, then why would they bother trying to do anything skillful?"

In other words, you have to have a sense of when a particular teaching is appropriate and when it's not. You learn part of this by being around people who've practiced. This is why the Buddha set up the apprenticeship of the Sangha. A lot of this cannot be explained in words, but you can pick it up by being around people who've trained—if you're sensitive and open to learning. This is why one of the most important verses in the *Dhammapada* is about the difference between

the tongue that can taste the soup, and the spoon that can be in the soup for days and days and days, and yet not know the taste at all. You've really got to be sensitive; you've got to be open to good examples.

So the discernment is not just a matter of ideas. The ideas suggest possibilities, and they prepare you to look for certain distinctions. But to actually *see* those distinctions requires a lot of sensitivity on your part. Again, it's like the professional taste testers. They can learn the vocabulary for all the different types of tastes there may be. But if their tongues can't pick out the difference between one taste and the next, then the vocabulary is pretty useless—at least, *they're* not getting any use out of it.

The effort to put these things into practice and figure out what in your mind is the defilement and what in your mind is something skillful: That's what enables you to figure out how to encourage the skillful side and abandon the unskillful side. It's only when you really try that you begin to get a sense for these things, and you really do get the results that they're aimed at, which is freedom—freedom from the stress and suffering you've been causing for yourself and you've been putting up with for who knows how long.

Even as you do something as simple as observing the precepts, practicing restraint of the senses, or sitting here trying to get the mind to settle down and be quiet for a bit, there's a lot of discernment that comes with the act of trying. You're discerning that this is something worthwhile to try. There are a lot of people out there who don't see the worth of this at all. At the very least, you see that it's worthwhile—worth spending time with and putting up with the difficulties. When you have a teaching about stress and suffering on the one hand and the possibility of an ultimate, unconditioned happiness on the other, the appropriate discerning response is, "Okay, there's something I've got to *do* here."

You don't just read about it and think about it. It's a challenge: Can I do this? What can I do to do this? How can I figure this out? As Ajaan Fuang said, "Don't expect everything to be handed to you on a platter." If there's something in the teachings that doesn't make sense, it's not necessarily because there's something wrong with the teaching. Maybe there's something lacking in your willingness to try to make sense out of it.

Again, it's a challenge, and the discerning response is to *take* the challenge, be *up* for the challenge. Otherwise, where are you going to be? Just suffering the same way you've been suffering all along. You're free to choose whether or not you want to practice in this way—but there's only one discerning choice.