

Discernment Through Ardency & Evaluation

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When Ajaan Lee talks about mindfulness practice, he emphasizes the three qualities that we bring to the practice: mindfulness, alertness, and ardency. Mindfulness is keeping something in mind. Alertness is watching what's actually going on, both with the breath, if that's your object, and with the mind—making sure they stay connected. Ardency is the quality of doing it right, trying to be skillful, noticing when things are not going well, how you can improve them, and when they are going well, how you can maintain them and develop them further.

Not all three qualities deal exclusively with the present moment. Mindfulness is helping you remember useful lessons you've learned from the past that you can apply to the present. Alertness is focused mainly on the present. Ardency is focused on what you're doing to shape both the present and the future, with the knowledge that your actions are going to have consequences.

This is why of the three qualities, Ajaan Lee points to ardency as being the one that gives rise to discernment. This fits in with that question the Buddha said lies at the basis of discernment: "What, when I do it, will lead to my long-term suffering? What, when I do it, will lead to my long-term welfare and benefit?" Discernment lies in the knowledge that what you *do* is having an impact on your experience and how you can change it to improve that impact, and being wise enough to actually make the effort.

This is very different from when you read in a lot of other discussions of mindfulness when they talk about the three qualities. Instead of "alertness," they call *sampajañña* "clear comprehension" and they identify *that* as the wisdom faculty. And at the first glance, raising this issue may seem just like shuffling the words around a little bit, but the two explanations have a very different meaning in practice. For them, clear comprehension is knowing how to label things as stressful, inconstant, and not-self. In practice, this means having a vocabulary to classify things, watching them arise and pass away and then identifying them—okay, this is what's arising, this is what's passing away—labeling them. That's a fairly passive approach and it's ignoring the fact that you are actually doing something to shape your experience. Because the discernment, the wisdom lies in knowing that your actions are what make a difference. Your actions are the things that are shaping things.

When the Buddha talks about dependent co-arising, you can get involved in a lot of very technical discussions about what he has to say, but there's one point that's always worth bearing in mind, which is that a lot of the factors come prior to sensory contact, counting the mind as one of the senses. For that reason, you want to look at what you're doing to shape

things even before they happen. And have the perspective that you've got to look at your actions and take responsibility for them. That's where discernment comes from.

Early in Ajaan Lee's discussions of getting the mind into right concentration, he has a lot to say about the factors of the first jhana. There's directed thought, evaluation, singleness of preoccupation, pleasure, and rapture. He divides those factors into two: causes and effects. The directed thought, evaluation, and singleness of preoccupation are the causal factors. Those are the things you do. The pleasure and rapture are things that come about as a result. And of all *those* factors, the wisdom or discernment factor is the evaluation. In other words, you look at what you're doing and then you decide whether you're doing it well or not. This fits in with the ardency. It's what makes the ardency skillful ardency, or makes the effort right effort. You've got to develop your powers of evaluation, one, to evaluate cause and effect; and two, to figure out, okay, what's a good effect? And when you've got something good, what do you do to develop it, to make the most of it?

So you focus on the breath and find which way of breathing feels good. Once you've got a good way of breathing that maintains a good sense of fullness in at least one spot in the body, in one of the centers—in the middle of the chest, the base of the throat, the roof of the mouth, the nose—try to expand that sense of well-being because you're going to be trying to inhabit your body as a whole. If the well-being can spread, it's going to be that much easier to maintain the solid foundation you want.

So both cases—the ardency and the evaluation—build on the knowledge that what you do makes a difference and that you have to depend on yourself, both to do the right thing and to evaluate it. You've got to develop your own powers of evaluation so that you can have a clear sense of what really is satisfactory or not.

Take the Buddha as your example. He started out by looking at his actions: "What am I doing?" He noticed that things were not satisfactory so he turned around and looked at what he was doing to see what was causing the stress, what was causing the lack of satisfaction. And it wasn't that his standards were too high. He kept his standards high. He simply realized, "The actions I'm doing are causing the results I don't want. I've got to change my actions." When he found something that seemed satisfactory, he stayed with it for a while until his powers of evaluation got more subtle, more refined. And he looked back again at what he was doing to see what could be further improved.

This is where discernment comes from. This is how he gained awakening: Learn how to look at your actions. Look at the results. See what's connected to what and then decide, "Okay, is it satisfactory?"

When he came up with the teaching on what they call the three characteristics or the three perceptions, those were tools for evaluation in this process. In other words, if something seemed pleasant or good, he asked himself, "Okay, is it constant?" If there's any inconstancy in here, it can't really be the long-term welfare and happiness you're looking for. There's going to

be stress there. If there's stress, is it really worth holding on to as "you" or "yours"? Notice, he's not saying that there's no "you," he's just saying: Is this worth it? These are standards for evaluation. Are the results of your actions good enough? If not, turn around and look at your actions.

You notice that what we're doing here as we get the mind concentrated is that we're pushing against those three characteristics, trying to find something that is constant, full of ease and well-being, something you have under your control. You keep pushing and pushing, and you find that you can get the mind quite still, very still, very solid, with a good strong sense of well-being. That's part of the path. You want to learn how to master it so that you can take advantage of it. At that point, use those perceptions of inconstant, stressful, and not-self to deal with anything that's going to pull you away. And they have their power, because you know you've got something better to hold onto.

You push in this direction as far as you can go, and then you begin to realize that the concentration, too, has its ups and downs. It, too, has its inconstancy. That's when you want to look for something still better. We have the Buddha's example and that of all the noble disciples to encourage us in this direction: Find something better than this. It's when you've invested a lot in the concentration and learned a lot and gained a lot from it that the insight into inconstancy, stress, and not-self is really going to have power.

Some people say, "Why bother with all that work? Can't we just start off from the very beginning labeling things this way?" Well, you can, but you miss a lot of what's going on. You miss the fact that you're fabricating things, you're putting things together, the extent to which you are participating, even in something as basic as the fact that you're picking up sights, sounds, smells, tastes, tactile sensations—there's an intentional element there and you're not going to see it if the mind isn't very, very still.

I've told you before about the young man from Singapore, who wrote a letter to Ajaan Fuang one time, asking for advice in his practice, saying that he was labeling things as everything he saw and did as impermanent, suffering, and not-self, and he wanted to know if that was the right path. Ajaan Fuang told me to write back and say, "Who is it that's labeling things these ways? Look at that. That's where the problem is. The problem is not with the things. It's what the mind is trying to do with those things, make out of those things." And you're not going to see that unless the mind is very, very still.

So always keep in mind that discernment is a factor of reflecting on the principle of action—what you're doing, the results you're doing—learning how to change what you're doing so you can find some results that really are long-term welfare and happiness. It comes from ardency and evaluation. Keep the questions coming back to your actions, coming back to your actions. That's where the problem is, and the act of coming back and looking at them and looking at the results—that's where the solution lies. Always give that your foremost attention.