

## *Discernment – Commit & Reflect*

*December 10, 2020*

There's a sutta where the Buddha lists things that are desirable but hard to obtain. And it's an interesting list. Some of the things are worldly, like wealth and friendship. Others have to do with the Dhamma: things like virtue, celibacy, discernment, and the Dhamma itself. Two of the most interesting explanations he has, as to the obstacles to these things, are the ones for discernment and for the Dhamma.

For discernment, he says the obstacles are an unwillingness to listen and a lack of questioning. Now, this can apply to discernment in its sense of the discernment that comes from listening —*sutamaya-pañña*—and the discernment that comes from thinking—*cintamaya-pañña*. If you don't listen, you're not going to learn. Or you can hear things, but if you have no questions, you don't really engage with how what you've heard relates to your mind.

As for the Dhamma: Here it's "Dhamma" in the sense that the Thai ajaans talk about "finding the Dhamma" or "reaching the Dhamma." It's not so much the teachings, it's more the quality of Dhamma within your own heart. And the two obstacles there, the Buddha said, are a lack of commitment and no reflection.

In other words, if you don't *do* the dhammas—that's one of the meanings of "dhamma," by the way, an action: If you don't do the actions the Buddha recommended, you're not going to know the Dhamma. You'll just know the names of the dhammas. But the Dhamma itself, the quality of the heart that comes from the practice: That's going to be beyond you.

But simply doing it, even committing yourself to the practice, is not enough. You have to reflect on what you're doing. Remember the Buddha's image to Rahula, when he first taught him about the practice. "Look at your actions as you'd look into a mirror." Because your actions reflect your mind. Of course, the mind is where we have to look anyhow.

So you need to have this quality of reflecting back: When you do something, what's the intention? When you've finished something, what were the results? Were they in line with your intention? What could be improved? It's this ability

to reflect on your actions: That's where you're going to learn the Dhamma—especially the Dhamma that's really going to be useful.

After all, as the four noble truths point out, the cause of suffering is not outside. It's not in sights, sounds, smells, tastes, tactile sensations; it's not in what other people do or don't do. It's in what your own mind does or doesn't do. Yet the mind's constantly flowing out, paying attention to things outside, and paying very little attention to itself. So we've got to turn that around.

Of course, simply looking at the mind can get pretty depressing. This is why you also commit yourself to the practice. This is a quality of truthfulness. If you're going to know the truth—as Ajaan Lee used to say, “If you're going to know the truth, *you* have to be true.” If you're unwilling to commit, it's like standing on the edge of a swimming pool. The water looks cold, and you think “Gee, that water looks awfully cold, I don't know if I can take it.” You wonder about it, but you don't jump in. Yet as long as you don't jump in, you're not going to know anything about it. You've got to *give* yourself to the practice if you're really going to know it. The attitude that a lot of people have—“Well, prove it to me first, and then I'll practice”: That gets you nowhere.

There are so many things in the practice that you have to take as working hypotheses that can't be proven, beginning with the fact that you can actually *do* an action. It's not some outside force acting through you. You don't really know that. There are so many things we think we know, but we don't.

But the Buddha says, take it as a hypothesis: that the quality of your intentions will determine the results of the actions. And these results will come back to you. Take *that* as a working hypothesis. Commit yourself. Try these things out. The Buddha's argument, before you try things out, is to think about it: If you didn't believe in the power of your actions, would you be careful in what you did? No. And if you do? Yes. Okay, that's a pragmatic test.

But then again, the real proof comes when you actually do it. Ajaan Fuang made this point in one of his Dhamma talks, one of the few that were actually recorded and transcribed. He said that if you suffer from uncertainty, it's because of a lack of truth in yourself. After all, the things that the Buddha says you should be certain about are not far off. They deal with: What's skillful in the mind? What's unskillful in the mind? If you don't actually try to develop some skill,

you're not going to know. You won't have a basis for comparison.

So you've got to *do* these things if you're going to understand, if you're going to gain some discernment. You have to do the path in order to understand the path. And reflect on what you're doing as you do it. You see this with the precepts; you see this with the practice of generosity: really basic stuff. Consciously be more generous, consciously be stricter with yourself about the precepts, and notice what happens. If you're going to be stricter about the precepts, you find you're more careful. If you're more generous, you find there's a good quality that develops in the mind.

Then the lessons you've learned there give you a little bit more confidence, as you meditate, that you know how to observe your mind. I don't know *how* many people come and say, "I can't tell what's a comfortable breath from an uncomfortable breath." Well, who's going to tell for you? You've got to try a certain rhythm of breathing for a while, and then you try another rhythm of breathing, and then compare the results.

You're not going to *know* until you *do*. Right view gives you some pointers as to what to do, and things to look for, but the actual knowledge is something else. That comes from doing things and then reflecting on the actions, and then changing them, and then reflecting on your actions and their results again. After a while, you begin to gain a sense of the difference: which is more skillful, which is more useful, which has a better impact on the mind.

That's the kind of discernment that allows you to see the Dhamma as a quality in the heart. And that's the kind of discernment that's really worthwhile. That's what we're aiming at. It is possible to understand the books—what's in the books, what's in the suttas, what's in the teachings of the ajaans— on one level, but if you're going to make a value judgement as to the worth of those teachings, you have to put them into practice.

And you remember that discernment *is* a value judgement as to what's worth doing, what's not worth doing. Because everything the Buddha teaches is focused on action. After all, as you see your actions, you begin to see the mind in action. And you catch yourself: "Oh, I'm doing *this*. I'm clinging here. Craving there. Here in the midst of things I *want* to do, I can find some stress. And I can find the causes for stress. Do I still want to do them?"

If you don't see an alternative, you'll stick with what you're doing regardless. But when you start seeing that there are alternatives, then your discernment develops. You see distinctions. This is why "trying to see everything as one" is *not* how you develop discernment. As the Buddha said, to gain discernment, you have to see things as *separate*. "This is one thing; that's something else. Doing this gives these results; doing that gives those results. Which is better? Which is more worthwhile?"

Or as Luang Puu Dune used to say, you develop your discernment by trying to see things in pairs. Have something to compare. I have a student who teaches software design. He said one of his most effective lessons one time was when he had a student who wrote what he called "ugly code." He had to give the student a sense of how ugly it was, so he pulled out a piece of code that was designed to do basically what the student's code was designed to do, but in a much more elegant way. And it was because the student could see, "Okay, these two things were aiming at the same purpose, but they went about it in a very different way, and one was obviously superior," the student really began to improve his skills.

It's when you see things in pairs, when you have something to compare in your actions, that you learn. You commit yourself to doing one thing, you commit to doing something slightly different, and you reflect: That's how you get the kind of discernment that comes from developing—*bhavanamaya-pañña*, which is the kind of discernment that's going to make a difference in your mind.

This is the strength of discernment that develops on the strength of conviction. Without conviction, you're not going to commit. When you have conviction, persistence, mindfulness, concentration, all these things come together to make your discernment strong. Then the discernment turns around and solidifies those other qualities, because you begin to see things for yourself. You're taking them not just on faith or because you believe in them. It's because you've seen them. You move from right view to right knowledge.

And the knowledge is what makes the difference in the mind. Some people talk about how they're going to cut the fetters and get to stream-entry. But it doesn't work that way. The fetters are not something you can *cut* through an act of will, because there'll be something hiding behind that act of will. But when you've had your first glimpse of the deathless, when you know it's for real, then

you come back and everything else looks different. It's that glimpse—the *seeing*—that cuts the fetters. It's the seeing that makes a difference.

And where does that ability to see come from? From committing yourself and reflecting. So keep these two principles in mind. They're the nutriment for your discernment that makes it strong.