

Analysis of Dhammas

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The Buddha tells of how when he was young and it finally hit him really hard that he wasn't going to be young forever. He was going to grow old, get sick, ultimately die. And here he was, looking for happiness in things that would also grow old, get sick, and die. He decided the only thing that was really worthwhile to take as a goal was something that would not grow old, get sick, or die—something that was deathless. So he went out and searched. And he characterized his search as the search for what is skillful.

It's an interesting connection—that to find the deathless, you'd have to find something skillful. He was assuming several things. One was that if the deathless is to be found, it's going to be found through human action. It doesn't just come floating by. Awakening is not a spiritual accident. It comes from your actions.

The idea of a skill also implies that there are patterns to the actions. Certain actions lead to good results. Other actions lead to bad results. There's enough of a pattern that things make sense, but not so much of a pattern that everything is pre-determined. There is some freedom of choice.

All those are the basic assumptions that lead to wisdom and discernment.

In the factors for awakening, the discernment faculty, called analysis of dhammas—which can mean either analysis of qualities or analysis of actions—is fostered by paying careful attention to what's skillful and what's not skillful. Which thoughts side with the dark side of the mind? Which ones side with the bright side of the mind? Here again, there's an assumption—that the mind is the cause of the actions, and you do have choice. There will be some actions that lead to good results, and others that won't lead to good results. If you pay appropriate attention to that issue, you'll be able to see for yourself. In fact, that's a lot of what discernment is: looking for yourself, not just simply believing what you're told.

You take certain things as working hypotheses, and you put them to the test. When the Buddha was talking to the Kalamas, that's what he was basically saying. You don't just go by scriptures or out of respect for your teacher. You also don't go by your own sense of reason, or what you like, or what seems to make sense given your current worldview. You have to look at what actually happens when you act on certain teachings, certain principles. If you see that they're unskillful, you abandon them. If they're skillful, you develop them.

Some people say that this teaching for the Kalamas was meant only for people who aren't really Buddhist, who haven't committed themselves to the path. And,

in one sense, those people are right, because the Buddha says that once you've committed yourself, you keep reminding yourself, "The Buddha knows. I don't know yet, but the Buddha does." But that doesn't mean that you accept things blindly. You still have to test them, because discernment is a matter of seeing things for yourself.

Now, you do get some advice from others. One of the ways of augmenting your discernment is to ask those who know: What is skillful, what is not, what leads to long-term happiness, what leads to long-term suffering and pain—which is a good working definition for skillful and unskillful. But you've got to look. You get ideas from other people but then you've got to test them. As the Buddha said, he points the way, but it's up to you to not merely to obey him, but to take his teachings and see if they really work. This is a principle that's really strong in the forest tradition.

Ajaan Maha Boowa at one point once said, "Try to prove the Buddha wrong." In other words, you have conviction in the Buddha. But still, you've got to test it. Is this conviction well founded? To find out, you pay appropriate attention. In other words, you look at what you do when you try to follow the path, and you gauge the results. If something is working, you keep that in mind. If it's not working, you keep that in mind as well. You have to depend on your powers of observation.

Ajaan Lee, when he talks about this factor of awakening, analysis of dhammas, equates it with directed thought and evaluation. That's one of the ways in which it manifests itself as you're doing concentration practice, because these factors for awakening start with mindfulness and end with concentration. They basically show you how to use your discernment, when you start out being mindful, to get it into concentration. The key is basically learning to adjust the mind and the object of the mind so that they fit snugly together and the breath is a good place to stay. You're working with the breath. Can you evaluate the breath? What ways of breathing are good? What ways of perceiving or conceiving the breath are helpful? If you're not sure, try some out because there's nobody to tell you, "Okay, a breath this long is going to be good for you here, a breath that long, or fast breathing, slow breathing, whatever."

Some people will tell you that you have to focus around the mouth. That's one possible translation of a term, *parimukham*, which is used in a lot of the Buddha's descriptions of breath meditation. But it's also used in his descriptions of other types of meditation that have nothing to do with breath at all. In fact, universal goodwill meditation also starts by establishing mindfulness *parimukham*, and when you're extending thoughts of goodwill to all beings, you're not focused

around the mouth. What the word seems to mean is that you bring the topic of the meditation to the fore. You make that the most interesting and prominent thing in your range of awareness. Don't let other things come in and take over or obscure it. This means that you can focus anywhere you want in the body. You can focus on your little toe if you like. You can focus in your bones. Just keep your focal point always to the fore.

Ajaan Lee gives you some ideas for good resting spots of the breath, as he calls them: the areas from which the breath energy seems to emanate as you breathe in. But those are just the beginning. When you look at his Dhamma talks after he wrote "Method Two," you find that he has lots of different ways of dealing with the breath. Sometimes they go against the ways he recommends in "Method Two." Instead of having the breath go down the spine, for instance, he has it go up.

He also talks about different levels of breath energy in the body. You can investigate those. There's the in-and-out breath, and then there's what he calls the refined breath, which are the waves of energy that go through the blood vessels and the nerves. Then there's the profound breath, which is still. We've got all these levels of breath going on in the body at any one time. It's simply a matter which one you're going to tune in to, and which one is good for your mind right now. That's what appropriate attention means: You check out these various things and see the results. This is how you develop your own discernment. It's a development of your own sensitivity.

I was reading recently someone saying that the word *pañña* in Pali, which we translate as discernment, really doesn't mean just discernment. It means profound understanding of the three characteristics. But the word *pañña* is related to a verb, *pajanati*, and that can relate to anything, profound or un-profound, where you use your discernment to distinguish what's happening, what's also good about what's happening, or what's wrong with what's happening. Even noticing that your breath is short or long: That's *pajanati*. You notice when a certain mind state is present or absent: That's also *pajanati*. But more importantly, you're going to see connections. Discernment sees distinctions, but it has to see connections between these things that you've seen as separate or distinct.

As the Buddha said, it's when you see things as separate, that's when you understand them—separate but interacting, but particularly separate from your awareness. Your breath is one thing. Your awareness is something else. This is where the factor of analysis of dhammas goes beyond just directed thought and evaluation in the first jhana. You use it to start evaluating your concentration as you go from one level to the next. And whether you're leaving that jhana to do a

little first jhana work before you go into the next jhana, or however you divide it up, the important thing is that you're checking to see: How is the meditation going? Where is it still? Where is it not still? Where is the disturbance right now?

You want to wait until the mind is thoroughly settled in before you do this. That's something else you have to gauge: When are you ready for this asking of questions? Sometimes it's all you can do just to get the mind to settle down and stay there, which, if that's all you can handle right now, that's what you *should* do. But there will come a point where you can ask, "Is this as still as the mind could be, or could it be even more still? And what's preventing it from settling down even further?" You can get some ideas from the Buddha's map of the different levels of concentration, but you've got to see these things in action. Again, this is where the real discernment comes in, the real sensitivity. You see it as you get the mind still but there's an unevenness to the stillness.

There's a level of subtle stress that goes up and down. You want to catch it when it goes up. What did you do when it went up? What did you do when it went down? What was the perception that made it go up? When the perception dropped, did it go down? Maybe they're connected. Check it out.

There's lots to gauge: the perception, the point where you're focused, the quality of the breath, the range of your awareness. There's a lot to experiment with. That's how you develop this factor, because it connects with the next one, which is persistence, i.e., right effort.

Once you know that something is skillful, you try to develop it. If it's unskillful, you try to drop it. You're not learning these things simply, as they say in Thai, to decorate your mind. You're learning these distinctions so that you can put them to use. After all, when the Buddha was searching for what is skillful, he didn't stop with knowing that something was skillful or unskillful. He put that knowledge to use. It was for the sake of the deathless.

So you keep checking as the mind settles down. We're heading for something that doesn't change, so you want to look at the state of the mind that you develop as you get the mind concentrated and make it as unchanging as you can. That allows you to see subtle levels of change that you might not have noticed otherwise.

This is how you explore. This is how you put that knowledge to use. This is the path that the Buddha followed in order to find the deathless. And the path hasn't changed. It's simply up to us to follow it as best we can, with as much sensitivity as we can, so that we can find the same results that he did.