

Virtue, Concentration, Discernment

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There's a passage in one of his books where Ajaan Lee blurs the distinctions between virtue, concentration, and discernment. Concentration, he says, is a developed aspect of virtue: As you're sitting here, you're not only observing the five precepts outside, but as you get the mind into concentration you're observing them *inside*. You're not killing your good qualities; you're not stealing the bad qualities of other people to think about; you're not engaging in illicit thoughts about sex; you're not lying to yourself; and you're not intoxicated. You're alert; you're mindful.

At the same time, as you develop your discernment, you bring the mind to deeper and deeper levels of peace. In this way, discernment is an advanced version of concentration. This is a theme that you see throughout the Forest tradition. Ajaan Chah makes a comparison: He says the practice is like a mango. The mango has one end where the stem is, and another end on the other side, but it's all one mango. Virtue is the stem side, discernment is the other side, but it's all one mango.

So the question is: What is the advantage of thinking in these ways? One is that it reminds you that as you work on any of these three trainings, you're strengthening the two others. This is why, when Ajaan Suwat was asked how to bring meditation into daily life, he said, "Work on your precepts."

One of the people there who was listening in was very upset, thinking that Ajaan Suwat was implying that lay people were not up to doing *real* meditation in the daily life. But his point was actually something else entirely. Remember, the word for meditation, *bhāvanā*, means to develop. And as you're developing good qualities through observing the precepts, these qualities are then going to have an impact on your concentration and on your discernment.

Remember what discernment is. It starts with the question that lies as a thread through all three of these practices: "What, when I do it, will lead to my long-term welfare and happiness? What, when I do it, would lead to my long-term harm and pain?" By observing the precepts you're working for your long-term welfare and happiness. At the same time, you're developing that inner voice of the observer, the *commentator*, and you're learning how to train it.

So much has been written about how horrible it is that we have this inner critic: We have to silence the inner critic, and learn how to speak to ourselves only in positive terms.

That's what they tell us, but the issue is a lot subtler than that. The inner critic has to know: What are the values you want to talk about? What are the things you should be observing? You should be observing when you're doing harm—and how you can stop doing harm.

How many levels of harm are there? There are many levels: There's the harm you can do with your speech—harm to yourself, harm to others. There's the harm you can do with your actions. And as you get into concentration, *harm* is not quite the word, it turns into *disturbance*.

How do you disturb yourself when you're meditating? You start out with directed thought and evaluation, but there comes a point where you don't need those parts of the concentration any more, and you have to drop them. That way, you get into a state of concentration that's less disturbed. Then the disturbance is the rapture, and you drop that. You go to the pleasure and then you get to a point where even pleasure seems to be a disturbance—the mind wants to be really still. Even the fact that you have to breathe seems to be a disturbance—you want to be that still.

From there you can go into the formless states, where having to maintain a perception of the shape of the body is a disturbance. And so on through the various levels of concentration.

This then shades into discernment: You see how the mind creates unnecessary suffering for itself—sometimes in the concentration, sometimes as you're leaving concentration, sometimes as you're going through the day—and you learn to drop that. Whatever is *causing* it, you drop the cause.

So it's all one process, simply that it differs in levels of subtlety. What you find that as you make it more subtle is that you're focusing more and more attention on this commentator inside. What are its values? And how harmless is the commentator? The commentator will learn how to focus on other parts of the mind—as you're going through the day, as you're sitting in meditating—but also, it has to learn how to focus on itself, it has to *train* itself. For instance, it may be focusing on the fact that the pressure you're putting on the breath is too strong, but how does it tell you that it's too strong? Does it tell you in a way that's self-defeating, or in a way that's encouraging? “Here's a mistake you're making, but you can undo the mistake, and you can get more, and more skilled.”

So in all three cases—virtue, concentration, and discernment—we're training this inner commentator, bringing it more, and more to the fore. It starts, with virtue, commenting primarily on your intentions: What is your intention in acting? What is your intention in speaking?

Ajaan Mun made a big point about this. The textbooks in Thailand that were produced in the 1910s defined virtue simply as restraint of body and speech, with no mention of intention at all. Ajaan Mun pointed out that it was taking a ceremonial view of the precepts, a purely external view of the precepts, whereas the true essence of the precepts, the true essence of virtue, was the intention.

That focus on intention then goes into your concentration—you *intend* to stay with one thing. It goes into your discernment—you *intend* to solve this problem of why the mind keeps creating unnecessary suffering. And so you reflect. This falls in line with that passage

where the Buddha says that the two ways you learn the Dhamma are through *commitment* and through *reflection*. You commit yourself to the triple training, and then you reflect on how well you're doing it.

Then you reflect on the commentator to see how skillful it is. You make sure that it's not discouraging, that it's not a horrible beast of a critic, that its criticism is there, not so much to put a final stamp of disapproval on something, but simply to say that, given that this is a work in progress, this is how things can be done better, so let's do them better.

In this way, all three parts of the triple training are connected in that they're training that inner commentator. After a while, you get more, and more interested in, "Who is this commentator? Who's talking to whom in here? Why does the mind need to be sending messages like this?" That's when things get really interesting. It's when you get this inner commentator on friendly terms with everybody else in the mind that you can really look into it—not trying to push it away, not trying to deny it, but just simply to see: What's going on? Why does this have to go on? What happens if we stop?

Ajaan Lee again: In his description of the different jhanas, he makes the point that when you leave the first jhana and go into the second, dropping your directed thought and evaluation, that's one spot when the noble path and the noble fruit can appear.

There are the three aspects of your self: the self as the producer, the self as the consumer, and the self as the commentator. Focusing in on the commentator, you see an awful lot. When you can let go of it, there's a lot of freedom—but you can't let it go until it's been trained. And who's going to do the training? It has to train itself.

This is why we say that you don't drop your sense of self right at the beginning. You learn how to train your sense of self until it's worked so well that it's no longer needed. That's when you put it down.

So it's through training all aspects of the mind—through virtue, concentration, and discernment—that this inner commentator gets trained as well. When it's well-trained, you can see it for what it is and let it go—on friendly terms.