

## *Strengthening Discernment*

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The standard definition of discernment is the comprehension of fabrications, or *sankharas*, and you try to comprehend fabrications in terms of the four noble truths: seeing, on the one hand, how some fabrications cause suffering and actually constitute suffering—suffering itself is a fabrication—and on the other, how you can turn some of these fabrications into the path.

After all, the path is something you put together. Some people think the path is just being equanimous, learning how to watch things arise and pass, pass, pass away, and not get involved. But equanimity, it turns out, is also a kind of fabrication. And you need more than just equanimity in order to really understand fabrications.

One of the best ways to develop discernment around fabrications is to actually put the factors of the path together. It's like getting a chemistry set. You learn about the chemicals by mixing them in different ways. The best way to do that with your meditation is to mix the fabrications of your mind and your body in a way that gives rise to a sense of real stillness, so you can see things very, very clearly and, in the course of getting there, you really come to understand how the mind acts. This is how it deals with the breath, how it deals with feelings and perceptions, to create a state of becoming. Then, from that state of becoming, when you're really solid and very clear, you can see the subtle fabrications going on that you would otherwise have missed.

So, we're focusing on the breath. This is called bodily fabrication. How do you use this bodily fabrication to create a state of right concentration? As you watch the breath, you begin to notice that there are feelings, and the way you breathe is going to be guided by your perception, your mental image, of what it actually means to breathe. There's a whole tribe of people out there who, every time they say they focus on the breath, point to their nose. But that's not the only place where you feel the breath. In fact, if that's your perception of what the breath is, it's important to realize that you can create a lot of tightness, a sense of constriction, lots of uncomfortable feelings in the body, as you try to focus everything on that one spot.

And stop to think: When the Buddha is talking about right concentration, he says you want to have a sense of ease, fullness, refreshment going throughout the whole body, suffusing and permeating the body. It can come in waves over the body. Or it's totally still and solid throughout the body. There is a sense of peace that fills the body. The important thing is that the ease and pleasure pervade your sense of the whole body.

What kind of breath could lead you there? And what perception of breathing could lead you there? This is where it's useful to think of the breathing as a whole body process. The breath is not the air. It's the energy that allows the air to come in. And that's only one aspect of the breath energy. There are other energies that flow throughout the body as well. You can think of these energies coming in waves through body as you breathe in and breathe out. And that can get you to one level of concentration. It allows the mind to settle down with a sense of spaciousness, so you're not clamping down on one spot in the body.

Then if you think further, there's Ajaan Lee's distinction between what he calls the visiting

breath and the resident breath. The resident breath is the sense of energy that's there all the time, like the cosmic background radiation from the Big Bang. It's always there in the background. If you hold that perception of the breath in mind—with all the blood vessels and all the nerves as being breath channels, and they connect throughout the body, out to every pore—then if one part of the body seems to be starved of breath energy, where can it get that energy from? If it has to pull it in from outside, it's disturbing. How about allowing it to flow in from other parts of the body? Think of everything connecting up, connecting up, connecting up. Go through the whole body with that perception of allowing things to connect, and that your body is open on all sides like a sponge. Then notice how that feels.

That act of noticing is called evaluation. It's a verbal fabrication.

What you're doing is that you direct your thoughts to the breath, which is another kind of verbal fabrication. And then you hold in mind certain perceptions of the breath, and try to develop a perception that allows the mind to settle down with a sense of ease and refreshment filling the body. The feelings of ease and refreshment count mental fabrication. And the perceptions that you hold in mind of the breath, count as mental fabrication as well.

This means that you've got all the three of the major kinds of fabrication right here: bodily, verbal, and mental. You're putting them together to create a sense of ease and well-being. This state of becoming in the present moment is called right concentration.

So it's through mixing the chemicals that you learn about chemistry, through dealing with fabrication that you learn about the processes of fabrications in your experience of body and mind. You begin to see subtle levels of fabrication in the mind that you may not have noticed otherwise: assumptions that you carried around, for instance, about the breath. And you'll catch yourself as you do this, sometimes thinking of the breath shrinking as it goes out, forgetting that the resident breath doesn't have to shrink. If your sense of energy shrinks with every out-breath, and your awareness shrinks with every out-breath, you won't be able to create that full body, still, constant, awareness that the Buddha is asking you to develop.

So on the one hand, you want to keep in the back of your mind his descriptions of right concentration, and on the other hand, watch what you're doing. Use the descriptions as a way of evaluating. Are you getting there or not? If not, what's wrong with your perception? What's wrong with the way you breathe? What's wrong about the way that you're thinking about things and evaluating them? Could you do this more skillfully?

This requires that you use your ingenuity, an aspect of discernment that all too often gets overlooked. But it's something that you have to strengthen all the way along the path. Not only in concentration, but also when you're developing your virtue. Working with the precepts, you'll find yourself running up against situations in which you know that if you stick very narrow-mindedly to the precept, you may be causing trouble. So how do you stick with it, avoid breaking it, and yet avoid the trouble? You've got to use your ingenuity. Like in the cases where you don't want to tell the whole truth because you know someone will get damaged: How do you change the subject? How do you answer a question without really answering it? You have to use your ingenuity.

Or if there are ants or other pests in the house: How do you get rid of them without killing them? The dumb way is to go around killing them every chance you get. That doesn't require much intelligence. The ingenious way is to figure out: How do we get the pests out and not kill them at all?

This issue came up once in a discussion group, when we were talking about how to deal

with ants in the house. And someone complained, "Gee, a really profound subject here tonight, dealing with ants in the house." I said: "Look, if you can't figure out an intelligent way to rid your house of ants without killing them, how are you going to figure out more subtle things?" This is a good test of your ingenuity right here. It's a good test of how you fabricate a situation, how you perceive it, how you think about it. And this applies to all aspects of life. The way you talk with other people, the way you have dealings with other people, the way you deal with hardships in life: All of these are a test of your ingenuity, a test of your ability to fabricate a state of mind that doesn't suffer in the face of difficulties, hardships, the rough and tumble of every day. That's an aspect of discernment as well.

So the way we strengthen discernment is by looking at every opportunity we have in life to understand how we're fabricating a particular situation through our perception of it, and how we can change our perception about the opportunities, the alternatives, that are available to us.

This comes back down to the standard description of how discernment develops and how it's made strong: through developing virtue and concentration. It's not that discernment is the end product that comes once the virtue and concentration are developed. It's in the process of developing the concentration, it's in the process of working with the challenges of the precepts, that your discernment grows stronger day by day.