

Developing Discernment

August 4, 2009

The Pali word, *pañña*, is usually translated as “wisdom.” It’s one of the qualities we’re trying to develop as we follow the path. “Wisdom” may not be the best translation, though. One reason is that the Pali noun *pañña* has a verb to go with it, *pajanati*, as we chanted just now, *ye dukkham na pajanati*, whereas “wisdom” doesn’t have a corresponding verb. And the other reason is that *pañña* is a quality that we all have to some extent, yet a lot of us are not very wise.

I remember when I was first staying with Ajaan Fuang and would have problems in the meditation. I’d ask him about them, and he’d say, “Well, use your *pañña*.” One day I said to him, “But I don’t have any *pañña* yet. That’s why I’m here trying to meditate.” He looked at me as if I had come from the other side of the world, which of course I had. But he went on to say, “Everybody has some *pañña*, otherwise you wouldn’t be a human being.” So I went back to think about what he said, and finally came to the conclusion that what he was talking about was discernment. As I checked the various texts, the places where *pajanati* is used as a verb, “discern” fits very well. You discern something. Something was hard to see before, but now you can have the discernment to see it. You see distinctions.

This is a lot of what *pañña* is. One of the standard definitions is seeing arising and passing away. On the one level, that’s very common. We see things arising and passing away all the time. There’s the sound of the crickets starting and stopping, there’s the arising of the breath, passing away of the breath, the arising of a feeling, the passing away of a feeling. But the purpose of seeing these things arise and pass away is to see what we’re doing as they arise and pass away, so that we can learn to act skillfully. And ultimately, of course, we want to see the arising and passing away of suffering, stress, so that we can understand how it arises, how it passes away. If you don’t see the arising and passing away, you can’t see the factors that go into causing them. When you can’t see the factors that cause them, you can’t let them go.

This arising and passing is happening all the time. It’s right here. So the question is learning how to discern it. How do we do that? How do we see something that’s been right next to us all the time but we’ve been overlooking? The texts recognize three types of discernment. The first is the discernment that comes from listening, which in our day and age would also include reading Dhamma books. The second is the discernment that comes from thinking things through, pondering them over. And finally there’s the discernment that comes from developing. It’s through listening and reading that we get the basic ideas of what the practice is all about, and what to pay attention to. Thinking things through allows us to see how they make sense. But the real discernment that actually makes all the difference and can liberate the mind is the one that comes from developing.

Developing what? The Buddha lists five strengths: the strength of conviction, strength of persistence, strength of mindfulness, strength of concentration, and strength of discernment. And he explains them in such a way to show that the first four lead to the fifth. So if you're looking into ways for how to develop discernment, look at how to develop conviction, persistence, mindfulness, and concentration.

How do these things contribute to giving rise to discernment? First there's the strength of conviction. This means conviction in the awakening of the Buddha, that it was an important event that makes all the difference in the world: the fact that someone through his own efforts was able to find true happiness, and was able to do that not because he was a special divine being, but because he developed qualities of mind that all of us have in potential form. As he once said, insight and light arise in one who is ardent, resolute, and heedful. So it wasn't because he was some great being who just naturally had these insights. Anyone—that's the implication— anyone who becomes ardent, resolute, and heedful can develop these qualities, too.

So think about what that means for you. True happiness is possible if you work at it. This conviction gives rise to discernment in the sense that you take the arising and passing away of suffering seriously. You take your actions seriously. And you take that possibility for true happiness seriously—so that when your desire for immediate entertainment comes in and says, "I don't know about this, I'd rather look for entertainment right now," conviction gets you to turn and look at that desire: "I don't know about you either. Where do you really go?"

Because, consciously or not, we're always mapping our lives against the lives of other people. We've seen somebody out there whose life seems to be a good life. And we've been mapping our lives on that. Sometimes it's in seeing other people having fun: We'd like to have fun the way they do. Seeing people excel in a particular skill, and we'd like to excel the way they do, because it looks like a good way to live. It looks like we'd be happy doing that ourselves. And so what the principle of conviction is asking is that we take the Buddha's life as our map, as a basis for judging what it's possible for a human being to do.

And to develop discernment, this is one of the topics of recollection to reflect on. If you get tired of the breath, you can reflect on the Buddha and his awakening, how it's not just a story coming in from the past. It's not just a myth from an archetype. It's an actual example of how a human being can live, what a human being is capable of. That right there gives rise to discernment of: (1) what's a worthwhile goal, and (2) what's involved in finding true happiness. It gets your priorities straight.

As you develop conviction in this way, it should give rise to the strength of persistence, the willingness to put more effort into making your actions skillful. We're not here to practice simply at a leisurely rate, or what feels comfortable to us. We have to stretch ourselves, to put more effort into it than we may like. Because if you just go along at your normal casual rate, it doesn't force you to discern new things that you didn't see before.

The issue then becomes: How can you put in more effort and yet not get strung out? How can you give yourself encouragement, to keep going, even when the results are not immediate? This requires ingenuity. It requires an understanding of how you can get the best results most efficiently. Because right effort doesn't mean just pure exertion. It means *skillful* effort, having a sense of how much effort is too much, how much is too little, and a sense of what kind of effort is needed at any one particular time. When do you have to work, say, at a particular unskillful quality? When do you simply watch it, to see it fade away?

It's not the case that every defilement is going to fade away simply by your being mindful and noting it, or by trying to burn it away. Defilements don't get burnt away—they get understood. That's when you can get past them. Sometimes you can understand a particular defilement—a particular case of greed, aversion, or delusion—simply by watching it and seeing, "Oh, this is how it comes; this is how it goes." Because you never watched it before, the ability to observe it can cut through what you hadn't noticed before.

Other times, though, the defilements are not that easy to deal with. They're more tenacious. You have to exert more effort. You have to change the way you breathe, the way you think about and you perceive the situation that gives rise to the defilement. That requires a more active figuring out. And there are some defilements that you can't uproot right now, so you simply have to put them aside. At least cut their strength down, so that you've got room in your mind in which you can actually practice.

So that's another type of discernment that develops from putting effort into the practice: learning how to live with the knowledge that you've got some unfinished business. You're not *repressing* the defilement—in other words, you're not denying that it's there. You're *suppressing* it, putting it aside for the time being, and you learn how to live with the fact that you've got those goals that you haven't attained yet, but you're going to keep working on them. That's a lot of discernment right there. So as you apply the strength of persistence, you develop a lot of discernment, beginning to distinguish what's skillful and unskillful, what particular type of effort is needed, whether it's an active one or a more passive one, or whether the particular problem you have is one where you try to comprehend the stress, or where you notice the cause so that you can abandon it, and what you're going to do to develop good qualities in the mind. And having a sense of the right time and place to work on something, and the right time to let it go for the time being.

Underlying all this is your ability to generate desire to do this. This is where you have to psych yourself up. How do you encourage yourself? How do you get yourself interested? Sometimes you can read the teachings of some of the ajaans who give a lot of encouragement. Or you think of their examples.

The Buddha lists three ways of psyching yourself up. One is thinking about how much you really would like to not be suffering anymore. This is called putting yourself first. Another is thinking about the excellence of the Dhamma: that it's really hard to find a teaching like this.

Here's your chance. You've found it, you can work with it. You have its guidance available. It may not be there all the time, so take advantage of it now. That's called putting the Dhamma first.

The third is an interesting one. It's called putting the world first. What it means is realizing that there are some people out there who can read minds. They can read your mind. You're supposed to be meditating, but what are you doing? Are you really meditating? Or are you dithering around with something else? You'd rather show them that you're actually serious about what you're doing. This reflection can apply not only to meditation, but also to your daily life. You want to present a good example to other people. That's called putting the world first.

So see which one of those motivations works at any one time. You may find that one may work today, and another may work tomorrow. Or you may find that you've got to come up with other ways of encouraging yourself. This is an awfully important part of using persistence as a way to develop discernment. You have to talk yourself into doing the things that you know will lead to long-term welfare and happiness, even though you may not like doing them right now. You also have to know how to talk yourself *out* of doing things you like to do right now but you know are not going to lead to long-term happiness. That's an important part of discernment right there. And the way you develop it is by putting in the effort, putting in the effort. If you find yourself getting strung out, you've got to find some way of giving yourself more energy, fine-tuning the effort so it's really effective.

Strength of mindfulness builds on that, because you realize you've got to keep this quest in mind all the time. You begin to see that if you forget it and wander off into other things, it's very easy to slip into old mental states that are not all that productive. Why? Because you simply forgot what you are here for. This is one of the features of the process called "becoming." We create worlds in the mind, and it's amazing how quickly one world can be dropped and another can be created in its place. And while you're in that particular world, you may find that it has no reference to the Buddha's awakening at all, no reference to the practice at all. When you're not mindful, you start indulging in that particular world, and the whole world of the meditation just gets dropped—a huge gap, so that the meditation doesn't develop the kind of momentum that it should.

Because that's another aspect of persistence: being mindful to stick with it consistently, so that you begin to see things in the mind that you didn't see before. A lot of the mind's subterfuges lie in the gaps. As Ajaan Lee once said, there comes a point when the mind just passes out and suddenly you find yourself in a different world. What happened in the moment of passing out? You don't know. What you're really doing is that you're hiding these things from yourself. It's like what happens in a play. They try to create the illusion that you're in a parlor in pre-revolutionary Russia, but it doesn't help to see them putting up the set or all the actresses putting on the makeup. They want you to get the impression of pre-revolutionary

Russia immediately, so everything gets done behind the curtain. The set gets put up, the actresses go out and come back in, and as curtain rises, there you are: pre-revolutionary Russia.

The mind does the same sort of thing. It hides things behind curtains to construct its little worlds. If you saw yourself constructing the worlds, you'd see all the ignorance and other unskillful qualities that go into the process, and you wouldn't believe the worlds that result. But part of the mind wants you to believe them, wants you to go off into those worlds. So in order to fight that tendency, you've got to be consistently mindful. When you're mindful, you begin to see these processes as they're happening. This is another way in which mindfulness develops discernment.

Then the fourth strength, of course, is concentration. Concentration is basically developed mindfulness, able to stay with one frame of reference really consistently, whether it's the body or whatever topic you find congenial. The Buddha doesn't force everybody to stick with the breath all the time. In fact, he has other topics of meditation, too. When the breath gets boring, you can think about the different parts of the body, think about the virtues of the Buddha, the Dhamma, the Sangha. You can think about death if you find yourself getting lazy or complacent. There are a wide variety of things that you can use as topics of concentration.

There's a sad story about a young Western monk in Thailand. He went to see one of the famous ajaans and asked him, "What technique is going to work in getting my mind to settle down?" And the ajaan basically said, "I don't know." The monk thought maybe the ajaan didn't know anything, so he left. Of course what the ajaan was saying is that you have to find a topic congenial to you. Nine cases out of ten, the breath is the best topic. It's by far the safest topic. It's always good to have as part of your arsenal, because some of the other topics can get you into strange states of the mind, and you need a good place to come back to reestablish alertness, reestablish your sense of well-being. The breath provides that good place.

But to know which technique you're going to need at a particular time, you've got to use your discernment to see what's working with your mind. This is one of the ways in which concentration develops discernment. You learn how to observe your own mind: what's working, what can you settle down with. And in the course of settling down—as is the case with mindfulness—as you try to keep the mind with its object, you're going to start seeing things that pull it off. If you didn't have this one focal point to keep yourself oriented, you wouldn't be able see the movements of the mind.

It's like that image Ajaan Lee gives of the post planted at the edge of the sea. If the post stays in one place, you can put a ruler or a measuring stick on the post and see exactly how high the water has come up, how low the water has gone down. The measurements will be relevant and useful because you stay in one place. If you keep shifting the post around, though—moving it back on the shore, moving it out into the ocean—then the measurements you take are meaningless, because you don't have a single standard reference.

So if you really want to see arising and passing away of your mind, you've got to get the

mind as still as possible. When blatant movements of the mind settle down, you start seeing the really subtle ones, and this is where discernment gets sharpened.

These are some of the ways in which you develop discernment through developing the four other strengths: conviction, persistence, mindfulness, and concentration. All of them get easier when different facets of discernment arise, because all of them require a certain amount of discernment just to get going. As discernment gets stronger, as the Buddha said, it strengthens these qualities, too.

So they help one another. The image the Buddha gives is of the substructure to a roof. You've got to start by putting up all the rafters. You can't really get the ridgepole up on top of them until you've got the supporting rafters in place. But as the rafters go up, they're not really solid. They're solid only when they get nailed to the ridge pole. So in the same way, the discernment you get from these four strengths helps contribute to the arising of the strongest discernment, and the strongest discernment strengthens these other strengths, makes them more solid, and reliable.

So if you're looking for ways to develop discernment, try developing these four qualities. Try to be as observant as possible as you do this, at the same time being honest with yourself about what you're doing and what the results are. The Buddha once said, let an observant person come who is honest and no deceiver, and he would teach that person the Dhamma. Those are his prerequisites for anyone who was going to practice and get results. If you're not honest with yourself, you'll start to deny things that are arising and passing away in the mind. And if you're not observant, it all goes right past you.

This means that the Dhamma is something special. The discernment of the Dhamma is something special. It's not something you can figure out by reading books and being clever. It requires good qualities of the heart, and in particular this quality of honesty, which is basic to all the other good qualities you need. So make sure that honesty enters into the mix as well. That's how the discernment becomes penetrating, as the Buddha says, leading to the right ending of suffering and stress.