

The Perfection of Discernment

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Close your eyes and watch your breath. Try to stay with the breath all the way in, all the way out. See how long you can stick with it.

You want the mind to be able to settle down and be still so that you can see what's going on. We develop a quality called discernment—it's one of the perfections—and to do that, you've got to get the mind really still.

It's like trying to observe a tree. If you run past the tree and then someone asks you what's in the tree, you can't really say clearly, because everything was a blur. But if you stand still and look at it for a while, then you can see, "Oh, it's got these leaves and it's got these birds and these diseases," or whatever is in there. You see it clearly because you're still.

In the same way, if you want to understand your mind—and particularly to understand where the mind is creating any unnecessary suffering for itself—it's got to be still.

But simple stillness on its own is not enough. You have to know what to look for, what to observe.

This is why the Buddha said the beginning question—and this is what discernment comes from, asking questions—the beginning question on the road to discernment is, "What's skillful? What's not? What, when I do it, will lead to my long-term welfare and happiness? What, when I do it, will lead to my long-term harm and suffering?"

That involves discernment because, one, you realize that your happiness and your suffering depend on your actions. They don't come just floating your way. You do certain things that make you suffer; you do certain things that make you happy.

Discernment also lies in seeing that long-term is better than just short-term, because short-term happiness turns into something else. And what it turns into is not more happiness. It turns into a lot of regret. You do things that may get what you want for a little bit, but then the long-term consequences are bad. It's not worth it.

It's a very basic and very simple principle, but one that we hardly ever use.

There's a passage in the Dhammapada where the Buddha says, "If you see a greater happiness that comes from giving up a lesser happiness, the wise person gives up the lesser happiness for the sake of the greater."

Someone who translated that into English said, "This couldn't possibly be the meaning of this passage. It's too simple, it's too basic. Everybody knows that." Well, yes, everybody knows that, but to what extent do we actually follow through with it? All too often we go for the short-term because it's right

in front of us.

This is another reason why you want to get the mind to be still and stable: so that when you have the short-term temptation, you can say, “No, I don’t need that. The long-term is going to be much more valuable.” And you have the strength and the well-being inside in order to resist the temptation.

So this is how we start putting discernment into action: Keeping still, looking at our actions—nothing very abstract. It’s something very simple and direct: looking at things we tend to overlook because we think there’s something more important out there. But what’s really more important is what you’re doing right now and the possibility that you’re could do it really well.

That’s what discernment is: taking what you’ve got and making the best use of it, not overlooking the little things that are right near you because something outside, something further away is more exotic.

So ask yourself, “What am I doing right now? What am I doing that’s leading to suffering? What am I doing that’s leading to long-term suffering? Maybe it’s time to change. What am I doing that’s leading to long-term happiness? How do I maintain myself in that?” That’s where the discernment lies.

So if we want to be discerning in our lives, we’ve got to get the mind still and we’ve got to ask ourselves the right questions. When you ask the right questions, then the answers come.

You see that your life begins to lighten. You actually do find more long-term happiness, more long-term well-being, and less suffering for yourself, less suffering for the people around you. That’s what discernment is good for: putting an end to suffering.

We have a lot of discernment in other things, but the really good discernment, the useful discernment, is the one that teaches us how to stop suffering and how to create the causes for a happiness that’s lasting. That’s when discernment shows its real worth.