

## *Seven Facets of Discernment*

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The Buddha once listed the two qualities that he looked for in a student. One was that you be observant, and the other that you be truthful. And you see why he looked for these qualities when you look at the way he defines discernment. There's a sutta where he talks about seven facets of discernment. And they're not just a matter of memorizing the Dhamma or being able to explain it. There's a lot more to being a discerning person, although the first quality the Buddha does mention is that you have a sense of the Dhamma. In other words, you know what the Buddha taught. That gives you a good fund of ideas to draw from.

It's good to have that kind of knowledge in reserve, because we have so much other garbage sloshing around in our heads: weird ideas we picked up from who knows where. The media try to make us feel that we lack whatever they're trying to sell. They teach us values that are not really in our own best interest. So it's good to have a fund of knowledge and values that really does take your own best interest to heart and shows you what it is.

So having a sense of the Dhamma is the beginning of discernment. You listen to it, you think about it, but then you have to develop it. And that's where the books don't give you that much help. They point you to what you've got to learn, to the fact that you've got to be observant, but they can't *make* you observant. That's something you've got to do yourself.

The next quality the Buddha listed is that you have a sense of the meaning of the Dhamma. "Meaning," here, is not just the ability to translate the Dhamma into other words. You also have to know what it's for, what it's aimed at. There are teachings that encourage you to let go. There are teachings that encourage you to develop. There are teachings that encourage contentment. There are teachings that encourage desire. So you have to figure out which is the right time for which particular teaching.

You hear so much emphasis placed on being alert to the present moment, and the Buddha does teach that in some places, but that's not the whole of the teaching. You also have to think about the long-term consequences of your actions, and you have to think about lessons you've learned from the past. So even though, as we meditate, we're trying to stay focused on the breath in the present moment, we're also thinking about why we're doing this—what will be for our benefit now and into the future—and of lessons we've learned from the past. If something comes up in the present moment, you don't just sit there with

whatever comes. You figure out, based on what you've learned from the past, what should be done with it: Is it a skillful quality that you can simply allow to grow on its own or is it something you have to encourage?

The same with unskillful qualities. Some of them will go away when you look at them. It's like turning the light of the sun on a little bit of water and it evaporates. In other cases, the water is so plentiful that it's not going to evaporate at all. You can just look at it but it's not going to go away. It requires that you exert an effort.

So you have to learn how to figure out which teaching applies to which situation. You have to figure out what the teachings are for. This means that you're not just reading the texts. You're also reading the situation, you're reading yourself, you're reading the people around you. And that requires that you be observant. That's why the Buddha was looking for that quality in his students.

You see this especially in the remaining factors of the list, beginning with having a sense of yourself. In other words, what are your strengths right now? What are your weaknesses? What needs work? What can you depend on within yourself to do that work? You have to remember that no matter how bad the situation, you've got some strengths. Have a good sense of what they are so that you can draw on them.

There will sometimes be self-destructive thoughts coming into the mind. Sometimes they take over, and you look at yourself and you don't see anything good at all. You have to realize you can't believe those thoughts. They may be right to some extent but it's not the case that you're totally hopeless. The fact that you're a human being means you have some strengths. If you're observant enough, you can find those strengths and draw on them.

So have a sense of what your strengths are—and where your weaknesses are so that you can figure out what needs to be done, and how you can do it, in your own particular case. That helps you to figure out which teaching applies to which situation for you.

Another facet of discernment is having a sense of the right time. When is the time to ask questions? When is the time to figure out things on your own? When is the time to listen? When is the time to go off and just work on the problem yourself? This is something you have to observe. There's no book that tells you the basic rules.

The next quality is having a sense of enough. How much is enough meditation? How much is enough reading? How much is enough food? How much is enough sleep? These are things you have to observe on your own. You try things out and see what works.

Another quality is knowing how to talk to different groups of people. Back in the time of the Buddha they had very clearly delineated castes. When you talked to brahmins, you talked in one way. When you talked to noble warriors, you talked in another way. Nowadays our castes and classes are not quite so clearly delineated but you should still have a sense of the people you're with and what kind of conversation is appropriate.

And finally, there's having a sense of individuals: In other words, what kind of individuals are worth emulating? Because with a lot of these qualities—such as having a sense of yourself, a sense of the right time, a sense of enough—you can learn a lot if you associate with the right people. When they approach a problem, how do they approach it? How do they stick with the practice without getting all tense and tied up in knots about it? These are important lessons you can learn from being around people who have some experience on the path. But you have to know who to look for and also who to avoid.

This is especially true now that we have the Internet invading our homes and our minds. It was bad enough with TV. Now the Internet is with us all the time. Everywhere you go, people are glued to their screens. But they're not just screens, there are people sending messages through those screens. You have to figure out: Who do you listen to? Who do you not listen to? Which links do you click on and which ones do you not? There are values being imparted, and you want to make sure that you don't pick up all the wrong values, and that you learn how to detect the biased ones. They're a little bit behind the scenes.

So all this requires that you be very observant and also very truthful about what you observe. Because it is possible to notice things but if you're not quite honest with yourself about what you're looking for, you miss a lot. They'll be there right in front of you, you detect them, but they don't register. You've got to be very clear about what your goals are and be true to your best possible goals.

So of all these facets of discernment, one is just having a good body of Dhamma knowledge and the rest have to do with watching things yourself, noticing things yourself. This is one of the reasons why in the old days in the forest tradition they didn't explain things very much—even simple things like how you clean up a place.

I've told you many times that with Ajaan Fuang, as I was becoming his attendant, he never told me where things went or what things should be done. He told me what they shouldn't be, sometimes, especially if I'd done it wrong. So I'd have to guess: What's the right way to do this? What's the right way to do that? I'd try to notice when he put things in order: Where did he place them? He acted this way to encourage my powers of observation and also to encourage a

willingness to make a mistake and learn from it rather than expect everything to be handed to me. Because when you're sitting here meditating, there's nobody here to hand you advice. There's nobody in your ear telling you to do this, to do that. You've got to figure it out on your own.

As we go through life, there's no prompter. The problem is that we have these random voices going through our heads and we take them as prompters, but we have to be very careful about what we listen to. Aging comes. Illness comes. Death comes. You have to figure out how to handle these things. We have some guidance that comes from the past, from other people's words, but a lot of it has to come from our own powers of observation. What you do with your mind right now? What skills can you learn about how to keep your mind focused—how to keep it observant, where to focus it—so that when aging comes you don't focus on the things that deplete your strength? So that when illness comes, you don't focus on the things that make the mind upset. The same with death. There are ways to focus the mind even as the body is dying so the mind doesn't have to suffer.

We're told some of these skills as we read about how to meditate, but we have to learn the rest of them from observing our own minds as they relate to the breath, as they relate to distraction. As they relate to greed, aversion, delusion.

We have to learn these lessons by being observant. When you've learned something, figure out what's the right time to apply it—because sometimes you can learn a lesson that will be good for some situations and not for others. We develop our powers of concentration, our powers of mindfulness, our powers of discernment so that we can pick up the lessons that are here for us to learn. There's a lot to observe right here in the present moment. There's a lot to observe as you deal with issues coming in from the past, planning for the future.

As the forest ajaans liked to say, there's Dhamma all around. It's simply a matter of learning to read it even if it's not in books. And as with learning any language, a lot of it depends on your own powers of observation.