

The Discernment of a True Person

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There is a passage where the Buddha talks about the seven qualities of what he calls a true person or a person of integrity—the Pali term is *sappurisa*. These qualities are basically different aspects of discernment. Of the seven, only one of them has to do with something you can learn through words, and that's having a sense of the Dhamma. You learn what the Buddha taught; you learn what the ajans taught.

The other qualities have to do with developing your own sensitivity as to how to use these teachings. The second quality starts right in with *attha*, which means goal, meaning, purpose: in other words, understanding what the Dhamma is for. People can read books and explain the words, but that on its own doesn't really get to what the Dhamma is for.

It's for liberation. The Buddha says that release is both the essence of the Dhamma and it's also its flavor. The Pali term for essence is heartwood, or *sara*. It's the real core or the real solid part of the Dhamma, in that it leads to release. As for the flavor, you listen to the Dhamma and it should have a flavor that helps inspire you to put down your burdens. And how do you do that? That's something that you've got to learn for yourself.

We have all the instructions, 16 steps of breath meditation. It seems like a lot. But when you actually look at them, they don't explain very much. There are a lot of issues where they require you to develop your own sensitivity. The Buddha says to breathe in a way that gives rise to rapture, or to breathe in a way that gives rise to pleasure. How do you do that? He doesn't say. How do you breathe in a way that makes you aware of the whole body? He doesn't say.

All of these are areas where you move beyond the discernment that comes from listening or reading and into the discernment that comes from thinking and developing. In other words, you have to think about the questions. The Buddha poses the questions, so you think about them, come up with some hypotheses, and then test them. Then you evaluate the results. Are they good? Are they useful?

This is a large part of what sensitivity in the Dhamma means—combining your thinking and your developing of qualities in the mind so that you can gain a real sense of what the Dhamma is for. You find that it does lift some of the burdens off your mind. It makes you a more reliable person, a person you can trust.

Because there's another part of sensitivity as well. How well can you trust your intuitions? You've got to be able to judge them.

Think of Ajaan Mun out in the forest. He was getting all these visions. Sometimes there would be devas or other beings coming and telling him that he should practice this way, practice that way. If he had believed everything he saw, he would have gone crazy. He realized that he had to learn how to forget about whether it was a deva or whatever giving the lesson. He had to look at the lesson itself: To what extent did it fit in with what he already knew about the Dhamma? And if it looked like it might fit, then he'd give it a try. But even then, he didn't believe 100% that this was how it had to be. He had to evaluate the results objectively, without giving in to his preferences. That's how he developed his sensitivity.

This is one of the reasons why the Buddha told Rahula—before he started breath meditation—“Make your mind like earth.” The more non-reactive you can be, the more you see things, and the better judge you are of the various experiments that you do.

Then the remaining five qualities—beyond having a sense of the Dhamma and a sense of its meaning—have to do with the different aspects of the practice that accompany the meditation.

Having a sense of yourself is the next quality. It means having a sense of where your strengths are, where your weaknesses are, where work needs to be done. And being willing to do it. Think of that old statement that the Great Way is not difficult for those with no preferences. It doesn't mean you don't have any preference for, say, happiness over suffering. You do prefer happiness. The issue of preferences has to do with the means. What do you have to do to gain that happiness?

There are certain things that you've got to do if you're going to find true happiness and release, and some of them go against the grain. Contemplation of the body: A lot of people don't like that. The various ascetic practices. Restraint of

the senses. They go against the grain. Some people complain that these practices are unnatural. Well, yes, there *is* something unnatural about them, but then look where nature goes: birth-aging-death, birth-aging-death, birth-aging-death. That's natural. We're trying to go against that.

We're finding something that is there. It's not that we're creating something out of nothing. But a lot of our natural tendencies, the ones that are really habitual, are not going to take us all the way to release. Some people say, "Well, just naturally relax." Everyone likes to relax. But you relax for a while and then it gets dull and you want some entertainment. A lay teacher once said, "Having a hand that's relaxed is much nicer than having a hand that's tight, curled up in a fist. That's the hand's natural position." But a hand that stays relaxed and doesn't move is a dead hand.

The nature of the body is that it goes back and forth between tension and relaxation, but the mind doesn't have to go back and forth with the body. And that's what we're working on: an independent mind. So if you notice that you have problems with lust, okay, contemplate the body. See exactly what is worthy of lust and why the mind wants to lust to begin with. The body is not the problem. But looking at its unattractive side at least helps to clear one of the issues out of the way. The mind is going to say, "That really is beautiful, how can I not lust for it?" So you look into it: Where is it really beautiful? And where is it not? And what things come along with it? This way, as the body gets less and less prominent, the issue of the lust in and of itself becomes more prominent. That's when you can deal with it directly: Why do you want the perceptions that give rise to lust?

So whatever your problem is, there is an antidote. All too often, our problem is that we don't like the antidote, so we pretend that it's not a problem. You need to admit the problem before you can solve it—which is why having a sense of yourself is an important part of gaining discernment.

Another quality is having a sense of enough. How much food is enough? How much sleep is enough? How much staying with tranquility is enough? To what extent do you have to start working on insight? At what point does the insight work become counterproductive?—in other words, you don't have the strength of concentration to carry it through. Ajaan Maha Boowa talks about this a lot. He

says that you find that when you've sharpened your knife in concentration and then you use, use, use, use it, it's going to get dull. You've got to sharpen it again. But if you just stay with a sharpened knife and don't use it, then that's not worthwhile, either.

So as you go through the day, ask yourself, "How much sleep is enough? How much walking meditation is enough?" This is something that no one else can tell you. You've got to figure it out for yourself. You may learn some ideas from other people. One that I've found is that you want at least one good long session of meditation every day, but also learn how to break up your other sessions into different lengths. Give yourself some variety.

Then there's the question of having a sense of the right time and the right place. When is the right time and place to talk? When is the right time and place to be quiet? You've got to be sensitive to these things, especially when you're living in a community.

That point deals directly with the next two: the sixth and the seventh aspects of discernment. One is having a sense of groups of people when you enter them. What kind of behavior is appropriate for this group of people? What kind of behavior is appropriate for that group of people? With some people, you have to use a certain level of language; with other people, you have to use another level. With some people, there are certain topics that you can talk about. With others, there are topics that you have to stay away from. When you have a sense of communities of people like this, then it's a lot easier to practice.

All too often, we simply want to say what we want to say, without thinking about what kind of impact it's going to have on the long term health of the community. But you have to think about these things if you want the community to be a good group to practice with.

And finally, there's the sense of which people are worth hanging around with. The Buddha says you want to hang around with people who are interested in the Dhamma. They not only listen to it, but they like to think about it. They like to discuss it but not too much. That's when you get back to the issue of how much and the right time and place. There are *way* too many Dhamma discussions down at the guest house, down at the kitchen. We're living here as a group and we want to be able to help one another find some quiet.

And then carefully choose the people you want to hang around with. This is especially important as you leave the monastery. You're going to be willy-nilly dealing with all kinds of people, but who are the people to whom you go for advice? Who are the people you want to emulate? Who are the people whose point of view you want to develop? You have to develop a sense of this.

And as I said, the Buddha doesn't give many instructions in these areas, but he does raise the issues, and that's important. All too often we don't even think about these things. We look at our life in other terms, ask other questions. So learn how to ask yourself questions about these things. Now that you've learned the Dhamma, what's it for? And how do you head in that direction?—in terms of finding the right time, having a sense of yourself, having a sense of how much is enough, having a sense of which people you should hang out with, and how you should treat the various groups of people you encounter.

It's good that these questions are raised. You think about them in terms of where they're going to lead, in terms of that goal of the Dhamma. The most important one of these is that second one, the *attā*, the goal, the purpose of the practice. Because that's where the essence lies. That's where the real flavor of this practice lies—the extent to which the mind can be released.

So think about these issues. Test them in your life, and then contemplate the results. This is how your discernment grows from simply knowledge of the Dhamma to real knowledge of what it's all for. Thinking and developing and thinking again about what you've developed, and then developing things some more. There's a back and forth between the two processes. That's how your sensitivity grows. And your sensitivity is the essence of discernment, if you push it in the right direction.

So even though it's a natural process, it's a natural goal that we're aiming for—in the sense that it's something there in nature—we have to question what has seemed to be our natural way of doing things up to now, and subject that “natural way” to the Buddha's questions. That way, we can head in a direction we've never been before, learn something we never learned before, experience something we never experienced before. And that comes from doing things we've never done before.

So keep these issues in mind. Because they make you sensitive in the areas that really will bear fruit.