

Mindfulness + Discernment = Intelligence

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The Thai word for *intelligence* is a combination of two Pali words, the words for mindfulness and discernment: *satipañña*. And the ajaans like to talk a lot about applying your *satipañña*, your intelligence, to the meditation. The question is, what kind of intelligence are they talking about?

Here it's good to look at the Canon. When the Buddha talks about how mindfulness leads to discernment and how the two go together, he basically says that as you're practicing the four establishments of mindfulness, you're also completing the seven factors for awakening. The first three of those factors are mindfulness, analysis of qualities—which is the discernment factor—and then persistence.

You start out, say, with the body, staying focused on the breath in and of itself, ardent, alert, mindful, putting aside greed and distress with reference to the world. "Mindful," of course, means keeping things in mind. "Alert" means noticing what you're doing while you're doing it, and "ardent" means trying to do it well.

It's in the ardency that mindfulness connects up with discernment. If you're ardent, you want to be mindful of the right things, alert to the right things. Ordinarily, you can be mindful of anything in the past—after all, mindfulness is just a faculty of the memory, but when you're ardent, you want to manage your memory well: Whatever is going to be appropriate to remember right now, you apply that. What's not appropriate, you put it aside. The same with alertness: You can be alert to anything at the moment, but here the Buddha's having you stay alert to what you're doing. As for being alert to anything else, you put it aside.

Ardency is directly related to the question of what's skillful and what's not, and this relates very directly to the sutta where the Buddha talks about how he first got on the path. He developed right resolve to keep in check any thoughts that might wander off out of sensuality, ill will, harmfulness, and he allowed his mind to think only thoughts that were coming out of renunciation, non-ill will, and harmlessness, because of the effect that they would have on the mind. He looked at his thoughts in terms of cause and effect, not in terms of what he liked or didn't like, but of what was going to be useful.

That's the same approach we take to mindfulness. There are certain things you could keep in mind right now that would be entertaining or maybe useful for whatever work you've got to do tomorrow, but you realize that those memories are not appropriate right now. What you want to keep in mind are the lessons

you've learned from the past about how to stay with the breath, the lessons you've learned about abandoning the hindrances as they come up, the lessons you've learned about developing the good qualities of concentration, because those thoughts will be useful for what you're doing right now.

This fits right in with what the Buddha said about how mindfulness leads to the factor of analysis of qualities, because that factor is all about noticing what in the mind is skillful and what's not. That's where the discernment comes in. It's practical discernment, pragmatic discernment, the discernment that's useful for doing what's right, right now. This is illustrated by the Buddha's analogy of the way you plow a field. Mindfulness is the goad. In case you're not familiar with how they plow fields with goads, you have your ox hooked up to the plow, and as the ox is pulling the plow, it might go off to the left or right. You're trying to keep it straight, so you've got a stick with a sharp point on one end. If the ox goes to the right, you poke it in the right side with the point to get it to head back to the left. And if it turns to the left, you poke it in the left side to get it to head back to the right. So here you're not following the image that the Buddha had for right resolve, which is simply knowing when you have to keep the cows out of the rice fields and when you don't. Here you've got more detailed work: trying to plow a straight furrow.

This is where all the different establishings of mindfulness come in. The basic one, whether you're sitting meditating or out and about, is that you stay with the body. Then, based on that, you might pull in some of the other frames of reference as well, because after all, they're all right here: body, feelings, mind, qualities in the mind. It's simply a question of which list of qualities is relevant to what you're doing.

When you're out and about, your main concern is with restraint of the senses: what you're looking at, how you're looking at it, why you're looking at it, and what happens as a result. The same principle applies to all the senses. There the Buddha says it's like having six animals on leashes. If you just tie the leashes to other leashes, the animals can pull one another in different directions. Whichever animal is strongest—in his image, there's a crocodile, a monkey, a dog, a jackal, a bird, and a snake. And of those, the strongest is probably the crocodile, so it's going to pull every other animal down into to water. They'll all drown. But if you tie the leashes to a stake, and the stake is firmly planted in the ground, then pull as they might, they're just going to stay there right next to the stake. Eventually they're going to stop pulling and just lie down next to the stake.

In the same way, you stay grounded with the body as you go through the day, and you start thinking in terms of the fetters and the six senses. When you're

looking at something, are you fettering yourself by the way you look? Is that what you want to do? In other words, if there's passion for what you're looking at—it can be passion either in a positive way or passion in the sense of being aversive: Is that the effect you want? Here again, you're looking at things in terms of cause and effect, not in terms of your likes or dislikes.

When you're sitting here meditating, you're grounded again with the body, with the breath, but you're more interested in terms of the hindrances—which hindrances are arising right now, how you get past them—and with the factors for awakening: how you give rise to them if they're not there, how you maintain them when they are.

Of course, doing this—making this distinction between what's skillful and what's not, and trying to do what's skillful—automatically brings in the third factor for awakening, which is persistence. Here the intelligence of persistence is looking at things in terms of cause and effect. You know that there are certain things you like doing but you also know the ultimate effect is not going to be good. If you're intelligent, you learn how to talk yourself into not doing them. At first it may require some willpower to force yourself not to do them, but then you realize it's a lot wiser if you can talk yourself into *wanting* not to do them. The same with things that you don't like to do but are going to have good results in the long term: Talk yourself into wanting to do them, getting yourself psyched up to sit longer, to sit more often, to pay closer attention to what you're doing as you meditate and not just drifting off into a pleasant feeling.

It's in this way that mindfulness and discernment go together to make intelligence. It's a pragmatic coupling, realizing that there are things that have got to be done, skills that have to be mastered, and then doing your best to master them. That's intelligence. This is very different from the way you often hear how mindfulness is connected to discernment. It's often said that when we practice mindfulness, we try to see things in terms of the three characteristics. Sometimes that's true, but sometimes it's not. Of all the wisdom teachings, the three characteristics are the ones, both in the Canon and in the teachings of the ajaans, that come with warnings, saying that you have to be very careful about when to apply them and when not, because they're very easy to apply in an inappropriate way.

The teaching on inconstancy: Ajaan Lee has a nice passage where he says there are people who see that things are inconstant so they just say, "Okay, I'm going to leave them alone, not get involved." He said it's like having a wound in your body and saying, "Well, the wound is impermanent, so I'll just leave it." If you do that, it's just going to get worse. It's going to get infected. You create more trouble for

yourself. If you see that it's wounded, you should put medicine on it and wrap it with a bandage. That way the wound can heal. That's the intelligent way of dealing with it.

The same with stress: You may say, "This is a hard practice. It's taking a lot out of me. Just thinking about getting the mind concentrated is very wearisome." If that's how you think, you're never going to get the mind concentrated. The duty with regard to concentration is to give rise to it and develop it.

In terms of self or not-self, in the Canon there's a case where a monk decides that if the five aggregates are not-self, there must be nobody doing anything and nobody to be affected by what's done by what's not-self, so you can do anything you want. The Buddha chastises him for misappropriating the teaching.

There are plenty of other examples. Ajaan Chah has a nice one where he says you've got a cup and you say, "Well, the cup is impermanent," so you just throw it around. If you do that, you don't get any use out of the cup. The intelligent thing is to take care of it.

There's a case in the Canon where someone reasons that all actions result in feeling, all feelings are stressful, so all actions result in stress. As the Buddha points out, that's going to lead people to say, "It doesn't matter what I do."

The three characteristics or the three perceptions are teachings where we have to know the right time and place. In other words, they have to fit into the skills of the four noble truths. That's when you use them intelligently.

So this is the kind of intelligence we're trying to develop as we practice: pragmatic intelligence. We look at our memory and ask, "What in my memory is useful for right now? What's not useful?" Focus only on the things that are useful, and those good memories will help you recognize: What right now is skillful? How do you recognize what's skillful coming up in the mind? How do you recognize what's not skillful? How do you remember what to do? If you can't remember, how do you figure out, using your ingenuity? How do you figure something out? What is it similar to? That's using your memory in an intelligent way.

So use your intelligence as you practice. Look at what you're doing. Approach it as a skill. You're trying to plow your field properly. Make sure the furrows are straight, and then you get the crops that you want: pleasure, rapture, parts of the path, and then the higher crops. If you just let your ox wander around as it likes and say, "Well, the ox is impermanent, where it goes is impermanent," you're not going to get anywhere. You're not going to get any crops at all.

So the Buddha offers us all these tools, and we have all these potentials within us. Intelligence lies in recognizing what's happening right now as having

potentials and not just being something we have to accept. You accept that it's there, but also you accept the fact that it has potentials. You work on those potentials. That's when you're showing intelligence in your practice.