

Developing Discernment

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When you focus on the breath, it's important that you *want* to stay here. You'll find that the committee of the mind has some members who are happy to be here, and other members who are not. This is why the Buddha says there are two duties that you *do* as you get the mind to settle down with right mindfulness and into right concentration: One is to keep track of the object you're determined to focus on, like the breath. And the other, as he says, is to "put aside greed and distress with reference to the world." In other words, how to say No to any thoughts that would come by and pull you away from your focus.

In learning how to make yourself want to be with the breath, and not want to be with those thoughts: That's how you exercise your discernment. Because with discernment, we can't wait until the very end of the path and say, "Now that my virtue is perfect, now that my concentration is perfect, I'll start thinking about discernment." It doesn't work that way.

Everything you do in the path, even beginning with generosity—your ability to talk yourself into being generous, talk yourself out of holding on to things that you know that you *can* give away with good results—is the beginning of discernment.

Because the Dhamma is all about your actions. As the Buddha said, we suffer because of our actions, but we can also learn how to not suffer through our actions. So it's a matter of choosing which actions we want to follow, which ones are really in our interest, and which ones we want to put aside.

You have to realize that the act of choosing is going to be an act of fabrication. As when you choose to stay with the breath: You've got the three types of fabrication right there. Bodily fabrication—which is the breath itself. Verbal fabrication—directed thought and evaluation, as you direct your thoughts to the breath and analyze the breath to make sure that it's comfortable; when it's comfortable, how to maintain that sense of comfort; and when you can maintain it, how to spread it. Then there's mental fabrication—the pictures or labels you have in the mind, together with the feelings you're trying to create here, feelings of well-being.

So, picture the breath in the body in a way that helps you stay here, with a sense of the breath filling the whole body, well-being filling the whole body, and your awareness filling the whole body, with every cell in the body being nourished.

Then use those same three kinds of fabrication to analyze the distractions as well, because they too are fabrications that come in. You're trying to figure out: Where's the appeal of those distractions?

In some cases, a distraction comes in and doesn't have much pull in the mind. You realize you've left the breath and all you have to do is pull yourself back, and there you are. But with others, the mind wants to go back. It wants to look at that distraction again, follow it, see where it goes. Here again you have to analyze things in terms of the three kinds of fabrication: What kind of breathing goes along with that distraction? What are you telling yourself about that distraction that makes it appealing? And what images do you hold in mind that give it an appeal? Can you change those kinds of fabrication, so that you can see that the appeal is pretty ephemeral, pretty weak, and the drawbacks are much greater?

Try to use whatever kind of image helps. I found in my own case that a good image is to see the thoughts that I go over again, and again, and again as rotten. So, do you want to be like a dog that finds something rotten on the ground and just rolls on the rotten thing? Is that what you want to do? Holding that perception in mind helps make the thought a lot less attractive.

Remind yourself of the attractions of wanting to stay with the breath. Here's a path out. The Buddha said it's possible to put an end to suffering. And even though some parts of his path don't seem all that appealing—all those teachings about dispassion—still, he wants you to be passionate about the path.

So, learn how to have good associations with the path: ways of picturing the practice to yourself that make it appealing, something you want to do. In this way, you're developing your discernment. You're learning how to do the things that are for your long-term good interest, and to abandon things that are for your long-term harm.

It's simply that as the practice develops, you're taking that principle and making it more and more refined. So, every time you can talk yourself out of doing something unskillful and into doing something skillful: Regard that as an exercise for your discernment. That principle of focusing on your actions, trying to make them as skillful as you can: That will carry you through.