

## *Discernment*

*May 17, 2022*

When the Buddha defined the faculty of discernment, he defined it as “knowledge of arising and passing away—noble, penetrative, leading to the right ending of stress.” Some people, hearing that, focus on the “arising and passing away” and draw the conclusion that discernment is all about seeing the principle of inconstancy: Things come and they go; nothing’s permanent.

But the adjectives that the Buddha used to describe that knowledge show that there’s more than that. One of them is “penetrative.” Elsewhere, he defines “penetrative” as seeing the gradations of things, distinctions among things: things that are skillful, things that are unskillful, what kind of results they lead to. So your discernment, when it’s penetrative, sees more than just arising and passing away. You see what kind of arisings are skillful and which ones are not, which things lead to well-being and which ones don’t.

That has to do with the “noble” part because, remember, the Buddha defined the noble search as the search for what is deathless. So, what kind of knowledge about arising and passing away would lead to the deathless? And to the right ending of stress?

The Buddha goes on to define discernment in terms of the four noble truths. Here’s where he lays it out: what’s skillful and what’s not. Craving is an unskillful cause because it leads to clinging, which is suffering; the noble eightfold path is a pattern of action that leads to the end of suffering. So there’s a distinction right there. Actually, discernment is all about distinctions.

There’s another place where the Buddha defines discernment as seeing things as separate. You don’t just glom things together; you don’t deal in vague generalities. You look at specifically what’s happening and, more specifically, what’s happening in your mind. When the Buddha talks about the principles of causality, this is where he’s really focused. He’s not concerned with causality out there in the world so much, except when he uses it to illustrate points having to do with causality in the mind.

The causality in here, of course, is intention, which is based on contact and also colors contact. The intention is the important thing because that’s going to lead to the results.

Ajaan Mun made this point one time in one of his talks that was written down—or, more precisely, notes were taken of it. He talked about how, when Sāriputta was still a wanderer, he met Ven. Assaji. You probably know the story: Assaji was

on his almsround and Sāriputta was impressed just by his demeanor. This is something good for monks to think about: What's *your* demeanor during the almsround? Is it the sort of demeanor that would impress somebody? Would it make them want to ask the question, "Who is your teacher? What does he teach?"? At any rate, Sāriputta realized that while Assaji was on his almsround was the wrong time to ask. So he followed him out of the town and, when Assaji had finished his meal, he went and asked him.

And Assaji said, "I'm new in this Dhamma. I can't explain very much. I can just explain the gist."

Sāriputta said, "That's what I want. I want just the gist."

Assaji started out, "Whatever arises from a cause: its cause and its cessation. That's the teaching of the great contemplative."

Ajaan Mun noted that, when Sāriputta heard the word "cause," he wasn't looking at causes outside. He immediately looked at causes in the mind. That, Ajaan Mun said, was the big cause. And how are you going to bring about the cessation of things that arise from that cause? You have to turn around and look at the cause itself in the mind, to see what's making it give rise to these things, and how it can stop.

Sāriputta's wisdom—his discernment—was so sharp that that's immediately how he interpreted it. And he immediately looked into what was beyond, after the cessation of that cause. That's how he saw the deathless. That's the kind of insight—the kind of discernment—that's noble.

When you look at the four noble truths, you notice, of course, that discernment itself plays a role in right view. When the Buddha lays out the noble eightfold path, he puts right view and right resolve first. Discernment comes first, then virtue, then concentration.

In some of his other explanations—say, in the five faculties or the five strengths—it's virtue, concentration, discernment. In the seven factors for awakening, the factors themselves don't contain virtue but there's a passage where the Buddha says they build on virtue. So, in that case, you've got virtue, then discernment, then concentration.

So, the order's not fixed. It's simply that, of those three trainings, virtue is the first one to be mastered, then concentration, then discernment. But that doesn't mean you just *do* virtue or *do* concentration without any discernment. The discernment has to be there to inform them all, all the way along, because you're looking at, "What are your actions? What are you doing right now?"

Right now, you say, "I'm watching my breath."

"Why are you watching your breath?"

“To get the mind into concentration.”

“Why would you want to get the mind into concentration?”

“Because the mind in concentration can see things more clearly.”

“What do you want to see things clearly for?”

“To stop causing suffering—to see how I’m causing suffering now and how I can learn how to stop.”

So, in doing concentration, the motivation is discerning.

The same with the precepts: You follow the precepts not just to be obedient to the rules, but because you realize that virtue is an important part of training the mind, for the sake of concentration, for the sake of the discernment, and on to release.

Which means that we have to bring discernment to all aspects of our practice.

When you’re observing the precepts, they’re sometimes challenging. Suppose you know some information that you don’t want to divulge, and someone asks you for it, and you’re afraid that that person’s going to misuse it. How do you not give it? In some cases, you simply don’t give it. In other cases, you have to distract the person.

Or there are ants in your house: How do you get them out without killing them?

The precepts present challenges, and it’s in meeting the challenges that you develop your discernment. Of course, your original motivation for observing the precepts starts out with discernment. But, in the practice, you develop more.

This is in line with the Buddha’s observation that there are three sources for discernment: listening (which includes reading), thinking things through, and then developing: in other words, you develop good qualities in the mind. Of the three, of course, the last one is the really important one, but it’s informed by the other two.

We think of the Forest Tradition as being rough and ready and non-scholarly—and it is very much anti-scholarly in a lot of ways—but that doesn’t mean that the forest ajaans were not well read in the Dhamma or the Vinaya. They knew their Dhamma really well; they knew their Vinaya really well. It’s just that they realized that, after having read these truths and having thought about them, the truths compel you to try to develop them in your mind. That’s a sign that they knew how to read.

So, as we develop discernment through with virtue, we’re taking our original insight that virtue’s going to be a good thing and we make it more developed and refined. The same with concentration: We start out with the general idea that concentration’s going to be good and then we have to wrestle the mind down.

This is what directed thought and evaluation are all about. As Ajaan Lee points out, directed thought and evaluation are the work of discernment—trying to figure out, if the mind's not settling down, why. Is the problem with the breath or is the problem with the mind?

If the problem is the breath, work with it. Breathe in different ways: long, short, medium; deep or shallow; heavy, light; fast, slow; narrow, broad. Think of the breath coming in, going down the body; think of the breath coming in from the bottom—through the soles of your feet, up through the legs. See what that does. You can work with the breath, you can imagine the breath, in lots of different ways, and it'll have an impact on how the breath energy flows in the body. You find that the energy is really responsive to images in the mind.

Then, when you've found something good, how do you maintain it? That's the next work for directed thought and evaluation.

Then, when you maintain it, how do you use it? How do you spread it so that a sense of ease fills the body, and you're bathed in a sense of fullness?

It's in this way that concentration starts with discernment and then refines your discernment.

Ajaan Lee, when he wrote one of his first Dhamma books, pointed this out as one of the distinctive features of what he had learned from Ajaan Mun: that we don't just do virtue and then concentration and then discernment. He said that your discernment has to foster your virtue and concentration, your concentration has to foster your virtue and discernment, and, of course, your virtue fosters concentration and discernment. They help one another along.

But the important point here is that discernment is strategic. It's not something you read about or think about and then leave it there. You try to develop the good qualities in the mind that discernment says will be good to develop, and you figure out all the twists and turns of the mind as it resists that.

As the Buddha once said, one of the measures of your discernment is knowing that something is going to be good for you but you don't like to do it, but you can still talk yourself into wanting to do it; or knowing that something is not going to be good for you but you like doing it—this is where a lot of addictions come in—but you can talk yourself into wanting *not* to do it. Discernment is strategic, it's pragmatic, it's there to guide your actions.

So, we're not here just watching things arising and passing away and thinking that in and of itself is wise. We're trying to figure out: What kind of things can we give rise to in the mind that would be good? That's when your knowledge of arising and passing away is really useful: when you understand the causes for what

can make good things arise, what can make bad things pass away. That's what discernment is good for. Always keep that pragmatic side in mind.

When the Buddha lays out the three qualities that you bring to mindfulness practice, which is the basis for concentration, he lists mindfulness, alertness, and ardency. As Ajaan Lee points out, the ardency is the discernment there: in other words, seeing that the purpose of all this is to put it into practice and to do it well.

So, listen to the Dhamma, think about the Dhamma, but, if you really want to know the Dhamma, you've got to commit yourself to doing it. Reflect on what you're doing so that you can do it better and better. That's what it means to be wise.