

## *Discernment All Along*

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In the *Wings to Awakening*, the Buddha describes the path in many different ways. There are seven sets altogether, and they have a lot of factors in common, but they order them in different ways. The most prominent one is the noble eightfold path. In that set, your discernment comes first, followed by virtue, and then right effort, right mindfulness, right concentration. This emphasizes the fact that you have to have some understanding of what you're doing if you really want to develop virtue, if you really want to get the mind into concentration.

But then, there are the five faculties: You start with conviction. You have a general conviction in the principles of the Buddha's awakening, but the discernment doesn't come until the end—and that *confirms* your conviction.

Then, the seven factors for awakening: You start out with mindfulness, and then you have what's called *analysis of qualities*, which is the discernment faculty. Then from there you get the mind into concentration.

So, it's not the case that you can line things up in the same way for everybody. I think that's one of the reasons why the Buddha set things out in all these different ways: Different people approach the path in different ways. Some people, as Ajaan Fuang said, find concentration really easy. They're the type of people who don't think very much. It's very easy for them to let go of their daily concerns and just drop down into concentration. Other people think a lot, and it's going to take a lot for them to settle down. They have to learn how to use their thinking, use their discernment, to get the mind still.

Ajaan Lee makes the point that even with the practice of generosity, you want to use your discernment. You figure out: What's a good gift? Who's a good person to give it to? What's the right attitude to have as you're giving the gift? That way, you can get the most out of it, and other people can get the most out of your generosity as well.

In this way, you approach generosity as a skill. In fact, this is how Ajaan Lee approaches the practice as a whole. For instance, getting the mind to settle down in concentration: He often compares it to a manual skill, and that falls in line with the Buddha's observation that you learn the Dhamma through commitment and reflection.

For instance, Ajaan Lee says you can take silver, you melt it, and you can make it into different things. As you get better and better, your handicraft becomes more and more something you can use for your livelihood. But it has to come from observing what you're doing: learning from the object you're focused on.

In his case, you learn from the silver. Silver reacts to heat in different ways. You can get rid of impurities in different ways. If you're observant, over time you get a better and better sense of what you're working with, and you can make better and better things out of it.

The same principle applies to the breath and the state of concentration you can develop with the breath. You have to observe, you have to evaluate, and this is a preliminary form of discernment.

Especially we here in the West: We think a lot, so we have to learn how to harness our thinking so that we can get the mind to be still. So you work with the breath. Learn *from* the breath because it has a lot to teach. It'll tell you when you're pushing too much or when you're not pushing enough. It'll tell you when you have a useful way of conceiving it—picturing it to yourself—or one that's not so useful.

In the beginning, you think about the breath coming in from the outside, and that's your main focus. But don't limit it. Don't limit your focus to just the air coming in and out through the nostrils. Think of the way the whole body moves as you breathe in, moves as you breathe out. If it feels tight or tense, what ways can you think of the breathing to relax some of that tension?

After all, as the Buddha said, you want to learn how to breathe in and out sensitive to rapture, breathe in and out sensitive to pleasure. Where are you going to find these things? By being really sensitive to how the breath comes in, how the breath goes out—giving it some space, and airing out your concepts of what's actually happening as you breathe in, breathe out.

Ajaan Lee says you can be sensitive to the breath coming in and out even through the pores of the skin. Think about that: All around you there are pores of the skin. The breath isn't coming in just in the line from the nose down to the abdomen. All the little tiny muscles around the pores are involved as well. Think about that and see what that perception does to how you feel the breath—how it opens things up.

And you needn't focus too much on the surface of the body. Think of yourself sitting here in a big breath cocoon that's in the body, but also extends a little ways out from the body. See how that perception helps the process of breathing, so that you can breathe in and out sensitive to... it may not be rapture, but at least it's refreshment. Breathe in and out sensitive to pleasure.

As you explore things in this way, you get a sense of what works, and that's the result of your discernment. You're getting the mind to settle down by using your discernment, which means that even in the beginning of the practice, discernment has a role to play.

When the Buddha was teaching breath meditation to Rāhula, he started out by talking about the elements or properties of the body; the practice of goodwill; the contemplation of inconstancy. These are all topics of tranquility, but they're also topics of insight. Even the

brahmaviharas, which tend to be wishes, don't have to be just wishes. You can stop to think about, "Well, what's the wisest way to express goodwill?"

If you really have goodwill for other beings—what does that mean? It means basically that you wish that they would behave skillfully, because that's how they're going to be happy. And in what ways could you be helpful in that?

When you learn how to think in these ways and ask these kinds of questions, that's how your discernment develops. At the same time, the well-being that comes from your goodwill gets increased. This teaches you a very important lesson: that your well-being and your suffering come from *how* you do things.

In other words, you're not sitting here perfectly passive, waiting for pains to come or pleasures to come, or hoping for pleasures and fearing the pains. We're *active*. We go out looking for things. And when you can be sensitive to the fact that you're out there looking—looking for pleasure and many times you come across pain—still, you keep on looking, looking, looking. But a lot of the ways you look doom you to have to suffer.

So, basically the Buddha is telling you to hold up a mirror to your mind in action. Watch the mind as it's engaged with the breath. Watch the mind as it's engaged with all the various skillful things that are parts of the path: virtue, concentration, discernment—and see what you can learn.

It's easiest to learn when you're engaged in skillful activities or engaged in the attempt to do something skillful. If you find yourself getting frustrated that things are not settling down as you like, well, reflect on that. Does the frustration help? Will it get you anywhere?

How can you get around it? By developing a cheerful attitude: You're here doing something really good. You're here doing something really harmless. It may take a while, but we're not in a race. You read that the Buddha says you have to be heedful, ardent, resolute—but he doesn't say you have to rush.

After all, this is meticulous work: You're trying to figure out your mind. If we could simply get to nibbana through the force of our desire, as Ajaan Fuang said, we would have all gone there a long time ago. We have to be observant, and we have to use our ingenuity. The combination of being observant and being ingenious: That's discernment—as you notice what you're doing, and then you try to think of new ways of doing things that are not satisfactory yet.

So, don't wait for discernment to come at the very end of the path. It's not the case that you observe the precepts until the precepts are perfect, and then you do concentration until concentration is perfect, and then you develop discernment. Even as you're being generous—one of the very first steps of the path, even as you're choosing your good admirable friend to teach you—that requires a lot of discernment. Even the first step that's often listed as one of the first steps in the practice—finding an admirable friend—requires a lot of discernment.

Generosity, if you want to do it well requires discernment; virtue requires discernment; concentration requires discernment.

As you apply your discernment to these things, it develops. It gets more and more sensitive, and it gets more and more aimed *inside*—where the real issues are. So, it's a matter of discernment all the way. This is why the Buddha put right view at the very beginning of his list of the factors of the path.

It wasn't the first factor that he discovered. He says that he discovered concentration first, but right view was what made everything right. And of course, how do you develop right view? By trying all the factors of the path and gaining some practical experience, committing yourself to the practice, reflecting on it. In this way, all the other factors of the path keep feeding back *into* right view. So, when things aren't going well remind yourself: You do have your discernment.

When I first went to stay with Ajaan Fuang, there was one time he told me to use my *paññā*—the Pali word that I translate as “discernment” now. Back in those days, if you opened any dictionary, it would say that *paññā* means “wisdom.” So I complained. I said, “I don't have any wisdom.” He said, “Everybody has some *paññā* if they're practicing. If you're born in the human realm, you've got *some*.”

Which made me stop to think about what he meant. I realized it was discernment: the ability to see things clearly, to see distinctions, to be able to rank things as to which is better, say, of two ways of doing things. It also means being able to see how things are interconnected—what their relationships are. These are all abilities that we have to some extent, it's simply a question of whether we apply them or not, especially to this issue: trying to understand our own minds.

So take the discernment you've got and apply it to the practice, and then be discerning in how you read the results. That element of discernment in your virtue, in your generosity, in your concentration will help keep you on the right path.