

Discernment on the Path

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There was an ajaan in Thailand who didn't become famous until very late in his life. He gave very short Dhamma talks, and one of the talks he gave was basically one sentence. He said, "Take *buddho* as the path for the mind."

Buddho is the meditation topic he worked with, but the same principle applies to the breath or whatever other topic you're focusing on. It's your path. You stick with it; you follow it. With the breath, you don't leave the breath until the breath leaves you. In other words, you stay with the breath energy in the body until everything gets really, really quiet, and the breath doesn't even move. That's when you start working with the formless meditations. But until that point, you want to stay with the breath. And even when you're analyzing the formless meditations, you find yourself having to come back to the breath.

All too often, people think that you do a little concentration with the breath, and then you have to look someplace else for the next step. Well, you don't; it's right here. You stay with the breath until the whole mind gathers around the breath so that you can see clearly everything that's going on in the mind. It's all right here: body, feelings, mind states, and mental qualities. They all gather around the breath. So whichever frame of reference you want to use, it's right here.

That reminds you to look at this state of mind from all directions. When the time comes to develop discernment, you're watching right here because discernment is basically guidance in what to do right here. The four noble truths are guidance for action. The fourth truth is a path: something you follow, something you develop. Each of the other truths also has a duty associated with it. You try to comprehend wherever there's stress. You look at it—not only at the stress, but also at the mind—because the cause for the stress, at least the part that's weighing the mind down, is actually coming out of the mind itself.

This is one of the reasons why we want to have this all-around view of what we're doing right here. It's one of the reasons we try to develop a full-body awareness. If you stay focused on one point, everything else gets thrown into a big blind spot. You may be very clear about that one point, but there are a lot of other things going on in the mind that you're going to miss. Whereas if you learn how to develop an all-around awareness, you can look at your state of concentration to see what's coming in to bother it—or what you're pulling in to bother it—and you see that you don't have to do that. You just drop it. That's the abandoning of the cause of stress.

So as you sit here, try to protect this state of mind and learn how to survey it all around. That's the purpose of keeping everything as still as possible. You're not trying to suppress the breath. If you do that, the concentration gets uncomfortable. But you want to keep the mind as still as possible.

In the beginning, there has to be some movement to the mind as you're settling in. You work through the knots of breath energy in the different parts of the body, because it's through the breath that you know the body. It's through the breath that you can move the body. So you want to get the breath as normal as possible. As Ajaan Lee says, it's like trying to see if the mirror in which you're looking at yourself is concave or convex. You're trying to make it flat and clear so that what's there in the mind and the body will be reflected, clear and undistorted, in the breath.

That's why the image for the first jhana is of a person kneading water through a ball of bath powder. There's an activity there—a conscious activity. Of the different images for jhana, that's the only one with a conscious agent doing something. You're working through the different knots and obstructions and other irregularities in your breath energy. The fact that you just dropped all other preoccupations: That's what they call “secluded from unskillful qualities.” There's a sense of pleasure and rapture born of that seclusion. The mind may not be absolutely still, but it's dropped a lot of its other concerns. That right there removes a lot of burdens.

And as you open up the breath channels to the different parts of the body, that allows the sense of ease and rapture to spread out into different parts of the body until everything feels well nourished. That's when you don't have to do the spreading or adjusting so much anymore. You're just there with that sense of stillness. The mind gains confidence, and the rapture and pleasure are now born of concentration—the fact that everything is centered. You really are single-minded.

Then you learn how to stay with that. One problem that people often have when they develop concentration is that they get the mind to settle down just a little bit and then they're concerned, “Now we have to do the next step, which is discernment.” Actually, the discernment's going to be found right here in the process as you learn how to adjust the mind, as you learn how to weed out the little disturbances that would come in and destroy your concentration, or the disturbances that are there in the perception of the breath that's holding you in concentration. Can you develop a more refined perception of the breath? But if you find that asking these questions is beginning to destroy the concentration, drop them for the time being.

An important principle in practicing is having a sense of time and place. When are you ready for a particular stage? This requires trial and error. You try analyzing things a little bit, and if the analysis is beginning to unravel the concentration, okay, stop. Just stay with the stillness so that the mind can get really clear, really well nourished. Keep on doing this as you go through the different stages of concentration until, as I said, everything settles down and is still—not because you’re clamping down on it, but simply because the mind is very content to stay right here. The movement of the in-and-out breath grows calm. There’s just a very still but alive energy filling the body.

Again, you learn how to maintain that because it’s in that state that the Buddha was able to gain awakening. His awakening started right here from this spot where the mind is centered, everything in the body is still, and the mind is still, alert. And what do you look for? You look to see what other subtle movements there are in the mind, where it’s going for something else, or it’s developing a little sense of pride around its attainment. You want to see these things clearly because these are the little things that can abort any insights or limit insights when they do come.

Sometimes an insight will come into how you’ve been carrying something really dumb around with you—some idea, some thought, some assumption. You begin to see that it doesn’t really help you in any way and you drop it. There’s a great sense of relief that comes with that. But then there can also be a sense of “Wow! I’ve been able to do that.” You immediately take on something new: a new burden, the burden of pride, the burden of conceit. One of Kee Nanayon’s most valuable pieces of advice is that as soon as you have an insight, keep watch on what happens next. What other little things are going to come up in the mind? Learn now to drop those as well. As long as you’re dropping other bad habits, try to drop the subtler ones, too.

This is what’s really important about discernment. It allows you to see what you’re doing, and it gives you some ideas about how you can do things more skillfully. It gives you some ideas about what things to watch out for in the variety of activities you might be engaged in. There are some things you simply have to watch until you can comprehend them. You want to watch their ups and downs. This is what the teachings on the three characteristics are all about. All too often, they’re presented as, “This is the picture of reality, and if you see this is the way things really are, then you’ve gained awakening.” But these three characteristics are not goals to which we strive, they’re actually meant to be tools to a higher goal.

You look for inconstancy because inconstancy tells you that there’s something going on in the mind that’s inconstant. The mind is still moving very subtly; that’s

why things go up and down. The level of stress, even in a subtle state of concentration, can go up and down a little bit. You want to look for those ups and downs and then learn how to disidentify with whatever it is that's accompanying them. That's why the Buddha made the distinction between the duties for stress and the duties for the cause of stress. You abandon the cause of stress; you don't abandon the stress. You look for whatever else is going on, what movement of craving is going on. That's what you abandon. In other words, you stop doing it. This is where the insight gets really valuable.

So on the one hand, there is that element of just seeing things as they are, but you see them within the context of a particular framework. Some of the images of discernment help illustrate this. One of the most frequent ones is that as you see the four noble truths, it's like a person watching fish move around and being still in a clear pool of water. In other words, you see precisely what's happening. But it goes beyond just seeing.

Another image for discernment is the plastered wall of a fortress. They would put plaster on fortress walls so that the enemy wouldn't be able to get a handhold or a foothold on the plaster. If you build the wall out of logs, then there are plenty of places to grab hold and climb up on the wall of logs. So you have to plaster everything over; then there's no place where the defilements can get a hold on you. In other words, that instruction that whatever comes up, whatever insight you gain, watch to see what the mind does next: That's how you put plaster on your mind. That way, greed, aversion, delusion, conceit, and all the other things that can spoil your insights won't be able to get a handhold.

Another image is of the rafters of a house. Discernment is the culminating factor in the five strengths and the five faculties. The other four—conviction, persistence, mindfulness, and concentration—are the rafters that you put up. But they're not really secure until you put that top rafter at the peak of the roof. Once that's in place, it holds everything else in position and makes it secure. In other words, your discernment is what protects your conviction and your persistence. It guides these things. It guides your mindfulness, guides your concentration to keep them on target, to keep them on course.

Discernment is basically a guide to what to do, a guide to action. The release that comes: That's something you can't do. That's what you're looking for. But you use all the tools of discernment—the four noble truths, the three characteristics, the three perceptions that help you see if something really is as good as it looks—to get you to that release.

I once had a student who tended to have a lot of visions that would come in the concentration about the nature of the world, the nature of reality. I had to

keep on reminding her, “But that’s not what we’re here for.” The only aspects of reality that are really useful are the ones that we need to know to put an end to stress. Remember what the Buddha taught. He said he taught suffering and the end of suffering, or stress and the end of stress. We want to comprehend the reality of the suffering so that we can develop the path that leads to the end of stress. The teachings are all aimed at that course of action.

Those are the things you want to look for as you meditate: What are you doing? What are the results? Are they heading in the direction of more suffering, or are they heading in the direction of less? Those are the main questions you have to keep in mind.