

Strength of Discernment

April 14, 2020

The Buddha defines the strength of discernment as the discernment of arising and passing away that's penetrative, noble, leading to the right ending of stress. Some people hear that definition and they focus on the arising and passing away, thinking that all you have to do is just sit back and watch things coming and going, and agreeing with the Buddha that, Yes, things do arise and pass away—and that that's the end of the matter. You simply have to step back and watch, abide in the space around the arising and passing away and you're going to be okay.

But that interpretation is not very useful for people who actually have to make choices in life. And it's not really in line with what the Buddha meant when he said “penetrative” anyhow. Because as he explains it, when you really penetrate something, you know its cause; you know its diversity, in other words, where it's good, where it's bad, where it's skillful, where it's not; you know its cessation; and you know the path leading to its cessation. That requires a lot more than simply watching things coming and going.

When something comes into mind, you have to ask yourself: “*Why* is it there?” And then you look in terms of what the Buddha calls its diversity: “Is this skillful? Is this not? How skillful is it?” And if it's not skillful, you've got to get rid of it. You have to figure out what the cause was so that you can get rid of the cause. Once you've done that, that's the cessation. Of course, the path to the cessation requires all of the elements of the path, everything from right view down to right concentration.

So the discernment of acting, knowing what to do, requires a lot more than simply watching. You have to evaluate. You have to make value judgments. Especially in a time like this, where a lot of choices are presenting them to you thick and fast, and a lot of information and misinformation is circulating out there. You have to focus on where you should pay attention. Because we're trying to give rise to discernment, and discernment lies in knowing which things are fit for attention and which things are not fit for attention. That's the diversity of these things. You have to ask yourself: “What are my duties right now? Where am I responsible?” And you focus there.

I was talking with someone this morning who was concerned that she was too focused on her work. She has a job where she actually can continue working, and she wasn't thinking too much about all the people out there in the world who are suffering from the quarantine right now, so she wondered if she was in denial. So I asked her, “What can you do for the people who are out there suffering? If there's something you can do, go ahead and do it.” She works

as a therapist, and she can work, helping her clients. And all of us can help our neighbors, the people around us. As for the people beyond that, that depends on our capacities, our time, our energy, where we feel we can be of help. That's worthy of attention.

As for what's going to happen in the future, again, you ask yourself: "Where should I focus my attention right now? There are certain qualities I'm going to need to deal with the future when it comes. I'm going to need mindfulness and alertness for sure." So you ask yourself: "What are those things based on?" They're based on virtue and they're based on right view.

So work on your virtue. When you're living in difficult times, you have to be very careful and determined that you're going to maintain your virtue in spite of the difficulties. That requires something strong inside: right view coupled with the practice of mindfulness and concentration. These things keep you strong. So don't let yourself be overcome by worry. Don't let yourself get knocked off course by the news.

Discernment lies, as the Buddha said in one of his really basic explanations, in knowing what is your task and doing your task and knowing what is not your task and not moving in on other people's business—or taking on more than is really appropriate for you. So when you're stuck in confinement, look around you. All too often, we think that the things right next to us are not worthy of attention. But now is a good time, if you have the time and the energy, to clean up your dwelling. As one of the forest monks said, you don't need psychic powers to see somebody's state of mind. Just look at the place where they live. So clean up your dwelling and that'll help to clean up your mind.

Pay attention to things that are close to you. Pay attention to your breath. The way you breathe through the body is going to have an impact on the mind. And you can use the breath to undercut unskillful states. You can ask yourself, "If something's coming through the mind and I'm focusing on something that's not really worthy of attention, how can I give a karate chop to the mind?"—in other words, the part of the mind that finds this appealing or useful, or simply says, "This is my habitual way of doing things, so I'm just going to give in."

Now's a good time to learn new habits, to pay careful attention to what's going through your mind. Because things could get a lot worse and you're going to need something to rely on. And if you can't rely on your own mind, you're really up the creek. So the discernment here lies in seeing what's worthy of attention and what's not, paying careful attention to the things that are right close to you, the things you are responsible for. And you find that the things close to you give you their rewards.

Ajaan Fuang calls this the grass at the gate. His image is of cows in a corral: As soon as the gate is open, they go running out to the meadow, eat the grass

out there, and they run right past the grass that's growing at the post right by the gate. There are things that are close by that are useful. Your breath is useful. The way you relate to the breath, if you develop it as a skill, it can be very, very nourishing. You're taking advantage of what you've got close at hand. And that gives you the strength then to deal with other more obstreperous parts of the mind that insist on paying attention to things that are not fit for attention.

This is how discernment plays out in our minds, plays out in our lives. That factor of diversity in your actions, diversity in the things that present themselves to your attention: You want to get really discerning about what's worth going with, what's not. That's what diversity means in the Buddha's teachings—the diversity between what's skillful and what's not skillful, realizing that we're not simply passive observers.

It is possible to stay with the space around the arising and passing away, but that's simply the mind in the observing state. Yet the mind is also an actor, and it can't stay in that space and just let things come and go. It's making decisions and will be making decisions all along the path.

So we're working on developing our powers of judgment as to what in the diversity of things that offer themselves to us right now is really worth paying attention to and what's not. It's so tempting to get on the Net, so tempting to just keep surfing around picking up all the flotsam and jetsam on the waves, this little piece of information, that piece of misinformation, cobbling them together, paying attention to the wrong places. The right places are right where we're responsible right now. If you're good at handling where you are responsible, then you find that your range of effectiveness in the world will expand from there. It'll come from a solid foundation. If this inner part is not well-taken care of, though, then no matter how much good you try to do in the world outside, it's not coming from a good place, and it's all going to fall apart.

When you're building something good in the world, you have to have a good foundation, and the best foundation is inside. So pay attention inside, pay attention to things that are close to you, things that are in your area of responsibility. Strengthen your discernment in this way and you'll find that the good you can do inside and the good you can do in the world will simply expand.