

## *Seeing Distinctions*

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We're trying to bring the mind to stillness for two purposes, and the purposes go together. One is that when the mind is still, there's a sense of ease and well-being. The second is that when it's still, it can see things clearly. These go hand in hand, because if you don't have a basic sense of well-being as you meditate, and you see certain things about what you've been doing that cause suffering, you're often unwilling to stop that old behavior. The idea that you're doing something wrong, that you have to change your ways, is exasperating, irritating. It feels burdensome. So we have to soften up the mind to get it in a good mood. In other words, allow it to breathe in a way that feels good, so that being in the present moment is a comfortable experience. You want to stay here more and more; you feel more and more inclined to stay here. The more steadily you stay here, the more you can see.

What are you looking to see? Primarily you want to see your intentions. Sometimes we're told we have to see things in terms of their being inconstant, stressful, and not self, but you have to put that in a larger context. If you see that something is inconstant but you don't see anything better, you say, "Well, I'm still going to hang on because this is as good as it gets." It's only when you see better things that you're willing to let go. In other words, you see that you've been holding on to something, finding happiness in something that's not really worth the effort. There is a better happiness, a higher happiness, a happiness that goes deeper that comes from letting go. When the mind sees this, it doesn't have to be forced to let go. It'll let go on its own.

But you can't just tell it to let go from the get-go. You have to show it that, one, you've been attached to something; two, it's not worth the attachment; and three, you've got a better alternative.

So how do we learn about intentions? And why they're so important? Well, intention, of course, is kamma. It's what shapes our present moment: intentions from the past, intentions in the present. So we focus the mind on holding to one intention because the best way to get to know intentions is try to keep one going. Then you'll detect all the other intentions coming, trying to knock the first intention off course.

Otherwise, it's like floating down a river where two different currents converge. You don't know which current you're on—whether the current of the original river or the current of the second river—because everything is just

flowing. But if you set up a marker with the thought, “I’m going to stay right here,” then you begin to see: Is the water flowing from the direction of the first river or is it flowing in the direction of the second?

In the same way, you make up your mind to stay with the breath. Any intention that pulls you off the breath is something you don’t want right now. Those intentions will have their blandishments, they’ll have their attractions, but for the time being, you have to learn to say No. This requires mindfulness, it requires discernment, and also requires understanding, the understanding that you can come up with good reasons to say No to these things. And you can watch the mind as it’s beginning to wander off.

For many people, this is a totally new idea. Ordinarily, you’re staying with the breath and all of a sudden you don’t know what happened but you’re way off on the other side of the world. The other thoughts seem to come out of nowhere, and you’re not even aware of the fact that you’re switching. You may think that you can’t be aware of these things, that it’s an impossibility, that the mind is just that way. But it doesn’t have to be that way. There are stages in the process of the mind’s switching from one object to another, and the more observant you are, the more you see these things. You begin to realize that there are points in the process where you can say No. You don’t have to go.

You also see that there was an intention buried under a lot of other stuff, but the intention was there to shift. It’s only by setting up one intention and sticking with it that you’re going to notice these other surreptitious intentions. The more you can say No to them, the more quickly you can sense them, then the more you see what’s going on in the mind.

You begin to see that there are other things that go along with the intention. For example, there’s the act of attention, your sense of what’s important to pay attention to and what’s not. There are perceptions, the labels you put on things. And there are feelings: pleasure, pain, neither pleasure nor pain. All of these shape our intentions and all these are things you need to know. The more distinctly you can see them, the better.

This is an important quality of discernment: seeing distinctions. This is the opposite of what we’re sometimes told, which is that discernment sees the oneness of all things. That’s not what the Buddha taught. He taught you have to see distinctions, to see things separate. This is one of the reasons why he has you focus on arising and passing away, not simply to see that things do arise and pass away, but also to see that lots of different things we tend to glom together are actually arising and passing at different points. A feeling arises, then a perception arises on top of that. They’re two separate things. We tend to glom them together.

But if you want to free yourself from suffering, you've got to see that they are distinct. Then there may be an intention that builds on top of the perception. Again, you want to see that as something distinct. And there's the whole issue of feeling: There's an intentional element in all of our feelings. There are perceptions that are related to our feelings. There are acts of attention related to our feelings. You want to be able to tease them out.

This is one of the reasons why the Buddha has you focus on suffering or stress as the main point of discernment. The four noble truths start here, because this is where everything comes together. We have lots of perceptions surrounding our pains. Many of them go back to the days before we even knew language, which is why a lot of those perceptions are pretty strange. We may have the feeling that the pain is coming at us and we've got to do something to catch it so that it doesn't go deeper into us. So there's always the act of catching pain, catching pain, catching pain, which adds to the stress, but there is another way of looking at it, which is to realize when pains come and go, they come and go very quickly.

This is why it's so important when, say, there's a pain in your body, that you learn how to see the distinction between the actual feelings of pleasure and pain, and the other sensations of the four elements: i.e., the motion of wind, the solidity of earth, the liquidity of water, and the warmth of fire element. If you glom everything together, then the relative permanence of the solidity of the earth element seems to apply to the pain as well. You miss the fact that pain sensations are coming and going, flipping around very quickly. Even though they may come back to the same place again and again and again, they are moments of pain. But you learn to make the distinction that the solidity is one thing, and the pain is something else. You begin to see the pain is arising, passing away, arising, passing away very quickly.

So you have to be able to perceive this distinction. Once you perceive it, then you can look at the arising and passing away from another angle, seeing it as not so much something coming at you, but as something going away, going away as soon as it arises. Focus on the passing away as soon as you're aware of the pain. As the Buddha says, as soon as you're aware of something, it's already turned into something else. So as soon as you're aware of each little moment of pain, think of it as passing away from you. You don't have to catch it. You don't have to do anything to prevent it. You're just watching it as it's passing away on its own. That gives you a totally different relationship to the pain. Even with that one shift in perception, you're dropping a lot of the pain, a lot of the burdensomeness that we tend to associate with pain.

This is why seeing distinctions is so important. If you glom everything together, you'll never notice that. So insight meditation is not simply a matter of noting or scanning. You have to ask questions. This is a function of attention, one of the elements that helps to clarify the intention you have in the present moment. Ask the questions that help you see where there's an intentional element in your pain that's affected by the way you perceive things, by the way you label things, by the way you focus on things.

It's only when you see the contribution of the intention: That's when you realize that there's something to let go. In other words, we let go of that particular intention, because your intention was to get some happiness out of whatever you were experiencing, yet it didn't have a happiness to offer. You were putting an effort into perceiving things in a certain way and holding on to things in a certain way, and the effort wasn't really being rewarded. That's the proper insight into inconstancy and stress and not-selfness, i.e., they're things that are not really in your control. That's when it really goes deep and really affects a change in your behavior. When you can see that you have the alternative to holding on in that way, that's how you let go.

So all these factors come together, the factors of name in dependent co-arising: attention, intention, perception, feeling, and contact within the mind and between mental factors and the physical properties. Your ability to tease them out allows you to see where the problem is and how you can solve it. In particular, the problem is the craving that goes along with the intention that wants to get a certain happiness out of things, a happiness those things can't provide. When you see that you have an alternative to that way of relating to things, and there's less suffering involved, then you let go. No problem. And it really is a genuine letting go, an important letting go—because when you see clearly that this is the way you've been creating suffering for yourself, you don't want to go back to that kind of behavior at all. You've learned a new skill, a new approach.

This is why we try to make the mind still: so that we can see these things and to put the mind into the mood that once it sees these things, it's willing to make whatever changes in behavior are required.

Try to keep this in mind. We're bringing the mind to a state of oneness so that we can see the genuine distinctions that are there. We tend to come into the meditation with lots of false ideas about what's happening in the mind, what the different forces in the mind are and how they work, so we've got to bring everything to one first, and then when they're brought to one, they separate out on their own in the way they actually arise and pass away, as opposed to the way we thought they were arising and passing away.

So the oneness is important. It's the oneness of concentration, the singleness of preoccupation that starts with the first jhāna, and then the total unification of the mind that starts with the second jhāna. Ajaan Lee's image is of taking a rock that has different kinds of ore. You put the rock into the smelter and then you apply heat. When different temperatures are reached, different ores are going to melt out. The lead melts out at one temperature, the silver at another, the gold at another. They separate on their own without your having to go and take a pickax and try to separate the little tiny bits of ore from the rock. It's when you get things really still and really together in the mind, that's when they'll start separating out—if you're very careful to watch in the right place, with the right framework.

This is why the Buddha gives you the framework of the four noble truths. That's what you're using to watch things with. When you look from that angle, then they separate out on their own.

So discernment is a matter of seeing distinctions that builds on the oneness of concentration. Keep this in the back of your mind as you meditate, that you want to bring things to oneness, not because the oneness is in and of itself the end. It's a means to the goal of seeing distinctions. When you see these distinctions in the right light, they put an end to suffering. So watch carefully.