

Noble Ardency

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There are three qualities we're trying to develop as we meditate: alertness, ardency, and mindfulness.

Alertness is paying attention to the present moment, and in particular what you're doing and the results of what you're doing.

Ardency is the desire to really do it well. In the Canon, they talk about ardency as the proper response when you realize that if you don't develop skillful qualities of mind there's going to be suffering down the line. If you allow unskillful qualities to stay, there's going to be suffering down the line. So you do your best to be as skillful as possible.

Mindfulness is what keeps this in mind, at the same time reminding you to stay alert to what's actually happening. After all, you already have some ideas about what's skillful, but they may not necessarily be accurate. So you've got to be alert to check them as you put them into practice. And you've got to check your actions to make sure they really are skillful, in line with your original intention.

These qualities are listed under right mindfulness, but they apply to concentration as well. In fact, there's no real clear line between mindfulness practice and concentration practice. If you're very mindful and alert and ardent, the mind's going to settle down. Right mindfulness is how you get the mind to settle down, and that's how you get it to stay settled down. The quality of ardency in there is what gets the concentration stronger and stronger.

Ardency is also very directly related to the development of discernment. As you look at what you're doing, ask yourself, "Is this good enough? Is there still some stress here? To what extent is the stress unnecessary? To what extent is the level of stress changing? Is it going up or down?" This is where you get to watch: If the level of stress goes up, you can ask yourself, "What did I just do?" If it goes down, "What did I just do?" This is how you get more sensitive to the actions of the mind and their results.

So the ardency is the factor that we have to work on, because that's what keeps the meditation going and makes it better. And you learn how to ask these questions of yourself at the right times. When the mind first begins to settle down you have to be very quiet. Don't push it too much. In other words, don't question and probe it too much. You just want to ask yourself, "Is this good?" And if it's good, "Okay, we're going to stay here." Then you fight off any other thoughts at the moment. Just stay still with the breath until you really settle in and have a sense of being nourished by the breath, nourished by the concentration. Then you can ask yourself, "Is this *really* good? Could this

be better?” You’re learning to be a real connoisseur of your pleasure, a real connoisseur of the breath.

And as for what level of right concentration you’re on, that’s not really the issue. I noticed when people would come to Ajaan Fuang and tell him of their meditation experiences in hopes that he’d say, “This is the first jhana, this is the second jhana,” he’d never label it this or that. He’d simply ask them, “What does it feel like?” and get them to describe it in their own terms. Then he’d give some suggestions, and the suggestions would basically come down to this: “Look for any unnecessary stress there.”

So the question when you gain concentration isn’t what level it is. The question is, what are you going to do with it? How can you use this as a basis for more discernment?

Because these questions you’re asking: In the beginning they’re like refinements of the questions of hunger: The basic question of hunger is, “Where do I get to eat next? Do I stay here? Do I go someplace else? What do I eat?” Here we’re talking about not only physical eating but also the way we’re trying to find mental nourishment: in our emotions, in other people’s emotions, our status, wealth, whatever. It’s good to step back every now and then and ask yourself, “Is this really good eating?” In other words, are you really nourished? Are you creating trouble for yourself by the way you eat? Unnecessary trouble? There’s a phrase in Thailand: “If you know how to eat, then you can eat for a long time.” In other words, you don’t just go gobbling down everything you can get your hands on. You learn to think about the future. You learn to share. You learn to think about how other people are eating as well.

This is one of the reasons why generosity comes at the beginning of the practice. The mind’s basic relation to its experience is to feed on things, but generosity is where you decide *not* to. You learn a little bit of delayed gratification and a little bit of compassion. You think about other people’s needs as well. There’s a moment of freedom in that decision, in the realization that you don’t have to give in to your original greedy impulses. And there’s a benefit that comes: That’s an important realization. In fact, that’s the underlying insight that allows us to step back more and more, to question the way we’re feeding on things and to ask if there’s something better.

This is where discernment comes from: from generosity, with the realization that we do have choices. We don’t have to be pushed by the questions of hunger that demand an answer right now, right now. And from that first act of material generosity, we find there are other kinds of generosity as well: There’s the generosity of giving your time, giving your energy, giving your knowledge, giving your forgiveness.

There’s also the generosity of being virtuous—in other words, deciding

you're not going to harm anybody. You give safety: You're not going to kill or tell anybody else to kill. You're not going to steal or tell anybody else to steal. No illicit sex, no lying, no taking of intoxicants. Period. All of those decisions, all of those promises you make yourself, are a gift to yourself and to others.

The desire to meditate well is also a gift. Because through the meditation, you learn how to look after your own needs in a way that doesn't have to take anything from anyone else. And you have more to offer: When there's less greed, aversion, and delusion coming out of your mind into your actions, then there's less of your greed, aversion, and delusion for other people to suffer from.

So these questions of discernment that ask about the level of stress and whether it's necessary and what you can do to put an end to that stress: They all come out of that moment of freedom when you chose to give rather than to take and to eat. You realize that there is another way of finding happiness. As the practice progresses, these questions go beyond the question of how to feed skillfully and they turn into the question of, "Is it possible to find a happiness that doesn't need to feed at all?"

That's where the teachings are headed. That's where they become really noble. I was reading recently someone who was saying that "noble truth" was a mistranslation of the term *ariya-sacca* because there's nothing noble about stress, nothing noble about craving. But really there is if you approach these things in the right way. In fact, the approach is what makes the noble truths noble. If you learn how to ask these questions, you're putting the mind on a noble path. It leads to a noble destination—in the original sense of noble. At the time of the Buddha, the word we translate as noble, *ariya*, also meant universal, something that applies for everyone. They're not just personal opinions. They're not just a cultural assumption, true for one culture but not for others. There's something about these truths that's true for everybody. So they really are noble, in the sense of being universal, and they give you a guide to a noble life, in the sense of a life worthy of admiration.

They point out the fact that if there's suffering and stress, you try to comprehend it. You don't just accept it as being inevitable. And you don't blame it on other people or things outside. You take responsibility for it: That's noble. You try to figure out what it is that you're *doing* to cause it. And if you can see the cause, then you abandon it. You develop the path so that you can realize the end of suffering. These are noble ways of approaching the problem of suffering. They're a guideline to a noble life in which your desire for happiness doesn't have to conflict with anyone else's.

This element of desire really is an important part of the path. It's written there into right effort. It carries over into mindfulness through the quality of ardency and from there into your concentration, again through the quality of

ardency. It's the ardency informed by a sense of responsibility that gives rise to discernment.

So the question always is in your meditation, "Are you ardent enough in being mindful and alert? What can you do to give rise to more ardency?" Because it's in the ardency, responsible ardency, that everything noble about the noble path lies.