

Doubt vs. Discernment

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The Buddha recommends that you bring three qualities to your meditation: ardency, alertness, and mindfulness. Ardency is trying to do it well. Alertness is watching what you're actually doing. Mindfulness is trying to keep in mind that you're trying to stay with one topic—say, the body in and of itself—and you're putting aside greed and distress with reference to the world.

The commentary, when explaining those three qualities, identifies *sampajañña*—which I translate as alertness—as the wisdom quality. It defines it as seeing things in terms of the three characteristics, which is why you often see *sampajañña* translated as “clear comprehension.”

But the Canon doesn't define alertness that way at all. It's simply knowing what you're doing while you're doing it. It's funny that the commentary is very snide when it tries to argue with people who point out how that quality is defined in the Canon. They say that everybody knows what they're doing. Jackals know what they're doing when they howl; babies know what they're doing when they're sucking at their mother's breast. But how well do we really know what we're doing? A lot of us are pretty ignorant.

In fact, that's what the Buddha taught us: We're ignorant about our cravings, ignorant about our clingings, which is why we suffer. We're ignorant about the things we're doing. When Ajaan Lee explains those three qualities, he leaves alertness as alertness and he identifies ardency as the wisdom quality. It's what burns into things, understands them, out of the desire to master this path.

This, of course, fits in with the fact that the discernment factors in the path are not covered just by right view. There's also right resolve. Once you understand what's skillful and what's not skillful, then you resolve to do what's skillful. If you're not sure, you resolve to find out. There's a passage where the Buddha discusses the ways in which you feed and starve the hindrances and feed and starve the factors for awakening. And it's interesting that the way you starve the hindrance of doubt is the same way that you feed the factor of analysis of qualities, which is the discernment factor in those factors for awakening.

You do both of those things by looking into the mind and asking yourself, “What's skillful in here? What's unskillful in here? What qualities in the mind, when I act on them, lead to stress and suffering? What qualities lead away from stress and suffering?” Immediately after that, you act on what you see, to put it to the test. That's how you overcome doubt. Simply asking questions and then other

questions and other questions is not going to put an end to doubt. It's good that you can frame things in terms of questions so that you know what your problems are. But if it's just a kind of a doubtful state of mind, not knowing anything at all, and just wondering about things without trying to test them, that's the opposite of discernment.

I was talking to an athlete a while back who was having some problems with his breath meditation. I gave him some instructions. He followed through, got some good results, and his mother asked him the next day, "Any more questions?" He said, "No, I haven't mastered what I learned yesterday." That's the quality of a student who wants to gain discernment. You take a lesson and you really work with it before you come up with your next question.

This Q&A session we have here every evening at the monastery tends to encourage questions for the sake of questions, which is not what it's intended for. It's intended to give you some ideas of what to do and put into practice. Wait until you've given it a good try, or you run up against an obstacle that you can't figure out: Then you make your next question. That's the sign of the kind of doubt that leads to a discernment. The doubt that leads to laziness just doesn't really want to know, or doesn't want to put in the effort to find things out for yourself. That kind of doubt never gets resolved, no matter how many answers you get to your questions. And it really becomes an obstacle. That's why it's a hindrance.

So when you have instructions as to what to do, do it. Let your questions come from the doing, rather than from the abstraction, just wondering about this teaching, wondering about that teaching. The Buddha lays things out really clearly in the noble eightfold path. You're going to need virtue, concentration, and discernment, and he divides these things up into factors that are easy to remember. There's a lot that's not explained, but at least he heads you in the right direction.

When we chant the analysis of the path, notice that the first five factors have very short definitions. The factors having to do with concentration have long definitions. That's where the Buddha really lays it out. These are the things you can focus on. It starts with right effort, which is basically the same thing as ardency. What makes the effort right is that it's informed by right view as to what's skillful, what's not.

Then you can do what you should be doing with that kind of knowledge. You realize, "I'm sitting here, I've got some suffering." Don't just sit here wondering, "Gee, how can I put an end to the suffering." You look at the instructions. They tell you what to do. You see something unskillful coming up in the mind, you try to get rid of it. You try to prevent it from arising again. As for skillful things that

are not there, you give rise to them and then try to maintain them. Hold on to them—not only while you're sitting here meditating, but as also you go through the day. If you're really working at that, you don't have much time to come up with idle questions. There's no space in the mind for idle questions.

Then you take that determination to do what is skillful, and you establish it in a frame of reference that really allows you to see what's going on in the present moment, right here in the body, right here in the mind. It gives you the right focus because the present moment is the laboratory where you can see your intentions in action. You see the processes of thought construction in action. If you lose your reference to the present moment, you'll go drifting off into thought worlds. When you're in a thought world, you can't see it clearly for what it is, how it's constructed, how it's jerry-rigged, so you're missing a lot. Everything that's happening right here in the context of the present moment is what you need to know. And whatever you need to know is right here.

So try to maintain this frame of reference. If you really are serious about putting away unskillful qualities and developing skillful ones, the mind will have to settle down. It'll become clearer and clearer as to what's skillful and what's not. Your standards for what counts as skillful will rise.

So the way to overcome doubt is to take some instructions, make sure that they're clear, that you're clear on them, and then just do them. Questions may come up in the doing, and you try your best to figure them out on your own. It's when you can't figure them out that you come up with another question to ask. That's the only way your doubts are going to be resolved.