

## *Producing Discernment*

*May 20, 2023*

As you sit here meditating, your sense of you as the meditator can take any of three roles, usually a combination of all three. But sometimes one role or two roles are more emphasized.

The first role is the you who's doing the meditation. You're the one who intends to get the mind to settle down and you do what needs to be done: working with the breath, working with the way you talk to yourself, working with the perceptions you hold in mind. See how these things can get the mind to settle down and be with the breath as consistently as possible with as much of a sense of ease as you can manage. There's the potential for ease here. Try to find it and make the most of that.

Then there's the you who's supposed to enjoy the results of the meditation—enjoy the calm, enjoy the pleasure, even the refreshment and rapture sometimes. As the breath feels really good, the mind settles down and doesn't have to jump around. It feels just right here.

Then there's you the commentator, watching all this, deciding when the you as the producer is doing well or not, giving some encouragement to the you as the consumer, the enjoyer of the meditation, checking how much enjoyment you actually get, and then making comments on it: How could you do this better? If what you have done is done well, how do you remember that?

You're going to be playing all three of these roles. And as I said, sometimes the producer gets emphasized, sometimes the enjoyer, sometimes the commentator. But all three have to be trained. The commentator seems to be the one that does the training. It tells the producer what's working, what's not working. But it also has to train itself, because a lot of us have a very bad editor in our minds. The commentator can be really harsh, unreasonable.

You have to make sure that you listen to the comments that are actually helpful, that intend to help you settle down, because sometimes when you're harsh and critical about what you're doing, behind that voice is a voice that wants to give up meditating, so it tries to discourage you. You have to watch out for that.

In other words, you have to be sensitive to all these different roles. You have to learn how to read your mind to see what's needed at any one particular time. This is why discernment is not just a matter of memorizing a few basic principles and applying them all the time, or telling yourself, "If I just learn to accept what the Buddha had to say about the nature of reality, then I'd be okay." Discernment is

individual. It comes from your sensitivity, your ability to read a situation, and see what's needed. It also involves some imagination.

Think of Ajaan Fuang's two most common words when he gave meditation instructions. One, be observant; two, use your ingenuity.

It's good to have a sense of the possibilities of what you can do. When things are not going well, what alternatives do you have? There may be alternative ways of breathing, alternative places to focus, alternative ways of perceiving the breath, imaging the breath to yourself. Or there are times when you need to use another meditation theme altogether. The mind isn't willing to settle down with the breath. There's something going on in the mind that you have to correct, and you have to think your way out of that unskillful mind state. Simply telling yourself, "I'll be with the breath and everything will dissolve away," doesn't work.

Again, reading the mind, getting sensitivity, and having a sense of your options: This is how your discernment grows. This is why we say it's *your* discernment. You borrow the Buddha's discernment to help you get some ideas of what's possible. You borrow the discernment of the ajaans, like Ajaan Lee's maps of the ways the breath can go. Or you may have learned some other maps. Chi Gong and Tai Chi will teach you different maps of how the breath should go, how it can go, and you can play with them.

There are people who criticized Ajaan Lee for having learned about breath energy when he was in India, saying he was importing weird Hindu ideas into Buddhism where they don't belong. But of course they belong. The Buddha himself talked about breath energy going through the body. You're spreading a sense of well-being through the body, and you do most easily by working with the breath energies, thinking of the breath flowing through the body. But the fact that Ajaan Lee was willing to learn, to see what he could pick up from outside that was helpful, gave him some new insights into what the Buddha had to say.

That's something to keep in mind. It's the ingenuity part of your meditation.

If you get more sensitive to these different roles that you play inside, you find that they play a role in your engagement with the world outside as well. You get more sensitive to what you're bringing, where it's skillful, and where it's not skillful, what you can do to change. Because there is an awful lot in the world that we can't change.

There are things outside that will trigger you. You can't go around telling the world not to have triggers. After all, this is a world of triggers, a world of aging, illness, and death. It's a world where people are kind, people are unkind. People mean well; people don't mean well. It shows up not only in their words, but also in their actions. If you want a world where everybody is nice, you're in the wrong

place. So, given that this is where you are, you want to learn how not to suffer from it. You have to look at what you're doing to create suffering inside. What is your internal producer doing? What is the part of the mind that wants to enjoy a particular pleasure but is not getting the pleasure, and so starts getting obstreperous? And how is your commentator helping? What does the commentator know about how to read what's going on, and how to think about good alternatives to what you're doing right now? When your system gets set off by events outside, how do you undo that reaction?

You can start with the breath. Remind yourself that even though the body may be in a bad breath cycle, you can change it. Consciously breathe in a way that's calmer. Hold in mind perceptions that are calmer. Talk to yourself in ways that calm you down. You can borrow the wisdom of the ajaans, the wisdom of the Buddha. But you also have to learn how to produce some of your own.

Ajaan Lee makes this point. You're not really secure on the path until you can start producing your own discernment, and that comes through your sensitivity—in your sense in the potentials of what can be done, what things are not going well. We're not here just to apply Ajaan Lee's ideas. We're here to use them and then work variations on them. He himself worked variations on them; Ajaan Fuang worked variations on them. I once commented to him that it'd be good if he would write a guide to meditation. He replied that everything he taught was there in Ajaan Lee's *Keeping the Breath in Mind*. I told him there were so many interesting details, different perspectives that he had on those things. His response was, "Well, it's all there. It's up to each person to learn how to read the basic principles and then work variations on them."

Working variations on them is part of your development of your own discernment. A book that would map out everything that can happen in meditation, and everything that you're going to do to deal with it, would be too big to be a book. You'd get lost in all the details. But if you can learn how to read a situation, then come up with an approach that works, that's the activity of discernment. After all, discernment is an activity. It's not just a set of ideas that you're supposed to accept. It's an active part of the mind.

So as you bring the mind into concentration so that it can be still, so that it can observe itself, you're basically creating a state of mind that's likely to be discerning both in the sense of being sensitive and in the sense of learning how to work with options, work with possibilities. As for the insights come up, if they're appropriate to what you're doing right now, you use them and then you put them aside. If they're not appropriate, let them go. Don't try to hold on to your old insights.

Ajaan Maha Boowa makes this point. He has lots of techniques for dealing with pain: learning how to separate your awareness from the pain so that the awareness and the pain separate out in the same way that oil and water separate out, or oil and vinegar separate out in salad dressing. But as he said, the techniques that worked yesterday to separate them out may not work today. What works today may not work tomorrow.

This ability to keep coming up with fresh solutions to a particular problem: That's what your insight has to do. It's like having the goose that lays the golden eggs. As in any fairy tale, if you try to keep the golden eggs, they turn into ashes or bits of coal. Use the gold right when you've got it and keep looking after the goose so that the goose can keep on producing the eggs.

Keep looking after the ability to watch your mind, observe it, with a willingness to see new things. Remember techniques that have worked in the past—don't throw them away—so that you can sort through your repertoire, try things out. You get sense of what works or what tends to work in certain situations. If you've got a situation where they're not working, what can you do to create another golden egg? You're ardent. You're alert. You're mindful.

So you're working on the qualities that create discernment, nurture discernment, basically by developing your sensitivity, developing your ingenuity. That's how discernment deepens and grows.