

## *Discernment Through Right Effort*

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The Thai word for intelligence, *satipañña*, is a combination of two Pali terms: *sati* (mindfulness) and *pañña* (discernment). In other words, it's the ability to keep things in mind, and then know what you should be keeping in mind and why. You watch for distinctions to understand things—to see what's a cause and what's an effect. Which causes are connected to which effects, and which ones are not connected to any effects? Or which ones are not connected to each other at all? This, you have to see for yourself.

The Canon mentions three ways of fostering discernment. One is through listening or reading; another is through thinking; and the third is through developing, in which you actually try to develop good qualities in the mind. You use your mindfulness to keep in mind what you've learned, and in trying to apply it, you develop a different order of discernment. This is where practice takes the things you've studied to a different level—and takes *you* to an entirely different level, too. It's possible to read Dhamma books and then not do anything with the knowledge. But that's not what the knowledge is meant for. It's meant to be put to use to bring about true happiness. If you don't put it to use in that way, that's a sign of lack of intelligence.

You can also see it as a lack of honesty. After all, who doesn't want happiness? Yet you study about these things and then you just leave them there. If you're really intelligent, you want to put these things into practice for the sake of finding true happiness, and that's when you actually learn a lot more. It's through making an effort that the discernment develops.

Of course, that's *right* effort. We can learn about right effort. There are four kinds of right effort. There's the effort to prevent unskillful things from arising in the mind, and if unskillful things have arisen in the mind, you try to abandon them. As for skillful things, if they're not there yet, you try to give rise to them. When they *are* there, you try to maintain them and bring them to the culmination of their development. Those are four different types of effort. But right effort is not just a matter of making the effort; you also have to motivate yourself.

There are lots of different ways of motivating yourself to practice. You can think about all the suffering you're going to undergo if you don't practice, and the suffering you're going to cause for other people as well. You can think about how fortunate you are you have this opportunity to practice, so don't throw it away.

There are lots of different ways of motivating yourself, and they basically come down to the principle of heedfulness, realizing that you're doing things all the time, and they're leading to consequences all the time, so you might as well do them skillfully. If you don't do them skillfully, you're going to do them unskillfully. It's a choice you have to make. You can't say, "I'm just not going to engage in any actions at all." You're constantly making these choices, so you might as well do them well. Do them with care.

We can talk about these things, but how you actually use them in your practice: That's something you have to learn for yourself by practicing, by making the effort. I can sit up here and talk about all kinds of different ways of motivating you to practice, but it's up to you to realize which ones are going to work for you and which ones are not. And if the methods for motivating yourself you've read about or heard about don't seem to work, what are you going to do? There are a lot of things on the path that give good results, but you don't like doing them. They're hard. So that's one of the first lessons you learn: how to motivate yourself.

And then, when we talk about those four kinds of effort, which ones are the most appropriate to apply right now? They're part of a larger pattern where the Buddha talks about the duties with regard to the four noble truths. Essentially, what's talked about in right effort are the duties with regard to the cause of suffering and the duties with regard to the path.

The further duties include trying to comprehend suffering. In other words, you look at it and try to figure out, in any situation: Where is the suffering right now? Where is the stress right now? And what kind of stress is it? Is it the kind of stress that's just *there*? Or is it stress that you've been adding unnecessarily? And if you've been adding it, why? What's pushing you to do that, and how can you figure out the reasons for why you make suffering? And how can you figure out how to undo those reasons?—in other words, to develop a sense of dispassion for them. After all, they're you crave. Yet in going for them, you create suffering and stress for yourself, suffering and stress for other people. Most of us have learned how to ignore that, to turn a blind eye to the stress and suffering because we want the things we crave so much.

So look at your practice. You're sitting here right now meditating, trying to develop the path. If you've got some mindfulness, how do you keep it going? If you've got some concentration, how do you keep it going? I can give you advice on that, but the real discernment comes when you figure out how to do it for yourself: how to read your situation and figure out what kind of effort is needed right now.

Then, of course, there's the issue of how much effort is just right. How much strength do you have right now? A lot of the members of this community have been laid low by flu and colds and whatnot. When you're sick, what's the appropriate amount of effort? How much effort can you put into the practice? What expectations should you have? When you're feeling well, when you're feeling healthy, how much more effort is appropriate?

There's also the issue of the particular issues coming up in your mind. Some of them require that you simply look at them and they'll go away. It's because of these that a lot of people think, "Well, that's all there is to the meditation. Just look at what comes, it'll go, and that's the end of the problem." Yet there are a lot of issues in life that don't just go away—a lot of issues in the mind that are causing you stress and suffering. You can look and look and look, but they're not going to go away. That's when you have to dig down deeper to see where the mind is lying to itself, telling itself that it's not doing anything at all, yet somehow, for some reason, there's suffering, some stress coming up. "Who knows why it's there? It's not my fault." Well, look into that. That's when you have to dig deeper, when you have to exercise your ingenuity, exercise your abilities to watch carefully and learn how to read the mind: when it's telling you the truth and when it's covering up things.

This issue of "just right" covers all kinds of areas in the practice—starting with how much sleep is enough, how much sleep is too much, and how much sleep is not enough. The same with food: How much is too much, how much is too little, how much is just right? How do you learn how to read yourself in this way? When you listen, you can hear that these are issues you want to look into. But what you're actually going to see and actually how you negotiate what you see: That's where you develop your own discernment.

Finally, as you're sitting here watching yourself practice, where is the extra stress, and what can you do to avoid it? This applies not only to blatant stress, but also to the stress of the path itself in bringing the mind to concentration, observing the precepts—developing *all* the different factors of the path. This requires effort, and it's going to require some stress. So how do you figure out which stress that you're experiencing right now is an essential part of the path, and which is an unnecessary burden you've added on top of yourself?

It's in looking at those extra burdens that you begin to see the various types of craving that hover around the path. We know there are certain levels of craving that are necessary for staying on the path, but you've got to learn how to separate things out, see which parts are necessary, and which parts are not.

For example, as you observe the precepts, it is necessary to get very strict with yourself and develop a real sense of shame and compunction around any mistakes you might make in terms of the precepts. As you practice, you'll begin to realize you're starting to apply the same standards to other people. It gets so that it's hard to look at people who misbehave. Ultimately, that's an unnecessary part of the path, but for certain stages, it's a necessary spillover. If you don't develop a strong sense of shame or a strong sense of distaste for actions that go against the precepts, it's very easy to justify to yourself, "Maybe I can be a little bit looser here. After all, it's all about the middle way, right?" But the question about moderation in observing the precepts: The precepts themselves already describe a moderate way of life, a moderate path of practice, so you want to be strict in adhering to them. That's how you stay right there in the moderate spot.

When things start going overboard is when you start really getting down on other people. You look at other people and all you can see are their mistakes. That, ultimately, is something you want to learn how to let go. In the meantime, you develop the discernment that comes with telling yourself, for instance, that you're not going to tell a lie, trying to stick with that, and then realizing that there are situations where you don't want to tell the truth because it's going to harm somebody. Okay, how do you avoid saying that thing without lying? It's when you take the precepts seriously that you develop more discernment, more ingenuity.

The same applies to your concentration. You go through the day and say, "I'm as mindful as I can be." But if you decide to be really, really on top of things, how do you stay on top of things without getting all on edge, without driving yourself crazy and the people around you crazy? How are you very strict in your mindfulness and yet able to act in a natural way? These are skills that require discernment. And they're going to develop your discernment because discernment is all about learning to watch yourself. See what you're doing. See what the consequences are. Realize where you're adding unnecessary stress and how you can let it go.

We can talk about these things; you can read about them. One of the reasons the Buddha established this pattern of apprenticeship is so that you can be around a teacher who can watch you as well. But ultimately, you've got to do most of the watching; the teacher can't watch you all day. After all, you've got to develop your own discernment there—your own sense of responsibility. Otherwise, the path just doesn't work.

These are some of the ways in which discernment does get developed when you put forth right effort—putting forth whatever effort you can and then making it right. That's how discernment grows. That's how it actually achieves its purpose,

which is to bring about true happiness. It's the most intelligent use of your mental capabilities, so try to keep that point in mind.