



Week 7 Lesson:

Cultivate Discernment

*If the heart is restored to health,
purged of restless desire,
then the Merciful One is seated on the throne.
After this, the Divine One guides the heart directly,
since the heart is with Him. –Rumi¹*

Spiritual discernment is the key to turning our life around— turning from searching to satisfaction, from frustration to fulfillment. It is the principal tool we use as we learn to follow inner guidance and develop the skill of Self-referral. Through cultivating discernment, we discover how to be inspired and follow the promptings of the soul, rather than pushed by circumstances or old habitual patterns. The highest expression of discernment is the power of the soul shining its light through the purified intellect. In this capacity, it becomes a “honing device” for dharmic living, continually guiding us toward alignment with the higher Self.

Essential Discernment

As noted in lesson three in this course, *viveka* or discernment, is the awareness which allows us to know what is true, setting it apart from what is false. This is the ability to discriminate between that which changes, and that which remains constant—discerning ultimate Truth from relative truth.

¹ Rumi, Mathnawi I, 3665-3666, revised from a translation by Kabir Helminski and Camille Helminski, The Rumi Collection, (Boston: Shambala publications, 1998), p. 102



Although we use the capacity to discern in various ways—many of them mundane, such as which flavor of ice cream we prefer or which route is the best to reach our destination—the principal spiritual discernment we need can be called *essential discernment*. “Essential discernment” is the primary distinction we must make between spiritual and material existence in order to realize the Truth of our being. While there is only one Reality that is the source and the substance of all that is, this Reality is both transcendent and immanent. Its transcendent essence is supremely conscious, pure, and still. It is unmoving and unchanging, birthless and deathless. It is Ultimate Reality. Its immanent expression contains qualities which allow the creative process of manifestation, characterized by movement and change, arising and dissolving, birth and death. This creative expression is considered relative, not because it is less real, but because it is continually changing. Changing phenomena has no independent existence, no enduring reality. It is a process of ever-becoming, ever-evolving, ever-new expression.

The essential discernment between Ultimate Reality and its relative expression provides insight into who, or what, we are. Our essence of being is unchanging Supreme Consciousness, pure Spirit. Our body and mind are vehicles of spirit; they are material and thus continually undergo change.

Once we become aware of our true Self through this essential discernment, we have the foundation for a happy and fulfilled life. Many of us come to this insight about our true nature through what I would call the back door, not the direct route. The direct route, or front door, is meditative contemplation of who we are. That back door is the process of wondering how to be happy, how to find lasting fulfillment. It’s a more common path of Self-discovery.

Many of us can attest to taking a long and winding road in search of happiness. Looking here and there, we discover it for a time, only to have it elude us at the next turn. First a relationship or a vocation or creative expression that seems to satisfy our heart. But in time, that changes and the yearning persists.



What Brings Happiness?

In the ancient *Chandogya Upanishad*, we find the story of Narada who has reached a point of divine grace in his life. He begins to seek the Truth. He reaches out to the spiritual teacher, Sanatkumara and asks for the guidance. Before he begins instructing Narada, Sanatkumara asks him what he already knows. The list is long. Narada tells his prospective Guru all of the things he has explored and mastered in life. He has traveled that long and winding road in search of happiness and true fulfillment.

Along the way, he mastered mathematics, grammar, medicine, philosophy, creative arts, ethics, logic, and even all the scripture—including the four *Vedas* and the *Mahabharata*. Surely there was enough accomplishment there to provide a happy life. But Narada reports to Sanatkumara that despite all of his achievements, he suffers from a pervasive sense of sorrow. Many of us recognize that sorrow as our own. It is the sorrow of the soul yearning to be realized, to be discovered, and provided an opening to express.

Discernment comes into this picture when we realize that the happiness we are seeking cannot be found in the changeable material realm. No matter what we acquire in the material world, or how great our level of success, it will ultimately fall short of what we really want. This is because what we really want is infinite, unchanging happiness. What is changeable, cannot possibly provide what is unchanging.

The unconditional happiness that we long for is bliss. It is the soul's own nature, the pure joy of conscious being. This is a great liberating insight. Now that we know what we are looking for, we can set our sights on finding it. This is where viveka's (spiritual discernment's) great friend comes to assist. The true and lasting friend of viveka, spiritual discernment, is *vairagya*, renunciation.



Two New Best Friends

Sometimes we think of renunciation as some extreme form of asceticism or self-mortification. Neither has much appeal. Thankfully, *vairagya* or renunciation is not that. Instead, it is a natural blossoming of spiritual discernment. As the rising sun allows us to discern the colors of the landscape once hidden to us by the darkness of night, *viveka* makes it possible for us to see what is useful to our higher purpose and what is not. Then *vairagya* kicks in. We begin to renounce what is not useful and move toward what is most supportive of dharmic living.

Viveka and *vairagya* are like good friends who are always together. They are the companions we need to live a spiritually conscious life. Once we discern the lasting happiness we seek will not be found in externals, or even in accomplishments, we renounce our attachment to that as the source of our happiness. This doesn't mean that we cease to be engaged. It doesn't mean that we don't strive, participate, and enjoy what life has to offer. It simply means that we are free from the erroneous belief that any of it is the *source* of our happiness or able to bring us *lasting* happiness. Temporary happiness, enjoyment, and delight – yes. But along with this, we recognize that frustration, disappointment, and sorrow are an inescapable part of that experience. Like Narada, we begin to seek freedom from that sorrow and yearning for the bliss that will not disappoint. We start to cultivate the soul life, recognizing it as the way.

Honing Our Svadharma

Now we have a very important piece of the puzzle. We can see why our highest happiness is found in Self- and God-realization. This provides insight for choice-making every day. Discernment points out that the soul life—spiritually conscious living—is what satisfies the heart. Renunciation then steps in and shows us how to let go of what does not serve that purpose—the way to release attachments that would clutter our heart. Renunciation frees the heart so that God, the divine Self, can direct our life.

Dharma 365!

A Year of Living Purposefully



Our svadharma, the way we live our life with higher purpose and express our divine potential, is the way our soul powers unfold. Remember that the purpose of our svadharma is not so much what we do, but what we are *becoming*, as we express our soul capacity. Discernment and renunciation are guideposts along the way for realizing our svadharma. Every day there are choices to make: what we will do, what we won't do, what we will pursue, or what we will not. Now we look through the eyes of viveka and vairagya. Is our choice supportive of fulfilling our svadharma? Is it consistent with living in the highest way? Does it free our heart for remembrance of God.





Lesson Journal:

What is it like when my heart is free of restless desire?

Is Narada's story familiar to me?

What do I believe will bring me happiness?

Are the choices that I make in my daily life consistent with that belief?