

March 2017

A Reflection on *The Voice of the Silence*, No. 3

“Before thou takest thy first step learn to discern the real from the false,
the ever-fleeting from the everlasting.”

—*The Voice of the Silence*

Before the neophyte takes the first step on the path, he is advised by an experienced teacher to develop the power of discrimination, the basic function of which is to draw distinctions or perceive differences. The Sanskrit word for this is *viveka*, broadly defined as the ability to distinguish between the real and the unreal. The word *discernment* has also been used, as has the word *insight*. In any case, this advice is a veritable *sine qua non* for those seriously considering the path of discipleship, and it has been so since time immemorial.

To better understand the function of the discriminative faculty in the spiritual life, it may be helpful to cite a few examples from ordinary life. A world-class chef, for instance, has developed the ability to distinguish between subtle flavors and knows when an entrée has too much basil and not enough oregano. A skillful painter knows the exact shade of color and degree of brightness needed in order to convey a certain mood or impression from the canvas. The conductor of a symphony orchestra has an acute sense of when the tempo is too fast or too slow, whether the crescendo of the brass section is overpowering or understated. We admire such artists for their well-developed esthetic sensibilities and their percipient sensitivity to subtle nuances.

The power of discernment plays a key role in the spiritual life as well. It enables the aspirant to discern the true from the false, the important from the unimportant, the eternal from the ephemeral, and other such dualities. Its application to the inner life depends not on sensory organs—a discerning eye, ear, or palate—but on right perception, which is to say, one’s understanding of the world. We are told that the objective world is not what it appears to be, a point on which scientists and sages agree. So important is this recognition that in Buddhism, the very first step of the Noble Eightfold Path is listed as Right View. If the disciple does not view the world rightly, he will trip and stumble on the path or lose his way in an endless series of byways and cul-de-sacs. While “the path” may be a familiar metaphor that rolls easily off the tongue, the pitfalls and dangers associated with this process are most real, and sometimes unexpected. And so, in *The Voice of the Silence*, the seeker is forewarned: “This earth, disciple, is the Hall of Sorrow, wherein are set along the path of dire probations, traps to ensnare thy Ego.”

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