

Judgment vs. Discernment



Good or Bad. Right or Wrong. Fun or Boring. Easy or Difficult. Beautiful or Ugly. Every day, we're surrounded by judgments, whether on the television or in our own minds. Our culture is strongly attached to categorizing and comparing.

Yet we're also told that it's not politically or even spiritually correct to judge. Accept difference, see similarity, no one is better or worse than anyone else. Some kid's baseball games no longer keep score for fear of being the "losers." We're no longer stiff; we're just "flexibility-challenged".

Judgment creates polarization

There's good reason why society has shifted away from judgment. It's all too easy to fall into condemnation of things or people that are different than you, or to bad-mouth things that we dislike or disagree with. Judgment, labeling, stereotyping, and segregating can lead to polarization of societies, dividing and angering large and small communities.

The need to distinguish things

At the same time, we can easily fall into the trap of swinging to the opposite extreme. Without some way to determine what's good and not so good, standards disintegrate. The truth is, some people do certain things better than others. Not everyone can be a great artist, although we can all enjoy creating our own art. Some swimmers are faster than others, but even if we don't win the Olympics we can still enjoy a dip in the pool. Hurting another person intentionally is wrong, period (taking circumstances into

consideration). We can't avoid altogether distinguishing things from each other.

If we feel pressured to accept everyone as they are regardless of their behavior, children can go undisciplined, hurtful behavior ignored, and vandalism tolerated. Workers can become sloppy and unmotivated without some comparison of what's good work and what's just mediocre. We're already seeing signs of the kind of deterioration that comes from absence of making distinctions for fear of offending or leaving anyone out.

So if we're not supposed to judge, but still need to tell right from wrong or good from bad, what are we to do? Yoga philosophy proposes the use of Viveka, or discernment.

What's the difference?

Discernment may seem like judgment, but the difference between these two approaches to life is significant. The dictionary definitions of the two terms shed some light.

Judgment: “an opinion or estimate, criticism or censure, power of comparing or deciding”. Judgment implies a power differential - I perceive myself to have power over you when I judge you (for example, “you're a loser!”). Judgment feeds the ego's deception of being better (or worse) than someone or something else. Judgment assumes that the person judging has the power and right to determine what is good or bad in general, not just from their point of view. It usually comes from a reactive place inside of us, like a knee-jerk when the doctor strikes the mallet on that joint - it's unconscious. Judgment also has a sense of finality, like a sentence being passed. We know what it's like to feel judged by someone else: it sticks to you like duct tape, and at times you find yourself feeling the pain of that condemnation days or even years later.

Discernment, however, is a more personal and conscious approach. It's the cognitive ability of a person to distinguish what is appropriate or inappropriate. With discernment we make good choices for ourselves, and for the good of others. Webster's dictionary says that to discern is to “separate (a thing) mentally from another or others; recognize as separate or different” and “to perceive or recognize; make out clearly”. Discernment is described as “keen perception; insight; acumen”. Viveka, the Sanskrit word for discernment, is about seeing things as they are. Insight is seeing into something, from our inner self, not from outer rigid standards, opinions, or social pressures. When we use Viveka, we are tapping into something much

deeper than our egos passing judgment. We are using the ability to perceive clearly.

Reaction is judgment

Viveka is not an easy practice. We're much more used to our reactive, judging minds. "What a jerk!" "This sucks!" "Stupid people!" "He's always incompetent" "That (fill in the blank) is so wrong/bad/etc." Case closed, mind made up, and that person, thing, religion, culture - whatever - has been condemned. This is often a reaction from insecurity, fear, jealousy, or ignorance. If we felt confident in our ability to speak, we wouldn't spend too much time criticizing the way others say things. If we understood the essence of the other religions of the world and saw that, despite their differences, they all have a similar bottom line - be good to each other and a good human being - there would be little to fear from that understanding.

Understanding and clarity

Therefore Viveka comes from understanding both ourselves and others, compassion for those who suffer themselves or cause us pain, and a balance of confidence in our own abilities and humbleness in the face of the greatness of the vast universe. We know there are others out there that are more skilled or gifted than each of us are, yet we also acknowledge our own strengths. We can recognize a master's exquisite painting while still feeling the joy in our simple drawing of a flower.

A person who is negative, puts people down, and carries around anger all the time has bad energy - we choose not to spend time with them because it's simply not healthy for us. We don't have to tell other people "that's a bad person". We know they aren't good for us and it will become self-evident for others who use their discernment. Viveka gives us clear perception and the ability to make good choices without having to be better or worse than anyone else.

This is the more practical aspect of Viveka - what helps us in day to day life to determine good choices and right actions. Yet there is a more esoteric, deeper aspect of Viveka that Patanjali speaks of in the Yoga Sutra. In Chapter II, verse 26, he states: "The means of attaining cessation [of the fluctuations of the mind] is the unceasing vision of discernment".

The Real and the unreal

Ultimately, in order to quiet the mind we need to discern between what is real and unreal. The outer distinctions - right and wrong, pleasant and unpleasant - are what we attribute to things, but they aren't their true nature. The inner essence of all things, according to many spiritual traditions of the world, is spirit itself. Divine energy constitutes the true nature of existence.

For deepening our spiritual awareness, especially for practices of meditation, this more esoteric aspect of Viveka becomes vital. If we are to go beyond the mind's tendency to make commentary, analyze, and judge, then we need to have some way of seeing beyond all those inner chatterings. Judgment doesn't serve us in meditation, but discernment can.

For both practical living in the world as well as more inner spiritual practices, Viveka, or discernment, brings clarity and true perception, whereas judgment merely serves the illusions of our minds. We believe ourselves as better or worse than others when we judge, and therefore can never experience true inner peace. We perceive appropriate actions and attitudes when we discern, and develop the ability to look beyond even those at the unchanging essence of the universe.

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