

The Humane Quality of the Path

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One of the special features of Buddhism as a teaching is that it was founded by someone who knows what it's like to be imperfect. It wasn't established by a god who started out being perfect. It was established by a human being, someone who's been where we are and knows how to get from where we are to the point where there's no suffering, to the highest happiness.

So there's a very humane quality about the Buddha's teachings. There's no question about whether people are basically good or basically evil. In fact, the Buddha never talks about people being basically anything at all. If you start out with the idea that you're a certain kind of person, it imprisons you. He says that however you identify yourself, that becomes a limitation on yourself. So his attitude is to look at everything in the mind is an action, and you see that there are all kinds of actions in the mind. As Ajaan Lee once said, it's when you start practicing that you really see how many defilements you have. You find there's a lot more greed, anger, and delusion in your mind than you would like to think.

So you have to develop a humane attitude to yourself as well. When you see that there are parts of your mind that you don't like, instead of being very judgmental or harsh on yourself, or trying to say that it's okay that way, you realize that neither extreme is the right way. You realize that you've got habits that cause suffering and you don't want to continue suffering. So how do you deal with them?

On the one hand, you have to develop the right attitude, realizing that this is where we all come from. Everybody starts out with a mix of good habits and bad habits, or as the Buddha prefers to say, skillful habits and unskillful ones. Talking in terms of skill makes it obvious that there's a way you can develop. The mind's neither good by nature nor bad by nature. It's just that your actions sometimes get the desired results, or sometimes they get the good results you desired, but they turn out to be not as good as you thought they'd be. But a lot of times they get totally undesired results, not what you wanted at all.

So the practice is a matter of learning how to retrain yourself. When you take that larger view, you realize that we all have unskillful habits, and the Buddha's teachings are designed specifically for taking unskillful people to a place of skill. That loosens up a lot of the hardness in that judgmental attitude, but at the same time, it points the way out.

So that's taking the right attitude, looking at things in the right way: beginning to look at things in terms of actions and results, without putting yourself in the picture.

This way you become judicious. You can use your powers of judgment without being judgmental. When voices come up in the mind—the idea to do this, the idea to do that—look at them just as ideas, actions. Or as we said today, there are lots of different committee members here in the mind. We have a tendency to identify with particular members, but we don't have to. We have that choice. You may want to rearrange the committee or change your allegiances, but seeing the mind as a committee makes it a lot easier to do that. If you had an inherent nature, there'd be nothing you could do to change it. But with lots of different members in the committee, you can change the balance of power in the committee, train the skillful members to be even more skillful, even more strategic, so that they have more influence over the mind. In other words, skillful actions become more attractive, and you get better at them.

That's one way of dealing with the unskillful members in your mind: just seeing things in these terms, so that when you see unskillful things happening in the mind—greed, anger, delusion coming up in ways that you don't like—it doesn't mean that recognizing that you don't like them doesn't have to be a hardened judgment, which would just tie things up in more knots than is necessary. You can just see that the action is unskillful and choose to drop it.

The next step, in addition to developing the right attitude, is developing the right place where you can look at these things with a more dispassionate attitude, more objective attitude. That's why we develop concentration. In the very beginning, you can't take on all the issues in the mind. It'd be like going into a ring with a world champion boxer. You're going to get knocked flat. It's not worth trying. What you do is you gradually build up your talents, build up your skills, until you're in a stronger and more secure and more confident position.

This is why we work with the breath, making the breath more comfortable, getting to be on good terms with the breath. When the breath gets comfortable, think of spreading it out in all directions throughout the whole body and being aware in all directions throughout the whole body. This all-around awareness is crucial. On the one hand, it puts the mind in a much better position. The mind doesn't like being hemmed in, it doesn't like being confined, yet we often confine it and hem it in through our greed, anger, and delusion. In other words, when you're greedy, you have to focus only on the aspects of what you like about the thing you're greedy for, and you have to forget about how long it's going to last,

and about the bad karmic results of the actions you may have to do in order to get that thing.

What's happening is that you really narrow your range of awareness. This is why you feel cut off from yourself when unskillful urges take over, because to act on a really unskillful attitude or unskillful idea, you really have to cut off large areas of your awareness.

The same with anger. You have to totally forget that "If I act on this, what are the results are going to be?" You've acted on anger before, you know what happens as a result, yet when you want to act on the anger again, you subconsciously blot those memories out. Your sense of shame, your concern for the consequences of your actions just gets thrown out. You put blinders on. As a result, large parts the mind get cut off from one another. You feel confined. You feel alienated.

So learning how to develop this comfortable sensation in the body and learning how to spread it throughout the body, and learning to be aware throughout the body, puts the mind in a much more comfortable position, one that's much less confined. Then you work to develop that. Other issues may come up in the mind, but for the time being, you just put them aside: "I'm not ready for that one yet." If something is really urgent and you *have* to deal with it, then you take what powers of concentration and discernment you do have, and you use them. But otherwise, you develop your discernment and concentration by working on being with the breath and then maintaining your concentration.

It requires discernment to maintain concentration. It's not simply through force of will, it's also through understanding what's going on in the mind, understanding the ways the mind tends to hide things from itself, the ways it suddenly slips off seemingly without warning. As you get to know the mind, though, you begin to realize that there are warning signals that the mind is about to play tricks on itself. Part of it wants to go someplace, then another part will be willingly pretend that it doesn't know what's happening. But to maintain your powers of concentration, you have to see through both of those parts.

So the emphasis is on developing a sense of stillness, a sense of calm in the mind, and you begin to sharpen your powers of mindfulness, alertness, and discernment as you do that. Then, when you come from a more confident position, you can begin to deal with other aspects of the mind that you really don't like, but you can now do that while feeling a lot less threatened, because you learn that you don't have to identify with them. You can identify with the sense of stillness, the sense of calm.

When you're in a better mood, it's a lot easier to see your own shortcomings and laugh good-naturedly at them. Say, "Oh, yeah, there is that there, too." When you have that attitude, you can deal effectively with those unskillful attitudes. You can see right through them. And because you're willing to see them, you don't feel threatened by them. The reason we hide them from ourselves is that we feel threatened by them one way or another. They're threatening to our self-image, threatening to our ideas of what we should be, or what other people expect us to be. But when you're more confident in your powers of concentration, there's a sense of well-being that's really strengthening. It puts you in a better position to look at these things and not get bowled over by them and not be afraid to look at them.

This is how you get more in touch with what's going on throughout the mind. When you're willing to see even the things you don't like about yourself, and you can do it without feeling threatened, you come to understand them. When you understand them, you can really do something about them. Otherwise, you just push them away, push them away, and they come back like *The Thing*. It extends its tentacles underground and bursts out in all sorts of weird places. But when you can develop this comfortable center and make it your center of gravity, then you can deal with these other issues a lot more effectively. You can see them more clearly, and you're less threatened by them.

So what you need is a combination of the right attitude and the right understanding about what's going on in the mind, and the right technique, the right strategy, learning how to strengthen the sense of well-being inside. It's not just concentration that strengthens this. The other parts of the path strengthen it as well. Learning to be generous, making a habit of being generous, is another way of strengthening the sense of well-being inside. Taking on the precepts, saying, "I'm going to stick to these principles in my behavior, no matter what," and then finding the strength to really carry it through with that determination: That gives a greater sense of well-being as well.

So all these are the Buddha's very humane ways of saying that we're starting out in places where we don't want to be, but here is the way to get where we *would* like to be, a place where the skillful voices in the mind are much stronger, where they really take charge. The habits of the mind get trained to a point where they don't cause any suffering anymore. You see through all those unskillful habits and realize that you don't really want to follow through with them anymore, because you see them clearly enough from cause all the way to effect. When you see the allure of your unskillful habits and compare that with their drawbacks, why would you want to do them anyhow? You begin to realize that the drawbacks really

outweigh the allure. When you can compare those two, then you can begin to let these things go.

So even though, when we start out meditating, we see a lot of unskillful things going on in the mind, remember: It's normal. That's the starting place. And the path we're practicing is one that's very humane in taking us from that starting place and to a much better place, where everything really is at peace in the mind.