

Mastery

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One of the old questions in ethics is how to judge an action. Do you judge it by its intention or it by the result? As usual, the Buddha found a way of not falling for that dichotomy. He said to judge the action both by the intention behind it and by the result. The two are intertwined. In other words, it's not just a question of the goodness of your heart. Simply having a good intention is not enough. It sets you in the right direction, but you've got to learn more than just having good well-meaning intentions. At the same time, it's not just a question of being effective regardless of what your intentions is. You want to be skillful all around.

In this way, the Buddha takes the question out of the realm of ethics and into the realm of skill. As any craftsman or craftswoman knows, a good piece of art is accomplished not just by intending to do a good piece of art or by working from a good idea. It has to be good in the execution as well. At the same time, good execution of a bad idea doesn't yield good art. The intention and the execution have to work together. There has to be a process of learning over time, as your skills get better and as your understanding of what you're doing gets better.

This is the type of knowledge we're trying to develop here: the knowledge comes from doing. Ajaan Lee has makes this point many, many times in his talks. As he says, learning to be a good meditator is like learning how to sew, learning how to weave a basket, learning how to make clay tiles—the list goes on and on and on. You make the object, then you look at it and you figure out what still needs to improve. Then you go back and you do it again. And again. And again. We're not operating on the pattern of simply arriving at an act of judgment. In Buddhism there is no final judgment, but there is, however, the ultimate development of skill. And that's what we're working toward all the time.

We begin with the right intention, the attention to be truthful, the intention to be sincere in trying to give rise to a happiness, trying to put an end to suffering. So before you do anything, ask yourself: Where is this action going to go? If it's going to give rise to harm, you don't do it. But if it seems harmless, you go ahead and do it. But then you watch what's happening as you do the action, because sometimes the results of the action come out immediately. If you see anything harmful coming up, you stop. If you don't see anything harmful, continue until you're done.

But then when you're done, you look at the long-term results. If you realize, contrary to expectations, that something harmful resulted, you learn from that.

Resolve not to do it again. Develop a sense of shame around that—shame here not being focused on your sense of yourself as a bad person, but on the action. You realize that was a shameful action—either ignorant in the intention or shoddy in the execution—and you'd be ashamed to do it again. This is actually a sign of high self-esteem, that you're better than that kind of action.

If you see that what you did caused no harm at all, then take joy in the fact that you're on the path—joy in a sense of pride in craftsmanship. And even though ultimately we're trying to get rid of pride, we use it on the path as nourishment when we're sure we've done something right. But we keep on training. In other words, you look again and again and again each time you act, because sometimes you find that what seemed okay the first time around is not okay the second time or the third.

This is how your knowledge grows. It's a knowledge that grows through mastery. The basic themes that the Buddha talks about are themes that we experience right away. Suffering: It's the first thing we experienced when we were born. Then there's pleasure. We've experienced that as well. But we don't really understand these things until we understand their causes, and we don't understand the causes until we've mastered them. In other words, it's not just a matter of book learning. It is, as the Buddha says, the discernment that comes from developing, from meditation. You may know on one level that craving causes suffering, you may have seen it actually happening now and then. But you don't really know craving until you've totally abandoned it.

The same with the path: You may have found that moments of concentration, or even longer periods of concentration, give rise to a sense of ease. You develop mindfulness and all the other factors of the path. You see that the burdens, in the sense of weight in the heart, get lighter and lighter. But you don't really know the path until you've fully mastered it to the point of awakening. That's the ultimate skill we're working on. We're trying to head in that direction: knowledge that comes from doing, the knowledge that comes from mastering a skill.

Back in the old days in the time of classical Greece and Rome, they made a distinction between the knowledge of the scribe and the knowledge of a warrior. The knowledge of a scribe is expressed in words. The knowledge of a warrior consists of skills mastered on the battlefield. Two of the important elements in developing a skill are, one, that you have to have a clear sense of what you can change and what you can't change. The Buddha once said that this was a sign of a wise person, knowing what's your duty and what's not your duty—and certainly what you can't change is not your duty. In other words, you're not trying to change things that you can't change. That's certainly not your responsibility. Your

responsibility is to figure out what you can change and you're responsible for changing it. You focus on that.

It seems a simple-enough principle. But as you get into it more and more deeply, you realize that it leads to a lot of the really important insights. For instance, there's the kind of stress that's simply a part of the world, and there's the stress for which you're responsible. It turns out that the stress and suffering for which you're responsible are the things you can actually change. And not only that: Those are the only forms of stress and suffering that really weigh on the heart. Once the stress and suffering that comes from craving is done with, then the stresses of the world don't weigh on the heart at all.

That's an important lesson. If there were stresses and strains in the heart that we couldn't do anything about, that'd place a huge limitation on the path and our ability to find true happiness. It wouldn't be something we could do at all. So that's an important lesson: that the stress and suffering that weighs in the heart is unnecessary. It is something you can do something about.

As you develop your skill, you keep running up against things that you can't change, at the same time learning about areas where you *can* change things. So pursue that question. See how far it takes you. It connects with the teaching on not-self, the question of what you can control and what you can't. As long as you find that you can control things like form, feelings, perceptions, thought constructs, and consciousness—the five aggregates—you do exert control over them. You do develop a sense of self around them on the path: the self as its own mainstay, the self as its governing principle. But you try to develop it, not in the sense of trying to define who you are, but in a sense of competence, a sense of responsibility. That sort of self is actually useful part of the path. It's only when you don't need it anymore that you let it go.

This ties in with another aspect of developing a skill: having a sense of time and place. Some teachings, such as the precepts, apply across the board no matter what: no killing, no stealing, no illicit sex, no lying, no taking intoxicants. Period. No ifs, ands, or buts.

But then there are other aspects of the path, other areas of life, where things that are skillful today might not be skillful tomorrow. This is where an element of paradox comes in. One of Ajaan Chah's students once asked him, "Why is it that you seem to be saying one thing to one group of people and another thing, totally opposite, to another group of people? Why are you so inconsistent?"

Ajaan Chah replied that it was like seeing someone walking down the road and he's veering off to the right, so you tell him, "Go left, go left." Another person is veering off to the left, so you say, "Go right, go right." There's a paradox in that the

instructions sometimes seem to be saying opposite things, but they're all aimed in the same direction.

Then there's a whole question of the role of desire in the path. Ultimately we're trying to go beyond desire, but you have to use desire to get there. We're trying to go beyond thinking, but you have to use thinking to get there. Directed thought and evaluation, the categories of the four noble truths: These all involve thinking, analyzing, understanding. You may think you'd like to go to a state of pure peace and stillness, that you don't want to be bothered with thinking at all, but if you don't learn how to analyze things in this way, there are a lot of actions that don't get developed to be skillful at all. Your work gets left undone. Even though you try to run away from your responsibilities, they follow you.

Remember: The Buddha didn't teach a onefold path. He didn't teach us one duty. Meditation is not a Johnny-one-note kind of activity. There are things you have to comprehend, things you have to abandon, things you have to realize, things you have to let go, things you have to develop, things you have to prevent, things you have to maintain. You have to realize which is which. This requires thinking and analyzing. It's only when you've completed those duties that you can get to pure peace.

And same with the desire: Remember the story of the brahman who came to see Ven. Ananda and asked him, "What is this path for?"

Ananda said, "One of the purposes of the practice is to put an end to desire."
"How do you get the end of desire?"

Ananda said, "You develop the bases of power: concentration based on desire, persistence, intent, and discrimination."

The brahman said, "Well, that won't work. How can you use desire to get rid of desire?"

Ananda asked him in return. "You came to the park." They were staying in a park. "Before you came here, didn't you have the desire to get here?"

The brahman said, "Yes."

Ananda said, "Now that you're here at the park, where is that desire?"

"It's gone. It's been fulfilled. It doesn't have any function anymore."

Ananda said, "In the same way, desire is an element of the path. You have to want to do it. You have to want to abandon what's unskillful and to give rise to what's skillful. You have to want these things for them to happen. It's only when this desire has fulfilled its purpose that you're free to let it go.

When you're working on concentration, you're creating a state of becoming so that you can put the mind in a position where it can finally go beyond becoming.

So it's important that we realize the role of paradox in what we're doing. Sometimes we have to develop skills that eventually we have to transcend, but you can't get past them by saying, "Well, I know I'll ultimately have to let go of this, so why should I waste time developing it? I want to go straight to the goal without going through the path."

This is one of the reasons why a lot of modern people find it difficult to practice: They don't have any experience with physical skills. They don't develop the attitude that can deal with paradox, that can deal with understanding time and place, getting a sense for what's true across the board and what's true only for particular instances. They don't have a clear sense of what they can control and what they can't. You can learn these things only through exploring and having a willingness to learn from your mistakes.

As the Buddha said, this is how you reach purity. You reach it not by trying to please somebody else, hoping that some being up in the sky is going to pass a positive judgment on you. You're working on a skill. You try to reach a happiness that's totally satisfactory—but at the same time, you also try to raise your standards for what you judge as satisfactory as you get more and more sensitive. This is also an aspect of learning a skill: You get more and more sensitive to what you're doing, more and more sensitive to the possibilities of what can be done. You get more discriminating in what passes muster and what doesn't.

So when you pass judgment on your actions, remember, it's not just a matter having your heart in the right place. You have to look at the results and realize that the two are intertwined. You may have good intentions, but if the results don't come out well, maybe it's an example of something you couldn't control, or maybe it's an example of an area where you had some delusion. It takes experience to be able to tell which is which—the experience of testing and experimenting over and over again, until you finally reach mastery.