Skillful Judgment

October 4, 2009

Here it is, the end of the rains retreat. For those of us who've been observing the retreat, it's been a time for special effort in the practice, a time to accelerate the goodness that we want to get out of ourselves, out of this opportunity we have being born as human beings with special powers in terms of what we can do, what we can say, and what we can think. Special in the sense that there's a lot more we can do than common animals can. We have a sense of right and wrong, we have a sense of fellow feeling, compassion for one another. At least it's there in a potential form, and it's up to us to develop that.

So there's a tradition that from the full moon in July to the full moon in October, we have three months to try to do something special with these potentials that we have—more special than normal—partly as a way of testing things. If you put more effort into the practice, what results do you get? Are you capable of that extra effort? Three months is a good length of time to try something out to see if it works. The important thing, of course, is that if it really does work, then you don't want to stop at the end of the three months. Otherwise, the practice goes up and down, up and down, up and down. It doesn't really develop much momentum.

So whatever special vows you made at the beginning of the rains retreat, if you've been able to keep them up and they are helping you, you should continue with them. Because that's the purpose of trying these vows out: to see what works over time, what you can take on as a more constant practice. So it's good to stop and take stock: How are things going? Do you want to try another three months? Do you want to ratchet things up a little bit more?

An important part of meditation in general is reflecting, looking at your actions and seeing what's been working, what hasn't been working, and figuring out ways to do it better. If you're going to take on an identity, your identity as a meditator has to include this: that you're always willing to learn. You're willing to take criticism; you're willing to see your mistakes so that you can improve your actions.

I got a letter the other day from someone in Australia who has both a prison counseling service that he offers to men in prison, and also a men's group. He was commenting that the two groups have very different ideas about ethics. The men in prison were willing to accept the teaching that there are skillful ways of behaving and unskillful ways of behaving, and that you've really got to do your

best to work on developing the skillful ones. The men in the men's group, though, didn't like the idea of being judged as skillful or unskillful. One of them had heard of somebody who had a medallion around his neck. It was a phrase from Rumi: "Someplace out beyond good and evil, right and wrong, there's a field. I'll meet you there." The group all liked that. It's interesting that the men in prison were the ones who had a stronger sense of right and wrong than the men who hadn't been in prison.

A part of that reflects our attitude toward being judged in general. If we haven't really seen clearly the harm that our actions can do, if our noses haven't been rubbed in it, we like to tell ourselves that it doesn't matter, that the worst thing you can do to somebody is to judge them. Well, there are lots of worse things you can do to somebody than to just judge them.

So it's good to look at our attitude toward judgment. Sometimes it comes from an experience in childhood where being judged meant that love was withdrawn or withheld. So it seems, in that sense, that judgment shows a lack of compassion. But by now we're adults. We've had to raise children. We've had to deal with subordinates in work. We've had to see that sometimes you tell people what's right and wrong, and you realize that it's for their own good. If you have a son who has been tormenting animals, you have to tell him not to do that. If you have a daughter and you're afraid she's going to get involved in drugs, you have to tell her to keep away from those things. And you give them reasons.

What this means is that instead of going from one extreme where all judgments are harsh, to the other extreme saying that we shouldn't have judgments at all, we have to learn how to pass judgment skillfully. The skillful attitude toward judging yourself and judging other people is that you're judging for the sake of seeing what's unskillful, what's harmful so that you can stop doing it. You can replace it with skillful behavior, harmless behavior.

So, one, this means you have to see that you have to pass judgment not in terms of the person but in terms of the act. If you're judging yourself, it means you see that the act was harmful. You have to want to admit that it didn't work. You have to develop a sense of shame around it. Here again, the shame is directed at the action, not at the person. And that kind of shame is actually part of self-esteem. You realize that the action is beneath you. There's got to be a sense of self-esteem that goes along with that, that you're better than that kind of action and you don't want to repeat it.

The second point is to view being judged not as the final word on your action. Remember that being on the path is a work in progress. You want to develop it. So instead of thinking of a judge sitting on a bench passing final judgment on the

defendant, think of a carpenter sitting at his bench. He's working on a piece of furniture, and he just made a mistake. He was planing the wood and he planed it a little bit too far. What does he do? He's got to figure out some way of compensating for the mistake he made. Or think of a pianist sitting on her bench. She's playing the piano, and the tempo doesn't seem right. So what is she going to do? She has to pass judgment that it's not right and then figure out how to improve it. So the purpose of judging is to improve what you're doing, to learn from your mistakes, and to see how you can act more skillfully.

This means that judgment is not necessarily a bad thing. You can do it skillfully or you can do it unskillfully. So instead of throwing the baby out with the bathwater, you try to keep the baby, the skillful side of judgment. After all, otherwise how would we learn? If you have the idea that you're going to have no judgments at all, you're throwing out the baby and keeping the bathwater. Because then the judgment becomes the idea that anyone who's passing judgment is judgmental, and that's bad. You're depriving yourself of the ability to learn.

And you're depriving yourself of the kind of community that comes when there's a sense of trust. Trust isn't something you can create by having people be nice and non-judgmental with one another. Trust comes from being with one another over time, and seeing it proven in your actions and in other people's actions, that we do have a sense of right and wrong in common, and we're all trying to live by it. If you're not willing to have a common sense of right and wrong, that sense of community, that sense of trust never really gets developed.

This is why the Buddha talked about seven factors that characterized a person of integrity. The first two have to do with knowledge of the Dhamma: You know the Dhamma and you know its meaning. The rest have to do with being observant.

To begin with, you know yourself. You know where your strong points are. You know where your weak points are. You know where you've acted skillfully. You know where you've acted unskillfully. And you see where work needs to be done.

This is where it's helpful to be in a community because sometimes it takes other people to point out your weak points. It's like the ghost in the mirror. There's a folk belief that if you see someone and you're not sure if it's a ghost or not, you look in a mirror. If you can't see the ghost in the mirror, then it really is a ghost. And for most of us, our faults are like that ghost. You look in the mirror and you don't see them. This is why the Buddha said that someone who points out your errors, someone who points out your mistakes, is someone who's pointing out a treasure chest, i.e., the opportunity for you to improve your actions.

So a clear sense of self, a sense of where you are in your practice, is an important thing to develop.

Then there's having a sense of enough—enough in terms of how much sleep you need, how much food you need, how much time you need to devote to the practice.

That's another aspect of the discernment that comes from observing yourself. For example, you give yourself *x* hours of sleep and all you can think about when you wake up is that you're going to go back to sleep right again. For a while you have to test that to see if it's just your old habit or if it really is a genuine need for sleep. The same with food: How much food do you need? You've got to test it. Try going with a little food, try going with more food to get a sense of what's right. This is something that's not written in books and you can't memorize it. You have to learn by observing your own actions.

There's also a sense of time and place, the right time to act in certain ways, the right time not to act in certain ways. Here in the West we have a tendency to think, "Well, I am the person I am and it would be not being true to who I am to change the way I behave in different situations." But that's foolishness. You've got to learn how to read the situation. What are the times when you can be informal with people, what are the times when you have to be more formal? What are the times you have to be restrained? You've got to watch for this and keep looking at it as a question: "What's the skillful thing to do in this situation?" That's more useful than asking, "What do I want to do or what do I feel like doing, what I feel is the expression of the true me in this situation?" Because if the practice should teach you anything, it's that there are lots of different yous. And also that your actions have consequences, so you want to focus more on the actions than on your sense of self or your sense of what you feel like doing.

We have this tendency to believe that our feelings are our true selves: the part that hasn't been socialized. But our feelings are fabrications just like anything else. You can learn how to fabricate them skillfully or unskillfully.

This falls in with the next aspect of a person of integrity's knowledge, which is the knowledge of groups of people. In other words, when you're with this group of people, how do you speak? How do you act? What are the appropriate manners for being in that group? For another different group of people, what are the appropriate manners? And you look at yourself. For monks, Ajaan Fuang used to say, if you find yourself forgetting that you're a monk, run your hand over your head to remind yourself, "Oh, I am a monk right now. Monks should speak in a certain way, act in a certain way, not just blurt out with whatever you want to say, or just do whatever you want to do." You look at the situation around you: How

formal is the situation, now informal is the situation, and adjust your acts and your words accordingly.

Finally, there's the attribute of passing judgment on the people you should hang out with, having a sense of who is good to associate with and who's not. And here again, you're not passing final judgment on the other person. You're passing judgment on your strength—because if people stayed only with excellent people, nobody could stay with anybody. But you have to look and see: When you stay with this sort of person, what happens to your behavior? What happens to your attitudes? Are you strong enough not to get pulled down by that person if that person is the sort that might pull you down? So it's not so much a judgment of the other person as it is a judgment of where you are in your practice and what you're capable of handling. To the extent that you are judging the other person, it's whether or not it's the sort of person that's good for you to be with.

For these five factors—having a sense of yourself, having a sense of enough, having a sense of the right time, having a sense of different groups of people, having a sense of how to judge individual people as to whether you want to associate with them—there are no hard and fast rules in the books. You can't just study a book on the topic and know what you should do. They're things you have to keep being observant about all the time, whether it's during the rains retreat or after the rains retreat. There's a lot of judging going on, so you have to do it skillfully. You have to do it with the right motivation so that it does become skillful. In other words, it leads to greater and greater skill in the different areas of your life.

So remember that this is one aspect of the Dhamma that holds all year around, not just during the rains retreat, not just for the last day. Here, it is the *Maha Pavarana*, the day of the invitation where the monks invite one another to criticize one another as to whether they've seen or heard or suspected anyone of breaking any of the precepts. It's not that you've just passed judgment one day out of the year and everything else is forgotten for the rest of the year. We're all passing judgment, so you want to do it carefully, you want to do it skillfully, for the purpose of making progress on the path.