

Moral Intelligence

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I've been reading a Dhamma talk by a Ajaan Uthai where he takes the terms "emotional intelligence" and "moral intelligence" and interprets them in line with the Buddha's teachings. And it's interesting how he divides things up.

Emotional intelligence he aligns with discernment—in other words, seeing what motives you have for your thinking, and seeing where different emotions lead, and in particular, motions of passion, aversion and delusion, which, as the sutta we just chanted pointed out, are like fires burning everything you look at and listen to, smell, taste, touch, think about. The discernment in seeing these emotions as fire and realizing that you want to put the fires out: That's how discernment is related to emotional intelligence.

As for moral intelligence: You might have thought that he would align it with virtue. And on one level he does, but in a deeper sense he aligns it with concentration.

This is a theme that goes way back in the forest tradition. There's a Dhamma textbook that came out in the early twentieth century, was printed by the ecclesiastical hierarchy in Bangkok, and it identified virtue as being an affair of body and speech. Right there was where Ajaan Mun disagreed. He said, "If it's just body and speech, then it's just ritual."

But virtue's not just a matter of ritual. It's a matter of the heart, because the heart is what gives the orders. And if you're going to train in virtue, you have to train the heart.

This is how concentration is related to virtue. In other words, externally you may follow the precepts but if your heart is still killing and stealing and having illicit sex, then it's not a virtuous heart. You have to bring its preoccupations into line, which is what we do when we concentrate.

We use mindfulness to remind ourselves that this is where we want to stay. We're not going to wander off. Why? Because we know that if we wander off, there's going to be trouble. If we allow the mind to wander into thoughts of greed, aversion, delusion or sensuality, ill will, harmfulness, then we're going to suffer—and eventually other people will suffer, too.

So our efforts to control the heart here, bringing it into line, choosing an object to stay on: It's moral issue. We don't usually think about it, but that's what it is.

Ajaan Lee makes a comparison. He says that if your mind is killing off your goodness, then you've broken the first precept. If you're stealing the bad points of other people to think about, that's breaking the second precept. If you're thinking about all kinds of sensual issues, you're breaking the third. If you're lying to yourself that you're actually here concentrating, that's breaking the fourth. And as for breaking the fifth precept: That's the drowsiness, the weaving back-and-forth in your meditation and finally falling asleep on the side of the road.

It's a nice series of images, but it's making a very serious point, which is that keeping the mind here is a moral issue, because if it starts wandering off, then pretty soon it's going to

lead your physical actions and your verbal actions to wander off course as well.

Often we in the West don't like to hear about morality, because we associate it with arbitrary rules—or, at least, rules that *seem* arbitrary—and we feel like we're confined. But if you think of morality more as an issue of harmlessness—that you're trying to find a happiness that's harmless, that's not going to harm yourself, not going to harm other people—that's actually making your life more spacious. That spaciousness comes from the moral dimension to our practice here.

So even on days when the meditation is not going well, where it seems to be a constant struggle, at the very least you're not giving in. You keep bringing the mind back, bringing it back, trying to develop skillful qualities. That's a moral victory.

I was reading a meditation guide recently that started out by saying, "Meditation is not a matter of giving rise to particular mindstates. It's just uncovering the natural goodness and peace that's already there." Which is pretty appalling when you think about it. If your mind were naturally peaceful, why would you have to train it? And if somehow it had gotten peaceful and then you'd forgotten your true good nature or your true peaceful nature, that means that when you get back to that purity, you're not going to be able to stay there. You'll forget it again.

Fortunately, we're actually working on cleansing a mind that may be defiled, but it can be cleansed—and once it's really cleansed, it doesn't get defiled again. So once the work is done, it's done.

And an important part of the work lies in trying to develop good, skillful qualities in the mind. It's work, sometimes hard work, but it's pleasant work. And it's noble work as well. This is a side of morality that we tend to forget: There's a nobility to behaving in a way that's harmless. There's a dignity to behaving in a way that's harmless. Keeping your mind in harmless states gives a dignity and a nobility to your mind as well.

So, as I said, even on days when the meditation is not going well, at least remind yourself you're involved in a moral pursuit, a dignified pursuit, a noble pursuit.

And if it *is* going well, maintain it. Don't get complacent. There's that line of thought that says, "Well, I've stacked up all this merit and all this goodness, so I can afford a little slack time." That doesn't work, because the slack time in the mind starts leading to slack behavior and you have to fight to get back to where you were.

Once the mind is in good shape, try to maintain it there. It's a lot easier to maintain it when it's in good shape than when it's lost it and you have to struggle to bring it back.

When you develop this virtue and morality of the mind, it becomes more and more your normal state. In fact, that's how Thai ajaans like to translate virtue: Virtue is normalcy. It's your normal state. You can have good virtue and you can have bad virtue – your normalcy can be bad as well. What we're trying to do is develop a good normalcy, so that goodness does become the normal state of mind: centered, solid, secure. When you're in that state, you can see clearly what should be done. And you've got the strength to do it and you can see clearly why you *want* to do it.

You realize that morality is not just an issue of rules. It's an issue of wanting to be

harmless and acting in line with some of your deeper aspirations, your more noble aspirations.

So let that thought be there in the back of your mind whenever you need inspiration in the practice: You're developing moral intelligence.