

Pro-self, Pro-help

January 17, 2013

In the passage we chanted just now, the Buddha described the noble eightfold path. It starts with discernment: both right view and right resolve. Notice that discernment doesn't consist of just a view; there's a resolve that goes with it as well. When the Buddha talks about suffering and the possibility of ending suffering in right view, the wise response is to resolve not to do anything that'll cause suffering. In other words, you realize that your actions make a difference. And you have to be careful, because some of the ways you can act can cause a *lot* of suffering both for yourself and for others.

It's important to realize the extent to which wisdom or discernment requires action. You see this in another one of the Buddha's teachings, which is the list of five strengths. They start with conviction; then there's persistence, mindfulness, concentration, and discernment. Discernment comes at the end. But as the Buddha says, to develop any of these requires heedfulness, which contains an element of discernment there already: the realization again that your actions make a difference and you've got to be careful.

Building on that realization, you start with conviction. You don't know for sure that you're going to be able to make a difference by changing the way you act, but you're convinced it's the only possible way out. Traditionally, conviction is made up of four things. It starts with belief in the Buddha's awakening, that the Buddha really was awakened. Second, the Dhamma he taught was well taught—is *still* well taught. In other words, the way he expressed it wasn't right only for people in ancient India, but it's been right enough to last for more than 2,000 years now. The third thing is that there are members of the noble Sangha who've practiced well and gotten results, and they really are worthy of respect. And then finally, your own behavior, based on this, falls in line with the principles of the precepts in a way that would be pleasing to the noble ones.

So conviction has several dimensions. One, you're convinced of a particular teaching, that action really does make a difference, and it is possible to act skillfully in a way that puts an end to suffering. Two, you have faith in particular people. There's the Buddha; there's the noble Sangha. You're willing to learn from these people. This is one of the reasons why we bow down to the Buddha so often because the only way you're going to change your habits is if you have respect for the people who are teaching you. Then finally, your conviction doesn't just sit

there. It actually has an impact on your actions. You try to act in a way that avoids harm to yourself and other people. All of that comes under conviction.

Once you have that conviction, then persistence or effort comes in as the next strength. Here again, we see how having this kind of conviction requires that you act. Once you see that there are unskillful and skillful qualities in the mind, you've got to do something about them. You've got to make sure the unskillful qualities don't arise. If they do arise, you try to get rid of them. As for skillful qualities, you try to give rise to them. And then, once they're there, you try to maintain them. You don't just watch them come and go, thinking that that's wisdom. You really do have to make a difference; you really do have to *do* something about these things.

I was reading a piece today where someone was commenting on how ironic it was that Buddhism has had such a big role in the self-help industry. After all, isn't Buddhism anti-self and anti-help? That is, there's no self, and everything is just okay as it is; you learn to accept everything. That's what they were saying. This is what the general impression of Buddhism is, but it's really way off the mark. The Buddha has you *use* the concept of self when it's useful, and you put it aside when it's not. It's a tool.

Avoiding the issue of whether there really is or is not a self, the Buddha focuses on when it's skillful to assume a self, as when you want to take responsibility for your actions, take responsibility for *improving* your actions. Again, this is the other side. Accepting unskillful qualities is not in any of the factors of the path at all. You really do want to help yourself; you really do want to change. When the concept of self is unhealthy or when it gets in the way, that's when you want to drop it. The Buddha teaches you to use these things as tools for the purpose of changing the way you think, the way you act, the way you speak—everything. You don't just sit there and say, "Well, this is the way things are, so I just learn how to accept it," and that's it. You push things in the right direction. This is where the real discernment, the real wisdom comes in.

You see this in the third strength as well, which is mindfulness. Mindfulness requires three qualities: mindfulness itself, which is the ability to keep something in mind. Then there's alertness, which is watching what's you're actually doing. Then finally, there's ardency, which again is the principle of persistence informed by heedfulness. You want to do this *well*. Ajaan Lee, I think, was right in identifying ardency as the wisdom factor among these three.

There's a passage where the Buddha talks about having mindfulness in charge, and it's informed by the principle of ardency. You see that there's danger in your choices. You could choose to do some really unskillful things. So if there are

unskillful qualities have arisen in the mind, you remember that you've got to get rid of them. If they haven't arisen, you've got to prevent them. As for skillful qualities, you want to give rise to them and then keep on developing them. So mindfulness isn't just a matter of watching things arise and pass away on their own. You remember there are certain things you want to have arise and other things you want to have pass away, and you work toward that.

That's the wise response. When you realize that your actions are important, your state of mind is important, you're not going to just sit there and accept things as they are. It's like that Calvin and Hobbes cartoon where Calvin is building a snowman, and after he gets the second part up, he says, "Well, I think I'll stop here. If I push myself, I won't have enough self-esteem, so I'll be satisfied with what I've got." Hobbes' remark is, "Remind me to invest overseas." If Calvin's attitude is we have here in this country, then there's no hope for us.

So Buddhism is not anti-self or anti-help; it's pro-self and pro-help. It reminds you that you have the ability to make a difference. It gives you all the advice you need to make that difference. You want to keep that in mind.

It's when you keep that in mind and really develop the first three strengths that the fourth strength, concentration, becomes strong. If you find that you have trouble staying with the breath, you can ask yourself what's missing. Is there a lack in your conviction? A lack in your persistence? In your mindfulness? How about your sense of heedfulness—the sense that this really does make a difference, the fact that you're training your mind? It does make a difference whether you're going to stay with the breath or not stay with the breath.

Now, you have to learn how to take that knowledge and use it in a way that's wise so that you're not beating yourself up if you're not staying with the breath. But at the same time, you do encourage yourself. You have to look at the conversation you're holding in your mind. How do you encourage yourself to do well without choking? In other words, things are beginning to go well in the meditation. The mind is beginning to settle down. There seems to be a bit of rapture coming up, and then you tighten up. You freeze. That moment of self-consciousness: You just have to let it pass and get back to what you were doing.

Have conviction in the actions; have conviction in the instructions. These things are going to work. And try to take a matter-of-fact attitude. We all want things to go well. But before you learn how to get them to go well, you're going to have to learn what it means *not* to go well. You want to learn from that. In other words, you want to learn from your mistakes. So don't let your desire for good results get you all bolloxed up. You do want good results. This is what this is all about, but you have to take a matter-of-fact attitude toward them. You're learning

a skill. It's like cooking. If the dish doesn't turn out right, you just throw it away and make another one. You don't freeze up around it. Just stay with the causes, make them as good as you can, and the results will sort themselves out.

It's in this way that the practice of concentration teaches you some discernment. Discernment comes at the end of the list, but you have to use it all the way through, and you develop it all the way through as well. Working with unskillful emotions, working with skillful emotions, you begin to get a sense of what works and what doesn't work. How do you let your ardency really make a difference without getting all tied up in desire? How do you let your concentration work without getting all self-conscious about it? In other words, how do you monitor what you're doing without letting the fact that you're monitoring it get in the way? These are skills you need to develop, and through them you learn to develop your discernment.

The ultimate level of discernment, of course, takes you beyond these skills. In other words, you develop the factors of the path, which will require a sense of self and self-help, you take them as far as you can until you realize that that sense of self is the one thing that's getting in the way.

You learn to look for where there's stress in what you're doing, and you watch the ups and downs of stress in the state of concentration, in the state of being mindful. As you look for the ups and downs, notice: When things go up, what happened? What did you do? When things go down, what did you do? You want to see connections, and hopefully you've been noticing the connections all along. It's simply a matter of seeing them more precisely this time—more subtly.

So these strengths culminate in discernment. In fact, one of the images the Buddha uses to describe this is that you're building a house, and you've got the rafters going up. But only when you get that top rafter, the ridge pole that holds all the other ones in place: Only then will the roof be solid. Those first four strengths are like the rafters going up, and then discernment is like the ridge pole that ties them all together.

But don't think that you just wait for discernment to come at the end. You have to develop it all the way through. You *begin* with that discernment of heedfulness, realizing that your actions will make a difference, so you've got to be careful. From that, you develop the conviction that if you really are on top of what you're doing, it can make more than just an ordinary difference. And that's what gives energy to your persistence, your mindfulness, your concentration, and your discernment.

Notice the discernment here doesn't start with reading books and knowing an awful lot about the theory. It starts with a conviction that there is a cause for

suffering that you can comprehend, and you can do something about it. There is that possibility, and so you want to make the most of it. Discernment here is a truth of the will. It comes from *wanting* to put an end to suffering, wanting to engage in really radical self-help.

So the Buddha's teachings are not anti-self or anti-help; they're pro-self, pro-help. They're pro-self in the sense that you're the one who's got to do this, but you *can* do this. They encourage you to do this. I don't know any other teaching that puts so much faith in your ability to make a real difference in your life. It's up to you now to decide whether you want to have that same faith in yourself. If you do, you can go far.