

Skills to Make a Difference

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Many times, when Ajaan Lee is talking about meditation, he compares it to skills—manual skills. This is keeping with the Canon. The Buddha also uses analogies with skills. Being a good meditator is like being a good cook, a good carpenter, or a good archer. A good cook knows how to read his boss: what kind of food the boss likes and doesn't like. The boss doesn't have to say, but the cook notices what kind of food he reaches for, what kind of food he eats a lot of. He then makes more of that.

Ajaan Lee expands on that image by saying that you don't fix the same thing every day. If it's porridge today, porridge tomorrow, porridge the next day, even if you make a really good porridge, your boss is going to try to find a new cook. You learn how to vary your offerings.

So as you're sitting here meditating, focusing on the breath, notice what kind of breathing you like. And remember that the breathing you like right now may not be the breathing you'll like in five minutes, so keep on top of it.

Another image the Buddha gives is of an archer who's able to shoot long distances, fire shots in rapid succession, pierce great masses. It took strength to be an archer back in those days. They had enormous bows. You had to be really strong in order to pull the bows back. If you shoot great distances, you see that what you're experiencing now in terms of the aggregates is going to apply to whatever aggregates you experienced in the past and will experience in the future. You take that to heart.

When you fire shots in rapid succession, you see where the mind is suffering and where it's causing itself suffering. In other words, you actually see the act of clinging, the act of craving, and how they're connected.

To pierce great masses is to pierce the mass of the ignorance, *avijjā*.

It's interesting that the Buddha and Ajaan Lee use these images of skills. The word *avijjā* is the opposite of *vijjā* in Pali, and *vijjā* means not only "knowledge" but also "skill." This is the reason why we suffer: We lack skill in how we handle our minds.

So as we meditate, we're trying to learn how to be more skillful. We don't just sit back and watch things pass. When the Buddha talks about having penetrative knowledge of arising and passing away, make sure you notice the word "penetrative." You're not just looking at things coming and going. "Penetrative"

means that you understand where they're coming from, where they're going, and what's arising that's more skillful and what's less skillful.

Then you use that ability to see things in this way to perfect your concentration and to perfect your discernment, because we're engaged in what the Buddha calls "directed thought and evaluation" right here. You direct your thoughts to the breath, then you evaluate it, and then you make changes based on your evaluation. That's the beginning of both concentration and discernment.

As Ajaan Lee notices, the more refined your evaluation, the better the results are going to be. Try to be really sensitive to how the breath feels. He says it's like sifting flour to make a cake or sifting sand to use to make clay tiles. If your sifter is coarse, you're going to get coarse sand, and the tiles will have low quality. But if you have a fine sifter, then you get better sand, better tiles.

In the beginning, you just make ordinary flat tiles. Then you start changing the shape. You change the composition of the clay and the sand. As you keep this up, you find that you can make better and more interesting things out of the clay.

How do you do that? Through your ingenuity. When the Buddha talks about how you reflect on yourself as you meditate, he says you reflect on your conviction, you reflect on your generosity, your virtue, your discernment, your learning about the Dhamma, and your ingenuity. To be ingenious, you have to think outside the box a bit. It's the craftsmen who think outside the box who move their craft forward. In this case, you're trying to move the craft of your mind forward.

So notice what's good about the breath right now. Try to nurture the good parts of the breath in the body. Then ask yourself: Is the breath too long? Is it too short, too fast, too slow? What would be better?

Use your imagination. Some people object to that idea. They say, "We're supposed to be just sitting with what really is." Well, the fact that the mind is shaping its experience already: *That's* what really is. If you want to be sensitive to how it's shaping its experience, you consciously change the way you shape it. Sometimes you need an active imagination to open your mind to possibilities of what's actually happening.

It's like learning to imagine that the world is round. It takes an active act of imagination, because you look around and the earth looks like a flat disk with a sphere of the sky over it. And as you think about the idea of the world being round, you wonder, "What about the people on the other side? Don't they fall off?" That's when you have to start thinking about gravity. And as you allow your imagination to think about these things, it opens up the possibility, "Well, maybe that's the way it actually is."

So when you're using imagination, using your ingenuity with the breath, yes, you are creating an image in the mind, but then you're testing it right away. Does it help? Does this way of perceiving the breath help? How about perceiving it coming in from the front? How about perceiving it coming in from the back—what difference does that make? Sometimes, as we pull the breath in, we create a lot of tension in the back of the neck and in the shoulders. So how about thinking of the breath coming in from behind you, through the back of the neck and the shoulders? What does that do?

As Ajaan Lee says, you learn from the object you're working with. If you're working with clay, you learn from the clay. If you're working with the breath, you learn from the breath, because the mind is going to be reflected in the breath. You get a better and better sense of what works and what doesn't work.

This is how discernment develops. Remember, the Buddha's first question for discernment is a dualistic question: "What, when I do it, will lead to my long-term welfare and happiness? When, when I do it, will lead to my long-term harm and pain?" You're trying to see these distinctions. When the Buddha sets forth his answers to that question, basically they come down to two of what he calls "categorical truths."

And it's interesting. They're the only teachings in the Canon that he calls "categorical." This is one of the advantages of having a digital version of the Canon, because you can check: How many times is a word used? Where is it used? Where is it not used? You learn a lot of interesting things that way.

Type in the word "categorical." Only two teachings in the Canon are said to be categorical, one of which is that you abandon unskillful bodily conduct, unskillful verbal conduct, and unskillful mental conduct; and you develop skillful bodily, verbal, mental conduct. It's really basic, but it gets you thinking in terms of skill.

Unskillful conduct of the body would be killing, stealing, and illicit sex. Unskillful verbal conduct would be lying, divisive speech, harsh speech, and idle chatter. Unskillful mental conduct would be inordinate greed, ill will, and having wrong views. Those are things you avoid. You abandon them if you find that they actually exist in you.

Then you try to develop their opposites, which you have to approach as skills. Learning how not to lie at all is a real skill—one, because it's so easy to just say what you think is going to get people satisfied so they don't ask too many more questions. But the Buddha says No. No lying. Period. That means if there's some information you don't want to give, and you're sure that you've got a skillful motivation for not giving it, how do you avoid giving the information without lying? That's where your ingenuity has to come in.

So even these basic principles of action teach you a lot—and get you ready for the other set of categorical teachings, which are the four noble truths. These truths, too, don't just sit there. They have duties associated with them. The first truth is the fact that stress is in clinging to the aggregates. The duty is to comprehend that: in other words, to see it actually happening, to understand how it's happening. That leads you to the second noble truth, which is what's causing it—craving of three kinds: craving for sensuality, for becoming, for non-becoming. These forms craving are to be abandoned.

Then there's the fact that that craving can be ended, and that when you end the craving, that's the end of suffering. That's something you want to realize, to actually see it happening. And you do that by developing the path, which basically comes down to virtue, concentration, and discernment.

So the Buddha's categorical truths are, one, dualistic, because the choices you make really do make a difference. Suffering and not suffering really are different. Following your cravings and abandoning your cravings: Those really are different and they make important differences. So they're dualistic. And then, two, they have inherent duties. They're not truths that just sit there on the page. They ask you to look at your own behavior and see what you can change in your behavior—because the reason you're suffering, of course, is something you're doing that's unskillful. But you can do other things that would put an end to the suffering, that would actually overcome that lack of skill.

So the Buddha's truths are active, and they ask you to focus on areas of life where you really can make a difference.

Basically, this comes down to the fact that you've been unskillful in the way you run your mind. You don't clearly know what's going on. And often, you'll misuse some of the skills or some of the powers of the mind—because the mind is very powerful. It shapes your life. The fact that you're engaged in the world depends on the mind. You're not simply sitting here on the receiving end of sights, sounds, smells, tastes, tactile sensations, or ideas. The mind actively goes out and shapes these things.

There are potentials coming in through the senses. They come from your past actions, but your actual experience is something you're shaping right now. And you don't see that, which is why you suffer—because you're doing it with lack of skill. But if you can see this happening, you can be more skillful, and what you do actually turns into a path to the end of suffering.

So these are the skills we're working on. They're laid out in the Buddha's categorical teachings. They all come down to the principle that there are good causes and bad causes. The good causes give rise to good effects. The bad causes

give rise to bad effects—a very basic idea. It’s so basic that people tend to overlook it. They want something more sophisticated, something more advanced.

Years back, I was asked to give a talk to a group of people on the four noble truths. The talk was arranged by a Tibetan group. The leader of the group sat down beside me after I had finished the talk, turned to the audience, and said, “Well, that was a dualistic interpretation of the Dharma. We get to the really good stuff later, when we get to the non-dualistic.” That’s the problem. Everybody wants to rush to the end without mastering the basics.

Even though nibbāna is not a dualism, it really is not the same thing as saṃsāra. Saṃsāra is a process by which we create suffering again and again and again. We keep on going, going, going, creating new worlds and then moving into them, causing suffering for ourselves and for others. Nibbāna is the ending of that process. Those are two very different things.

So what it comes down to is that we can either be skillful or unskillful. And if we develop the proper skills—learning from our actions, using our ingenuity, learning from the clay or the silver or the vines we use to weave baskets, whatever our skill—we see that we really can make a difference.

That’s the whole reason the Buddha taught. He was making a difference. The world without the Dhamma and the world with the Dhamma are two very different worlds. We’re lucky we have the Dhamma available, so that we can make a good difference, too.