Spectrum of Skillfulness, The

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Rinz once read a book where the author was complaining about the traditional account of the Buddha’s awakening. He said he was looking for lights and technicolor action, pains to oneness for the universe, and he didn’t find it. It was just a statement of a causal principle. When this is, that is. From the arising of this comes the arising of that. When this isn’t, that isn’t. From the passing away of this comes the passing away of that. It sounds awfully prosaic, but it’s important. As the Buddha once said, there was an awful lot that he learned in his awakening, but he only taught a very small part of it. You know the story where he’s walking in the forest and picks up a handful of leaves. He says that the amount that he taught was like the handful of leaves. What he actually learned in his awakening was like the leaves in the forest. The reason he didn’t teach the whole leaves in the forest was because he said it wouldn’t serve any purpose. He taught the handful of leaves because it would help people gain relief from suffering. So when he talks about that causal principle, it’s because it’s useful. It underlies all his teachings on how to put an end to suffering. In other words, causality in our lives comes down to two basic principles. Influences coming from the past combine with influences from the present, and it applies immediately as a causal principle. As we meditate, you sit here and you’ve got the intention to stay with the breath, and you want to hold on to that intention. Then, for some reason, it changes. Sometimes it’s because of things that come up that are totally out of your control. Those are influences coming from the past, which then force you to change your intention, or you feel forced. You take them as an excuse to change your intention. Then there are other times when you just simply change your intention without much of an input from anything. So as you’re sitting here trying to maintain this intention to stay with the breath, keep the mind focused, stay with the sensation of the body here in the present moment, you’ve got to watch out for two sorts of things. One is any sensory input that’s going to come in by way of the eyes, ears, tongue, nose, body, memories from the past, anticipations from the future, about the future. You have to chalk those up to past karma. Your present karma is your intention right now. That’s it. That’s what you’re responsible for. Once you can make this distinction, then a lot of other distinctions come in as well. The Buddha said the beginning of discernment is seeing distinctions, and particularly seeing the distinction between what’s skillful and what’s unskillful. You want to explore that distinction and learn how to work with it intelligently. In other words, getting worked up about influences coming from the past is not skillful because it doesn’t accomplish anything. You can’t change what’s coming in from the past. You’ve already done those things. The causal process has already been set in motion. That’s where you have to practice equanimity. As for what you’re doing in the present moment, that is the area where you really can make a difference. So you can’t let yourself be too easily equanimous about it. Don’t have what in Thailand they call the equanimity of a water buffalo. There’s a famous story of a monk staying with a Jahn Chah who, during the early part of the rainy season, had half of the roof of his hut blown off in a storm. So he decided to practice equanimity by simply sleeping in the other half of the hut, allowing the rain to come in the half that was blown off. When Jahn Chah came along and saw this, he asked him why he wasn’t fixing his roof, and he said he was practicing equanimity. That’s when a Jahn of Chah said, “That’s the equanimity of a water buffalo. It’s not the equanimity of a monk. Go and fix your roof.” If there are things you can do in the present moment to make the situation better, to decrease the amount of harm and suffering you’re causing for yourself and other people, the wise thing is to make those choices. Do whatever is required. Sometimes we have a problem with being judgmental about ourselves. If we see ourselves doing something unskillful, then we pile more unskillfulness on top of it by the way we pull ourselves around and berate ourselves. You have to learn how to be skillful in how you treat your unskillful choices. This is one of those things that can be learned only with time. Knowing when to be firm and when to be gentle. Realizing that there is a place for firmness in the path, there is a place for gentleness in the path. Then you’ve got to be sensitive to what the situation is, which sort of approach is required, which is why it’s good as a meditator to have a lot of tricks up your sleeve, a lot of tools to apply to the practice. One thing that’s useful if you find that you were brought up with people who tended to be harsh or you have been surrounded by people who are harsh in their judgments and you tend to pick up their harshness in the way you treat yourself, is to go out and read some books of some wise people who are clear and firm, but wise in how they pass judgment on things. Being judgmental is different from being judicious. You’ve got to pass judgment on what’s skillful and what’s not. You have to do it in a judicious way, in a way where you really do get skillful results. It really does encourage skillful behavior. This is one of the reasons why the Buddha did not encourage guilt. If you think about your past actions and get all worried about what you’ve done in the past, that saps the strength you need in order to make the wise choice in the present moment. There’s a story about a man named Chan Kao. Chan Kao was a Buddhist monk. He was ordained fairly late in life. He was thirty-five before he was ordained. After a very messy marriage, his wife had gone off and had an affair when he was away on a trip at one point. He came back and contemplated killing somebody. Either the wife or the lover decided the better thing to do would be to ordain. But he carried a lot of anger. One night he was cursing his mind for being unruly. Of course, when you live in a jhana like a jhana, money knows what’s going on. The next morning he said, “Look, don’t curse your mind. It’s not healthy.” In a case like that, he taught Chan Kao a very long and involved chant for metta, involving six hours to do the whole chant, spreading metta to all possible kinds of living beings in all directions. With practice, Chan Kao became a person well-known for his compassion. He never abandoned the fierce side of his nature, because there are times when you have to be fierce with your defilements. But he learned a wider spectrum of approaches. This is what you need as a meditator. There’s no one-size-fits-all little word of wisdom that you apply all the time in your meditation. You’ve got to figure out what’s appropriate for right here, right now. That’s part of learning the skill of meditation. The standard you use is, when you make a choice, is it harmful to yourself? Is it harmful to others? Does it help increase skillful qualities in the mind, or does it pile on more unskillful ones? Some of the results you’ll see only over time, but a lot of the results you’ll see in the immediate present. Learn to watch for those results so that you can adjust your actions accordingly, adjust your approaches to how you deal with the mind when it wanders off, how you deal with the mind when lust seems to take over and doesn’t let you go for a couple of weeks, or when anger takes over, fear, greed, whatever. As long as you maintain a basically cheerful attitude and a sense that all of these problems can be dealt with. People in the past have dealt with them. This is why we have recollection of the Sangha as a meditative theme. When you’re getting discouraged and everything seems impossible, think back on all the stories you’ve heard of meditators who just had really, really hard times, and finally managed to pull out of it, to find what strengths they had and focus on those, capitalize those, and develop those to get over the weak spots. That’s a valid use of your meditation time. Don’t think that you always have to be focusing on nothing but the breath, because there are times when you need to think about other things. There’s recollection of the Buddha to encourage a sense of conviction in the path, thinking of the sort of person who found this path to begin with, the purity of his motives, the compassion he had, recollection of the Dhamma, thinking about what an excellent path this is. It’s aimed at totally practical issues, putting an end to suffering. Recollection of the Sangha for when you’re getting discouraged. Recollection of death when you’re getting lazy. You remind yourself that death could come at any time. Ask yourself, “Are you ready to go? If not, what do you have to do before you go?” How do you pack your bags, get your tickets and everything in order? In other words, how do you get your mind in good shape? Because that’s what will see you through. When you’re feeling down on yourself, recollect on the times when you really were virtuous and you really have been generous, to remind yourself that you’re not a totally worthless human being. You’ve had your good moments. This kind of reflection is good when you keep on adding new good moments to your life. If you try to trade off something you did fifteen years ago, it gets pretty dry. It gets pretty old. So keep on being generous, keep on being virtuous, and allow yourself to feel good about the fact that you can do that. These are all ways of thinking that make it easier to focus the mind back into the present moment and deal with this big issue that we’re constantly creating karma, constantly making choices in the present. We have to be as skillful as possible, relentlessly skillful. Of course, there are going to be slips, but learning how to slip and not fall. Learning how to catch yourself quickly. If you do fall down, learn how to pick yourself up, dust yourself off, and keep on going. In meditation, it’s not just a technique. It’s learning how to approach the techniques skillfully. You have a full tool chest, and you know how to use the chisel, and you know how to use the saw, and you know how to use every little tool that’s in there. This takes time, but it’s time well spent. It’s an important part of developing discernment. We all hear discernment as seeing things in terms of the three characteristics or realizing things, which all sounds very fine. But as the Buddha said, you develop discernment by focusing on the issue of what’s skillful and what’s unskillful. This means how you use your tools, the tools of your body, the tools of your speech, the tools of your mind. That’s where the real discernment lies, and that’s where discernment shows its real usefulness, because it does help put an end to suffering. There’s a lot of wisdom out there. It sounds very wise, but if it’s not practical, it doesn’t really help put an end to suffering. Remember, it’s not the Buddha’s wisdom. Everything he taught was with a practical purpose. We don’t have all the wisdom. We develop our wisdom, we develop our discernment by taking the same approach, noticing that some of our thoughts, some of our ideas are skillful and some of them are not, and then working with that, learning how to be more discerning, more discriminating, which mental qualities we encourage and which ones we put aside. That’s how our discernment grows—learning from mistakes and learning from the times when we don’t make mistakes and being mature enough to learn from both, and having imagination to realize there are a lot more alternatives in dealing with the mind than you may have thought. If you find that you’re presented with only two very unskillful alternatives, use your imagination to figure out that there must be more, because, as the Buddha said, there’s always a skillful way to respond to whatever comes up. Many times our problems are basically addictions. We have a very narrow idea of what’s possible, and none of the alternatives seem to work. So we go for the default mode. When you find yourself in a situation like that, try to use your imagination. There are times when the middle way is not just a middle point on the spectrum; it’s totally outside of the box. At the time when the wanderer asked the Buddha if there was a self, the Buddha didn’t answer. When he asked if there was no self, the Buddha didn’t answer that. It’s like his response was, “This is a question that’s not worth asking,” which was totally outside of the box, not only in the Buddha’s time, but even nowadays you get people resisting that. So when you see yourself presented with two alternatives, neither of which looks particularly good, there’s got to be something else. It’s another way of looking at the whole situation, all of which is a function of discernment.

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