Mastery

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One of the old questions in ethics is how you judge an action. Do you judge it by its intention, or do you judge it by the result? As usual, the Buddha found a way of not falling for that dichotomy. In effect, he said you judge it both by the intention and the result. The two are intertwined. In other words, it’s not just a habit. It’s not just a question of the goodness of your heart. It’s not just a question of being effective regardless of what your intention is. Because having a good intention is not enough. It sets you in the right direction, but you’ve got to learn more than just having good, well-meaning intentions. You want to be skillful. In this way, the Buddha takes the question out of the realm of ethics and into the realm of skill. As any craftsman or craftswoman knows, a good piece of art is not just a matter of intending to do a good piece of art, or having a good idea. It has to be good in the execution as well. The two go together. And it’s a process of learning over time, as your skills get better and as your understanding of what you’re doing gets better. This is the type of knowledge we’re trying to develop. The knowledge that comes from doing. And John Lee has made this point many, many times in his talks. As he says, learning to be a good meditator is learning how to sew, learning how to weave a basket, learning how to make play tiles. The list goes on and on and on. You take the object, and then you look at it, and you figure out what still needs to be improved. Then you go back and you do it again, and again, and again. Because we’re not operating on the pattern of an act of judgment. In Buddhism, there is no final judgment. What there is, however, is the ultimate development of a skill. That’s what we’re working on. We begin with the right intention—the intention to be truthful, the intention to be sincere in trying to give rise to happiness, trying to put an end to suffering. So that before we do anything, we ask ourselves, “Where is this action going to go?” If it’s going to give rise to harm, you don’t do it. If it seems harmless, you go ahead and do it. But then you watch what’s happening as you do the action, because sometimes the results of the action come out immediately. If you see anything harmful coming up, you stop. If you don’t see anything harmful, continue until you’re done. But then when you’re done, you look at the long-term results. And if you realize that, contrary to expectations, something harmful happened, you learn from that, resolve not to do it again, and develop a sense of shame around that. Shame here being not the being ashamed of yourself for being a bad person, but just the action you realize is a shameful action and that you would be ashamed to do it again. This is actually a sign of self-esteem, that you’re better than that kind of action. If you see that what you did caused no harm at all, then take joy in the fact that you’re on the path. There’s a sense of joy, there’s a sense of pride in craftsmanship. And even though ultimately we’re trying to get rid of pride, we use it on the path when we’re sure that we’ve done something right. But we keep on training. In other words, you look again and again and again each time you act, because sometimes you find that what seemed okay the first time around is not okay the second time around. This is how your knowledge grows. It’s a knowledge that grows through mastery. The basic themes of the Dhamma are the themes that we experience right away. Suffering is the first thing we experience when we’re born. Then there’s pleasure. We’ve experienced that as well. But we don’t really understand these things until we’ve understood the causes. And we don’t understand the causes until we’ve mastered them. In other words, it’s not just book learning. As the Buddha says, the sermon that comes from development, the sermon that comes from meditation, the sermon that comes from the path. You may know on one level that craving causes suffering. You may have seen it actually happening now and then. But you don’t really know craving until you’ve totally abandoned it. The same with the path. You may have found that moments of concentration, or even longer periods of concentration, give rise to a sense of ease. You develop mindfulness in all the other factors of the path. You see that the burdens and the sense of weight in the heart get lighter and lighter. But you don’t really know the path fully until you’ve fully mastered it to the point of awakening. That’s the ultimate skill that we’re working on. We’re trying to head in that direction. So it’s a knowledge that comes from doing, a knowledge that comes from mastering a skill. Back in the old days, in the time of classical Greece and Rome, they made a distinction between the knowledge of a scribe and the knowledge of a warrior. The knowledge of a scribe is what’s found in words. The knowledge of a warrior is what’s developed in terms of skills on the battlefield. And two important elements in developing a skill are, one, that you have to have a clear sense of what you can change and what you can’t change. The Buddha once said that this was a sign of a wise person, knowing what’s your duty and what’s not your duty. And certainly what you can’t change is not what’s your duty. In other words, you’re not trying to change things that you can’t change. That’s certainly not your responsibility. Your responsibility is to figure out what you can change and are responsible for changing. You focus on that. And it seems a simple enough principle. But as you get into it more and more deeply, you realize that it leads to a lot of the really important insights. For instance, there’s the kind of stress that’s simply a part of the world, and there’s the stress for which you’re responsible. And it turns out the stress and suffering for which you’re responsible, those are the things you actually can change. And not only that, those are the only forms of stress and suffering that weigh on the heart. Once the stress and suffering that comes from craving is done with, then the stresses of the world don’t weigh on the heart at all. That’s an important lesson. If there were stresses and strains on the heart that we couldn’t do anything about, that would place a huge limitation on the path and our ability to find true happiness. It wouldn’t be something we could do without. So that’s an important lesson, that the stress and suffering that weighs on the heart is unnecessary. It is something you can do something about. And so as you develop your skill, you keep running up against things that you can’t change, and learning about areas where you can change things to pursue that question. See how far it takes you. It also takes you into the teaching on not-self, the question of what you control and what you can’t control, as long as you find that you can control things like form, feelings, perceptions, thought constructs, consciousness, and the five aggregates. You do exert control over them. You do develop a sense of self on the path, but you try to develop a sense of not trying to define who you are, but a sense of competence, a sense of responsibility. That sort of self is actually a useful part of the path. It’s only when you don’t need it anymore that you let it go. This ties into another aspect of developing a skill is having a sense of time and place. Some teachings apply across the board, no matter what. In terms of the precepts, there’s no killing, no stealing, no illicit sex, no lying, no taking intoxicants, period, no ifs, ands, or buts. But then there are other aspects of the path, other areas of life where there’s a sense of self. Things that are skillful today might not be skillful tomorrow. This is where an element of paradox comes in. One of the Jon Chas students once asked him, “Why is it that you seem to be saying one thing to one group of people and another thing totally opposite to another group of people? Why are you so inconsistent?” Jon Chas said, “It’s like seeing someone walking down the road and he’s veering off to the right. Well, you tell him, ‘Go left, go left.’” Another person is veering off to the left. You say, “Go right, go right.” So there’s the paradox in that instructions sometimes seem to be saying opposite things, but they’re aimed in the same direction. Then there’s the whole question of the role of desire in the path. Ultimately, we’re trying to go beyond desire, but you have to use desire. We’re trying to go beyond thinking but you have to use thinking. Directed thought and evaluation are the categories of the Four Noble Truths. These all involve thinking, analyzing, understanding. We think that we’d like to go to a state of pure peace and stillness. We don’t want to be bothered with our thinking. But if you don’t learn how to analyze things in this way, there are a lot of areas of life that don’t get developed skillfully at all. You work left undone, even though you try to run away from them, they follow you. Because the Buddha didn’t teach a one-fold path. He didn’t teach just one duty. Meditation is not a Johnny One-Note kind of activity. There are things you have to comprehend, things you have to abandon, things you have to realize, things you have to let go, things you have to develop, things you have to prevent, things you have to meet. You have to realize which is which. This requires thinking and analyzing. It’s only then, when you’ve completed those duties, that you can get through to peace. It’s the same with desire. The story of the brahmin who came to see Ananda and asked him, “What is this path for?” Ananda said, “One of the purposes of the practice is to put an end to desire.” “Well, how do you get to an end to desire?” Ananda said, “You develop the base of power based on desire, persistence, intent, and discrimination.” The brahmin said, “Well, that doesn’t work. How can you use desire to get rid of desire?” Ananda asked him in return, “Well, you came here to the park.” They were staying at a park at the time. “Before you came here, didn’t you have the desire to get here?” The brahmin said, “Yes.” “Now that you’re here at the park, where is that desire?” “Well, it’s gone. It’s been fulfilled. It doesn’t have any function anymore.” Ananda said in the same way, “Desire is an element of the path. You have to want to do it. You have to abandon what’s unskillful to give rise to what’s skillful.” You have to want these things for them to happen. It’s only when this desire has fulfilled its purpose that you let it go. When you’re working on concentration, you’re creating a state of becoming so that you can put the mind in a position where it can finally go beyond becoming. So it’s important we realize the role of paradox in what we’re doing. Sometimes we have to develop skills that eventually we’ll have to transcend, but you can’t get past them by saying, “Well, I just want to get around that.” You go straight to the goal without going through the path. This is one of the reasons that a lot of modern people find it difficult to practice, because they don’t have any experience with physical skills. They don’t develop the attitude that can deal with paradox, that can deal with understanding time and place and getting a sense for what’s true across the board and what’s true only for particular instances. They don’t have a clear sense of what they can control and what they can’t control. You can learn these things only through exploring and having the willingness to learn from your mistakes. As the Buddha said, this is how you reach purity. You reach there not by trying to please somebody else or hoping that some being up in the sky is going to pass a positive judgment on you. You’re working on a skill. You’re trying to reach a happiness that’s totally satisfactory, but at the same time you’re also trying to raise your standards for what’s satisfactory. You get more and more sensitive. This is also an aspect of learning a skill. You get more and more sensitive to what you’re doing, more and more sensitive to the possibilities of what can be done. You get more discriminating in what passes muster and what doesn’t. When you look at your actions, remember, it’s not just a matter of having your heart in the right place. You have to look at the results and realize that the two are intertwined. You may have a good intention, but if the results don’t come out well, it may be an example of something that you couldn’t control, but at some time it may be an example of an area where you had some delusion. It takes experience to be able to tell which is which, the experience of testing and experimenting over and over again, until you finally reach mastery. you

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