Exercising Your Judgment

July 9, 2010

The Buddha’s very first teaching was the Noble Eightfold Path. His last teaching was the Noble Eightfold Path. Everything he taught fits into the path, right view. It’s not just a theory. It’s a way of looking at things as part of the path. The fact that the Buddha found the path that gives him the rank of being an admirable friend, which, he said, is the most important external factor for the practice, the most important internal factor, is our own appropriate attention. In other words, learning to look at things as skillful and unskillful, looking at things in terms of the Four Noble Truths, and realizing that each of those truths carries a duty that we have to carry out if we want peace of mind. The Buddha never imposed his teachings on anyone. His shoulds are all conditional. If you want peace of mind, you want true peace of mind. This is what you have to do. So appropriate attention is basically looking at things in two terms, again, skillful and unskillful, and the Four Noble Truths. These are the Buddha’s categorical teachings, his most important ones, the teachings that apply across the board. And it’s important to look at things in terms of skillful and unskillful and to question some of the things that we assume automatically are skillful or automatically are unskillful. The Buddha himself started out realizing that he had to make distinctions here and to question some of his presuppositions. Remember that he’d practiced six years of austerities, convinced that by denying himself any kind of pleasure at all, he’d find true happiness. Well, it didn’t work out. Pain was not always good, just as pleasure was not always good. It depended on what states of mind grew out of these things. Some pleasures are skillful, some are not. Some pains are skillful, and some are not. Joy, grief, equanimity can be skillful or unskillful, depending on what they give rise to in the mind. And the same principle applies to a lot of other things we tend to take for granted as being either one or the other. Judging mind is sometimes said to be bad, but the Buddha said there’s a lot that the mind has to judge. I mean, you’re judging all the time, one way or another. So it’s good to be upfront about the fact and decide how you’re going to judge skillfully. Because if you can’t judge, how do you know what’s skillful or what’s not? And the same with fear. Not all fear is unskillful. The fear of doing something harmful, that’s a skillful fear. The fear of giving in to greed, aversion, and delusion, that’s a skillful fear. The fear of growing old and sick and dying without having practiced, that’s a skillful fear. So it’s good to take this point of view and apply it to different things in your life and ask yourself, “To what extent are these things that I take for granted as being either good or bad?” And to what extent are they really good, and to what extent are they not? For example, we don’t like pain. But sometimes when you’re in pain, you gain a lot of really important insights into the mind, how it relates to the body, how it relates to pain. The Buddha says you don’t take on any unnecessary pain. In fact, he has you start out with pleasure, one of the main factors of the path. Right concentration, in fact, is the first factor the Buddha himself discovered. It has pleasure, pleasure, pleasure, rapture among its factors. That kind of pleasure is generally skillful. So the Buddha has you develop this as a backup, as a foundation for the mind. But not simply to indulge in it. He says it can be used as a pleasant abiding, but you can also develop this pleasure as a way of developing mindfulness and alertness. In other words, the pleasure allows the mind to stay in the present moment without wandering off and looking for snacks here and there. It’s got good food right here. And it’s also useful for developing discernment. Because having this pleasure as something you can tap into makes you more bold in dealing with pain. Because if you find the mind stays settled for long periods of time without anything really happening, you might say, “Well, let’s sit a little bit longer. Let’s endure a little bit more pain here and see what happens. Does this disturb the stillness?” And if it does, what’s the disturbance? Where’s the attachment? Where’s the craving? Where’s the clinging? Because as the Buddha said, wherever there’s suffering, there’s going to be craving and clinging. So if the mind gets upset by pain, you’ve learned an important lesson. There’s something you want to look into. The extent to which you identify with a body, the extent to which you identify with your pains. This is an important lesson to be learned from pain. This is where skillful fear comes in. Unskillful fear is afraid of the pain. Skillful fear is afraid of not understanding the pain, not understanding your reactions to the pain, i.e., the fear of heedfulness. You don’t know how much time you’ve got left. Conditions right now are okay for the practice, but how much longer is it going to stay this way? You don’t know. What you do know is you’ve got the opportunity right now. So sometimes you should experiment a little bit with the pain, realize which fear is skillful and which fear is not. And as you practice this way, you discover over time that you understand which kind of judging is skillful and which is not. You develop your powers of evaluation. Again, one of the factors of right concentration, vijjana. You evaluate the breath. You evaluate what’s going on in the mind. You decide what’s working and what’s not working. And then you learn to measure your principles for what works and what doesn’t work. As a political philosopher, I was upset at the teachings of pragmatism, saying, “The idea of what works can get pretty sloppy. The idea of what’s good enough for me is good enough for me, and that’s all that matters.” Well, how good is good enough for you? Right now, a little bit of peace, a little bit of ease may seem good enough. But then the whole question of heedfulness comes in, that skillful fear. Is this level of concentration good enough? Is this level of mindfulness good enough? Is your level of discernment good enough? If things suddenly got really bad, would you be okay? And if not, you’ve got work to do. How do you pace yourself in all this? This is another level of skillfulness you have to develop through trial and error. You’ve got to learn to push yourself a little bit too much sometimes. You don’t know how much is too much until you’ve pushed it. And then you see, “Oh, this is a little bit too much. This is getting frazzled.” The mind doesn’t want to practice. So you back off a little bit. But you keep testing it. You keep pushing the envelope. And you learn that when, say, you want to analyze something, you want to really understand something, but nothing is becoming clear, it’s a sign, okay, your concentration isn’t strong enough yet. Go back and work on that. Because sometimes the drive to push yourself and push, push, push doesn’t get results. This, again, is where learning how to use your powers of judgment skillfully is very important. So this categorical teaching of the Buddha, the question of what’s skillful and what’s not, has lots of implications. It’s not the case that the Buddha taught just a Johnny One-Note kind of meditation where you just practice equanimity or just practice acceptance or just note. There are lots of mental qualities that have to be developed. They have to be balanced so that they all work together. It’s when they work together that they’re strong. And it takes the mind that can balance things and judge what’s working and what’s not to bring everything together. Of course, you don’t know ahead of time what’s going to work and what’s not. The Buddha gives you ideas, but you have to put them into practice to see what works for you. The level of pleasure, the level of pain, that’s skillful for you. It’s not necessarily the same as it would be for somebody else. So you’ve got to learn this on your own. But this is what’s good about the practice. It’s not trying to force us to clone awakening or clone somebody else’s ideas about what true happiness may be. It’s for us to learn how to explore on our own what really works for us inside. The Buddha’s constant reminder that there is the possibility of a true happiness that doesn’t depend on conditions and isn’t even touched by any change at all. He says that’s a possibility. Now you can listen to that and it’s just going to shrug it off. Or you can listen to it and take it as a challenge. You can listen to it and take it as hope and inspiration. It’s up to you to make the most of it.

<https://www.dhammatalks.org/Archive/y2010/100709%20Exercising%20Your%20Judgment.mp3>