Bad, Good, & Skillful Intentions

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We all know that meditation is only one part of the path. Well, there is one way you can define meditation, the Pali word bhavana, which means to develop. And it covers a lot of the path, beyond meditation too. You develop generosity, you develop virtue. As you meditate, you develop mindfulness, concentration, discernment. And for the path to be complete, you need all of these factors. The eight factors of the Noble Path are divided into three sections, discernment, virtue, concentration. And we need all three. As the Buddha said, when concentration is nurtured by virtue, it has great reward. It gives rise to a dependable discernment. Because if your actions aren’t dependable, it’s going to be hard for your discernment to be dependable. So we think of our meditation as part of a larger program, where our whole life is a path. And you want to make sure that we’re always on the right path. The basic principle is that we try to abandon unskillful qualities and develop skillful ones. And virtue, concentration, and discernment help in all of those three. Discernment helps us to see what’s skillful and what’s unskillful. And we learn, as we get to know our minds really well, that unskillful qualities don’t always come out of bad intentions. Sometimes our good intentions can be unskillful too. There’s no greed, there’s no aversion, but there is delusion. And once there’s delusion, it can hide all kinds of things from us, so that we misunderstand our intentions, we misunderstand the situation around us. This is one of the reasons why we need the precepts. Because there might be times when you would say, “Well, if I lie to this person, I avoid hurting that person’s feelings.” And so you think that’s a kind act. But as the Buddha said, of the five precepts, lying is the most serious. Because when people take in some information and they think it’s true, but it’s not, that can mislead them for a long time. When I was in France, the question came up about taking care of people who are close to death, people who are seriously ill, and whether it’s okay to lie to them about how serious their condition is. And one of the people in the retreat happened to be a hospice nurse, and said that in his experience, people know when they’re being lied to. Even when you say, “The doctor says it’s not serious, no need to worry.” When they feel they’re being lied to, then they don’t trust anybody. I knew of one case in Thailand where the family kept the father’s cancer diagnosis from him. Then as he got more and more sick, he began to realize that he could trust his whole family, even his wife and his children, less and less and less. That was probably worse than hearing a cancer diagnosis. This is one of the reasons why we stick by the precepts. Something we may think is kind, but actually can create all kinds of trouble down the line, when the precepts say, “No, no lying, no killing.” Another question that came up during the retreat was about assisted suicide. As I pointed out, we don’t really know where someone’s going after death. We may think that we’re putting somebody out of their misery, and they may want to be “put out of their misery.” But they don’t know where they’re going. We don’t know where they’re going. Maybe to some places worse than this, unless they take advantage of the opportunity to practice. Even when you’re suffering as a human being, there are things you can learn, good things you can develop inside. So the best thing is to encourage the person to learn how to understand pain, understand suffering. Give whatever painkillers are needed to take the edge off the suffering. But at the same time, encourage them that our opportunity to be a human being is nothing to throw away. And at the same time, if you’re committing assisted suicide, you’re engaging other people in the act of basically killing you, supporting you in killing yourself. That becomes their karma too. So the precepts make us stop and think about the larger implications of what we’re doing. And when the Buddha chose the precepts, he meant them to be clear-cut rules. Because we need something clear-cut when the situation around us is murky, or our minds are murky. And so we have something to hold on to, to make us think about the larger implications of what we’re doing. At the same time, when you hold too firmly firm principles like this in your thoughts, and words, and deeds, or in your intentions, and words, and deeds, then it’s going to help with the meditation. And John Munn made a lot of this point. He took issue with the fact that in Thailand the textbooks talk about virtue as being a matter of controlling your words and controlling your deeds. No mention of the mind at all. Whereas throughout the canon, it’s always a question of intention. The virtues are there. The precepts are there to keep pointing you back to your mind. What are your intentions right now? Make sure your intentions are clear. Make sure they’re skillful. At the very least, make them good. And then try to make them as skillful as you can. This virtue then becomes part of your mind. Someone once asked Ajahn Munn, “Can you separate a person from their virtues?” And he said, “No.” And if you could, people probably wouldn’t. They’d steal your virtues. Virtues are part of your mind. Someone asked him one time, “How many precepts you followed?” He said he followed one, which is the mind. Look after the mind. And everything else follows from that. Now some people have mistaken that by saying that he must not have been too much concerned about the Vinaya. Oh, the Vinaya is there. The monk’s rules are there to point out to you. These are the ins and outs of what is skillful and what’s not skillful. And if you make up your mind that you’re just not going to intend to break any of the precepts, that’s the important part of the training. So the precepts keep focusing you back on the mind, and you get used to watching your own mind. This becomes a good habit to develop for the sake of your concentration, and for the sake of the honesty of your discernment. So remember that the practice is not just a matter of sitting here with your eyes closed or doing walking meditation. It’s all your actions, all your words, all your thoughts. You want all of them to be on the right path. And John Lee makes the point that when we’re not making progress in the path, it’s because we’re not following this path all the time. We follow the right path sometimes and the wrong path sometimes. Go back and forth, back and forth, back and forth. When you go back and forth like that, you don’t get anywhere. You have to make sure that you’re totally on the path. And then the path will develop momentum. And it will take you to where you want to go.

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