Good for What Purpose?

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The Buddha has a list of what he calls craving verbalizations, things we tell ourselves because of craving. And two of them are “I am good” and “I am bad.” You might wonder, why would the Buddha mark these out as being craving verbalizations? Well, suppose you believe that you are innately bad. How could you practice? All your intentions would be corrupt, all your perceptions would be corrupt. You’d have to depend on some outside force to come in and save you. And there are teachers who would take advantage of that, telling you that you’re basically depraved and you need their help. But the idea that I’m basically good also has its problems. To begin with, it makes you complacent. You say that you can trust whatever urges come up in the mind. But who knows what’s going to come up in the mind? As the Buddha said, the mind can change directions very fast. If the mind is basically anything, it’s basically changeable. And quickly changeable at that. So what do we do? I mean, there are some people who say they don’t want to believe in rebirth, for instance. Because the idea of having to be moral simply because you’re afraid of punishment strikes them as being childish. But the Buddha never said that that was the meaning for the teaching on rebirth. Basically that you’re responsible. Your actions have impacts that are going to go not only into this lifetime, but into future lifetimes. So you want to be heedful. You want to think about when you do something, why you’re doing it, what the consequences are going to be. That’s called being responsible. And that’s an attitude that he actually does in courage. So we take his teachings as working hypotheses. But we realize that they make us adults. Responsible adults. Mature adults. Mature in the sense that we tell ourselves if we’re going to get anywhere in this practice, it’s going to be up to us. We do have that potential within us. So we’re not inherently bad. But we do have some bad characteristics. We have a whole stable of different selves in here. And some of them can be pretty selfish, some of them can be pretty nasty. And we have to recognize that fact. But we also have to recognize that we have some good selves in here as well. More skillful. They’re all based on the desire for happiness. In our sense of what actually works. And as we take on the path, the Buddhist wants to give us a higher standard of what it means to work. This is called a pragmatic approach to the truth. When you take on your perceptions, you take on your views, with an eye to what they will lead to, what they lead you to do, and what the consequences of those actions will be. And because we’re proactive, we come into the world and we learn a few perceptions. And then we start pasting them onto things. And the question is, the perceptions we have, that don’t come from the objects themselves, but come from within our minds, we have to ask where they come from. This is called safeguarding the truth. And then you have to ask yourself, what are those perceptions useful for? And they may be useful for all kinds of things. For instance, when there’s a pain in the body, part of the mind really wants to know where the pain is, so you can identify what’s wrong. And sometimes that’s wise. If you don’t pay attention to the pain, it could lead to some problems down the line. Something internal. But the question is, when you locate the pain, what are you doing? You’re putting together some perceptions. And they may actually make the pain worse. So when you’re sitting here meditating, and there’s a pain, say, in your legs, in your knees, or whatever, ask yourself this tendency you have. Do you want to locate the pain, pinpoint the pain? Is that actually helpful right now? How about not pinpointing it, not placing that label onto it? See what that would do. So you’re questioning your perceptions. A perception that might have been useful for one purpose may not necessarily be useful for the path. As you’re sitting here, and actually if you can see the body as one thing, the pain as something else, your awareness as something else, you can divide things out like this. On the one hand, it makes it a lot easier to live with a pain and not feel oppressed by it. It doesn’t invade your mind and remain. And at the same time, you learn the arbitrary nature of your perceptions. It doesn’t get you thinking about the arbitrary nature of your sense of who you are. And those various stables of cells you have inside, some you find easier to identify with than others. But you have to ask yourself, for what purpose? In many cases, it’s simply out of the force of habit. How about changing your habits? This is what the Buddha wants you to do. Change your habits. Change your way of looking at things. We tend to really resist that. For many of us, our view of ourselves, our view of the world, is perfectly adequate. But he wants to point out that it’s not. This may be one of the reasons why he focuses on the issue of suffering, stress, pain. Because those are the facts that make you sometimes wonder this view that you have of things. Is it really good enough? Is it actually part of the problem? When you can start asking questions like that, then you can pull yourself out of your old habits, your old ways of looking at things, your old ways of slapping perceptions on things, and get some distance from them. And it’s when you get distance like this, this process that’s called metacognition, that you can actually train yourself. So you can see that what you already have is not innately good or not necessarily innately bad. But the things they used to work for are not necessarily what you want anymore. You’re trying to raise your standards for what works. This is one of the complaints that’s usually leveled against pragmatism, which is the philosophy that says we have our ideas of truth based on what works for us. Which is true in a lot of ways, but for a lot of people their sense of what works is pretty low. What works for making a good profit, what works for getting people to do what you want them to do. And pragmatism in its pure form can’t really say that any one particular purpose is better than another. This is why the Buddha put so much emphasis in his Fourth Noble Truths, and the fact that suffering can be ended. It’s something that human beings can do. And when that can be done, why settle for anything less? And the answer for most people is, well, force of habit. It’s the way I’m used to things. So even though we talk about how you shouldn’t be focusing on the goal all the time, you should focus instead on the path going to the goal. Sometimes you have to remind yourself, well, where is this path going? So you can see clearly the things that come up in the mind, which thoughts, which ideas, which perceptions actually are part of the path and which ones are not. Think of those standards that the Buddha taught to Mahāpajāpati as to what counts as Dharma and what doesn’t. It’s always the question, where does this lead? Does it lead to being fettered or being unfettered? Does it lead to passion or dispassion? Does it lead to modesty or to self-aggrandizement? Does it lead to entanglement or seclusion? Does it lead to contentment or discontent? Does it lead to laziness or effort? The teachings are all judged on where they lead. So you should look at your senses of self, you should look at your ways of perceiving things and ask, where do these lead? Because facts are not just individual poker chips that just sit there. The facts of our awareness, the facts of our consciousness are all fabricated. Well, what is fabrication? Fabrication is putting things together for the sake of something. In other words, there’s an intentional element and there’s a name. There’s a desire that underlies it. This is what the Buddha said, “All things are rooted in desire.” So you have to ask yourself, well, which desires are being served by this particular way of looking at things or this particular way of looking at yourself? It’s not a question of whether you’re basically good or basically bad, or your ideas are basically good or basically bad. The question is, what purpose do they serve and can you serve a better purpose? So those are the Buddha’s standards. His teachings are fabrications too. But he’s thought very carefully about where these fabrications lead. What happens when you adopt them? What happens when you breathe in line with his instructions? What happens when you talk to yourself in line with his instructions? What happens when you use his analogies and similes to look at your life? And if you see that the results are good, okay, adopt them. What this does, it helps give you a more fluid sense of who you are and the world you’re in. And a slightly skeptical attitude towards your perceptions. That this has got to be this way and that has to be that way. You can ask yourself, well, for what purpose? Because this is how we test the truth of our perceptions. Do they serve our purposes? And are our purposes good enough? The Buddha’s purposes for his own life had to do with putting it into suffering and then teaching that way to others. He has a purpose for your life, but of course it’s up to you to decide whether you want to take it on or not. He doesn’t force this on anybody. But he left behind a whole series of teachings that are basically for you to use for the highest purpose possible. Your own freedom from suffering. It’s almost as if he had more compassion for you than you have for yourself. But, you can change. As I said, you’re not innately bad, you’re not innately good. You’re changeable. And you’re free to change in many different directions. Even though a lot of the things you experience are based on past karma, past actions, not everything is. How you put it all together is determined by your fabrications right now, your intentions right now, your desires right now. So this is what we’re trying to train. What kind of desires are really useful for you? Just because something comes up in the mind doesn’t mean it’s part of your innate nature that you’ve got to follow. You can say yes, you can say no. So it’s through the practice that we take our ideas of what’s right and what’s wrong, what’s true and what’s false. And we test them for the purpose of putting an end to suffering. That’s when you’re on the path. That’s when you’re practicing the Dharma in accordance with the Dharma. As the Buddha said, that’s how he wanted people to pay homage to him. It’s basically paying homage to your desire someplace inside your mind for happiness that doesn’t let you down. [BIRDS CHIRPING]

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