The Buddha’s Cost-Benefit Analysis

February 17, 2025

It’s not the case that we give in to every desire that comes into the mind. After all, so many different desires are clambering for our attention. We have to decide which ones are worth following, which ones are not. And subconsciously we do a kind of cost-benefit analysis. Is it worth the effort? The problem is that some of the considerations that go into that cost-benefit analysis are pretty stupid. A lot of them have to do with simply what we like and what we don’t like. Things that catch our attention. Sacred preferences that we tend to feed and nourish. So for a lot of us this cost-benefit analysis goes underground. We don’t like even to hear the idea that there is such a thing. But it is an important part of our lives. This is one of the problems with teenagers. They’re not really good at figuring out what’s worth going with and what’s not. And part of your maturity is when you get a better sense of how to do it well. And really mature, you learn how to do it well. It’s part of the path. Think about the Buddha when he said he was on the path. He began to divide his thoughts into two kinds. Those that were imbued with sensuality, ill-will, harmfulness, on one side. And those imbued with renunciation, non-ill-will, and harmlessness on the other side. He was looking at his thoughts not in terms of what he liked, or at least in the thoughts themselves, but where they came from and where they’re going to go. He learned how to step back from these things. This is how we learn Right Resolve. There are different accounts of which of the factors of the path are the first factors the Buddha discovered. There’s one where it starts with Right Concentration. There’s one where it starts with Right Resolve. Deciding that whatever thoughts were on the unskillful side, he’s going to beat them back, just like a cow herd would beat back the cows that were trying to get into the rice during the rainy season. As for thoughts that were skillful, he’d allow them free range, like the cow herd during the dry season. There’s no trouble about getting into the rice fields because there’s no rice in the fields. So the cows can pretty much go where they like. But the important thing was he learned how to step back from his thoughts. This includes his desires. And expand that cost-benefit analysis in two directions. One, looking at where these thoughts came from. And two, holding them to a high standard. As he said, the ones that were unskillful should be abandoned because they didn’t lead to awakening. That’s a pretty high standard for your desires. Most people go through life with making that cost-benefit analysis without even thinking about awakening. It doesn’t even come into the equation. And at best, they think about the consequences of what they’re going to do. The question of where these thoughts come from, where these desires come from, for most people, is a very dark and mysterious area. It’s precisely there that the Buddha said we have to look. So we step back. There’s probably this part of his own personal experience, his own personal path, that led him to make that five-step program that we talk about. Looking for the origination. In other words, where in the mind do these thoughts come from? Where did these desires come from? What kind of mind state? Imbued with passion, aversion, delusion, or free from those things. And when you look at where these things are coming from, in philosophy they call that genealogy. The same way that we talk about your genealogy in terms of where your ancestors come from. Where your ideas and desires come from can also often be a very sobering experience. Realize they come from some pretty bad mental states. But that should help give you some sense of stepping back from them. Do you really want to identify with this part of your mind? So you look for the origination inside, and then you look to see how these things pass away. A lot of our desires like to tell us that they’re gonna hang around until we give in to them. But if you really notice them, they come and they go, and they come again and they go again, back and forth. And a lot of times it’s because we dig them up, and even in cases where we have a mind storm, where they just seem to be coming, coming, coming. If you look carefully, they’re not there all the time. It’s just that they have a quick repeat button. But seeing that they do pass away helps give you some handle on them, it helps give you a sense that you can get past them. That you’re not totally sucked into what they have to say. Then you look for the allure. When the mind decides to go with something, why? Here the Buddha says you want to look for the location of your craving. Seeing that you crave a person, exactly where is your craving located? Very rarely in the person, him or herself. It often has to do with your perceptions about the person, the storylines you make up involving you and that person, or simply the perception of you in relationship to that person. All kinds of things that have nothing to do with the actual person. This is why our interpersonal relationships are so unreliable. We’re all caught up in our thought worlds and they blind us to what’s actually going on outside. Yet these are the things that drive us. Little bits and snippets of an idea or something that appeals to you. This is why the Buddha has you bring in drawbacks. Here again, as I say, this is where you go beyond the normal cost-benefit analysis, because you look and see, this desire, is this really going to lead to awakening? Then you have to say no. So many times. Yet part of you wants to give in. You have to ask yourself, what’s that all about? And that goes back to your question of where is this desire located? To what extent have you really decided that, yes, this is where you want to do it? You take the Buddha seriously. Then soon when you see the drawbacks weigh out, weigh the allure, that’s when you have the escape. So you apply these five steps to any of those unskillful mental states in the Buddha Center, the things you want to avoid and right resolve, like sensuality. You realize sensuality is one thing, sensual pleasures are something else. Sensuality is our fascination with thinking about sensual pleasures, the mind’s internal dialogue, made up of your inner conversation, your perceptions. That’s the big problem. As the Buddha said, it’s not the case that every sensual pleasure is bad. But you do have to be careful. Sensual pleasures lead to unskillful mind states coming up. Some of the good ones, he says, include enjoying the beauties of nature, enjoying solitude, enjoying a community when the community is harmonious, doing your best to make the community harmonious. Those are good pleasures to cultivate. But even there, he says, you can’t get obsessed with them. There’s a lot of pleasures that are really bad for the mind, because they pull you down, they encourage more greed, more lust, more aversion. When you’re arrested, the idea that they might be taken away. More delusion when you keep telling yourself, “Well, this is a really worthwhile thing to go after.” But it’s very much not. So we have to see the drawbacks of this. That’s why we have that chant on the 32 parts of the body. Exactly where in there do you feel lust for someone else, or where do you feel pride in your own body? Which of those organs is the center of your lust? Well, none of them, when you take them apart like that. Then why is it that when you put them together, you can feel desire? What is the mind doing to itself? This is why this contemplation keeps leading away from the body itself. The body is not so much the problem. It’s all this elaboration we make around it. When you can see how arbitrary it is and how false a lot of it is, it’s easier to see the drawbacks. The same with ill will. What on earth do you gain by seeing someone else suffer? Sometimes there’s a satisfaction of seeing someone who’s done something really bad getting what they deserve. But what does that solve? A lot of people are punished for wrongdoing, and they don’t admit that they did wrong. So it keeps coming back, back, back, continuing to do wrong. Why would you get satisfaction out of seeing that person get punished? What kind of mind state is that? What part of your mind is it something you would really want to encourage? Well, no. This is why it’s important to remember what goodwill means. It doesn’t mean, “May you be happy doing whatever you’re doing.” For people who are doing unskillful things, it means, “May you see the error of your ways and voluntarily stop.” Because that’s how these things are ended. So try to cultivate goodwill. As for thinking imbued with harmfulness, that’s basically doing harm but without ill will. A lot of times when you realize that an action you have, or a desire you have, is going to harm some people, and you tell yourself, “It doesn’t matter.” It’s kind of a callous attitude. You say, “Well, there’s bound to be collateral damage.” And you say, “It doesn’t matter.” That’s the attitude you have to get over realizing that if you’re willing to harm anybody in your actions, that harm is going to come back to you. You’ve got to have a strong sense of compunction. That you don’t want to do anything that would cause harm. A strong sense of compassion, thinking about people’s feelings. Nobody likes to be relegated to the category of, what they call them, “surplus mouths” nowadays. Everyone has his or her feelings. Everyone has his or her desire for happiness. This is why the Buddha said, “You can go the whole world over and not find anybody you love more than yourself, but then remember everybody else loves themselves just that much.” So if you’re willing to look for happiness in a way that causes harm to somebody, even without any ill will, they’re not going to stand for it. They’re not going to be treated as nothing. So these are the ways that we can think to get the mind to do a better cause-benefit analysis of what desires really are worth going with and which ones are not. This is what Right Resolve is all about. It’s the active side of discernment. Think about it. John Lee, when he talks about the three qualities of mind that go into mindfulness practice. There’s mindfulness itself and the ability to keep something in mind. Then there’s alertness, knowing what you’re doing while you’re doing it. And finally, ardency, the desire to do this well. Of those three qualities, he assigns wisdom to the ardency. Because he realized that the Buddha didn’t teach simply to decorate our minds with ideas. The wise response to listening to his teachings is to say, “I’ve got to learn how to master this skill.” That’s what Right Resolve is all about. Realizing, given the Four Noble Truths, particularly the truth of how suffering is originated, you want to avoid any thinking that would originate more suffering. So you learn how to step back from your thoughts, step back from your desires, and view them in this context of the cause-and-effect chain. Where they come from, where they go. So you can develop dispassion, or put it simply, you can give desire and passion, which is the fifth step of the five. It’s the step that leads to the escape, that leads to freedom. Because remember, for the Buddha, freedom doesn’t mean simply doing what you want to do. It means learning how to act in a way that you’re not going to cause harm to anybody. And that’s a skill we can all develop if we put our hearts and minds minds to it.

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