Persuasion

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There are four kinds of action, the Buddha said. Things that you’d like to do that will give good long-term results. Things you’d like to do that will give bad long-term results. Things you don’t like to do that will give good long-term results. And things you don’t like to do that will give bad long-term results. Now two of those are no-brainers. The things you’d like to do that will give good long-term results, they’re very easy to do. Things you don’t like to do that will give bad long-term results, they’re very easy not to do. It’s the other two that require some discernment. In fact, the Buddha said this is the measure of your discernment. Your ability to use your powers of persuasion to make yourself want to do the things that you ordinarily don’t like to do but will give good long-term results, and to not want to do the things that you like but will give long-term bad results. In the old days they made a distinction between logic and rhetoric. Logic is when you can point out good reasons deduced from basic principles. Rhetoric is when you use your powers of persuasion. It’s more than just logic. It’s thinking about your emotions. What makes you want to do something? After all, the mind is really good at persuading itself to do things that it likes to do. It knows it’s going to get bad results. But it can try its best to ignore those long-term results. Say they don’t matter. Or that your actions don’t matter anyhow. There’s no real connection between acts and their results. You just do what you like. The history of the world is full of all kinds of rationales for doing things that are really not skillful and are going to cause harm to yourself in the long term. Think about it. It’s really crazy. We can persuade ourselves to do things that we know are going to harm ourselves or harm the people we love. So obviously you’ve got some powers of persuasion in your mind. The question is learning how to use them in the right way. It’s important that you focus on the long term. Have a very live sense that, yes, it’s going to be you down the line who’s going to suffer from the unskillful things you do now. And there’s you down the line who will benefit from the skillful things you do. Now, the problem is that your old powers of persuasion have been pretty good at poking holes in that. Telling you that you just don’t have it within you to do the practice. Who cares about the long term? I want what I want right now. Those kinds of things. So you do have the ability to persuade yourself. The question is, how do you turn it around? When you think about the long term, really try to imagine yourself in that position. You’re lying on your deathbed and you haven’t learned how to deal with pain. You say, “Gee, I wasted all that time when I could have been meditating and learning how to deal with pain. I was putting up obstacles.” In a moment like that, who’s going to help you? Going to an old folks’ home where you see some people who are really out of it can be a really sobering experience. Realizing that these are people who didn’t train their minds and this is what it’s like. You go back and you say, “Okay, I don’t know how much time I’ve got, but I do have this time right now.” Of course, the mind will come up and say, “Well, you won’t be able to stick with it. We’ve seen you in the past. You’ve lasted for a day or two. Things fell apart.” You tell yourself, “Well, that’s the past. I’m responsible for right now. And for the next couple of days, what that’s going to be like, I’ll be responsible then. But for the moment, I’m responsible for right now.” And when you do something good, learn how to pat yourself on the back and not be cynical about it, skeptical about it. The good things you do really are good. Then you’re happy that you’re able to say no to something that you know is unskillful. So the mind has its tricks. You need to learn some tricks on the side of the Dhamma. So stop and think. When you’ve talked yourself into doing something bad in the past, how did the dialogue go? Sometimes it was just force of will. Your unskillful desire came in and just said, “I’m just going to break things until you do what I want.” Then you have to question it. Break what? At least I’m going to put pressure on you. Your desire to do the unskillful thing will just build and build and build. This is why the Buddha has you look at origination and passing away of these things. What is the moment when an unskillful desire arises? And what was the cause? How long does it actually last? If you don’t keep it going, it’s going to stop. Why do you pick it up again? Just the simple ability to see that it does stop reminds you that it’s not this constantly increasing pressure. That’s one of the pictures that the mind likes to paint to get you to do something bad. To paint a different picture, that you can turn yourself around. You’re not limited to those old ways. The more that you can see that you are trapped by your unskillful thoughts. But all you have to do is just drop them and you’re free. If you have a losing streak, you can break it with one win. That’s all it takes. But the mind’s mathematics will say, “Well, you have to make up for all those losses you’ve made in the past, and then we can talk.” Don’t listen to that. One win and you’ve broken the streak. Then you can start a new streak. It may seem awfully small, just two or three times. But learn how to give yourself pep talks. You’re creating the present moment with your inner dialogue, as it is already. So why create a bad inner dialogue? Why create a bad present moment for yourself? There are lots of ways you can learn how to figure out the mind, to counteract the old powers of persuasion. Like that magazine they used to make called “Adbusters” took the techniques of modern advertising to use them against modern advertising. So pick up whatever skills, whatever tricks you have in the unskillful direction and turn them around. If nothing else, think about all the efforts that the Buddha went through to find this path, put his life on the line, went through all kinds of hardships that we probably couldn’t endure ourselves. But we don’t have to endure all those. He had to find the path without any guidance. We now have the guidance. He made that effort, and he offered it to anybody who wants to put an end to suffering. He said, “I’ve had enough of this.” And you can include yourself in that group, because he did this for you. And why are you throwing it away? Just because of a mood? Learn how to talk to yourself in a skillful way. Learn how to use your powers of persuasion so they actually help you on the path. And that’s the beginning of wisdom.

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