Powers of Judgment

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One of the biggest misunderstandings about the Buddha’s teachings is that he prized a non-judging state of mind. After all, look at the Buddha. As he set out to Vinaya, he had to spend his entire teaching career passing judgment on the actions of the monks and the nuns. Which things were right, which things were wrong, and when they were wrong, how seriously were they wrong? And he had no qualms about criticizing people who acted in ways that forced him to create the rules. He called them worthless men. At the same time, he set out ideals. Look at the Dhammapada. Some of the biggest sections in the Dhammapada have to do with being a judge, being a good judge of character, being a good judge of other people, and being a good judge of yourself. And the ideals of what an ideal monk should be, an ideal practitioner should be. In fact, the first words of his first sermon were “shoulds,” the two paths that those who’ve gone forth should avoid. A lot of the misunderstanding comes from the Sutta, the Satipatthana Sutta, or the way people interpret it. It’s a very long sutta on the topic of right mindfulness. But it sends the message right at the beginning that it’s not a complete discussion of the topic. This is an important point to keep in mind. He starts out with the full formula. “Keeping track of the body in and of itself, ardent, alert, mindful, putting aside greed and distress with reverence to the world.” Then he asks one question, “What does it mean to keep track of the body in and of itself?” The same with feelings, mind states, and dhammas. The only questions that are asked are, “What does it mean to keep track of these things?” That’s only part of the formula. The rest of the formula, what it means to be mindful, alert, and especially ardent, as you put aside greed and distress with reference to the world, those topics are not discussed. So in the sections on feelings and sections on mind states, where the Buddha lists, say, skillful mind states, unskillful mind states, and doesn’t say what you do with them, he’s not sending the message that you don’t do anything. He’s simply pointing out that these are the kinds of mind states that you try to keep track of. As for what you do with ardency, he discusses that elsewhere in the Canon. When you look at ardency, it’s basically right effort. As the Buddha says elsewhere, the duty of right mindfulness in its role in the path is to keep in mind the fact that you want to develop the right factors of the path and abandon the wrong ones. When mindfulness is a governing principle, the duty is to notice that if there are skillful states that haven’t arisen yet, you are mindful to give rise to them. And when they’re there, you’re mindful not to let them pass away. So mindfulness is not a non-judging state of mind where you just watch things coming and going. There are specific things you keep in mind. In particular, you keep in mind the distinction between what’s skillful and what’s not skillful. In the Buddha’s categorical injunction that skillful behavior is to be developed, unskillful behavior is to be abandoned. The fact that it’s categorical says a lot. There are only two teachings in the whole Canon that the Buddha says are categorical, i.e., true and beneficial across the board. One is this principle. The other is the Four Noble Truths. That’s it. Everything else has its time and place. Even things that are always true are not always meant to be kept in mind all the time or to be applied all the time. There’s a famous passage where a young monk has been asked, “What are the results of action?” And he says, “Stress.” The person asking the question was a wanderer from another sect, and he said, “I don’t think I’ve heard that from any Buddhist monks before. You’d better check that out with a Buddha.” So the young monk goes with Ananda’s help to see the Buddha. And the Buddha says, “Basically, I don’t know where you got that.” Another monk who’s sitting and listening says, “Well, maybe he’s thinking about the fact that all feelings are not-self, all feelings are inconstant, all feelings are stressful.” And the Buddha says, “When we’re talking about karma, that’s not the time to bring in those three characteristics. We’re talking about actions that lead to pleasant feelings, actions that lead to painful feelings, and actions that lead to neither pleasant nor painful. Because if every action is going to lead to stress, why bother trying to be skillful? That’s one of those teachings that, even though it’s true, has to have its right time and place. But the principle that skillful action should be developed and unskillful action should be abandoned, that’s true across the board. So basically, the Buddha is teaching us to use our powers of judgment. The insight we’re trying to develop is insight into what is worth doing and what’s not worth doing. It’s going to be informed by what the Buddha has to say about what’s possible. And he says it is possible to put an end to becoming and you’re not wiped out. In fact, he says that what happens, or what’s experienced at that point, is the ultimate happiness. That’s something at the beginning you don’t know. So the Buddha is going to train you to develop your powers of judgment and develop your ability to be a good judge of whether this is true or not. And he sets out standards from the very beginning. Before you look for a teacher, before you accept a teacher, you look at the teacher’s behavior. And you see, is the teacher knowledgeable? Is the teacher compassionate? Is the teacher truthful? Truthful in the sense of not claiming to know things that he or she doesn’t know. Compassionate in the sense of not telling people to do things that will be for their harm. And knowledgeable in knowing subtle teachings about the mind. You want all three characteristics. Some people know a lot of subtleties about the mind, but they’re not really compassionate to the students. Those are people you want to avoid. And then you listen to that person’s Dhamma and you try to decide, is this true Dhamma or not? Here again, the Buddha gives you standards for judging. When you adopt a certain teaching, does it make you more dispassionate? Does it make you unfettered? Does it make you content with few material things? Does it make you want to put forth effort? Does it make you unburdensome? Does it make you modest? These are the kinds of things you want to look for in a teaching. And when you find a good teaching, then the Buddha says there are four steps you follow after that. There are four stages. One is desire. The second one is willingness. The third is judgment again. And the fourth is effort. The desire there, of course, is to want to put the teaching into practice. Willingness is the willingness to accept what the teaching has to tell you about what you should be doing. Judgment here means basically judging your actions against those standards. Then, based on the judgment as to what needs to be done, you exert yourself. And you don’t just drop the judgment then. You keep on judging the results of your actions. It’s an ongoing process. Like when you’re sitting here meditating, how is your breath? Is it easy for the mind to settle down with the breath? What can be done to change if it’s not? Change the breath, change the mind. You’re developing your powers of alertness. You’re developing your powers of evaluation as you look at this. Then try to solve this problem. How do you get the mind to settle down and be still? And then, as the mind does get still, the next question is, is there still any stress in that state? Is there still any disturbance? And you notice that the mind’s discussion with itself is getting in the way of real stillness. So you put that aside. And as you follow this path of questioning, you get more and more sensitive to the actions of the mind. You get more and more sensitive to what counts as good enough in terms of stillness. You get more and more demanding. And in this way, you develop your powers of mindfulness, your concentration, and discernment, which are precisely the qualities you need to be a fair judge of things, particularly to be a fair judge of your actions. So it’s not simply a matter of following the Buddha’s recommendations on how you should judge things, but also developing good qualities so that you’re in a better position to actually judge. That’s what the Buddha had to say was really true. So this way, you don’t lose out in any event. If it turns out that the Buddha’s teachings are not true, you still develop your mindfulness, your concentration, your discernment, which are really valuable qualities to have if you’re going to test any teaching. And of course, if it turns out that they are true, you’ve opened new possibilities in your mind. You think about the young prince looking for the deathless, and his friends say,”Ah, it’s impossible.” They could give their reasons. We don’t know what their reasons were, but they didn’t encourage him, that’s for sure. But he was convinced that if it is a possibility, why not go for it? And if you don’t know whether it’s a possibility or not, why? Why cut yourself off by saying it’s impossible? So he went forth, tried different ways. And it was learning from his actions that he figured out what qualified as a legitimate answer and what was not. Recognizing his mistakes as mistakes, learning from them. And in the course of that, developing his powers of mindfulness, concentration, discernment, until he finally got to ask the right questions, looking into his mind, he found that, yes, it was a possibility. It was a reality. There is a deathless dimension where there is no suffering, and it can be attained through human effort. Now, that was his proof for himself, and he couldn’t take it out and show it to other people. But as he said, if you block off that possibility out of ignorance, you’re not really showing compassion for yourself. And this is why the teaching on not-self works, learning how to let go of things that are unconstant, stressful, and not-self. If there were no deathless happiness, then you’d have no reason to let go. But it’s because the deathless can be found through dispassion for these things, letting go of your clinging for these things. That’s why it makes sense to let go of them. Now, at the moment, you don’t know whether the possibility of the deathless is true. And it’s up to you to decide if even the possibility stirs you. But you can’t lose by following the path of developing your mindfulness, your concentration, your discernment. Because those are the qualities that make you a reliable judge of whatever you do. So focus on developing those qualities as far as you can. See how far they can take you. The Buddha says they can take you farther than you can conceive. You have to ask yourself, does that statement pique your curiosity or not? That’s a question that you have to ask for yourself, and only you can provide your answer.

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