

## *Indecision*

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A group of people came to see the Buddha one time and complained that they had heard so many different teachings from so many different people, all very contradictory, that they didn't know whom to trust. Of course, the question was, were they going to trust the Buddha?

He gave them some standards for deciding what's skillful. If you put a teaching into practice, what results do you get? Then you measure the results by whether they harm yourself or they harm other people.

We live in a pluralistic society, very much like that in the time of the Buddha, with lots of different theories about what's right and wrong. In fact, it's almost impossible to do something without being criticized from one angle or another. If you meditate, there are people who criticize you for meditating. If you don't meditate, there are people who criticize you for not meditating. You hold to the precepts, you get criticized. You don't hold to the precepts, you get criticized.

So what you've got to do is learn how not to listen to the criticism. Ask yourself instead, "What, when I do it, leads to long-term well-being?" The Buddha gives you some guidelines for coming to an answer. One is that you look at your actions in terms of what you do and what you tell other people to do: That's the first area that you have to focus on. Some of our actions may ripple out into the society in ways that are really hard to track down and hard to anticipate, and if you get too concerned with the widespread ripple effects, you tend to miss what you're actually doing and what you're actually telling other people to do. Yet that's the area where you really are responsible. If once you've got that area down then you move into other areas further out, okay, that's up to you. But the first focal point you have to maintain is: What am I actually doing and what am I actually telling other people to do?

And are those things skillful or not? Are they harmful or not? The Buddha measures harm in two ways. One is harming yourself; the other is harming others. Harming yourself starts out by breaking the five precepts: no killing, no stealing, no illicit sex, no lying, no intoxicants. If you break these precepts, the Buddha said, even though you may gain some temporary gain, still the long-term effects are going to be bad. That, he says, is harming yourself.

To harm others, you actually get *them* to break the precepts. So if you're choosing an occupation, choosing a way of life, you have to ask yourself, "Will anything in this particular require me to get other people to kill or steal or have

illicit sex or lie or take intoxicants?” If so, that’s an occupation you want to avoid.

The other way of harming yourself is engaging in something that’s going to give rise to greed, aversion, or delusion, or passion, aversion, or delusion in your own mind. If you have those qualities in the mind, they’ll lead you to act in ways that are unskillful. Delusion, particularly, will make it difficult to see what’s skillful or not. You harm others by trying to incite passion, aversion, and delusion in them. So, again, if you look at a particular occupation, a particular way of life, does it depend on inciting greed and passion in people? Does it depend on inciting anger in them or getting them deluded? Those are things you want to avoid.

That simplifies things quite a lot. Again, this is the beginning stage in trying to decide what you want to do with your life, how you want to lead your life. Get these basic principles down and then if you want to deal with things further away, that’s your gift to yourself and to other people.

When you get into the areas of gifts, the Buddha said, you give where you’re inspired. You don’t have to justify your giving to anybody. If you have something, it’s yours. And you want to give it to somebody else, it’s your choice to give to someone else.

King Pasenadi once came to the Buddha and asked him, “Where should a gift be given?” The Buddha replied, “Wherever you feel inspired or you feel it would be well-used.” Then the king asked, “A gift given where gives great fruit?” And the Buddha said, “That’s a different question. If you give to people who are devoid of passion, aversion, and delusion, or who are practicing to get beyond passion, aversion, and delusion,” he said, “that gives great fruit.”

Again the choice is yours. He’s not saying to give only to those people. He said that if you say, “Give only to my group but not to the other group,” you’re creating a lot of demerit. In fact, if you get in the way of anybody’s giving a gift, there’s demerit in three ways: you harm yourself, you harm the person who’s giving, you harm the person who’s going to receive the gift. So you don’t stand in the way of anyone else’s generosity.

At the same time, no one else has the right to demand that you be generous or to say that you have a duty to be generous in a way that you don’t feel inspired to give. This opens up a lot of freedom. This quality of freedom in your choice of how you want to be generous with your time is an important principle in Buddhist culture.

That’s because an important part of the teaching on karma is that you are free to make choices. And one of the first ways you’re sensitive to your freedom is when you decide to give something away. Something that you could have used

yourself, you freely decide, “No. I’d rather give it to somebody else.” That’s a moment of freedom from your own greed, your own stinginess, and your own narrowness. When you learn to appreciate that you have that choice, that’s the beginning of the path.

So many of the Buddha’s lists of ways of explaining the Dhamma start with generosity. The three forms of merit or inner worth start with generosity. The talk that he would give to get people ready to hear the four noble truths starts with generosity.

Here in the West when we learn about Buddhism, one of the first things we learn is the four noble truths. But the question is, are we ready to hear about them? The Buddha would first get people ready. He said it was like taking a piece of cloth that you want to dye. First you’ve got to clean the cloth, to make sure there’s no dirt on it, no stains on it. Only then is it ready to take the dye. In the same way, your mind has to be prepared to hear the four noble truths and to understand what they’re for and to appreciate them.

The Buddha would start with generosity: what a good thing it is and how it is an expression of freedom.

Then he would move on to virtue. In some cases, he would explain virtue also as a gift. You’re giving a gift of universal safety when you observe the five precepts without exception. In other words, you don’t say, “Well, I’ll avoid killing in some cases, but there are other things I want to kill or cases where I think killing is okay,” or, “There are cases where I think it’s okay to lie or okay to take things.” You see this all over, the exceptions that people make to the precepts. But that’s not much of a gift. It’s a very partial gift. You’re giving safety to some people and not to others.

But if you hold by the precepts in all cases, as the Buddha says, you’re giving universal safety to everybody. They may not be safe from danger from other quarters but they’re safe from danger from you. And when you give that kind of gift, you gain a portion of that universal safety, too.

After talking about generosity and virtue, the Buddha would talk about the rewards of the two, both in this lifetime and then in the pleasant lifetimes in heaven afterwards.

But then he’d start talking about the drawbacks, even of pleasant lifetimes in heaven hereafter. After all, heaven doesn’t last forever. It’s very easy for the mind to get carried away with the pleasures that come from being generous and being virtuous and to start thinking unskillful thoughts through heedlessness. This is one of the reasons why the life of all beings goes up and down. We work for the sake of goodness for a while and then we start wallowing in the results and we get

heedless and careless, especially when we start getting carried away by sensual pleasures. The mind gets intoxicated, and there's a lot of delusion around those pleasures.

When you appreciate that fact, that's when the Buddha said you'd be ready to hear about renunciation. Renunciation's not just giving things up. It's actually making a trade for something better: a state of mind that's free from having to be a slave to sensuality.

Like the state of concentration we're working on now: That's actually a form of renunciation. We're putting aside all thoughts about the food we might eat tomorrow or fix tomorrow or the other pleasures we might get when we leave the monastery. We put those aside and we're just here with the breath coming in, going out. This is called the pleasure of form, as you work with the breath so that it feels good all the way down through the torso, and other related energies feel good going all the way down the arms and the legs. This is called the pleasure of renunciation.

When you were ready to see that renunciation is a good thing, that's when the Buddha would teach you the four noble truths. As the mind gets more and more sensitive, you begin to see there are ways in which it still imposes unnecessary stress on itself. It's bad enough that there's aging, illness, and death in life. There's separation from the things that we love. But we add a lot of unnecessary suffering on top of that—and that's the suffering and stress that really weighs the mind down. Which is why the Buddha focused his teachings on solving this particular problem.

He came from a wealthy family. He could have been a ruler and he could have ruled wisely. But he saw that that wasn't going to be enough to deal with the problems that human beings have. In other words, fixing up the world outside: There's no end to that. After all, when you think about human desires, as the Buddha said, even if it rained gold coins we wouldn't have enough for our sensual desires. So looking for completion and contentment in that way is the wrong way. If you try to straighten out the world, there's a lot in the world that resists straightening out.

That's why the Buddha focused on straightening out the mind. He said that if you solve this problem, then people don't create suffering for themselves. On the one hand, they benefit; on the other hand, people around them benefit, too. That's why he focused on this. If we can get rid of our greed, aversion, and delusion, we benefit and the other people around us don't have to be victims of our greed, aversion, and delusion.

This is why this is *the* important point on which he focused. He explained that

this suffering comes from our three forms of craving, and these forms of craving can be uprooted. We can develop dispassion for them by following the path: virtue, concentration, discernment. These three activities are key to lessening our own suffering and lessening the burdens we place on others. So we focus here. It's not much: three parts of the training. But it really helps to have things boiled down like this.

To follow this path requires some trial and error. Even though we do have people to show us the way, we need to follow the way ourselves. They can't do the work for us. As the Buddha said, he simply points out the way, while it's up to you to follow it. Some things are laid out clearly, and other things you've got to learn for yourself.

This can be another source of indecision. On top of the fact that our culture pulls us in many different directions, there's part of the mind that doesn't want to make mistakes and doesn't want to be accused of making mistakes or blamed for making a mistake. This is where we need to have the courage to say, "Well, I'm going to act on what seems to be best but then keep an eye out for any unexpected bad consequences."

In other words, you really take responsibility for your actions and their results, and you want to learn from them. The attitude that says, "I don't want to make mistakes at all," gets in the way of doing many things that are really skillful. The proper attitude is, "I'm always willing to learn, to be careful to gauge my actions before I do them and then watch them carefully as I do them and then after they're done." If you see anything that seems to be harmful, you don't want to act on it to begin with, but if you thought it was going to be okay but it turns out it wasn't, you want to talk it over with someone more advanced on the path.

This is one of the reasons why the Buddha said that the path depends on admirable friendship. Admirable friends not only point out the way but they can also set good examples. So choose your friends carefully, the people to whom you go for advice. With their support—and with a quality the Buddha calls appropriate attention, i.e., looking to see things in terms of the four noble truths, where you're causing unnecessary stress, and how you can stop: Those two qualities will take you far. They can cut through a lot of indecision as to what to do with your life.

So even though the culture around us may pull us in different directions, and there's a part of us that's afraid to make mistakes, you begin to realize that there's nothing you can do that's not going to be criticized from one angle or another. So choose some wise standards that enable you to gauge other people's criticism to see whether it's valid or not. As you're looking for a set of standards to try out, the

Buddha's have stood the test for two thousand five hundred years. So it's worth giving them a try.