

Judging Your Thoughts by What They Do

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There's an old controversy in ethics, as to when you're judging an action, whether you should judge it by its motivation or by its consequences. The Buddha's answer to that question is, "Both." You look at what mind state it's coming from, and you also look at what impact it has. We have to be careful, because sometimes something seems to be coming from a good mind state but it can have a bad impact, in which case you have to go beyond simply having good intentions. You have to make them skillful. In other words, you have to be willing to learn from past mistakes, and apply that knowledge the next time you act.

This principle applies not only to external actions but also to the actions of the mind—in other words, your thoughts. When we settle the mind down into meditation, it's not simply to watch what's going on in the present moment. We want to give the mind the solidity to remember lessons from the past when they are necessary, and also to be able to resist old habits when you've learned that they're not skillful. The concentration gives you strength, keeps you grounded in the present. But remember: The present moment isn't everything.

The present moment has its own input—in other words, in terms of your intentions right now—but it's also got things coming in from the past that are going to have an impact now and on into the future. You want to take all of that into consideration. It's when the mind is stable and still that it can take that larger view and not simply jump for whatever the immediate impulse is.

After all, as the Buddha said, there are some things that feel good in the present moment but have bad consequences in the future; some things that feel good and have good consequences; things that feel bad in the present moment and will have bad consequences in the future; and also things that feel bad but will have good consequences. In all those cases, you have to aim for the consequences. Those are the means by which you judge things. There's one spot where he even says, "If leading the holy life has you crying so that the tears are bathing your cheeks, it's still worth sticking with it, because the long-term consequences are worth it."

When the Buddha divided his thoughts into two sorts—that was the point where he first got on the path—he looked both at where the thoughts were coming from and where they were going. Thoughts that were motivated by sensuality—in other words, our fascination with thinking of sensual pleasures, planning for sensual pleasures—thoughts motivated by

sensuality, by ill will and by harmfulness, he realized would have bad consequences, simply because of the motivation. That's enough to tell you right there that these are heading in the wrong place, wrong direction. Those are the kinds of thoughts he tried to stop. As he said, he would check them and curb them, keep them in line, in the same way that a cowherd would beat his cows to keep them away from rice plants during the rainy season, for fear that they'd eat the rice.

Thoughts that were motivated by renunciation, non-ill will, and harmlessness he said were okay. He didn't have to keep them in check. He further commented that the kinds of thoughts you think become tendencies in the mind. They bend the mind in their direction. It becomes easier and easier to think those thoughts. And those thoughts will lead to actions.

So what kind of actions do you want to head toward? Apply the principle of skillfulness expressed in his teachings to Rahula. You look at the action while you're doing it and when it's done. If you see that it's causing any harm while you're doing it, you stop. If it's not, you continue with it. If you realize after it's done that it *has* caused harm, then you resolve not to repeat the mistake. This means that even though you thought the action was going to be harmless, maybe there was some delusion in your motivation that you didn't realize. So you've got to keep checking things back and forth like this.

Notice: Nowhere does it say that the thought is to be judged by how it feels. Some unskillful thoughts can really feel bad, but there are also skillful thoughts that create a lot of stress, especially when you have a strong urge to do something that you know is unskillful, and it would be easy just to go along with the urge. But you've got to put up a fight, and that's going to cause stress. It's going to feel tense in your breath, tense in your breath energy. But that's no gauge as to whether the thought is good or not. We can't just relax our way into nibbana. It's going to require some work.

Again, this is one of the reasons we try to get the mind into concentration, to give ourselves the strength we need in order to do that work, the sense of well-being that allows us to say No to the thoughts that otherwise would run right over us. One of the things that those thoughts dangle in front of our faces is: "There's going to be some pleasure, and it's going to come right away." If you don't have an alternative pleasure to withstand them, you're bound to give in, either openly or surreptitiously. In other words, sometimes you admit to yourself that you're giving in to something unskillful, and other times you learn to tell yourself, "No, it's not unskillful." You can come up with *all* kinds of justification.

So we work with the breath to create a sense of well-being that gives us strength, and a stillness of mind that allows us to see things clearly for what they are.

The concentration will also sensitize us to disturbances in the mind. The more you get in touch with the breath energy in the body, the more you begin to see that the breath is a mirror for the mind. But we have to take more than just that sense of disturbance as our gauge for what's worth thinking and what's not. You have to think of where it's going. And again, sometimes the difficult thought or the difficult thing to do, the stressful thing to do, is going to be the right thing to do.

Remember Ajaan Lee's analogy for the relationship of the path to the goal. He said it's like distilling salt water to get fresh water. As you know, the fresh water is already there in the salt water. But if you just let it sit, it's not going to separate out. You have to apply the heat of the fire to the water. Only that way can you distill it to get the fresh water out. It's not like you're creating fresh water, but it requires that effort to get the water out. To find the element of the awareness that's unconditioned requires the heat of effort—right effort and all the other factors of the path.

So we get into the present moment to have a better perspective on what we're doing, to see more clearly what's going on. But the present moment isn't everything. You've got to think about where your decisions are going to lead. Try to get a better and better reading of what's happening in the mind right now as an indication of where your thoughts are going to lead—so that you can develop an all-around skill, so that your actions are good both in their motivation and in their consequences. This applies to thoughts as well—they're actions, too, you know.