

Your Judgments Matter

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There are only two of the Buddha's teachings that he labeled as categorical. One is the teaching that skillful actions in body, speech, and mind should be developed; unskillful actions should be abandoned. The second was the four noble truths: suffering, its origination, its cessation, and the path to its cessation.

These teachings have two important features in common. And it's good to think about these features because they form the foundation for everything else the Buddha taught. They provide the context.

One of the features is that they present dichotomies: the distinction between skillful and unskillful, a dichotomy that gets more refined in the four noble truths. As the Buddha points out there are things you do that cause suffering, and things you can do that can put an end to suffering.

The other feature they have in common is that they deal with actions. Each of them has its shoulds. Skillful actions should be developed. Unskillful actions should be abandoned. Suffering should be comprehended. Its origination should be abandoned. The cessation of suffering should be realized, and the path should be developed.

So when we think about the rest of the Buddha's teachings and our practice in this context, it's about choosing between dichotomies. The reason we have to make choices is because different actions we can do will have different results. It's all very basic, but it so often gets forgotten. And an important part of the distinction between skillful and unskillful is that you learn how to exercise your powers of judgment.

There's a big misunderstanding out there that somehow we're not supposed to pass judgment in the practice. We just accept, accept, accept. But notice, accepting is not in any of the duties that the Buddha lays out. There are things to develop, things to abandon. So you've got to look at your own actions to see where they fit into these categories for the purpose of putting an end to your own suffering and for putting an end to the actions that would lead to suffering for other people.

It really does matter what you choose to do, so it really does matter that you learn how to develop your powers of judgment. There's only one thing the Buddha says not to judge, and that's the attainments of other people, especially other people who've passed away, because you don't know. Maybe at the very last moment they gained some insight. There was a case in the Canon of a man who

drank a fair amount of alcohol. Yet after he passed away, the Buddha said, at the moment of his death, he became a stream enterer. One of his relatives complained, saying “This means anybody can be a noble disciple.” And the Buddha cautioned that person, “You don’t know what’s happening in another person’s mind at the moment of death.” So it’s better not to pass judgment on that. But there are a lot of other areas where the Buddha does have you pass judgment, starting with teachers.

Before you commit to a teacher, it’s good to get to know the person. Pose a couple of questions in your mind and be very observant to see: Would that person claim to know something that he or she didn’t know? Would he or she get other people to do things that were not in those people’s best interest? If the answer in either case is yes, find somebody else. If it’s no, then you listen to the Dhamma they teach. Here again, you have to judge the Dhamma, the things that are being taught. If you put them into practice, will they develop good qualities of the mind or bad ones? And how are your own powers of judgment? Are they up to the task?

This is one of the reasons why we meditate: to develop the qualities of mind that make us better judges—better judges of other people, better judges of the things they teach, and better judges of our own actions. Mindfulness, alertness, discernment: These are all things you need to exercise your powers of judgment. When we’re judging other people, we’re not so much judging them as people in and of themselves as much as we’re judging whether they’re good people for us to hang out with. When we’re judging the Dhamma, again: Is it good for us to follow it?

When we’re judging ourselves, think about the Buddha’s teachings to Rahula. You think first before you act: What do you expect to come from the action? If you expect any harm, don’t do it. That’s a judgment right there. While you’re acting, what kind of results are coming? If the action is causing harm, either to yourself or others, stop. If it’s not causing any harm, go ahead and do it. That’s another judgment. When it’s done, you look at the long-term results. If you realize it did cause harm, you resolve not to repeat that mistake and then you go talk it over with someone else. If it didn’t cause any harm, take joy in the fact that you’re progressing on the path—again, a judgment.

It’s because our actions matter that our judgments matter as well. The difficulty, of course, is learning how to make accurate judgments, circumspect judgments, so that we’re not simply being judgmental—in other words, arriving at snap judgments based on too little information, or being unwilling to change your judgments when you realize that your earlier ones were faulty.

Skillful judgment, on the other hand, comes under the quality that the Buddha called *vimansa*, circumspection, the ability to look at things from many angles.

They say that Ajaan Mun was an extremely circumspect person. Students who lived with him said that he would see things from angles that they had never thought of before. And, of course, living with somebody like that made them more alert and circumspect, too.

This is especially important as the mind settles down and you get focused. Sometimes you just see things from one angle. The more intense your concentration, the more one-angled you get, which is one of the reasons why we develop the kind of concentration that spreads your awareness around and makes a lot of use of your powers of evaluation. You're not told that you have to breathe in a certain way. It's up to you find whatever way of breathing seems most interesting and most comfortable for you. And then when you've got it, what do you do with it? You can try spreading it around, the sense of well-being that comes from the breath. It helps a lot with your ability to stay concentrated, to stay still with a sense of ease, with the breath energies in the blood and everything in the body flowing smoothly.

If any insights arise, Ajaan Lee recommended that you ask yourself, "To what extent is the opposite true?" As he said, don't be a person with just one eye or one ear. Have two eyes, two ears. Otherwise, you may be running with some judgment and you just run it into the ground because you don't get a sense of the extent to which it applies and the extent to which it doesn't.

So try to exercise your powers of judgment, because for the Buddha this is an important part of discernment. When he talks about developing analysis of qualities, the discernment factor in the factors of awakening, you start out by seeing what's skillful and what's unskillful. In a similar vein, the Buddha would talk about developing your discernment by looking at things in pairs, and then coming to a judgment as to which member of the pair is better. But it goes back to those two principles, the foundation of the Dhamma: skillful actions should be developed, unskillful ones should be abandoned; and the four noble truths that also carry their duties, their shoulds, because we're here on a path of action, the path of action that puts an end to suffering.

It's not the case that there's only one path out there that we could follow in life, or that all paths lead to the end of suffering. You have to choose the best path. It's like a mountain. There's not only one path on the mountain. And if you've ever been on a mountain, you know that not all the paths lead to the top. As the Buddha said, he looks at the world and he sees people on different paths. There are

paths going to hell, paths going to the animal realm, paths going to the human realm, paths going to the realm of the hungry ghosts, the deva realms, and the path going to nibbana. There are different paths. And you want to learn how to judge which path you're on. And if it's a bad path, you want to learn how to get off it and get on a better path.

So learn how to use your powers of judgment wisely because they make a huge difference. This is why we have to be heedful. Our actions make a difference. Our judgments make a difference. So try to exercise your power of judgment as skillfully as you can.