

Dichotomies

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We used to have a Zen practitioner who came here on a regular basis who was planning to go back to school to get a PhD. He told me his plan for a thesis: the number two and all the problems that come from the number two. I tried to discourage him. I pointed out that there are a lot of good “two’s” in the world. There’s a passage where the Buddha describes analysis of qualities as a factor for awakening. Basically, boils it down to seeing things in pairs: What’s skillful, what’s unskillful? What’s dark in the mind, what’s bright in the mind? Because those pairs really do make a difference.

There was a famous translator one time who translated that passage and then wrote a footnote saying he didn’t understand how this was the proper description for discernment. I guess he was assuming that discernment had to mean seeing things in terms of the three characteristics. But the Buddha’s wisdom teachings are all about “two’s.” The two teachings he says are categorical are dichotomies. The first is that unskillful qualities should be abandoned, and skillful qualities should be developed. Sometimes those activities—the abandoning and the developing—are two sides of one thing, but what’s skillful is really different from what’s unskillful.

The other categorical teaching, the four noble truths, is also a dichotomy. On the one hand, you have suffering and the cause of suffering, and on the other hand, you have the path leading to the end of suffering and the actual cessation of suffering. Those things—suffering and not suffering, the cause of suffering and the path to the end of suffering—are really are different. In fact, this is what discernment is all about: seeing these distinctions, realizing that we have choices, and making the most of those choices.

The fact that we can make choices, and that they have consequences, is what makes the distinctions important. It’s what gives them meaning. In fact, if we didn’t have choices at all, we’d be like machines, just running our gears without making any real choices of our own. There wouldn’t be any way to say that the machine was skillful or unskillful, aside from the use that the person using the machine would put it to. You keep getting back to the person who is making choices. And these really are important choices.

Look at the path. The Buddha sets out wrong view, wrong resolve all the way through the wrong concentration on the one hand, and right view all the way through right concentration on the other hand. They really are different. If you

follow wrong view, it's going to lead to a lot of suffering. If you follow right view and carry through the other factors of the path, it's going to lead to the end of suffering. And suffering and not suffering are two very different things.

So, keep this in mind as you practice: that you're here to get the mind to settle down so that you can see distinctions. See where you're making choices and where you're making them in an unskillful way so that you can change your ways. If everything were all Oneness, why would you bother to change anything? Why would you bother making any effort at all?

We have to be very careful to figure out what's skillful and what's not. We have to look at things as causal processes, to see where our thoughts come from and where they go. When we do, we realize we can make a difference. The Buddha gives his analysis when he talks about the causes of suffering. He talks about different kinds of craving, and the real dilemma is the distinction between craving for becoming and craving for non-becoming. As he said, all cravings that lead to becoming will cause suffering. Becoming is taking on an identity in a world of experience. It can happen on the level of the mind: in other words, having a desire, then thinking about the world in which that desire could be fulfilled. It also includes the "you" who's going to act to fulfill the desire and the "you" who is going to benefit once it's fulfilled. There's also the "you" who's watching over this to decide whether this is worthwhile or not.

You would think that the desire to put an end to that becoming would be a good thing. But the Buddha says craving for non-becoming—to destroy a state of becoming you already have—is also going to lead you to more becoming, too, because you're thinking in terms of worlds and self-identities, even as you're trying to destroy them. Thinking in those terms leads the mind in that direction. So the trick, he says, is to see things as they've come to be, which means seeing the causal factors that lead up to becoming. Instead of attacking the becoming that's already there, you look at the causes simply as events in a causal chain and try to develop dispassion for them.

That's what dependent co-arising is all about, and particularly the factors prior to sensory contact. Those are the ones that prime you either to suffer or not suffer, no matter what comes in through the eyes, ears, nose, tongue, body, or mind.

Now, one of the important factors prior to sensory contact is name and form—another dichotomy. Within that factor, there's no question of physical form being skillful or unskillful. The issue lies in those mental factors in "name." Those are the ones that will make a difference because they can be skillful or not. You can use form, you can use the breath elements in the body, but it's the name factors that are using it to make a state of concentration, to give a sense of well-

being. So the form factors can play a role as part of the path, but, as I said, the name factors will decide what kind of path that's going to be.

The two really important name factors are intention and attention. This is where the issue of skillful and unskillful plays itself out most clearly in dependent co-arising. With attention, it's the way you look at things. There are skillful ways of looking at things and unskillful ways. The skillful ways have to do with looking at things in terms of cause and effect. Unskillful ways would include looking at things in terms of whether you like them or not.

This is where you have to be careful, because as the Buddha says, sometimes you do unskillful things and it's pleasant. Or you're doing skillful things and it's unpleasant. You're sitting here meditating and sometimes there's pain, sometimes there's frustration. You can't just say, "Well, I'll just do whatever comes easily. After all, nibbana is a really relaxed state, so I'll find it in a relaxed way. I'll reach nibbana by relaxing into it." That doesn't work. That's not the way cause and effect works. You have to look at the quality of the intention behind a particular mind state and then see where it goes.

That's how the Buddha got onto the path to begin with: by making that distinction in his thoughts. Skillful thoughts, on the one hand, were those that aimed at getting away from sensuality—in other words, renunciation—or that aimed at non-ill will and non-harming. The unskillful ones were aimed at sensuality, ill will, and harmfulness. He realized he couldn't divide his thoughts in terms of his likes and dislikes. That would have been a misleading dichotomy. The real dichotomy—the one that takes you to the end of suffering—came down to: where do these things lead? To affliction or to non-affliction? After all, the events of the mind don't just sit there. They don't just appear and disappear, arise and pass away.

There's that passage where the Buddha says discernment consists of seeing things arising and passing away, but in a penetrative way that leads to the end of suffering. "Penetrative" means that you see that some arisings are good—in other words, they lead in skillful directions—whereas some arisings are unskillful: They're going to lead in unskillful directions. The discernment makes its distinctions based on that issue. So, of course, what do you do? You encourage the skillful arisings and you discourage the unskillful ones. There will come a day when you let go of both sides—there's that level of knowledge that cuts through dichotomies—but to get there, you've got to develop skillful qualities. You have to hold on to this sense that there is a difference. Your choices do make a difference. They are real and they matter.

If the Buddha heard of anyone who denied the reality of your present choices or denied that they had any impact on the present moment, he'd actually go and argue with those people. He wasn't the sort of person to go around picking fights, but in cases like that, he'd go to those teachers and challenge them: "You're leaving people unprotected. You're leaving them bewildered. They're suffering, and you're denying them any insight into the causes of their suffering. They're going to stay bewildered. You're leaving them unprotected because you don't give them a sense of that there even *is* such a thing as skillful and unskillful."

In other words, if you're denying the fact that people have choices and that choices really do make a difference, it's really inhumane. He took the issue that seriously. So when we look at our own behavior, we should ask ourselves: Are we treating ourselves in a humane manner or not? From the Buddha's point of view, it's that serious.

On the level of name and form, you're going to be approaching this issue as you meditate. Even before you get there, you have to look at the rest of your life, too, in terms of why you make choices. Are you influenced by your likes or dislikes or are you influenced by something more objective—more in line with actual cause and effect?

The dichotomy between likes and dislikes is the dichotomy the Buddha's asking you to outgrow. After all, that's the dichotomy children use in their approach to the world. There's that big battle over what they will eat and what they will not eat. The things that are good for them, they refuse to eat. As adults we can see that that's a childish attitude, but we tend to bring that attitude to a lot of other areas of our lives. Our likes and dislikes get in the way. So, it's really good to take the Buddha's dichotomy seriously.

His dichotomy is between skillful and unskillful actions—bodily, verbal, and mental. He treated that as a categorical truth, in other words, true across the board. It's true that you should try to abandon unskillful qualities and develop skillful ones: That's true across the board, as well. This is the insight that informs the four noble truths, and even dependent co-arising. Dependent co-arising is the teaching that the Buddha uses to resolve a lot of false dichotomies: as to whether the world is a multiplicity or a oneness, or whether the person who does an action is the same person who receives it. He cuts through those issues by pointing to dependent co-arising. But dependent co-arising itself has its two functions. There's the function of dependent co-arising leading to suffering and dependent co-arising leading to the end of suffering.

So, the fact that there are skillful and unskillful courses of action and that we are free to choose between them: To see that is the beginning of wisdom. And it

carries through all the way, delivering you to the verge of awakening. That's when you can step out of causality, because at that point you won't be making choices. But up to that point, you're going to be making choices all the way.