

Justice vs. Skillfulness

July 31, 2016

When we develop the brahamaviharas—attitudes of goodwill, compassion, empathetic joy, equanimity—we try to make them unlimited. In other words, we develop goodwill for all beings, compassion for all, empathetic joy for all, and we have to learn how to apply thoughts of equanimity to all when necessary.

The problem is that although our attitudes may be unlimited, our resources for actually helping people and improving the world are not. This is why we need a clear set of priorities as to what can we do, what we cannot do, what things are worth doing, worth improving, what things are not—because if you spread yourself too thin, you end up not accomplishing much at all. Or, if you focus on solving the wrong problems, you end up regretting it later.

For example, sometimes we're told that the Buddha's main purpose in teaching was to put an end to all suffering. Well, yes, but his approach to accomplishing that end was very specific. Instead of running around trying to right all the sufferings caused by the injustices of the world, he focused on one type of suffering: the suffering we each cause ourselves, through our own craving, through our own clinging, through our own ignorance. When we put an end to that suffering, we don't suffer from anything outside at all. But the problem has to be solved from within, which is why he never said that the whole world, or half the world, or whatever, would put an end to suffering. He simply taught the way. It's up to each of us to follow it. And none of us can follow it for anyone else.

As for the suffering that comes from the three characteristics, that's something that can't be stopped. Those characteristics are still going to keep on manifesting themselves in the world. The question is: Do you have to suffer from them, does your mind have to suffer from them? And the answer is No.

So the focus is specifically on how the way you engage with the world is causing suffering *through your engagement*, through clinging and craving and ignorance. So that's what we work on as we meditate.

As for helping other people, that's a matter of generosity. The Buddha set out duties only in terms of the four noble truths. As for the issue of helping other people, he didn't place a duty on anyone. He pointed out the advantages of being generous, but he didn't try to force anyone in that direction. He simply pointed out that certain things are skillful and certain things are unskillful in your engagement with other people, and it's up to you to choose.

And it's important to note that the main emphasis is on what's skillful and not. This is indicated in the set of questions that the Buddha says lies at beginning of discernment: What when I do it will lead to my long-term welfare and happiness, what is skillful, what is blameless? That's the question on the positive side. Then on the negative side: What when I do it will lead to my long-term harm and suffering, what is unskillful, what is blameworthy?

Notice the terms of the questions. There's never a question of what is justice. The question is, what is skillful. When you look at the world around you, you see a lot of injustices. You see a lot of mistreatment of people and animals. But are we going to deal with it primarily as an issue of injustice or as an instance something that's unskillful?

Our idea of justice is based on the idea that there's a beginning point to a story. From that point, you figure out who did what first, and then who did what second, and then at the end of the story you figure out how things should be apportioned in terms of guilt or lack of guilt, based on which actions were justified by what went before and which ones weren't, so as to bring things into a proper balance.

But in the Buddha's vision of time, there's no beginning. As he said, you could trace back, back and back and back, and not find a conceivable beginning. The beginning point, he said, was inconceivable. Not just unknowable, inconceivable. You can't even think it. And we've been through the ups and downs of time so many times, through so many universes, that, as he said, it's hard to meet someone who hasn't been your mother or your father or your brother or your sister or your son or your daughter in all that time. The stories are very long.

So if you're going to start apportioning blame and trying bring things into balance, where do you start?

There's a famous story concerning Somdet Toh. A young monk once came to him to complain that another monk had hit him, and Somdet Toh said, "Well, you hit him first." The monk replied, "No, no, he just came up and hit me over the head and I hadn't done anything at all."

Somdet Toh said, "No, you hit him first."

Back and forth like this for a while and then the young monk got upset and went to see another senior monk to complain about Somdet Toh. So the other senior monk came and asked Somdet Toh what was up, and Somdet Toh said, “Well obviously it’s his karma from some previous lifetime. He had hit the other monk first at some point in time.”

And of course that might have been after the other monk had hit the first monk first—so it goes back and forth, back and forth like this.

So when you see mistreatment around you, the first question isn’t “Is this just or unjust?” The question is, is the person dishing out the mistreatment behaving in a skillful way or unskillful way, and what can I do behaving skillfully to put a stop to unskillful behavior?

Now there’s some unskillful behavior you can stop and other unskillful behavior that you can’t. The kinds you can’t stop are where someone’s karma—your own or others’—gets in the way. But the basic question is this: When is it skillful to interfere, when is it skillful to get involved, and what kind of interference would be skillful? Sometimes the answer is clear and sometimes it’s not. If you have the energy and the wherewithal and it’s not too dangerous, you try to help. Then, if you see that it’s not working, you pull back.

But a lot of this also has to do with your priorities. There are some unskillful things happening in the world that really are worth banding together with other people, getting your energies together, and seeing if you can put a stop to those things. But you have to do it in a skillful way. There’s never a case in the Dhamma where good ends justify unskillful means. The means have to be good—in fact it’s all means. After all, where would you put the ends? You settle one issue and there’s another issue. You settle that issue, then everyone dies, they get reborn, and things start up again. We don’t have the closure of a final judgment.

The only real closure in the Buddha’s teachings is nibbāna, and that’s a closure that each of us has to find within ourselves. We’re not going to find closure out in the world, because the world just keeps on going around and around and around. Even at the beginning of each cycle in the universe, there’s not just one beginning. The Buddha has several ways of describing how the universe starts to evolve. There’s no one person behind the evolution, no one plan behind the evolution. There are just lots of individuals with lots of plans, and they’re driven mainly by craving and ignorance. And that’s what keeps the whole thing going.

As long as you're trying to straighten things out outside, your attempts are dealing in craving and ignorance. Sometimes it's other people's craving and ignorance, sometimes it's yours. Your ideas of a just resolution, their ideas of a just resolution, contain a lot of ignorance. In fact, most of the problems of the world come when people's ideas of justice conflict. So you have to be very careful around this issue.

This is why we work on the mind, because only in the mind can closure come. Meanwhile, the main question is not an issue of justice or injustice. The issue is, is this particular action I'm contemplating doing skillful or unskillful?

The Buddha never tries to justify, say, oppression by saying that the oppressed people deserved it. The word "deserve" also doesn't appear in the Buddha's teachings, aside that the statement that arahants are deserving of offerings. In fact, that's what "arahant" means.

Until we reach that point, there are simply skillful actions with good results and unskillful actions with bad results, and we all have a big mix of both. So when you see somebody suffering, you don't know which part of their mix is showing, and how much good stuff, say, is not showing. The part that's not showing is what gives the potential for you to help them.

In other cases, it's clear that you can't help, like the squirrel I saw yesterday. Something was obviously wrong with one of its legs—or maybe two of its legs—but the closer I got to it to see what was wrong, the more it tried to struggle and struggle to get away. I realized that my concern was causing it a lot of suffering. So I backed off.

That's the kind of situation where you can't help. But other situations are not quite so easy to see. The important thing is to remember the categories. It's not about ends. It's about means. It's not about just or unjust ends. It's about skillful or unskillful means.

When there's unskillful behavior outside, at the very least you don't condone it.

You don't encourage people to engage in that behavior. And if you can think up some skillful way to stop it, you try. But your primary responsibility is what *you're* genuinely responsible for, i.e., your own choices, what you do and what you choose to tell other people to do. Make sure that those choices are skillful.

If everybody looked after this one issue, the world would settle down. Our problem is we're trying to straighten everybody else out without straightening ourselves out first.

This is why we develop equanimity in addition to goodwill, because there are cases where, because of karmic obstacles, past or present, we can't help. After all, for people to be happy they have to create the causes for happiness. You can help them by encouraging them to be skillful, but the choice of whether or not to follow your advice and example is theirs.

As for the unclear cases where you're not sure whether you can help, you have to keep your priorities straight. What are the most important things for you to do? Where do you want to focus your energies to make a difference in the world? In other words, where do you want to choose to be generous?

As the Buddha said with generosity, there are no shoulds. He simply recommended that you give where you feel inspired, where you feel the gift would be well-used. That applies not only to material gifts but also to gifts of your time, gifts of your energy to improve things in the world. It's up to you to decide where you want to make your mark, who you want to help, realizing that once you've chosen that, there are other things you're going to have to put aside. If your energies get too scattered, the Thai phrase is that you take a container of pepper sauce and pour it into the sea. There's so much water in the sea that the pepper sauce makes no difference at all.

So this is why we have to practice equanimity. We have goodwill for all but we have to realize that we can be helpful only in certain circumstances and you have to be very careful about when your efforts at help are skillful and when they're not.

Make sure that those are the terms of your analysis. Once you keep that point straight in your mind, then it clears up a lot of other difficulties.

Now, our society doesn't think in these ways. Most people think in the terms of a story with a beginning and an end, where it's clear to them who's right and who's wrong. We argue over the details—that's why there's so much conflict—but everybody seems to have the idea that there's a beginning point and an end point and a plan to all this—and that there's somebody up there who's got an idea about a just way to arrange things, and assigns us duties.

But that's not in the Buddha's universe at all. There's no clear end, no clear beginning, and there's no one in charge. As that passage goes on to say, the world is swept away. You just want to make sure you don't get swept away with it. Try to be clear about what you're doing, clear about doing it skillfully. That's how you come to closure. That's how you get out.

This is what the practice is all about, getting out. We try to leave some good things behind as we get out—in fact you can't get out without leaving some good things behind—but sometimes the best gift you can give to other people is simply to show them there is a way out that they can follow, too.

Try to keep that way open as much as you can through being skillful in your thoughts and your words and your deeds. Look at the Buddha: He gave the greatest gift of all. He gave us the Dhamma, showed us the path, and then he left. Now it's up to us to give that gift to ourselves and to the people around us as best we can.