

Skillful in Everything

January 17, 2006

One of the most basic concepts in the Buddha's teaching is the distinction between skillful and unskillful. Someone once complained to one of the Buddha's students that the Buddha didn't take positions on all the big issues of the time: "So, is the cosmos eternal? Is it not eternal? Is it finite? Is it infinite? And was there a God who created it? Or has it been here all the time?" "The Buddha didn't answer those questions." And this person said, "Well, it seems like the Buddha doesn't take a stand on anything at all." And the Buddha's student said, "No, that's not true. There's one important issue that he does take a stand on: what behavior is skillful and what behavior is not skillful."

It starts with very basic things and works on up to the behavior inside the mind. There are skillful ways of acting, skillful ways of speaking, skillful ways of thinking, skillful ways of managing your mind—and there are unskillful ways. The practice is all about mastering skills that can lead to an end of suffering.

So it's good to reflect on what this means, how this applies in our lives. Because the skills here are not just the skills in meditation. They're a matter of how you approach everything. As I said this afternoon, how you do anything is how you do everything. The way you approach something simple like cooking, sweeping, making brooms, fixing this or that around the monastery: It reveals a lot about how you meditate. If you want to become a better meditator, it's also good to become more skilled at the things you do in the course of the day.

Having a sense of skill, of what's skillful and what's not skillful, is very useful. It sets up the right attitude in the mind. One, it gives you high standards: There are ways of behaving that are worth taking the effort to master, they're worth the effort you put into them. It's not that you do things just to get them out of the way. You try to do them well. It's good for yourself; it's good for the people around you. The things you make, the things you do will be of more use. And the process of making them teaches you a lot of good lessons, teaches you to look very carefully at what you're doing and to be objective about how well you've done. Otherwise, you can't learn.

Ajaan Lee makes analogies with skills all the time. There's one about making baskets; another about making clay tiles. He says the object you make becomes your teacher. You look at it: How well did it turn out? Is it possible to make it turn out better? And you're willing to put the time and energy into doing it again and again until you get it right. This means that you're honest and objective, and you use your ingenuity. These are all qualities that are going to be useful in the meditation. As you develop them in the course of your everyday skills, then you can use them as you meditate. You run into a problem

with the breath, well, one, you can recognize it as a problem. And two, you can start thinking about different ways of solving the problem. It develops your ingenuity.

If you're the sort of person who's willing to put effort into mastering a skill outside, it's going to translate into the effort you put into your meditation. In other words, you don't just insist that what you've done has to be okay just because you did it. You recognize sometimes that there are higher standards. And you want to strive to meet those higher standards.

This is something that's a problem here in America these days, because most people don't have many skills. As a result, they haven't learned all the important lessons of how to get good at something you're not automatically good at, how to put time into a project that's going to take a lot of time.

Sharpening a knife, for instance, is a skill. Nowadays we have a machine that does it for us: zip, zip and it's sharp. In the old days, they had to use a stone. You sat there and it took half an hour to sharpen the knife. And it required a very constant state of mind. If you got anxious or impatient, you could ruin the blade. You had to learn to keep just the right amount of pressure on the blade as it ran over the stone, and to keep that pressure even over time. Which is a good lesson to learn in meditation: how you keep the pressure on the breath even, how you keep your pressure through mindfulness on the mind even over time.

Back in old societies the way you wanted to impress somebody was to show them something you had made. Nowadays we impress people by showing them what we've bought. But back in those days, it was what you made that impressed other people.

I was in an antique store once in Chiang Mai, and in the corner they had a lot of long poles. And it turned out that these were poles for carrying loads on your shoulder. In the old days, when you'd go to the monastery, you'd have a basket of food in front and a basket of food behind on a pole over your shoulder. Young men would carve these poles and decorate them with decorations on the ends. They were made out of wood, you'd carve nice decorations, and the pole would be shaped so it wouldn't hurt the shoulder and was nicely balanced. And then you'd present one of these to your girlfriend. If she liked the way you'd made it, that might be the beginning of the relationship.

Another time, I was in Japan sitting in a restaurant with a friend. He picked up a pottery mug on the table and started talking about what you could tell about the person who had made the mug just from the workmanship. And he was right, you really can tell a lot about a person from how he or she makes things.

So it's good to revive these attitudes, because they're very important in

meditation. After all, meditation is all about qualities of mind. And it's in developing a skill, learning how to do something well, that you can develop a lot of skillful mental qualities.

So as you go throughout the day: Whatever you have to do, do it as a skill. Notice what you're doing, notice the results that come out, and try to think, "What's a more efficient way, what's a better way of doing this? What gets better results?" If you have the attitude that likes to learn in this way, that's what being skillful is all about: You cultivate the desire to learn, and then you stick with it and give it all your attention. You use your ingenuity. This list—desire, persistence, intent, and ingenuity—is called the bases of power, the bases of success. When you develop these qualities, you find not only that the things that you create are nicer but you've also got a nicer mind, a better mind, a mind better suited for meditation.

This is why the great ajaans always paid so much attention to the little things around them. All the time I spent with Ajaan Fuang, things had to be put precisely in the right place, everything had to be very neat. And he wouldn't tell you where the right places were. You had to learn how to observe for yourself: If he placed things, where did he place them? Sometimes he'd do something and wouldn't explain why he was doing it. You had to figure out: What was his good reason for doing that? You didn't just assume that it was just his way of doing things, or just because he was Thai. He had his reasons. If you wanted to learn, you'd try to figure out, "What was the good reason behind that?" That way, you learned to use your ingenuity, your powers of observation.

That takes you out of your old ways of doing things. Because after all, what is meditation but taking you out of your old ways of doing things? If you have the attitude, "Well, this has to be like that and that has to be like this," and just go and arrange things that way, maybe you're right, maybe you're not, and how are you going to know? You have to be observant, you have to be honest, you have to be willing to devote time to learning these things. There are mental skills that come from learning physical skills, and those are the mental skills that you really need to do well in meditation.