Questions of Skill

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Sometimes the Buddha traces the causes of suffering down to craving. And sometimes he traces them further, avicca. It’s usually translated as ignorance, but it also means lack of skill. What are the skills we need? The skills having to do with the duties of the vulnerable truths. The truths are not just truths about something. They’re truths that you have to approach in a skillful way. You try to comprehend suffering to see what it really is. You trace it to its cause. You abandon the cause. You try to realize the cessation of suffering. And you do that by developing the Noble Eightfold Path. Like we chanted just now. It’s in the path that all those skills are combined. When the Buddha first taught, that was the framework he taught. His introduction to the teaching was that it’s a path, it’s a path of practice, something you do. The very last person he taught, he taught the Noble Eightfold Path to, again, something you do. So the big questions the Buddha has us ask are how to do things in a way that we can put an end to suffering. We approach this as a skill. Sometimes we think Buddhism is all about certain metaphysical truths, like the idea there is no self, or all things are empty. But when the framework is a framework of action, those ideas have to take their meaning within that framework of action. For example, the teaching on not-self. Sometimes we think that not-self is the framework. In other words, there is no self. But then there’s the teaching on karma, which doesn’t seem to fit in very well. The teaching on rebirth doesn’t seem to fit in very well. There’s nobody there who’s doing the karma. There’s nobody there who knows what’s going to get you born. But the Buddha taught the other way around. Karma is the context. The teaching is all about what you’re doing. So that’s the metaphysical issue we have to address first. Is action real? Yes, it’s real. Do you have choices? Yes, you have choices. Do your actions have consequences? Yes, they have consequences. What determines the consequences? The quality of mind. The quality of the intention. Then within that context, the teaching on not-self, which is not about a characteristic of not-self, it’s actually a perception. Again, the perception is something you do. The question becomes, when is the perception of self skillful? When is the perception of not-self skillful? And what kind of self perception is skillful? What kind of not-self perception is skillful? And when are these perceptions unskillful? Those are the kinds of questions you want to ask. Because you do need a perception of self to get on the path. That you are capable of doing this path and you will benefit. And you’re going to develop the skill of learning how to commit yourself to the path and reflect on the results. So you get better and better results. So in that sense, perception of self will be skillful as part of the path. That’s a perception of not-self. Anything that would pull you off the path, any ideas you might have, any feelings you might have, you have to say no to them. I can’t identify with them. That’s where the perception of not-self comes in. And the perception of not-self can also be unskillful. That’s when somebody asks you, “Why did you run to the stoplight?” You say, “Well, there’s nobody here.” “Who’s responsible for this?” “Nobody. There’s nobody there.” That kind of perception is an unskillful perception. So you want to learn how to address things in a skillful way. So in a sense, karma is the context. All the other teachings find their place within that context. Like the Four Noble Truths, you’ve got an unskillful action, which is craving, based on ignorance, based on lack of skill. The result is the clinging to suffering. But then there’s the Eightfold Path, which is a cause for getting you toward the cessation of suffering. Now the cessation of suffering ultimately is not caused by anything, because it is unfabricated. But the path takes you to the threshold. It’s something you do. And you’re going to learn by doing, which is why your ability to reflect is an important part of the path. When the Buddha teaches mindfulness, it’s not just a matter of accepting whatever comes up. It’s keeping certain things in mind, as to what’s skillful, what’s not skillful. When unskillful attitudes come up in the mind, what do you do? You’ve had some experience chasing them out. You’ve had some experience of maintaining your frame of reference, say, with the breath. Well, you remember what’s worked. So you can use it again the next time. Now sometimes the next time the problem is going to be different. But at least you’re building a body of knowledge, a body of skills. That you can draw on. Then you have to be alert. What are you doing right now? Then you want to be ardent. You want to do this well. In other words, you want to be mindful well. You want to be alert well. Mindful of precisely what is needed right now. What things you can put aside. What things you can forget for the time being. So to start, sometimes it’s taught as being aware of whatever’s coming up in the present moment. But that’s not the case. The Buddha wants you to focus on what you’re doing in the present moment. And the results you’re getting. And then part of your desire to do this well, you ask yourself, are you getting good results? If not, what could you do to change? So these are the questions you ask. How to get suffering so that you can comprehend it. How to focus on it. How to understand it. The best way to do that is to work on the path. The best way to abandon craving is to work on the path. Because you get to know these things better and better by dealing with them. Like suffering is defined as the five clinging aggregates. Where are you going to find those aggregates? You find them as you’re doing concentration. You’ve got the body here. That’s form. You’ve got the feeling of pleasure that you’re trying to create. You’ve got the perceptions and the images you hold in mind of what the breath does as it comes in, where it goes, where it goes when it goes out, how it moves through the body. You’re talking to yourself about the breath, evaluating it. That’s fabrication. And then there’s consciousness, aware of all these things. So if you want to know those five clinging aggregates, this is where you know them best. When you want to know craving, this is where you know it best. You see, there’s craving for sensuality. Sensuality is not so much the sensual pleasures themselves, it’s our fascination. Fascination with fabricating, fantasizing about them. You think about a certain food you might want to make. You can think about it all through the meditation session. Even when you actually eat it, it takes only a few minutes. We’re more attached to our fantasies than we are to the things we actually encounter. We get to know these things really well by saying, “I want to be a part of them.” As you try to get the mind into a state of concentration. As you’re trying to replace your fascination with sensuality with fascination about how you feel the body from within. That’s called form. You’re going to start taking on an identity within this form of your body. You as a meditator. That’s going to teach you a lot about craving for becoming. When you get states of mind that you don’t like, that’s going to teach you about how you deal with craving for non-becoming. So it’s in the practice of concentration that you get to know these things. If you just get the mind still and hang out with the stillness, you stop. But if you come with an inquisitive attitude and become informed by the four noble truths, you begin to realize this is where your laboratory is. You’re going to learn about the aggregates by manipulating them in a skillful way. You’re going to learn about the forms of craving by either fighting them or encouraging them as is appropriate. Because you do need desire on the path. So you learn about craving and desire by focusing on skillful desires and putting aside unskillful desires. So you don’t have to look anywhere else. Sometimes we think you get the mind still and then you have to go out and do vipassana someplace else. What is vipassana? It’s insight, seeing things clearly, where they come from, where they go, how you fabricate them. Well here you’re fabricating a big fabrication, the fabrication of the mind and concentration. As the Chan Fung used to say, don’t go looking at things outside. The big problem is inside. When the mind says that things are inconstant, stressful, not-self, the problem is not the things. It’s the mind that’s making these comments. That’s what you’ve got to get to know. You have to have this ability to turn around and look at what you’re doing. Because as I said, that’s where it all comes from. This is where it all leads. Understanding what it means to do something. How do you do things skillfully? How do you do things unskillfully? You’re going to see them all here. With the skills that you’ve been developing, getting the mind to settle down, you learn how to say no to any other thoughts that come up. No in a skillful way, in an effective way. And you’re going to realize there are lots of different ways you’re going to need to say no. Sometimes you simply notice that you’ve slipped off, you come right back. Other times you have to stop and think for a while about the drawbacks of whatever thinking has you pulled away. Sometimes when you can’t stop the chattering in the back of your mind, well just leave it in the back of your mind. You stay focused here up front with the breath. Or if you notice that disturbing thoughts actually require energy to maintain them, just relax around those thoughts. This is especially effective when you’ve learned how to become sensitive to the breath energy in the body. You begin to see where a thought has begun to form in the breath energy. It’s like a little knot, a little entanglement. You notice where the entanglement is, you comb it out. But it’s a knot, you zap it. Like Alexander with the Gordian knot. The story goes that somebody created this very complex knot. And the question was, was anybody smart enough to untie it? Then Alexander came in with the sword and just cut it. That was the end of the problem. In other words, sometimes you try to get involved in your thoughts, and the more you try to figure out your thinking, the more they pull you in. In which case you’ve just got to cut right through them, saying, “I’m not going to go there. I’m just going to breathe through whatever pattern of tension is in the body is maintaining that thought.” You learn a few karate chops. Meditation doesn’t require that you understand all of your defilements before you get in, but just that you learn how to sidestep them. Give them a good chop. So you can create a space in the mind so you can settle down and begin to see these things more clearly. The more stillness you’re able to maintain, together with that inquisitive mindset, the more you’re going to see them clearly. So look right here. Everything is right here in the heart as the heart gets settled down. All of its defilements come to roost. All of its activities come to gather right here. When they’re gathered, that’s when you can see them clearly and figure out how to get past them. These teachings may cover a wide range of topics. They’re designed to gather you in right here. They keep pointing here. When the Buddha teaches about karma, there are times when he teaches about karma over many, many lifetimes. Cycles of the universe. But then at the end of the discussion he says, “And where did all these cycles of the universe come from?” They come from the choices you make in the mind. Where do you make them? Right here. When do you make them? Right now. So right here, right now, is where you stay focused. Not because the present moment is a great place to be, but because it’s where you’re going to understand things and get past them. So be very sensitive to what you’re doing in the present moment, how you’re forming the present moment through your intentions. When you do that, you’ll be on the right track. Thank you very much.

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