

Discernment Performs

October 11, 2011

There are several characteristics of right speech that apply to right thinking as well. You want your thoughts to be true—to represent things as they are. And you want your thoughts to be beneficial—to actually help you.

This is where the Buddha gets into the area of what's called performative speech—and also, performative thoughts. In other words, he's not simply interested in describing things, or seeing how words may or may not be accurate in describing things. He's also interested in seeing the impact that they have on the mind: on the minds of the people who listen, the mind of the person speaking, and the mind of the person thinking.

That moves on to a third quality, which is that speech be timely. You want your thoughts to be timely as well. Certain truths are useful at certain times and not at other times, just as certain words can be useful at some times and not at other times.

So when realizations come into the mind, you have to ask yourself: To what extent is this true, beneficial and timely? Are there areas where it may not be beneficial, where it may not be timely—even if it is true? You have to be very observant.

When you read what the Buddha said about not-self, for instance, or about the three characteristics, you have to know the right time and place for those teachings. There's a sutta where a young monk is asked by a non-Buddhist ascetic, "What's the result of action?" And the young monk says, "All action results in pain," which was a Jain teaching. This non-Buddhist ascetic knows enough about Buddhism to say, "That doesn't sound quite right. You'd better go check with the Buddha."

The monk goes and checks with the Buddha, and the Buddha calls him a fool. Then another monk steps in and says, "Well, maybe this monk was thinking about the fact that all feeling is stressful." The Buddha said the second monk was a fool, too. He said that the ascetic was asking about kamma, and so the right answer was to speak of the three kinds of kamma, corresponding to the three kinds of feeling produced by kamma: pleasant feeling, painful feeling, and feeling that's neither pleasant nor painful. When you're concerned about the results of your actions, those are the kinds of feelings you focus on. You don't go on to the idea that all feelings ultimately are stressful, because in that case, there would be no idea of what would be a skillful action or a non-skillful action. Everything would be

painful. You'd be left, in the Buddha's words, "bewildered and without a protector." This means that this is a performative issue—a matter of using the right teaching at the right time.

So when you're looking at the ideas or realizations that come into your mind as you're meditating, it's even more of an issue of: "What's the right time and place for this? Are these ideas true?" Even if they're true, then the question is: "Are they beneficial? And is this the right time and place for them?" This means that you don't put your 100-percent stamp of approval on things coming into your meditation, or even on things that you read. You have to ask yourself: "When is this appropriate? When is it not?" And you have to learn how to look at the impact of certain kinds of thinking, certain ideas.

Even Dhamma teachings can be misused. There's that famous image of the snake. You want a snake—maybe you have some use for its venom—and so you have to catch it. But if you catch the snake by the tail, it's going to come around and bite you. You have to catch it by the neck and then, even though it may coil back and forth around your arm, it's not going to do you any harm. Then you can get what you need from the snake.

One of the purposes of getting the mind still is to get in touch with the activity of the mind that's just an observer. Regardless of what happens, it just watches, watches, watches. It's something separate from its object. When you focus on the breath, at first you try to develop a sense of oneness between your awareness and the breath. You try to cultivate that so you really can be solidly with it. But after a while, things begin to separate out, in the same way that when you put oil and vinegar into a bottle and just leave it there, they ultimately separate out.

You try to stay with that sense of the observer as much as possible. Now this, too, has its time and place because you do want to maintain your concentration. There are times when concentration requires that you get back into the breath, work with it, move it around—and you're in the body, in the breath while you're doing this. If you don't keep this up as a regular practice, you find that your health suffers. You don't have the strength to keep up the meditation. Your concentration suffers. But once you've done the work with the breath, then you let things get as still as possible and allow that sense of the observer to separate out. And then learn how to maintain it.

Ajaan Maha Boowa talks about how, when Ajaan Mun passed away, he felt lost. Here was the teacher he'd gone to with all of his problems of the mind. Now that teacher was gone. He felt like someone who'd been depending on a doctor for many years, and all of a sudden the doctor's dead. What do you do? He started reflecting on Ajaan Mun's teachings. And one of the teachings that came back to

him most strongly was, “Whatever comes up in the mind, if you’re not really sure about how safe it is, stay with your sense of the observer and watch it. And you’ll be safe.” Step back a bit and just watch what those thoughts, what those ideas, what that kind of knowledge does to the mind—because even good things can have a bad impact if they come at the wrong time.

There’s that famous story about the monks practicing contemplation of the body, and their practice veered off in the wrong direction. They started getting really disgusted with the body to the point where they didn’t want to live any longer. Some of them committed suicide; some of them hired assassins. The Buddha came back and basically said, “Where is everybody?” When he found out what had happened, he called all the remaining monks together and said, “When unskillful attitudes develop in the meditation, then have the mind go back to the breath and use the breath to freshen the mind, to clear it out.” He compared it to a big rain that comes at the very end of the hot season. It takes all the dust that’s been building up over the months of the hot season and the dry season, and clears it out of the air. So you use the breath to clear things out of the body and mind.

You have to notice that sometimes certain insights—insight into the elements, insight into the aggregates—if you use them in the wrong way, you start thinking, “Well, there’s nobody there. It’s just aggregates, just elements.” If there’s nobody here, nobody there, then you start wondering about what use it is to be good to people if there’s no real person there. That kind of thinking goes way off in the wrong direction.

So remember that as we’re practicing, we’re not here for the purpose of gaining discernment as the goal. Discernment is one of the actions that we’re trying to master. That is, it, too, has to be seen as performative. What is it doing to the mind when you hold a particular idea in mind? It may be true, but is it beneficial? Is this the right time and place for it? These are the questions you always have to ask. Don’t be too quick to put your stamp of approval on anything.

Things have to be tested. If you develop the stillness of concentration, the stability of your mind puts you in a much better position to be able to pass judgment on these things. And we *are* passing judgment. There’s so much talk in Buddhist circles now about how bad the judging mind is, but you have to realize there are times when you have to exercise a lot of judgment in the practice. Just learn how to do it skillfully.

Remember, you’re looking at actions. Is this a skillful action, or not a skillful action? Don’t get entangled in issues of, “Am I a good person? Am I a person with any hope in the meditation, or am I hopeless?” That’s an unskillful use of judgment. The skillful use involves looking at actions and looking at your state of

mind as it's affected by those actions. "To what extent can I trust my observations on things?" The Buddha did talk about checking things in your own actions, but he also said to check them against the opinions of the wise, because sometimes the wise look at things in a longer time-frame. They see things from a larger perspective that you might not grasp immediately. So you want to take their opinions into consideration.

There's a sutta where a general comes to the Buddha and asks him to talk about the benefits of generosity in this lifetime, the implication being that he didn't want to hear about anything beyond this lifetime. So the Buddha gives a list of the benefits that come when you're a generous person, but he doesn't stop just with this lifetime. He reminds the general that there are longer-term consequences, too—because, after all, kamma is complex. Sometimes you do something that's unskillful, but you get a reward. The Buddha himself lists cases where, say, a man kills the enemy of the king, so the king's going to reward the man. He steals things from the enemy of the king; the king rewards him. He has sex with the wives of the enemy of the king; the king likes that. He gives him a reward. He tells an amusing lie to the king that makes the king laugh; the king gives him a reward.

In cases like that, you look at the action, and you say, "Well, what is this about the precepts? The actions they forbid don't always leading to pain and suffering." The Buddha says you have to look at things over the long term. There are some immediate results, which may not go in line with the general principle of kamma. But when you look at things over the long term, you begin to see that the principle of kamma really does hold sway.

From his point of view, even seeing things from one lifetime to the next may not be a long enough perspective. Sometimes you do a lot of good things in this lifetime, but you've got a lot of bad kamma from a previous lifetime, and in your next lifetime you experience the bad kamma from older lifetimes. If all you can see is just this life and the next life, you could easily misunderstand things.

So remember, you always want to check things not only in your own experience, but also against the opinions of the wise. Of course, you have to be careful in choosing who you think is wise.

What this means is to always be open to the fact there may be a larger perspective that you're not seeing. This is why the Buddha instituted the monastic sangha, in hopes that there would be people around who've had more experience that you can consult with. You can tap into their wisdom; you can tap into their knowledge.

So you want to be a person with an all-around perspective, learning from your own actions and learning how to put the mind in a position where it can observe things clearly—observe your physical actions, observe your words, and observe your thoughts. See how they perform, what they do, and always be willing to learn from the wise. In that way, you can come out safe.