

The Wisdom of Dualities

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When I was in Thailand this last time, I went to pay my respects to Ajaan Uthai. When I got there, he was talking to a group of lay people, and he invited me to join the conversation. He started asking questions about the monastery here. One of his questions was, “When Westerners come to the monastery, what do they come for?” I said, “Most people come looking for peace of mind.” And one of the lay people commented, “It sounds like those Westerners are going straight for the top.” Ajaan Uthai turned to them and said, “What do you mean, straight for the top? Even common animals want peace of mind. If you’re a human being, you want something better than that. You want goodness as well.” In other words, if you’re a genuine human being looking for a happiness that puts your mind at rest, it has to be good, too. It has to be harmless. It has to be blameless.

That, of course, is a value judgment, but it’s an important one. As the Buddha said, the beginning of wisdom is, among other things, asking, “What is blameworthy and what is blameless? What is skillful? What is unskillful? What, when I do it, will lead to my long-term welfare and happiness? What, when I do it, will lead to my long-term harm and pain?”

Discernment starts with the realization that there are these dualities, these choices you have to make—and that one course of action is better because it gives better results than the other. Your discernment lies in seeing which is better. This is a theme that goes all the way through the practice. The fact that you’re sitting right here now, meditating: You’ve made the choice. This is better than going out and having a few drinks. Even though there’s pleasure that could be had that way, you realize that it causes a lot of harm to your health, to your safety, to the state of your mind.

Even with more innocent sensual pleasures, the Buddha said that it’s better to get the mind in a state of concentration where you put sensuality aside—your fascination with thinking about sensual pleasures—and find a pleasure that comes from simply inhabiting the body: being here with the breath; noticing how the breath feels throughout the body; developing a sense of ease around the breath; and then allowing that ease to spread; thinking of the breath as your first experience of the body, your primary experience of the body, so that when the breath is easeful, you can let that ease spread anywhere in the body. Give it priority so that even though there may be pains in some parts of the body, the

pleasant breath has priority over them. When you can find a sense of well-being here, then the temptation to go out and do something unskillful gets a lot weaker.

So this is a better pleasure, and it's harmless. You're not afflicting anybody. Remember the Buddha's first instruction to Rahula. When you're thinking about doing something, ask yourself: Do you expect that it will afflict anybody? If you see that it will afflict other people, yourself, or both, you don't do it. There's a better course of action. That's the beginning of discernment.

The fact that you're sitting here meditating: It's a better course of action than a lot of other things you could be doing. But, of course, there are levels of, concentration, levels of attainment, and some are better than others. This is why, when you settle down with the breath and work the breath through the body, there will come a point when you begin to realize that analyzing the breath and trying to improve the breath doesn't make it any better than it is. In that case, you decide that the better course of action would be to settle down, just be with the breathing, and try to develop a sense of oneness with the breathing. That, too, is a better course of action.

So it's always important to realize that wisdom lies in seeing dualities and getting a sense of which course of action is better than another. This is one of the best ways that people can teach you things: They can show you two things and point out why one is better than the other. I have a photography book where, page after page, the photographer gives two pictures of a site, along with a little discussion as to why one of the pictures is a better picture than the other. I've learned a lot about photography from that book. When you have something to compare, you see things you wouldn't have noticed otherwise if you had just looked at one picture. You can say, "Oh, yes, the color here is warmer. There's more variety to the color. The composition is better."

There's always something to notice when there are differences. And this is how you develop your own discernment. You get the mind into a state of concentration, then you get it into another state of concentration, and you can compare the two. Or when you come out of concentration and you see the mind going for something, you can ask yourself, "Well, which is better? The mind when it was concentrated, or the mind when it's running around?" The fact that you have something to compare things with refines your sense of judgment, because an important aspect of discernment is developing sound judgment as to what's worth doing, what's not, what's better to do than what other thing.

Now, in the Buddha's descriptions of the factors for awakening, he points out that analysis of qualities is the discernment factor. And he defines it as making distinctions, seeing the difference between, as he says, bright states of mind and

darkened states of mind, skillful states and unskillful states. I remember reading a footnote given by a translator of that passage. He was perplexed. He said, "This is supposed to be the discernment faculty, and yet it talks about skillful and unskillful actions." I myself was surprised at the translator's "and yet," because that's what discernment is: seeing what's skillful to do. The translator was probably assuming that discernment meant seeing things as inconstant, stressful, and not-self. But that's only one aspect of discernment. There's also the question of when it's useful to see things as constant and when it's useful to see them as inconstant, because everything has both sides. When is it useful to emphasize the pleasant aspects of something and when is it useful to emphasize the stressful aspects? When is it useful to emphasize the fact that you have some control over your actions, and when is it useful to focus on things being not-self? After all, the whole purpose of these perceptions is to give you some guidance in how to choose what to do, and your discernment lies in knowing exactly when to apply which perception.

When you're focusing on your choices of what to do, that's not a time to say, "Well, my choices are not-self, so I'll just go with whatever." That's a time to adopt the assumption that you are responsible. You have the desire to do something well, so go with that desire: whatever seems to be the better option. If it turns out that it was a mistake, well, you've learned something you wouldn't have learned otherwise. Then you can use that knowledge to be more skillful the next time around.

When you're practicing concentration and the breath is uncomfortable, that's not the time to say, "Well, everything is stressful, inconstant, not-self," and just leave it there. The mind will have trouble settling down. So you do what you can to make the breath comfortable: Change the length, change the depth, the speed with which you breathe, the heaviness. There are lots of things you can work with. In fact, one of the best ways of developing your powers of evaluation is to try different ways of breathing to see what effect they have on the body, and then to decide which is best. This is something that no one else can give you precise instructions on, because no one else can sense your breath as you're feeling it right now.

Your body, the body as you feel from the inside: That's your own exclusive territory, so you're the one who has to explore it. All a teacher can do is simply point out possibilities: that there are these different ways of breathing and these different ways of experiencing the body. Can you detect them? It's like learning to be a professional taster. By giving you a vocabulary and pointing out the differences between different scents, different tastes, the teachers help you begin

to detect, “Oh, yeah, there really is a difference,” which you wouldn’t have noticed without the vocabulary. This is why teachers are useful on the path. They give you the mental apparatus for noticing differences, so that you can then decide, “What should I do with these differences? What’s the best thing to do with these differences, or what’s the better thing to do?” And keep on learning.

Even as the mind gets into deeper and deeper states of oneness, you’ll find that one state of oneness is better than another, just as some kinds of infinity are bigger than others. Some states of oneness are better for different purposes. So you refine your discernment that way as well. It is possible to get the mind into formless states, and they are much more refined and quiet than focusing on the body. But, as Ajaan Lee points out, it’s like having worked and then living off your pension, whereas focusing on the body is like working and getting a salary at the same time. As long as you’re working, the salary doesn’t run out. If you live off your pension, you never know. You might run out.

Even when you get to the ultimate state of oneness in the mind, the Buddha said that that, too, is fabricated, just like all the other parts of the path. So there’s something better to do there, which is to learn how to let go, because underlying all of this is activity of discernment is the realization that experience comes in two types: fabricated and unfabricated. The unfabricated is nibbana. And it’s so much better than everything else that it’s the one and only goal. Everything else is done for the purpose of that.

So given that there’s this basic duality in the potentials for human experience, it only makes sense that discernment be dual as well. This is why the Buddha’s first teaching was the four noble truths. Right view teaches that there are desires leading to suffering and there are the desires that can, when implemented properly, lead to the end of suffering. One course is better than the other.

So have some appreciation for dualities. Have some appreciation for the fact that there is a way to judge things that is really useful. Learn how to be wise in your judgments—judicious rather than judgmental—because practicing discernment this way really is better than not.