

Insight Is a Judgment Call

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When the great ajaans were practicing in the forest, they were out alone in the forest. What kept them going was the realization that they weren't really alone. They belonged to something much larger. They belonged to the culture of the noble ones. This is a culture you can join simply by adopting its values. And you want to remind yourself of those values, especially in this land of wrong view, because otherwise you start feeling lonely. You start feeling that you're the only person practicing and your values aren't in line with those of other people. And those people don't just sit by and watch neutrally. Most people try to tend to push you in their direction: to do what they do, think the way they think. So think about how the noble ones that would respond to that pressure. Ajaan Fuang's image one time was of people who have stepped in dog shit and then want to make sure everybody else steps in dog shit too. You've got to think in those terms if you want your practice to survive.

So think about the values of the customs of the noble ones. There are four altogether. The first three have to do with contentment. You're content with whatever food, clothing, shelter you get. You're not constantly thinking about ways to make the food better, or the clothing better, or the shelter better. There may be times when you feel that something's really lacking. But if these things serve their purpose—and this is one of the reasons why we have that reflection every evening to remember what that purpose is—then you've got enough.

You really don't need to be ambitious to make yourself large in the world, just for the sake of more food, more clothing, more shelter. Even if you have a thousand sets of clothing, you can only wear one at a time. And that thought frees you. It frees you from all the extra work you'd have to do to get things that are basically extraneous, that are there only for show.

And that allows you to focus on the most important of the customs of the noble ones, which is to delight in the developing skillful qualities and to delight in abandoning unskillful qualities. In other words, you want to make yourself *want* to do these things. Sometimes it doesn't happen naturally, even when you're practicing. There are times when the momentum begins to wear out. You need to give yourself pep talks, to remind yourself of why you're doing this and why it's a good thing.

You're learning to make a judgment call as to what's worth doing, what's not, and taking delight in what is really worth doing. The mind calculates these things

all the time. There's a part of the brain that keeps saying, "Is this worth it, the energy that goes here? Or would the energy go better there?" That's a basic function of the mind. The problem is that it often *mis*functions, either based on our own past experiences, or our own lack of clarity on what the results of our actions will be. So a lot of the training is learning how to read our actions so that we can make a better judgment call to what's worth doing, what's not.

Wisdom begins with those questions: "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 suffering?" Look at everything in terms of actions, this reality that we're trapped in, that we've created, that we keep on creating through our own fabrication. You could say it's a web of fabrication. It sounds like a web of lies, which is not quite what the word "fabrication" means here: It's simply something that's put together. We're constantly assembling it. And it's constantly falling apart. So we keep assembling it some more. We're driven to this because we like to feed on these things. And we think it's worth the effort that goes into it, so that we can get the food that comes out of our efforts.

The problem is that sometimes we're impatient. We want the food right now. So we're not too picky about what we get right now: As long as we get something right now, we're happy. This is one of the reasons why we try to find alternative sources of food, try to get another visceral pleasure, aside from the pleasure of sights, sounds, tastes, smells, tactile sensations. The pleasure of concentration is a substitute. As the Buddha once said, you can know all the drawbacks of sensuality, but if you don't have an alternative pleasure, such as the pleasure of right concentration, then you're going to go back to feeding off all the old things that you told yourself were bad, because you don't see the alternative. It's not immediately there. So the pleasure of concentration is one of the ways we keep ourselves sustained on the path.

The Buddha, when he was describing the noble eightfold path, at one point called right concentration the main factor, while the rest were the auxiliary or helping factors. Right concentration is where you get to use pleasure in a skillful way, a pleasure you gain while staying focused on the breath. But at the same time, you learn an important lesson about pleasure: that if you go running after the pleasure, you're going to lose the cause. So you stick with the cause and enable the pleasure to develop on its own. And it'll do its work. You don't have to gobble it down. It'll suffuse through the body, nourish whatever immediate need you feel for a sense of well-being. And that puts you in a better place to make a better judgment about what's worth doing, what's not.

When the Buddha talks about developing discernment from those first two questions, a lot of it focuses on actions. There's the discernment that comes with learning how to get yourself to do things you don't like to do, but you know are going to give good long-term results; and the discernment that gets you to stop you from doing things that you like to do but are going to give long-term harm. This kind of discernment is practical. Strategic. And we develop it how? By being virtuous, by doing virtuous things, by being generous, by giving.

We gain discernment by acting. The Buddha recommends good ways to act: He says that if you act this way, you're going to get good results. You put it to the test and you find that it's true. There is a sense of well-being. When you give something, the well-being that you gain inside is worth much more than the object you gave. And it's much more yours. It becomes your karma now. It becomes a habit. It becomes a quality of the mind.

The same with virtue, when you really put virtue into practice, by following the precepts. Try to make it an absolute promise to yourself: You're going to stick to these precepts. You catch yourself about to do things that you used to do and you used to think were okay. But you begin to realize, they have their drawbacks. And again, you have to learn how to think strategically so that you can stick to the precept not to lie and not to kill, even in situations where it's difficult. But you learn, with time, that you're a happier person.

So you gain discernment by learning how to act properly. This makes you more and more sensitive to the role you play in shaping your experience. Then you finally get to the subtler levels of discernment, for example, the Buddha's questionnaire on inconstancy, stress, and not-self. The teaching on not-self is not meant to make you to come to the conclusion that there is no self. The conclusion is, is it worth it in this situation to create the activity of a self, in other words, to make a sense of self, or make a "me" or a "mine"? You learn how to apply those questions strategically. In other words, while you're developing concentration, you don't apply them to the concentration. You apply them to the things that would pull you away.

When you're trying to be virtuous, when you're trying to be generous, again, you apply those questions to things that would pull you away from these practices. It's only when the path is fully developed that you apply those questions to everything. Notice, it's a value judgment. You ask yourself, "Is it worth saying, 'This is me. This is mine'?" Insight is always a judgment call. And you want to learn how to delight in making more and more skillful judgments.

I was talking on this theme a few days ago to a Buddhist group in the Bay Area. A woman came up afterwards and said, "Gee, thinking about how my actions

shape my life: That's putting a whole new perspective on things. It means my life isn't shaped by my DNA." And my answer was, "Well yes, this is what the Buddha's talking about. You shape your life." He's putting you in a position of power. The question is, are you going to maintain that position of power or are you going to succumb to the parts of the mind that don't want to put all the effort into being skillful? If you try to maintain that position of power, it puts you in the culture of the noble ones. This is one way of motivating yourself: taking a sense of joy, delighting in what you're doing. You can motivate yourself through heedfulness. You can motivate yourself through skillful shame, skillful pride, compassion: compassion for others, compassion for yourself. Or you could do it simply through the pride that comes from learning how to do something skillfully: to make more and more skillful judgment calls.

Another person that evening said to me, "You're making it sound all very ordinary and psychological." Well, that's how it starts. You start by looking at yourself as an agent and asking yourself, "How can I be a more skillful agent? How can I make my decisions more skillfully?" And you pursue this more and more to deeper levels, subtler levels, where you find that what you're taking apart is not so ordinary.

You get to a very deep level and the effect it has on your experience of the senses gets very radical. It opens you up to another dimension. There is a dimension that is unfabricated: It doesn't require that you keep tending to it and keep feeding it or keep feeding off it. Everything is unconditioned in that dimension and it doesn't require all this constant care. And opening up to that dimension is very radical. The final acts in the path that allow you to do that, those are judgment calls as well.

So if you're going to learn how to get to that radical level, you have to first develop the ordinary, everyday level of learning to be more skillful in how you speak and how you think and how you act, looking again and again at what you're doing: remembering what you should be doing and looking to see if you actually are doing it. Like the lesson we had on the clothesline today. You remember which side of the robe to expose to the sun and then you check to make sure that that is the side of the robe you're exposing. And then you look at the results. The robe doesn't fade so quickly. Simple things like that, but you move from the simple things to the subtler ones. And there's a greater sense of self-esteem that comes as you learn to make more and more precise and skillful judgment calls in all the areas of your life.

So remember as you go through the day, everything you do is a choice. Everything you do involves intention. And if you learn how to look carefully at

them—these intentions and these choices—and stick with the desire to be as skillful as possible, to be a member of that noble culture, the culture of the noble ones, you find that you do take more and more joy and more and more delight in developing what's skillful, abandoning what's unskillful, and the results go deeper and deeper. As Luang Puu Dune once said, "The practice is one thing clear through." He didn't say what that one thing was. It's actually a cluster of things, but they all work together. One of them is this ability to make better and better judgment calls. That's what your discernment is, that's what insight is. It's a practice that, on whatever level, you notice that you're making a decision, making a choice, and in trying to do that skillfully, you see how the path and all the areas of your life connect.