

Skillful Thinking

Thanissaro Bhikkhu

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It's very common when we come to the practice that we bring along some very strong notions of who we are or the kind of person we'd like to be: "I'm this sort of person. I want to be this sort of person." This type of thinking is very common. And yet it's not all that helpful, because that concept of who we are is very nebulous, based on all kinds of information and misinformation. It often gets in the way of what's the best thing to do at any given moment.

This is why the Buddha says to put those questions aside— "Who am I? Who am I going to be? Who have I been in the past?" — not only in their philosophical, abstract or metaphysical sense, but also in their psychological sense. Just look at what opportunities you have right here, right now for thinking, acting and speaking in skillful ways. That kind of question— "What's the most skillful thing to do right now?" —is a useful question. This is what the Buddha was getting at when he said to put thoughts of "me," "myself," "what I have been," "what I will be" aside and to think instead in terms of the four noble truths. These truths give you a way of looking at experience that focuses directly on the issue of skillfulness.

In other words, you look at your experience in terms of four variables: cause and effect on the one hand, and skillful and unskillful on the other. The first noble truth, the truth of suffering and stress, is an unskillful result. The unskillful cause is craving and ignorance. On the other side you've got the path of practice: that's a skillful cause with the cessation of suffering as its result. So when situations present themselves to you, just ask yourself, "What's the most skillful thing to do right here?" Then allow yourself to think outside the box a little bit. The teachings of meditation are not necessarily there to just be followed one, two, three, four and bingo! there you are: Bliss. Oneness. Awakening. You've got to keep reflecting on what you're doing, what results are coming, what adjustments have to be made. If things don't seem to be working out, use your ingenuity.

Of course, there are some general parameters in which you have to stay. When you're practicing meditation, you want to stay in the present as much as possible. So: what do you have to do to stay in the present? Sometimes the mind just refuses to settle down. So you find other topics aside from the breath in the present moment to focus on. If you're really having trouble focusing on the

present, think of the Buddha, the Dharma, and the Sangha. Those topics help foster conviction in the path and in your own ability to practice the path. After all, the members of the noble Sangha are human beings just like you. They started out with all the strengths and weakness you have and somehow they were able to use those strengths to overcome those weaknesses in the face of all kinds of odds. If they could do it, so can you. Think in those ways for a while until you feel more confident in yourself and in the path, and then you can get back to your practice.

Or, if you find yourself getting complacent and lazy, you can think about death for a while, because death can come at any time. It's right here in your breath. If you breathe in and can't breathe out, that's death. If you breathe out and can't breathe in, that's death too.

Then you notice the way you breathe. Normally you breathe in to a point where it's not comfortable to keep on breathing in any more, so you stop and then start breathing out. You continue breathing out until you reach a point where it's no longer comfortable, and then you breathe in. You keep running into that point of the pain and discomfort each time you breathe and have to change from an out-breath to an in-breath, or an in-breath to an out. That point of discomfort may not be blatant pain but it's a sense of tension. It's got the breath hemmed in right there all the time.

If the events of the past few days have confirmed anything, they've shown how fragile everything can be. Death comes very easily. A little clot gets the wanderlust in your bloodstream, starts wandering on and then decides it's going to settle down, gets lodged in a capillary in your brain, a capillary in your heart, and that's it. Your whole system shuts down. Or some strange vagrant germ can find its way into your body and that can be it, too. Death can come from the tiniest things. The body is so fragile.

So the question is: Have you completed the work you want to complete? Do you have any idea of what work you do want to complete? Okay, when you figure that one out, you can get to work and do it. The most important work, of course, is straightening out your mind, because that's what you're going to take with you whether you live or die. So if you find yourself being complacent, think about death for a while until it gives you the incentive to get back to the practice. In other words, take what's close at hand and use it as a tool.

Don't believe the rule that meditation can't involve thinking. Sometimes you do have to think in ways that will bring you back to the present moment. Some people complain about the Buddha's teachings on past lives and future lives, that they're a distraction from the present, but when he talks about past lives and future lives he keeps coming down to the principle of kamma: that all the past, all the future—everything—is shaped by your choices. Okay, what choices are

you responsible for right now? The ones in the present moment. He gives you the teachings on what shapes the past and future in order to bring you back to the present with an even greater sense of its importance.

So there are times when you have to use thinking, skillful thinking, in order to get past negative thinking. If you find that the narratives in your life, the issues in your life, are just too sticky to let go of easily, then use your powers of thinking in skillful ways to get you around those narratives so you can come back to the present moment, with the proper context.

So you make use of what you've got. That's a sign of discernment. Discernment isn't built except by using it, exercising it. No matter how strong or weak it is, you've got to take what you've got and put it to use if you want it to get stronger. It's like your body. If you sit and wait for it to get strong on its own without exercising it, it's going to waste away. So even as you're just getting started in the meditation, you have the chance to use your discernment, strengthen your discernment, by learning to deal with distraction.

There are lots of ways for dealing with distraction. One is just to catch yourself wandering off and bring yourself back. Another way is to reflect on the drawbacks of that distraction. If you kept thinking in that direction, where would it take you? Is that where you want to go? Or if the distraction is really insistent, tell yourself, "Okay the distraction can stay there in the background if it wants to, but I'm going to stay here with the breath in the foreground." Consciously ignore it. Don't get involved. It's like a glob of tar. If you even try to push yourself away, you get stuck. Some thoughts are like that. Other thoughts involve tension in the body. When you detect that it's tense to think in that way, just relax the tension associated with the thought and it'll go away.

There are all kinds of ways of dealing with distraction. Don't feel that you only have one tool. You've got to use all kinds of tools because there are all kinds of distraction. Each time an issue comes up in the mind, stop and ask yourself: "Okay, what's the most skillful thing to do here?" And if an immediate answer doesn't come, try experimenting. How do you think the Buddha found the path? Through experimentation. And even after he set out his teachings for people to hear, each person has had to experiment to see which way the teachings are best applied in his or her particular circumstances.

If you don't have this willingness to experiment, to make mistakes and learn from them, you're going to have a hard time making progress in the path. That's what they mean by beginner's mind: being open to the possibility that maybe the only way you're going to learn here is to make a few mistakes. Once you start learning from them, okay, then you become wise.

So the basic questions are, always: "What's the most skillful thing to do here? What exactly is the problem? What tools do I have?" And then work from there.

You don't have to get involved in such questions as who's creating the solution, who's facing the problem. Just put those thoughts out of your mind and you'll find that the practice begins to progress, simply because you're not carrying a lot of unnecessary baggage around.