

Judging the Dhamma

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One of the first things you notice as you try to get the mind quiet is how unquiet it is. Or as Ajaan Lee once said, a lot of the practice is getting to know your defilements. All these thoughts that come into the mind and pull you away from the practice: There are lots of them. And getting to know them doesn't mean just seeing them, which you see all the time, but also recognizing them as defilements, because sometimes there are thoughts that come into the mind that seem to be perfectly reasonable, perfectly authoritative, telling you things as they are, saying, "This must be Dhamma." But as you get to know them, you begin to realize that they're actually getting in the way of the Dhamma.

The Buddha once gave some instructions to Mahapajapati Gotami, his stepmother. She asked for some brief Dhamma instructions that she could take and use to meditate on her own, and he gave her some standards for judging what's Dhamma and what's not Dhamma. These standards apply not only to teachings you've picked up from other people, other sources, but also to thoughts that come into the mind. In other words, when a thought comes into the mind that actually helps toward dispassion, then that thought is Dhamma. If it helps to make you unburdensome, if it helps to unfetter you from things you've been tied down to, that's Dhamma. If it helps encourage you to put forth energy in the practice, that's Dhamma.

But one kind of thought we come to think of as Dhamma actually deflates you, robs you of your energy. Those are all the negative judgment that come in, saying, "What kind of person are you? What kind of meditator are you? Who do you think you are, trying to meditate?" Those are not thoughts that encourage you to practice. Those are thoughts that discourage you from practice. They're not Dhamma. Recognize them as such. They're nothing you have to believe.

Often you find your laziness hiding out in those thoughts, because the practice does take effort, and part of you doesn't like putting forth the effort. So it tells you that you can't do it. You're not up to it. You don't have it in you. It sounds true and it sounds genuine, but it's not Dhamma. You want to listen to the voices that encourage you to stick with the practice, that encourage you that, yes, you can do it.

This is one the reasons why the Buddha has the recollection of the Sangha as one of his ten basic recollections. Go reading through the Therigatha and Theragatha, the verses of the elder monks and elder nuns, and you'll see that many

of them concern the people who were ready to give up. One monk tells of how he had been meditating for twenty-plus years as a monk and he hadn't had a moment of silence, a moment quiet. He was ready to commit suicide. But in the midst of his desperation, he did finally catch on to watching his mind, and realizing that all these thoughts that had been telling him this, telling him that, weren't Dhamma. The thoughts that were driving him to destroy himself weren't Dhamma. Thoughts that got him to give up weren't Dhamma. They were defilements. No matter how authoritative they may sound, you don't have to listen to them. Because the Dhamma is all matter of encouragement.

As the Buddha once said, if getting the mind to be skillful wasn't something human beings could do, he wouldn't teach it. But it's something we *can* do as human beings. You *can* look at your actions. No matter how many times you've made a particular mistake, you can unlearn that mistake. Once you see that it's not necessary and it's causing suffering, you'll drop it naturally.

Somehow, part of our mind believes it's necessary to act in a particular way, to think in a particular way. But as soon as you realize you don't have to do it, and it's causing you suffering, why do it? Once you make that connection, then you drop it. Or as Ajaan Suwat said, it's like darkness. Darkness has no right to say, "I've been here many millions of years, and who does this little candle think it is, trying to drive me away?" As soon as you light the candle, it drives the darkness away. You turn on a spotlight, it drives more darkness away.

So if the face of thoughts that you're this kind of person or that kind of person, remember the Buddha's teachings on not-self. Your sense of who you are is based on a whole pattern of actions and habits. Habits can change. Actions can change. You can decide not to repeat something you've done in the past. It may not be easy to begin with, but this is part of being a human being: You have the ability to see your mistakes and learn from them. You have that freedom in the present moment. All these old thoughts, all these old patterns, are ways of denying yourself that freedom. Part of you is scared of the freedom to change. But you have to examine that fear: Is it Dhamma? Does it help make you unburdened? Does it help unfetter you? Does it help give rise to energy in the practice? If that's not the case, then you don't have to listen to it.

This is why the Buddha gave that teaching to his stepmother, so that she could sort out her thoughts, figure out which ones to listen to, which ones she didn't have to listen to. All the old narratives of your life—that you're this kind of person or that kind of person—come simply from observing the habits, the way you've been doing things up to now, but you can change. You don't have to listen

to those things. You don't have to carry those narratives around. You don't have to continue the old narratives.

Sometimes we think what we have to wait until there's closure. But you don't have to close. Just leave it. Let it fizzle out, because that's the way most people's lives are anyhow. People work and work and work on a project and they get too old to work on it, their faculties go, and so they have to drop things unfinished. The end of life is not a closure. The people you would like to say goodbye to, you rarely get to say goodbye to. Old issues that you'd like to get settled, they don't get settled. Things just stop. So there's no reason that we have to get closure on old narratives. Let them just stop, because they weren't good narratives anyhow. Or as the Buddha said, we go around with our cravings as our companions. Well, these aren't old sentimental companionships that you'd like to get a nice closure on. They're harming you. You can just stop them. The way to do that is to focus on the present moment.

You notice in the Buddhist teachings that there are no grand narratives about how the world came into being or where are worlds going to go. The Buddha taught more how to get to know the present moment, how to recognize what's good in the present moment, what skillful and what's not skillful, and to make your choices. It's these little movements of the mind in the present moment that are the creative forces of the world. You've got tendencies, you've got habits that come in from the past, but with each moment you have the choice to say yes or no, to move with the old habit or not, to carry on the old narrative or just to stop it.

At first glance it doesn't seem that the present moment has much power, especially if you're dealing with a habit you've been holding to for a long, long time, and just saying no once seems pretty weak. Part of you may say that just saying no once is not going to really have any power, because in a few minutes, you're going to go back to your old habit. Again, is that voice Dhamma? Is that helpful? Is it a voice you want to listen to? In another minute, you can say no again. And then you can say no again. The issue may keep coming up, but don't get discouraged. You've got that power of past habits, but all that's required is that for each moment you say no to a bad habit. And don't get discouraged because the bad habit seems to have a lot of power. There's old karmic stuff coming in from the past, but all you have to worry about is each moment, right now. That's what you're responsible for.

So learn not to weigh yourself down. This is why when you deal with pain, you're told not to think about how long the pain has been persisting in the past or how long it's going to last into the future. That thought weighs the present

moment down unnecessarily. It places restrictions on how much freedom you have here and now. And the same principle applies to all your other old habits: No matter how long you've been a lazy person, you don't have to keep on being a lazy person. Don't even think of who you are. Just think that here is a choice in the present moment. Do you want to do a lazy action, or do you want to do an energetic action? Do you want to do something that's working toward the Dhamma or away from the Dhamma? Then the next present moment will come along, and you can make that one count, too.

So all you have to watch out for is the present moment. The past will take care of itself. And if you're looking after the present moment, the future will take care of itself, too. This moment is all you're responsible for. When you realize this, you realize also that this is a responsibility you can handle. There's just this breath, just this moment. Take care of that much, and you've got everything covered.