

## *Circumspection*

*January 31, 2009*

I was talking a while back to a person who had been born in another country and then came to the States when she was, I guess, in her teens. Her English is very good. But I've noticed occasionally, when talking to her, that she stumbles across a word that she doesn't know or hasn't encountered. It tells you a lot about American society to hear an immigrant say, "Oh, what's that word? I've never heard it used."

In this case, the other day, the word was *circumspection*. I had mentioned that she had to be circumspect in her practice. She said, "What's that? Never heard it." Which is a good indication that circumspection is word we need more of—not just the word, of course. We need more of that quality in our society, in our lives, in our minds.

It's especially a problem in meditation when you find that you've solved a particular problem. You say, "Ah, here is the solution to everything. This is the key that's going to unlock all the other problems in my meditation." You find that it works for a couple days and then it doesn't work anymore. Then you throw away the key. Then you try another key, and another one, another one, until you get something that works. Then you're going to use just that key.

You've got to realize there is no one quality, no one technique, no one strategy that's going to cover everything. You have to collect your keys and learn how to read your own mind to see which key is needed. This is not simply a question of using skillful means as opposed to unskillful things means. There are many different skillful means, and the question is then: Which skillful means is appropriate right now? And how far should you use it?

Sometimes it's a question of balance, as in that image of holding a baby chick in your hand. If you squeeze it too tight, it's going to die. If you hold it too loosely, it's going to fly away. You've got to apply just the right amount of pressure.

There's the issue of finding the balance among the factors for awakening. There are the ones that are energizing, like analysis of qualities—that's the wisdom or discernment faculty—persistence, and rapture. These things energize you. Then there are the calming factors: serenity, concentration, equanimity. You've got to figure out which ones you need right now.

So how do you figure that out? You watch. You try things out and see what works and what doesn't work, until you begin to get a sense of how to read the

mind. This principle applies all across the board throughout the practice, to every one of the perfections. All the meritorious activities have their limits. For example, you're encouraged to be generous, but you don't want to be generous to a fault. The Buddha said that a person of integrity doesn't give in a way that adversely affects him or herself or the recipient. In other words, you don't give so much that it harms you. You have to figure out how much is appropriate.

They even have a rule about this in the monk's rules, for what they called "a family in training": someone who's newly introduced the Dhamma, really enthusiastic, and they're giving so much that it's harming the family. The monks are told not to go to their house so as not to put too much pressure on them, until they seem to have gained a sense of just right or what's enough for them.

There's also the issue of the precepts. We're told to be truthful, but how truthful is truthful? As the Buddha said, there are times when you know that if you say the truth about a certain matters, it's going to give rise to greed or aversion or delusion, in which case you don't talk about it. This doesn't mean that you lie about it. You find ways of not talking about it: changing the subject, other ways of avoiding the issue. Or those cases where the actor and the soldiers came to see the Buddha: They talked about how they had been promised by their teachers that through their acting or through their soldiering, they were going to go to heaven. What does the Buddha say about this? He tries to avoid the question. It's only when they keep pressing him that he finally answers, because he knows the answers are going to get them upset.

Then there's the practice of goodwill. We want to have goodwill for all beings. We develop that quality as a standard part of our practice every day, every day: "May all beings be happy. May all beings be free from oppression." And we work on our attitude to make sure that we really do sincerely feel that—not that you have to love all beings, but you wish them well. There are a lot of people out there who are hard to love for one reason or another, but you want to make sure you don't wish them ill. You work on that attitude and try to spread it around to everybody.

But then this runs up against the teachings about knowing who to take as a friend. The Pali word here is *sevanā*: These are people you "partake." Some people are good to partake. You learn good things from them. You try to associate with people who have conviction, people who are generous, people who are virtuous, people who are wise and discerning. Those are the people you want to hang out with. Those are the people you want to open up to, to talk about what's in your heart. But as for people who don't meet those standards, you've got to be very careful about how open you are with them.

So you have to balance your goodwill with discernment. You have to be circumspect. Otherwise, you start opening yourself up to all sorts of influences, all sorts of ideas, and you don't even know what to think. So you have to learn how to balance. Be circumspect in the way you develop your generosity, the way you develop your virtue, the way you develop an attitude of goodwill.

We're not here to connect with everybody. That's an idea that has its roots back in European Romanticism: the idea we're suffering because we don't connect with all our fellow humanity. Well, there are some people you don't want to connect with because they'll have a bad influence on you. It's not that you're passing judgment on them forever, but you use your judgment, you use your circumspection to see which friendships are actually having a good impact on you, and which ones are not.

So you have to use your discernment in everything, all aspects of the practice. Be circumspect. After all, this is the middle way we're practicing. Sometimes it's simply a matter of balancing between extremes, but it's also learning how to combine different qualities that seem to conflict. After all, the mind is a complex thing. The needs of the mind in training are complex. And this is not a onefold path. Even with the practice of exercising your discernment, as the Buddha says in his comments about the factors for awakening, the analysis of qualities which is the discernment faculty: Sometimes if you use that too much, it gets the mind scattered. If you try to figure things out but just can't figure them out, maybe it's time to let the mind rest.

So you have to use circumspection even in your application of discernment. Develop a sense of "just right" in all your dealings.

And don't be afraid of using your powers of judgment. Judgment, if it's harsh, unthinking, too quick to really read the situation, is being judgmental. You don't want to be judgmental, but you do want to be judicious. You want to use your powers of judgment to gain a sense of circumspection. Try to manage your meditation, keep it on track, remind yourself that there's no one silver bullet that's going to do everything for you. Just because one of the bullets doesn't do everything for you doesn't mean it's useless. Don't throw them away. Keep them in your collection, so you have just the right bullet to shoot down whichever defilement is in the way, whichever problem is in the way.

In doing this, you develop your powers of discernment so that they really are all around. That's what circumspection means: You look all around. As the Buddha once said, it's not that he praises all practices or condemns all practices, he doesn't praise every form of renunciation, he doesn't condemn every form of renunciation. He would praise the practices that would lead to fewer defilements,

and condemn the ones that don't. The test, of course, is when you apply a particular strategy or apply a particular tactic, what are the results?—realizing that you have to look at the results from many different angles. Ajaan Maha Boowa once said that this is one of the lessons he had to learn from Ajaan Mun, that he himself was the sort who tend to go off on a single-minded tangent. Ajaan Mun would have to remind there were other dimensions to think about. Look all around you as you practice, to make sure you are not going off on one extreme.

This is how you get on the middle way: by looking to the left and the right, and forward and back, to make sure you're on track.