

Mindful to Be Skillful

July 28, 2009

The Buddha said that there were two of his teachings that were categorical. In other words, they apply across the board, every situation. One is the distinction between what's skillful and unskillful—that skillful behavior should be developed and unskillful behavior abandoned. The other's the four noble truths. These are the teachings you want to keep in mind at all times.

When the Buddha talks about right mindfulness, he talks about being mindful of the body, feelings, mind states, and mental qualities in and of themselves. But there's more to it than just that. You're mindful, which means that you keep these things in mind. You're alert, which means that you watch their behavior. And then you're ardent. "Ardent" here means making an effort to be skillful, to develop skillful qualities and to abandon unskillful ones. To take a delight in this is one of the customs of the noble ones: learning how to delight in trying to be skillful and in trying to abandon unskillful behavior.

So that's something else you want to keep in mind as you're focused on the breath, as you're focused on feelings, whatever your meditation theme: You always want to do it skillfully. And not just the meditation: With everything you do, that's something to keep in mind. When you're dealing with other people, you want to do it skillfully—in other words, in a way that doesn't harm yourself, that doesn't harm others, in a way that doesn't lead to unnecessary entanglement. When you're speaking, again you want to do it skillfully.

This requires that you know the general principles of what the Buddha said about being skillful: no killing, no stealing, no illicit sex, no lying, no divisive talk, no coarse talk, no idle chatter, trying to overcome excessive greed and ill will, and to develop right views. These are the areas in body, speech, and mind where you want to be careful to avoid unskillful behavior and try to develop skillful behavior in its place.

Right view is where skillfulness moves into the four noble truths, because you want to see things in terms of what you're doing to cause stress and suffering, and what you need to do in order to abandon the cause. It's in this way that these two teachings come together. But they're not just things to memorize, not just little rules to memorize. There are a few rules to memorize, but there are also general principles that you have to bring to bear, because the rules can't cover every situation. This is where you have to develop your own intuitive sense of what's

skillful and unskillful in a particular situation. One way, of course, is to look at the behavior of other people who are skillful, to get some sense of how they interact with others, how they respond to specific situations, and try to understand why.

I noticed listening to some of the Westerners who went to study in Thailand: They noticed the behavior of the monks in the monasteries and learned how to behave in a way that fit in with the monasteries. In some cases, they learned to internalize the reasons, but in other cases they didn't. Where they didn't internalize the reason, they felt, "Well, this is just the way Thai people do things, there's not much reason to it. It's simply a custom, so when we come back to the West, we don't have to bring those customs back."

But then there were the people who said, "There must be a reason for this. It's not just arbitrary." They tried to figure out the reasons behind it. That way, they internalized the principles. They found that by internalizing the principles, they had something very useful to bring back.

So this is always a good principle to keep in mind: Try to look for the reasons when you see someone who's generally well trained, who seems to behave in generally an admirable way, doing something you don't understand. If there's something that doesn't fit into your preconceived notions, you might want to ask, "Maybe something is wrong with my preconceived notions. Maybe there's a reason for this." That opens the possibility for you to think in new ways.

Now, it may well turn out that the person simply is acting in line with custom, but you're not going to know unless you test it, try to figure out the reasons, and be open to the possibility that there really is a good reason behind that and there is something here to learn. This is an important aspect of respect: a willingness to learn in all kinds of situations.

But then, of course, you come into some situations where things seem to be totally new. You don't have any models to follow. And there may be some conflicting principles. You don't know whether to apply this principle or that principle. This is where you simply have to be willing to make a mistake. In other words, go ahead and do what seems right, but then see what happens as a result. When I was studying with Ajaan Fuang, he frequently put me in situations like this, where things were not explained, where I didn't have somebody's model to go by. If I was afraid to act or hesitated, he'd yell at me. And if I acted and made mistake, he'd yell at me. But at least if I acted and made a mistake, so I could figure out, "Oh, that's wrong. Maybe something else is right." The only way I was going to learn was to be willing to make mistakes, and then to try to figure out what his intention was. I learned a lot that way.

So this is how you apply this principle of skillfulness. There are times when there are rules or clear models you can follow, where the way to apply a principle seems pretty obvious. But there are other times when it's not. This is where you get to refine your understanding of what it means to be skillful and unskillful, to look more carefully at your intentions, to look more carefully at your actions, to look more carefully at the results. This is why the practice is not simply one of following rules. It involves developing qualities of mindfulness and alertness and the desire to be skillful. In other words, you want to develop the qualities of mind that are needed to be observant, to learn, to discover things on your own.

I had a student once who had been a chef in a French restaurant in Singapore. He said every year they would have a contest for local people who wanted to try their hand at fixing French food to see who is the best amateur French cook. And he said they all just followed the books. Nobody really used his or her own powers of observation. Nobody was willing to experiment. They just stuck by the book. As a result, their food was okay but there was nothing special about it. If you want to be an especially good French cook, you have to do a lot of it. You have to be very observant and make adjustments on your own.

The same principle applies in the practice. You can follow the rules and do okay, but it's nothing really special. And that attitude of mind that simply wants to get by through following the rules is not one that should be encouraged. It very easily turns into attachment to habits and practices, thinking, "As long as I follow the rules, I'm okay. That's all I need to do." But that's not what the Buddha wants to encourage. It's a fetter.

He wants you to practice the precepts, work on concentration, work on discernment specifically for the sake of discernment, the kind of discernment that can be used to put an end to suffering. That comes from learning to be observant, to experiment, with the idea in the back of your mind that you always want to try to do the skillful thing. This can apply to any area of your life. In fact, the more you try to apply this principle of skillfulness to everything, the stronger it will grow in your meditation. If you have the habit of being willing to make a stab at something that's not yet clear, at least try something out in your day-to-day activities. Then you'll find that you develop that same quality in your meditation. And it is a useful quality to have, because not everything in the meditation is explained in the books. The mind has lots of in and outs that you can never really put in a book, but you've got to learn how to figure them out, you've got to learn how to handle them skillfully, which requires that you experiment—and that you take responsibility for your mistakes and take responsibility for learning from them.

As soon as you recognize a mistake, immediately try to think it through in a different way. What could you have done differently? If you have the time to try that experiment, go ahead. If not, save it for your next meditation session. This way, you find that the general principles of skillfulness and the four noble truths start having ramifications that you didn't expect. And that's a sign that you're learning.