

Discerning Actions

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Of the different factors in the path, discernment is the last to be perfected. But you have to begin with some discernment. Otherwise, the path wouldn't appeal to you at all.

You have to see that you're suffering, and you have to see that it may be dependent on your actions. Or maybe you don't focus so much on the suffering but simply on the fact that the happiness you have doesn't satisfy. There must be something better. That's the beginning of discernment.

The Buddha recommends that you then go and ask someone who has attained true happiness,

“What's skillful? What's not skillful?

What's blameless? What's blameworthy?

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?”

The emphasis there is on your actions. What can you do that's going to make a good difference?

This was the question the Buddha himself asked himself on his path to awakening. He'd notice that he was suffering or at least was not satisfied with his progress for some reason or another. He'd look to see if something in his own actions was causing the problem. He'd realize that there was something he'd been doing that could possibly be the cause of what was dissatisfying. So he decided to change his actions. And it was through changing his actions that he was able to attain awakening.

So you want to follow his example. Look at what you're doing. If there's something in life that's causing you distress or causing you dissatisfaction, what are you doing? What could you change?

Then look at his teachings for advice on what you might change in your actions. The Dhamma is all a guide to action. The basic image that the Buddha gives of his teaching is of a path: something you follow, something that you have to engage in, in an active way.

All his various teachings, even the ones that seem very theoretical, are guides to action.

Take the teaching on emptiness. It sounds awfully abstract. But basically the Buddha's saying to look at your meditation and see what in your meditation is causing any stress, any disturbance. Then when the mind settles into a deeper state, notice that it's empty of the disturbance it had before. But is there still some disturbance left?

This is one way of appreciating the mind's various stages of concentration as

you get deeper and deeper. It's also a reminder that these states of ease, states of well-being, are the results of actions.

One of *the* big mistakes you can make in meditation is to hit something really spacious and blissful and to tell yourself, "Ah! This must be it! This is the Ground of Being." You neglect to see, "What did you do to get there? And is there still some disturbance there?"

The teaching on not-self is also a guide to action. You look at all your various senses of self and see them as actions. The question then is, "Which ones can you still use on the path, and which ones are you going to have to put aside?" A lot of the meditation is just this: sorting out which selves are useful and which ones are not—and how long the useful ones are going to be useful and at what point you have to give them up.

There's a teaching in psychology that divides the functions of the mind into what they call id, ego, and superego. From the point of view of psychology, there's always going to be a struggle among them. The id consists of your raw desires, and raw desires don't really care about consequences. They just want what they want right now. Your superego gives you your sense of what you should do—and it doesn't care whether you want something or not, you've just got to do it because you should. Then you've got the ego, which is trying to negotiate between these two intransigent forces. And it's doomed from the start. In terms of modern psychology, there's no real happiness, there's just a splitting of the difference.

The Buddha doesn't see the mind that way, but he does talk about things you need to do in order to negotiate within the mind. You've got your short-sighted desires and your wiser desires for happiness. They're all alike in that they want happiness, it's just that some of them don't look at the long-term consequences or are deluded about the long-term consequences or just really hungry for a little satisfaction right now. Then there's a part of you that really does care about the long-term consequences. And you've got to negotiate.

In your negotiation, you're going to have to use your various senses of self: your strategic ones, the ones that are based on a sense of heedfulness, the ones that know how to provide some pleasure in the present moment so that the impulses that want some pleasure right now can find some satisfaction.

This is one of the reasons why we do concentration practice. You breathe in, breathe out, and there's a sense of ease right there. You want to learn how to appreciate that. It's ease that doesn't cost any money, doesn't cause any problems, doesn't weigh on you or on other beings at all. It just requires some skill.

As you develop the skill, it gives you something you can tap into. It gives you strength, gives you nourishment, so that when you have to say No to your short-sighted desires, you can give them an alternative kind of happiness,

something right away.

It's through the practice of concentration that restraint becomes possible—and it doesn't feel like a burden. It becomes something that you can do and not feel strung out.

The other healthy ego functions—compassion or altruism and humor—have to come in as well, so that the path is not a burden. It doesn't become something really hard to take.

A sense of humor is really important. It's your ability to laugh at yourself, not in a nasty way but in a good-natured way. To admit that, Yeah, you do have these defilements, and some of them are pretty dumb, and yet you like them, you've been training them, you've been keeping them as pets in your house for a long time. But if you can approach them with humor, the whole business of restraint is a lot easier.

This is one of the reasons why the origin stories for the rules in the Vinaya often contain a lot of humor, so that you can recognize human foibles. The human race has not changed that much in 2,500 years. You can see the excuses that the monks give and the strange reasoning they go through, and you can recognize that you've seen that in your own mind. Seeing that sort of thing from the outside helps you to distance yourself from it. That's a lot of what humor is: being able to distance yourself from things that would otherwise pull you in the wrong direction. Yet you do it in a way that's not repressing them. There's no denial. You can just say No in a way that sticks.

All these skillful ego functions are selves you're going to need for a while. These are your self strategies. You use them, you recognize them as actions, something you choose to do, and then you recognize when you have to put them aside.

That's what the not-self strategy is all about. It's like having tools and then knowing when to put the tools down.

So all these teachings that generally we regard as fairly abstract are actually guides to action, guides to seeing where your actions have been causing suffering, causing stress, getting in the way of true happiness, and seeing how you can change.

This is why the Buddha's categorical teachings are all framed in terms of actions: the teaching on skillful and unskillful actions, the teaching on the four noble truths. The reason there are four noble truths is because there are four duties with regard to stress. You want to comprehend the stress, to abandon its cause, to realize its cessation, and to develop the path to the cessation. Four different things you've got to do: That's why there are four truths. They're guides to action, guides to where you focus your energy and then knowing what you've got to do when you've recognized that one of those truths is presenting itself to you.

This is what discernment is all about. It's about action, what you're doing, because this is where you can really make a difference. This is where you're really responsible.

As the Buddha said, the sign of a wise person is knowing what you're responsible for: what you really do have to take on as a burden and what you don't. There are lots of things out there that you don't have to take on as a burden. For example, what are you, really? That's something you don't have to worry about. How about the nature of the world? Was there somebody out there who created it? Did they have a plan? That's not your responsibility.

What *is* your responsibility is what you're doing right now, realizing that it's going to have consequences right now and on into the future.

An important part of discernment is, one, learning how to frame things so that you can focus on what really is your responsibility; and two, learning how to keep your priorities straight.

So we're focusing on our actions. And where do our actions come from? They come from the mind, activities in the mind. This is why we have to train the mind to develop the mindfulness and the alertness it's going to need to watch its actions and really see what we're doing and the results of what we're doing. Then we develop the ardency to try to do all this well.

So whatever you're encountering in terms of the Buddha's teachings, always remember: This has to do with action in one way or another. If you can figure out how the particular teaching relates to the choices you're making, that's when you get the most benefit out of it.