

## *Insight Is a Judgment Call*

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There are two factors of the path that go very closely together: right resolve and right concentration. In fact, the relationship is so close that there's a sutta where the Buddha defines mundane right resolve as resolving on renunciation, on non-ill-will, and on harmlessness; and noble right resolve as the equivalent of the first jhana. In the different accounts of how the Buddha got on the path, sometimes he says he started with right resolve, and sometimes, with right concentration. So the two are very close.

When the Buddha talks about how he moved from right resolve to right concentration in his own path, he starts off by describing how he made a value judgment about his thinking. He stepped back from his thoughts and basically asked himself two questions: Where do they come from? Where do they go? These questions are based on the realization of right view that your actions have consequences, and they come out of the mind. So you have to look into your thoughts to see what kind of actions they are, where they come from, what kind of consequences they'll have, and whether they're worth thinking or not.

This a value judgment. As the Buddha said, not only do these thoughts lead you to specific actions, but if you keep thinking about certain kinds of thoughts, they bend your mind in a particular direction. It's like putting a rut in your mind. Every time you go over that particular road, you fall into the rut. So he saw that thoughts based on sensuality, ill-will, and harmfulness would bend the mind in the wrong direction, whereas thoughts based on renunciation of sensuality, non-ill-will, i.e., goodwill, harmlessness, i.e., compassion, would bend the mind in a good direction. The first ones were not even worth the effort to think. So whatever effort went into stopping them was effort that was well spent.

He compared himself to a cowherd during the rainy season. That's the time when the rice is growing, and if the cows get into the rice there's going to be trouble. You'll be dragged to court by the owners of the rice. So the cowherd has to check the cows and beat them and make sure they stay afraid of going into the rice. But as for thoughts that were imbued with renunciation, non-ill-will, harmlessness, the Buddha said, that was like being a cowherd during the dry season. The rice has been harvested and put away, and so there's no danger for the cows. They can wander anywhere, pretty much. So the cowherd can just sit under a tree and all he has

to remember is, “Oh, the cows are over there someplace.”

It’s the same with the skillful thoughts. You see that it’s okay to think them, it’s worth the effort. Still, the Buddha realized that if you think even skillful thoughts all the time, it’s going to be tiring for the mind, so that’s when he decided to bring his mind into concentration.

That’s how you go from mundane right resolve to noble right resolve: seeing that concentration is a better place to be, a better investment of your energy.

Here again, it’s a value judgment. In fact, with the entire path, as you’re developing your right view through practicing the path, you’re getting more and more refined in your judgments as to what’s worth doing, what’s not worth doing. In terms of the mind, it’s basically an issue of what’s worth thinking. This means we have to step back from our thoughts to see clearly where they’re going.

Concentration gives us a good place to step back, and it’s a back-and-forth process. On the one hand, you have to appreciate the concentration, the rest that it offers you, and see that it’s better than the thinking. But you’re not going to see that until your concentration gets good. And your concentration’s not going to get good until you see its value. It sounds like a double bind but it’s actually pointing out that it’s going to be a complex process. You get some concentration, you learn some lessons, then you forget them. Then you get concentration again, and try to learn those lessons again, and then after a while the lessons begin to take and they begin to grow.

Which is why you shouldn’t get frustrated with the ups and downs of the practice. They’re expected. The texts don’t lay things out in terms of ups and downs. For the most part, everything’s very orderly, very neatly laid out for you from step A to step B to step C, and there’s hardly any talk about regression. But when you actually look at the stories of the monks and the nuns told in the Theragatha and Therigatha, there’s lots of back and forth. Right resolve depends on right concentration, and right concentration depends on right resolve. The two go together. To understand whether your thoughts are worth thinking or not, you have to step back from them, and you have to apply a good standard of judgment.

The whole path is a matter of developing your standards of judgment. It starts with generosity, with the realization that it’s worthwhile to give. Ajaan Lee has a nice image. He says that when you give something, it’s like squeezing the juice out of a fruit: You give the rind to the other person and you keep the juice. When you can see generosity in that way, it becomes a lot easier to be generous. It changes your ideas about how important it is to own things as

opposed to how important it is to develop qualities of mind.

The same with virtue: There are lots of things you could gain by breaking the precepts, but there comes a point when you realize they're not worth it. It's better to have the precept than to have the money that could come, say, from lying, stealing, or cheating.

You begin to see things in terms of cause and effect, actions and the results that you gain from those actions. As you develop your powers of judgment outside, you can start applying them inside the mind. And what you carry in from generosity and virtue is the realization that you've learned to enjoy abandoning unskillful qualities and developing skillful ones. This puts you in line with what are called the customs of the noble ones.

There are four all together. The first three have to do with contentment: realizing in terms of material surroundings that you don't need that much. Food, clothing, shelter: Your basic needs are pretty small, and anything beyond that is excess.

The purpose of this is to unburden yourself from the materialistic values that the world encourages, and to change your values over to delighting in abandoning unskillful qualities and delighting in developing skillful ones, which is the fourth custom of the noble ones.

And here you run up against some pretty deeply entrenched habits of the mind, the way the mind has been bent in the past.

We enjoy our anger usually, we enjoy our lust, we enjoy our desires. Sometimes we even enjoy our fear, our jealousy, our desire for revenge. And so we have to see that these things have some pretty strong bad consequences—seen in terms of the teachings on kamma—and the best way to see that, of course, is to not only keep thinking about the principal of kamma, but also to develop some space for concentration in the mind. Have some confidence that you can do it.

One of the qualities of the second jhana is assurance. In the beginning, you have to have the confidence that, yes, you can do this. You begin to focus in on your object and you adjust it here, and you adjust it there. Is it quite right yet? Well, no, it's not quite right. Well, keep adjusting. There's always a bit of doubt, and a bit of uncertainty in the directed thought and evaluation. But finally you decide, "Okay, I'm going to settle in," and you hold on. At first, it's like holding on to a ship that's being pulled through the ocean really fast and you're just holding on by your fingernails. There's a little bit of fear that you could fall off at any time, but then you begin to realize you have a stronger, stronger, and stronger hold, and you can do it.

Then when you've got that sense of pleasure inside, you can look at the allure of things that

would pull you away, and you can look at their drawbacks. And you're looking from a much fairer, or a much more objective point of view, but still you're engaging in right resolve, looking at your thoughts and seeing where they come from, where they go, instead of asking yourself how much you enjoyed that particular thought, how much that thought is really your thought, the kind of thought you would think where you're affirming your identity or whatever else, whatever other pleasure you may get out of certain kinds of unskillful thinking. You step back and say, "I don't know if I want to go there," and you have to realize it's good to have that choice. It's good to have that option to step back.

But when you step back from your anger, you see that you're not simply becoming a person of niceness who gets stepped all over. You're actually putting yourself in a stronger position. If you show your anger, people know how to get to you. Sometimes we think, "I shouldn't show my anger because I have to be a nice person," but the Buddha's not telling you to get past your anger for the sake of niceness. Strategically, not showing your anger is a better position to be in. At the very least, when you don't show your anger, then no one can know when they got to you.

I've been reading about the feud between Voltaire and Rousseau. Rousseau kept opening himself up, and Voltaire was vicious in finding and exploiting Rousseau's weak spots. Rousseau kept showing his anger and petulance, and Voltaire would keep digging into those openings and turning them into open wounds. So that was a case where Rousseau would have been a lot better off if he hadn't shown his anger. Voltaire wouldn't have known where to hit him.

So don't think of overcoming your anger as a kind of weakness. It's a victory, as the Buddha said. Better than a victory over a thousand people is victory over yourself, and that includes victory over your anger. So learn how to see that. Change the perception in your mind that sees anger as a strength, and learn to see it as a weakness. When you don't show your anger to other people, they don't know how to get to you. Think of it in that way.

So go through all the various perceptions that give some allure to your anger, or allure to your lust. For some reason, we seem to think that when we're feeling lust we become attractive, but when you see other people doing that, you realize how ridiculous it is. This is where it's good to look at other people's thinking and emotions as they show them, and say, "It's pretty ridiculous." Then turn around and say, "Well, I've got the same stuff in myself."

That's what the Buddha's talking about when he tells you to be mindful of mind states both inside and outside. You look at the mind states other people are showing and say, "Oops, I've

got that, too. I've got to work on that." This enables you to step back from your thoughts, both through concentration and through discernment. In every case, it's a value judgment. Insight is always a judgment call, and the practice is designed to improve your values, improve your sense of judgment, so that you can finally judge where you're causing yourself unnecessary suffering and why it's better to stop. That's the best judgment call of all.