

## *What's Worth Doing?*

*December 25, 2018*

When the Buddha gave his first instructions to Rahula, he was teaching Rahula a basic principle of wisdom: that discernment is a process of judging which things are worth doing, which things are not. That principle applies all the way through the practice. The answers get more refined as we go through the practice, but it's always important to keep that question in mind.

The mind is primarily active. The passage we chanted just now talks about the eye and the ear and the nose and the tongue and the body being on fire: Well, they're not on fire on their own. They're on fire because of the mind. The things we see, the things we hear and smell: They're on fire because of what we're looking for. We're constantly out looking for something. After all, this mind is attached to this body that needs to feed, and that needs to act in order to feed. It lives in its actions, but it doesn't really see them.

This is why the first principle of wisdom is learning how to step back and look at your actions, looking at your intentions to begin with. Because that's where the action begins. Ask yourself, "Where is this going?" The Buddha would then give you various instructions on which kinds of intentions were worth going with and which were not. In the beginning, the standard is simply this: If it's going to harm you or harm others—or both—don't do it.

The four noble truths basically take that principle further. Look into the mind. Is it worth causing suffering for yourself? And the answer is that in some cases it is—if the suffering is the suffering involved with the path. After all, everything that's fabricated involves some stress. And every state of becoming, where you take on an identity in a particular world of experience, is going to involve some stress and suffering, too. Now, you need to do that in order to create the path. So the actions of the path are actions that are worth doing. As for actions that lead to a suffering that's not connected with the path—the different types of craving—those are not.

So we've got a principle here. As the Buddha said, his main duty as a teacher was to give us a sense of what should and should not be done. And he did that

duty through many different levels of subtlety—from a level that's blatant enough for a young boy to understand, all the way to the final acts of a person about to be an arahant. It's a question of what to do, what to hold on to, what to let go of.

And it's a selective letting-go. If you let go all at once in the very beginning, as Ajaan Lee says, you let go like a pauper. You don't have your car, you don't have your wealth, and you say, "I'll just let go of them." But you don't have them to use. You can't do anything with that letting go.

Whereas if you develop that wealth and then learn how not to carry it around, it's there when you need it and you can share it with others. The pauper who lets go can't share anything with others at all. But the wise person who has developed good qualities, developed good skills, can share them. So the amount of stress and suffering that goes into following the path is really worth it.

Just make sure you don't get waylaid, particularly with sensuality. There are four kinds of clinging: clinging to sensuality, to habits and practices, to views, and to ideas of the self. Of the four, three of them actually have a role to play in the path. Sensuality is the one that doesn't. Sensuality, of course, is the mind's fascination with thinking about sensual pleasures—lustful thoughts or simply thoughts about food, clothing, shelter, how you'd like this to be that way or that to be this way. The amount of time we spend fantasizing about these things, dressing them up before and after, keeps pulling the mind in the wrong direction. It gives us the wrong idea of what's worth doing and what's not worth doing.

As for habits and practices, any practice that's in line with the path is something you should hold on to. When you're practicing concentration, there is a holding on. I read a book a while back, written by a monk, saying that because the effort in concentration requires that you be dedicated and have a strong sense of motivation to think about yourself in the future benefitting from this, it all involves a sense of self. It involves a lot of work to build it. And as we know, the author said, the Buddha said that a sense of self is bad, so you shouldn't try to create concentration. Right concentration has to happen on its own, and right effort is basically the effort of no effort—an attitude that short-circuits the path entirely. Again, you're letting go like a pauper. You don't have concentration, so you let it go, and you're no better off than you were before.

Concentration, effort: These are habits we need because as you make the effort to get the mind to settle down, you learn a lot of things about it that you wouldn't learn otherwise. You see subtle things moving around that you wouldn't have noticed otherwise. It's like casting a light down into a murky pool. You begin to see that there are little animals down there that you wouldn't have seen otherwise. So whatever clinging, whatever stress is needed to get the mind into good, solid state of concentration and keep it there, it's all to the good. It's all worth it.

Right view, too, is worth holding onto: right view about the precepts, about the Dhamma, the Vinaya, about the practice. These are things you have to hold onto. And as for your sense of self, there are times when it's very, very useful to have a sense of self. Because when you're developing the path, you need to be confident that you're capable of doing it, and that you're going to benefit from it. Those are two kinds of self that you need to develop: the self that can produce the path, and the self that will benefit from it. Otherwise, the mind won't be motivated to do any of the practices. Then, gradually, even those senses of self peel away as the different parts of the path get perfected.

At stream entry, your virtue is perfected, and so you don't need any sense of yourself around your virtues. You don't exalt yourself over others. You don't create a sense of who you are around the precepts. They're just there. But there are still other parts of the path that you have to work on, which is why there is a lingering sense of self all the way up to the end of the path, because you still have to develop your concentration, you still have to develop your discernment.

The work of developing does require a state of becoming. In Pali, this is obvious. *Bhava* is the word for becoming. *Bhavana*, the word for meditation, means developing. So as you meditate, you develop a state of becoming. You take on an identity. But you take it on when it's worth it. You let it go when it's done its duty.

So all the way through, you're making value judgments as to what's worth doing and what's not. The four noble truths are value judgments. The three characteristics are used in the context of the four noble truths, to help you see clearly when you're doing something that's not really in your best interest, and then you can stop. You can let go. But as for the parts of the path that you still

have to develop, you still need to have clinging and even some conceit—conceit in the sense that “I can do this.”

And you hold onto the path. Remember the image of the raft. You go across the river and you don't let go of the raft until you're on the other side. Which means that when you're doing concentration like this, you really do need to hold onto your object. You can't let the sense of comfort that arises lift you away. As the breath gets more and more subtle, you still have to stay with the sense of the body. Remember that your awareness of the body, even though it may seem still, is a kind of energy. Your awareness of the solidity and the warmth and the coolness of the body all get filtered through your sense of the breath energy. This is why, as the sense of comfort grows in the meditation, you should try to expand your awareness to fill the body and maintain that perception of breath. Because that's what keeps you in proper concentration, keeps you alert. In fact, all the way through the different states of jhana, you have to hold onto the perception of your object. You can't let it go. It's simply that your sense of what it is, your sense of the breath or space or whatever, will grow more and more refined.

Even here, there's a value judgment. What kind of breathing is worth doing? What kind of breathing after a while gets too heavy, too gross?—gross in the sense of being too laborious or too strong. And when is it right to do strong breathing? You're perfecting your powers of judgment. That's what discernment is all about.

Ultimately, you get to a place where you don't have to judge anything anymore. You've arrived. Because originally, your powers of judgment are there to decide, “What should I do next? What should I do next?” This is the question that eats, eats, eats away the back of the mind. After you've done the best that can be done, though, you can get to a place where you can let that question go. Then there's no need for judgment. But that's because it's obvious that what you've found is really worth it. It was more than worth all the effort that went into the path.

So try to be conscious of the fact that you are passing judgment, you are making distinctions between what's skillful and what's not, what's worthwhile, what's not. This is *not* delusion. Some people will tell you that when you're thinking, it's delusion; when the mind is not thinking it's not deluded. Well,

when the mind is not thinking it can be extremely deluded. But if it's thinking rightly, it can keep itself on the path.

So starting with the teachings to Rahula on the question of deciding what's worth doing and what's not worth doing, try to use the Buddha's teachings to give yourself better and better answers to that question.