

Issues

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When we live in the world, we're sharing a becoming with other beings. You know how beings are defined—they're defined by their attachments. And they have to feed. This applies to other beings; this applies to us—as long as we take on the identity of a being. Which means that there are going to be conflicts. And there are a lot of conflicts that, the more you get involved with them, the more they entrench you in this level of becoming.

The Buddha saw that the way out was, in many cases, not to get involved with the conflicts. He taught what he called the middle way. We know the most famous formulation of that in his first sermon, where he found the middle way between commitment to sensual pleasure and commitment to self-torture, saying that neither commitment was noble. He proposed the noble eightfold path as the middle way out.

Now, this is not a *middling* way, halfway between self-torture and sensual indulgence. Instead, it cuts through. You might think of the number field. If you ever took math, you know the number field is defined by two axes: There's the x axis going left and right, and the y axis going up and down, and the two axes meet at their zero points. You might think of the question of sensual indulgence versus self-torture as being on the left-to-right axis, but with the Buddha coming in from the up-and-down: looking at things in a totally different way, framing his questions in different ways, arriving at a middle way that cuts across the x axis, going up and down.

We see this approach, however, not only in the first sermon, but also in many other talks where the Buddha points out two extremes. There's the line running from the extreme that everything is a multiplicity to the extreme that everything is a oneness. He says the middle way out of that is dependent co-arising. There are the two extremes of saying that the person who does the action is the one who's going to receive the results, as opposed to say that when a person does an action, somebody else will receive the results. He said the middle way out of that is to see how both views are a result of contact.

This gives you an idea of what he's doing when he goes along the up-and-down axis. Instead of looking at the content of either extreme on the left-to-right, he asks, how are these extremes formulated? How do they come about? What's the process? And how can you look at the process in a way where you don't get sucked into that either/or?

In another place he calls this "seeing what has become, *as* what has become"—in other words, seeing things as *processes*. This means looking at views, not so much in terms of their content, but in terms of how they're formed, and how they're clung to—and how you can develop dispassion for the process by which they're formed or clung to.

Regardless of the extremes, the process by which they're formed and clung to is the same on either side. So rather than getting involved in which side is right and which side is wrong, he's basically saying: The whole controversy is built out of clinging, so it's going to entail suffering.

So it's good to look at the various issues that you face as you go through the day to see: How many of them are issues where you really do have to get involved? How many of them are issues that are forced on you, or your standard way of thinking forces on you? Ask yourself, "What's going on here? What's the *process* by which this either/or was formed? And how do we cut it through?"

Now, you have to be selective in how you do this, because there are controversies where you do have to get involved, where you do have responsibilities. The Buddha himself, when he set out the Vinaya, said there are dispute issues and there are accusation issues. Disputes are over what's right and what's wrong, what's Dharma, what's not Dhamma, what's Vinaya, what's not Vinaya. Accusation issues: Did so-and-so break one of the principles? And if so, or if not, how do you find out? What do you do when you reach a verdict?

The Buddha sets out the processes by which you should settle these issues. You don't just say, "Well, it's a matter of right and wrong. I'm above right and wrong, so I'll just go home." That's irresponsible. When an issue comes up as to what really is Dhamma, what's not, what's Vinaya, what's not, the monks especially, have to be responsible for looking into it. When someone's been accused of breaking one of the principles, we have to look into it.

And you look at the Buddha himself: It wasn't the case that he avoided every debate. There were cases when people would come looking for trouble. There was the brahman who came and said, "So, this teaching of yours, what do you teach?" And the Buddha could tell he was looking for a fight, so the Buddha said, basically, "The sort of doctrine whereby people don't get involved in useless debates." And the brahman left.

There were other cases like that, too: people coming to see the Buddha just for the sake of wanting to contradict whatever he said. So he had them look at their motivation. In some cases, they were intellectually blind, and they were not going to look at their motivation, in which case he had nothing to do with them. In other cases, though, he was able to get them to do some introspection, to see: Where does this conflict come from? Where does this *desire* for conflict come from? Is it leading to a good place? Those were the best cases.

Then there were other cases where he simply engaged in debate, and established what was right and what was wrong. Which means that you have to look at the question of controversies and show some discernment: Which ones do you get involved with to figure out who's right and who's wrong? Which ones do you try to cut through with the up-and-down axis?

This applies not only to controversies outside, but also—and especially—to controversies inside your own mind. Sometimes there are issues where your mind is driving you crazy, and you have to step back to ask yourself: What gets resolved? What gets accomplished by

answering this question? And where does this question come from: What kind of motivation? What kind of belief?

You can chase things down dependent co-arising: What kind of *fabrication* went into this? What kind of *name and form*? In other words, your *intentions*, things you're paying *attention* to. What are you *clinging* to? What are you *craving*? That framework puts things on the up-and-down axis, with which you can release yourself from a lot of issues.

Because one of things that defines this world, this state of becoming in which we live, is the issues. There are a lot of them that, the more you get entangled in them, the more they lead you to further and further becoming. But after all, we're here to get *beyond* further becoming, so we have to figure out which ones are the ones that are purely entangling, and which are the ones where we have to be responsible. The Buddha himself, after his awakening, had to settle a lot of issues, but he was able to do it in such a way that he wasn't entangled in any becoming. That's a skill.

And his example is a challenge. If he avoided *all* issues, that would be easy: just avoid issues. But that's not the example he set. You have to figure out which issues are worthwhile and which ones are not; how to deal responsibly with the worthwhile issues, and how to take that middle-way approach to the ones that are not—cut right through the middle. That way you can live in the world and be responsible, but minimize entanglement.

They say that the Buddha had an *all-around eye*: He looked at issues from all-around. And a good part of our practice is learning how to look at our own issues in the same way—all-around. Not just left or right, but think about up or down, and then make the best decision that you can come to, based on looking at things from an all-around way.