

Judicious vs. Judgmental

May, 2003 - Ven. Thanissaro Bhikkhu

One of the most difficult but necessary skills we need to develop as meditators is learning how to be judicious without being judgmental. And as a preliminary step to developing that skill, it's good to reflect on the difference between the two.

Being judgmental is basically an effort to get rid of something we don't understand and probably don't *want* to understand. We see something we don't like and we try to dismiss it, to stamp it out without taking the time to understand it. We're impatient. Whatever we're being judgmental about, we just want to get rid of it quickly.

Being judicious, however, requires patience together with understanding. A judicious choice is one you've made after understanding all the options, all the sides of a question. That way your choice is based on knowledge, not on greed, aversion, or delusion.

This is why the Buddha, in his analysis of the four truths, said that our task with the regard to the first truth — the truth of suffering or stress — is to comprehend it. All too often we treat pain in the same way we treat anything we don't like: We want to get rid of it as fast as possible without taking the time to understand it. So what we're learning as we practice is how not to be judgmental about the things we don't like inside ourselves. We develop the patience and the skill we need in order to stop and take a good long look at these things so that we can deal with them judiciously, so we can deal with them through understanding. We give them space so that we can watch them, can understand them, so that when we finally decide that they really are unskillful, that we really don't want to have them going on in our mind, we can get rid of them neatly, effectively.

The problem with being judgmental is that it's not effective. We try to stamp out things here and they go springing up someplace else, as in the old movie, *The Thing*. The Thing would go underground and suddenly spring up someplace else. If you cut off one head here, one identity here, its underground roots and tentacles would spring up with a new, even more horrific identity someplace else. The same thing happens when we try to get rid of anything in the mind when we don't understand its roots, don't understand where it's

coming from.

Being judicious, though, is more effective. It's more precise. We see what's really skillful, what's really unskillful in the mind, and we learn how to disentangle the two. Often our skillful and unskillful habits get entangled. The things we don't like within ourselves actually do have some good in them, but we don't notice it. We focus instead on what we don't like, or what we're afraid of, and we end up trying to stamp it all out, the good along with the bad.

So this is why we meditate: to step back a bit, to watch things patiently so that we can see them for what they are and deal with them effectively. Our concentration practice gives us a comfortable center in our awareness where we can rest, where we feel less threatened by things. When we feel less threatened and less oppressed, we have the resilience to be more patient, to look into what's going on in the mind, and to develop the proper attitudes toward what is skillful and what isn't.

This is where the four sublime attitudes come in. Back in the 70's I read a book about Buddhism whose author tried to organize everything around the four noble truths but couldn't figure how the four sublime attitudes fit into the framework of the four truths. They just didn't seem to connect anyplace at all, so the author ended up treating them as an entirely separate topic. But actually the four sublime attitudes underlie the whole practice. They're the reason the Buddha focused his teaching on the four noble truths. You need a sense of goodwill to be even interested in the question of trying to understand suffering, because you want to find an effective way of dealing with it. You want to be rid of suffering, to experience wellbeing, precisely because you have goodwill for yourself and for others. So as meditators we try to use that attitude, that desire, as a way of developing the center we need in order to work toward that wellbeing from a position of strength. If you don't have that basic sense of goodwill, you'll have a hard time trying to stir up the energy needed to master the concentration, to keep with the breath, to keep coming back to the breath no matter how many times you wander off.

Now, you may want to be at a more advanced stage than trying to rein in the mind. You want to sit down and *Bung*, there it is: the first jhana. But when it doesn't happen quickly you get frustrated. So put that frustration aside. Put away all the pride and the shadow side of pride, which is the shame. Just put those things aside, and remind yourself that this is the way things are, this is where you are, and be willing just to keep coming back, coming back, to stick with those simple tasks. The people who master any kind of skill are the ones who are willing to step back and master the simple steps, to practice them over

and over again, because it's in doing the simple steps and being observant that you learn many of your most important lessons.

These steps are not just a mechanical process that you have to bulldoze your way through as quickly as possible. You have to pay attention to what you're doing even when things are not going well. Pay attention to how the mind slips off, pay attention to how you bring it back, and you'll learn an awful lot right there. Underlying all this has to be an attitude of good-natured goodwill. If there's a sense of frustration, remember that you're here because of goodwill, not for the sake of frustration, not for the sake of finding some new thing to beat yourself over the head about or to be judgmental about. You're here for the sake of goodwill, for the sake of giving the mind a place where it can settle in and be at ease.

Develop compassion for yourself. Think of all the suffering you could be causing yourself if you weren't meditating. Think of all the suffering you might be causing others if you weren't meditating. This helps to remind you that when things aren't going all that well in the meditation, it's still a lot better than most of the things that people do in their lives. It's a good, beneficial use of your time.

Then develop an attitude of sympathetic joy, appreciating the happiness you can develop through the practice, appreciating the happiness of others. Of all the four sublime attitudes, sympathetic joy gets the least press. It's often the hardest to develop. There seem to be voices in our heads that resent happiness — either the happiness of other people or, if other people have resented our happiness, we've picked up their voices someplace and can even be distrustful of our own happiness. So we have to counter those voices by realizing that there is nothing wrong with happiness. It comes through our actions. If the happiness that someone is experiencing right now doesn't seem to be deserved in terms of his or her present actions, there must be something in the past to account for it. At the same time, remind yourself that an attitude of resentment doesn't help you or anyone else at all. Sometimes it seems unfair that some people are happy and others are not. But for the time being, just put the question of fairness or unfairness aside. Wherever there's a sense of wellbeing in the mind, learn how to appreciate that sense of wellbeing. It has its uses.

Most people, when they experience happiness, get complacent, which is one of the reasons why the quest for happiness is often branded as selfish. People enjoying power or beauty or wealth tend to get complacent and as a result of their complacency start doing very unskillful things. But if you

approach happiness from the attitude of someone who's practicing as the Buddha taught, there is a use for happiness. It's a quality in the mind that, if properly used, can bring about peace of mind. After all, the concentration we're looking for in our practice has to have some basis in wellbeing. Otherwise the mind wouldn't be able to stay here. So if you learn how to use that sense of wellbeing properly, without complacency, it has no drawbacks.

The Buddha, when he was practicing austerities all those years and years in the wilderness prior to his Awakening, had a very unhealthy attitude toward happiness. He was afraid of it. He was afraid of pleasure, afraid that it would lead to all kinds of detrimental things in the mind. Only by reflecting carefully on the sense of pleasure in jhana and realizing that there was nothing to fear, that there were no drawbacks in that type of pleasure, was he able to give himself wholeheartedly to the practice of jhana.

It's good to remember that whatever issues we have in the practice, the Buddha went through them all. It's not that there's something especially wrong with us. These are natural human tendencies. The Buddha was a human being and had to overcome natural human tendencies, too. So we're in good company. We've got his example to show that they *can* be overcome, and his assurance that we as human beings have what it takes to do it.

Finally there's the attitude of equanimity, which is useful in many ways. When we're working here in the meditation and the results aren't coming as fast as we'd like, equanimity teaches patience. It reminds us that the principle of action often requires that things take time. If you're working on something that takes time, try to develop equanimity. That makes it easier to be patient. Realize that things don't necessarily have to go the way you want them to right away. When you're willing to admit what the situation actually is, then you can actually act more effectively with it. Again, this is a matter of being patient, taking the time to understand what's going on.

So when we work at these sublime attitudes and bring them to the meditation, we find that they create a sense of patience, a sense of wellbeing, an ability to work at a task that takes time. Sometimes the practice seems to require that we do mindless things over and over again: Just bring the mind back to the breath, bring the mind back to the breath. Why? Don't ask questions right now, just bring the mind back to the breath. But be observant while you do it, because as you catch the mind going off, you can learn some very interesting things. You come to a point where you can see the mind beginning to move and you have the choice to go with it or not. Once you catch yourself at that point, then it's a lot easier to stay with the breath. You've

learned an important lesson about how to read the movements of your mind.

The same principle applies to how you bring the mind back when you realize it's wandered off. Do you bring it back in a judgmental way or in a more judicious way? If you find that your attitude is judgmental, can you find other ways of simply bringing it back without all the extra baggage? Just very matter-of-factly bring it back and leave it at that. Just this simple process in and of itself teaches you a lot of lessons about the difference between being judgmental and being judicious. In other words, you try to understand, you try to look for patterns, so that the way you order the mind around or try to create some sense of control in here is actually effective.

The reason control freaks have a bad reputation is because they're ineffective. They're judgmental, they're not judicious in how they control things. Actually, control isn't a bad thing. But — as with being judicious — it has to be done skillfully. And that takes time, requires powers of observation. Watch what you're doing, watch the results. If things don't work, admit the fact and try something else. When you do this, you find it easier and easier to tell the difference being judgmental and being judicious. At the same time, you start getting better results from your meditation, because you've taken the time to watch, to observe, to understand what's going on.

One of the main problems in modern life is that people have so little time. When they meditate, they want to cram as much of their meditation as possible into their little bits and pieces of spare time. Of course that aggravates the whole problem of being judgmental. So keep reminding yourself that meditation is a long-term project. When you have a sense of that long arc of time, it's a lot easier to sit back and work very carefully at the basic steps. It's like learning any skill. If, in one afternoon, you want to gain all the skills you're going to need to play tennis, you end up doing them all very sloppily and won't get the results you want. But if you realize that this may take time, you can work on one skill at a time: How do you keep your eye on the ball? How long is your backswing? Take the skill apart step by step by step and be willing to work on small things like this bit by bit by bit so that you really understand them deep down in your bones. That way, when the time comes to make choices, they'll be judicious choices, not judgmental choices, and you'll get the results you want.