

NEWSLETTER
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RUNNING IT BY THE PRECEPTS

As promised, I wanted to continue my thoughts on meditation, and this time I would like to write a little about judgmentalism. It is one of those mental habits about which I wrote last time, that can be detrimental to meditation practice.

So what's wrong with judgmentalism? We need to make judgments about things to survive, right? On one level, yes, of course. For example, we need to discriminate between fresh food and spoiled food to keep ourselves and others from getting sick. The problem arises when we allow ourselves to stray into preferences, a form of clinging, which is the cause of suffering according to the Second of the Four Noble Truths. The difference between simple discrimination: the taking in of information; and preferences: the expression of the selfish-self, can be very subtle. This is why it is so important to have a regular meditation practice and a deep, practical familiarity with the Precepts. These guide us in listening to our hearts, in truly getting in touch with our own Buddha Nature. Don't misunderstand me, there is nothing really wrong with preferences. They simply tend to lead us into suffering, especially when we *indulge* them, when we allow ourselves to be controlled by the thoughts: "I must have...", or "I can not stand...". It is fine to appreciate something; however, clinging to it, grasping after it causes suffering. It is simply inescapable that our clinging to getting what we want and avoiding what we don't want will create suffering for ourselves and others, if for no other reason, than because we will often be unsuccessful. It is our delusion that makes us think that this holding onto what we like/want, and pushing away what we don't like/want can bring us lasting happiness.

Dealing with preferences can feel overwhelming. Most of us have *many* of them. And some of us may not be at all sure that we want to give them up, if that is what is called for. Don't worry. It's all right. We are not expected to begin with no problems. We are not expected to get rid of all of our preferences; in fact we are not expected to get *rid* of anything. We are simply asked to be willing to try to begin, and continue, the process of training. That is truly all that is necessary. Asking any more than that of ourselves may be getting caught in judging our training.

By following the path of training, we eventually become aware of things that we need to do something about. This awareness arises naturally out of our meditation practice. When we see something clearly that obviously causes suffering, then we find that we truly want to do something about it and, through meditation, we eventually see what it is we need to do. Until we see it, there is nothing that we can do about it, and that is not a problem, as long as we continue to work on trying to be willing to see. With a regular meditation practice and a willingness to open ourselves, we can become familiar with this ongoing process of an arising awareness of a problem, and the eventual resulting desire to do something about it. This familiarity allows faith to grow and helps us to persevere.

The selfish-self is very subtle, so we need to use the Precepts, with which we must develop a daily familiarity, as a standard for "judging" whether we are *indulging* our preferences or not. We do this by simply asking ourselves if whatever action or discrimination we are contemplating may somehow involve killing, or stealing, or coveting, or lying, etc., and if it is helping us to *cease from evil, do only good, and do good for others*. In other words, this process is simply "running it by the Precepts." [For a fuller description of the Precepts, you may wish to click on the link on our Home Page.] And then we do our best to learn to trust our "gut feelings" for an answer. Since our gut feelings can be selfish and mislead us, we always need to be willing to look at the consequences of any action or discrimination that we make; and for larger choices, it can be good to take refuge in a teacher before we act. If the consequences of our actions lead us deeper into training, into keeping the Precepts, into becoming more patient and compassionate, then we may well have been listening to our hearts.

Over time experience in this helps us to be aware of when we are listening to our hearts and when we are not, and thus this also deepens our faith and helps us to persevere.

When we feel reasonably certain that a contemplated action—of thought, word, or deed—is Preceptual, then we may go ahead, while always being willing to be aware of, and to learn from, the consequences. We may come to see from those consequences that we weren't, in fact, listening to our heart. That's OK. That's the process of training. We just add this new information to the hopper, and then we do it all again. And we will continue to make mistakes—and suffer the often painful consequences of those mistakes. Again, that's OK. Being willing to persevere even though we know that we will continue to make mistakes—making mistakes *and learning from them*, in light of meditation and the Precepts—is essentially what training is. We just need to keep at it. In my experience judgmentalism can get in the way, causing us to lose faith in the process, to lose faith in our ability to benefit from the Buddha-Dharma. It simply reinforces old habits of thought, word, and deed. However much we may believe otherwise, judgmentalism simply isn't helpful.

In the final analysis, dropping judgmentalism, is so important because, as my Master wrote: "Know that NOTHING stands between you and the Lord except your own opinion of yourself."*

Rev. Rokuzan Kroenke

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