

‘What is it Good to Do?’

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Today we are going to look at making decisions, at how we determine what it is good to do in practice, in daily life. We have to start by examining how we function in the world and we have been looking at aspects of this over the past two days. We know that if we rely just on the discriminatory mind, that leads to suffering. When I act on the basis of self, when I act on what I want, this hardens the sense of ‘me versus you,’ the dualistic view of the world. This brings us into conflict with the rest of the world, because everyone else is doing the same thing. So we become defensive and this keeps us feeling separate and isolated. This is painful, it’s the basis of suffering. But the selfish self doesn’t have to be the dominant force in our life. Fear and desire don’t need to drive our actions. If meditation is the basis of our life, this gives us a different perspective on each situation that arises and it brings us into a different relationship with the world.

As Buddhist meditators, we come to act on the basis of ‘What is it good to do?’ This question encapsulates a pivotal point of practice and, as we go on, this becomes our basis for

action in life. In any situation, it becomes the basic question that we ask. This expresses *zazen* and manifests our understanding. At each point of choice or decision in our life, how do we step forward to act, without stepping out of meditation? How do we decide what to do in a difficult situation—for example, if we're not sure whether we should say something about someone, a colleague perhaps, because we know that if we do speak out it's likely to have serious repercussions?

Some useful questions to ask

Let's start by looking at some practical aspects, by considering some questions that it can be helpful to ask. These questions don't mean that we should be analysing the situation in meditation. These are questions that we might ask ourselves outside of formal meditation. They're not meant to be a checklist, but asking these questions may help to open out the situation, to give a different perspective, beyond our constricted view and our own concerns.

What is least likely to cause harm or suffering here?

Or we may ask "What will cause least harm?" Re-phrasing the question in this sort of way can give us a slightly different perspective on 'What is it good to do?', which may be useful.

What is going to be most helpful here?

What is going to move things forward here, whether for me or for others?

What is the compassionate thing to do here?

We need to consider not just the compassionate thing for the other person in the situation, but also for me. But we have to take care that it doesn't turn into 'me being compassionate', or 'I am magnanimous.'

Is this personal?

Or it might be helpful to ask, "Is there something here that is eating away at me?" It can be very difficult to distinguish the voice of the self, but in the talk a couple of days ago, we looked at the warning signs, the characteristics of the discriminatory mind: the hard edge, the critical views, the driven quality, and an excitable, emotional way of responding to the situation.

Am I investing heavily in one particular outcome?

Can I hold all possible outcomes lightly and equally? If I realise that I am strongly favouring one particular side of the argument, that may be a good area to explore.

Where is acceptance in this?

Is there a softness present? Can I see 'it is as it is'? : as we discussed yesterday—this is a whole area of training in itself.

How might my conditioning be contributing to this decision?

On the one hand, if I act in this situation, where is that coming from? Are there things from my past, or ideas of the type of person that I think I am, that are influencing my decision? On the other hand, if I don't act, where is *that* coming from? Is it arising from fear, inadequacy, or a wish for quietism? It's not that we get involved in a detailed analysis or go search-

ing for how these sorts of factors are influencing us, but if we do see them at work, it can be useful and it warns us to take care.

In this area, it is helpful for us to recognise our tendencies. If I usually tend to express my opinions and to be quite forceful, can I, on this occasion, err on the side of not saying anything? Alternatively, if I generally tend not to speak up, can I err on the side of saying something, in the current situation? In other words, am I willing to step outside my comfort zone? This doesn't mean that every time I must act against type. But it does help if we can acknowledge our resistances—this gives us a broader perspective.

Physically, where does the response seem to be coming from?

I find that I can often feel a difference, physically. On the one hand, there is acting from somewhere 'out there', i.e. from a place about two feet in front of my body, which seems to be drawing me on to act in habitual ways. Then there is acting from 'in here' from the centre of my being, and to do that I have to take a metaphorical step back, breathe and centre myself, which helps me to come back to meditation.

The most important question is probably, "Is there a Middle Way here?"

So often, a decision becomes polarised, into either/or, when actually there is a Middle Way. If we can get opinions out of the way, see the whole situation as it is and have zazen as our basis, then frequently we find that there is middle ground. In fact, so often is this the case that perhaps the question we should be asking is, "*What is the Middle Way here?*" In the

example that I mentioned earlier, where we're not sure whether we should say something about a colleague, perhaps we come to realise that we don't necessarily need to talk to the boss, but instead there is someone else with whom we can have a quiet word informally about the situation.

The language used to frame the decision

How we frame the decision in our minds, the language that we use, is important, as this affects how we engage with the issue.

Is there a suggestion of blame?

We can all recognise how different it feels when we say that "The bucket was knocked over," rather than, "So-and-so knocked the bucket over."

Are we demanding that others see things as we do?

Are we looking for others to agree with us and reassure us that we are right?

Do we want a particular outcome?

Are we framing things in such a way as to skew the outcome? Instead, can I just offer my contribution and trust the outcome?

Talking it over with someone else

Putting our views and concerns into words and getting feedback and advice is a very important aspect in the decision-

making process. It offers us a different viewpoint and can help us to see a bigger picture and become aware of any blind-spots that we may have. In this regard though, are we willing to ask someone who is likely to have a different take on the situation, or do we only tend to talk with people who will probably agree with us and back us up?

After the practicalities are considered, zazen is the basis for our decision

It is meditation that gives us the best sense of the next step forward. In saying that, we do not exclude rational thinking. Our preferences and inclinations, the views and opinions that we looked at a couple of days ago, they are all part of the picture. It might actually be good to draw up a list of pros and cons, to see the different points written in black and white. But when we come to sit, we offer this type of analysing into the meditation and let it go.

In sitting with the decision, much more is involved than just the practicalities, the rational aspects. We sit within the whole situation and trust that something deeper can invest the process. If it is time for a meditation period, then we don't want to be thinking about the decision that is occupying us, to keep going over and over it in our minds. We can just ask the question, "What should I do in this situation?" and then let it go and trust to the meditation. Thoughts on the issue will keep coming up, but we can let them go, pass through. They arise and pass. We can say, "I'm not going to get involved with all of this right now—this is a meditation period and for the next 30 minutes I am going to do things differently." We can be with the feelings,

such as anxiety and agitation, that are associated with this issue for us and recognise the discomfort. We sit with that discomfort, which is an incredibly difficult thing to do. We can watch how we try to squirm away, how we want to get lost in thoughts and distraction. But we keep coming back to here and now. We can be still and keep an open heart within all that is going on.

In *zazen*, we sit in the heart of fear and desire, without letting the hard edge drive us to act. The thoughts pass through and they do quieten down. We sit with the feelings and see that they too come and go—they are found to be insubstantial and they can dissolve. Eventually it does not matter if the feelings are there or not.

Acceptance is a key aspect in all of this, acceptance both of the circumstances of my life right now and of how I am. I might wish that I didn't have to make this decision, I would rather things were different to how they are now. But, despite that, I can turn towards what life is presenting and be willing for everything to be as it is.

It is important that we don't try to separate ourselves from the present moment, from the reality of current circumstances. There is nothing solid that can be separated off. We just keep offering ourselves to the meditation and giving ourselves completely to it—then there can be a spaciousness to the meditation. As we keep on doing this, it seems that the central point, 'me', becomes less important. Meditation is about letting go of being me: what makes me 'me' in this moment, all the thoughts, feelings, memories etc. And instead it is just being—being part of existence—and that includes the thoughts and the feelings etc., but they're no longer the whole picture.

Then we can step forward and act from here in daily life. In this way, living becomes less about me. From meditation flows action, right action. And this is important, because it's not about quietism. Our lives become an expression of compassion—we want to help others, because we are aware of a bigger picture and we know that it's not just about me. From here, a sense of 'What is good to do?' presents itself.

To act or not to act

We have to take care not to cling to needing to act. Actualising our understanding is not equivalent to acting. We express zazen by sitting on our cushion as much as by acting. Great Master Dōgen in the *Eihei Koroku* (Dharma Hall Discourse 24) says:

Each movement, each stillness is not other than the Dharma of all Buddhas, so do not act carelessly or casually. ¹

We don't need to rush ourselves unnecessarily to make a decision. So often we put ourselves under pressure with self-imposed time-frames, perhaps because we just want to get it over with. Sometimes we might act because it feels better if we're doing something. It can be helpful if we recognise whether we have a tendency to 'like to get things done', or whether we 'don't like to cause a fuss.' Wherever our comfort zone is in this area, we can be willing to push the boundary.

We have to beware of being paralysed into not deciding. This can be a problem particularly if we feel that there is only

one right decision in this situation and then we don't trust our ability to find it.

We need to take care too not to just go along with what the world expects us to do. We have to be willing to swim against the current, if necessary. This may mean that we don't act, that we don't go demanding revenge, crusading on the side of the wronged, if to do so is really just 'jumping on the bandwagon.'

Ultimately, we have to trust our best sense and make a choice. Often this means that we feel our way forward and we keep listening and adjusting our response accordingly. Flashes of 'certainty' tend to be infrequent. Most of the time we have to edge forward, listening to any niggles, trying to be aware of what is going on in the periphery of our vision. To do this, we have to be still, we have to keep meditating.

Sometimes, though, the decision has to be clear-cut, because something definite is needed and there seems to be no middle ground. In the example that I mentioned earlier, perhaps I come to realise that I do have to speak out about my colleague and I am fairly certain that when I do all hell will break loose. Well, if it must done, then I turn towards it. Usually, if there is an unpleasant decision to be made, we tend to resist, to try and keep it at arm's length. But we can have courage, act as skillfully as possible and then be willing to take the consequences. And we can trust our good and sincere intention, even if things turn out messy.

What do we do with our choices once they have been made?

We keep an open mind and an open heart. We keep listening and we keep meditating. We try not to be rigid, to stick to an opinion, but instead we're ready to adjust to any new information that presents and to changing circumstances. In other words, there is a fluidity to our response. Also, we can remember that there may be 'appearing and disappearing', in that what seems right one day may look different the next. That is alright—we don't have to fix the decision and be inflexible. We can be willing to look a fool and do a U-turn, if necessary.

It is important that we don't judge the outcome. It does not necessarily follow that if we have done the right thing, all will work out well. Many factors are involved. It may be that we just don't know if we did the right thing. Perhaps there was no single right decision. I find it more helpful to think in terms of, "I made a choice and these are the results and now I deal with them. If I had made another choice, there would have been different results to deal with."

We take the consequences of our actions

It is really important to be willing to take the consequences of our actions, as this helps us to move forward and prevents us from being paralysed. We accept responsibility for the choices that we make, without judging ourselves. It's important that we don't retract just because the repercussions are tough, if we still feel that we did the right thing. However, it may be that we come to have doubts about our decision—we may realise that we had a blind-spot at the time or perhaps a new factor comes

to light. We may then regret the choice that we made, in which case we do what we can to alleviate the effects and we try to make amends.

If we do come to realise that we made a mistake in our choice, it is worth, at this point, reminding ourselves that our intention was good and we did the best that we could at the time. It's important that we don't hold on to the regret—we don't have to turn it into guilt. It is enough to be sorry and to learn, so as not to make the same mistake again. If we feel that we have made a mistake, we acknowledge it and offer it into the meditation, into the spaciousness and interconnectedness. We give ourselves more fully to that and we entrust ourselves to the process, to the ongoing letting go.

Decisions in the midst of daily life

What I have been describing so far is perhaps slightly idealised: a step-by-step process where a leisurely decision can be made. But what if a rapid response is required? Of course, the same principles apply. It is important that we act from the heart of zazen. As we go on, we become more rooted generally in zazen, so that we can more readily call on this way of being in times of need—this becomes more of a natural state of being for us. Personally, I have found that this is one of the most striking ways in which zazen makes a difference in my life. For example, if I am faced with someone who is very angry, or I find myself in a situation where I am afraid, then I can be still and grounded and act from the heart of zazen, which enables me to engage with the situation in a way that is not driven by the self. This is a major step towards the end of suffering. And,

yes, I still make plenty of mistakes. But I am coming to see that ultimately what is important is to do the best that I can in the moment and to continue to do my best in subsequent moments, as the results of those actions play out.

The manifestation of wisdom

What I have been describing in this talk is wise discernment, the manifestation of wisdom in our lives. It may not seem like wisdom to us at the time. It may seem just that this is a difficult situation and I am trying to reach a decision with zazen as the basis. We tend to think of wisdom as having a crystal-clear clarity, slicing through delusion. However, as we make our way through whatever life presents, rooting ourselves in zazen, wisdom unfolds naturally. It's there, even if we don't recognise it. My life may seem messy and difficult, but as I work my way through, that's the lotus flower blossoming from its roots in the mud. Of course, if I start to think "I am being wise and making wise decisions", that's not it. That's the dualistic, discriminatory mind speaking and I am back in the world of delusion versus enlightenment.

We come to see that what is important is not so much the decisions that we make and whether they are wise or foolish, although the consequences of those decisions can be significant in terms of cause and effect. What is more important is that we engage with practice and we continue to get on steadily, as described—then wisdom manifests naturally.

I'd like to finish with a brief quote from Great Master Dōgen, which sums up nicely what we have been looking at

today and over the previous couple of days. It's from the Bendowa (Lecture on Training) chapter of the *Shōbōgenzō*:

When sitting cross-legged, allowing the Buddha Nature to manifest itself by giving up all opinions and cutting all ties, we enjoy great wisdom quite naturally, for we instantly enter into the world which lies beyond both delusion and enlightenment, wherein there is no difference between the wise and the foolish.²

Notes

1. Dōgen, Great Master; in *Dōgen's Extensive Record: A Translation of the Eihei Koroku* (Dharma Hall Discourse 24). Trans Taigen Dan Leighton, and Shohaku Okumura (Wisdom: 2010).
2. Dōgen, Great Master; Bendowa, from *Zen is Eternal Life*, (Mt Shasta, Shasta Abbey Press: 1999) p. 185, available from <http://www.shastaabbey.org/teachings-publications.html>