Right View Comes First

July 2, 2025

The Buddha has two ways of describing the relationship among the factors of the path. But in both cases, you start with the right view. You need to have the right understanding of how things work. If you don’t have that understanding, then you can get involved in wrong resolve, wrong action, wrong everything, all the way down the line. And it is important that you see the right views about how things work. Sometimes it’s described as knowledge of things as they really are. But we’re not interested in essences or nouns so much as we are interested in actions, verbs. When you do x, you get y as a result. When you do z, you get a as a result. So right view is about actions you do, and actions you should do and shouldn’t do, if you want to put an end to suffering. In my description of the path, it just starts out in a line. You’ve got right view, and then from right view comes right resolve. From right resolve comes right speech. From right speech, right action. Right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness, right concentration. In another, though, he starts with right concentration. He says all the other factors of the path are requisites for right concentration, but then describes each of the factors, points out how with every factor you need to have, it’s circled by right view, right effort, and right mindfulness. Right view tells you what is right view and wrong view, right resolve, wrong resolve, and so on down the line. Based on that knowledge, you hold that knowledge in mind. That’s the right mindfulness. You should abandon the wrong version and develop the right version. And then right effort actually does the work. So in both ways of describing the path, it starts with right view. You need to know what you’re doing, why you’re doing it, so that you can do it well. When I think about knowledge of things as they are, as opposed to knowledge of things as they function, you learn about how things function by meditation. You try X and you get a certain result. You try Y and you get another result. That’s something you can actually prove through your meditation. As for the nature of things in and of themselves, the meditation’s not going to tell you that. And that’s not the issue. The issue is what are you doing that’s causing suffering? And it is an issue of your actions. There were a lot of teachers in the time of the Buddha who taught that your actions had no meaning, either they were unreal, or you weren’t the one actually choosing to do them, that there was an outside force acting through you. In other words, they taught powerlessness. Well, the Buddha’s more concerned with teaching about the powers you have. You can change the way you act. If you’ve been creating suffering, you can change the way you act, so that you don’t create suffering. That’s the view you have to hold to. Right view comes in three levels. The first level has to do with just the principle of action in general. There’s evil deeds. There’s this world and the next. In other words, the results of evil deeds, the results of good deeds, will be found not only in this lifetime, but also in future lifetimes. And it’s through the power of your actions, the power of action in general, that mother and father have a real meaning, that they really have done things for you, and you should be grateful for that. Generosity has meaning. In the case of your parents and others who’ve helped you, they had the choice not to help you. There’s a case in the canon where a courtesan gives birth to a child. Her plan is, if it’s a girl, she’s going to teach the girl how to be a courtesan, but it turns out it’s a boy. The little baby boys are useless around the places where courtesans live, so she threw them out in the trash heap. You’re lucky your parents didn’t throw you out on the trash heap. Even though your parents may not have been perfect, you still owe them a lot, because they’ve worked hard to raise you. They introduced you to the world. It’s because of the principle of action that your intentions really do make a difference, and you really are the one choosing to do your actions. These relationships have meaning. The same with generosity. If everything were predetermined by outside forces, an act of generosity wouldn’t have any meaning. And if you were snuffed out at death, it wouldn’t have much meaning either. But the fact is that there’s life after death, and the fact also that you have the choice, other people have the choice, to give or not to give. Which means that when people do give, it’s a meaningful action. Generosity and virtue do have meaning, again because of the principle of karma, and they get rewarded in heaven. It’s interesting that the Buddha talks a lot about generosity, a lot about virtue, but there are very few passages in the Canon about heaven, whether the monks decided they weren’t worth recording, or the Buddha didn’t want to focus too much attention on people’s imagination of what heaven might be like. Aside from the next step in the graduated discourse, which was the drawbacks of sensuality, because those heavens have lots of sensual pleasures, much more refined, much more intense than human sensual pleasures, but they’re going to end. And it’s as if some sorrow were a trick that someone was playing on you. You work hard to be generous, you work hard to be virtuous, you work hard to develop good qualities in your mind, and then when the rewards come, they corrode those good qualities. Can you imagine what it’s like to be up in heaven when you want something and it appears? You want something else and it appears. You get spoiled. You get complacent. And because of that, you fall. And in the Buddhist discourse, the people listening would then, if they really took it seriously, think there must be something better than sensuality. That’s when the Buddha would introduce the topic of renunciation, finding happiness in things that are not sensual, like we’re doing right now, finding happiness in being with the breath, finding pleasure in the breath. It’s not a sensual object, it’s a pleasure form, the body as you feel it from within. It doesn’t have most of the drawbacks of sensuality. It doesn’t require that you take anything much from anyone else. The breath is yours. The way you feel the body from inside, that’s your territory. Now, in giving this talk, when the Buddha got people to this stage, when the disciples were focused, gathered into one, he would teach them the Four Noble Truths. This is Right View on the transcendent level. He would have them look more deeply into their minds and tell them that whatever suffering they had was something they were doing, they were clinging to what he called the Five Aggregates. We call them khandhas. It’s unfortunate that we don’t have a really good translation in English. Aggregates sound like piles of gravel. But the khandha, the word in Pali actually means heap. You’ve got heaps of things, you’ve got heaps of your sensations in the body, the form of the body, you’ve got feelings, you’ve got perceptions, thought constructs, consciousness, and you cling to these things. That’s the suffering. Suffering is not something that you are passively receiving. You’re actually doing the action that is suffering. Think about that. And why do you do that? Because of craving. Either craving for sensuality, craving for a state of becoming, or craving to obliterate some state of becoming you already have. Buddha would then explain that this craving can be put to an end through dispassion. And you develop that dispassion by developing the path. So the whole path is there inside Right View, which of course is inside the path, which is in Right View. And you entertain each other. But it’s important that the Buddha, when he introduced them, he introduced the path first. Because this is a path of action. Because these truths about suffering are not just interesting topics to talk about, think about. They’re ways of dividing up your experience. And in each case, then, you have a duty to comprehend that act of craving. The clinging that you’re doing. To fully understand that yes, this is the suffering. To develop some… To abandon the craving. The duty with regard to the cessation of suffering is to realize it. And the duty with regard to the path is you develop it. Whatever potentials you have, beginning with Right View, down to Right Concentration, you work on making them strong. And in the course of making them strong, your Right View gets more and more subtle, more and more precise. Especially as you get the mind into deeper and deeper stages of Right Concentration, you’re going to see things in your mind that you didn’t see before. As long as you have that framework of the Four Noble Truths. What are you doing that’s the suffering? What are you doing that’s causing the suffering? What can you do to develop this passion for that cause? You’re going to see things in your mind that you didn’t see before, and you’re going to be able to let them go. But then there’s another stage of Right View. As the path gets more and more developed, there comes a stage where it’s the only thing standing between you and total release. When you’re able to let go of everything that’s opposed to the path, and you’ve been fortunate to have at least a glimpse of where the path is going, then you realize that the path is the only thing that’s getting in the way, because it’s a fabricated phenomenon. It’s based on passion. You have to have some passion of what you’re doing here. That’s when you get expressions of Right View that are going beyond looking at things in terms of four categories and bring everything down to one, i.e., one duty. Everything has to be let go. The teachings that the Buddha gives to people, and on the verge of arhantship, one of them is that all dhammas are unworthy of adherence. That means everything, good, bad, whatever, has to be let go. In fact, even that teaching, all dhammas, because it’s the dhamma too, that’s going to have to be let go as well. This is why the Buddha uses that image of the raft. You’re on this side of the river, where there’s danger. The other side of the river is where safety is. There’s no bridge going across the river. There’s no nibbana yacht coming to pick you up, take you over. So what do you do? You have to make a raft. What do you make the raft of? You make a raft of things on this shore, which the Buddha identifies with self-identity, i.e., the fact that you’re clinging to the aggregates. So you’re going to use clinging, and you’re going to use the aggregates in a skillful way. That’s what the path is. And then you make an effort. As you swim across, buoyed up by the raft, when you get to the other side, you’re not going to carry the raft with you any longer. As it’s served its function, you let it go. That’s the ultimate stage of Right View. There’s a passage in the Canon where an individual has been visiting with some sectarians, and they tell them, tell him their views. In each case, he says, “Well, this view you have is fabricated, dependent, and co-arisen. Whatever is fabricated, dependent, and co-arisen is suffering and stressful.” And so if you hold on to that view, you’re adhering to stress. So they ask him what his view is. He says, “Whatever is fabricated is stressful.” “Whatever is dependent and co-arisen is stressful.” They say, “Well, if you adhere to that, you’re adhering to stress, too.” He says, “Well, this is a view that allows me to see beyond it. It allows me to see the escape.” In other words, you see everything else that’s fabricated that you’re holding on to, you let go. And then you look at this, and you say, “Well, this is fabricated, too.” You let go of it. And John Munn talks about this stage of the practice. He says, “There’s a point where all four noble truths become one, which means that they all have one duty, let go. But before you can get to that one duty, you have to fulfill the other duties of the four truths.” So that’s what we’re working on now. As you develop the path, you find that it helps you comprehend suffering, it helps you to let go of craving. So again, it’s all about what you’re doing. If you have the right view about how things work, how cause and effect work, which actions are skillful, which actions are unskillful, then you’ve got the right guidance. Notice that right view is not right knowledge. It becomes knowledge as a result of the path, as a result of following the path. But with the right view, we’re borrowing the Buddha’s wisdom. We’re borrowing his discernment. And he’s freely given it to us. So try to make good use of it, because it’s the only way out.

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