

## *Right View Tells You What to Do*

*December 8, 2018*

The factors of the path in the sutta we chanted just now start with right view. Right view is not the view of awakening, it's the view that gets you there. It's about actions: It points out the actions you do that lead to suffering, and the actions you can do to put an end to suffering. And its purpose is to take you to something beyond right view.

There's a passage where Anathapindika goes out in the morning. It's too early to go see the Buddha, so he decides to stop by and see some wanderers of other sects. They ask him about the Buddha's views. He says, "I don't really know all the views of the Buddha." And here he was, a stream-enterer already. He'd already had his first taste of awakening but still he said he didn't know all the views of the Buddha, or all the views of the monks.

So the wanderers asked to hear his views. So first he says, "I'd like to hear your views first, then we'll talk about mine." So they expound their views about the world being eternal or non-eternal, or infinite, or finite... other views of that sort. And he points out to all of them that all those views are fabricated, and because something's fabricated it's going to be stressful, so as they hold on to those views they're holding on to stress.

So then they ask his view. He says, "Whatever is fabricated is stressful, whatever is stressful is not me, not mine, not myself." They say, "Well, you're holding on to that view. It's a fabricated view, so you're holding on to stress." He says, "Yes it's a fabricated view, but in holding on to it I also see what goes beyond it, so I can let it go."

So we're not here to arrive at right view. We're here to use it. And right view gives us instructions: what to do, what not to do. For instance, as we're sitting here meditating, trying to get the mind into concentration, we start with right mindfulness: trying to focus on the breath in and of itself, putting aside any thoughts that have to do with the world outside. Those are the two activities: focusing on the breath, and clearing out other things that get in the way. And then we bring three qualities to this practice: ardency, alertness, and mindfulness.

Ardency is trying to do it well. If you're not with the breath, you try to bring your attention back as quickly as possible. When you *are* with the breath you try to be as sensitive as possible to how the breath feels. When you breathe in, where do you notice it? Focus first on the areas where it's obvious... And by "breath" here we mean not just the air coming in and out of the lungs, but also the

movement of energy through the body. Where do you feel that movement, and does it feel comfortable? If it doesn't feel comfortable, you can change. You can experiment with different kinds of breathing: longer, shorter, or in long out short, in short out long, deep, shallow, heavy, light—lots of ways you can explore.

Then there's mindfulness, which basically is keeping something in mind. In this case you're trying to keep in mind the fact that you're trying to stay with the breath—you don't want to forget that. If something unskillful comes up in the mind, anything that would pull you away from the breath, you want to remember how to recognize it as unskillful and how to deal with it. In other words, you try to let it go, and how have you let go of those things in the past in an effective way? As for things that are going well, how do you maintain them? That's something you want to remember as well.

And finally, there's the quality of alertness, where you're watching what you're doing. We're not just being present for the present moment, willy-nilly, whatever comes up. We want to focus specifically on what we're doing. Because remember, that's what right view is all about—what are you doing? Are you creating suffering, or are you creating a path to the end of suffering? It's one or the other. So if you're noticing the fact that the mind has wandered away from the breath, then you bring it back. If you notice that it's staying there, you try to be really sensitive.

These are the three qualities that turn mindfulness practice into concentration practice. You remember the two activities you're doing here. We're not just doing one activity yet. We're working on the one hand trying to stay focused with the breath in and of itself—in other words, the breath totally on its own terms, without any reference to the world outside. Of course there will be thoughts that go to the world outside: Those you put aside. And all too often what you find is that you've left your original frame of reference and gone out to another one. So you have to drop it, remember your original frame, come back. And the trick here is learning how to catch the mind before it leaves.

An image I like to think of is of an inchworm coming to the edge of a leaf. It's crawled along the leaf, and it reaches the edge and it's looking around to see what else is out there. It hasn't totally left the leaf yet, but part of it is swaying around trying to find what else is there. Another leaf comes by and pop! It's off on the next one. You want to catch the mind while it's still on the original leaf. Once you notice that it's beginning to lose a little bit of interest in the breath, or it's looking around for, "What else is there around here?" you've got to say, "Nope, not going." And the more quickly you can catch that, one: the stronger your concentration will be, and two: the more you learn about your own mind, how it

forms a thought-world. What are the stages? A lot of those stages are in what we call the subconscious or the unconscious. This makes it sound like a place, like a basement in your house, with monsters coming up out of the basement every now and then. But actually the subconscious is just a name for activities of your mind that you're not paying attention to. We like the other worlds, we want to get into the worlds, so we're not too picky about how they're constructed.

But now we've decided we're not going to go there. You need to have the breath, or at least an object of concentration that you stay with steadily. Otherwise, it's like being on a boat going down a river, and the currents of the river can push you one way, then another way. It's hard to tell the currents apart because the boat itself isn't fixed to anything solid. But if the boat is tied to a post or an anchor then you begin to see, oh, now the boat's being shifted over to the right, now it's being shifted over to the left. The more you can get the sense of being still and solid with your object, the subtler the movements you're going to be able to see in the mind.

So we do the concentration, which involves both focusing on one object and also being prepared for the fact that the mind is going to go off, so you've got to learn how to bring it back. In the course of that, we begin to see the different stages in the mind. And areas that used to be in the subconscious, or basically activities that you were doing that were subconscious, suddenly become more and more conscious.

And you have to prepare yourself for the fact that you're going to see things about the mind you're not going to like. We read about concentration in the texts, we read about insight, and it all sounds very wonderful, as if it's a different world. The descriptions in the texts are there to tell you about what it should be ideally, but first you're going to have to grub around in some of your own greed, aversion, and delusion.

Because it's one thing to be able to see the mind forming another thought, and realizing it's not all that interesting to begin with, and so you drop it. But then there are other thoughts that have more pull, and you want to look into that pull—why do you like them? First you have to be able to see them come, because when you see them come you begin to see what sparks them—that's going to give you your first insight into things.

The Buddha uses the term origination. In other words, it's not simply the fact that a thought has arisen in the mind: There's something to spark it: either another thought or a sensation in the body. Something happening outside will spark a thought and we find ourselves going with it. But it doesn't last forever. It's going to stop, and sometimes it stops more quickly than one might think.

All too often what's actually happening is when you're thinking about something you're stitching together little thought-moments: the thought will get sparked and then it will die away, and then you stir it up again, and then it dies away again. If it's something you're really fascinated with, you keep stirring it up, but it keeps dying away. You want to see both the arising, so you can catch what's called the origination, and the dying away.

So again, this is another good reason to want to stay as solidly with the breath as you can, because the breath is often involved in these processes. It's part of what the Buddha calls fabrication. In this case it's bodily fabrication. It creates your sense of the body, and in the area where the mind and the body meet at the breath that a lot of the original stirrings for thought will be felt, when you're really sensitive. So it's good to be sensitive to the body in and of itself, right here, so that you can catch things there at the interface.

And then when the thought that's distracting you goes away, why did you lose interest? After all, interest is what keeps these things going, and if you don't lose interest, well you dig it up again, and dig it up again. But there'll be moments when you do lose interest—you want to see them. And then when you dig it up again, then you begin to see, what's the allure, why do you keep digging it up? What do you think you're getting out of it?

And here's one of those areas where you have to look long and hard, because at first the mind's not going to give you any reasons. It just wants to. It says, "of course, of course." Well, what do you mean, "of course"? And then it will throw out a reason that it thinks you might like. And you try that on, and say, "Well if this really is the reason I go for this, and I see through it, then why do I keep going back? There must be something else, something else that the mind is hiding from itself.

Because when we talk about the subconscious there are two reasons for things to be subconscious. One is that there are lots of things going on in the mind that we're simply not interested in; the other is that there are things going on that we don't like to admit to ourselves. And both of those things get blotted out. So what we're trying to do is undo the blotting.

The blotting out happens in these little moments between thought worlds. Which is one of the reasons why you want to make your awareness as continuous as possible, so that you can see through those little cracks between one world and the next.

And when you begin to see some of the reasons why you like to go for that kind of thought, then you can compare them with the drawbacks, i.e., "If I

actually sat and thought these things, what would happen?” And it’s when you really see that it’s not worth it, that’s when you let it go.

And now in the decision that it’s not worth it, sometimes you use the analysis the Buddha gives in terms of things being inconstant, stressful, not-self. But those are the general terms. You might find there are some really specific reasons why it’s really not worth it. Whatever the pain is, whatever the harm is, that’s when you develop dispassion for it—which is basically the point where you’ve outgrown it.

It’s like children playing games that are kind of harmful, and they begin to realize the harm they’re causing. They’re sensitive to it, and then they stop, because they see that they’re not only harming others, they’re harming themselves, and it’s not worth it, and they lose their interest.

So this is how getting the mind into concentration helps with your discernment. Again, it’s an issue of watching what you’re doing and figuring out what would be a better way to act. That’s all under the purview of right view.

Now ultimately this sensitivity to your actions takes you to a place where there’s nothing *doing* in the mind—that’s what this is all about. But we get there first by understanding exactly what we’re doing. We can’t stop doing unskillful things once and for all unless we understand them. We can’t understand why they’re unskillful until we’ve learned how to do more skillful things.

That’s what concentration is. It’s one of the most skillful things you can do with your mind, because you’re getting it under control. You’re putting it in a place where it can really understand itself, where it can start shining a light into activities that used to stay in the shadows, or simply were not in your range of interest.

You begin to realize that these things really do run your life—and sometimes they run it into the ground. But you’ve got something better to do, and as your sensitivity to what really is acceptable gets more and more refined, finally it does take you to a place that’s not fabricated, that’s not made, that’s not done, just simply *is*.

This is why this is called a path. It doesn’t cause the goal, but it takes you there. Of course the path doesn’t pick you up and take you. You do the path, you follow the path, but by following it, then you arrive.

So the emphasis always is on watching what you’re doing, and not being afraid to see that you’re doing some unskillful things. Because you know that you can learn—you don’t have to keep doing them. This is when you really understand what you’re doing, and see the harm—that’s when you can stop.

But this insight doesn't go to the heart until it's your own insight. Right view is there to give you some general guidance: This is where you look, this is what you do. But it's in the *doing* itself that you really learn.