

Accepting the Way Things Function

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Right view isn't just a matter of seeing how things are. It's more a matter of seeing how things function, and how we can get them to function in a way that leads to happiness, to well-being.

This is an important distinction. All too often you hear that discernment is simply a matter of accepting, "Well, everything changes, so you have to be resigned to that fact. Accept the fact that everything changes, you have no control." In that case, though, right resolve would be resolving simply to accept things and to give up the fight. Some people say that the cause of suffering is the struggle against change. So, you just stop struggling, or you make up your mind to try to stop struggling, and that should solve the problem.

But that's not how the Buddha explained things. He said there is suffering, he identified what it is, identified its cause, and said that suffering can be brought to an end by ending the cause. But the cause isn't resisting change. Suffering is caused by acting on unskillful intentions.

Don't forget that right view includes views about action in general. From that, right resolve is the resolve to act in a way that doesn't cause suffering, that leads to the end of suffering.

So, that's what discernment is. It's not a matter of just looking at things and accepting them as they are; it's seeing that things can be changed, and that you want to learn how to change them well. This means that right resolve is something you fabricate, something you put together. As when you're meditating right here: There's directed thought and evaluation. That's called fabrication. You're thinking about the breath and evaluating how it's going, and then you adjust it. You don't just sit there. You do something with it. If one way of breathing doesn't feel good, try another one.

You also use your perceptions about the breath. When you breathe in, how do you perceive it? What image do you hold in mind? Perception, here, can include not just words, but also mental images, or visualizations. What way of visualizing the breath helps? What way of visualizing your body helps, so that you can make this a good place to be?

This principle applies in all the aspects of right resolve—the resolve to go beyond sensuality, (in other words, resolve for renunciation), the resolve for non-ill will (i.e., for goodwill), and the resolve for non-harming, (in other words, compassion). These are all thoughts you have to put together.

The relationship between resolve and intention is that intentions can be fairly random, but resolve is firmer. It's more planned out. It's the standard against which you measure your individual intentions. So, as you go through life, you may say, "Okay, I'm going to resolve on goodwill." And then you have to be careful, you have to be mindful as you chose your intentions, to keep them in line with your resolve.

Remember that goodwill is a form of mindfulness. You have to be mindful that any time you come up with any thoughts of wanting to see so-and-so suffer, or how much they really are just a so-and-so, you have to ask yourself, "If I think that way about that person, can I act skillfully around that person? Can I trust myself to act skillfully? And if I can't trust myself, I'm setting myself up for a fall."

So learn how to think thoughts of goodwill, and remember what goodwill means. It means wishing that person would understand the causes for true happiness and be willing and able to act on them. There's that chant: "May you look after yourself with ease." It's not, "May you be happy continuing doing whatever unskillful things you've been doing." It's, "May you be happy through learning what true happiness is, and how it's found, and have the ability to do it." That's something you can wish for anyone. There may be some lingering desire to see some people suffer for things they've done in the past, but that's not a useful desire. All too often, when people are suffering, they don't see how justified their suffering is or how right it is. All they see is that they're being imposed on. We're all that way. So you want to think thoughts of goodwill for everybody.

Now, that might take some talking to yourself and using some skillful perceptions. You've been learning how to breathe in a way that feels good so that you can have a sense of well-being that you can then wish for other people. If you don't have any sense of well-being inside, it's hard to think of the well-being of others. So you're using all the different kinds of fabrication—bodily, verbal, mental—to put together right resolve around non-ill will.

The same with non-harming: Harming is the opposite of compassion, in the sense that you see somebody who's already down and you say, "Now I've got my chance to get them." It's closely related to ill will, but it goes a little bit further. If you catch yourself feeling ill will to the point where you actually want to harm somebody, you've got to stop and think: "This person is suffering already. We're all suffering already. And you want to add more suffering to yourself by making that other person suffer more?" That's a useful way of thinking. At the very least, it reminds you that you don't want to harm them, because the harm is going to come back at you.

As for thoughts of renunciation, if there are any sensual pleasures that you're really addicted to, and that you tend to act unskillfully around, you've got to resolve—and this has to be very strong resolve—that you're not going to continue to give in. This, too, requires a fair amount of fabrication. You've got to think about those pleasures in a way that allows you to see their drawbacks—in particular, the drawbacks of the way you act around them. You have to be able to think about the advantages of not being a slave to those things.

Here, again, you use your perceptions. We have that chant on the unattractiveness of the body. Use that. And you can use other perceptions as well. The perception of other people when they're lustful, when they're greedy; they've got to get this that and the other thing: What kind of people are those? Just big stomachs. Do you want to be that kind of person? Think in these ways. Hold these perceptions in mind. Visualize these things so that you can see their drawbacks.

But right resolve is not a matter of just these three things. As the Buddha said, it moves on to a higher level as we move into concentration. There's that passage where he talks about getting some control over his thoughts, treating them as a cowherd would treat his cows. During the rainy season when the rice is growing, and there's a danger that your cows will get into somebody else's rice field, you've got to keep careful watch on your cows, keep them in line. He said he would hit and check his thoughts in the same way that you would hit and check the cows at that time, if those thoughts were involved in sensuality, ill will, or harmfulness.

But if the thoughts were engaged in renunciation, non-ill will, and harmlessness, then he said it was like a cowherd during the dry season, when the rice has been gathered. There's no more danger that the cows would eat anybody else's rice, so the cowherd can be generally mindful that the cows are there, but he doesn't have to be so aggressive in controlling them. You can treat your skillful thoughts in the same way.

But, even then, you begin to realize that if you thought all day about good things, it would tire the mind. The mind needs to rest. So you use the directed thought and evaluation to bring the mind to rest. That, too, is a kind of right resolve. And it's interesting that the Buddha draws the connection here. Right resolve, which is one of the discernment factors, then becomes part of the concentration factor.

This confirms something that Ajaan Lee said, which is that when you're getting the mind to settle down, directed thought and evaluation are a function of discernment as you're trying to figure out what the mind needs in order to get it to settle down. When you're dealing with the breath, it's not just a matter of

keeping watch over the breath. You also have to look at how you're thinking about the breath, what images you have. What are you telling yourself about the breath? Could you tell yourself something different that would still be true, but would have a different impact on the body? That way you're trying to figure out your mind, figure out your breath, as a way of getting the mind to settle down.

This is what Ajaan Maha Boowa calls discernment fostering concentration. You need both of these qualities together for the concentration to work, and especially for it to work when you're dealing with issues that come up into the mind. You can't solve the problem of the mind's not settling down by just telling it, "You've got to settle down." You've got to figure it out sometimes. Is the problem today because of the breath? Or is it because of the attitudes you're carrying in from the day? What do you need to straighten out about those attitudes first?

This is why the Buddha has not only the breath as a topic for meditation, but also other topics. In addition to goodwill, there's recollection of the Buddha, recollection of the Sangha. Just thinking about them can often put the affairs of the day into a different perspective. If you're feeling discouraged, think thoughts about your generosity and your virtue: the good that you've done. Think in a way that gets the mind more and more in the mood to meditate.

Then you can focus on the breath. Here, again, it's not just awareness of the breath. There are also your perceptions, your visualizations. How do you visualize the breath to yourself? How do you visualize your relationship to your body? Do you feel comfortable in your own skin? Comfortable inside your body? If not, can you at least create a beachhead, some one spot in the body that's *your* spot? Tend to it carefully. Look after it. Treat it well. Eventually a sense of belonging here will grow. The breath will begin to expand out through the body, and there will be a sense of everything breathing together. It feels really good to be here.

Then, from that practice, you learn to use the same pair of skills—i.e., discernment together with concentration—to deal with other issues as they come up. When something troubling comes up in the mind, one, look at how you're breathing around it and see if you can change the breath. And then, two, ask yourself: "How am I talking to myself about this? What images do I have in mind?" Sometimes these images will just flash for a little bit, but they can have a huge impact, like the subliminal messages they put on TV stations: just a little flash that you're hardly aware of. Sometimes you're not even aware of it, but it's there. It's already spoken to another part of your brain. Other times, the perceptions are more persistent. They hang around, and you get to see them clearly. But the more still you can make the mind, the more you can see those

subtle things that flash, that have such a huge impact on why we think and feel the way we do.

The same with the way you talk to yourself: That's what the Buddha means by directed thought and evaluation. You pick up a topic and you think about it, talk to yourself about it, ask questions, turn it over. When an issue comes up and it's causing pain to the mind, ask yourself: "What am I saying to myself about this? Is there something better I could be saying?" There may be many levels of conversation, many levels of commentary going on. If you can take an attitude of curiosity toward these things, rather than being afraid of them, you begin to sense that some of the voices in the mind are having an influence but don't really make any sense. Or they're voices that you picked up while you were a kid, and they seem to be hanging around—and they can hang around only because you're not paying them full attention.

So, it's a combination of discernment working together with concentration, based on the knowledge that the way things are is better understood as the way things function. In other words, you're not just stuck with things as they are. You can play a role in making them better. After all, if the Dhamma were just, "Change happens and you have to accept it," there wouldn't be much in the Buddha's teachings. And there wouldn't be much worth in the Buddha's teachings, either. So many people in his time were saying that human choice doesn't make that much of a difference. But, as he said, if you believe that, you're totally unprotected, because your choices do make a difference. What you need to know is what kind of choices are good, what kind of choices are bad? There has to be a sense of what should be done and should not be done. That's your protection.

And that's what he offers to us. "This is how things work," he's saying. "And this is how things can be made to work well." You've got it within your power. It's simply a matter of learning how to bring your concentration and your discernment together, so that your discernment makes your concentration easier to attain, because you understand what's going on in the mind, so that when there are obstacles you know your way around the obstacles. At the same time, your concentration makes your discernment more subtle, because the more still you are, the more subtle things you can see.

So, the solutions to the problems in the mind come down to getting these two faculties to work together. We already have some discernment; we already have some concentration. Just learn how to bring them together and you'll be able to cut through any problem that the mind has been carrying around.

This is the Buddha's message: Have confidence. Things don't have to be the way they are. They function the way they function, but they don't have to end up

the way they are right now. You can make them function in a better direction. Always keep that conviction and that possibility in mind.