

Using Right View Rightly

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The Buddha teaches three levels of right view. There's mundane right view, which talks about beings doing things and receiving the results of their actions. It talks about worlds—the world after this world. Then there's transcendent right view, which doesn't talk about beings or worlds at all. In fact, it takes apart concepts of beings and worlds to show how they're fabricated, how we can create a lot of suffering around them, and how to look at the world in a way that doesn't use those concepts. Finally, there's ultimate right view, which sees how even right views have to be let go.

So the question is, which level do you use? Or when do you know which one to use? That's going to involve developing skill. But it's the skill that comes from precisely the perspective that you're *using* the view. In each case, you have to ask yourself, what are you using it for?

You can use mundane right view to motivate yourself to accept the idea that you're the one who's responsible for doing the practice. You're the one who's going to benefit from it, and you're the one who's going to suffer a lot if you don't do the practice. Or as the Buddha noted, the terms of mundane right view—the “I” and the “am” in “I am in this world”—can lead to a type of thinking he calls objectification, *papañca* in Pali, which is the basis for conflict. You stake out an identity. That means you also have to stake out a part of the world as your source of food, and that may overlap with somebody else's staked-out source of food.

Here's where the skill comes in. There are some conflicts that are actually worth getting involved in, and others that are very much *not* worth getting involved in. Then there's a gray area where it's not so obvious. After all, even the Buddha himself got involved in discussions and arguments. He didn't simply smile blissfully no matter what anybody was saying. He realized that some people were saying things that, if other people believed them, would cause those people to do really unskillful things that would harm them and harm others—such as the belief that all your actions are predetermined or that pleasures and pains were the result of the act of a creator god. Or they came totally randomly—there was no cause for them. All of these beliefs would induce people not to really want to put the effort into doing anything skillfully. They'd basically give up.

That kind of view the Buddha not only argued with, but he would actually seek out the teachers who taught it and argue with them. So it's not the case that simply because right view can involve conflicts means you shouldn't use the view.

But you have to be very careful about which conflicts you get involved in, what your purpose is, and what's going to be gained even if you win.

Similarly with transcendent right view: There are very skillful uses of that. It comes in the terms of the four noble truths, which are not expressed in terms of beings or worlds. Simply, "This is suffering, and this is the cause of suffering. This is the activity that leads to suffering, and this is the activity that leads to the end of suffering." They get identified, and then you can look at your experience in those terms. You begin to see that even your sense of who you are or what the world is, and the desires that are at the root of all things, are all constructs.

There's a passage where the Buddha's talking to a monk, saying, "Do you have any desire for things you haven't seen, heard, smelled, tasted, touched, or thought about?" The purpose being to point you to the fact that desires come totally out of your sensory experience—just these six senses right here. Then, from those desires, you build all kinds of things. So the Buddha recommends, "In the seen, there's only the seen; in the heard, only the heard" and so on, down through the senses. In that way, you get practice in not constructing things out of what comes in the senses. You see how fabricated your sense of the world is and how fabricated your sense of you is.

He says when it's just sensory experience, there's no "you" there and there's no "here" or "there" or "between the two." In other words, the spatial dimensions of the world don't occur then. That's useful for deconstructing any sense of "I" or the "world" that would lead you to do unskillful things. Of course, it is possible to use that same thinking in an unskillful way. You could start denying responsibility—after all, there is no you—or denying that your actions have consequences if there's no world out there. You have to learn how to use these views in the proper way.

Then there's also the old issue of people getting after one another, "I thought you were a Buddhist. Why do you have such a big I—a big ego? Why do you hold so strongly to your views?" Well, that's taking one level of right view and using it to attack another level of right view.

The same applies to the ultimate level of right view, where everything gets let go. Once transcendent right view has done its work, then there's only one thing to do. That's to turn to the analysis of transcendent right view, i.e., seeing things as events, and looking at the right view itself as an event. If you do it right and let go, there's awakening. There's a moment of non-fashioning where you're not creating anything out of anything. But that same view, which you can read about in the books, can be used in an unskillful way: "Just let go of everything; accept everything just as it is. There's nothing to develop. There's nothing to abandon.

Just be okay. Have a sense of spacious abiding or spacious non-abiding.” But that short-circuits the path.

So it’s as if we have trifocals, different lenses for looking at things. We have to learn how to figure out which lens is the appropriate one to use at any one time, and how not to mix up the lenses.

You can compare the Buddha’s different levels of right view to different types of scientific knowledge. Say you’ve got a rock. A geologist looks at the rock and can describe it as being sedimentary rock or metamorphic rock. A physicist would look at the rock and wouldn’t be concerned about sedimentary or metamorphic rocks. He’d be concerned with atoms or sub-atomic particles. On that level, the type of rock would be irrelevant. So the question is, what do you need the rock for? What do you need to know about the rock? Why are you looking at the rock, and what use do you want to get out of looking at the rock?

This is where real discernment comes in: knowing how to use these things properly. Discernment is not just parroting what’s in the views. Discernment is realizing that views are meant to be put to use. That’s why Ajaan Lee says that when you’re practicing mindfulness, ardency is the factor of wisdom, the factor of discernment. In other words, you don’t simply notice skillful and unskillful qualities, but you realize the wise thing to do with the skillful qualities is to develop them. The wise thing to do with the unskillful qualities is to abandon them.

Or if you can get some skillful use out of unskillful qualities, that’s wise as well—as when using thoughts of spite to work with your anger. You know the story. The Buddha says you realize that if you’re angry you’re going to do or say stupid things that will harm you, and that’ll please your enemy. Do you want to please your enemy? Well, no. This is for times when it’s hard to feel goodwill for the enemy, so you overcome your anger with spite. You’re using something unskillful in a wise and discerning way.

So the discernment lies in the uses. With right view, it’s a question of how to use your trifocal mind: which lens for which purpose. When you develop that skill, that’s when you have right view about right view. And that’s when you can use it for its intended purpose, which is to put an end to suffering. When you’ve reached that level, that’s when you know that you’ve used these views rightly.