

Using Right Resolve Rightly

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Right resolve: The Pali term, *sammā-saṅkappa*, is sometimes translated as right thought. And although the word *saṅkappa* is a little bit more purposeful than ordinary thinking, it does raise an important issue. How purposeful is your thinking as you go through the day? All too often, we simply follow what's entertaining—what happens to pop into our minds—and we latch on to things without really thinking: What's the purpose of thinking anyhow?

You notice in the path that when the Buddha lays out the factors, right resolve follows on right view. When you realize that the suffering weighing down your mind comes from the mind's own activities, the right response is to look carefully at those activities and to want to get some order established among them. You want them to be devoted to the purpose of putting an end to suffering. That means marshaling your thoughts, sorting them out, and being really clear when you're thinking about something, why you're thinking about it and where it's going to go.

Right resolve is followed by right speech. This is one test for your resolves: What kinds of things do you tend to talk about? What comes into your mind very quickly goes out your mouth. What the mind is concerned with, as the Buddha noted many times, will determine the kinds of things you like to talk about.

So look at yourself as you go through the day. Do you like to talk about the themes of right resolve? In other words, do you like to talk about renunciation, non-ill will, and harmlessness? If not, it's a sign you have to look more carefully into the mind. Why can't you be thinking more in these terms? What are the things you'd rather be thinking about? Look carefully into why.

After all, the power of thought does rule your heart. It rules your mind and rules your life. If you want to stay on the path, one of *the* big ways of staying there is by marshaling your thoughts. Look at what the purpose of right resolve is. It's to bring into being all the other factors of the path and especially right concentration. There's a very clear connection between the two.

There's one place where the Buddha talks about mundane right resolve and noble right resolve. Mundane right resolve is being resolved on renunciation, non-ill will—in other words, goodwill—and harmlessness, or compassion. Noble right resolve is the directed thought and evaluation of the first jhana. So the way you're thinking should be aimed at how you bring the mind into stillness. Look at your

thoughts as you go through the day. Are they tending toward stillness, or are they tending someplace else? Are they scattered around?

Renunciation doesn't simply mean reminding yourself that sensual pleasures are not all you want to look for in life—or even the primary things you want to look for in life. You want to renounce thoughts not only about sensual pleasures but also about anything coming in through the senses that you would find pleasing. That includes relationships. It includes the way you'd like society to be—all the various ways of looking for happiness, looking for pleasure outside. You have to keep reminding yourself that that kind of pleasure is unreliable. It's going to set you up for a fall. You're letting your happiness depend on things that don't really belong to you—that are not really in your power.

But thoughts of renunciation simply don't stop right there. They turn around and say, "What can I find inside that would create a greater sense of well-being?" This is where your thoughts of renunciation become more noble. In other words, you're focused on the directed thought and evaluation of concentration: "How do I get to understand my breath? How do I get to understand whatever it is that I'm going to take as my object for concentration and adjust it in a way, adjust the mind in a way, so that the object and the mind fit together, and there's a sense of well-being—intense rightness from just being here?" That's the kind of thing you should be thinking about, not only as you're sitting here with your eyes closed but as you go through the day.

It's the same with thoughts of non-ill will. You develop goodwill for all beings and think about what that means. The highest level of goodwill is when you wish for each person to find true happiness. To some extent, you can be helpful for other people's happiness, but there's a lot that they're going to have to do on their own. There's a lot that you're going to have to do on your own, too, beginning with getting the mind in right concentration. So here's a way of showing your true goodwill for yourself: trying to figure out, "How do I get the mind to settle down?"

It's the same with harmlessness. The most harmless happiness is the happiness that comes when you don't have to take anything away from anyone else. And concentration is the ideal happiness in that way. It's not 100 percent independent from the world around you, but it's heading in the right direction.

So this is where your thoughts should be aimed as you go through the day: "How can I get the mind to settle down? How can I get the mind to be still?" All the other issues you carry around from the world, from your family and your work: You have to see them as wrong resolve. Dwelling on those things is not going to solve the issue of the pain and suffering you cause for yourself. The issue is

solved by creating a sense of well-being inside from which you can then look at the present moment and gain some insight in how the mind creates unnecessary suffering and how that unnecessary suffering is the only thing that really weighs the mind down.

Right resolve points in here, right here at the breath and right here at the mind, figuring out how to bring them together: That should be *the* primary principle you use as you go through the day. Of course, there are other issues you have to think about in terms of your chores, your responsibilities, but so much of the mental chatter that goes on in the mind is not really related to anything necessary at all.

So when you find the mind wandering off into things that are not going to lead to its true happiness, you've got to bring it back. You have to have some principles in your thinking. You have to be resolved on how you're going to use your mind. As the Buddha keeps pointing out, one of the best ways to use your mind is to figure out how to bring it to stillness.

I was listening to a strange teaching the other day, someone saying that *sammā-saṅkappa*—which he translated as “right thought”—doesn't mention “no thought.” Therefore, the Buddha always wants us to think as we meditate; he doesn't want us to stop thinking. Well, that's true in that it's a good antidote to the idea that meditation is nothing but “not-thinking.” But the ability to get the mind not to think is one of the important skills we have to master.

Here again, the Buddha points this out in many places. There's a passage where he says that if you think skillful thoughts all day and night, it may not cause any unskillful behavior on your part, but it will be tiring to the mind. It was with that realization that he brought the mind first into the first jhana, and then from there, into the second, the third, and the fourth. In the second jhana, there's no directed thought; there's no evaluation. And as the Buddha stated in another place, that's where skillful resolves all cease.

It's a passage where he talks first about what unskillful resolves are—starting with being resolved on sensuality. We don't think we're resolved on sensuality, but if we let our thoughts wander into that area all the time, that's what we're resolved on. Resolved on sensuality, resolved on ill will, resolved on harmfulness: Those are unskillful resolves. Then where do unskillful resolves cease without remainder? There in the first jhana.

But then he says, even better, where do skillful resolves cease without remainder? That's in the second jhana. In other words, you use your directed thought and evaluation to get the mind snugly with the object—like one of those wooden Chinese puzzles where the pieces of wood are fit together very nicely, very

precisely—so that it feels just right to be here. Then you drop all that other thinking and maintain that sense of just-rightness. There will be a perception going on in the mind, “This is breath, breath, breath,” or “Still,” or “Here, here, here,” or whatever keeps you here. But it’s a very simple perception. There’s no discursive thinking going on at all. The mind really does get a sense of rest and energy from that. And from the second jhana, of course, it can go deeper.

So it’s not the case that the Buddha would have us stop thinking once and for all. Right resolve is aimed at getting the mind to a place where it *can* not-think. Then you have the skill, as he says, to think the thoughts that you want to think and not think the thoughts you don’t want to think. You have the skill both of skillful thinking and skillful not-thinking. That’s when you’ve used your right resolves in the right way.