

Grasping the Snake

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There are passages where the Buddha teaches the relinquishing of all views. There are passages where he advocates right view. There are passages where he argues with people about right and wrong view, and a couple where he actually seeks people out to question them about their wrong views.

So what's going on? I think a lot of it has to do with how we hold the view and what the view is designed to do. Some views are designed simply for the sake of argumentation. You take the position that the world is eternal, and what are you going to do with that view? You can get into arguments with people who say that it's not—that it was created by a creator god or whatever. That's the kind of view that issues only in arguments. There are other views, though, that can be used to put an end to suffering, and those are the ones the Buddha recommends as right view.

Even there, though, it's possible to use them to get into arguments.

Think of the image of the snake. If you grasp the snake wrongly—say, by the tail—it's going to bite you. But the Buddha doesn't say not to grasp the snake at all. After all, the snake may have some venom that can be used for making anti-venom. So you learn how to grasp it rightly. You take a forked stick, pin it down right behind the head, and then no matter how much the snake may writhe around your arm, you can hold it safely. You get the use out of it that you want.

So it's not that we don't hold to views at all. After all, how could you function if you didn't hold to views? Why would you talk? If there were no right and no wrong, what would be the purpose of talking? But you have to ask yourself: right for what purpose or wrong for what purpose? When you can answer that question, you can get somewhere with your views. The Buddha's views are not designed for argumentation. They actually focus to a great extent on qualities in the mind, just looking at what your mind is doing right here, right now. They're right for putting an end to suffering if you keep this focus in mind.

Think of the Wings to Awakening: seven lists of dhammas that are useful for the practice—different ways of looking at the practice. You've got the four establishments of mindfulness, the four right exertions, the four bases for success, the five strengths, the five faculties, the seven factors for awakening, the noble eightfold path. They're almost all exclusively lists of mental qualities. Now, that kind of view, you can put to use. You can look at the lists and learn some important things.

One is that the four main factors of the path, which appear again and again in the lists, are effort, mindfulness, concentration, and discernment. These are the qualities we have to develop within ourselves.

The different lists will differ in the order with which they place these qualities. Sometimes you start with discernment, and you use that to develop concentration. Sometimes the concentration comes first, and then the discernment comes later. It's the same with mindfulness. Sometimes mindfulness comes after discernment and sometimes it comes before, which means in the practice that the causal influence can go either way.

With each of these two pairs—mindfulness and discernment or concentration and discernment—each side of the pair helps the other side along. As your mindfulness gets better, your discernment gets more expansive, because you can remember more things from what you've learned in the path. As your discernment gets better, it provides more for useful things for mindfulness to keep in mind. The same with concentration: The more you get the mind firmly established, the more your discernment is going to see. But to get it established requires that you understand the mind at least to some extent.

However, it's interesting to notice that in all the various ways in which the Buddha lists these faculties, effort and mindfulness all come before concentration—always. So as you're trying to get the mind to settle down, remember it's not going to just happen on its own. There will be times when the mind just seems to settle down naturally, but that's because the conditions are right, and you can just plunk right down. But if you're going to wait for the conditions to be right, it's like waiting for the weather to be right. It's totally beyond your control.

You're trying to develop a skill here, which means that you look at the qualities coming up in the mind not only while you sit here with your eyes closed but also as you go through the day. To what extent do you allow anger to come in and take charge? To what extent do you allow greed to come in, or feelings of being slighted, or of not being respected? Those feelings, the Buddha said, come under restlessness and anxiety, which are hindrances. So as you go through the day, watch out for those feelings. If they're allowed to take root in the course of the day, then they're going to be here, rooted in the mind, when you sit down to meditate.

So you've got to be very careful. Meditation is an all-day process. The effort goes in all the time. Now, effort doesn't mean that you have to walk long hours of walking meditation or sit long hours of sitting meditation. It means, though, that you have to keep watch over your mind at all times. The person meditating and the person working in the kitchen, the person meditating and the person working

in the orchard: They're all the same person. Qualities that are allowed to establish themselves in the mind don't automatically go away when you sit down to meditate. They're right there, established. They're going to get in the way.

So remember, there's an effort that is to be carried out all the way through the day. There's the effort to prevent unskillful qualities from arising. In other words, if you know that you have certain bad habits, you make a point to be especially on the lookout for them. Then do what you can to think in new ways. If you have a problem with anger, think in ways that will undercut the anger. Actively develop thought patterns in the mind so that when an angry thought comes up—and you know the kind of conversation the mind has with itself when it's angry—well, have some antidote for it ready. If anger does come into the mind, use the antidote and get rid of it. Otherwise, think in the terms that would undercut the anger before it can come.

It's the same with skillful qualities. What can you do to be more mindful? What can you do to be more compassionate and have more goodwill? Actively think these thoughts. All too often, we think of meditation as not thinking. It may feel artificial to go around thinking thoughts of goodwill all the time, but it's a useful exercise. "Artificial" and "natural" are adjectives that you can put out of your mind for the time being. Training the mind is artificial. Every effort is artificial. They're the products of artifice.

Now, some efforts come more easily than others, but that's because they're more habitual, that's all. Here you're trying to make right effort habitual. The same with right mindfulness: Try to go through the day rooted in the body, rooted in the breath. The lessons you learn as you try to keep the mind under control as you're rooted in the breath will be there in the breath. They'll be right there, available so that when you sit down to meditate and you get focused on the breath, a lot of good associations will come along with the breath. You'll be ready to practice and get the mind to settle down.

So right effort and mindfulness are the qualities we need to develop in order to get the mind into concentration. Now, we use discernment in order to foster them. We have to have right view about right effort, and we have to have right view about right mindfulness. We keep reminding ourselves that this is a really worthy activity we're engaged in. Then, as we engage in these activities, our right views become more precise.

The Buddha talks about three kinds of discernment. There's the discernment that comes from listening and the discernment that comes from thinking things through. But then there's the discernment that comes from practicing. You can listen to the Dhamma, and you get right view on the level of listening. That points

you to the practice. You can think things through as you come up with difficulties in the practice. But the developing is what really gets the discernment going. It makes it yours. Otherwise, you're just borrowing other peoples' discernment.

As long as you're in a position where you have to borrow somebody else's discernment, at least borrow the Buddha's. But ultimately, you want to get to the position where you can produce your own. You can depend on it. It really has been tested and fine-honed by your practice. That's when it's really yours. And paradoxically, once it's really yours, that's when you begin to let it go. But you can still use it. After all, after the Buddha's awakening, even though he said there was nothing in him that was fastened to any views, he still taught right view. And he still went out and argued with people who taught wrong view, especially the wrong view concerning action.

So it's a question of learning *how* to hold to the views. If you learn how to hold skillfully, then you can get a lot of use out of them. If you hold them wrongly, then they bite. So find that forked stick—the attitude that you're going to use the views for the right purpose—and that'll keep you safe.