

Right Action

November 28, 2007

Today I was talking to someone who said in passing that sitting and meditating when your mind is a mess all over the place is a waste of time. And of course that's not true. At the very least, meditating when the mind is messy gives you an opportunity to look at what a messy mind is like. Maybe with enough time, you'll get tired of it, and want to do something about it.

I've often found that one way of jumpstarting your practice is to make up your mind that you're going to sit for a certain amount of time every day and really stick with it. You may find in the beginning that your meditation is miserable, and you don't like it. But if you stick with that set amount of time every day, there comes a point where you have to say, "Look, as long as I'm sitting here, I might as well do this right." Sometimes you have to corner the mind that way before it will begin to shape up.

Another consideration, of course, is that while you're sitting here with your eyes closed, you're not causing anyone any harm. You're not engaging in wrong speech, you're not engaging in wrong action or wrong livelihood, and that's not a small thing. So at the very least, even when you're mind is a mess in the meditation, you're keeping yourself from causing harm.

The teachings on right action are very rarely mentioned in the talks here, because as we're sitting here nobody's killing anybody, nobody's stealing, nobody's engaging in illicit sex, unless you're doing that in your mind. But it's important every now and then to think about why right action is part of the path.

To begin with, it grows out of right view and right resolve. You realize that your actions are important, in thought, word, and deed. You don't want to do anything that's going to be harmful either to yourself or to other people. The three types of wrong action are three of the things that the Buddha singled out as always harmful. And unlike right speech, all three forms of wrong action find a place in the five precepts. In other words, they're a basic practice for everybody. You don't kill anybody, any animal that's big enough for you to see. You don't steal anything. You don't engage in illicit sex. Period.

These are vows that you take for yourself. They're "right" in the sense that they're skillful. If you don't cause harm to yourself, if you don't cause harm to other people, then they benefit, you benefit, and that makes it a lot easier to meditate. It cuts off a lot of unskillful thinking when you realize, "I just can't do that. I can't engage in that kind of action, so why even think about it?"

That helps put up a wall. Now often we think of a wall as a restriction, but here the wall is a protection. It protects you from rationalizing. Otherwise, there are lots of easy ways where the mind could justify actions of this sort.

One of the reasons the precepts are so short and clear-cut is that they're especially important to remember when you start finding reasons for breaking them—when your life is endangered, when the life of your loved ones is in danger—and you have to remind yourself, "No killing." Because it's short, it's easy to remember. Now you do what you can to stop the danger, short of killing. But no killing. And so on down the line.

These forms of wrong action are also related to the hindrances. As the Buddha pointed out, when a hindrance is particularly strong—as when there’s the desire to get engaged in sensual passion, or you’re feeling thoughts of ill will, restlessness, and anxiety—you don’t recognize the fact that those thoughts are unskillful. That’s one of the main problems with the hindrances: They blind you; they get you to see things in their way. But having the precepts reminds you that these mind states really are unskillful no matter what, no matter where. So that fact stops you short. It’s a red flag: No, this kind of behavior is out of the question.

At the same time you can, as with right speech, think of right action as a set of guidelines for your meditation. On one level, as I said, it refers to the hindrances. You think, “Okay, no killing.” That relates directly to the hindrance of ill will. No stealing. No illicit sex. Those, depending on your motivation for stealing, could relate to ill will or to sensual desire. You may steal simply because you really want it, but there are times when you might steal because you’re angry at somebody, you want to deprive them of something: That’s stealing through ill will. The same with illicit sex: That can be motivated either by sensual desire or by ill will.

This focuses you on the two big hindrances, to remind you that you don’t want to go there, because if you’re going to get the mind in a good solid state of concentration, then, as the texts say, you have to be secluded from sensual passion, be secluded from unskillful mental qualities. Sensual desire and ill will are the two the big unskillful qualities. They’re forms of wrong resolve.

And even further, Ajaan Lee takes the teachings on right speech and right action and makes them more symbolic of other things that go on in the mind when you’re meditating as well. Killing for instance: You don’t want to kill your goodness. Where does your goodness come from? It comes from being heedful. As the Buddha said, when you’re heedless, it’s as if you’re dead. You’re killing yourself; you’re killing the goodness of the mind. If you say, “Well, there’s nothing much I have to do; everything is perfectly fine as it is; I don’t have to work at putting any effort in the path”: That kills you right there, kills the practice. So you want to make sure you don’t kill your practice. You don’t kill your goodness. You’ve got to be heedful at all times. This means having a strong sense that what you’re doing right now is important, and you don’t know how much time you’re going to have to do skillful things, so you’ve got to develop as many skillful habits as you can—which means you have to do them right now.

The Buddha once talked about having the monks develop mindfulness of death as a useful form of meditation. The different monks talked about how they developed it. One said, “I think every day, ‘May I live at least one more day so I can practice in the Buddha’s teachings; I’ll be able to get a lot out of it.’” Another monk said, “I think every half day, ‘May live another half-day,’” and so on down the line, until it came to two monks. One said, “I think, ‘May I live to breathe in and out once more.’” Another monk said, “While I’m eating, may I live the amount of time it takes to eat a mouthful of food, so in that amount of time, I’ll try to do as much skillful practice as I can, and I’ll get good results that way.” And the Buddha said, “Only these last two monks really count as being heedful.” So here you are, meditating. You’ve got the chance at least with this breath, as it comes and goes out, to develop something skillful. And then you do the same with the next breath, and the next. That’s how you avoid killing your meditation, killing your goodness.

As for stealing, as Ajaan Lee says that, on the level of concentration practice, it means stealing the affairs of other people, thinking about how this or that person is no good. He says, “You never really asked their permission to think about their bad habits, so it’s like stealing their stuff.” And what kind of stuff you are stealing? You’re stealing their garbage. If you’re going to steal things from other people, at least steal their valuables. Think about their good points in a way that gives you some energy to emulate those good points yourself. Remember the analogy the Buddha gives, of a person traveling across the desert, tired, trembling with heat, thirsting for water, and finding little bit of water in a cow’s footprint. He realizes: “Here I am, tired, thirsty, and trembling. I need that water. But if I try to scoop it up with my hand, I’ll get the water all muddy.” So he gets down on all fours and very carefully slurps up the water straight from the cow print.

Your need for the goodness of other people is that extreme. If all you can see is other people’s bad points, you’re going to lose your enthusiasm for treating them skillfully. You’ll say, “Well, everybody else is cheating, I might as well cheat as well.” That’s a very common attitude that you see throughout society. Again that kills your goodness.

So you don’t want to steal other people’s bad traits. Think of their good traits. Think about the great ajaans, and think about Upasika Kee: people who gave their lives to the practice and have done so much for the world as a result. You can do that, too. There’s nothing about them that’s super-human. While you’re thinking about their good habits, maybe you can think about how they might have solved the problems you’re facing right now. That gives you energy. So as Ajaan Lee says, as long as you’re going to steal something, steal their valuables. Don’t steal their garbage.

But ultimately you want to get to the point where you’re more of a self-starter. You can stop stealing because you can maximize your own inner resources. And what are your inner resources? You’ve got the four properties of the body here. You’ve got the breath. You can develop that. You’ve got good mental states. Develop those. Develop your own resources. You’ll find that you’ve got all the inner wealth you need, so you don’t need to steal anything from anybody else, good or bad.

As for the precept against illicit sensuality, this relates to sensual desires. You don’t want to get anywhere near them while you’re sitting here meditating. Remind yourself that every sensual passion, every sensual desire, comes with a price. The Buddha has a long list of analogies for the drawbacks of sensuality. He says, it’s like a dog gnawing at a bone that has no meat: all that effort for no nourishment at all. It’s like a person carrying a torch against the wind: The flame of the torch is going to burn you if you don’t throw down the torch. It’s like using and flaunting borrowed goods: The sensual pleasures you get from other people, they can take away at any time. Another analogy is that sensuality is like a man up in a tree, gathering fruits, and someone else comes along and says, “I want the fruits but I can’t climb the tree, but I’ve got my ax, so I can cut down the tree.” If the first man doesn’t quickly get out of the tree, he’s going to get hurt pretty badly. In other words, someone else may come along and very easily take the sources of your sensual pleasures in a way that can damage you. So you’re putting yourself in a dangerous position when you indulge in sensuality.

Sometimes you hear of the dangers of *jhana*, that you're going to get stuck in *jhana*, and it's going to be so wonderful and enthralling that you'll never gain awakening. You can find a few passages in the Canon that make that point, but they're very, very few. The danger of getting stuck in concentration is very small compared to the dangers that come from being stuck on sensuality. As the Buddha said, this is why we have wars, this is why we have quarrels, this is why people work themselves to death. This is why they steal and cheat, in their desire for sensuality. I don't know anybody who's broken the five precepts from being attached to the pleasure of *jhana*.

So *jhana* is a safe place; sensuality is a dangerous place to be. Always keep that in mind. In this way, you take the principles of right action and bring them inside so that you have your own inner wealth to build on. There's no need to steal anything from anyone else, no need to expose yourself to the dangers of trying to find your happiness outside. And by being heedful this way, you keep your goodness alive. That's the most important possession you can have.