

Right Resolve

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The two path factors of right resolve and right concentration have a very close relationship. Right resolve is the motivation for why we're practicing. We want to abandon unskillful qualities so we can put an end to suffering. Right concentration is setting your mind on a particular object. Both of them are very closely connected to intention. These things don't happen unless you really intend them, unless you really want them to happen.

And the three qualities associated with the right resolve—abandoning sensuality, abandoning ill-will, and abandoning harmfulness—are actually realized when the mind settles into right concentration. There's a passage where the Buddha says that when the mind reaches the first jhana, that's finally when all unskillful resolves disappear, because to get into the first jhana you have to be secluded from sensuality, and from unskillful mental qualities. The unskillful qualities here include everything from wrong view all the way through wrong mindfulness. It's finally when the mind is secluded from those things that it can settle down and be still.

So it's good to think about right resolve as you're here trying to get the mind to settle down because it's an important part of getting the mind in the right place. The basic principle underlying all three forms of right resolve is the principle of non-affliction. You don't want to cause any affliction to yourself or any affliction to anyone else. If you look at the ways in which you do cause affliction to yourself, it turns out your sensual passions are a big element in this.

When the Buddha talks about sensuality, he's not talking about sensual objects. Sensuality, in his terms, actually stands for your passion for all your plans and resolves and thoughts about how much you want to enjoy this sight, sound, smell, taste, or tactile sensation. We really feed off of these desires. We feed off these plans. You can spend hours planning a meal that will take maybe half an hour to eat. You can fantasize for days on particular sensual pleasures. And when the pleasure comes, it's over pretty quickly.

Years back, I was reading a book on the Buddhist attitude toward desire, which was said that as long as you're not attached to the object of your desire you can go ahead and desire as much as you want—which is a recipe for a serial sex offender. The book actually had it all backwards. The desiring and the obsession with your desires: That's where the real problem lies.

You've got to learn how to look at the drawbacks of sensuality, this kind of obsession. This is why the Buddha has all those analogies and images for the drawbacks of sensuality. He says it's like a dog chewing on some bones that don't have any meat. Ajahn Lee's explanation of this is all the dog gets is the tastes of its own saliva. There's no real nourishment there at all. Sensuality is also like a hawk getting a little piece of meat and flying off with it, and all these other hawks, crows, vultures, and other birds come to attack it, trying to snatch the meat from it. If it doesn't let go, it's going to be put into trouble.

In other words, our quest for sensuality puts us in a position where if we get something, other people are going to attack us.

The Buddha has long, long descriptions of the drawbacks of sensuality. It's amazing that when people talk about meditation, you often hear them talk about the dangers of jhana, the dangers of right concentration, but those are so minimal when compared to the dangers of sensuality. People very rarely like to talk about those. They extol sensuality as sacred energy or whatever.

It's because of that sacred energy that people kill one another. We have battles. We have wars. All the conflict we see in our society right now is from people fighting over sensuality. There's not enough sensual pleasure to go around. There's never enough. As the Buddha said, even if we had a shower of gold coins, it wouldn't be enough to satisfy even one person's sensual desires. There's always going to be a sense of lack, a sense of not enough. You get this pleasure and you want more. Because the pleasure itself is going to wear away, wear away, wear away, you have to keep finding more and more and more to replace it.

So we have to see the drawbacks of these things, realizing that we feed these sensual desires in hopes that we can then feed off of them. It's like raising chickens for their eggs. If we find out, though, that we spend ten thousand dollars feeding the chickens and we only get two thousand dollars worth of eggs, we'd very quickly stop feeding the chickens and let them go. But we have so much invested in our ideas about sensuality that even though the investment is even worse, we still can't admit it to ourselves.

This takes a lot of reflection. That's why we keep reflecting on the unattractiveness of the body.

This is one of those reflections that people don't like: thinking about the parts of the body that are inside the skin. Of the various chants we have, that's the one we have the people most complaining about. Of course the fact that they're complaining many times tells you something. They'll say, "It's not an issue for me, so why should I have to chant this?" But if it were not an issue, then why would you be bothered by chanting it? Or: "It's an issue only for certain types of people, but not me. We have to look into that "not me." What's resisting the reflection there?

Because this is a very important reflection, seeing that the objects of sensual desire are not all that attractive. The effort spent on sensual thinking really is a bad investment. But reflecting on the drawbacks of sensuality allows you to admit to yourself that, yes, you'd be a lot better off if you could find a happiness that didn't have to depend on sensuality.

The Buddha talks about developing this state of concentration where the pleasure comes from the sense of form. It's a higher level of becoming, he says. It's a higher level of pleasure, that gives you the strength you need in order to see the drawbacks of sensuality very clearly. So that's one of the ways in which right resolve is connected with right concentration. On the one hand, right resolve reminds you this would be a good thing to get the mind concentrated. And on the other hand, when the mind is concentrated it gives you the strength you need in order to look more deeply at your attachment to sensuality so that ultimately you can work your way free of it.

The second form of right resolve is to get rid of ill-will, which is the desire to see other people suffer. You have to look at why you would want them to suffer, and how you justify that desire to yourself. Go

down the list of people you would like to see suffer and ask yourself: "What would you gain from their suffering?" There may be thoughts of revenge or thoughts of justice, you might say. It's not fair that these people get away with all the horrible things they're doing in the world. But why do you have to get involved in that? Why do you have to be the one who's passing judgment on others in that way? It enflames the mind. There's no real happiness there at all. And it leads you eventually to doing unskillful things.

When the Buddha talks about developing thoughts of good will, it's precisely because you need that motivation to nourish your own good actions. You want to be happy and you realize your happiness cannot depend on the misery of other people. So you have to think very carefully about your attitude towards other people, when you're going to speak to them, when you're going to act in ways that engage them. What's the underlying motivation? If your motivation is good, you want their happiness. Then when the time comes to sit down and meditate it's a lot easier to settle down. You're not carrying thoughts of revenge. You're also not carrying thoughts of your own hypocrisy. If you're dealing with someone and you're pretending to be good, but you've got some underlying unskillful motive, there's a cognitive dissonance right there. Dissonance like that can get in the way of being honest with yourself as you meditate.

Now, when you're sitting here meditating focused on your breath, you're not harming anybody at all. You're not taking anything away from them. So the meditation is an embodiment of this ideal of non-ill-will. You're looking for happiness in a way that is not the least bit harmful. It causes no one any affliction. This is a really valuable form of happiness.

The resolve to abandon ill-will is also very closely associated with the third resolve, the resolve to abandon harmfulness. Ill will is often paired with goodwill, harmfulness is often paired as an opposite of compassion. And compassion is very closely related to goodwill. Compassion is what goodwill feels when we see somebody suffering. So harmfulness basically would mean, when you see somebody suffering, that you want to pile on. You've got to remember that people are already suffering and you're not going to gain anything from adding to their suffering. When people are in a position of weakness, that's not the time for you to take advantage of it.

As the Buddha said, when you see somebody suffering like that, reflect on the fact you've been there too. And if your practice doesn't go very far, you're going to back there someday as well. Think about that when you're engaging with people that you could take advantage of. Don't see it as an opportunity to settle old scores or to prove that you have the power to take advantage of somebody. That just creates worse states of mind and really bad karma that's going to come back at you when you're in a position of weakness.

And again it's very difficult to get the mind into an honest state of concentration where insight can really arise if you engage in that kind of behavior.

The antidote to that kind of thinking is to engage with the breath in a way that gives rise to a sense of refreshment and well-being. When you can nourish your mind in this way, your sense of being oppressed by other people gets a lot weaker, and fades away. And whatever

motivation you might have to be unskillful with other people, that fades away as well. You're not harming anybody; you're not thinking thoughts of ill-will for anybody. You've got a happiness that's above the sensual level. This is how right resolve and right concentration are closely connected.

Right concentration is the embodiment of right resolve. If, as soon as you sit down and meditate, you find that you have trouble settling down, well, look at the way you're living your life. What kind of resolves are you acting on as you go through the day? If they're right resolves, the mind should find it a lot easier to settle down. If you can detect any wrong resolves that have come up in your thoughts, or your words, or your deeds, you've got to figure out some way of uprooting them. Because even though they may happen at a time when you're not sitting with your eyes closed, they become a part of your meditation. They're something that's eating away at your meditation.

So reflect on right resolve all the time. This is one of the reasons why they have you develop thoughts of goodwill every morning, the first thing when you get up. They say that Ajaan Mun would develop thoughts of goodwill three times a day: first thing in the morning, and then again after he woke up from his afternoon nap, and then the last thing at night before he went to sleep. Goodwill frames the day, right resolve frames your whole practice, particularly your practice of trying to get the mind to settle down in right concentration.

So as you try to develop skill as a meditator, you can't let the mind wander around and think whatever it wants and resolve on whatever it wants as it goes through the day and then get your act in order only while you're sitting here with your eyes closed. Your mind doesn't work that way. The habits it develops in the course of the day are going to show up here as you meditate. So you want your resolves as you go through the day to be congruous with what you're doing right now.

That's what gives strength to your concentration.