

Choosing Sides

November 8, 2013

When you read the factors of the path, one of the first things you notice is the word right, which implies that there is also a wrong view and a wrong resolve—all the way down to wrong concentration. And the Buddha doesn't leave it just implied. There are passages where he talks explicitly about wrong view and all the other wrong factors—which means you have to make a choice.

It's not the case that every path leads to the top of a mountain. I don't know of any place in the world where every path leads to tops of mountains. A lot of paths lead down into Death Valley. A lot of paths lead down to the ocean or into a swamp. There are lots of different places the paths can take you, so you have to choose: Is this the path you want to follow? And the choice really does make a difference.

We live in a culture where people like to have their choices inconsequential. In other words, it's simply a matter of personal taste. Do you want your enlightenment to be yellow, or would you prefer metallic grey? As if we were choosing a car. But even when you choose a car, there are consequences—and even more so with a path of practice. You've got to decide: What do you really want out of life?

Once you've decided what you want, you have to decide to make it come into being: That's another aspect of the path that's really important. It's something fabricated. You have to put it together; there's work you have to do. There are things that are not arising yet that you want to make arise; and there are things that are arising that you want to learn how to stop. That's what right mindfulness and right effort are all about. Again, this is something else that we in our culture don't like to think about or even hear.

Just today, I was reading an old translation of an Ajaan Chah Dhamma talk, trying to decide whether it deserved to be translated anew. Things were going along well for a couple of pages. Then all of a sudden, there was a passage where, in the original, Ajaan Chah talks about how important it is to understand the truth about dukkha, stress or suffering, and the cause of dukkha, so that you can learn how to stop the cause and, in that way, stop suffering. But the translation said you want to learn about dukkha because that, in and of itself, would stop the suffering. The activity of doing something to stop the cause was dropped entirely.

This is so typical of Western Dhamma. All you have to do is know things, accept things, and that's going to be the end of the problem—that's what they say. But the Buddha did teach right effort. And he taught right mindfulness as a guide to right effort. There are things you have to remember to work at putting an end to, and things you have to work at giving rise to. Once you've given rise to them, you have to develop them. This is all about making choices, taking sides. Which side do you want to be on, the side of right view or wrong view?

Many people say that the whole point of the practice is learning how not to take sides, not to cling to views that something is right or wrong. The Buddha does talk about not clinging to views, but that's a teaching to use after right view has done its work. When you don't need right view any more, you put it aside. But as long as you haven't gotten to the end of the path, you need to side with right view all the way down the line.

It comes back to that choice: What kind of happiness do you want? We'd like to have every kind of happiness, yet if we try to scoop them all up in our arms, some of them are going to get pushed out of our grasp. Some kinds of happiness actually push the other ones out. Sometimes we end up dropping them all. So there are choices that have to be made. If you go after some kinds of happiness, other kinds of happiness just can't happen. Not all forms of happiness are harmonious and conducive to one another. You have to think about that basic principle, as the Buddha said: When you see that a greater happiness comes from letting go of a lesser happiness, you've got to let go of the lesser happiness.

So while you're sitting here meditating, you're choosing. And you're making important choices. Do you want to stay with the breath? Or do you want to take this time to wander around in the world of your mind and pick flowers and gaze at the sky with no concern for

where you're going? Or do you want to put it to work to develop good, strong powers of concentration and good, strong powers of mindfulness?

Mindfulness, you know, is not just watching things coming and going. As the Buddha said, when mindfulness becomes a governing principle in the mind, it sees things that are unskillful and it works toward getting rid of them. It sees things that are skillful and works toward giving rise to them. It actively gets involved in making things arise and making things pass away.

So you are taking sides as you practice. Hopefully, you're taking sides with the right side—right view and all the way down to right concentration—because it really does make a difference.

When the Buddha talks about different paths, it's not that this path leads to the top of the mountain from the north, and that other path leads to the top of the mountain from the south, all leading to the same top of the mountain. In his description of paths, he says it's like seeing that some paths lead to a pit of burning embers while some of the other paths lead to a cesspool. There's a path that leads to a beautiful place and another that leads to a lake with a nice shore and lots of shade on the shore.

In other words, there are paths to good and bad places, and there are gradations of good and gradations of bad. So you have to ask yourself, which path do you want? A lot of us want to have... we want all the nice places. But if you go to one, you miss out on the other. You could, if you wanted to, try all the paths, but it would take a long time before you were done with them. The choice is yours.

So while we're here, we try to practice right concentration, right mindfulness. This is why restraint is such an important part of the practice: realizing that some things are going to get in the way of right mindfulness and right concentration, and you have to learn how to say No to them. The choice is yours. And remember that it is an important choice. It's not simply a matter of personal preference that will be inconsequential down the line. The choices you make really do make a difference. Try to side with the right choices, so when you look back on your path, you say, "Ah, this was the right path, and I'm glad I chose it."