

## *Right Resolve in Real Life*

*July 11, 2017*

Right resolve and right concentration are very closely connected. The beginning of the definition for right concentration says, “Secluded from sensuality; secluded from unskillful qualities.” It refers to the work of right resolve. You’re resolving to stay away from sensuality through resolve on renunciation, which means you’re not going to let yourself get engaged in sensual thinking. You’re resolved on non-ill will, i.e., goodwill. And you’re resolved on harmlessness, i.e., compassion, so that you can actually carry out those resolves. Those are the beginning conditions for getting into right concentration.

One of the suttas talks about two types of right resolve: mundane and noble. Mundane right resolve is the three resolves I just mentioned. Noble right resolve basically is the first jhana, when you’ve succeeded with clearing out of the mind things like sensuality, ill will, harmfulness. The concentration also helps with your right resolve, because a lot of these resolves are not easy to stick with. We can think in the abstract that, yes, it would be a good thing to have the mind free from things like sensual obsession, ill will, or harmfulness. But when you actually start living with human beings and putting up with the stresses and strains of daily life, it’s very easy to want to go for sensuality, ill will, and harmfulness.

This is where the concentration helps and gives you another place for the mind to feed, because the things that are going to pull us away from right resolve are mainly two: painful feelings and harsh words. Those are things the Buddha said we should learn how to tolerate. In other words, you have to build up patience and endurance for them. And concentration is really good for building up those qualities. When the Buddha’s talking about patience, it’s not simply a matter of gritting your teeth and putting up with hardships. It’s learning how to find a sense of pleasure even in the midst of hardships so that you have something to sustain you. Learning how to get a sense of well-being as you settle in with the body; settle in with the breath: That’s good sustenance.

So the two factors, right resolve, which is an aspect of discernment, and the concentration, go together. The discernment begins with the realization that, as the four noble truths say, if the mind is suffering, it’s because of something in the mind. An abbot of a monastery in England was talking one time about a number of members of the community who were complaining all the time about the conditions in the monastery: This wasn’t right. That wasn’t right. And his analysis was, “They don’t understand the four noble truths.” Because if you spend your

time complaining about things outside—even if you’re not complaining out loud, just complaining to yourself—you’re going to miss seeing what you’re doing to make the situation intolerable and hard to bear. And when you’re focused on things outside, the pains outside, unpleasant things outside, it’s very easy to want to go for sensual thinking.

As the Buddha said, if you don’t see any alternative to pain aside from sensual thinking, that’s what you’re going to go for: the sensual thinking. And then you start thinking about the other people who’ve caused you pain, who’ve said nasty things to you, done bad things to you or people you love or people you respect, or people you care for, it’s very easy to feel ill will for them. And then to think, “Okay, once they’re down, once I have the opportunity, I’m going to get some revenge.” That’s harmfulness.

So you’ve got to turn your thinking around, and concentration helps give you a foundation for doing that. If you can create a sense of well-being inside and feed on that, you’re less likely to be feeding on things outside and less likely to be complaining about them. You can notice that something’s not right, but if it’s not interfering with your internal food source, it’s a lot easier to bear with it.

The things that we have trouble bearing with are the ones that we bring inside, the things we try to feed on. Sometimes you bring them inside simply by the way you breathe. You get upset about something and your breath changes and becomes intolerable. It’s not the situation that’s intolerable. It’s your breathing that’s intolerable, but you lash out. So you constantly have to be on the lookout for when the breath changes. One of the reasons why we practice here, sitting with our eyes closed, focusing on the breath, is to make ourselves more and more sensitive to this aspect of the body and its relationship to events in the mind. Then we want to take that sensitivity out into our other activities, so that when someone says something displeasing or harsh or nasty, we look immediately at our breath to make sure that the breath doesn’t get affected.

Remember the Buddha’s image to Rahula when he says, “meditate like wind.” That’s breath as part of the wind element. It doesn’t mean that you blow your mind around. It means that wind can blow disgusting things around, but the wind doesn’t get disgusted, in the same way that when it blows pleasant things around, it doesn’t get elated. It’s just wind. So, when there are good or bad things in your environment, try to keep your mind just mind, just awareness. Try to keep your breath on an even keel.

When you’ve got the breath on your side, that’s half the battle right there. Otherwise, your greed, your aversion, and delusion hijack the breath and they hold it hostage. They say, “Okay, we’re going to be making a lot of unpleasant

feelings here in your body until you do something in line with what we want. And only then will we let it go.” That’s a pretty high price, because what they want you to do can often be very unskillful. And you’ll be the one to pay the price, not them. So don’t let them take the breath hostage. Try to be on top of how your breathing feels and learn how to breathe in a way that feels good, even when things are falling apart around you, because that way your head will be a lot clearer in spite of the situation, and you can think of the most skillful thing to do.

When you’re not stabbing yourself with events around you, you can fall back on the mantra we talked about today: “I can take this. I can take this.” You can survive these things because you’re not bringing them in to wear yourself down. This doesn’t mean that you’re totally passive. When you see something out of line, something that’s inappropriate, and you have the ability to change it, go ahead and change it. But there are a lot of things in the world, a lot of people in the world, that are very hard to change.

But, as the Buddha pointed out, when we’re living with things that we don’t like, or being separated from things that we do like, the suffering is not in the things that we like or don’t like, it’s with the clinging and the craving—which means you’ve got to look inside. This is what right resolve deals with. It reminds you that craving and clinging are the things you’ve got to watch out for.

Sensual craving is number one. You’ve got to be very alert and very attuned to the harm that a lot of your sensual fantasies do. Even if you don’t act on them, they get the mind in a certain mood. It starts getting sloppy. When it starts getting sloppy, this little slip doesn’t matter. That little slip doesn’t matter. “All I want is my pleasure.” That’s the attitude it has. And then when you do start acting out on these things, you can cause yourself a lot of trouble. You can cause other people a lot of trouble, too. So the concentration is there to give you an alternative pleasure. It’s the combination of discernment and concentration, seeing the drawbacks of sensuality and having this alternative pleasure: That’s what enables you to get past that sloppiness.

When you’re dealing with difficult people, confronted with feelings of pain and harsh words, having a place of concentration really helps. Even if you can’t occupy the whole body and fill it and suffuse it with pleasure down to every last cell, the fact that you have *some* part of the body that you can make comfortable allows you to find your sustenance there so that you have the strength to deal with the pain, the strength to deal with the unpleasant words. Because you’ve got this alternative source of food, you’re not out there stuffing those things into your stomach and then finding that they give you indigestion.

Ajaan Lee says when someone else spits out some nasty words and we take them inside to think about, it's as if they've spit something on the ground and we've picked it up and are eating it. Of course, we're going to get sick. And who are you going to blame? You were the one who picked it up. So even though people are aiming their words at you, you have to learn how to sidestep them and see the words as their karma, as having nothing to do with you, even though they're saying your name over and over and over again. Just remind yourself that they're aiming at their *concept* of you, and they're not aiming directly at you. You're not their concept of you, so they can't hit you at all.

In Thailand, one of the insults that's commonly hurled around is that people get called dogs. And the different ajaans have interesting ways of dealing with that. Ajaan Funn says, "They call you a dog. You look around. You don't have a tail. And they don't have tails either. So if you're a dog and they look like you, then they must be dogs as well." Or Ajaan Lee's way of saying it, "You look around you. You know that dogs do have tails. You look at yourself. You don't have a tail. Okay, what they're saying is not true." "But there is an advantage when they call you a dog," he adds: "Dogs have no laws. They're free to do as they like." So whatever the insult, learn how to look at it in a way that gets you out of the line of fire and to see some humor in the situation. When you can laugh at their insults, you're far away from them. They can't hit you. Now, don't laugh out loud at them because that'll cause trouble. But you can laugh to yourself.

There's a story in the Canon where the monks are walking along as a group and there's a sectarian from some other sect along with his student following behind them. The student is praising the Buddha and the teacher is denouncing the Buddha. And the monks got upset because the teacher was denouncing the Buddha. And the Buddha said, "Even when run-of-the-mill people praise me," he said, "they don't know what they're talking about. So why should I get upset when they're denouncing me?" Try to develop the attitude that if there is really something true about what they say, you can learn. Otherwise, you just let it go.

You can live with a lot of things in this world and not get tempted to do unskillful things in response. Because that's the main problem: When people do unskillful things to us, there's an immediate tendency for us to turn around and do unskillful things to them. And that goes for things that we like as well as for things we don't like.

So we've got to learn how to resist the temptation to do the unskillful things that we like, or to respond to the unskillful things that we like in unskillful ways—or to respond to the unskillful things that we don't like in unskillful ways.

Right resolve helps with the combination of right concentration because the resolve brings in the element of discernment.

Simply learning how to breathe, simply learning how to be calm in the face of something, doesn't deal with the whole problem. There's the problem of the "I" and the "me" that gets in the way and is feeling injured by these things. If you can learn how to take those concepts apart to see whatever "I" you have doesn't need to be in the line of fire, and it's not harmed by the other things that other people do to you, then you put yourself in a position of safety: safe not only from what they say, but also from your potential unskillful reactions.

That way, you really can carry right resolve into the world with all of its messiness and keep it intact. This principle applies to all the factors of the path. They're not designed simply for situations where the practice is easy and the conditions are good. They're meant to be followed all the time: when they're easy, when they're hard, when the world outside is supporting you, when the world outside is not supporting you. You want to have the wherewithal in terms of your virtue and your concentration and your discernment to protect your path, i.e., to protect your thoughts, your words, and your deeds to keep them in line with what you know will ultimately lead to true happiness, to the true end of suffering. When you keep that goal in mind, you realize that a lot of the other baggage that you tend to carry with you is an unnecessary burden and you can let it go.