

## *Right View*

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In developing the path, the Buddha said, right view comes first. So what is right view and how do you know it? It's good to look at where it begins. A lot of people, when they read the Buddhist texts, like to go all the way to the end, to the really abstruse and subtle parts. But it's easy to get lost in those parts if you don't know where the Buddha's beginning, because the beginnings give you a sense of perspective. They lay the foundation.

As in the sutta where Ven. Sariputta is talking about right view: He starts with the issue of skillfulness. That right there has a couple of important implications. When the Buddha starts with basic right view, he starts with the principle of karma: that your actions really do make a difference; they really do have results. That basic assumption is a good one to make. If you can't make that an assumption, why bother? That assumption cuts through a lot of useless things you hear, such as the idea that you have no free will at all. If you didn't have any free will, then your actions wouldn't be yours, and they wouldn't make any difference.

Or the idea that the path is something you can't do. You hear this a lot: the idea that awakening is something unconditioned, whereas a path is conditioned, so doing anything in the path gets in the way. Or that you can't create nibbana: Of course, the Buddha never said you create nibbana. You *go* there. There are actions that take you there. Right view about action is that there are four kinds. There's action that gives good results within the cycle of rebirth, action that gives bad results in the cycle of rebirth, action that gives mixed results, the kinds of things we see everywhere; and then there's the fourth kind of action, which, the Buddha said, ultimately puts an end to action. That's the noble eightfold path.

So it is something you do. Because of the complex nature of causality, you can do things that take you outside of the system or network of doing. So it is something you can do. That's the basic assumption: We're working with actions.

Then you look at actions in terms what kind of results they get. That's your test. This is where the whole idea of skillful and unskillful comes in. Skillful actions lead toward the end of suffering; unskillful ones lead to more suffering. How do you know which is which? Well, you have to look for yourself at your own actions, but the Buddha's not forcing you to reinvent the Dhamma wheel. He gives you some guidance.

When Ven. Sariputta talked about skillful and unskillful actions, he started out with some very basic do's and don'ts. Killing, he says, is unskillful. Stealing,

illicit sex: These things are unskillful. Lying, abusive speech, divisive tale bearing, idle chatter, greed, ill will, and wrong views: These are all unskillful things. These are the standard do's and don'ts that hold across the board.

This is like those signs they used to have up in Alaska about bear awareness, warnings about bears. They start out with do's and don'ts, because there are certain things that really do hold across the board. When a bear charges at you, don't run away, because it'll chase you. Your immediate reaction when you see a bear running at you is that you want to get out of there. But the people who know say No. You're safer if you stand your ground.

The precepts are like that. They're not just for times when things are easy. We notice the madness that sweeps through human society every now and then when there's been an attack, when something upsetting has happened, and people want to throw morality away, saying that morality is good only when things are calm and peaceful, but when it comes basic survival, you've got to look after number one. That kind of attitude is really harmful because it just perpetuates the cycle of suffering. This is why the precepts are short, clear, to the point. No matter who's planning to kill you, you don't kill. No matter who's been stealing from you, you don't steal. And so on down the line.

What's interesting about the bear awareness sign is that at the very end, they say, okay, if a bear does attack you, lie down, play dead. Even if it starts chewing on you, continue to play dead. The bear, in nine cases out of ten, will then lose interest and go away. But then there's that one case out of ten where the bear is hungry, and so they say, try to be alert and notice: When the bear is chewing you out of curiosity, play dead, but if it looks like he's chewing you out of hunger, then start fighting back for all you're worth.

Of course, you've got to have a lot of mindfulness and alertness to discern the bear's motives when he's chewing on you. That's why the Buddha has us practice mindfulness and alertness as we meditate, not so much in case we're attacked by bears, but because there are a lot of issues in the world in which the issue of skillfulness and unskillfulness can't be contained in a few do's and don'ts. As he also noticed, as you practice, your sensitivity as to what's skillful and unskillful is going to develop. The more mindful, the more alert you are, the more concentration and discernment you have, then the more you'll be able to detect, one, what you're doing; two, what the results are; and three, whether they're skillful or not.

If you combine that sensitivity with some ingenuity and your powers of analysis, you can figure out, if it's not skillful enough, "What can I do to make it more skillful?" The important thing is that you keep those questions of skillfulness

and unskillfulness uppermost in your mind. That's really what right view comes down to, the issue of, "What are the important questions to ask?" And they follow in those areas: "One, what am I doing? Two, what are the results? Three, are they good enough? And four, if they're not good enough, what can I do to make them better?"

If you keep those questions in mind, then when you encounter things that you're not quite sure about—teachings you've heard, or things that come up in the course of your meditation—you've got the right framework for testing things and looking at them, weighing them, considering them, and coming into some provisional conclusions. The word "provisional" here is important, because you can assume that there always will be some element of wrong view or some insensitivity in your practice, but that's something you work with. Think of your conclusions as Post-it notes. As you gain more experience, you may want to rearrange the notes or just pull them off and throw them away altogether. But this framework helps you judge a lot of issues that otherwise might get confusing.

Like the whole issue of desire on the path: How many times have you heard that desires are a bad thing? Or conceit: Conceit is a bad thing. Ego is a bad thing. But there's that interesting sutta where Ven. Ananda is talking to a nun. She had hoped to seduce him, and he realized what was going on. So he said to her that the practice we're working on is to ultimately go beyond food—in other words, to put the mind in a place where it doesn't need to feed anymore—but you need to use food on the path. The purpose of the path is to go beyond conceit, but you need to use conceit on the path. The purpose is to go beyond craving, but you need to use craving on the path. The purpose is to go beyond sexual intercourse—and the nun is probably thinking, "Wow!"—but then he says there's no room for sexual intercourse on the path.

That's one of the clear-cut don'ts. But look at the first three. There is a role for these things if you learn how to use them skillfully. The skillful use of food is to reflect on it, what we're supposed to be doing every morning before we eat: why we're eating, not for intoxication, not for beautification, not simply for the taste of food, but to keep the body going so we can practice. As you reflect on these things, it not only helps you be moderate in your consumption, but you also start thinking about the human condition. That old question—"What is one? All beings subsist on food"—points to the basic causal relationship in life: feeding, eating. And think of all the suffering that's gone into the meal that's coming your way—the suffering of farmers, the suffering of the people working in the store, the suffering of the people driving the trucks—all the way to the point where it's gotten to you. And here you are, living off the suffering of others. This is one good

way to motivate yourself to practice to find a happiness that doesn't require anybody else's suffering.

Then there's the skillful use of craving and desire. If we didn't have the desire for awakening, we couldn't follow the path. Again, this is one of the things you hear often: that the desire for awakening is what gets in the way of your awakening; having a goal is what gets in the way of your fully appreciating the present moment. But the Buddha never said that. If you don't have the desire, you're not going to follow the path. And what's so wonderful about the present moment if it's a moment that's eating things. It's not where you want to be.

If you want to get beyond eating, you've got to find some way of developing the mind. That's kind of desire is helpful, because it points you to what needs to be done, to get the mind in a position where it doesn't need to feed. *Then* you can be content.

Then there's the issue of conceit. Ananda says, you see that other people have attained awakening, so you ask yourself, "Why can't I?" That's a useful use of conceit. This is why we read the Therigatha and the Theragatha, and why we have sanghanussati as a useful meditation topic when things get dry, or when you start getting discouraged about your own place on the path. You reflect back on the fact that other people have been worse off than you, and yet ultimately they were able to pick themselves up, dust themselves off, and gain awakening. They could do it, you can do it. This is an important motivating factor on the path.

So there is a place where the proper use of conceit, desire, and food plays a role in learning how ultimately to overcome conceit, desire, and the need for food. How do you know their proper use? You learn to look at what you're doing in the path as you practice, and gauge the results.

Of course, you're going to make mistakes. This is part of following any path where you have to rely yourself, but you learn how to learn from your mistakes, keeping in mind everybody makes mistakes. The Buddha himself came from a big mistake—all those six years of self-torment—and you can imagine the conceit that went around that. Yet finally he was able to drop that and find the right path.

So we have his example. He was able to make mistakes but he was also able to learn from them. If you're the sort of person who doesn't like to admit to yourself that you've made mistakes, you're never going to get anywhere. But if you can learn to recognize a mistake, laugh at yourself a little bit about it—not a nasty laugh, but a good-natured laugh—and then use your ingenuity to see how you can do things better, talk things over with other people, people you respect, to get their perspective on things, and then resolve that you're not going to repeat the

mistake, realizing that that's the best of any human being can do, is to make that resolve and then follow through with it: Then there's hope for you.

Once you have the right attitude toward mistakes, realizing that you're going to make them but here's how you deal with them, then you can gradually adjust and fine-tune your understanding of what right view means in any given situation. As you learn to act in ways that cause less and less suffering, less and less stress, you get more and more sensitive to the mind's potential for happiness, its potential for well-being. This applies not only to outward actions, but also to inward actions. You concentrate the mind in a particular way, focus in a particular way, and see: Does it really get concentrated? Does it really have a sense of well-being that's not tense and constricted? And once you gain a sense of well-being, how do you maintain that? What can you do with it?

As you get used to it, it's like your eyes adjusting to the light in a very bright room. After a while, you begin to see there are things in this room. At first, the light is so bright that you can't see anything at all. But after a while, you began to notice that there's a little bit of stress in the concentration, a little bit of inconstancy here. Can you move the mind onto a new perception, to a new state of concentration where there's less of that stress? Learning to ask yourself that question is what develops your concentration, develops your meditation, and develops your insight at the same time you're getting more and more sensitive.

So those basic questions are: What are you doing? What are the results? Are they good enough? When you ask these questions, you begin to see that you're doing things in areas where you might not have thought you were doing anything at all. Sometimes you hear the distinction made between doing things in the meditation and just allowing yourself to be. Well, the Buddha said being is a kind of doing. Or being equanimous: Some people think that you're not doing anything at all when you're equanimous, because there are no likes or dislikes, but to be equanimous, as the Buddha said, is also a kind of doing. You can get stuck on it, i.e., you keep doing it over and over again. When you see it as an action, that's when you can start moving beyond it.

So look at everything that's happening in the mind and ask yourself, "Where is the action here? And what are the results?" If you can't see the action, look for the issues of inconstancy and stress. Those should alert you that there's something going on here, there are some decisions being made. There is some commentary that the mind is running on about what's happening. Try to ferret that out. And whatever you see is causing any stress or any inconstancy, just let go of it.

So notice, it's the same questions all the way down the line: What's the action? What's the result? And is it skillful enough? What can be done to be more

skillful? When you keep those questions in mind, even though your understanding of right view may still be crude, at least you're got the basic framework. Once the framework is in place, then it can be used in making your understanding more and more precise, more and more helpful, more and more productive, until finally it becomes that kind of action that leads to the end of action.

This is how right view comes first. It gets you thinking and questioning in the right way. When you get to the end of the path, then you don't need right view anymore. As the Buddha said, arahants continue to look at things in terms of right view as a comfortable way of dwelling, but they don't need it to cut away anymore defilements. They can let go. Or as Ajaan Lee used to say, the world needs right view and wrong view, but in nibbana there are no right views or wrong views. You've used right views as tools and then you can put them down. But don't throw them away before they've done their work. It's like having a house to build, and you go out and throw away your hammer, throw away your saw. The house will never get done.

Once the house is done, though, then you can put them aside. Even then, you don't throw them away. Just put them aside. You don't have to carry them around. They float around behind you. When you need them, you can pick them up and use them again, then put them down again. They continue floating around behind you. You don't have to carry them around. As long as you need your right views, make sure you keep them sharpened, make sure you keep them in good shape, because they are what will see you through.