

The Resolve to Let Go

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In the factors of the noble eightfold path there's a strong correlation between right resolve and right concentration.

Right resolve is composed of three kinds of resolve: the resolve for renunciation, the resolve for non-ill will, and the resolve for harmlessness. All three of these are essential to the practice of right concentration. To get the mind rightly concentrated, you have to be willing to renounce your attachment to sensual pleasures, your attachment to sensual passions.

As the Buddha noted, our real attachment to sensuality is more to our thoughts about sensual pleasures than to the actual pleasures themselves. The pleasures are very fleeting, but you can think for hours about how much you want a particular sensual pleasure. And we're very fussy in the details. It has to be like this, it has to be like that. Whether it has to do with lust or hunger for food, we're very particular about the kind of pleasure we want. And we can think for hours on all the little details.

Yet when the pleasure actually comes, it's pretty fleeting. It comes and goes. When you eat food, there's just a brief taste of the food on your tongue. The same with the physical pleasure of lust. It's pretty short. Yet we can obsess about these things for hours and hours. And by obsessing on these things, you can create all kinds of unskillful mental states and do all sorts of unskillful things. Which is why the realization of right resolve is that you've got to let these things go.

If you're going to get the mind into right concentration, think about the first part of the definition: "secluded from sensuality." This doesn't mean that you have to go to a place where there are no sensual pleasures at all, simply that you seclude the mind, withdraw the mind from that sensual kind of thinking. You have to learn how to let it go.

The same with non-ill will. It's very easy to start fixating on people who've wronged you in the past or political figures whom you really, really dislike. And again, you can go for hours on how bad those people are and how much you'd like to see them get their just desserts. But what does that gain for you? It certainly doesn't help you get into right concentration. You have to learn how to let that go.

Then there's the resolve on non-harmfulness. It would seem to be redundant with the resolve for non-ill will, but the texts say that non-ill will correlates to metta or goodwill, and harmlessness correlates to compassion. In other words,

when you see that somebody is suffering, you don't want to go and add a little bit more on. You'd prefer to see the end of suffering. This applies not only to people outside but also to your own mind.

This is why right resolve is such an important part of right concentration. If you have any tendency to get down on yourself and to wish yourself ill—letting yourself fall into a bad situation, leaving yourself in a bad state of mind—you've got to let go of that tendency. If things aren't well, you have to figure out how to make them better. That desire to put in the mind in a position where it's not suffering as much as it is right now: That's an important part of the resolve for right concentration.

So there's both the letting go and a determination to do something. You let go of your fascination with sensual thoughts. Sometimes that's easy and sometimes it's not. If it's not, you've got to start thinking about the drawbacks of all that sensual thinking, what a total waste it is.

The Buddha once said that even though he wasn't the sort of person who would praise sleeping, still it would be better to sleep than to get involved in sensual thinking. Because the sensual thinking will lead eventually to sensual passion and sensual actions, sensual fever. It just builds and builds things that take over the mind, and your capacity for seeing what's skillful and doing what's skillful really gets harmed.

So you can look over the drawbacks of the sensual thinking and also the drawbacks of the actual objects on which you've been focused, to see that they're really not worth all of that obsession. That makes it easier to let them go.

The same with ill will: If there's somebody you'd really like to see suffer—even if that person is yourself—you have to ask yourself, "What would you gain by the suffering?" When people suffer, they tend to behave in even more unskillful ways. They tend to lash out at others. So there's nothing really gained by wishing suffering on somebody else. The same goes for the desire to add on to other people's suffering when they're down.

You have to learn how to see the drawbacks of this kind of thinking and learn how to let it go. This talent for letting go is also an important prerequisite for concentration. Now, there *is* the element of doing that we have to engage in as we concentrate the mind. It's not totally just letting go, letting go. But the ability to practice renunciation: Even the Buddha said that his mind didn't leap up at the prospect when he was starting out practicing. He had to think again and again and again about the drawbacks of holding on to his thoughts of sensual pleasures, his passion for sensual thoughts before he was willing to let them go and allow the mind to get into the first jhana. But he was able to do it. And he benefitted from

it. And other people, following his example, have been able to do it and benefit from it as well.

This is why it's good to develop the habit of learning how to let go. It starts with giving. The principle of giving, the principle of generosity, would seem to be such a common virtue all over the world that the Buddha's teachings on giving would seem to be very uncontroversial.

But it turns out that during his time there were actually two groups of thinkers who called it into question. One actually said that giving is the teaching of fools and idiots because nothing good comes of it. That was the teaching of the annihilationists, that basically said no matter what happens in human life, everybody just dies and that's it. Everybody's wiped out, so nothing that you do for anybody serves any real purpose because nobody's of any real worth. The only good things in life are immediate pleasures.

The other people who questioned the principle of giving were the determinists. If what everybody does is determined by forces outside of them, there's no real virtue in giving, there's no freedom there: That's what they taught. So if somebody gives you something, it wasn't because they had the choice not to give it. They just had to. So there's no real virtue there, no real merit.

Of course, as you can imagine, this kind of thinking is very detrimental to social life at large, which may be one of the reasons why the Buddha repudiated it. But his reasons go deeper than that. Sometimes you hear that dana is a 2,500-year-old tradition. But it goes way back further than that. It goes back to the beginnings of human society. It's what enables us to live together.

And it gives us good practice in two things: One, realizing that letting go can have good consequences. And two, it's an expression of our freedom. As I said the other day: You realize, when you give something, that you were free not to give it.

When you were a little child, this was probably your first experience of freedom. You had a choice to hold on to something and use it yourself or to give it away. And there's a happiness that comes from giving it away.

So when the Buddha starts out a lot of his teachings with the principle of generosity, with the principle of giving, he's trying to tap into that experience of the happiness that can come from letting go of something that you've been enjoying. That principle is an important part of getting the mind into deeper states of concentration, and it's also an important part of discernment.

Because a lot of discernment is learning to let go of your unwillingness to examine things you've been holding on to. We hold on to our sensual desire, we hold on to our ill will, we hold onto our sloth and torpor.

When the mind gets sleepy, it's very easy for us to say, "I'd like to go along with

that.” Then you have all kinds of excuses for, “Well, my mind is getting bleary, this concentration is not working. It’s time to give up.” If you give up every time you get sleepy, the concentration goes nowhere. It develops no strength.

The same with restlessness and anxiety: It’s a negative thought pattern, but there’s a part of the mind that sometimes enjoys it, that likes worrying about the future, thinking that somehow by worrying about the future you can keep bad things at bay. Now, there is a certain use in planning for the future and anticipating future difficulties. But when it becomes obsessive, then it’s unhealthy. And again, it’s not helpful for the concentration, not helpful for getting the mind in a position where it can really see things clearly for what they are.

The same with doubt, uncertainty: We often have our reasons for liking to hold on to it. An unwillingness to commit. An unwillingness to change ourselves. But only when you begin to see the drawbacks of that kind of thinking can you really get the mind into concentration.

So the practice of relinquishment, the practice of generosity, letting go: These are all tied together. And they all help in the practice of concentration. If you’re going to stay with the breath, you have to let go of anything else that comes into the range of your awareness, no matter how amazingly wonderful or desirable or stylish or glamorous or whatever it may seem. If you’ve had practice in letting go, giving things away, it’s a lot easier to take the leap, to give this practice the benefit of the doubt: Maybe it would be a good thing to let go. Especially when dealing with the hindrances: That attitude right there is more than half the battle.

The commentaries give lots of practices for how to overcome the defilements, but the most important one is that you actually learn to see them as a problem. Because so often when a defilement arises, you’re willing to go along with it.

A sensual desire arises and you say, “It’s time the mind had a little bit of pleasure.”

Or ill will arises and that person really does deserve to suffer and you’d really like to see that person suffer.

Sloth, drowsiness come along and you say, “I really do need to sleep.”

Anxiety: “You really do need to worry about these things.”

Uncertainty: “I’ve really can’t come down one side or the other on this issue, I can’t trust it.”

That’s the kind of thinking that gets in the way. Once you can get over that kind of thinking, then the techniques for dealing with the hindrances, as they say in Thai, are like bananas: They’re so easy to peel.

So it’s good to reflect on this connection between letting go and getting the mind into right concentration. Remind yourself of all the good that has come in

the past from times when you've let go and you've been generous. That helps get the mind in the right frame for actually doing the practice, for applying yourself to the doing side of the practice with a sense of commitment.

Because, as the Buddha said, the path is something that has to be tested, but it's not tested in a desultory or half-hearted kind of way. You really have to give yourself seriously over to the path if you want to say that you've given it a fair test.