

The Need for Right View

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As you focus in on the breath and try to stay with the breath, you'll notice that there's a commentary going on in the background. It might be as simple as the reminder: "Stay with the breath. Stay with the breath." Or it may be more elaborate. And as much as we'd like to think that there's a simple, pure awareness of the breath in the present moment, with nothing else going on, it takes a lot of steps to get there. An important part of the training is to train that voice in the background so that its comments are actually helpful and don't lead you astray.

This is why we need training in right view, so that we can know what to do when things come up—and that we'll know which pieces of advice to listen to, and which ones not. If we don't train ourselves in this way, we bring in old attitudes that we've picked up from who knows where. When something new and unusual comes in, we'll find ourselves flowing along in line with where those old attitudes were.

So one of the purposes of learning right view is to start questioning the attitudes you've been bringing to all kinds of things in your life, so that you can train that inner voice to be more useful, more helpful. If you find some of your old attitudes are useful, okay, you can include them. But if you find that they're getting in the way or leading you astray, you've got to very consciously retrain them. Remind yourself, "No, that's not a helpful way to go. No, that's not a helpful way to think."

This is why we learn the Buddha's teachings as part of our training. And the teachings don't interfere with our engagement in the present moment. They point it in the right direction: Ideally that's how they work. And it turns out that the basic principles are pretty simple. It's just that we tend to forget to apply them all around. And we may have a very narrow idea of what right view is.

It's important to realize that there are at least three different ways it's expressed in the Canon. They're useful for different levels of thought and levels of practice, but they all come together. The more blatant version leads to the more intermediate version, and the intermediate version leads to the more refined version. So in one sense, they're all of a piece. They give you some ideas of how you might apply the basic principles while you're meditating, and as you're going through life.

The first level of right view is conviction in the principle of kamma: that there are good and bad actions that lead to good and bad results, which are determined

by the quality of intention behind the action. A lot of us resist the teaching on kamma because we tend to run into it mostly when we find ourselves facing a bad situation, and kamma seems to say, “Well, you’re guilty, or you deserve this bad situation,” which is not what it really teaches at all. But because we think that, we tend to have a negative impression of the teaching.

Actually, when the Buddha introduced kamma, he introduced it to show that it affirms two very important values in life: generosity and gratitude.

He starts out by saying, “There is what is given,” which seems obvious enough, but it’s actually something that was controversial in his time. The brahmins had been claiming for a long time that gifts were important—but only gifts given to them. As you can imagine, over time people began to resist the teaching, and there were some people who actually said, “No. Giving doesn’t have any virtue at all,” either because people when they die just vanish, get annihilated, so what you do for them doesn’t have any long-term benefits, for them or for you.

Or there was the argument that everything was determined, that there was some causal mechanism put into motion in the beginning of the cosmos, either by a personal God or an impersonal principle, but everything that happened, or is happening, was already determined by the original principle. So people don’t have a choice. There’s no free will, which means that when they give, there’s no special virtue to it, because they had to give.

So when the Buddha starts out by saying, “There is what is given,” he’s making two points. First, there is something of lasting value in the act of giving. Death is not the end. There is rebirth, and there are people who actually know about this. It’s not just a hypothesis or guess. And second, people have free will. They do have the choice to give or not to give, so that when they give, it’s an act of value.

This is the beginning of right view: when you realize you have choices and the choices are important.

Another implication of this is the teaching on gratitude. Your parents really do play an important role in your life and they really do have a lot of merit in the fact that they didn’t squash you out as soon as you were reborn or starve you or anything like that. They went through all the hardship, in the case of the mother, bearing you through the pregnancy and birth, and then both parents in finding food for you, clothing, shelter, training you. Whether they did a good job or not, you still have a huge debt of gratitude to them.

And the principle of gratitude applies in a larger realm as well. Anybody who’s helped you, simply out of the goodness of his or her heart: You have a debt of gratitude to that person.

As the Buddha once said, a sign of a good person is gratitude, because it shows

that you appreciate goodness, and you appreciate how hard it is to be good. You value it. So you're more likely to put forth the effort to do good things yourself.

So it's wise to take on these attitudes and to start applying them to your day-to-day life. Your choices in what you do and say and think really are important. And you want to be very careful to look at your intentions, to make sure that they're not clouded by greed, anger, or delusion. If you find yourself acting or speaking and thinking in ways that are thoughtless—knee-jerk reactions that are harmful—you've got to stop and very carefully retrain yourself not to act, not to speak, not to think in those ways, to value the goodness of other people and to learn to be generous, both with material things and with immaterial things, things like your knowledge, patience, forgiveness, harmlessness. As the Buddha pointed out one time, the fact you're observing the precepts is a gift, a gift of safety, both to yourself and to others. At the same time, if you find yourself thinking in ways that are thoughtless, you've got to retrain those thoughts.

This is the beginning of the practice. It doesn't start only when you sit down and close your eyes and focus on the breath. It starts by developing the right attitude to your actions and your interactions with other people, so that when you tell yourself the story of your life, the underlying framework is this framework of skillful and unskillful kamma, issues of generosity, issues of gratitude.

When you can rework your narrative that way, it puts you in a much better position to sit down and face the present moment. It also reminds you that one of the reasons you're meditating is so that you can understand your intentions, to see them more clearly, because they're bound up in a real tangle of perceptions and views. The interaction of a lot of different mental events in the mind goes into a decision to do something. That creates the kamma. And it's going to have results. So you want to be very clear on what's happening in the present moment that shapes your intentions, and how you can learn to create the conditions that will make your intentions more and more skillful.

That's one huge primary motive for sitting down and meditating: You see that you're causing yourself unnecessary suffering through your unskillful actions, your unskillful intentions. Right view also reminds you that when you're sitting here meditating, you're also engaging in kamma. You're making choices. You're doing things. This is helpful to remember when the mind gets into very deep stages of concentration that there's a *doing* that's going on. It's not that you somehow reach the point of non-doing, a ground of being, or that you reach the unconditioned simply because you're watching things with equanimity. There is a doing even in the equanimity. There is a doing in the sensation of oneness, infinite consciousness. You've made certain choices. And when you learn how to look at

your concentration as a type of kamma, you are more likely not to get snagged on whatever comes up.

So that first level of right view, even though it's primarily dealing with what we tend to think of as issues outside of meditation, actually does have an impact on the way you're going to approach meditation, the way you understand what's happening in your meditation. So it's important that you get that first level right.

The second level is to look at things in terms of the four noble truths. As you're sitting here, what are you doing? It's not the case that you just stop doing and are simply being. Being, again, is a type of activity. As the Buddha points out, becoming comes from certain choices. So what you want to choose is to focus on the issue of suffering, and what happens in the mind to create the suffering. When you look at your experience in those terms, a whole new set of duties comes up in line with those four noble truths. Suffering, you want to comprehend. That means you want to see the clinging that is there in the suffering, so that you can develop dispassion for it.

The duty with regard to the second noble truth, the cause of suffering, is to abandon it. Once you see the craving that underlies that clinging, you want to drop it. Notice, you're not dropping the suffering; you're dropping the craving. So many of us want to drop suffering, but you can't do it. It's like holding on to one end of a stick and the other end is burning. You try to drop the fire, but as long as you're holding on to the stick, you can't do it. You've got to drop the stick, too, if you want to drop the fire. Or like coming into a room and seeing that the room is full of smoke: You can't put out the smoke. You've got to find where the fire is in the room, and then put out the fire. That's the end of smoke.

So when craving is apparent, that's when you can drop it. Until that point, you're engaged in trying to comprehend the stress, to see exactly where there is clinging here, because that's where the Buddha's definition of stress points you. He gives you a pragmatic definition, the five clinging aggregates, which means that you've got to look for the clinging. The way you're feeding on something entails stress. You're trying to figure out what is it you're feeding on, and why you want to feed on it. Keep looking at that until you get a sense of dispassion, a sense of disenchantment. That's when you've really comprehended the stress and you're in a position where you can let go of its cause.

Now, to do this, you have to develop the factors of the path, from right view all the way through right concentration. The Buddha one time singled out right concentration as the heart of the path, and the other factors as its requisites or supports. Because to see suffering, the mind has to be very still and have a great sense of well-being, so that it has the strength and the patience to watch the stress,

to watch the suffering, until you can comprehend it.

What this means is that when these different things come up in the meditation, you need to know what to do about them. It's not just a matter of everything that arises, you just let go, let go, let go. Some things have to be comprehended. Other things have to be developed, because that's the duty with regard to the path. You develop it. When there are states of clarity, it's not that you just say, "Oh, here comes a state of clarity. Now it's going to go away. That proves inconstancy, proves that things are impermanent. Chalk up another insight." That's not what we're here for. We're here to develop concentration, to develop mindfulness, and all the other good qualities of the path.

This is why you need right view to figure out what you need to do. If you find that trying to comprehend stress or suffering is getting a bit overwhelming—you're there with the stress, you know what's stress, but you don't have any idea of how to comprehend it—that's a sign that your concentration needs to be strengthened, your mindfulness needs to be strengthened. You've got to work on the factors of the path, to develop them.

So this is where right view helps you. It gives you a sense of what needs to be done: focusing on what your intentions are right now, what choices you have to make. Right view helps direct those choices in a fruitful direction.

Now, as the path develops, you get a greater and greater comprehension. Your clinging gets less and less. You finally get ready for the third level of right view, which is simply seeing things arising and passing away, without any reference to who you are, or what the world is out there: just events in the present moment. You see everything arising and passing away as an instance of stress arising and passing away. At this level, even the analysis of the five clinging-aggregates falls to the side. The analysis of the path, the four noble truths, all fall to the side. There's just stress arising, stress passing away.

This is when you watch it to develop dispassion for it. But to get to that point requires that you have a solid basis in the other levels of right view as well. You can't get to the point where things are just stress arising and passing away—and all you have to do is comprehend, comprehend, comprehend—until you've completed the other duties, because they've had to root out a lot of wrong views that may have gotten in the way all along. If you haven't uprooted them deliberately, consciously, they're going to be in the background. If that's the case, then when you're watching arising and passing away, there might be some strange interpretations coming in.

Sometimes you hear people say, "When you watch arising and passing away, you realize that you have no control over anything and you have no willpower."

That gets very defeatist, very deterministic, which again, as the Buddha said, is precisely *not* the right attitude. When you're watching things arising and passing away, you have made a choice. You've been making skillful choices, and they've brought you to the point where your one remaining choice is to watch these things arise, to comprehend them each time they come, each time they come, i.e., to learn how to see them in a way that gives rise to dispassion, so that the mind reaches a state of equilibrium where it can drop its intentions, any intention. And because it's become so thoroughly acquainted with its intentions and the role they play, you know for sure that you really have dropped it, and it hasn't just gone underground.

This is why the preliminary levels are required to get to that final level. You're getting training in seeing your intentions and their results, and detecting wherever they are, no matter how subtle they may be. That way, when the mind finally drops intention, you know for sure that it has dropped it. Then the results come: something that's not fabricated. As Ajaan Lee said, it's even beyond right view or wrong view at that point. But to get there, you have to drop wrong views and develop right views, as he says, until they're like a fruit that's ripened: ready to just fall from the tree. As I've said many times, you can't get a ripe fruit simply by painting an unripe fruit and squeezing it to make it soft. It has to develop. It has to grow.

So you nourish the roots of the plant, which start with the very mundane or basic levels of right view, and you work up through the intermediate before you can really arrive at that highest level of right view. You've learned to follow the advice of right view so that you know what to do when things come up, how to interpret them, how to decide what to develop, what to abandon, what to comprehend—so that finally you can realize the end of suffering.

When we study the Buddha's words, it's not a distraction. The words are there as tools. The concepts of right view are an important set of tools on the path, or to use one of the Buddha's images, they're like a raft for going across a river. When you get to the other side of the river, you can let go of the raft. But while you're on the way across the river, you've got to hold on. Use your hands and feet to swim across. The using of your hands and feet, the Buddha said, is the effort you're putting in. You want to make sure that your hands and feet are pushing you toward the farther shore, and not bringing you back to where you started.

So read about right view, think it through, so that it actually becomes something that you develop in the path. Don't regard the study of this factor as a distraction. Without it, you don't really have a path. Without the path, you can't reach the goal.