

Lessons of Right Resolve

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Right view is all about the power of action, to create pleasure, to create pain, and ultimately to find a way beyond all pain. When you adopt right view, you realize that it's all about how you have to act. You can't just sit there and say, "I believe," and leave it at that. It forces you to take a good long, hard look at your actions, to see to what extent you're acting skillfully or unskillfully. You realize you need to motivate yourself to act skillfully, because the mind hasn't been trained. It's a mixture of all kinds of things—skillful intentions, unskillful intentions—leading in all directions. And you realize that you don't want to go in all directions. There's one direction you want to go, and that's to the end of suffering.

That's why right view leads to right resolve—the resolve to straighten out your intentions. You realize that's the only way you're going to put an end to suffering—by getting a handle on your acts. And your acts come from what? They come from your thoughts. Which kinds of thought do you feed in the mind? Which ones do you not feed? Which ones do you encourage? Which ones do you keep in check?

There's a sutta—Majjhima 19—where the Buddha talks about this. You realize that thoughts based on sensuality, based on ill-will, or based on harmfulness are going to lead you to do harmful things. So you keep them in check, the same way that a cowherd, during the rainy season—when the cows could get into the crops, feed on the rice, create a lot of trouble—makes sure that the cows don't get into the rice fields. In the same way, you have to beat your thoughts, curb them and check them.

As for thoughts based on renunciation, freedom from ill will, freedom from harmfulness, those are thoughts that you allow. You actually encourage them, because they're going to provide the motivation to act in skillful ways, to speak in skillful ways, to think in skillful ways. So you encourage them. Or at the very least you don't have to keep them in check. You realize that they won't do any harm. This is like the cowherd after the crops have been gathered: The cows can pretty

much wander anywhere they want; they're not going to get into trouble. They're not going to try to feed off the crops, because there are no crops to feed off. So they can wander, and all you have to do is sit under the tree and remember that there are cows out there, so that when the time comes, you take them back to the pen.

In the same way, you can be aware of your skillful thoughts, and you don't have to worry about where they're going to take you. But you do have to remember that you are thinking. And there comes a point where thinking wears the mind out. This is when the mind gets inclined to concentration.

You need a place for the mind to rest. It's in this way that mundane right resolve develops into transcendent right resolve. There's a very clear connection between right resolve and right concentration. After all, what is concentration? The mind is firmly set on one object. And how does it get set there? Through your intentions. You have to motivate yourself to do this; the mind doesn't just come to concentration in a stable way. It can, every now and then, fall into concentration. But then you haven't developed a skill—it's just kind of hit-or-miss. What you want is something that's more skillful, something more deliberate, something where, when you know where you want the mind to be, you can get it there and keep it there. That requires an intention. So right resolve builds on right view, and leads to all the other factors of the path. But at the same time, it also improves right view.

As the Buddha said, there are three levels of discernment: There's the discernment that comes from hearing; the discernment that comes from thinking; and the discernment that comes from developing the mind by putting things into practice. When you start out with right view and you say, "Okay, it makes sense, what the Buddha says about action, what he says about the causes of suffering and the end of suffering," that's discernment simply on the level of hearing and thinking. But as you implement that right view, you learn an awful lot about the mind. You learn a lot more about action, as you struggle with the mind's tendency to want to act in unskillful ways, or its laziness around acting in skillful ways.

To begin with, you begin to realize that there's a dialogue going on in the mind. Thoughts come up out of your past actions, and there's a dialogue about whether to go with them or not. This is why we talk about the committee of the

mind. Just because something appears in the mind doesn't mean that you want to follow it, that you want to pursue it. You've got to examine it: Where is this thought going to lead?

This is what right resolve is all about—looking at where the thoughts lead. In fact, the Buddha said that this is one of the points where he got on the path, realizing that he should divide his thoughts into two based on where they came from, where they went—not so much their content but by asking questions like, “If I pursue this thought, where is it going to lead me? If I think in these ways, where am I going to go? What is it going to make me do? What is it going to make me say?”

So the ability to step back is an important part of understanding your mind. Before you can keep a thought in check, you have to be able to look at it. You begin to realize that there are lots of different voices in the mind that you've got to sort out. Simply because they appear there doesn't mean that you're committed to them. This gives you greater insight into the principle of karma.

Thoughts that appear are results of old karma, but what you do with them right now: That's new karma. This is one of the important aspects of the Buddha's teachings on karma: Not everything is determined from the past. People may have done things to you, of course, as a result of your having done things to somebody in the past. If you try to trace it back, you don't know how far it's going to go. It can go on and on and on, to the point where you begin to forget who started it. You have to realize that it doesn't matter. What matters is what you're doing with those tendencies right now. You have the freedom of choice in the present moment.

This is *the* important part of the Buddhist teachings on karma. People at that time either didn't teach karma at all or said that you were totally determined, in what you're going to do or say, either from something outside or from your own actions. But the Buddha said, “No, you have this choice right here in the present moment.” This is one of the important lessons that right resolve teaches your right view—that this freedom of choice really is real. You really *can* make a difference in your mind if you keep sticking with that decision that “Right now, I'm going to go with whatever is skillful and abandon whatever is unskillful.” In the beginning it

may be an uphill battle, but after a while you begin to realize you get more and more of a handle on your own mind. That's one of the lessons.

As you deal specifically with each of the types of right resolve, you gain more lessons on right view as well. In terms of the resolve on renunciation, you have to do battle with lust. One of the standard ways of battling lust is going through the contemplation of the 32 parts of the body. That takes care of some of your lust, but you begin to realize that the problem is not so much with the object out there, it's with the mind's attitude in here. It dresses things up because it wants something to lust for. So you have to strip away all the dressing up to see what's there—the body has its attractive aspects but it also has a lot of unattractive aspects.

You begin to realize that the whole problem is with perception. And the perception, again, is used for a purpose—there's something in the mind that wants to get lustful. Other times, there will be parts of the mind that'll want to get away from lust, and they'll use other perceptions in line with their wants. So you learn about the power of perception. As the Buddha said, it's a mental fabrication—it shapes your mind. It, in turn, is shaped by the dialogue going on in the mind about what you want, what you don't want. You begin to see all this processes as what the Buddha calls fabrication here in the present moment.

So as you try to overcome your lust, you learn more and more about what goes into lust—what the real causes are and what the simple excuses are. The idea that something is desirable, beautiful, attractive—that's the excuse. The real cause lies inside. This is another lesson that your right resolve teaches to right view.

As for non-ill will and harmlessness, ill will is the opposite of goodwill; harmfulness is the opposite of compassion. This is where you bring in the contemplations of infinite goodwill and infinite compassion. This, too, teaches you a lot of lessons, as you try to give rise to these states in the mind. You see that they depend on all three kinds of fabrications. There's bodily fabrication—the way you breathe; verbal fabrication—the way you direct your thoughts to a topic, in this case, goodwill, and the way you think about it and evaluate it.

You realize that this is something you *have* to think about, because infinite goodwill isn't something naturally there in the mind and you're simply going to uncover it. It's got to be developed. As the Buddha said, it's a determination; it's

something you have to keep in mind: to stick with goodwill. And you've got to keep fabricating this state. Although you may find it natural to feel goodwill for some people, there are a lot of people out there for whom it's very hard to feel goodwill. And with them, you've got to work.

You've got to remind yourself what goodwill means—it means a desire for happiness. And where does happiness come from? It comes from actions. So if you're wishing for someone else to be happy, you're also wishing for them to be skillful in their actions. It's not that you just wave a magic wand and touch them on the head and it makes them happy. *They* have to create the causes for happiness themselves. With people who have been very cruel, very harmful, if you have a wish of goodwill for them, you're basically saying, "May they change their ways; may they realize the error of their ways and learn to act in a skillful way." And you ask yourself: "Is there anybody out there for whom I cannot wish that?" There may be some people about whom you think, "I'd like to see them squirm a little bit; I'd like to see them suffer a little bit before they find true happiness." But what is gained by that thought? Often when people squirm and are unhappy, it makes them more and more likely to act in unskillful ways.

So if someone is able to change their ways for the better, you should be happy for them, regardless of what they've done in the past. That way, you can apply the same thought to yourself. In other words, if you want everybody to be punished for their bad deeds before they find happiness, then you have to apply the same principle to yourself. But if you *are* happy for their ability to act in ways that are skillful, that means that you're free to act in ways that are skillful. You can be happy about that. As for people who are suffering or doing things that are unskillful, it's simply an extension of goodwill.

These are all lessons from the practice of right resolve that come back and augment your right view, which becomes the right view that's based on practice, based on developing good qualities of the mind.

Right view interacts with all the factors of the path in this way. It provides them with the rationale, and then they provide it with more detailed understanding of how exactly fabrication works in the mind, how your actions in the present moment shape your experience. And you really are in a position to shape your experience in a good direction.

So regardless of the raw material coming in from the past, you can be resolved on acting in a skillful way. You can be resolved on being on the path. Remember that the Buddha didn't teach the path only to people who deserve to put an end to suffering. He taught it for everybody—everybody who realizes that they are causing their own suffering. They're sick and tired of blaming it on other people, because that goes nowhere. They turn around and ask what can they do so that they don't have to suffer. And to whatever extent they've been causing suffering for themselves or others in the past, that's not the issue. They can change their ways.

It's in this way that right view grows as you practice the path. You get a greater understanding of karma. You get a greater understanding of fabrication. You get a greater understanding of what exactly is skillful, and what's not skillful. This is how the practice of the path fleshes out your right view, and how all the factors of the path begin to coalesce. And when they all come together, that's when you begin to really see the Dhamma—you gain the Dhamma eye, which is illuminated by *all* the factors of the path coming together.