

Training in Right Resolve

October 2, 2020

Get your body in position: right leg on top of the left leg; right hand on top of the left hand; sit comfortably straight; close your eyes. Then get the mind in position. Make a survey of the body from the top of the head down to the toes. Then take a couple of good, long, deep in-and-out breaths. Notice where you feel the breathing most clearly in the body. Focus your attention there, then ask yourself if the breath is comfortable. If you're not sure, you can experiment with different kinds of breathing. See what the body needs right now, see what the mind needs right now, and see if you can bring their needs together. Sometimes the body likes very gentle breathing, but if it's too gentle for the mind to follow, that's not going to work. You have to breathe a little bit more heavily, find a good compromise. And then, as the sensation of breathing begins to feel good, think of it spreading it to the different parts of the body.

In other words, give the mind work to do. If you simply sit here with a sense of ease, your mindfulness and your alertness begin to blur out. So be very systematic in how you think about the breath going through the body. You could start at the back of the neck, right at the base of the skull, go down the spine, out the legs, then come around to the front, start at the navel, go up the front to the head, then down the arms, and keep going around the body this way, to detect any sense of stress, sense of tension, tightness, and see if you can allow it to relax.

That's the beginning work: what's called symptom management. Just working through the tensions in the body helps the mind to calm down. It doesn't solve the problems in the mind, but it puts the mind in a position where it's more likely to want to solve them in the correct way. When you're feeling tight and irritated, all too often you want to go for a quick fix, whatever's easy. But if you can induce a sense of well-being in the body, that has a soothing effect on the mind, and then you can start thinking about going deeper, being more meticulous, being willing to expend whatever energy is needed to figure out the problems of the mind, so that you can solve them.

Then we have the Buddha's description of the path as a guide to help us to figure out where we're going wrong, and it starts with right view. This may have come from the fact that, on the night of his awakening, he saw beings dying and being reborn based on their actions. And the question is, where do their actions come from? Their intentions. Where do their intentions come from? From their views—what they saw was worth doing, what they saw was not worth doing—and

some people had some very strange, wrong ideas, so they acted in unskillful ways. Other people had better ideas. They listened to the noble ones; they respected the noble ones. When the noble ones taught them that their actions really would make a difference, really were important, and the state of the mind behind the actions was important, then they acted accordingly, and as a result they avoided a lot of suffering, a lot of pain.

So you want to make sure your views are right, and the number-one message of right view is that the cause of suffering comes from within, but it can be cured from within. This is why the training focuses so much on the mind as we try to develop all the different factors of the path.

The other discernment factor is right resolve, and right resolve here is stronger than “right intention.” As you go through the day, you have many different intentions, but if you think about *resolve*, it’s a longer-term project: your basic standards for the kinds of intentions you’d be willing to act on. You think about the long term and you give yourself standards so that when an intention comes up in the mind to speak or to act, you can ask yourself, “Does this fall in line with right resolve, my resolve to act in such a way that I can put an end to suffering?”

The Buddha gives three examples of right resolve. One is to resolve on renunciation. In other words, you’re going to look for your happiness, not in sensuality, but in something better than sensuality. “Sensuality” here means your fascination with fantasizing about sensual pleasures. As the Buddha said, sensual pleasures themselves are not necessarily bad. The pursuit of some pleasures, though, is going to lead to unskillful qualities of the mind, so you’ve got to abandon those, but this is going to be an individual matter. As long as the pursuit of a pleasure doesn’t involve breaking the precepts and doesn’t lead to unskillful states of mind, then it’s perfectly okay. But if you spend all your time thinking about how you want this pleasure—no, you want that pleasure, how about this pleasure, tweaking it here, tweaking it there—it’s a major waste of time and energy. And it sets you up to look for your happiness in areas that are going to create a lot of conflict. So instead, you look for your pleasure in the practice of concentration.

Right resolve is very closely connected to right concentration. When you’re here with the breath, you’re putting aside thoughts of sensuality. At the same time, you’re putting aside the other two forms of wrong resolve, which are resolve on ill will and resolve on harmfulness. The resolve to avoid those two types of thinking, regardless: That’s right resolve. So avoid sensuality, avoid thoughts of ill will, thoughts of harmfulness. Hold that principle as your standard.

Remember, the Buddha taught this in pretty radical terms. Think of that image of the bandits pinning you down. They're sawing your limbs off with a two-handled saw, and the Buddha said that, even in a situation like that, you should have goodwill for them. So you want to develop goodwill all across the board. That's part of right resolve.

As for harmlessness, that's basically thoughts of either compassion or equanimity. That's for cases where you see that somebody's down. They're in a weak position, and you're not going to try to take advantage of that weak position to harm them. Either you develop thoughts of equanimity toward them or actively try to develop compassion.

These are the standards that the Buddha has you adopt.

This way, as you go through the day and individual intentions come up, ideas come up in the mind, you have something against which to measure them, to decide whether they're worth going with or not. This is called practicing the Dhamma in line with the Dhamma. You take your ideas of right and wrong, and you check them against what the Buddha said is going to be conducive to true well-being. Whenever there's a conflict between your ideas and his advice, you're willing to give him the benefit of the doubt. This is what's meant by "training." If you just pick and choose what you like out of the teachings, going with them when it's convenient and against them when it's not, you're not really training. You're just decorating the mind, as they say in Thai.

If you really want to get the most out of the Dhamma, you have to submit to its standards. These have been tested over many, many years, and the Buddha himself had tested them before he taught them. He wasn't the sort of person who'd just cook up an idea and throw it out. He'd observe things. His memory was very long, so he could cast back. He talked about people who had wrong view about rebirth, say, and he said, "There are these people who have a very short memory of rebirth, and they can come to all sorts of wrong conclusions." And for him, a short memory of rebirth meant 40 eons. His standard for an adequate memory of rebirth was far more than that, many hundreds of thousands of eons. So when he taught, he taught based on long experience.

So, if we decide that we want to take him as our teacher, we're willing to give him the benefit of the doubt, because we've seen that the way we live our lives still leaves a lot to be desired. There are a lot of areas where we're still unskillful and some of them are areas where we think we're right. That's the problem. That's what ignorance is all about. It's not just a matter of obviously unskillful thoughts. If that were the case, then we'd have gotten beyond ignorance a long time ago. But there are a lot of things we believe in 100 percent—we're convinced of our

rightness, we hold to our rightness—and there can be a lot of delusion there, a lot of ignorance.

Look at the Buddha. When he taught right view, he'd practiced it and then he'd put it down. He would pick it up then when it was appropriate. As he said himself, he himself was not defined by right view. Right view didn't have any hold on him after his awakening, but he would use it as a tool to teach others. So if we want our views to be right, want our resolves to be right, we have to learn how to use them properly. As we're training ourselves, we have to get past our inclination just to go with what we think is right, and really be willing to take on the Buddha's standards, and, when our standards conflict with his, give his standards a try—an adequate try—and try to figure out where he's right and where we're wrong.

Ajaan Fuang used to say, "Look carefully at what your teacher does and says. He has his reasons." Now, Ajaan Fuang was not the sort of person who would explain things very much, so it was up to me to try to figure out: Why did he do it this way? Why did he do it that way? I found that when I assumed there must be a good reason, I learned the most. I know some people who've gone to Thailand, and they just write off the teacher's decisions, saying, "Well, that's what he does because he's Thai," and they never let the teacher's unusual behavior stretch them. As a result, they didn't grow. So let the Dhamma stretch you, and let it challenge you in the areas where you think you're most right, because, remember, if you were 100 percent right already, there'd be no suffering. Wherever there's suffering, it's a sign that your rightness is not right enough.

So take the teachings of someone who was not suffering anymore, and practice them to see if he gave a good account of how he got there, because ultimately that's our way of testing the Dhamma: by putting it into practice. You're not going to test it by simply thinking about it, discussing it. You have to put it into practice and then think about what you're doing while you're doing it, observe what you're doing while you're doing it, because that's how the best kind of discernment, the most reliable kind of discernment, gets developed. It's only when you've found something that meets that test, and *you* meet that test, that you know you've got something good.