

The Rewards of Right View

November 11, 2020

Wherever you go, you have to take care to protect yourself. This is especially obvious now with the pandemic, but it's good to have a clear idea of what has to be protected. As the Buddha would say, the most important thing you can protect is your right view—because all the good qualities of the path come from right view, whereas all sorts of danger and all sorts of problems come from wrong view.

Your views are like seeds. The kind of view you hold will determine what kind of seed you plant, and what kind of seed you plant, of course, determines what you're going to eat. So plant good seeds. And even if you have to lose everything else, make sure that you maintain your right view.

I was asked a while back which Buddhist teachings are especially useful for giving rise to a sense of peace and harmony—teaching people to live with one another well. And the very first candidate is right view, because it's necessary to have goodwill if we're going to live together, and goodwill is based on right view.

Goodwill is a form of mundane right resolve. When the Buddha talks about mundane right view and mundane right resolve, mundane right resolve grows out of right view. Mundane right view, of course, is about karma and rebirth: teachings that the West has hated for so long. This hatred goes back to the eighteenth century, when people began to learn about Buddhism and right way began denouncing karma and rebirth as morally abhorrent. That was because they didn't understand them.

They felt that karma and rebirth were teachings to justify the status quo. If you were suffering, it was because you deserved to suffer: That's how they interpreted the teachings. But that's not what the Buddha meant by those teachings at all. His vision of karma and rebirth was much larger than that. On the one hand, it's because we do choose our actions—and our actions are under our control—that all the virtues we can think of really are worthwhile.

If everything were predetermined, the fact that you were good or bad wouldn't be your responsibility. It'd be something or somebody else's. But you have your choices—you're the one who chooses. So when you choose well, it reflects well on you, and it's going to come back to you in a good way. This teaches you to be very careful in how you treat other people, how you

treat yourself.

This is why goodwill grows immediately out of right view: When you start thinking about all the different things you've been over the course of time... As the Buddha said, you see people who are really poor: You've been there. You see people who are really rich: You've been there, too. No matter what the gender, the race, the position in society, you've been in all these places. And it's not the case you've been a human being all the time either. You've been all kinds of different animals. Which means that when you see other people and other animals, they're not strangers—and there's certainly no reason to look down on people who are currently suffering, or to be jealous of people who are currently raised up in society. There's all the more reason to treat one another with sympathy, with a sense of harmony, with a sense that we're all in this together.

The teachings also make you reflect on the fact that where you are right now is very precarious. The only things you have to support yourself are your actions. So what kind of actions do you want to create? This is where the Buddha's teaching on the three perceptions comes in handy.

There's a passage where he talks about developing the perception of inconstancy with regard to all fabrications. And it's interesting, he says the result of maintaining that perception, making it consistent, is that you develop a sense of dismay over praise, gain, and honor: in other words, the things that society holds in high esteem. On the one hand, you see that they're very impermanent, and on the other you see that there are so many unskillful ways in which people go after these things, harming one another.

Think of the Buddha's vision after he gained awakening: He looked at the world and saw everyone on fire: on fire with greed, aversion, and delusion; on fire with sensuality. Of course, when we think of beings on fire, it's a vision of hell. Because if you hold in mind the perception of inconstancy—that gain, honor, fame, the things that people go running after because they're on fire, are not really cooling, are not really going to solve their problem—you develop a sense of detachment. You see that the rewards of the world are really not worth running after.

Of course, that turns the mind to think about: Well, what is permanent? What is constant? What is something you can rely on? That's how the perception is meant to direct your thoughts.

The Buddha says that if you try to maintain this perception of inconstancy but you still find yourself attracted by the baits of the world, you have to keep reminding yourself: You haven't

accomplished anything by holding on to the perception. That's what the three perceptions are for: They're there to make a *difference* in your mind.

So you learn how to think, to use your powers of imagination as you hold on to the perception of inconstancy, to figure out a way in which you can develop a sense of dismay, a sense of *samvega*, a sense of detachment from the ways of the world. And maintain your desire to find something that's more solid—the desire that the Buddha says goes with renunciate-based pain.

This is the pain that comes with the thought, “Okay, there is a way out. There is a deathless element. The Buddha guarantees that. Other people have reached it, but I'm not there yet.” That's a painful thought: There's work to be done. This is where you bring in the next perception: the perception of stress or suffering in what is inconstant. That's motivation to stick with the path—to take you out of that suffering.

As the Buddha says, if you really hold on to this perception, you begin to see the danger of laziness, the danger of discouragement. It's interesting that those two go together. Sometimes we think we have every right to be discouraged if things are not going well. But we can't let ourselves *stay* there in discouragement. It's a dangerous place to be, because it gets in the way of our efforts, gets in the way of the path, gets in the way of any practice aimed at real happiness.

We have to give ourselves encouragement that this is a path that can be done. It may not show its rewards right away, but it has a trajectory that takes us in the right direction. So when you find yourself thinking that it doesn't matter if you take a couple of days off from meditating, or are not so strict with yourself in the practice, you've got to remind yourself: You don't know how many days you have left, but you *do* know that you have right now, and there's a danger in frittering away your time. And here again, if you don't see the danger of laziness, you haven't used the perception properly—because getting rid of laziness and discouragement is what it's aimed at.

Then finally, there's the perception of not-self in things that are stressful. There are so many things that we hold on to—our views, our opinions, our ideas about ourselves—that hold us back when we're not willing to let go. You have to see that there's stress in these things. And our sense of our self: What is it made out of? You look at the raw materials, and there's nothing *self* about them. They're all things that are beyond our control.

They may not be totally beyond our control. If they were totally beyond our control, we wouldn't hang onto them. We can control them to some extent—which is why we make the

path, *how* we can make them the path.

But we have to realize that we're using things that are not really ours. That again gives you some encouragement to accelerate your efforts, so that when these things are taken away from you, or when you lose these things, you will have found something in the meantime that *cannot* be taken away from you. That's what these perceptions all aim at.

They sound negative—inconstancy, stress, not-self—but they're aimed at shutting off the ways in which the mind deludes itself about where it's going to find happiness, and they point you in the right direction: to find something that's *deathless*, free from aging, illness, and death. What the Buddha calls, the ultimate happiness, the ultimate ease: That is possible.

If it weren't possible, the Buddha wouldn't have bothered with these other perceptions. He'd say, "Well, make do with what you've got. Make the best of what you can. Muddle your way through" if that's all that there were. But that's not all there is. There is something deathless that can be found right at the human heart—right where your awareness is right now.

The reason you don't see it is because you're holding on to other things: things that get in the way. So you use right view to give yourself the right perspective, and then you use these three perceptions, to whittle away the mind's attractions to the baits of the world, its attraction to laziness and discouragement, and its attraction to whatever it identifies as me or mine.

When you can cut through these things, that's when you've realized that right view really is your best possession: the thing that's most worthy of being protected. So guard it well.

It's true that as we go through life we lose a lot of things. And in a lot of cases the things we lose are beyond our power to keep ourselves from losing. But this is something that you *can* keep yourself from losing. It's within your power to protect it, within your power to keep it. So focus your main protective energies here.