

Right View & Right Resolve

August 23, 2021

For our practice to be right on the path, it has to be informed by right view. For example, as you're meditating here right now, you can have lots of different reasons for being here. But in terms of right view, think about why it is important to focus on the mind, to get the mind quiet. It's because the cause for suffering comes from within the mind. That's probably one of the most important points of right view.

People tend to think that they suffer because of things outside—things that other people do, or the economy, or the weather—but no matter how bad those things may be, if there's no craving and clinging inside the mind, then you're not going to suffer from them. But even when things are really good outside, as long as there's craving, you can still suffer from good things.

So we look at the mind. But to look at the mind, you need to give it a focal point, which is why we don't look directly at the mind to begin with. We start with the breath, get the mind focused on the breath, and get used to being here. Notice what way of breathing feels really good. Notice where you feel the breathing in the body, and what kind of breathing the body needs right now: energizing if you're tired, calming if you're wired.

As the mind gets more and more focused, then you can step back from the focus on the breath and watch the mind as it's focused on the breath. It's as if there are two layers of knowing here—what's called metacognition, where you can step back and observe your own mind: "My mind is still right here." You can watch it.

Now, if you're not informed by right view, you just may say, "Why bother watching it? Can't we just be comfortable here in the present moment, enjoying the present moment for what it is?" But an important part of right view points out that when you're here in the present moment, you're not just enjoying, say, a pleasant breath, or pleasant sensations coming in from outside. You're also doing things that shape the present moment and will shape the future. If you spend all your time just enjoying what's in the present, the future gets abandoned. You don't think about the long-term consequences of what you're doing, and you can end up doing some unskillful things with the desire simply to enjoy what's pleasant right here and now. So if you're heedful, you realize you've got to look at what you're doing that will have good long-term consequences, and what will have

bad long-term consequences, so that you can know what to do and what to abandon.

So when you think about the Buddha's teachings in the four noble truths, which are the principles of right view, the heedful response is right resolve. In other words, you don't simply watch suffering or watch its cause. You realize that you have to make up your mind to fight the cause. That's why we take on the path to begin with. The path is aimed at curing the problem at the cause, not at the result.

Years back, I read a story of a group of women from Bangkok who were the wives of high-ranking military men. They went out to a remote part of the country and stopped off at a little village school. All the little kids came out and lined up to greet the visitors. They looked so sad in their dirty, ragged clothes. So the women arranged for them all to get good school uniforms. That's solving the problem at the result, not at the cause. With the school uniforms, they may not look so embarrassed in front of visitors from outside, but they're still poor. The poverty was the problem, not the clothes.

That kind of approach was not the Buddha's approach. The heedful approach is to solve things at the cause. As the Buddha said, one of the causes of suffering is sensual craving. So the first part of right resolve is to resolve on renunciation: that you're going to look for your happiness in someplace besides sensuality.

Another way of causing suffering is through unskillful actions in general: based on ill will, based on harmfulness. So part of right resolve is to resolve on non-ill will—in other words, goodwill or equanimity—and harmlessness—compassion or equanimity—because you realize that suffering is not just an abstract topic. It's something you're feeling, and it's based on something you're doing. Because it hurts, you've got to change your actions. That's the wise response to right view.

The Buddha said that he got on the path where he learned how to divide his thoughts into two sorts: those that were based on sensuality, ill will, and harmfulness on the one side, and those based on renunciation, non-ill will, and harmlessness on the other. With the first sort, he said he had to keep them in check in the same way that a cowherd would keep his cows in check during the season during which the rice is growing. Otherwise, the cows would get into the rice and there would be problems.

As for thoughts based on renunciation, non-ill will, and harmlessness, he realized he could let himself think those as much as he wanted. They wouldn't cause any harm. Just like a cowherd during the dry season: The rice has been harvested, there's no danger of the cows getting into anybody's crops, so he can let

the cows wander as they like. But, the Buddha said, he realized that if you kept thinking thoughts like that for a day and a night, you'd get tired.

So the next step of right resolve is to get the mind into concentration. This is the other meaning of renunciation. You're not simply renouncing sensuality. You realize you've got to look for your happiness someplace else. You're not just renouncing ill will. You're going to look for your happiness someplace else besides ill will. And you're not going to look for happiness in harming others. You try to find a harmless state of mind where you can rest, where you can finally find true happiness that doesn't involve any of those things—and that's a state of concentration.

When the Buddha divides right resolve into two levels, mundane and transcendent, transcendent right resolve is the resolve to get the mind to settle down, along with all the directed thought and evaluation you use as you work with the breath, or whatever your meditation topic is, to make it a comfortable place to stay. The image the Buddha gives is of a bathman. Back in those days, they didn't have soap bars as we have them now. They had a soap powder that you'd mix with water and make into kind of a dough. Then you'd rub the dough over your body as you bathed. The bathman's job was to mix the soap powder with the water so that it was just right: no dry patches in the powder, and no excess water dribbling out. He had to knead the water into the powder in the same way that you would knead dough to make bread. In the same way, when you meditate, you get a sense of ease and well-being, and you knead it through the body.

This is what the directed thought and evaluation are for: to figure out what kind of breathing is good right now and—once you've got it good—how you can maintain it. And as you maintain it, how can you get the best use of it? Well, you can let it spread. How do you let it spread? You think about the breath going through the body and taking that sense of well-being with it: down the spine, out the legs; down the shoulders, out the arms; through the torso; throughout the head. Notice what ways of perceiving the breath—what kind of labels or mental images you have for the breath—allow the breath to flow more smoothly. Use those as your means for staying in concentration, and then let the feelings of refreshment and pleasure spread throughout the body.

All the thinking and evaluation that goes into that: That's part of right resolve. The purpose of right resolve as you've been doing concentration is to get to the point where you don't have to keep thinking in those terms. In other words, once the breath is really good, and everything is saturated in the body with a sense of well-being, then you can put the directed thought and evaluation aside and just be here, one with the breath. The Buddha calls it internal assurance, unification of

awareness. There's a sense that the awareness and the breath are one because your awareness fills the body. The breath fills the body. They're all there together. That's when right resolve has delivered you to a good place. It's the heedful response to right view.

Heedfulness realizes you can't be just a consumer in the present moment. You've also got to produce skillful mind states. As you do concentration, it's a way of producing skillful mind states that also create pleasure at the same time. This way, the mind gets used to being with pleasure but not getting distracted by it. If you get distracted by the pleasure, it turns into what Ajaan Lee calls delusion concentration, *moha samadhi*, where you leave the breath and just wallow in the sense of ease. Things get very blurry and ill-defined. You're quiet, but you don't really know where you are. When you come out, you ask yourself, "Was I awake? Well, I wasn't very awake, but at the same time, I wasn't asleep." That's what happens when you leave the breath and go for the pleasure.

So doing concentration is good exercise in learning how to be with pleasure—if you're going to do it right and not get taken in by it. You let it do its work, but you keep working at the causes. The causes are being alert to the breath in a continuous way.

The more continuous your focus, the smoother the breath's going to be: all the way in, all the way out, all the way through the mid-parts between the in and the out. The smoother the breath, the greater the sense of ease. So you focus on the causes, and in this way you get a sense of well-being in the present moment while you're also developing good habits for the future. You're learning how to overcome the hindrances. Your mind becomes more and more spacious, and you're getting the mind to a state where it can look more clearly at what it's doing. You begin to see the different forms of craving, and can let them go.

Now, it may seem strange that right resolve doesn't have resolve on going beyond becoming and non-becoming. After all, those are the two other forms of craving that cause suffering besides craving for sensuality. But in the beginning, you're not ready for that because you're going to be developing a state of becoming here in the concentration. So right resolve is aimed here first.

Then right view will then come in and start analyzing what's going on in this state of becoming. At first, it analyzes distractions as forms of becoming. Say, when a thought of ill will arises in the mind, how does it arise? How does the mind go into it? How can you learn *not* to go into it? How can you learn how not to encourage it? How can you learn how to take it apart into its component factors? When you see that, then you begin to realize, "There's a similar pattern in the concentration itself." Right view will then come back and do the work of

digging out craving for becoming and craving for non-becoming. Right resolve, though, gets you in a position where you can do that by pulling you away from sensuality and getting you into the good state of becoming that's right concentration.

So this is the heedful response to right view: realizing that when the Buddha's talking about suffering and the cause of suffering, he's pointing right at your heart; and not only the suffering that you know you're experiencing, but also the ways in which you're causing it about which you're not so very clear. If you're heedful, you realize, "Okay, I need to be more clear about what's going on in my mind. I need to get it to settle down in a way that's free from sensuality, free from ill will, free from harmfulness." That's precisely what right resolve does.

So learn how to appreciate this factor of the path because if you simply have right view but don't respond to it in a heedful way—if you just think about it, analyze it, talk about it—you don't realize how it applies to what you're doing as you're concentrating. But if you couple it with right resolve, then it becomes clear. This is all part of the Buddha's understanding of why there's suffering and why there doesn't have to be suffering, because there are things we can do to put an end to it.

As we engage in right resolve, we're putting his teachings to the test—and we're putting ourselves to the test as well. Are we willing to see that our sufferings come from within? If we are, this is what we have to do.