Right View Takes Over

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Buddhist teachings are often compared to medicine, and the practice is a form of healing, healing the wounds in the mind. They come from greed, anger, and delusion. Those are the causes of our diseases. And the treatment is something we have to give ourselves. The diseased mind is the one that has to treat itself, that has to train itself. This is where the difficulty lies. Sometimes you just don’t feel like you have the strength. And other times the mind doesn’t realize that it’s diseased. The disease has become such a permanent or lasting fixture in the mind that you hardly notice that it’s there. You look around, everybody else is suffering from the same disease, so it must not be a disease. It must be natural. That’s what the mind tends to think. This is why we need the teaching. Not only the medicine, but also the program behind the medicine. Understand what it’s all about, so that we’ll feel motivated to treat ourselves. And also have a better perspective on how to do it effectively, so that the treatment doesn’t become a dragon and it doesn’t become a burden. Because even though it is difficult, and some of the results seem to take a long period of time, there are also results that come immediately. Fighting with defilement is much better than giving in to defilement. Fighting the disease is much better than giving in to the disease. We have to keep being reminded of that. This is why the Buddha placed such emphasis on right view. He noted that the reason people suffer is because of their actions, which are their intentions. And the intentions are skillful or unskillful, depending on the view. So you’ve got two problems here. One is the intention, and the other is the view. And they actually influence each other. Because accepting right view is also an act of intention. You have to decide that this particular view does make sense, seems more effective in dealing with your suffering. You want to accept it. There has to be the desire to accept it. This is a question that keeps popping up in different religions. Do people misbehave out of ignorance, or do they misbehave out of willfulness? The Buddha says basically both. The two of them work together, and to an effect, to cure, both of them have to be worked on. And what we get from the outside is perspectives on right view, that when we compare them to our experience, make sense, make us want to accept the right view, make us want to act on right view. But the choice is ours. This is why both sides of the equation are important. There was a time when Ananda went to see the Buddha and he said, “Half of the practice is having a good teacher.” Those weren’t his precise words, but that was basically the message. Having a good friend, he said, an admirable friend. And the Buddha said, “Don’t say that. Having an admirable friend is the whole of the practice.” In other words, without that outside perspective, we tend to go our own ways, our old ways, and the disease never gets cured. But the practice is also entirely a matter of our own choice. Both factors are so essential that you can’t go half and half on either one. Each one is 100 percent important. So remember, though, that it does come down to your choices, your willingness to listen to right view. Your willingness to act on right view. This has to come from reflection. You look at your life as objectively as possible and see where the suffering is. This is important. These are the terms of right view. Instead of saying, “I’m this sort of person. I’ve got to do this that way,” or “I have these habits that I just can’t shake,” just look at the suffering. Look at the stress and the pain. The more you look at it, the more you realize that it’s all around you. The more sensitive you get, the more you realize it’s all around you. The purpose of this is to give you more inclination to accept right view, act on right view. In other words, you see that looking at life in terms of right view actually does give you a new perspective. It makes you understand and see things that you didn’t see before. It makes you see the amount of suffering that comes from your actions. It’s interesting, the Buddha talks about right view. It comes on two levels. One is essentially belief in the principle of karma, that the happiness and suffering you experience come from your own actions, either past actions or present actions. Then there’s a transcendent level of right view, which looks at things more in terms of suffering and its cause, the end of suffering and the path to the end of suffering. These two levels are connected. In other words, the cause of suffering is something you do. It’s an activity in the mind. It does bear results, both immediately and on into the future. But there is that possibility in the mind of not causing suffering. There are other kinds of actions in the mind that don’t cause suffering. Right view means learning to ferret them out. It’s not the case that every state that comes up in the mind is a deluded state. Or every state that comes up in the mind is going to cause suffering. We have them all mixed up in our normal makeup. People sometimes ask, “Does Buddhism believe that people are essentially good? That if they can get rid of their social conditioning, they would be naturally compassionate and wise and helpful with one another?” Well, no. “Does Buddhism believe that people are essentially bad?” Well, no. There’s no essential nature in there for the mind. There are actions that are good, and there are actions that are bad. We don’t want to learn to look at that issue of action, all those questions about essential natures or the reality out there. The Buddha says, “Put those aside and simply look at your actions and see how they give results.” Now, it takes a major shift. But if you learn to look at that, if you begin to see that, yes, there is suffering in life, and most of us realize that there’s suffering in life, there’s a question of whether we’re going to be honest about it or not. Or feel that we’re up to doing something about it or not. But it’s all there. It’s always there. It’s learning to be sensitive to it and also have that encouragement that there is a way out. This is why there’s not just one noble truth. There are four. There’s the suffering, but there’s also the cause of suffering that you can experience directly. It’s not something hidden away from your direct experience. But if you watch carefully, you begin to see that, yes, every time there’s suffering, there’s also an element of craving. There’s clinging, which is the suffering itself, and then there’s a craving underlying the clinging. That’s there. But there are also moments when the suffering lessens, and you begin to see exactly what the mental movements that lessen the suffering are. You begin to ferret things out this way and sort things out in these terms rather than the other terms that actually simply pile suffering on. When you can start sorting them out this way, it becomes a lot easier to encourage the skillful movements and to let go of the unskillful ones. Again, if you try to freeze things in terms of, “Well, this is my habitual way of doing things,” you miss the point. Or, “I feel this way. I feel that way.” Drop the “I” for a minute and just see what the feelings are. That loosens things up in the mind, gives a greater possibility for making change. So this is the whole purpose of Right View. It’s the part of the medicine that makes the treatment possible. It shows us why the treatment is necessary and gives us the incentive to take it, to follow through with it. Notice that when the Buddha talks about the factors of the path that deal with discernment, it’s both Right View and Right Resolve. So there is this element of Right View together with the resolve to act on it, to stop acting in ways that cause suffering, the ones that are really blatant. Thoughts of passion, thoughts of ill will, thoughts of harmfulness. This resolve is something that we want to hold on to, even though it’s difficult to overcome our habits for passion, ill will, harmfulness. At least hold on to the resolve, because that’s the wise part of the mind. See that these resolves really are useful things. The resolve not to be hold ill will, the resolve not to be harmful, those are easy to see as advantageous. The resolve to let go of passion, that’s a bit more difficult. So again, it requires that you look carefully at the way you act and the results that come from your actions. Also, look at the way your mind tends to build up structures around the way you act to make it seem impossible for you to change. Try to use Right View to dissolve those structures so you open up the possibility of change and open up this part of your mind that really would be happy to be free of sensual passion. That’s the part of the mind that tends to get trodden all over, never gets a chance to grow, never gets a chance to show itself. But if you really look carefully at the way we act and the results that come from our actions, you begin to realize that there is that part of the mind that would really be very happy not to be slaved to sensual passions. It would be happy to be free. There’s a sense of enjoyment when you are free from that particular kind of slavery. Get yourself acquainted with that. See that it’s there all the time. The potential is there all the time. It makes it easier to let go of your attachment to ways that cause suffering, ways that keep the disease in the mind going. So that Right View and Right Resolve become more and more habits in the mind and begin to take over. You find that the mind is a lot lighter as a result. Things are a lot easier as a result. Ultimately, you find that what the Buddha said is true. They really do put an end to these diseases in the mind.

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