Just Rightness

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We’re a very impatient society. We want quick results. When we’re taught a lesson, we want everything boiled down to only the very essentials so that we can put them into practice, follow the instructions and get great results. At the same time, we also don’t like being told what to do. It makes it very difficult to develop any kind of skill, because skills come from doing things and observing for yourself what works and what doesn’t work. A lot of times, you’re going to make mistakes, and you have to be willing to learn from your mistakes. Because it’s only that way that, over time, you get a sense of the just-rightness of the middle path. That’s the word sammā in front of all the factors, sammā ditthi, sammā saṅgappo. In each case, it means “just right.” After all, it is the middle way. But where exactly in the middle is it on the same six-inch mark, or is there a little room for five-and-a-half or six-and-a-half? There are no markers. There’s no ruler to say, “Right here is the middle spot.” You have to develop your own awareness of what’s just right, given any particular situation, any particular state of mind you’re in, what the state of your body is right now, and what’s the appropriate response there. That’s something you have to learn over time. By trying out different things and then learning from when you’ve done things right and learning from when you’ve done things wrong. An important principle is getting the “you” out of the picture as you do this. In other words, when you make a mistake, don’t use it as a measurement of what a good person or bad person you are. Just say, “Oh, that didn’t work. Let’s try something new.” Then you’re putting yourself in a much more helpful position. In this way, you’re open to learning all the time. As I said this morning, life always has new lessons to teach. When aging comes, you have to be willing to learn from aging. When illness comes, you have to be willing to learn from illness. When pain comes, you have to be willing to learn from pain. This is why the Buddha said, “The mistake has four noble truths right on that spot.” The suffering of aging, illness, and death. Even when death comes, there will be things to learn. For most people, death is the point where everything has ended. But as the Buddha pointed out, it doesn’t end there. Things keep going on. As long as there’s craving, there’s going to be a new birth. So whatever the situation, you have to approach it with a willingness to learn, that there’s something new to learn here. That doesn’t mean you forget all your old lessons. It’s just that you’re always open to the possibility that there’s a new way of applying your old knowledge, or a new wrinkle that you hadn’t encountered before. So try to approach each meditation with this attitude that there may be something new to learn here. So be very observant. The factors in the Noble Path are designed to help you be observant, to let go of the mental qualities that get in the way of allowing you to see, and to encourage the ones that put you in a position where you really can observe what’s going on. The Right View focuses your attention on the whole issue of karma, your actions and their results. Then, at a more refined level, it points out the issue of suffering. Seeing things in terms of the four noble truths, which means you don’t see them in terms of what you want or what you don’t want. I mean, that’s in the background. You don’t want suffering. You do want an end of suffering. But the question of whether your action means you’re a good person or a bad person, someone who deserves to suffer and doesn’t deserve to suffer, that doesn’t enter into the equation at all. Just look at the arising and passing of suffering. Try to figure out where it comes from. That puts you in the right position to look at what’s going on. Then there’s samma-saṅgapa, right intent or right resolve. You resolve that you’re going to act in ways that are not harmful. The two of them go together. Simply seeing things in terms of stress and its end is not enough. You want to resolve to put an end to the stress, to do the duties that are appropriate for the four noble truths. That’s how Right View and Right Resolve go together. Then, building on that, there’s Right Speech, Right Action, Right Livelihood. This, on the one hand, helps create a situation in which it’s easier to get the mind to settle down. If you’ve been lying all day, or even if you’ve told one or two big whoppers—you don’t have to tell too many, just a couple, big ones or a few little ones—it’s going to get in the way of your meditation. You’re going to harm somebody. Or, in order to find your livelihood in the course of the day, you had to do something that was underhanded and dishonest. That’s going to make it hard to settle down and be really frank and honest with yourself in the meditation. So those are things that you have to abandon. That’s what Right Effort is all about—abandoning not only things outside but also things in the mind in the same way. You bring your mindfulness to an awareness of the body right here, in and of itself. And using that as your object, you try to develop Right Concentration, the kind of concentration that’s balanced, that allows for alertness, that allows for mindfulness to be really solidly established. You use the word jhana for Right Concentration. There are also jhanas mentioned in the Canada that are not Right Concentration. There’s the jhana where you try to blank out. There’s the jhana where you try to force yourself not to breathe. Those are all wrong jhana, wrong concentration. Because on the one, you’re too blank to notice anything. On the other one, you’re too preoccupied with all the weird things coming up in the body. When you try to force yourself not to breathe, you’re simply through willpower. You’re so focused on your willpower that you can’t see anything. You want to bring the mind to a state of concentration. To be Right Concentration, you have to be in a position where you really can observe what’s going on. First, being really focused on the breath, and then being able to step back a bit and watch not only the breath but also the mind as it relates to the breath. That’s where you’re in the right position to observe both body and mind, to see the connections between them in particular, to see where you’re causing unnecessary suffering. So the path is all about putting you in the position to observe what’s going on, particularly to observe what you’re doing, what the results are. The kind of observation that leads to being more and more skillful, that’s where you want to be sensitive. That’s the questions you want to keep in mind all the time. What am I doing that’s unskillful? What am I doing that’s skillful? What makes it unskillful? What makes it skillful? What can I do to become more skillful? What actions would be more skillful? So it’s a question of balance, keeping the mind balanced right here in a way that’s still but alert, that has the energy to deal with whatever comes up. In some cases, it’s going to be a very refined kind of energy that’s going to be required, because the issues that can come up can be very refined. Other times they’re pretty strong, and you need lots of energy to withstand them. So just right doesn’t mean six inches on a ruler of twelve inches. It means just right for the situation. Ajahn Mahaprabhu gives an example. He says, “Suppose we had this huge pile of excrement right here in the middle of the cellar. You wouldn’t bring up a middling bowl of water to wash it away. You’d have to get all the big buckets you could find to splash it away. In situations like that, it requires a lot of effort. Right effort is very demanding. In other situations, it requires just simply watching and being very, very observant. So in all these cases, it’s the rightness of the right factors of the right path. It’s just rightness. And what makes it just is your ability to observe, to learn, to keep on learning. Always be open to learning something new, because new things keep coming up. The basic principles are the same, but how you apply them is going to be up to your skill and your developed skill, by learning again and again and again. When you have the attitude that’s willing to learn again and again, that’s when you keep yourself on the right path.

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