Right View

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Developing the path. The Buddha said, “Right view comes first.” So what is right view, and how do you know it? It’s good to look at where it begins. A lot of people, when they read the Buddhist texts, like to go all the way to the end, to the really abstruse and subtle parts. But it’s easy to get lost in those parts if you don’t know where the Buddha’s beginning is, because the beginnings give you a sense of perspective. They lay the foundation. There’s a sutta where Sariputta is talking about right view, and he starts first with the issue of skillfulness. This right here has a couple of important implications. When the Buddha starts with basic right view, he starts with the principle of karma, that your actions really do make a difference, they really do have results. That basic assumption is a good assumption to make. If you can’t make that assumption, why bother? That assumption cuts through a lot of things that you hear. The idea that you have no free will at all. If you didn’t have any free will, then your actions wouldn’t be yours and they wouldn’t make any difference. Or the idea that the path is something you can’t do. You hear this a lot. The idea that awakening is something that is unconditioned, or the path is conditioned, and so doing anything on the path gets in the way. That you can’t create nirvana. Of course, the Buddha never said you create nirvana. You go there and there’s an action that takes you there. The right view about action is that there are four kinds. There’s action that gives good results within the cycle of rebirth, action that gives bad results in the cycle of rebirth, action that gives mixed results, the kinds of things we see every day. Then there’s a fourth kind of action, which the Buddha said ultimately puts an end to action, and that’s the Eightfold Noble Path. So it is something you do, because the complex nature of causality is that you can do things that take you outside of the system of doing or the network of doing. So it is something you can do. That’s the basic assumption. We’re working with actions, and then you look at actions in terms of what kind of results they get. That’s your test, and that’s where the whole idea of skillful and unskillful comes in. Skillful actions lead toward the end of suffering. Unskillful actions lead to more suffering. So how do you know? Well, you have to look. But the Buddha’s not forcing you to reinvent the dharma wheel. When Sariputta talked about skillful and unskillful, he started out with some very basic do’s and don’ts. Killing, he says, is unskillful. Stealing, illicit sex, these things are unskillful. Lying, abusive speech, malicious tailbearing, idle chatter, greed, ill will, and wrong views, these are all unskillful things. These are the do’s and don’ts. It’s like those signs they used to have up in Alaska about bear awareness, warning about bears. And the Buddha starts out with do’s and don’ts, because there are certain things that really do hold across the board. When a bear charges at you, don’t run away, because it’ll chase you. Your immediate reaction when you see a bear running at you is that you want to get out of there, but they say no. The precepts are like that. It’s not just for times when things are easy. We notice the madness that sweeps through humans as they come into society every now and then, when there’s been an attack, when there’s been something upsetting happen, and people want to throw morality away. They say, “Morality is good only when things are calm and peaceful, but when it comes to basic survival, you’ve got to look out for number one.” That kind of attitude is really harmful, because that just perpetuates the cycle of suffering. So the precepts are short, clear, to the point. No matter who’s planning to kill you, you don’t kill. No matter who’s been stealing from you, you don’t steal. And so on down the line. What’s interesting about those bear awareness signs is that, at the very end, they say, “If a bear does attack you, lie down and play dead. And even if it starts chewing on you, continue to play dead. The bear, in nine cases out of ten, will then lose interest and go away.” That’s one case out of ten when the bear is hungry. So they say, “Try to be alert and notice when the bear is chewing you out of curiosity, lie and play dead. But if it looks like he’s eating you, then start fighting back.” Of course, that means you’ve got to have a lot of mindfulness and alertness to discern that sort of thing. That’s why the Buddha has us practicing mindfulness and alertness as we meditate, not so much in case we’re attacked by bears. But there are a lot of issues in the world where the issue of skillfulness and unskillfulness can’t be contained in a few do’s and don’ts. And you also notice that as you practice, your sensitivity towards what’s skillful and unskillful is going to develop. The more mindful, the more alert you are, the more concentration and discernment you have, the more you’ll be able to detect, one, what you’re doing, and then two, what the results are, and then three, whether they’re skillful or not. If you combine that with some ingenuity and your powers of analysis, you can figure out, “Well, if it’s not skillful enough, what can I do to make it more skillful?” But the important thing is that you keep those questions uppermost in your mind. That’s really what Right View comes down to. What are the important questions to ask? And they fall in this area. One, what am I doing? Two, what are the results? Three, are they good? And if they’re not good enough, what can I do to make them better? If you keep your questions in line with those areas, then when you encounter things that you’re not quite sure about—teachings you’ve heard or things that come up in the course of your own meditation—you’ve got the right framework for testing things. It’s looking at them, weighing them, considering them, and coming to some provisional conclusions. The provisional there is important because you can assume there always will be some element of wrong view, or at least some insensitivity in your practice. But that’s something you work with. You can come to conclusions as post-it notes. As you get new experience, you may want to rearrange the notes or just pull them off and throw them all together. But this framework helps you judge a lot of issues that otherwise might get confusing. There’s the whole issue of desire on the path. How many times have you heard that desire is a bad thing? Or conceit. Conceit is a bad thing. Ego is a bad thing. There’s that interesting sutta where Ananda is talking to a nun. She had hoped to seduce him, and he sort of realized what was going on. And so he says, “The practice we’re working on is to ultimately go beyond food and in other words put the mind in a place where it doesn’t really need to feed anymore. But you need to use food on the path. The purpose of the path is to go beyond conceit, but you need to use conceit on the path. The purpose is to go beyond desire, but you need to use desire on the path. The purpose is to go beyond sexual intercourse.” The nun is probably thinking, “Wow!” And then he says, “But there’s no room for sexual intercourse on the path.” That’s one of the do’s and don’ts. But look at the first three. There’s a role for these things if you learn how to use them skillfully. The skillful use of food is to reflect on it, like we’re supposed to do every morning before we eat, why we’re eating. Not for intoxication, not for beautification. Not simply for the taste of the food, but to keep the body going so that we can practice. As you reflect on it, it not only helps you be moderate in your consumption, but you also start thinking about the human condition. That old question, “What is one all-being subsist on food?” That’s the basic causal relationship in life. Feeding, eating. Think of all the suffering that’s gone into the meal that’s come your way. Suffering of the farmers, suffering of the people in the stores, suffering of the people driving the trucks. All the way to the point where it’s gotten to you. And here you are, living off the suffering of others. This is one good reason to motivate yourself to practice, to find a happiness that doesn’t require anybody else’s suffering. Then there’s the skillful use of desire. If you didn’t have the desire for awakening, you couldn’t follow the path. Again, this is one of those things you hear oftentimes, that the desire for awakening is what gets in the way of your awakening. Having a goal is what gets in the way of your fully appreciating the present moment. The Buddha never said that. If you don’t have the desire, you’re not going to follow the path. What’s so wonderful about the present moment? If it’s a moment that’s eating things, it’s not where you want to be. If you want to get beyond the eating, you’ve got to find some way of developing the mind. That kind of desire is helpful, because it points you to what needs to be done. Get the mind in a position where it doesn’t need to feed, and then you can be content. Then there’s the issue of conceit. The Buddha says, “You see, other people have attained awakening. Why can’t I?” That’s a useful use of conceit. This is why we read the Therigata and the Theragata, and why we have sankhanussati as a useful meditation topic. When things get dry, or when you start getting discouraged about your own place in the path, it’s a reflection of the fact that there are other people who have been worse off and yet ultimately they were able to pick themselves up, dust themselves off, and gain awakening. They can do it. You can do it. This is an important motivating factor on the path. So there’s a place where conceit and desire and the proper use of food are elements in learning how to overcome, ultimately, conceit, desire, and the need for food. So how do you know? Well, you learn to look at what you’re doing in the path as you practice and gauge the results. Of course, you’re going to make mistakes. This is part of following any path where you have to rely on yourself. But you learn how to learn from your mistakes, keeping in mind that everybody makes mistakes. The Buddha himself came from a big mistake. He went through all those six years of self-torment, and he imagined the conceit that went around that. He finally was able to drop that and find the right path. So we have his example. He was able to make mistakes, but he was also able to learn from them. If you’re the sort of person who doesn’t like to admit to yourself that you make mistakes, you’re never going to get anywhere. But if you can learn to recognize a mistake, laugh at yourself a little bit about it—not in a nasty laugh, but a good-natured laugh—and then use your ingenuity to see how you can do things better. Talk things over with other people, people you respect, to get their perspective on things. Make the resolve that you’re not going to repeat the mistake and realize that it’s the best any human being can do. Just make that resolve and then follow through with it. Once you have the right attitude towards mistakes, realizing that you’re going to make them, but here’s how you deal with them, then you can gradually adjust your understanding of what right view means in any given situation. As you learn to act in ways that cause less and less suffering, less and less stress, you get more and more sensitive to the mind’s potential for happiness, the mind’s potential for well-being. This applies not only on outward actions, but also on inward actions. You concentrate the mind in a particular way, focus it in a particular way, and see, does it really get concentrated? Does it really have a sense of well-being? Is it not tense and constricted? Once it gains a sense of well-being, how do you maintain that? What can you do with it? As you get used to it, it’s like your eye is adjusting to a very bright room. After a while, you begin to see, “Oh, there are things in this room.” At first, the light was too bright. You couldn’t see anything at all. But after a while, you begin to notice, “There’s a little bit of stress here, a little bit of inconstancy here.” Well, can you move the mind on to a new perception, to a new state of concentration where there’s less of that stress? Learning to ask yourself that question is what develops your concentration, develops your meditation, and develops your insight at the same time. You’re getting more and more sensitive to those basic questions. What are you doing? What are the results? Are they good enough? When you ask these questions, you begin to see that you’re doing things in areas where you might not have thought you were doing anything at all. Sometimes you hear a distinction between doing things in the meditation and just allowing yourself to be. Well, the Buddha said, “Being is a kind of doing,” or being equanimous. Some people think that you’re not doing anything at all when you’re equanimous, because there’s no likes or dislikes. But that’s being equanimous. The Buddha said, “Being is a kind of doing.” You can get stuck on it. You keep doing it over and over again. When you see it as an action, that’s when you can start moving beyond it. So look at everything that’s happening in the mind and say, “Well, where’s the action here? And what are the results?” If you can’t see any action, well, look for the issues of inconstancy, stress. Those should alert you, “Okay, there’s something going on here. There are some decisions being made. There’s some commentary that the mind is running on what’s happening.” Try to ferret that out. And whatever you see as causing any stress or any inconstancy, just let go of it. So notice, it’s the same questions all the way down the line. What’s the action? What’s the result? Is it skillful enough? What can be done to be more skillful? Keep those questions in mind. Even though your understanding of right view may still be crude, at least it’s got the basic framework. Once the framework is in place, then it can be used to make your understanding more and more precise, more and more helpful, more and more productive. It finally becomes that kind of action that leads to the end of action. So this is how right view comes first. It gets you thinking and questioning in the right way. Then when you get to the end of the path, then you don’t need right view anymore. Devants continue to look at things in terms of right view as a comfortable way of dwelling, but they don’t need it to cut away any more defilements. They can let go. As Ajahn Lee used to say, “The world needs right view and wrong view, but in nirvana there are no right views and wrong views. You’ve used them as tools, and then you can put them down.” But don’t throw them away before they’ve done their work. It’s like having a house to build, and you go out and you throw away your hammer and you throw away your saw. The house will never get done. Once the house is done, then you can put them aside. Even then, you don’t throw them away. You just put them aside. You don’t have to carry them around. They’ll float around behind you. And then when you need them, you can pick them up and use them again, then put them down again. They’ll continue floating around behind you. You don’t have to carry them around. As long as you need your right views, make sure you keep them sharpened. Make sure you keep them in good shape, because they’re what will see you through.

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