Just Right

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The chants list the factors of the noble path. You may have noticed the word sammā as in sammādhiti, right view, all the way through sammā, sammādhi, right concentration. The standard meaning for sammā is right as opposed to wrong. The Chan Fung often like to translate it as “just right.” Effort that’s just right. Mindfulness that’s just right. Concentration that’s just right. It implies a sense of balance, a sense of enough. And that’s one of the hardest things to develop. As we practice, is that sense of enough? It’s listed as one aspect of wisdom, matanuta, a sense of enough. A sense of how much is enough sleep, how much is enough food, how much is enough effort. This is one of those aspects of wisdom that you have to develop on your own. The Buddha gives you some guidelines, or you might think of them as checklists, things to look for in your meditation, things to look for in your practice. But exactly what the terms in the checklist mean, that’s something you have to learn with practice, learn over time. It’s like learning to be a craftsman. Say, when you’re planing wood, you have to put just the right amount of pressure on the plane, otherwise it gouges too deep into the wood. How much is just right? Well, you find out by gouging and then going back and doing it again, doing it again, planing again, planing again, until you get so you don’t gouge. In other words, you’re judging a work in progress. This is an important point to understand as you’re looking at your own progress, looking at your own practice. Your concentration is a work in progress. Your mindfulness is a work in progress. The mind-state that wants to impose a final judgment usually says, “This is not getting anywhere. I’m hopeless. Let’s stop.” That’s not helpful judgment at all. Because we swing back and forth from that extreme to the other extreme, we just push, push, push until we burn out. Both of those tactics lead nowhere. You’ve got to find out how much is enough, how much is too much, how much is too little, always keeping in mind the idea that it is a matter of just right. So the mind-state that wants to push you and push and push, you have to learn how to recognize that’s not the voice of the Dhamma. The voice of the Dhamma wants to experiment. “Let’s try this, let’s try that, and see what the results are.” This is why the Buddha gives you some checklists. You can think of the four bases for success. How much desire is enough? How much is too much? Desire in moderation is a good thing. Well, exactly where does that moderation lie? Persistence and effort in moderation are a good thing. Moderation here doesn’t necessarily mean just kind of halfway or middling. It means appropriate. What’s appropriate to the task? That’s the same with your desire. Sometimes you have to have a fierce desire for awakening to keep yourself on the path. But that desire has to be tempered with wisdom so that you realize, “Okay, maybe not tonight. If I just push and push and push, maybe I’ll actually set myself back.” So the desire has to be deep enough that it’s willing to look for moderation. Look to see, “Well, what’s just right here?” I.e., not only putting in the effort of gritting your teeth, but also putting in the effort of judging how things are going. That word “judging” has a bad connotation in a lot of circles. You have to remember that it has a good side as well. Using your powers of judgment, using your powers of discernment, being judicious. And again, it’s like being a craftsman. Think about those Zen masters. Someone comes up to study with them and says, “Well, first learn flower arranging or first learn archery. Have some physical skill under your belt, some artistic skill. So you have a sense of how to deal with desire so that it doesn’t get in the way and actually nourishes your practice, gives energy to your practice. The same with persistence and the matter of intent. There’s the same sort of thing. There’s too much intent. It might sound impossible, but if you decide you’ve just got to focus solely on this one thing, if things aren’t going well with your meditation, it can get very dry. And John Fulong often used to say that you should always have something on the side. For the monks, he would recommend working on your chants, working on some little project around the monastery. That’s a way of maintaining your balance. It is good to get out of whatever groove you’re in so that when you get back into the groove you’ve got more perspective on it. The same with analysis. You can overanalyze things just as you can underanalyze them. So remember, you want to look for the just right point in your meditation to get a sense of what’s enough. And also have a sense of how much you should push yourself. Because sometimes, as we know it today, the mind will say,”Well, that’s enough.” Well, who in the mind said that? And what was their motivation? Sometimes a sense of enough comes from the fact that you’re bored. In which case, you can pose the question, “Well, do I really understand what’s going on here? Do I really see everything? The Buddha talks about all these different levels of fabrication going on, all these different levels of intention. Have I seen them in practice? Do I have that kind of understanding? How much am I still suffering? Have I gotten to the point where I’m beyond suffering entirely?” Well, no. Okay, there’s more work to be done. Now, do you have the energy now to do that work? Sometimes a sense of enough comes from realizing you’ve expended all the energy you can. But other times, it’s just boredom. And so you have to learn how to check for that as well. How much do you push yourself? You don’t really know how much is enough until you push yourself a little bit too much. But then you have to learn how to recognize when there is too much effort, too much pushing. And don’t wait until you’re totally burned out before you come to that conclusion. So there’s a lot of judging that goes on in the practice. So you can get that sense of just right. And so it has to be a matter of skillful judging. And mindfulness is an important element in this. We’re sometimes taught that mindfulness is a nonjudgmental kind of awareness, but that’s not how the Buddha explained it. He talked about mindfulness as a gatekeeper, knowing who to let in and who not to let in. It’s watching your actions, your thoughts, your words, your deeds, and noticing what’s skillful and what’s not, and then steering you away from the unskillful patterns of behavior and steering you toward the skillful ones. That’s what mindfulness does. It keeps these things in mind. It keeps in mind the point that we’re trying to do this in a way that’s balanced and just right. Because it’s only when the different factors of the path are just right that they come together and strengthen one another. And this is a lot of where discernment comes in. It’s not simply a matter of being taught a particular technique and doing it again and again and again and again, hoping that the technique will automatically give rise to insights. The discernment and the insights come from what you see. You do this, you get those results. You do that, and you get these results. Then you learn to gauge which ones are to be preferred. There’s that saying that the true way is easy for those with no preferences. The way in which that makes sense is that if you learn that something works, then whether you like it or not, you go with what works. There may be things that you like, but they don’t work, and so you’re willing to abandon what doesn’t work. In other words, overall, you do still have that desire to gain freedom from suffering. To the extent that that’s a preference, that’s a skillful preference. But when you look at what’s working, what’s working in your practice, and what’s not working in your practice, we all want to be the type that has an easy practice that gets quick results. But that’s not always the way it is. Sometimes we have to put effort into areas that we’d rather not. But if you find that that kind of effort gets results, you’ve got to let go of your preference and do what needs to be done. So that other desires don’t get in the way of your desire for freedom. Which is why I said that the desire for freedom, the desire for liberation, has to be fierce, and that it’s not willing to let other things get in the way. But it’s also willing to use all the discernment and all the finesse and all the subtlety that’s needed to get past all the complicated issues in the mind. And they are complex. You look at dependent-core arising, and this is one of the reasons why people have so much trouble getting past suffering, because the causes are complex. But they can be ferreted out. And so you’re willing to develop the patience to sort through things and to pull out all the different threads. And you figure out some way of giving yourself the energy so you can stick with it. In other words, you want to give some wisdom to that desire for awakening, realizing that we’re in this for the long haul. So you learn to develop the resources and keep your energy up so you can stick with it over the long haul. So it’s a path that you can maintain. And as you get more and more familiar with it, you get a better and better sense of what it is to be just right in your concentration, just right in your effort, just right in your views. And part of that means learning to treat every meditation session as an opportunity to learn. So even though you’ve learned things you didn’t want to learn, you’ve learned something important. And you try to develop the resilience so that you can learn the things that you don’t want to learn. That’s the point of having no preference right there, but the bigger preference. We do prefer freedom over lack of freedom. Hold to that preference. And it’ll take some hard knocks in the practice, but try to develop the resilience so you keep coming back, coming back. There’s a story about a man who was staying with a Zen teacher in the Midwest. He was going to go to Los Angeles and try his luck. And so the teacher asked him, “What are you going to think if you go there and things don’t turn out the way you wanted them to?” The man says, “Well, I guess I’ll just learn how to be not attached to outcome.” And the teacher says, “No, they knock you down, you come back. They knock you down again, you come back again.” If there’s something you really want, you want to learn from being knocked down. Try to develop the resilience so you can learn from it and keep coming back. It sounds like you’re taking the tough guy approach, but it also means learning how to nourish yourself so you can come back. Otherwise, you don’t have to make things hard for yourself where you don’t have to. Learn how to draw on your strengths. Learn how to recognize your strengths, where they are, so that you can draw on them as you need them. As soon as you keep ranging back and forth between too little effort, too much effort, too little concentration, too much concentration, whatever, as Ajahn Man said, we all start out going through the extremes. And what makes all the difference is whether you’re able to learn from your mistakes and keep on going, and learning that it’s okay to pat yourself on the back when you do things well. And when you notice that your actions were not harmful, your thoughts were not harmful, your words were not harmful, take joy in that fact and use that joy to keep on training.

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