

Bringing Right resolve

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Years back, I was at a meeting with some Thai people, and there was a Thai lay meditation teacher who was listening to a talk I was giving. I was talking about the noble eightfold path, and he objected to the idea that right concentration had to be jhana. He said there are two types of right concentration: the right concentration in jhana, and the right concentration in vipassana. He said that to believe that right concentration has to be jhana is simply dealing with pariyatti Dhamma, the Dhamma that's been memorized, the Dhamma that's been put into words. The realization that there was a separate kind of right concentration, the right concentration in vipassana, was Dhamma that came from the practice. I later mentioned this to Ajaan Suwat, and his comment was, well, his saying that turns his vipassanā jhāna into pariyatti Dhamma, too. That's also memorized Dhamma, Dhamma put into words. So whose memorized Dhamma do you want? The Buddha's? Or some meditation teacher's?

It's important you realize that whatever you hear as Dhamma is Dhamma in words. You can't take the practice out and put it on the table. Right or wrong, it's memorized Dhamma. And when you listen to memorized Dhamma, you have to supply all the other elements. The talk gives you views, which could be right or wrong. As the Buddha says, one of the factors that can spark right view in you is hearing the voice of another person who teaches appropriate attention; one of the factors that get in the way of right view, in the way of right practice, is hearing someone who teaches inappropriate attention, or explains things wrongly. But all the other factors have to depend on you. In other words, the Dhamma that you want is not just the Dhamma of words, it's the Dhamma of qualities in the mind that you have to develop.

Now, right view is one of those qualities, so you have to learn how to listen to the Dhamma to recognize what's genuine Dhamma and what's not.

Part of that comes from being widely read, and part comes from your own practice, learning to recognize what works and what doesn't work in your own practice. But everything else, from right resolve on to right concentration: That's totally your contribution. You have to make sure that all the factors are there.

As with right resolve—the resolve for renunciation, the resolve for non-ill will, the resolve for non-cruelty: You have to have all three resolves present if you want to be on the path. Renunciation means looking at any sensual passion that comes up in the mind and learning how to say No to it. It's not that you're going to go

totally without sensual pleasures. There's no way you can live in the human realm without some sensual pleasures. They're bound to be here. Simply being out here in the forest, even though it's hot, there's still a lot of pleasure in being in a quiet place, having trees around you. The sensuality you have to renounce is the sensuality of your passion for thinking about the sensual pleasures you'd like to have, things you'd like to see, things you'd like to hear, to smell, taste, touch. You have to recognize those desires and renounce your passion for those desires.

This is one of the most interesting parts of the Buddha's teaching on the topic of sensuality. He realizes that it's not so much that we're attached to sensory objects or sensory contact, as we are attached to our fascination with thinking about these things, planning these things, and then going over the sensual pleasures after they're over. The mind can spend days, weeks, months, years, commenting to itself on this kind of stuff, whereas the pleasures themselves are fleeting. We try to milk as much satisfaction and gratification out of them, and our constant commentary on them, we have to realize, is where we drag the mind down. If this is the kind of stuff you're fascinated with, the kind of stuff you're fixated on, then pleasure and pain become the big issues in life. The issue of purifying the mind, the issue of finding the happiness that comes from the trained mind, gets pushed off to the side.

So there are areas where you have to make a choice: What kind of happiness you are going to look for? Are you going to look for the sensual stuff, or are you going to go for a higher level of happiness? You have to make a choice. Most of us don't like to make the choice. We'd like to have our cake and eat it too. But the only way you can do that is to eat the cake and have what comes out the other end of your digestive tract. So you've got to choose what you really want.

The human potential movement years back told us that we could have every excellence, every potential fulfilled, and that human happiness lay in trying to fulfill all your potentials: your potential for sensual pleasures, your potential for a spiritual life, your potential for political power, for wealth, physical fitness, everything. And what did that do? It drove people crazy, trying to excel in every area of life, forgetting the fact that we have limited time, limited energy, and we have to make choices. Some pleasures are more worthwhile than others, and some pleasures get in the way of finding other, higher levels of happiness.

So it's a large part of maturity to see that that's true, and to make the right choices. That's one of the parts of the path you have to provide.

Another part is non-ill will—or, to state it in a more positive way, goodwill: goodwill for yourself, goodwill for all the people around you, all the beings around you. This, too, forces you to make choices in terms of the happiness you're looking

for, because if the happiness you want is harmful to yourself or harmful to others, it's not going to last. So again, you have to be choosy about the happiness you go for. You want a happiness that doesn't harm anybody, a happiness you can live with for long periods of time, and a happiness that other people would be happy to have you live with for long periods of time.

It's interesting that for many of us, goodwill for ourselves is one of the hardest parts of this. The corollary to that is when we realize that we haven't been showing goodwill for ourselves, we can also be very immature in the ways we decide to give ourselves little presents, little rewards. Often they're precisely the pleasures we really ought to be outgrowing. You have to think hard about the happiness you're looking for, and how you can't really live for any length of time without some happiness, so you have to honor your desire for a happiness that's true.

There's a large part of society that gets into our own psychological makeup, saying, "You've got deny yourself happiness for the sake of other people." It gets so ingrained that we feel embarrassed about wishing ourselves well. Other people, of course, totally resist that message from society. All they can think about is gratifying any little desire that comes up. Both attitudes lead to suffering. You have to honor your desire for happiness, but you want it to be true happiness, a happiness that doesn't turn on you, and a happiness that doesn't turn on anybody else.

The last factor of right resolve is non-cruelty or non-harmfulness. This corresponds to compassion. When you see that there's something causing you to suffer, you want to do something about it. If you see something causing other people to suffer and you can help them, you want to do something about it. If you can't help them, you have to develop equanimity. The same for yourself: There are some areas where you can't change the conditions of your life that are causing hardship, but you can learn how not to suffer because of it. So you develop equanimity for the conditions you can't change, and you focus your compassion on the areas where you *can* make a change. And again, it's important to have wise, mature compassion for yourself, to help yourself in ways that really do advance the cause for true happiness.

So if you find that the path is getting dry, and things aren't working, you might want to stop and look at this factor of right resolve, to make sure that you understand what we're here for. We're here to honor our desire for true happiness. It's what the Buddha's teachings are all about. If you're serious about your happiness, this is what he offers you: a path of practice, developing the Dhamma of these qualities in the heart and mind, so that you understand that

this is where true happiness comes from: from the qualities of the heart and mind, not from having things outside arranged in a particular way.

Once you have that understanding and you act on it, you resolve that you really do want to find true happiness, you want to honor your desire for true happiness, and you're going to be very scrupulous and thoughtful about how you look for happiness.

You would think that people would pay a lot more attention to what causes true happiness as opposed to false happiness, yet so many people just go running for the false. Everyone wants happiness, which why you think they would think seriously about it. It's one of the great ironies of life. People see someone else doing something, and they say, "Hey, that looks good, that sounds good," and they just go for it, without seriously thinking about what they're doing.

So the Buddha offers us right view to help us understand what the causes of true happiness are. As for the other elements of the path, starting with right resolve, those are things we have to provide. The quality of the mind, the maturity of mind, and our determination and our effort: All of these things are the qualities that make the path whole, so that the Dhamma not only appears to the mind, but also, as the Buddha says, it becomes something you touch with your body. In other words, it's a total experience. It's not mediated by the senses or the aggregates or any of those activities. At that point, you can let go of the path. You don't need right view or the other factors anymore, because you've got the happiness that more than satisfies the desire for happiness that you've nurtured all along.