

Right Action & Right Livelihood

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When the Buddha got on the right path, he went straight from right resolve to right effort and then to right concentration. But when he explained the path, he put some other steps in between: right speech, right action, and right livelihood.

The question is, why? It may have been because he saw that if you're going to practice right resolve, you first have to start with your outside actions. If you resolve on renunciation but actually engage in sensuality, or if you resolve on non-ill will but you're actually mistreating other beings, there's something wrong. If you can't even control your actions, how are you going to control your thoughts?

Last night we talked about right speech, but the two other factors in between—right action and right livelihood—are also directly related to right resolve and directly related to the practice of right concentration as well. If you resolve on renunciation, you're not going to be engaging in illicit sex. If you resolve on non-ill will, you're not going to be engaged in killing or stealing. So it's a test. Is your resolve honest? Is it in earnest? And then, as you follow through with that resolve in your actions, you develop some good qualities you're going to need to get the mind into concentration.

You have to keep the principles of right resolve in mind. That's mindfulness. And you have to keep watch over your actions—do they actually fall in with right resolve? That's alertness. Then the effort you make to actually follow the principles of right resolve: That's ardency, which translates into right effort, remembering, as the Buddha said, that there are actually three factors that circle around every other factor in the path: right view, right mindfulness, right effort. So you're getting beginning practice in right mindfulness and right effort as you follow through with the principles of right action.

At the same time, you're learning how to focus on your intentions, because this is what makes the difference between following a precept and breaking it. If you kill something inadvertently, it doesn't break the precept. If you take something, not knowing that it's not yours, it doesn't break the precept. If someone forces you to have sex against your will, it doesn't break the precept. So, given the importance of your intentions, you're learning to look more and more directly at them.

After all, that's what concentration is: a firm intention. So you want to learn how to keep watch over your mind, to be honest with yourself about what your intentions are.

The same principle applies to right livelihood. In the definition of the factors of the path, it's given in very general terms—in fact, of all the factors, it's the vaguest: You abandon wrong livelihood and you follow right livelihood. That's it.

There are other places in the Canon, though, where the Buddha points out that some occupations are beyond the pale: selling weapons, selling intoxicants, selling poison, selling meat, selling living beings—which could include selling people to be slaves or selling animals that are going to be killed.

You might wonder why the Buddha had to add right livelihood when right action would seem to go against all these things. It's because the way we earn our livelihood—where we look for happiness—is an area where we tend to be blind to whatever harm we're doing, because we feel that our life depends on it. We don't want to hear about ways in which our livelihood is harmful.

This is why, when the Buddha was asked about different occupations—a soldier came to him one time, saying he had been trained that, if he died in battle, he would go to the heaven of heroes; what did the Buddha have to say about that?—the Buddha wouldn't answer right away. But the soldier was sincere; he wanted to know. So he asked a second time and a third time. Back in those days, when you asked something three times, it showed that you really wanted to know the answer.

So the Buddha said, “Well okay, if you're in the midst of battle—killing other living beings, thinking, ‘May they be destroyed’—your mind is filled with ill will. If you die at that point, it's not going to go to a good place; it's going to go not to the heaven of heroes but to the hell of those who died in battle.” The soldier burst into tears, and the Buddha said, “See, that's why I didn't want to answer.”

And the soldier said, “That's not why I'm crying. I'm crying because I was lied to by my teachers.”

There's a similar sutta where an actor comes and wants to know: Is it true, as his teachers had told him, that he's going to go to the heaven of laughter? And again, the Buddha says, “Don't ask.” The actor asks three times, and finally the Buddha says, “Okay, if you're trying to give rise to passion, aversion, and delusion in your audience and in your own mind, then when you die you go to the hell of laughter”—in other words, not where they're laughing *with* you, but where laugh *at* you. And again, the actor bursts out into tears, for the same reason.

This shows that this is a really sensitive issue: where we look for our happiness, where we look to maintain our lives. After all, we are *beings*—we've chosen to become beings by latching onto the different aggregates—and that requires feeding. We feel that our very identity depends on feeding. This is something that

all beings have in common. This is the answer to that question, “What is one?” in the Buddhist catechism: All beings subsist on nutriment. Everywhere, all around, they’re feeding.

So, if you really want to be sincere in following with the principles of right resolve, you have to look very carefully at the occupation that feeds you and make sure that it falls in line with the principles of right resolve.

As you follow both right action and right resolve, it develops an attitude in the mind that can be taken inward as you’re practicing concentration. For example, the principle against killing: What kills your good qualities in the mind? Heedlessness. “Heedlessness,” the Buddha said, “is the path to death.” So you can take that as a warning as you’re trying to get the mind into concentration. Don’t be heedless of the little thoughts that come in and say, “Now that you’ve got this hour here, we can actually think about something else. There’s something I’ve been wanting to think about for a long time, and here’s a nice empty space.”

There will be a voice that says, “It doesn’t matter; just for a few minutes.” But a few minutes turns into a lot of minutes or into another topic entirely, and these thoughts nibble away at your concentration until there’s nothing left. So, when thinking about the precept against killing, think about being heedful in your meditation.

Similarly, the precept against stealing: Don’t go thinking about the bad points of other people. Ajaan Lee says you’re stealing their bad points; you haven’t asked permission to take them and think about them. And there’s no real meat there, because often, when you’re thinking about their bad points, you can think about, “Well, they deserve to be punished,” or deserve to suffer in this way or that way. That turns into ill will, which is one of the major hindrances.

Then of course, the precept against illicit sex: Any sensual thoughts that come up in the course of the meditation, you’ve got to put them aside. Again, there’s part of the mind that says, “Here’s a chance to have a little fun, a little entertainment.” You’ve got to realize that that kind of thinking pulls you out of right concentration. You may be very focused on some of those sensual thoughts, but it’s wrong concentration.

Here you’re trying to provide the mind with a better source of happiness. After all, the way you think is going to bend your mind, and when your mind is bent, it’s going to bend your actions. So don’t think that when you’re sitting here meditating that you’re in a kamma-free zone where your thoughts have no consequences. They bend the mind, and can bend it crooked if you’re not careful.

Similarly, with the principle of right livelihood, Ajaan Lee talks about the livelihood of the mind—in other words, where you look for your happiness. Are

you going to continue looking for happiness in areas that cause harm to other beings, harm to yourself; or are you going to look for happiness being innocently here with the breath?

The Buddha himself compares right concentration to food. Each of the levels of jhana corresponds to an increasingly refined and nourishing food until you finally get to the fourth jhana, where you've got honey and ghee and butter. So, for the livelihood of the mind, for the strength of the mind, this is where you want to look: getting the mind centered, learning how to relate to the body in a way where you feel at home with the body, at home with the breath, nourished and well supported. This is your livelihood for the mind.

These are some of the ways in which the practice of right action and right livelihood helps carry over from right resolve into the practice of right concentration. They give you some practice in the quality of ardency, or right effort—in fact, in all the factors that you need for right mindfulness. And they create the proper environment. When you live adhering to these principles, you create peace around you.

As you create peace, you can sit down with no regrets in the mind. This, the Buddha said, is probably the most direct way in which following the precepts leads to concentration. There's a sense of no regret; you haven't done anything to harm anybody.

There are no wounds in the mind. Because, if you've harmed yourself or somebody else, it can either be the type of wound that's open and raw or the type with a lot of hard scar tissue around it—in other words, you're in hard denial—and neither kind of wound is going to be conducive to the kind of concentration where you can really see things clearly.

Remember, as the Buddha said, "Concentration fostered by virtue has great fruit." Now, it is possible to get the mind into concentration without virtue, but the fruit is going to be spoiled. As you're practicing right concentration, remember: You want a good crop of fruit—something you can feed on to maintain the livelihood of the mind. So make sure that these factors of the path are present in your practice, and that they help the other factors of the path come together.