

## *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 right away. At the same time, though, we also don't like being told what to do. That makes it very difficult to develop any kind of skill, because skills come from learning from people who are already skilled, and then from doing things and observing for yourself as to what works, what doesn't work. A lot of times you're going to make mistakes, so you have to be willing to learn from your mistakes. It's only in that way that you get a sense of sort of the just rightness of the middle path.

The word *samma* in front of all the factors—*sammaditthi*, *sammasankhappo*—in each case means “just right.” After all, this is the middle way. But where exactly in the middle? Is it right on the six-inch mark, or is there a little wiggle room for 5 1/2 or 6 1/2? 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 state the body is right now, and what the proper response is 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 from when you've done things wrong.

The important principle is getting “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.” When you identify with this willingness to learn, 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 staked his 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 explained, things don'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, an attitude that there is 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 knowledge, or new wrinkle that you hadn't encountered before.

So try to approach each meditation with the attitude that there may be something new to learn here. Be very observant. The factors of 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.

Right view, one, focuses your attention on the whole issue of karma: your actions and their results. Then, two, on its more refined level, it points out the issue of suffering, seeing things in terms of four noble truths, which means you don't see them in terms of what you want or what you don't want. That's in the background: You don't want suffering; you do want an end of suffering. But the question of whether your actions mean you're a good person or bad person, someone who deserves to suffer or doesn't deserve to suffer: That doesn't enter into the equation at all. Just look at the arising and passing away of suffering, trying to figure out where it comes from. That puts you in the right position to understand what's going on.

Then there's *samma-sankappo*: right intent or resolve, the 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.

Building on that, there's right speech, right action, and right livelihood. These factors help create a situation where it's easier to get the mind to settle down. If you've been lying all day—or even you've told only one or two whoppers, you don't have to tell too many, just a few—it's going to get in the way of your meditation. The same if you've harmed somebody. Or in order to find your livelihood in the course of the day, you had to do something that was underhanded or 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 you have to abandon. That's what right effort is all about, abandoning not only things outside but also things in the mind. 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.

The Canon uses the word *jhana* for concentration, right or wrong. There are *jhana*s mentioned in the Canon that are definitely not right concentration. There's the *jhana* where you try to blank out, or the *jhāna* where you try to force yourself not to breathe. Those are wrong *jhana*, wrong concentration, because on the one hand, you're too blank to notice anything, and on the other, you're too preoccupied with all the weird things coming up in the body when you try to force yourself not to breathe simply through willpower. You're so focused on your willpower that you can't see anything.

Ideally, you want to bring the mind to a state of concentration that's balanced. For it to be right concentration, you have to be in a position where you really can observe what's going on. First, be really focused on the breath and then learn to step back a bit and watch not only the breath, but also the mind as it relates to the breath. That's when you're in the right position to observe both body and mind, to see the connections between them, and particularly to see where you're causing unnecessary suffering.

The path is all about putting you in a position 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 where you hold to the right questions 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 a skillful? What can I do to become more skillful? What actions would be more skillful?”

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, a very refined kind of energy will 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 6 inches on a ruler 12 inches long. It means just right for the situation. Ajaan Maha Boowa gives an example. He says, suppose we had a huge pile of excrement right here in the middle of sala. 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 in that case is very demanding. In other situations, it requires simply watching and being very, very observant.

So in all these cases, the rightness of the right factors of the right path is “just-rightness.” What makes it just right 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 depend on your skill, and you develop that skill in 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.