

Right View as Tool

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There's a line toward the end of the Karaṇīya Mettā Sutta that describes the ideal meditator as "not attached to fixed views, but consummate in vision." That's how it's often translated. It turns out, though, that the word "fixed" is not in the original. In other words, "not attached to views but consummate in vision": That's what the line actually says. So how are we to practice when right view is an important part of the path? We learn how to use the view as a tool.

There's another passage where the Buddha says to a person who has asked him about the goal that it's not defined in terms of views, but you can't get there without views. In other words, views are tools. You try to use your discernment as a tool, just as you use all the other elements of the path as tools, and then you put it aside. And as with any tool, you want to learn to use it well.

Part of that means when you're dealing with people who disagree with right view, you don't use the tool on them. In other words, if you've got a hammer that's meant to be used in hammering some boards together, you don't hammer it over other people's heads. You use the tool for what it's meant for. We're here to cure the problem in our own minds, which is the problem of suffering.

And can anyone else see your suffering? No. They can see your face when it's contorted in response to suffering, or they can hear it in your voice, but they can't actually sense the suffering, sense the pain, sense the stress that you feel. *You're* the one who senses these things, and if you want to put an end to them, you have to learn how to be even more sensitive to your own suffering. That's what the tools of right view are for, to point out to you exactly what is the suffering and how to do something about it.

The Buddha gives a list of things that bring about suffering. There's aging, illness, and death, being separated from things you love, being together with things you don't like, not getting what you want—all of which are very intuitive. But then he concludes with something that's not quite so intuitive, which is that the five clinging-aggregates are suffering. It's not intuitive, but it's what makes this a noble truth. In other words, wherever the mind is pained, wherever the mind is weighed down with stress, you turn to look to see: Where is the clinging? It's

something you're doing.

That's something you want to comprehend, and to comprehend it you need to develop right concentration. Otherwise, the mind won't be stable enough, strong enough to comprehend the suffering. The mind needs a solid foundation. Without that solid foundation it's going to run away. It's going to get pushed around by pain and sometimes it'll go into denial. Sometimes people can be in horrible suffering and yet totally deny it.

I've told you the story of the man who lived in Blythe. Ajaan Suwat and I were riding on a plane back from Texas one time. The man was sitting next to me. He saw two Buddhist monks sitting next to him and he immediately said, "I don't have any suffering in my life." He had probably heard that that's what we talk about, that life is suffering—which is not the first noble truth, by the way. The Buddha never said that life is suffering, he just said that there is suffering, and he identified it as this habit we have of clinging to things.

Anyway, the man had heard probably that we said life was suffering, so he proudly announced that he wasn't suffering. Then he proceeded to tell us his life. What started out was bad enough: He was living in Blythe and had a car dealership. If I remember correctly, one son was in prison, and his daughter had gotten pregnant with a junkie and the baby had come out as a cocaine baby. Neither the father nor the mother was in any position to care for the baby, so the grandparents had to look after it. It all sounded pretty miserable, and yet he was denying up and down that there was any suffering.

Now, that would have been possible if he had been training his mind so that it didn't suffer from these things, but you could tell it was more out of desperation and out of denial that he was saying these things.

This is one of the things we have to learn how to peer through: to see our own denial, our own blindness to the ways in which we're causing ourselves suffering. Which again is why the teaching that suffering is clinging to the five aggregates is a noble truth. Instead of going around blaming other people for our suffering, we look inside for the cause. That's noble. And the purpose of being noble in this way, of course, is to find the way out.

The Buddha's teachings are not pessimistic. He's very frank about the suffering in life, like a doctor who has a good cure for a horrendous disease and can talk freely and frankly about the disease because he's got the cure. In the same way, the Buddha has a cure for suffering, so he'll talk a lot about it, and he'll point out things that people don't like to look at—some of which lie just below the surface of what otherwise looks perfectly normal, perfectly fine, perfectly okay.

But he points out, no, it's not okay—not because he's trying to badmouth it, but simply because he says there's something a lot better, and this is the way to find it.

This is what right view is all about. Suffering has a cause. The cause is craving. The reason we cling to these aggregates is because we have craving: sensual craving, craving for becoming, and craving for non-becoming. We love to think about and plan for sensual pleasures. We like to take on an identity of one kind or another in the world, although sometimes we've got an identity we don't like, we want to get rid of it.

All these cravings create suffering, and they're things to be abandoned. We need right view to show us what to do. A lot of times we see suffering and we want to abandon it. That's like coming into your house, seeing there's smoke filling the house, and you just try to put out the smoke. You've got to find the fire. Put out the fire and then the smoke will go away.

What makes right view right is that it actually works in solving the problem it's designed to solve. The Buddha's analogy is of trying to get oil. If you try to get oil by grinding gravel, it doesn't work. If you try to get oil by grinding sesame seeds, it works. Or like milking a cow: If you twist the horn, you're not going to get the milk; if you pull on the udder, you do get the milk. It's all about following the right method, and part of the right method is understanding what the problem is, so that you can tackle it properly.

You develop the path to make it easier to comprehend the suffering. When you comprehend the suffering, then you can abandon the cause, and that's the end of the problem. And you solve the problem, the problem inside, in the part of your awareness that other people can't see.

So in that sense, it is very much your own problem, your own solution. Which is why you don't see Buddhist monks standing on soapboxes on street corners, because we're telling people, "You've got a problem you've got to solve. Here's the way, but you've got to solve it yourself."

A lot of people don't want to hear that. They want to hear either that the problem is somebody else's problem or else somebody else is going to solve it, and you can't force the Dhamma on people like that. But if you see that the problem is within you, the cause is within you, and you want some guidance on how to deal with that problem, get rid of those causes, then here's the Dhamma. It's a tool. It's a means. Learn how to use the tool properly so that the problem of suffering doesn't overwhelm you, doesn't deceive you, doesn't blind you. And when you've solved the problem, you can be a good example to others. This is the best we can

do for one another in this area.

Some people say Buddhism is selfish or harsh with its teachings on karma, selfish in the fact that each person is looking out after his or her own well-being, harsh in that people are being held responsible for their own suffering. If the Buddha could have saved us all, he would have. He had an enormous immeasurable heart, but he saw that this is the way that karma is. There are lots of things about karma that are not fair. Look at Ven. Angulimala: He had killed almost a thousand people and yet he was able to become an arahant without having to undergo a thousand deaths to pay off that karmic debt. By training his mind, he was able to mitigate a lot of the suffering he would have otherwise undergone. A lot of people were unhappy about that. They felt it wasn't fair. The Buddha didn't design the teaching on karma to make things fair or to be consoling. He didn't design it at all. He just pointed out that this is the way things are, this is how they work.

The same with the path: It's something each of us has to do for him or herself alone, because the reason we suffer is our own lack of skill, and no one else can master a skill for us. We have to master the skill ourselves. But the more people we have who are mastering the skill, the more their influence spreads around. So it's not a selfish path, it's simply a path that works. It's the only path that works.

A lot of people don't like to hear that. They like to think that there are lots of different ways up the mountain. Well, there are lots of different ways up the mountain but it turns out that not that many make it all the way to the top. And it's up to each of us how far we're going to go.

Someone once asked the Buddha, "Is everybody in the world eventually going to go to nibbana?" He wouldn't answer, because people have the freedom of choice to follow the path or not. As Ven. Ananda told the man, the Buddha is like a gatekeeper in a royal fortress. He walks around the wall of the fortress and he sees that there's only one gate and that there are no other passageways in or out of the fortress, even big enough for a cat to slip through. He doesn't know how many people will go in or out of the fortress, but he does know that if any sizable animal is going to go in or out of the fortress, it'll have to go through that gate. That's the nature of the Buddha's knowledge. As to whether we're going to go in or not, that's entirely up to us