Mundane Right View

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In the Satipatthana Sutta, the discourse on the foundations of mindfulness, the Buddha describes in some detail the different ways of establishing mindfulness. There is the foundation of mindfulness of the body, of feelings—that quality of pleasantness, unpleasantness, and neutrality—mindfulness of the mind and mental states. And the last is called mindfulness of dhammas, which is often translated as categories of experience. That includes different teachings like the hindrances, the factors of enlightenment, and the Four Noble Truths.

In the final section of this discourse, the Buddha summarizes all of the instructions and the essential elements of the path. He does this in the teaching of the Noble Eightfold Path. This is what he says: "And what, bhikkhus, is the noble truth of the way of practice leading to the end of suffering?" That's a useful question. "It is just this Eightfold Noble Path, namely right view, right thought, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness, right concentration."

When I first heard these teachings, I was still in the Peace Corps in Thailand. This was in the mid-1960s, and I was first reading and studying all of this. The enumeration of these eight steps seemed to me almost a philosophic abstraction, a bit of Buddhist philosophy. It took me a long time to even remember what all the eight steps were. In fact, it's only when I started giving talks on them that I could actually remember them. But probably similar to your own experience, as I continued to practice and explore more fully how to live the path, this teaching of the Noble Eightfold Path took on a tremendous richness and depth that dramatically transformed my life. Slowly, over time, I began to see the internal logic and consistency of these steps on the path, and how each one leads to the next, until they really are a template for how to live a life in the Dharma.

We begin with the first and critically important step on the path, which is Right View. In Pali it's called Samma Ditthi. It might be interesting, though, just to look in your mind right now and see if there's any response even to that term, right view. Often in the West—and this has come up a lot in different teaching situations—in our very relativistic culture, even when we hear the term right view, there might be some resistance arising in the mind. We might associate this right view with some kind of dogmatic belief or orthodox dogma that we have to subscribe to. Do I have right view? What if I don't? All kinds of things come up in the mind.

It's really important to understand as we hear these teachings that none of the Buddha's teachings requires or asks for blind belief. We're always invited to come and see. That's a phrase used in the chanting of the qualities of the Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha. In the qualities of the Dharma, it has that

phrase: come and see. So it's all about our own exploration, our own investigation of the teachings. Does this accord with my experience? Does it seem true in my own experience? Is it conducive to the happiness and welfare of myself and of others? We're always testing it, and we have to hear the teachings in that light.

Right view is such an important first step on the path because it sets our direction. If we are on a journey, no matter how long or difficult the journey may be, if we're heading in the right direction and we keep on going, we will inevitably and certainly reach the goal. But if we don't know the right direction, even with strong aspirations and strong effort, we might wander around for a long time without realizing our aim.

There was a classic example of this in the suttas—a little sad, actually. In the Buddha's time, as you might know, in India many spiritual seekers practiced different ascetic practices. There were two practices called the canine ascetics and the bovine ascetics. These were people who had the view—it wasn't quite right view—that if they imitated the behavior of dogs and cows, that would lead to liberation. The sutta goes into a lot of detail about how they went about imitating them. Then they came to the Buddha and said, "We're doing these wonderful practices. Can you tell us where they'll lead?" The Buddha said, "Don't ask." They asked again and again, and finally he told them: this is not leading where you think it's leading.

They were not developing or cultivating wholesome mind states. They were not cultivating liberation. They were going in the wrong direction.

So this is the importance of understanding what our direction in practice actually is. Do we have right view? The Buddha said that just as the dawn is the forerunner and precursor to the rising sun, so is right view the forerunner and precursor of the breakthrough to the Four Noble Truths. That breakthrough or realization of the Four Noble Truths—which is awakening itself—right view is the precursor to that.

In one discourse particularly, the Buddha elaborates on right view, and he makes an interesting distinction between what we might call worldly or mundane right view—that is, the understandings that lead us to happiness and ease in our lives, in our worldly lives—and supramundane right view, which is the right view that leads to liberation.

This is how the Buddha described it: "And what, bhikkhus, is right view? Right view, I say, is twofold. There is right view that is affected by taints, partaking of merit, ripening in acquisitions. And there is right view that is noble, taintless, supramundane, a factor of the path."

Tonight and next week also, I'd like to discuss aspects of this twofold right view, because they have such important consequences for our lives.

The teachings on worldly or mundane right view very pragmatically acknowledge that for those of us—those few of us—who are not yet fully liberated, our wholesome actions are often in the realm of desire, of accumulating wholesome merit, of aiming for particular happy results in our lives. So even though these are wholesome actions, and they are the accumulation of merit, and they do bring good

results, it's still in the realm of acquisition rather than on the side of the abandonment of all desires. That's why it's called mundane right view or worldly right view. It shows us how to live in the world.

I find this aspect of the Buddha's teachings particularly relevant for us as lay people. We're practicing in our lives, engaged with the world, engaged in different kinds of relationships, in work. It shows us how we can live in a way that brings happiness and ease rather than difficulties or stress. It's just another example of the Buddha's great pragmatism. He understood so completely all the different levels that we aspire to. As lay people, we are living in the world. Can we live with ease? Can we live with happiness? And can we also aspire to full awakening? There are right views for each of those.

There's a traditional expression of mundane right view found in the suttas. In a few brief phrases, the Buddha points to a wealth of dharma understanding. It's like four or five phrases that, when unpacked, open up a whole world of understanding how we can live wisely. Some aspects will seem very obvious, while others may be outside the realm of our immediate experience. But it's worth listening to and staying open to what might be different ways of understanding the world. Even if they're not in our immediate experience, it might enlarge our understanding.

So this is the teaching the Buddha gave on mundane or worldly right view: "And what, bhikkhus, is right view that is affected by the taints, partaking of merit, ripening in acquisitions? There is what is given and what is offered and what is sacrificed. There is fruit and result of good and bad actions. There is this world and the other world. There is mother and father. There are beings who are reborn spontaneously. There are in the world good and virtuous recluses and Brahmins who have realized for themselves by direct knowledge and declare this world and the other world. This is right view, affected by taints, partaking of merit, ripening in the acquisitions."

These are a few pithy statements, which upon first hearing them, I think—what does this mean? What's the relevance to my life? So I'd like to unpack them a little bit, because I think there's tremendous relevance to how we live.

All of these specific declarations rest on the framework of understanding the law of karma. This is the fundamental and essential understanding that all of our volitional actions—which are many, innumerable through the day—all of our volitional actions bear fruit.

The fruit is conditioned by the motivation behind the action.

Now there's so much emphasis in practice on living in the present, paying attention in the present—which of course is the path of practice—but there's a larger understanding that we need to bring to our awareness of the present, and that is that our actions and the motivations behind our actions have the power, the energy, to bear fruit in the future. They're all like seeds. We need to understand this so we pay attention to our actions.

As I'm sure all of you are familiar with, actions rooted in greed, in hatred, in ignorance, are the seeds of

unpleasant future results. Actions based in non-greed, generosity, non-hatred, loving-kindness, non-delusion, wisdom—these bear the seeds of happiness.

This understanding of the law of karma is so fundamental to the teachings, and so far-reaching in its implications, that the Buddha emphasized it over and over again. It's interwoven through all the many texts of the Buddha's discourses, and it was emphasized by enlightened beings all the way up to the present time.

We've mentioned, I think, the first lines of the Dhammapada, where the Buddha says, "Mind is the forerunner of all things. If we speak or act with an impure mind, suffering follows, like the wheel of the ox cart follows the foot of the ox." And "Mind is the forerunner of all things. If we speak or act with a wholesome mind, happiness follows like a shadow that never leaves." The Buddha is saying it very directly.

The great Indian adept who brought Buddhism to Tibet, Padmasambhava, had an amazing vision of the Dharma and of emptiness. He said that though his vision of the Dharma is as vast as the sky, his attention to the law of karma is as fine as a grain of barley flour. So we need to be watchful not to get lost in either the concept or the glorious aspiration for realizing emptiness without acknowledging that within that is the working of the law of karma. We really need to pay attention on a very fine level.

His Holiness the Dalai Lama made a very interesting statement about this. Given how important the wisdom of emptiness is in the Buddha's teachings, the Dalai Lama said that if he had to choose between teaching about emptiness and teaching about karma, he would teach about karma. That's a really important indication of just how significant this teaching is for happiness and ease in our lives.

And I think the best expression of it—I really love this—is by the Korean Zen master Seung Sahn Sunim. He was talking about both emptiness and karma, and he said, "There's no right and no wrong, but right is right and wrong is wrong." So even as we develop insight into the emptiness of all phenomena—there's no right and no wrong—but right is right and wrong is wrong. We need to integrate these two levels of understanding.

Of course, it's not enough to simply know this conceptually or intellectually, or even to agree with it. "Oh yeah, that sounds right. Karma is a good thing." That's not enough. That's not what transforms our lives. We need to practice applying this understanding in our lives. As we're about to act, or when thoughts or emotions are predominant, do we remember to investigate and reflect on our motivation? Before our actions, do we stop and think: Where is this action leading? Is it where I want to go? Is this motivation skillful or unskillful? Do I want to cultivate it? Do I want to abandon it?

The beauty of being on retreat in quite an undistracted environment is that we have the chance to explore this, to investigate, because in the busyness of our lives without training, it's very difficult to catch ourselves. We forget to look. We just act out the patterns of our conditioning.

In the Buddha's description of mundane right view, held in this context of understanding the law of karma, he elaborated a few particular areas of investigation and practice.

The first statement in that list of phrases: "There is what is given, offered, and sacrificed." What does that mean? It refers to the moral and karmic significance of generosity. "There is what is given, offered, sacrificed"—he's talking about the power of any act of giving.

The Buddha emphasized this in his very well-known teaching when he said that if we knew, as he did, the fruit, the power of generosity, the karmic result of generosity, we would not let a single meal pass without sharing. That's how strong a force it is in the unfolding of our lives.

So a question for us in our very fast-paced, individualistic culture: Can we actually make generosity a practice? Can we cultivate it? Can we make it strong in our lives?

One way that I found to be very helpful and inspiring for myself, and really transforming of the way I relate to my life situation and the people I come in contact with: I've made it a practice to try and act on all those moments of generous impulse. Many times in the course of our lives, we have a generous impulse, we have a generous thought. So if I have a thought to give—whether it's something just small, a small gesture, or something quite big—if I have the thought, I try to practice actually acting on it at the appropriate time, rather than let the thought simply pass by or start second-guessing myself. "Oh, maybe that's too much. Maybe I shouldn't do that. Maybe I should hold on." If the thought comes to give, I try to act on it and do it, and it's had amazing results.

Acts of generosity are obviously of benefit to the recipient, but they also are of tremendous benefit to ourselves, both in the moment and also as future results. One of the immediate blessings of generosity and of practicing it is that it feels so good in the moment. Because what's going on in those moments of generosity? There are associated factors of metta, of loving-kindness. When we're giving something, that generosity is motivated by a feeling of friendliness towards the person we're giving it to. There's the associated factor of renunciation because we're actually giving something up, and so there's the lightness that comes from those moments of renunciation. And if we consciously reflect on this whole process and the benefit of it, we're also cultivating wisdom—so the wisdom factor gets strong. All of this is contained in a simple act of giving. That's why it feels so good.

The Buddha would often begin his series of graduated teachings with generosity. Because when we hear about it—even just in talking about it, and I hope I'm conveying this—or if you think about people who are generous, how does that make you feel? It gladdens the heart. It lightens the heart because it's such a beautiful quality. We love being around people who are generous, and people like being around us when we're generous. So it's just good. It's good from the very beginning, and it's not hard to do. We just have to consciously take it on as a practice.

The second phrase in the description of mundane right view is "there is fruit and result of good and bad

actions." We've already discussed this in terms of understanding karma. There is no way to overestimate the importance of these teachings—that actions bring results. Because when we practice this understanding in our lives, it allows us to engage creatively in the unfolding of our lives, since we are the heirs of our own actions. When we understand it and practice it, it's like we're artists and the medium is our life. We can shape it and craft it and create something beautiful, because we understand that our actions, moment after moment, are bringing results. There's no way to overestimate the importance of this. We begin to take a much greater sense of responsibility for our actions.

The next aspect of mundane right view says "there is this world and the other world." This is a statement about rebirth and other planes of existence. For most of us, probably this is outside the realm of our direct experience. It's also outside the mainstream of Western thought, so it may be difficult to sign on for these aspects of the teachings. When we hear about rebirth, when we hear about all the different planes of existence, for most of us as Westerners, I think there's usually quite a bit of skepticism.

When I was studying with Munindraji in Bodh Gaya, he loved to talk about this. He would go on about all the deva realms and the seven kinds of devas of sense pleasures and all the Brahma realms—he'd go on and on. I actually loved listening to it, but many of the other Westerners were kind of rolling their eyes. And Munindra would always end his little discourse on this by saying, "You don't have to believe this. It's true, but you don't have to believe it."

For myself, there was a very gradual process of opening to consider these possibilities, because I came to Dharma practice from a study of Western philosophy. I studied philosophy in college and had no

belief at all, and I probably hadn't even heard much about past lives and future lives and realms of existence. This was a completely foreign idea for me.

Over time, though, several things began to open me to consider these possibilities. One of the first things that opened me happened as I began practicing these meditation techniques and saw that so much of what the Buddha taught actually did resonate with my experience. I could test a good part of it for myself. "Oh, all of that seems true. Well, maybe this part that I don't quite experience yet—if he was right about this much, maybe I should consider the other part." And so I began reflecting a little more. I began to practice what the poet Coleridge called "the willing suspension of disbelief," because I saw that just as we can become attached, very attached to our beliefs, we can become very attached to our disbeliefs and hold on to them quite tightly.

The second thing that opened me was being with teachers like Dipa Ma. I think we've talked a little bit about her, and we'll undoubtedly talk more—this wonderful Bengali woman, an extraordinary yogi with a very interesting life story. Not only did she attain very high levels of enlightenment, but also through the concentration practices, all the different psychic powers that are mentioned in the texts. In being with her, such an extraordinary being, and hearing that she herself had experienced all of this, out of my great trust in her, I thought, well, maybe I should consider it. Of course, this is not at all scientific proof of rebirth, so

I'm not suggesting that it is. But it just opened my heart a little bit to thinking about it, considering it.

In this same vein, in our first teacher training program here at IMS, we had a young Sri Lankan man named Dhamma Ruwan, whom I had met in Sri Lanka years before when he was still a young child. He was quite an unusual person. At the age of two and three, before he could read, before he could write, he started spontaneously chanting whole Buddhist discourses in Pali—very complex Buddhist suttas in Pali. And he was doing it in a melody, a way of chanting that didn't even exist in Sri Lanka at that time. His parents didn't know these chants. It just started coming spontaneously at two and three.

As he got a little older and started meditating, he began to remember some of his past lives, and one of them was as a monk, a chanting monk, in the time of Buddhaghosa, the great sixth-century commentator of the Buddhist tradition who compiled that great commentary, *The Path of Purification*. Dhamma Ruwan remembered being a monk with Buddhaghosa, chanting these suttas, and he said that's where all of this chanting had come from when he was still such a young child. His parents taped some of these chants, and I thought it would be interesting to play just a few minutes of him chanting as a very young child.

So again, this isn't scientific proof, but it does raise some interesting questions. Where would that come from? It just makes one stop and think that maybe there are other aspects of what's going on that we don't yet quite understand. It's simply a way of opening to possibilities. It's not a question of necessarily believing, but of expanding the possibilities of what may be going on.

Each of us has our own relationship to these teachings on rebirth and other planes of existence. And it's important to emphasize that awakening and freedom does not depend on this belief. Whether we believe it or don't believe it, we can understand the causes of suffering and free ourselves from those causes. But as the great transmission of Buddha Dharma happens—and we're in the midst of it, this really quite amazing phenomenon, this transmission of these teachings from Asian cultures to our own—I think it's helpful not to immediately dismiss what is beyond our limited personal experience, and to simply keep an open mind about other possibilities.

Regarding mundane right view, we've discussed the aspects of karma, of generosity, of rebirth and other planes of existence. The next phrase in the teachings—"there is mother and father"—highlights not the obvious fact that we're all born of our parents, but that there is a special karmic relationship to our parents with attendant responsibilities. This is an interesting teaching for us in the West. Perhaps in Asia as well, but I think maybe particularly here, there are sometimes, and maybe even often, complications and difficulties in the relationship with our parents.

The Dalai Lama's often repeated teaching that at some point all beings have been our mothers doesn't necessarily evoke the same feeling in us as it does in him. "All beings have been my mother."

Regardless of our present relationship, whatever it may be, the Buddha is pointing out that there is a karmic debt for this great gift of this precious human birth. This is an important karmic connection, and

the best possible repayment of that debt is to somehow connect our parents with the teachings, with the Dharma—or at least try to plant a few seeds of understanding within them.

But of course, great skill and sensitivity is needed with this. How each of us might go about it will vary greatly depending on the particular relationships we have. And almost certainly, proselytizing is not going to help—that's not a very good strategy. The best communication almost always is not what we say but how we are. That's what gets communicated. If there is already an open and loving relationship, there might be real possibilities for Dharma discussion and maybe even an encouragement to practice. But if communication is difficult, as it often is, the first steps might be ones we take within ourselves—to simply cultivate less judgment and be more accepting of our parents just as they are.

Over these many years of teaching, I've met with many people where there was tremendous conflict and even trauma in their family relationships. But it's been amazing to me to hear many stories of how, over time, through years of practice and a tremendous amount of patience, even when there was some pretty intense trauma involved, the relationships were transformed just through the power of the aspiration to work on it. The relationships were transformed into ones of metta, of compassion.

These difficulties are not limited to our modern age. Even Sariputta, who was the chief disciple of the Buddha, second only to the Buddha in his wisdom, had mother problems. He was born into a Brahmin family and had three brothers and three sisters, all of whom eventually ordained and became arahants. But his mother was a staunch Brahmin, very attached to the Brahmanic rituals, and she remained hostile to the Buddha and his teachings.

There is a story describing a little visit Sariputta made to his mother: Once, when the Venerable Sariputta was in his home village of Nalaka with a large retinue of monks, he came to his mother's house in the course of his alms round. His mother gave him a seat and served him with food. But while she did so, she uttered abusive words. "Oh, you eater of others' leavings," she said. "When you fail to get leavings of sour rice gruel, you go from house to house among strangers, licking the leavings off the backs of ladles. And so it was for this that you gave up eighty crores of wealth and became a monk. You have ruined me. Now go and eat." Likewise, when she was serving food to the monks, she said, "So you are the men who have made my son your page boy. Go on, eat now." I can just hear it. So there were some problems.

But many years later, as Sariputta was contemplating his own imminent death—he knew when he was going to die—he thought of his mother, who, although the mother of seven arahants, which is quite extraordinary, still had no faith at all in the teachings and the Buddha. But through his eye of wisdom, Sariputta, this great being, also saw that she had the necessary conditions for attaining stream entry, the first stage of enlightenment, but that only he would be able to bring it about.

Understanding this, he returned to his mother's house, to his birth chamber where he was born. On the last evening of his life—he went home to die—it is said that all of these celestial beings, the devas and the brahmas, came down to pay homage to Sariputta, this great enlightened being, second only to the Buddha.

This seemed to impress his mother, that all these devas and brahmas were coming to bow down to her son. And she thought, "If all these celestial beings are paying homage to my son, what great virtues must the Buddha have?" In seeing that, her heart softened. Sariputta gave a final discourse, and she became a stream-enterer, bound for full awakening.

We may not have celestial beings come down when we visit our parents—maybe, but maybe not. But this story does point to the importance the Buddha gave to this very fundamental relationship. It may be an easy one, it may be one that is not easy, that is filled with difficulty, that takes great patience, great forbearance. But it's worth reflecting on how we might help, how we might offer or convey or communicate some aspect of these blessings of the Dharma, which have touched all of us. That's why we're here.

And even if our parents have already passed away, it's also possible to share our merit. You might do that at the beginning of a sitting, or the end of a sitting, or the end of a day—sharing the merit of our practice with them, the merit of our wholesome actions, dedicating it

to the welfare, the happiness, the awakening of our parents. And depending on circumstances, this dedication of merit can have a very powerful effect.

The last two statements in worldly right view are that there are beings who are reborn spontaneously in other realms, and that there are in the world wise and virtuous people who have realized the truth through their own direct experience.

Regarding spontaneous rebirth in other realms, we've spoken of simply the possibility of staying open to considering that possibility, even if it's beyond what we know for ourselves right now. It's the last aspect of mundane right view that I find particularly interesting and relevant in our Western culture, where the Buddha says that there are wise and virtuous people who have realized truth through direct experience.

When we look at our society, our Western culture, we don't really find that wisdom is a great cultural value. What do we value as a society? We value wealth. We value talent. We value beauty. To some extent, at least in some circles, we might value intelligence. But when's the last time you saw a magazine cover featuring the wisest person of the year? We don't even think in those terms. In India, if you went into any village and asked who's the wise elder, they would be able to point you to somebody. They may or may not actually be wise, but it would be a recognized value—a question that people would respond to. If you went downtown and asked who's the wise elder, people would look at you like, what are you talking about? Because somehow we haven't incorporated the idea of wisdom as being something important.

In some way, I think our egalitarian values, which of course have brought so much benefit, can sometimes diminish the understanding that there actually are people wiser than ourselves. I remember quite distinctly—I was young, in my early twenties—when that thought first occurred to me. Because we weren't brought up with the idea that there are wise people, it was like a light bulb going off: "Oh yes,

there are some people who might be wiser than I am." That was a great discovery. People from whom we can actually learn something about the Dharma, about how to live in a skillful way. There are people with this wisdom.

Acknowledging this also opens us up to wisdom from unexpected sources. It's not always in some conventional way of connecting with wise people. Just the people we meet in the course of our lives—if we're attuned to the possibility that people have varying degrees of wisdom, we listen for it in the people we meet. And very often it's quite surprising and unexpected where we really see: yes, these people have learned something from their lives. They have something to teach us. This becomes a powerful change in how we go through our lives and how we relate to others.

A very important implication of recognizing that there are genuinely wise beings in the world, awakened beings in the world, is that it reaffirms our understanding that this is possible for ourselves as well. Because we're seeing that yes, this is a human potential, and we all share in that.

We can practice these various aspects of worldly right view or mundane right view in different ways. Some are obvious, like the practice of generosity, like paying attention to the motivations behind our actions, realizing that they have consequences. Other aspects of this right view may not be immediately apparent. So we might want to experiment. We try them on for size, seeing how they might affect the quality of our lives.

Just as an example, what would it be like, what would it mean for your life if you were actually open to the possibility of rebirth in other planes of existence? Would it change in any way how you live or the choices you make? Would it affect the stress or ease in your life? It's a thought experiment—living it out a bit, trying it on for size. What would this mean for how I live?

For myself, in doing this and just entertaining the idea that yes, this might be true, there might be rebirth in other planes, I've noticed a significant change in how I live. Within the realm of worldly happiness, because of this understanding, I no longer feel the compelling need to fulfill every desire or accomplish every goal this time around. Life is going by so fast; it increasingly feels like a long weekend. It's just really speeding up. And if I don't become an expert skier, or learn the languages I want to learn, or learn to sing, or whatever the desire may be—well, if it doesn't happen this life, maybe it'll happen next life. This way of seeing things both takes the pressure off

And it allows me to prioritize what seems most important without thinking that I'm missing out on something. I can just let go of a lot of anxiety about having to do everything. It creates a lot more space, a lot more ease, a lot more relaxation.

So you might just play with it. What would it mean if you happened to have that belief? Not that you should believe it—it's just a kind of playing. Does it have any effect on your life or not? In this way, it becomes interesting as we explore these different possibilities.

Next week, I'd like to continue in this little two-part series, moving from mundane right view to supramundane right view. And we'll see, as we explore that, that the real freedom is not simply in living with ease and learning to live a bit more happily in our lives—which we can do—but that real freedom comes from letting go of the deeply rooted tendency of craving and from the deeply rooted belief in the concept of self. With supramundane right view, we cut through the Gordian knot of self, and we begin to experience our lives and who we are in a radically different way.

In one discourse, the Buddha said there are two conditions for the arising of right view—of both kinds, the worldly and the supramundane. Two conditions for its arising: the voice of another, and wise attention.

You've just spent an hour listening to the voice of another. The wise attention is up to you.

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