

Wise View by Rodney Smith

I recently saw a full-length newspaper ad for an investment firm. The ad featured a man dressed in a business suit and tie, briefcase beside him, sitting on the floor in full lotus position with his hands resting on his knees, palms up, thumbs and forefingers touching. There was an angelic smile on the man's face. Under him the caption blared in bold type, "**MUTUAL FUND NIRVANA.**"

I am sure almost everyone who meditates recognizes this ad as an obvious conflict between the secular and spiritual views of life. But how many of us understand the depth of the spiritual struggle inherent in these views and are aware that this struggle probably exists within our spiritual practice? In fact, resolving the tension between these opposite perspectives can help answer the most frequently posed spiritual question, "How do I integrate spiritual practice into my life?"

Almost every Vipassana meditation course ends with the teacher suggesting both a daily sitting practice and offering general instruction on practicing mindfulness throughout the day. And almost every one of us leaves the retreat with clear intentions to do just that, only to find our ability to practice in the midst of work and family quickly erodes. It seems no matter how hard we try, no matter what spiritual tricks we employ, most of us are only partially successful in keeping the practice current.

After a number of years of such effort, discouragement plagued my own practice. I did everything I was instructed to do yet felt drained by my effort and limited in my wakefulness. Obviously something was missing, some perception of the problem that was not understood? I went to the Buddha's Eightfold Path and found the answer to my confusion under Right View, the first step of the Path. I had been practicing the seventh and eighth steps, Right Mindfulness and Right Samadhi, without understanding the usefulness of Right View.

The ordering of these steps had always confused me. Why not simply go to the meditation and be done with it? Have a one-step path instead of eight! Wouldn't everything flow from the meditation? The answer is, not unless the mediation comes from Right View. There is logic and purpose to the ordering of these steps because

very little wisdom can occur outside of Right View. Right View, sometimes translated as right understanding, frames all the other steps.

I prefer the word “view” to “understanding” because view carries the visual idea of how we see the world. A spiritual view is what we understand the world to be when we look through our eyes. Most of us see life filled with separate things. When we engage the world through this view our efforts go towards assimilating, accommodating, or avoiding these objects. Since our internal strategies always mirror our outward ones, our meditation carries these same efforts as we attempt to inwardly duplicate our worldly successes and avoid our failures.

This is the secular view of the “Mutual Fund” in Nirvana. Even though we hear the meditation teacher speaking about “opening to what is” rather than “changing what is,” we simply convert this statement into a new effort and goal. This striving effortful practice can continue for a long time before we realize that our spiritual path is mirroring the course of our careers.

Right (or Wise) View is the true and natural relationship to all things. The purpose of insight meditation is to inform us about the true nature of relationship. It takes us into the process of living rather than the product of what we obtain or become. When we allow the meditation to operate correctly it absorbs us into Right View. We lose our self-centered perspective and abandon our defenses. There is an immediate sense of intimacy and ease.

A spiritual teacher once said that meditation practice [from Wise View] springs from enlightenment. It does not move towards it. The practice breaks down when we assert any sense of gain or avoidance because we are managing the meditation from an inherently inconsistent view. To manifest the true and natural way things are, the meditation and the view have to be aligned or self-exploration becomes secondary to making the self more comfortable.

Inevitably when we meditate with one view and live from another there is an inherent conflict between our spiritual and worldly strategies. There is no synthesis or integration possible because the two views are diametrically opposed. When we apply mindfulness from the typical way we relate to the world, it feels mechanical and artificial. Practice feels like something we are adding to the situation rather than

allowing it to flow from the activity itself. This mechanistic mindfulness creates a sense of distance and forced effort away from the activity. This distant objectivity reinforces the very sense of separation that was the reason we applied mindfulness in the first place. Misunderstanding the problem we work even harder to overcome it by applying more effort and mindfulness, and the goal retreats yet again. The cat is chasing its own tail.

Within Right View the meditation is automatic. When we suspend (or free from its isolated position) our old view reality, we experience connection. Awareness is there. Meditation and Wise View are one and the same. Since meditation arises from Wise View, to practice from our old view of reality is a contradiction in terms and will never feel integrated into our lives. We have to align the meditation with the view from which it is derived, or it merely reaffirms our conditioning.

So the question we might ask is, "How can I establish Wise View?" It is important to understand that the view of separation is only an assumption we place on top of perception. In fact the question of how to overcome wrong view is a question from wrong view. This is indeed a slippery slope, and herein lies the paradoxes of Zen. There is nothing to overcome...but there is much to learn. The spirit behind the meditation is to do just that. We only need to allow reality to inform us of the true and natural way it is. It is possible to simply stop believing in the validity of the view of separation and refuse to allow it to define the visual field of our experience. We free it from its isolated position by bringing the view of separation itself into our awareness. This means we know when we feel separate.

Knowing when we feel separate allows us to counter the moods and thoughts that accentuate that separation. Self-awareness offsets the mindstates that feed the sense of separation. We can use these divisive mindstates as a cue to turn towards connection rather than to articulate the separation. As an example, anger can only be maintained from wrong view. If we use anger as a signal that we are lost within the assumptions of separation, and if we have the strength to let go of our self-righteousness (a big if!), then we may be willingness to actually listen to the other person's point of view. When we connect and listen without judgement we are held within Wise View, and the anger cannot sustain itself. In fact greed, hatred, and delusion only exist within wrong view.

Another skillful way of transforming our views is using the precepts. The precepts are actions from Wise View. Violating the precepts indicates we are lost within our old view of reality, and such actions will inevitably bring conflict. We can use this struggle as a sign that we are not seeing the true relationship of things. Suspending our convictions and rationalizations in the midst of the struggle returns us home to Right View.

Finally to foster a different view of life, we have to be willing to accept what life is offering. The more we open to life as it is, the more integrated our lives are in Right View. One of the indispensable truths that has turned my attention towards Wise View is death. Death by its very nature ends wrong view. It is the reverse of the Big Bang theory. Everything ultimately implodes into the common denominator of death and thus has no separate existence. Why pretend that it does? If everything is going to die, why hold on in the first place? Reflection on death moves us into the right orientation to life by exposing false assumptions.

We do not stop with the understanding that all things are going to die without including ourselves within all things. If I am going to die then all states of mind and thoughts will die as well. In fact they are dying continuously. We reassert them moment after moment. Therefore, we simply allow the thought of separation to go without picking it back up. The view of separation dies with the thought. With the death of separation there is the birth of connection. Spiritual awakening is born within the view of connection. All doubts vanish with the relinquishment of wrong view. We understand there is no salvation through mutual funds.