

“Right Action” Sermon

When we talk about ‘right action’ what comes to mind?

Don’t we usually think of right action as the opposite of wrong action? As one of a pair of opposites? Immediately our mind starts giving us examples of right vs wrong, of good vs bad, and we start judging others and ourselves. Where does this take us? It keeps us caught between going from happiness when we perceive ourselves as doing right and sorrow when we perceive ourselves as doing wrong, and back and forth again.

We are getting close to New Year’s Day and the familiar resolutions that we make and inevitably seem to break. Are we going to exercise every day and lose that weight we promised ourselves we would? Are we going to follow a budget no matter what? If we look at our lists closely, we see that each item, each promise, has an opposite that we want to avoid or stop doing.

How do we get away from this trap? Let’s talk about another way of looking at “right action”. This right action has no opposite. It does not involve rewards or penalties. It is associated with the action that comes from knowing that there is but one God that is everything, including ourselves. It is when we recognize that everything that we know, see and experience is One. It is when we live in the present moment, not the past or future.

In today’s epistle reading, why did Malachi say what he said about praising God from dawn to dusk? He was illustrating that right action by the religious leaders involves total devotion to the Lord in thought, word, and deed. Times had gotten hard and the people had given up their hope for a new future. Malachi challenged the people and priests to be faithful to the agreement that God had made with Israel through honoring the Lord through right action.

The Gospel of Mark begins by saying that this is the good news of Christ, the Son of God. Christ gives many, many examples of right action through his teachings and his own actions. His examples entail looking at life and daily commitments through the viewpoint of right action - of not judging others, and of making decisions based on oneness with God.

A really good illustration of teaching right action is through Christ's Sermon on the Mount. The Beatitudes are part of this sermon covered in Matthew chapter 5 that are widely quoted and are also discussed by Swami Prabhavananda in his book, *The Sermon on the Mount According to Vedanta*. The word beatitude seems to be appropriate because it describes the "be-attitudes" of people who practice right action.

Let's look at a few of these "Be-attitudes":

"Blessed are the poor in spirit: for theirs is the kingdom of heaven."

- A person must be humble before he can accept what the teacher can offer him. His pride and ego in his learning, wealth, beauty, status, and even preconceived ideas of what spiritual life is, all get in the way of his mind being receptive to higher teachings.

"Blessed are they that mourn, for they shall be comforted."

- As long as we think we are rich in worldly goods or in knowledge, we cannot make spiritual progress. We need to recognize that all objects and knowledge are part of God. We must come to the stage that nothing can give us real peace except the vision of God - then comfort comes.

"Blessed are the meek: for they shall inherit the earth."

- Meekness is to live in self-surrender to God; free from the sense of "me" and "mine". Giving up the idea that things belong to us, including our ego, can be very practical: anger and resentment will be conquered by gentleness and love.

"Blessed are they which do hunger and thirst after righteousness: for they shall be filled."

- Righteousness is not what we ordinarily think of as moral values and good qualities as opposed to evil. It is absolute righteousness and absolute goodness; it requires us to practice self-effort to direct all of our thoughts and all of our energy consciously towards God.

"Blessed are the merciful: for they shall obtain mercy."

- When others are happy, be happy with them, not envious or jealous. When someone is unhappy, show sincere sympathy and be merciful. If we want to find God, we have to become God-like in mercy.

“Blessed are the peacemakers: for they shall be called the children of God.”

- We cannot bring peace until we realize our oneness with God and with all beings. There is a passage in the Bhagavata which reads: “ He in whose heart God has become manifest brings peace and cheer, and delight everywhere he goes.” He is the Peacemaker Christ speaks of in the Beatitudes.

So, attaining these characteristics of Right Action requires self-effort on our part. It brings us dispassion and non-judgment towards ourselves and others. It gives us a natural way of being toward others, that reflects our knowledge of being one with God.

Let's look at examples of right action:

- A woman being chased by angry pursuers takes refuge by a holy man. He answers the pursuers' question of if he has seen her by saying, no, he only sees God. - This awareness of the Truth of doing no harm to others is Right Action!

- Happening right now here in the Twin Cities - an anonymous person put \$100 bills in several of the area's Salvation Army buckets.

- Across the country anonymous people are paying off families' layaways at K-Marts and Wal-marts. - This Compassion is Right Action!

- Again, here in the Twin Cities: a local group recently started handing out 100 envelopes to 100 people with each envelope containing a \$1.00. Each of these people added money to the envelope, passing them on to strangers who either added money and passed them on or kept the envelope and used the money because they needed it. Who knows how this is affecting the lives of the givers and the receivers.

- Another example: Every year, a man gives away \$100 bills at random - He does not evaluate or judge the people he gives money to. He just gives. (Relate about the drug addict who received the \$100)

- These examples of Non-judgment are Right Action!

If we expect any reward for any action, it is not right action. We do these actions simply because we recognize who we are. We do these actions simply as our duty as humans.

What can we do now to facilitate right action?

- We can keep our hearts and minds focused on God
- We can be aware of what is real and what is true, giving up the ego that keeps us separate from God
- We can practice self-effort
- We can practice self-inquiry, constantly asking ourselves, "Who am I"
- We can practice compassion and non-judgment
- We can be merciful toward others
- We can keep the company of holy ones
- We can be content in who we are and what we do

In conclusion I would like to share with you the wisdom of the author Saskia Davi, who wrote the poem, *Symptoms of Inner Peace*. These symptoms also parallel the symptoms of practicing Right Action:

- A tendency to think and act spontaneously rather than from fears based on past experiences.
- An unmistakable ability to enjoy each moment.
- A loss of interest in judging self.
- A loss of interest in judging others.
- A loss of interest in conflict.
- A loss of interest in interpreting the actions of others.
- A loss of ability to worry.
- Frequent, overwhelming episodes of appreciation.
- Contented feelings of connectedness with others and nature.
- Frequent attacks of smiling through the eyes of the heart.
- Increasing susceptibility to love extended by others, combined with an uncontrollable urge to extend it.
- An increasing tendency to let things happen, rather than make them happen.

Aum shanti!

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