

In the Mahayana tradition, correct viewpoint means to see everything through the lens of emptiness. Everything is empty. No matter what you are seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, touching, you are aware of its emptiness. Your situation is fundamentally empty. Everything you think about is empty. Your thoughts themselves are empty. Ideologies are empty. Relationships are empty. War is empty. Peace is empty. Your life is empty. The sky is empty. The earth is empty. Space is empty. Time is empty. Even emptiness is empty. But this is not nihilism. Emptiness is not the same as nothing. It is not the void.

We can try to understand emptiness intellectually. But then we're just being seduced by grammar—*emptiness* is a noun, so there has to be some *thing* it represents. That is a well-known philosophical trap known as reification, inventing some kind of reality because there's a word for it. Also, the adjective *empty* isn't like green or purple. *Green* and *purple* are adjectives that distinguish things—some things are green and other things are purple and still other things are neither—but *every* thing is empty. What can an adjective mean when it applies to everything?

The Mahayana view understands all this. It understands that emptiness is not a thing. It understands that saying something is empty is not like saying it is green or purple. Emptiness/empty is a tool for overthrowing our conceptual thinking, so trying to understand it conceptually isn't very helpful. Sometimes we say “no self nature” to explain emptiness. But Sanskrit has two different words: *sunyata* for emptiness, and *anatman* for no self nature. They are not quite the same. Metaphors are more helpful. Zen Master Seung Sahn used the metaphor of cookie dough—everything comes from emptiness in the same way that you can make tree cookies and house cookies and soldier cookies and dog cookies out of the same cookie dough. Another metaphor comes from quantum physics: quarks and leptons and bosons continually flicker in and out of existence not only *in* space, but *of* space. That is, it is the nature of space to continually produce sub-atomic particles that instantaneously disappear, just as it is the nature of emptiness to produce the manifestations of form we see all around us—form is emptiness, emptiness is form. Both of these metaphors (cookie dough, space) of course fail because they still have some *thing*—cookie dough, space. Metaphors are helpful, but the only real way to really perceive emptiness is to practice hard. To *attain* emptiness. To carry it in our awareness like the air we breathe.

That's the Mahayana version of correct viewpoint: everything is empty.

In the Theravada version of correct viewpoint, everything is seen through the lens of impermanence. In the Mahayana version of correct viewpoint, everything is seen through the lens of emptiness.

But why have any lens at all? The sky doesn't say “I am impermanent” or “I am empty.” Your dog doesn't say that

either, or your shoes. Human beings like to make stuff up, so they say things like that, but it just gets in the way.

So we come to the Zen version of correct viewpoint: correct viewpoint is no viewpoint. No viewpoint means completely open. Completely open means don't know. Whatever you see, hear, smell, taste, touch, think is exactly what it is. You don't have to know anything about it in advance. In fact you *don't* know anything about it, or about anything else, and you never will. Your world doesn't need to be run through any filters, except of course the natural filters our bodies supply (for example, we can't see light waves that are too high or too low on the electromagnetic spectrum, and we can't hear sounds that are too high or too low).

A long time ago I was sitting a solo retreat and suddenly I felt I was possessed by a demon. Everywhere I looked, it wasn't me looking, it was the demon looking through my eyes. It was terrifying. I felt that if I woke up the next morning with the demon still inside me, I would have to check myself into a mental hospital (because that's how our culture deals with demons). But I kept up my retreat schedule—sitting, chanting, walking, bowing. And then, while doing walking meditation outside on my small porch, my view of the trees shifting as I walked past them, and I realized that nobody looks out through my eyes; the world comes in through my eyes. And the demon vanished.

This is correct viewpoint, right view. Letting the world in completely. No viewpoint. Only don't know.



Right Resolve (a.k.a. Right Thought)

Zen Master Hae Kwang (Stanley Lombardo)

The noble eightfold path is traditionally divided into three parts, with steps one and two, right view and right resolve, paired together as the first group and termed *prajna* (wisdom). The next three steps—right speech, right action, and right livelihood—are grouped together as *sila* (morality). And the final three—right effort, right mindfulness, and right samadhi—are collectively referred to as *dhyana* (meditation). Instead of a straight-out series of steps that begins with right view and culminates in samadhi, the path as a whole can be regarded as a kind of loop trail, with wisdom growing out of meditation practice and leading to correct function in this world, and then continuing around in a deepening cycle. Or the eight steps can be regarded as eight practices that we should try to cultivate simultaneously. In either scenario our practice has no beginning and no end. When we look at the noble eightfold path in this way, the second step, understood as right resolve, is crucial to the whole system, because without a strong resolve nothing happens, there is

no impetus to begin or to continue along the path.

The second step, *samyak samkalpa* in the original Sanskrit (*samma samkappa* in Pali), is sometimes translated as right resolve and sometimes as right thought. The latter is how the early Chinese Buddhist translators rendered *samkalpa*, using two characters that each have the radical for heart-mind and mean “thinking” or “pondering.” The Chinese translation was probably made under the influence of Theravadan sources of interpretation. Examples of right thought from traditional Theravadan sources include wholesome thoughts, thoughts of nonattachment, thoughts of loving-kindness. Our thoughts influence our actions, the next three steps on the path, for better or worse; and keeping our thoughts pure prepares our minds for the meditation practice that constitutes the three steps after that. And, completing the cycle, our meditation practice fosters the wisdom that are steps one and two. So, given the overall structure of the noble eightfold path, there is good reason to translate *samyak samkalpa* as right thought.

But there is another tradition, Mahayana and the spirit of the bodhisattva ideal, which interprets *samyak samkalpa* as right intention, or right aspiration, or right resolve. This translation is justified from both a scholarly point of view and, more important, from the point of view of our practice. To see why, let’s first look at the Sanskrit word more closely, keeping in mind that in Sanskrit, as in most languages, a given word can come with a rather wide range of meanings depending on the context in which it is used.

The word *samyak*, an adjective applied to each of the eight steps, means “complete, perfect, correct, right.” *Samyak* also occurs in the Heart Sutra in the phrase “*samyak sambodhi*,” which can be translated as “perfect, complete enlightenment.” (For some reason this phrase is left in Sanskrit in both the Sino-Korean and English versions of the Kwan Um School of Zen’s Heart Sutra).

The *sam-* prefix in *samkalpa* is the same as in *samyak*. *Kalpa* here (no relation to the better known word *kalpa* meaning an eon) signifies an act, especially an act of the mind or, more commonly, the will. If *samkalpa* means “thinking” it is something like the English use of the word in expressions like “I think I will do this,” meaning “I’ve made up my mind to do this,” conveying a considered intention rather than dreaming up ideas or even thinking good thoughts. The prefix *sam-* adds an intensive force, so *samkalpa* means a strong mental or volitional act—not just an ordinary thought or a wish, but rather a firm commitment, a resolute decision.

And adding *samyak* to *samkalpa* strengthens its meaning even more. This is no ordinary thought or decision or resolution that we have in the second step of the noble eightfold path, but a complete (*samyak*) commitment (*samkalpa*) on the order of great vow. It is the “fierce determination, resolute practice” that is the literal transla-

tion of the Sino-Korean *yong maeng jong jin* (an intensive meditation retreat, sometimes poetically paraphrased as “to leap like a tiger while sitting”). It sums up the essential spirit of the four great vows, in which we pledge to reorient our lives on every level toward wisdom, compassion and bodhisattva action. And we find it in its simplest, most direct form in the very first sentence of the Temple Rules: “You must first make a firm decision to attain enlightenment and help this world.” This injunction contains the three major divisions of the noble eightfold path. The firm decision comes first.

This kind of intense, total commitment might at times seem difficult to the point of being overwhelming. Zen Master Ko Bong said, “You should practice as if your hair were on fire.” But unconditional resolve actually clears away a lot of obstructions, imagined and real, and creates a sense of freedom, a bright, liberating energy that can sustain us through any difficulty. When our mind is truly made up and we are all in, we naturally “only go straight” and “just do it” and “try, try, try for 10,000 years nonstop” as Zen Master Seung Sahn often put it. And this leads to a snowball effect, the energy mass getting larger and gaining momentum as it rolls down the path. It’s up to us to get the ball rolling. When we recite the four great vows first thing every morning that is just what we are doing.



Right Speech

Zen Master Bon Shim (Aleksandra Porter)

Words do not have a fixed meaning. The meaning of words depend on the context: who is speaking and who is listening, the underlying tone. Let’s go back to the roots and remind ourselves what Buddha taught about right speech.

Buddha divides correct speech into four elements:

- Refraining from false speech
- Refraining from harmful talk
- Refraining from unkind, rude talk
- Refraining from gossip

Telling the truth

One who is speaking the truth is dedicated to it, reliable, trustworthy, not deceiving other people. Such a person never consciously lies for self or others’ gain, or any other reason. He teaches his son, the young monk Rahula: “Rahula, do you see the remaining water in the bowl? This is the spiritual achievement of someone who deliberately lies.”

Pouring out the remaining water from the bowl, Buddha said, “In this way, the one who lies is erasing all of his spiritual achievements. Do you see now this empty