

The Wrong Uses of Right

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Our path starts with right view, realizing that our actions are important because they do have consequences. And the fact that our actions are important underlies the value of a lot of the things we know are good in life.

We know that generosity is good; we know that gratitude is good. But if you think about it for a while, you realize that generosity is good primarily because people *choose* to be generous. That has good consequences. Gratitude is good because it's right to honor the times when people have chosen to help us, to do good things for us. It's not that they had to do them, or that they were fated to do them. It's because they chose to do good things to be helpful to us, to benefit us.

And from our understanding of the importance of action and choosing skillful actions over unskillful ones, we're led to a higher level of right view – the right view about the four noble truths – learning how to look at our own actions, look at our own minds to see where we are causing stress. Where is the stress to begin with? And then, we look deeper into the mind to see what *in* the mind is giving rise to that particular stress that's weighing down the mind. Then do what we can to abandon that cause, developing whatever qualities of mind are needed to abandon that cause. That's the right use of right view.

But the ajaans often warn, and the Buddha himself warned that people could have right view, and yet they can misuse it. The Buddha's image is of a snake. If you grasp the snake properly right behind the head, it's not going to bite you. But if you grasp it at the tail, it'll turn around and bite you. You have to learn how to hold on to these things properly. There were many cases in my time with Ajaan Fuang – and you read about other Thai ajaans saying the same thing – that people can have right views, but the way they hold on to them, the rightness is for the sake of wrongness.

You notice this in two ways. One is using the wrong teaching at the wrong time. There are teachings on not-self, and there are teachings on self. You have to know: When do you use teachings on self, and when do you use teachings on not-self? If you get very doctrinaire, the only real truth is the not-self. And that quickly turns into, "There is no self,"

which raises all kinds of questions and all kinds of problems. The teachings were not meant to be problems; they were meant to be tools. When you're working on developing your mind, developing your actions so that they're more skillful, who are you going to rely on? Well, you've got to rely on yourself. You gain examples from other people, but you realize that it's really up to you. And at this point, the teaching on self is really useful. But when you find that you're holding on to something that's causing suffering, okay that's the time to think about not-self – that whatever you're holding on to is not really you or yours. That way, you get the proper use out of these teachings.

Similarly with the teaching that all feelings are stressful: There's a case in the Canon where a monk was asked by someone from another religion, "What's the result of action?" And the monk says, "All action results in stress," which is a Jain view. And the person from the other religion said, "I never heard any Buddhist say that. You'd better go back and check with the Buddha." So the monk does. And the Buddha says, "You fool!"

Then Udayin pipes up and says, "Well, maybe he's thinking about the teaching that all feelings are stressful. And since actions lead to feelings, then all actions lead to stress." And the Buddha says, "Another fool! When you're asked about action, you respond in terms of the *three* feelings. There are pleasurable feelings, there are painful feelings, and there are feelings that are neither pleasurable nor painful. If you want to talk about the fact that ultimately, even the pleasure has an element of stress in it, that's not the time to talk about that. There are other times when that teaching is appropriate."

So this is one of the ways you have to be really careful about right views. When do you use a particular right view. What are the views that are said to be right, but they're not right for that particular time and place, that particular level of the practice? That's one area you have to be very careful about making sure that you're not only holding to right views, but also using them rightly—because that's what they're for: to be used.

The other time, of course, when you have to be careful about how you use right views is when you're holding on to right views to make yourself a right person. That's not what they're intended for. You can actually get into arguments about this. Who's right? Who's wrong? Ajaan Chah has a really nice talk about this topic. Everybody has their

right and wrong, but as for *whose* right and *whose* wrong is right or wrong, there's no final judge. But if you're holding on to your rightness and it's causing you to suffer, you say, "Okay, something's wrong here." That's not what right actions, right views or right whatever are right for. They're right for the purpose of abandoning the cause of suffering. But if you're using them to *create* causes of suffering, something's wrong.

Ajaan Chah tells the story of some guys out in the forest who hear a rooster crowing. One of them asks, "Is that a rooster crowing? Or is that a hen crowing?" And the other three decide to put their heads together and say, "Of course it's a hen." The first one says, "Wait a minute! How could a hen crow like that?" And they say, "Well, it's got a mouth, right?" They argue back and forth like this. So the first one, who was right, ends up in tears. He's so upset because he knows he's right, and no one else will recognize the fact that he's right. But then, arguing to the point where you're in tears doesn't accomplish anything.

So you have to look carefully at your right views. Make sure you *use* them rightly so they are right for the purpose of rightness and don't turn into being right for the purpose of wrongness. In other words, your discernment has to be all-around. You can't just hold on to the fact that you're right. You have to look to the question: Is the way you're holding on to your rightness causing suffering or not?

Always refer back to the four noble truths and look at yourself in terms of those truths. Look at what you're doing in terms of those four noble truths because that's what they're for, so that you can watch yourself in action. As the body acts, as your words act, as your thoughts act, look at where they come from. Look at where they're going. Don't just get into them and ride around. Step back from them and see who's driving them. That's how you learn how to step back from your views.

That's what right view is *for* is learning how to step back from your views, see them as actions, and learn when they're skillful, when they're not. When we use them in that way, they achieve their intended purpose, and then you can put them down. Remember the simile of the raft. Ultimately, even right views have to be put down because the goal is not measured in terms of right views and wrong views. Ajaan Lee has a nice Dhamma talk on this one. Nibbana doesn't have right views or wrong views; it doesn't have views at all. But you can't get there without views – correct views – right views and using them rightly. The fact that

you can let go of views ultimately: If you couldn't let go of your views, then you'd always be stuck on something.

So as he says, you look at your views to see where there's wrong – either in the view itself or how you're using it. You let go of whatever's wrong, you hold on to what's right for as long as you need it, and then you finally let go of both. That's when it gets good.