

## *Between Right & Wrong*

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Ajaan Phut was one of the few Thai masters who started directly with Ajaan Sao, Ajaan Mun's teacher. I heard him talk once about what it was like to hear Ajaan Sao teach. He was a novice at the time, Ajaan Sao's attendant. He got to listen in as lay people would come and ask Ajaan Sao how to meditate. Ajaan Sao started with instructions on using the word *Buddho*, sometimes along with breath meditation. And people would ask, "What does *Buddho* mean" and he would say, "Don't ask." They'd ask, "When I meditate, what are the results going to be?" He'd say, "Don't ask, just do it." And if they went home and did it and came back and reported the results, if it was something that was obviously wrong he would say, "No this isn't right. Try this." And if the results were going the right direction, and they'd ask, "Is this right?" He'd say, "Whether it's right or not, just keep doing it."

He'd never come out and say that it was right. Because after all, you're developing a skill. And even though you're heading in the right direction, it's not quite right yet because you're just getting started.

Think about it. We talk about the path having right view, right resolve, all the way down to right concentration. And when they're all right, that's stream entry. So if you haven't reached stream entry, it means that the different factors of your path are not quite right yet. They might be headed in the right direction but they're not there yet. So you have to live with approximation, halfway between right and wrong, but hopefully heading in the right direction.

This is one of the reasons why the ajaans are very slow to praise their students. Ajaan Fuang's attitude was that if you praised a student, that usually meant that that was as far as the student would get. And in my time with him, I never heard him praise me at all. It was always, "This isn't good enough, this isn't good enough, keep trying, keep trying." But he was encouraging at the same time. That someone had arrived at "right" was something he would never say.

Ajaan Maha Boowa talks about how being a teacher is like teaching boxing. You see that your student has picked up some of the moves, but he's still leaving himself wide open for getting punched and kicked. So you punch him and kick him right there. Not with ill-will, but just to point out to the student, "You're leaving yourself open here. There's still something not quite right yet."

So as you practice, this is the attitude you've got to have: You're approximating right. You're between right and wrong, heading in the right direction. And the correct attitude is that you're always willing to learn. So when criticism comes, you take it in the spirit with which it's offered, which is

that the teacher cares. When the teacher doesn't criticize, it means the teacher's given up. So there will always be room for improvement, even as the mind settles down.

There are levels of jhana. And even when you're dealing with insight, even though the progress of insight may not follow the steps that they have in the commentaries, still your insights do have a way of developing, getting deeper. As your concentration gets more solid, the things you can see get more refined. As you see more refined things and solve more refined problems, the concentration goes deeper still. They help each other along. It's not the case that you wait until your concentration is perfect and then develop discernment. One, discernment doesn't develop that way. It's in the course of doing the concentration that you notice things you hadn't seen before. Something that was perfectly okay before becomes not okay as you get more skilled.

This is one of the reasons why the Buddha uses people with skills as examples for the practice: cooks, soldiers, carpenters, archers. There's no single "right way" that you can master right away. As Ajaan Lee says, you start out, say, weaving a basket. You look at it and see that there's a lot to be improved. So you try weaving a new basket. As you make improvements, you look at that next one, and the next, so that each next one gets better and better. And then you get to the point where it's good enough that you can sell. Then it's up to you to decide, "I want to go further than that." Keep developing the skill. The baskets that are good enough to sell: Are they "right"? Well, there's a way of making them even righter. They're not wrong. But they're between right and wrong.

This is how skills develop as you get more and more sensitive to what you're doing and to the results. Your standards grow, get more refined. And it's in working on the skill that your discernment gets developed.

It's the same as when you're going to do some strength training: Your arms are weak. You don't say, "Well, I'll wait until my arms are strong, then I'll start lifting the weights." You have to lift the weights that you can manage, and that strengthens the arm. Then you're able to move on to heavier and heavier and heavier weights. It's by exercising your discernment that it develops.

The second reason why you can't wait to develop discernment until after your concentration is perfect is because some of the big issues come up in life before then. You've got to make decisions, and so you use the discernment you've got. You can't say, "Well, I won't make a decision until I can make the absolute right decision," because sometimes decisions get forced on you. So you say, "Well, I'll do the best I can." Then, if turns out the best you can is still not good enough, well, you've learned. You get another chance, and another, and another. If you've made some mistakes that you can't just drop and move on,

then you go back and try your best to compensate for them. And that, too, helps you to develop your discernment.

So as we're practicing, we're practicing between right and wrong. We're starting out with the discernment that comes from having read something or having heard something about the practice, and then we start practicing. When things get "right," that's when we have the attainment. In the meantime, you approximate right. You try to move in the right direction. You don't take it personally when someone points out that you're not quite right yet. You take it as an opportunity to learn. You're the boxer who that still exposes your ribs. Or you're the basket weaver who still hasn't quite mastered a particular weave. Okay, it's good to know.

You may have thought, "Well, this is good enough," but if someone, says, "No, it's not good enough," it's not because they have ill-will. It's because they care. Because this is a skill that really is life-and-death—the life and death of your goodness; the life and death of the well-being of the mind. So the more all-around and refined you can make your skill, it's all for the sake of your long-term welfare and happiness.

As the mind settles down, give it a chance to rest. And when it's rested, then you can ask it: What still is causing a sense of burdensomeness or a sense of stress? Anything that weighs the mind down, or as one of the forest ajaans said, anything that puts a squeeze on the mind: Is there anything still there? Look for it. The more assiduous you are in looking, the more you'll find from the practice.

So look carefully. What you see may not quite be right yet. It may still be between right and wrong. But at the very least, make sure you're heading in the right direction.