

## *Fix Your Views*

*October 27, 2021*

There's a line in the Karaniya Metta Sutta that's sometimes translated as *not holding to fixed views*. I've been tempted to take that translation and send it in to the people who collect fake Buddhist quotes because the word *fixed* doesn't appear in the passage.

There's no place where the Buddha says fixed views are bad in and of themselves. There's right view and there's wrong view, but it's not the case that wrong view is fixed and right view is not fixed. The difference lies someplace else.

After all, one of the adjectives that describes people who've attained the stream is that they've become *consummate* in view. They've seen the four noble truths really are true. Their confidence, conviction in the Buddha, Dhamma, and the Sangha has been confirmed. That's the point where view really is right. Of course, you don't stop there. You learn how to use it properly to take you even further, from right view to right knowledge.

What this means in practice is that, as we're starting out, our views are not quite right yet. We have a general idea: The Buddha talks about the four noble truths, he talks about the basic teaching that skillful qualities should be developed and unskillful ones should be abandoned. Those are categorical truths—in other words, true across the board.

There's never any place where the Buddha defines suffering, say, in other terms aside from the five clinging aggregates. He never says that they're the end of suffering. There's no place where he defines right resolve, say, as being resolved on sensuality.

Certain things are right and certain things are wrong across the board. And even though we're coming from ignorance, when we start on the path we have some idea of where the line is drawn between right and wrong, and we use that. Then we simply refine our understanding. So in that sense, we don't want to hold to our earlier understanding of what the views are. After all, the views are meant to be used, and as they're used they get further refined.

Remember what the four noble truths have to say about right view. It's interesting, the four noble truths *are* right view, but they also stand outside right view to describe the *position* of right view as part of the path—in other words, something to be developed. As you develop right view, it's meant to develop right resolve, right speech, right action, all the way down through right concentration.

These are views that are meant to be used, and as you use them you get to know them better. That's one way of knowing that your views are right: You know the right use for them—and actually use them that way.

Then, as you begin to get results, you find that as you develop the path it does lead to something deathless. That's when your right view has been confirmed. It doesn't change from that point on.

Now again, the Buddha himself has gone beyond right view, but when he's teaching right view to others, it's always the same. So in that sense, it's *fixed*. The same with the principle of developing skillful qualities and abandoning unskillful ones: His teachings are always consistent on those points.

As for some of his other teachings, they have their time and place. There was a young monk one time who was asked by a member of another sect, "What is the result of action?" And the young monk answered, "The result of action is stress (*dukkha*)." The person asking the question said, "That's the first time I've ever heard a Buddhist monk say that. You'd better go check that with the Buddha."

So he goes back. At first he talks to Ven. Ananda, and then Ven. Ananda takes him to see the Buddha. Another monk is listening in as they talk, so when the Buddha rebukes the first monk for having said that all action leads to stress, the monk listening in says, "Well, maybe he was thinking of the fact that action leads to feeling, and all feelings are stressful." The Buddha tells him that's not the time to use that teaching. When you're asked about action, you talk about the three kinds of feeling: pleasure, pain, neither pleasure nor pain. So the teaching on all fabricated things being stressful may be true, but it's not always useful. It's not always right for the context.

Then, of course, there are the many teachings on taking yourself as your mainstay, using yourself as your governing principle. If you try to bring in the teaching on not-self and say, "Well, everything's supposed to be not-self, so how can you use the self as a mainstay or a governing principle?" that would be bringing that teaching of not-self in at the wrong time, the wrong place.

You have to understand the teachings of the three characteristics, or the three perceptions, in the context of the duties of the four noble truths. They're appropriate and useful for abandoning your craving and for comprehending your clinging. But when you're trying to develop a path, you use those perceptions only on things that would pull you off the path.

You don't tell yourself, "Concentration is stressful, concentration is not-self, therefore I'll let go of it." That's true on one level, but it's not right when you're still trying to develop concentration. That's not the time to use it. So this is one area where you want to make sure that your views are not fixed, in the sense of trying to

apply a teaching across the board when it's not meant to be applied across the board.

There was a modern monk one time who, after reading about emptiness, told his mother, "The Dhamma teaches that you're not really my mother, because there's really nobody there." His mother looked at him and said, "Well, if anybody knows whether I'm your mother, it's me. They don't know." She was the one who was right at that point.

It's a matter of knowing the right time and the right place with teachings like that. As for the four noble truths, they are true across the board, and they don't change. That's one of the meanings of the word *noble*—noble in the sense of being universal. It's true for everybody everywhere. It's not true only in India, or only in one part of India, or at one point in time. These are truths that are true all through time, all through space. So in that sense they're fixed.

It's your relationship to them that you have to watch out for, especially as you're getting started on the path. You have to keep reminding yourself: Right view is there, not to beat other people over the head. It's to help you understand where you're going to look to see your own ignorance, and what you've got to do in order to see it clearly: You develop mindfulness, you develop alertness, so that you can gain clear knowledge.

Because this is *the* big problem: We're trying to battle ignorance, but where are we coming from? We're coming from ignorance ourselves. There are times along the path where it seems like the blind are leading the blind, but fortunately there is a part of the mind that has some clarity. That's what the Buddha meant when he said that the mind is luminous—it can watch itself and see clearly what it's doing.

So you apply your understanding of what the four noble truths are, particularly when you're developing the path, and you really commit to it. But then you reflect, "Am I getting the results I want? If I'm not, is the problem with the path or is the problem with me, my understanding of the path?"

In the beginning, you go on the assumption that it's your understanding—that's the problem. So you look again, act again, look again. Remember what the Buddha said about how the Dhamma is developed: It's developed through commitment and reflection. You commit to doing it, and then you reflect on what you're doing—and then make adjustments.

That way, by observing yourself, you begin to cut through a lot of your ignorance. So, it's not just reflecting, it's reflecting together with commitment, watching yourself in action. That's how you arrive at views that really are certain.

In fact that's one of the adjectives used to describe people who have attained the stream: They're *niyata*, they're certain. Their right view is certain, and their future is certain: They're going to gain awakening for sure. That much is fixed.

So try to have a clear sense, when the Buddha's talking about right view, of which things are true and right across the board, which things are true but right only at certain times, certain stages of the practice. And be alive to the fact that as long as you haven't yet attained the first taste of the deathless, or you haven't gained the Dhamma eye, your views still need work.

But you don't work on them by theorizing or simply being fluid in what you think. You work on them by committing to what you understand the path to be, and then reflecting. This quality of the *reflection* is going to carry you all the way through. If you don't learn how to reflect on what you're doing, you're going to miss a lot of things.

Like that person who said in a letter to Ajaan Fuang that he was practicing seeing everything as inconstant, stressful, not-self: He watched TV, he engaged in all of his daily activities, trying to see all things as stressful, inconstant, and not-self. Ajaan Fuang told me to write back to him and say, "Those things are not the problem. The problem is, who is it that's telling them that they're inconstant, stressful, not-self? Look at that. That's where the real problem lies."

The inconstancy of the mind is the problem. The stress caused by the mind is the problem: the mind holding on to things it really shouldn't hold on to.

So, how do you watch the mind? You get it to do something that you think is right, and you watch it in action. You get it to commit, then you reflect. That's how you get past your ignorance.