

Being Right

July 24, 2009

The mind needs time to be by itself, to straighten out its issues inside—which is why we have a place like this, a place of physical seclusion, so that you don't have to spend all your time looking at other people's issues. You've got just your own issues. And you have a chance to dig down inside and see where they come from, what can be done about them. So you want to value and protect your time here, to make sure that it is a time of seclusion as much as possible.

But there's the rub. We are social animals. Even here at the monastery, we have to live with one another. And a lot of us have to go back out outside of the monastery, where we deal with other people who have other views, other ideas, other ways of practicing. And we have to learn how to practice with that as well.

It's not easy. As the Buddha said, for a group of people to live together in harmony requires six things. The first three have to do with goodwill for one another: When you act, you act with goodwill. When you speak, you speak with goodwill. And when you even think about one another, you think with goodwill. As for the other three qualities, one is generosity. You share what you gain. You're generous not only with material things, but also with your knowledge, your help, your forgiveness.

The next quality is that you have your views in common. Your idea of what's right and wrong is something that you all hold in common. And the sixth quality is that your virtues are things that you hold in common. You all hold to the same standard of virtue.

These last two qualities are where things get difficult, especially when you're living out in the world where people are not practicing the Dhamma, are not interested in the Dhamma. They've got totally other ideas, totally different agendas. And so the issue is: How do you deal with people whose views don't coincide with yours, and whose idea of right and wrong doesn't coincide with yours?

One possible solution might be to give up your ideas of right and wrong, but that doesn't work. You don't feel right inside when you do that. The communities where they say, "We'll have no right and wrong here; everything is going to be non-dual": They don't work. They're very dysfunctional because right and wrong get shifted around. In other words, people do what they want, and then when anybody complains, the people who complain the ones who are wrong. They're the ones who are "clinging." They're the ones who are "holding on"—i.e., they are the ones who are wrong. So there is still right and wrong in a place like that, but it's a strange, twisted standard for right and wrong. It allows people to be harmed, with no recourse to have that harm acknowledged.

The Buddha, however, had a very strong sense of right and wrong. If he hadn't had a strong sense of right and wrong, he wouldn't have set forth the Vinaya, he wouldn't have established

the precepts. He wouldn't have pointed out that there are lots of views out there that are dead wrong, that cause people to suffer, that keep people in the round of rebirth, that prevent them from finding any release. He was very clear about that. And when any of the monks or nuns misbehaved, he was very strong in his criticism.

So you don't abandon your idea of right and wrong. You simply try to figure how to live with other people so that you can get them to see a little bit of what you may very rightly see as right and wrong. That's where those other qualities of living together come in: goodwill and generosity. You've got to have goodwill for people no matter how wrong they might be. You have to be generous with people no matter how wrong they might be—because otherwise, their behavior starts becoming your behavior. They're stingy, and you become stingy, too. Then you find yourself clashing and you fall into despair. You wonder if there's ever any way that you can come to any kind of peace.

On the one hand, though, you have to realize that the work of the world is never done. There are always going to be issues that stay unresolved. So you don't want to bang your head against things that cannot be changed, but you do want to work on what *can* be changed. And you have to keep working at it. You can't let yourself give up.

There is a story of a Zen student. I think he was in Minnesota. He was going to come out here to Los Angeles, to try his luck at the entertainment industry. He went to say goodbye to his teacher, and his teacher asked him, "Suppose you get out there and your first job is a failure, what are you going to do?" The guy said, "Well, I guess I'll just have to accept that." The teacher said, "No, you don't accept that kind of thing. You bounce back. Try again. Get knocked down again, you try again. Can't let yourself give in to despair. You have to be able to bounce back." In other words, you have to have confidence there is some way that this is going to work out.

This is why conviction is one of the most basic qualities you have to bring to the path. It's like someone lost in the forest. If you're convinced that there's no way out, there will be no way out, at least for you. If you're convinced that there's a way out, then when there is a way out, you'll find it. Keep at it. Keep at it. Keep at it. You have to have that kind of confidence in your sense of what's right and wrong. As for the distinction between the things that you can change and the things that you can't, it's by bouncing against the things that you can't change enough times that you begin to recognize them. So you have to take those bounces as learning bumps. But the principle of not giving up is crucial.

This is why in the old days they didn't make it easy for people to come and practice the Dhamma. In a Zen monastery, you had to sit outside the gate for 24 hours to prove your sincerity. Back in the early days when Ajaan Mun was wandering around Chiang Mai, if you wanted to find him, you had to go out into the forest and look for him. He wasn't sending out bulletins. He didn't have a website. He didn't keep people informed about where he was. You had to be sincere and persistent—the feeling being that if you'd showed that sincerity and that persistence, you'd be a good candidate to learn the Dhamma.

This is a lesson that gets taught from an early age. In Japan they have a little doll. When you knock it over, it rights itself. You knock it over again, and it turns right-side up again. They use this to teach children. If a child falls down and starts crying, the grandmother will toss the little doll out to the child. The doll will tip over and then it will get straight back up again—the lesson being: Try to make yourself like that doll. No matter how many times you get knocked down, you get right back up again. You keep fighting.

It's a frequent image in the Canon that to be practicing the Dhamma, you have to fight. If you get knocked down, this is part of fighting. It's not that you're going to be totally victorious every time and come out winning without any setbacks, without any scars. You have to learn from your hard knocks with the confidence that these are good lessons to learn. But you also have to have confidence in the Dhamma itself: that this is a good way to live. You need this for your heart.

That's what has to come first. If you simply go along with the ways of the world just to get along, you don't really feel connected. Even if it's for the sake of feeling connected and having friends, it's the kind of friendship where you feel even more lonely when you're surrounded by people. You know in your heart of hearts that you're suffering and you need to work on the cause of suffering, and it's not going to happen by hanging around with friends. It's going to happen by digging down into your own mind and following the path. You have to take that as your first priority. As for your relationships with other people, those come second. You look for relationships that are helpful and conducive on the path.

But you realize that you're in some relationships that you can't yet disentangle yourself from, and yet they're not helpful on the path—at least the person is not a person of right view or right virtue. So you've got to figure out how to use your powers of goodwill, your powers of generosity. Use your concentration to develop ingenuity in how to make virtue attractive to that person, how to make right view at least a little bit attractive to that person. You're acting out of goodwill. You're trying to be generous.

Because simply being right is not enough. You see this in the Vinaya. If one monk sees that another monk has been misbehaving, he can't just go up and tell him off. He's got to look for the right time, the right place, and also make sure that his intentions toward that person are kind. In other words, you're not doing this just for the sake of one-upsmanship, or to knock the other person down. It's for the sake of rehabilitating the person. Then you have to look at your intention to make sure that you're speaking out of goodwill and acting out of goodwill. Now, it may take some time to do that, to get your mind in order, to get your heart in order, so you can speak to that person.

I know one monk who has talked about an issue he had with another monk, and it was five years before he could finally talk with him. But after that fifth year, he'd finally gotten around to the point where he actually could have some goodwill for the other monk, and so the issue was resolved easily.

So you've got to adjust your attitude, even when you're right. It's hard to be right in the land of wrong view and wrong virtue. Even in the monkhood, it's not always easy to be right. But you have to be skillful in being right, so that you don't suffer from it, and so that you don't also compromise your principles.

There's a skill here, learning how to get other people to see at least a little bit in line with right view, and to act at least a little bit in line with right speech and right action. How do you make these things attractive to them? How do you make them see that it's worth their while, that it's for their own good to think and act in these ways? With some people, you'll be able to do it. Other people will be totally close-minded. But as long as you're coming with a sense of goodwill and try to use your ingenuity, learning to be more diplomatic, learning to be less confrontational, but trying to figure out how to get through to that other person—and this has to come from a mind of goodwill and sympathy—that's all for your own good. And it's the only way you're going to get through. Because after all, these people are deluded. You have to feel sorry for them.

The Buddha talks about when you feel hatred for someone, try to look for their good qualities. When you find those qualities, you focus on them. Like a monk who's looking for robe material: He wants to make a robe from thrown-away scraps, and he's found a piece of scrap cloth. Part of it is dirty and filthy, and can't be used. So the monk learns how to tear off the dirty part and take just the good part.

In the same way, you try to look at the good side of those other people. Focus on that. It gives you a sense of wanting to help them, to see that at least they have a seed or two of something worth cultivating. As for the people who have no good at all—and there are such people, the Buddha doesn't deny it, people who have been horrible in their speech, horrible in their actions, horrible in their thinking—you have to feel sorry for them. He said that it's like seeing someone out in the middle of the desert by the side of the road, sick, unable to care for himself. Regardless of who he is, you've got to feel compassion for him. In other words, the person who's horrible in every way is creating a lot of bad karma for him or herself. You've got to feel sorry for that person. If you can't help that person immediately, you express a wish: "Maybe someday, let's hope someday this person comes to his senses, comes to her senses, and learns how to see what's right and wrong."

So there is a skill to being right. It's not just enough that you are right. You have to be right in a skillful way—in the same way that your intentions can't just be good intentions, they have to be skillful intentions. Take that as a challenge. And you want to be up for the challenge, convincing yourself that there is a worthwhile skill to be learned here and you can do it. It may take time. You may find that it comes easy; you may find that it comes hard. As we mentioned today, this is one of the drawbacks of our educational system, that it doesn't teach people how to become good at things for which they have little aptitude. It takes certain qualities of mind, a certain type of confidence that's blended with humility, the humility that "I'm not really good

at this yet, but I can learn. I may not be the best whatever, but at least I can learn how to do a passable job.”

When you develop that kind of attitude, you find that it's also really helpful in your meditation. In the days when it's difficult for the mind to get settled down, you say, “Okay, here's a puzzle. Let's see if we can figure it out.” It's in this way that practicing with difficulties outside can be very useful in practicing with difficulties inside your meditation, so that when we talk about taking daily life as practice, it's not just words. You actually are learning something. You're trying to use your powers of ingenuity with other people's defilements so that you can get more ingenious in dealing with your own. You have to learn how to think strategically. It's amazing how cunning people can be when they're doing something really wrong. It's a shame that we can't be more cunning in how we do things rightly. But maybe we can. And it's worth the try.

That way, our being right is right all-around, and not just a form of clinging. You're being right with discernment. And discernment, as we all know in the Buddha's teachings, is strategic, realizing that even though things may seem very straightforward in the texts, in actual practice you have to learn how to think strategically, to deal with obstacles that come up, and find your way around them. That's how discernment becomes your own, a quality that's in your mind and not just there in the texts. It may not be easy but it's worth the try. Nobody ever promised it was going to be easy. But the Buddha did promise that this is the true way to happiness. So it's worth our while to take him at his word.