

Right but Wrong

July 2, 2022

One of the comments that you hear in the Forest Tradition again and again is that it's possible to be right and wrong at the same time. When an ajaan uses that phrase, it usually refers to one of two things: One is that you've got the right teaching but you're applying it in the wrong time or place. Another is that you're using the teaching for an unskillful purpose. Sometimes there's an overlap between the two.

But let's start with the distinction. Right teaching, wrong place: One ajaan tells a story of riding in a truck with one of his lay students, and the truck was really dirty—unnecessarily so. So he couldn't help but comment to the student, who was driving the truck, about how dirty his truck was. "Wouldn't it be a good idea to clean it up a little bit?" The owner of the truck replied, "Anicca, Than Ajaan. It's inconstant." As the ajaan said, the truck owner was right that, yes, cleanliness is inconstant, but using that as an argument not to clean the truck was wrong, a misuse of the teaching.

There's a similar case in the Canon where a young monk has been asked by a sectarian, "What is the result of action?" And the young monk says, "Action results in stress"—which is basically a Jain teaching. The sectarian said, "I never heard any Buddhist monks say that. You'd better go back and check that with the Buddha."

So the young monk goes to see Ven. Ānanda, and Ānanda's takes him to see the Buddha. As the young monk is trying to explain his reasoning, another monk, Ven. Udayin steps in and says, "Maybe he's thinking about the fact that all feelings are stressful, and all actions result in feelings."

And basically, the Buddha says No, that's not the time for that teaching. When you're asked about kamma, the proper response is: There are three kinds of feelings—pleasant feelings, painful feelings, neither pleasant nor painful.

After all, the whole point of teaching about kamma is to realize there are actions that are skillful, actions that are unskillful, and actions that are mixed. If you were to say that all action ends in stress, then why bother with skillful actions? It defeats the purpose of that particular teaching.

As for the teaching on all feelings being inconstant, stressful, not-self, that serves a different

purpose, and it's used at a different point in the practice.

So when the truck driver thought that leaving his truck dirty was a sign of wisdom, understanding the inconstancy of all things, it was a misuse of the teaching.

You try to be clean. One of the basic attributes of a good practitioner is that you're clean about the place where you live, the place where you meditate, because that develops good habits—the habit of being meticulous, the habit of being on top of things. If you're slovenly in your personal habits, your meditation is going to be slovenly, too.

So when the issue of cleanliness comes up, it's not a time to be thinking about inconstancy, stress, and not-self. It's a time to be thinking about, "How can I be more industrious, how can I be more diligent both inside and out?"

The other way of being wrong at the same time that you're right is when you use the Dhamma for arguments or for one-upmanship. It's very easy to get into Dhamma discussions where the point of the discussion becomes who's right and who's wrong. A lot of conceit can develop around being right in discussions like that.

Even though you don't abandon conceit until the end of the path, it's a good idea to avoid those kinds of discussions as much as possible. You don't want to aggravate your conceit, because the kind of conceit that's useful on the path has nothing to do with winning arguments. It has everything to do with the fact that there are people who have gained awakening: "They're human beings, I'm a human being, why can't I gain awakening, too?" The conceit of proving yourself right and proving other people wrong, though, is not the kind of conceit that's useful on the path. So you have to watch out.

This doesn't mean that there's no room for Dhamma debates at all, but you have to be very careful to make sure that both sides are trying to find the truth. Or if one side is obviously wrong and spreading wrong views around, you make a statement of right view, but you try to leave it at that—so you don't get into the wrongness of conceit.

The Buddha compares it to grasping a snake. If you grasp the Dhamma wrong, it's like grasping a snake in the wrong place. If you grasp it by the tail, it'll turn around and bite you. Now you do have to grasp the Dhamma—in the same way that you may have to grasp a snake to get its venom out—but you grasp it for the sake of holding on to the principles you need for your own practice.

After all, the views of right view are not designed for arguments. That long list of views that the Buddha avoided—about whether the world was eternal, not eternal, finite, infinite... on

down the line: Those views were designed to get people into arguments. People would state their view and add, “Only this is true, everything else is worthless.” That statement right there is simply a challenge: “Anyone want to argue?”

But when the Buddha stated the definition of suffering, its origination, its cessation, the path to its cessation, he’s basically saying, “Here, do this, and you’ll be able to put an end to suffering.” It’s a very different attitude, a very different kind of view.

It’s the view that’s part of the raft that goes off over the flood of wrong views, or the flood of views that get people into arguments. The flood of views can sweep you away; the raft of right view can get you across. It’s all a matter of how you hold on.

In the case of the snake: You take a forked stick, you hold its head down, and then you grasp it right at the neck. Even though the snake may writhe around your arm, you’re holding on to it in a safe way.

So how do you avoid being wrong even when you’re right? In the case of understanding where a teaching should be applied, always think about how it fits in with the four noble truths. For instance, with the three characteristics or the three perceptions: They’re useful for developing dispassion for suffering, developing dispassion for the origination of suffering. That’s why they’re there. If you use them for another purpose, you’re gone wrong. If you see that the pleasures of sensuality are very undependable and they involve a lot of stress, you’re using the perceptions rightly so that you can gain a sense of dispassion for your sensuality.

As for Dhamma discussions, it’s good to have some humility about your views. As the Buddha said, for most of us our views are based on either believing in a particular tradition, believing in a teacher, reasoning things out by analogy, or just comparing our various views and seeing what fits with views we’ve already accepted. In none of these cases are those reasons a guarantee that you’ve got the truth. So think about that.

For most of us, that’s where our views come from: reasoning by analogies, or reasoning by things fitting together, making sense together, or a tradition that we believe, or a teacher we believe, or a conviction. As the Buddha says, if you want to safeguard the truth, you say, “This is my conviction”—and leave it at that. Or: “This is what makes sense to me”—leave it at that.

The more humility we have around our views, the more we’ll be able to step back from them and see where they’re wrong—or see where we’re applying them in the wrong place, and have a good sense of when discussions are getting out of hand. Or when a discussion is going nowhere, you pull out for the sake of harmony in the group.

There's so much disharmony in the world right now, so much harsh speech, so much divisive speech. It's good to have a community where people are trying to learn how to live together and to restrain themselves from getting involved in the topics that could break the group apart. There are all kinds of things that we could be arguing about, but would it be worth it? What would it accomplish?

We're trying to create a community where there's harmony so that people can practice and find some joy in the practice. So if there's time for discussion, try to think about what would actually be helpful to talk about. We're not here to prove ourselves right and other people wrong. We're all coming from wrong.

If our views were totally right, we wouldn't be suffering. We wouldn't have to practice anymore. The fact that we have to practice shows that we still have something to learn.

So if we have the attitude that we're all trying to learn together, that could get rid of a lot of wrong speech, and a lot of the wrong uses of right views.