

## *Right & Right*

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It's possible to be right and wrong at the same time. In other words, the words, the ideas that you know may be right, but you can use them in the wrong way.

There's the famous example of the snake. If you grasp the snake at the tail, it can turn around and bite you. If you learn how to grasp it right behind the head, you can milk its venom and actually use the venom to good purpose.

The Dhamma is like that snake. You have to learn how to grasp it properly, learn how to use it properly, and in that way, what's right actually stays right. Otherwise, if it turns into opinions, turns into ways of putting other people down on the outside level or on the inside level, you may know all kinds of stuff about meditation, what's right and what's wrong, but if you use your knowledge in the wrong way, it can actually give rise to more defilements inside. You try to put down one defilement with another one, but if you do it in a childish or immature way, your defilements end up growing instead of withering away.

It's important in the meditation that we learn things from the texts, we learn things from where we've heard from the ajaans, but you have to be strategic in how you apply this learning. After all, the whole path is a strategic path. You remember that old distinction from the ancient world, that there are two types of knowledge. There's the knowledge of the scribe, and there's the knowledge of the warrior. Scribe knowledge is concerned with definitions, copying things accurately, defining terms properly, systematizing things in ways that are easy to pass on. Warrior knowledge has more to do with skills: learning how to read a situation, learning how to approach the situations strategically. Sometimes you take what you've learned from the scribes, other times you have to put it aside, because it may not be right for the situation you've got. It may actually be very wrong. Even though what the scribe teaches you is right in terms of proper definitions, proper organization of knowledge, still it may not be right for the situation you've got, may not be right for that particular defilement.

So remember, the Buddha would often compare meditators to warriors. He never compared meditators to scribes. We're in the trenches facing the defilements. Or to be more accurate, given that we're living here in the mind with the defilements, we're in the trenches and we've got defilements right there in the trenches with us. So you've got to learn how to deal with them in a way that they don't kill you there in the trenches.

So always keep this in mind. There's a dialogue constantly going on in the mind. Some of the voices side with the Dhamma, other voices side with defilements, and sometimes the voices that seem to be siding with the Dhamma end up being defiled as well. The only way we're going to learn that is to try putting what we've learned into practice and seeing where it works, where it doesn't work. If you find that something doesn't work, turn around and look at what you're applying, what ideas you had. Even though they were right ideas, maybe you've been applying them wrongly.

This is where you have to learn how to be strategic. Remember, one of the Buddha's definitions of wisdom is basically strategic: the ability to do what you know is going to give good results. If you don't like to do it, your ability to talk yourself into doing it is strategic. Sometimes you have to humor the defilements get enough of the mind willing to go along and do what you know is right. The same way with the other side: learning how to refrain from doing things that you like to do but you know are going to get bad results. Sometimes you have to distract the defilements, promise them some little reward, "Okay, don't do this, and I'll reward you later on." In other words, show them a little bit of understanding, learn to be strategic in how you approach things. You find that it's possible then to be right and right at the same time.

So the side of the mind that's on the side of the Dhamma has to be trained to be mature. It has to be an adult inside. You can't force the Dhamma on your mind in a childish, immature, or cocky way.

There's a famous sutta where the Buddha is talking with a brahman teenager who has apparently just finished his study of the Vedas and thinks he's pretty sharp. The Buddha points out that the things you learn from studying the texts could possibly be wrong. Just because you know a lot of stuff doesn't mean that the stuff is right, even though teachers have taught you and the book seem to be reliable. Maybe the teachers got it wrong; maybe the books got it wrong. These things are no guarantee, so you can't be cocky about your knowledge, insisting that "This is what I've read, this is what I've thought, so it must be right."

This is why wisdom has to be tested, not only what you've heard, but also what you've thought about. You have to put it into practice and see what actually works. It's like the warrior who has discovered that some of the stuff he learned in military school helps, some of the stuff he's got to learn how to think up on his own in the midst of a battle. That's the real test: what actually works in the trenches, what actually works in the battle with defilement. Because that kind of knowledge comes with experience, it's a kind of maturity that learns to see things not just as right or wrong, but as various combinations of right and right, right

and wrong, or wrong and right, and wrong and wrong, to figure out what actually is going to work, so that you're not right just in a shallow sense, but right deep down, right in your strategy, right in the application, because it's right in the results. That's the final test.

The Buddha himself didn't claim to be the Buddha until he had put his discoveries about the path into practice and found what actually worked. He'd completed the tasks with regard to all the noble truths. He didn't just know the noble truths, or know what tasks were appropriate. He actually completed the tasks, took them all the way until he realized, "Oh, this really does lead to the deathless." It's not just something that works a little bit and seems to be better than not working. It works all the way in the sense of leading all the way to the end of suffering. Zero suffering in the moment. Total release. That was the proof of how you can be right and right at the same time, i.e., you have the right knowledge and you've applied in the right way.

So this is a process that requires maturity. How do you become mature? You don't bring maturity with you, but you keep looking at what you're doing and keep being mature enough to admit when you've made a mistake. That's how this larger quality of maturity is going to develop.

So you don't throw away what you've learned, but you realize that it has to be applied properly, with the proper strategy, proper tactics, in the proper time and place. This is why one of the Buddha's definitions of wisdom includes not only knowledge of the Dhamma and the meaning of the Dhamma, but also knowledge of yourself: exactly where you are right now in terms of your strengths and weaknesses, what's going on inside, how you can deal with the different defilements inside yourself. Knowledge of the proper amount: having a sense of enough—this is not just enough in terms of what you eat, drink, wear, and use in terms of the requisites, but also how much is enough time and effort put into the concentration, put into the practice. Then there's knowledge of the time, which means both time and place, knowledge of the situation. That's when your wisdom, your understanding, becomes all around, because it's right all around, right from every angle.