Right & Right

May 17, 2007

It’s possible to be right and wrong at the same time. In other words, the words and ideas that you know may be right, but you can use them in the wrong way. There’s a 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 it of its venom and actually use the venom to a good purpose. The Dharma is like that snake. You have to learn how to grasp it properly, learn how to use it properly. That way, what’s right actually stays right. Otherwise, if it turns into opinions, it 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, what’s wrong, but if you use your knowledge in the wrong way, it can actually give rise to more defilement inside. You’re trying to put down one defilement with another one, but you do it in a childlike or immature way. Your defilements end up growing instead of withering away. This is important in meditation. We learn things from the texts. We learn things from what we’ve heard from the Ajahns. 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. 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 a way that’s easy to pass on. Warrior knowledge has more to do with skills, learning how to read a situation, learning how to approach a situation strategically. Sometimes you take what you’ve learned from the scribes and other times you have to put it aside, because it may not be right for the situation you’ve got. In fact, it may actually be very wrong, even though what the scribe teaches you is right in terms of proper definitions. So it may not be right for the situation you’ve got. It may not be right for that particular defilement. Remember that the Buddha would often compare the meditator to a warrior. He never compares meditators to scribes. We’re in the trenches with defilements. Or, more accurately, we’re in the trenches in which we’re living here in the mind with the defilements. We’re in the trenches. We’ve got defilements right there in the trenches with us, and you’ve got to learn how to deal with them in a way so that they don’t kill you there in the trenches. So always keep this in mind. There’s this dialogue constantly going on in the mind. Some of the voices side with the Dhamma, and other voices side with defilements. Sometimes the voices that seem to be siding with the Dhamma end up being defiled as well. The only way you’re going to learn that is to try putting what you’ve learned into practice and seeing where it works and where it doesn’t work. Then turn around. If you find something doesn’t work, then turn around and look at what you were applying, what ideas you had. Maybe even though they were right ideas, you were applying them wrongly. This is where you have to learn how to be strategic. Remember one of the Buddhist definitions of wisdom is basically strategic, the ability to do what you know is going to give a good result, but you don’t like to do it. Your ability to talk yourself into doing it. That’s strategic. Sometimes you have to humor the defilements. In order to get enough of the mind to go along to do what you know is right. Same way with the other side. Learning how to refrain from doing things that you like to do but you know are going to give bad results. Sometimes you have to distract the defilements and promise them some little reward. “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. Then you find that it’s possible 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 and to be an adult inside. You can’t enforce the Dhamma on your mind in a childish way, an immature and cocky way. There’s a famous sutta where the Buddha is talking with a brahmin teenager and this teenager apparently just finished his study of the Vedas and he thought he was pretty sharp. The Buddha pointed 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 books seem to be reliable. Maybe the teachers got it wrong, maybe the books got it wrong. These things are not a guarantee. So you can’t be cocky about your knowledge, insisting, “This is what I’ve read or this is what I’ve thought through, so it must be right.” This is why wisdom has to be tested. Not only what you’ve heard and what you’ve thought about, but you have to put it into practice and see what actually works. It’s like the warrior who’s discovered that some of the stuff he learned in military school helps, and some of the stuff he’s got to learn how to think up on his own in the midst of the battle. That’s the real test, what actually works in the trenches, what actually works in the battle. 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 and right and wrong, or wrong and right and wrong and wrong, to figure out what actually is going to work. So it’s not just right in a shallow sense, but it’s 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 didn’t claim to be the Buddha until he 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. He didn’t know what tasks were appropriate to them. He actually completed the tasks. He 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 mind. Total release. That was the proof of how you can be right and right at the same time. How you have the right knowledge and you’ve applied it in the right way. This is a process that requires maturity. And how do you become mature? You don’t bring out maturity, 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, the 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 are you right now? What’s going on inside you? How can you deal with the different defilements inside yourself? Knowledge of the proper amount, having a sense of enough. And this is not just enough in terms of what you eat and drink and wear and use in terms of the requisites, but also how much is enough time in a sense. Enough effort put into the concentration, put into the practice. And then there’s knowledge of the time, which means both time and place. Knowledge of the situation. That’s when your wisdom, that’s when your understanding, becomes all around. Because it’s right all around. Right from every angle. you

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