

Right but Wrong

May 29, 2014

This path we're practicing has a lot of right factors. In fact, the factors are very clearly delineated so you know what's right and what's wrong. We're always trying to be right and to act rightly, but you have to distinguish between the two. You should always try to act rightly. But *being* right has its dangers because you build up an identity around it, and that can get you into trouble.

There's a wrong way to be right and a right way to be right or to act rightly. So you want to be sure that you're right in the right way. It's like a suit of clothes. You want it to be well-cut so that it fits you rightly, but you want to wear it casually. If you're afraid that the clothes are going to get soiled, you're never going to wear them. If you're uptight about the clothes, there's no comfort in wearing them.

Ajaan Chah has a nice story about three men going into the woods, and they hear a rooster crow. Two of them decide to play a game with the other one. They say, "What do you think? Is that a rooster or a chicken?" And the other one says, "Well, of course it's a rooster." The other two say, "No, we think it's a chicken." They're teasing him, of course, and he gets all upset. No matter how much he tries to argue with them, they have sharp replies. "How could a chicken crow like that?" — "Well, it has a mouth, doesn't it?" That sort of thing. The one man ends up crying because he can't get them to admit the truth. That's one way of being right, but wrong: getting really upset when you're dealing with other people who will not admit that they're wrong.

There's another Ajaan Chah story about a famous monk in Thailand. One of Ajaan Chah's students went to stay with the monk and noticed that in that particular monk's monastery, the Vinaya was extremely lax. So the student asked the famous monk about it, and he said, "Well, really the essence of the Vinaya is to be mindful, so we just practice mindfulness here." The student went back and reported this to Ajaan Chah, who replied, "He's right, but he's wrong."

The Vinaya is about being mindful, but it's about a lot more as well. The rules are there to help you to be careful about how you're acting so that you don't act in ways that are unskillful but that you might not see as unskillful at the time. As you get to live in the community, you begin to see that these rules really do help protect you from a lot of disharmony.

I noticed this myself. For all the work I've done in the Vinaya, I have to admit that when I first read the rules, I was not all that eager to live a life under them. But then I began to appreciate that as you live with lots of people from lots of different backgrounds, it's good to have a clear set of rules as to what's right and what's wrong. And you try to hold very clearly to what's right. But you don't want to hold so closely that you start getting down on other people's behavior and thinking that you're better than they are.

This element of pride is a big problem. The Buddha saw this in his practice of austerities. He realized that sensual passions were not the way, so he figured that the practice had to go to the other extreme. So he went to the extreme of self-affliction. For six years, he underwent all kinds of self-inflicted tortures. You have to ask yourself what could keep a person going in cases like that, and the answer is pride. When he finally realized that path was not working, he was able to overcome his pride.

That's one of the more inspiring parts of the story. The Buddha thought he'd been right. He thought there were only two alternatives, and this was obviously the right one of the two. It was when he was able to open his mind that maybe there was more out there than just these two alternatives: That was when he was able to get on the right path. He realized that his pride was what was getting in the way of letting go of the path of self-torment. When he was able to let go of the pride, he was able to get on the path that was genuinely right.

You have to look at your rightness. Is it a rightness that involves pride? Is it a rightness that involves mental subterfuges like the ajaan who was saying that all you have to do is be mindful? Is it a rightness that's getting you upset when you're dealing with other people? If it's any of those types of rightness, it's wrong. It's not helping you on the path. You're creating a lot of burdens for yourself.

So it's good to open your mind to other dimensions. Ajaan Maha Boowa mentioned this in one of his Dhamma talks. He was very strict about the practice of not eating any food that he didn't get on his own alms round. He noticed other monks in the monastery who started out the rains retreat with that vow, and then one by one by one, they dropped away. Was he going to drop away? No way. There was an element of skillful determination there, but also an element of pride. Ajaan Mun saw that. So once or twice during the rains retreat, he would slip a little something into Ajaan Maha Boowa's bowl. And Ajaan Maha Boowa realized that there's more to the practice than just being right, or sticking to your vows. Sometimes it would be food from people who came late. They didn't get there on time to put food in the monks' bowls. You had to show some compassion for them. Ajaan Mun didn't do it often – just once very now and then, enough to make Ajaan Maha Boowa think: Okay, look all around you at what you're doing and see which aspects of your rightness are wrong.

It's so easy as we practice, when we get something right, to forget that a lot of our rightness comes from other people, the people who've carried the Dhamma along—transmitted the Dhamma all these many, many centuries. And it's good to be willing to listen to them, because they have a lot to teach. One of the most unfortunate aspects of American Dhamma is the idea: "Well, the Asians did a pretty sloppy job. They managed to keep some of the Dhamma alive, but they missed a lot of the points. And we're going to get it right this time." That kind of attitude closes the door to all kinds of good lessons that can come from really listening to the tradition, from really submitting yourself to the tradition.

This is one of the reasons we chant: to remind ourselves that there's a long line of ideas and attitudes that have been passed on. And they've been passed on because they're valuable. It's good to get them in our heads and our hearts so that the conversation inside the head is not just our own different voices. We're adding some new voices to make us look at things in a different way—to open a little air into the closed room of our opinions. It's good to reflect on the fact that we're part of a long chain—the people who've been trying to practice and benefit from the Dhamma—and we want to be able to pass it on intact. This is how we repay our debt of gratitude to those who kept the Dhamma alive all these many centuries.

I was recently reading a passage about how to read the suttas. The author said to choose the suttas that resonate with you, and also read some that you don't like. Go back to them again and figure out what it is you don't like about them. Instead of looking for the problem in them, look at the problem in yourself. This is how we grow.

So we try to act rightly, but as for *being* right, put that aside. And if you find yourself building a little pride around being right, remind yourself that you owe a lot to the people who went before. So when you are right—when you've got something right—show them some gratitude. For without them, we'd be nowhere.