

Right and Wrong in Buddhism

[This is the transcript of a talk given by Eido Michael Luetchford as one of a series of lectures to people interested in Buddhism in Miami in March 2001.]

Don't produce wrong.

Practicing the many kinds of right

Naturally purifies the mind.

This is the teaching of the buddhas.

This ancient poem, originally in Pali, is quoted by Master Dogen in the Shobogenzo, at the start of the chapter titled “Shoaku-makusa – Not Doing Wrongs.”

Buddhism is learning how to live. This is a very difficult task, and so it takes most of us most of our lives to learn. It is a never-ending process. Although when we are children, we imagine a world of adults, confident, knowing everything, capable, and all-powerful, we find ourselves as adults not knowing how we should lead our lives, and constantly making mistakes in what we do and in how we treat others and ourselves. We search for how we should live, and it is a shock when we discover that all the important decisions in our lives rest with us alone. In the end, there is no-one to tell us what to do but ourselves. So we are always trying to decide how we should act.

But in this search for how to act in the variety of situations we meet in our life, one fundamental problem is how to tell what is right and what is wrong. Of course, most of us, if we are fortunate, are taught right and wrong when we are children, and the moral code that we internalize stays with us through our lives. But in the modern world, the power of traditional religions is getting weaker, and the moral codes of the traditional religions that have made society orderly and peaceful no longer rule the behavior of large parts of society.

On the one hand, spiritual religions give us a fixed moral code that we are taught to follow, and we learn that to break the rules is to sin. After we have sinned, we need to ask for forgiveness in order to become pure again.

On the other hand, scientific materialism gives us a set of rules for how the world works that do not include a criterion for right and wrong. Scientists will say that the world works in this way, not in that way, obeying a strict set of rules, but science has not been able to give us rules for how we should act. For this reason, some people feel that science is dangerous, even amoral, and that material progress is not always good.

Between these two opposite views of the world, I want to tell you what Buddhism says, what Master Dogen taught about right and wrong. And in order to illustrate the Buddhist attitude to right and wrong, I want to tell you a little about our cat back home in the UK. He is still a kitten, about 5 months old, and it is very interesting to watch him growing. He is busy every moment of the day, teaching himself how to live.

Playing and working, cleaning and eating, sleeping. All of those activities are one unbroken flow in his day. Watching him react to us, we noticed that he decides how to act in a very simple way. He has two modes of action: he either does exactly what he wants with no hesitation, or he reacts to our expressions. When we are sitting at the table eating, he often wants to jump up to see whether there is something tasty on the table. But if he sees a stern face or hears a strong sound from us, he will immediately give up. It would seem he has learned that it is wrong to jump up when we are eating.

But that is not the case in fact. If friend is eating with us, he will often leap up onto their laps immediately, although he will not do that with Yoko or myself.

So although when only Yoko and myself are present, he seems to have learned that it is wrong to jump up when we are eating, in fact he has not learned the general rule that “jumping up at mealtimes is wrong” at all. This is because he is a cat. He does not make a general rule and then apply that general rule to future situations. He decides what to do just at the moment of the present. And as each situation is different, he decides differently in each situation, depending on what he wants to do, and what the person’s reaction is. And he goes on like this with every situation.

Then we might ask whether the cat has any sense of right and wrong. I think that looking at his overall conduct he clearly does, because he, and other cats, are very polite animals. They conduct themselves very carefully, and certainly behave well towards the world. They obviously have a way of deciding what is right to do and what is wrong, but that way of deciding is not based on an abstract code of behavior, but on something that they see intuitively in each situation in each moment. At every moment they seem to decide: I shouldn’t do that, I should do that, I shouldn’t do that.

Now we humans are much more complicated than cats because of our ability to think; to abstract and to form rules and codes. As we grow from children into adults, we “learn” how to behave. In the natural state, the cat doesn’t “learn” how to behave in a sense; it just decides how to behave at every moment.

The Buddhist attitude to right action contains the essence of the cat’s behavior, and it also contains the essence of our human ability to make abstract rules about right and wrong. It takes the best of both.

Buddhism insists very strongly that there is right action, but it says that we cannot decide what right action is only by thinking about it. It says that right action is decided just at the moment of acting. So that decision is not a decision in our mind alone, but an intuitive decision in our whole body and mind.

To say that we decide how to act with our body sounds very strange. We usually think that right and wrong are simply a question of deciding what is right in our mind and

then doing it, or deciding what is wrong and not doing it. But Master Dogen says in the Shobogenzo “Even though many kinds of right are included in the concept of rightness, there has never been any kind of right that is realized beforehand and that then waits for someone to do it.” He means that right as a concept is completely different from right action. Right as a concept is only a thought, only an idea. And even if we have the clearest and most perfect set of ideas about right and wrong, we still have to figure out how to ensure that we act right. The concept of right and acting right are completely different problems.

So the question is then, how do we ensure that our action is right. The answer that Buddhism gives is very simple. It says that as the decision is taken by our body and mind together at the moment of acting, then the best way to ensure right action is to practice putting our body and mind together in the moment of the present. And in order to do this, Master Dogen and all the Buddhist masters of the past have recommended that we practice the simple practice called Zazen. Zazen is sitting with body and mind as one. Without concentrating on thinking or on perceptions, we sit straight on the cushion. And when we do this, we put ourselves in the state that is “right action.” That is, we reinforce the state in our body and mind where we can simply act right.

Incidentally, the phrase “putting together” or “putting right” is the original meaning of the Sanskrit word “samadhi” which is often translated as “concentration.” It actually means “putting [ourselves] right” and refers to the practice of Zazen, or Dhyana as it was known in Indian Buddhism.

But of course we are not cats. Society must have rules, and we need guidelines to tell us the kind of behavior that is right action. For this reason, Buddhism has precepts. There are 16 of them in all, and these sixteen precepts are divided into three groups. They are the Three Devotions, the Three Universal Precepts, and the Ten Fundamental Precepts.

The Three Devotions are:

Devotion to Buddha

Devotion to Dharma

Devotion to Sangha

The Three Universal Precepts are:

No.1: To observe the rules of society

No.2: To observe the moral rule of the Universe

No.3: To work for the salvation of all living beings

The Ten Fundamental Precepts are:

No.1: Don't destroy life.

No.2: Don't steal.

No.3: Don't desire too much.

No.4: Don't lie.

No.5: Don't live by selling liquor.

No.6: Don't discuss failures of Buddhist priests and laymen.

No.7: Don't praise yourself or berate others.

No.8: Don't begrudge the sharing of Buddhist teachings and other things, but give them freely.

No.9: Don't become angry.

No.10: Don't abuse the three supreme values.

These sixteen precepts are the Buddhist's moral code. But when we try to follow a moral code, we find it almost impossible to do so. Translating our understanding of right and wrong into action is the problem that we all face.

There is another story in the "Shoaku-makusa" chapter of the Shobogenzo that goes like this:

A lay disciple of Zen Master Dorin asks him: *What is the Great Intention of the Buddha-Dharma?*

Master Dorin answers: *Not to produce wrong, to practice the many kinds of right.*

The disciple says: *If that is the Great Intention, even a child of three knows it and can say it.*

Master Dorin says: *Although a child of three can speak the truth, even myself as an old man of eighty has to make continuous efforts to practice it!!*

Although we know that we should act right, we need a way to practice it. We need a practical way that works in every situation, a way that is adaptable to fit each unique set of circumstances. Buddhism's answer to this is the practice of Zazen. To practice Zazen is to learn to act right. Because in Zazen we learn to live in the present moment. We learn to act simply and intuitively in every situation.

The Universe has a moral code. And this moral code is not an abstraction. It is implanted in the Universe itself. Part of this moral code is revealed through science. For instance, medical knowledge gives us knowledge about what we can do and cannot do to remain healthy. We can look on these as physical morals.

Part of the moral code of the Universe is revealed through religions. For instance, religions teach us what we should do to preserve our spiritual health.

Buddhism says that the moral code of the Universe is revealed both in the abstract and in the concrete sides of life. But neither abstract nor concrete knowledge about what is right necessarily help us to act right.

Buddhism says that to act right is to be happy. It says that we live in a field, and we should stay inside the field if we want to be happy. And to show us where the boundaries of our field of action are, we have the precepts. If we break the precepts, we know that we have gone outside of the Buddhist field. Then we can return to right action by putting our body and mind right. By practicing Zazen.

So in the end if we practice Zazen every day, we become people who cannot stray outside of the field. We become happy.