

THE BARE BONES OF THE BUDDHA'S TEACHING

By Victor Byrd

Right Action (Samma-kammanta)

and

Right Livelihood (Samma –ajiva)

I remember one lovely summer night on the New Jersey Shore, walking down quiet streets past perfectly manicured lawns. The evening silence was only disturbed by the frequent zap of bugs being fried as they flew into electric traps hanging on patio eaves. Instant incineration. Zap! Zap! Pan fried bugs. Those lovely lawns seemed a reflection of the perfectly manicured families living in each house. The only thing missing was a sign: Warning To All Creepy Or Flying Things! Travel At Your Own Risk.

As I pondered the stark contrast between that quiet summer evening and the deadly sound of those electric lamps, it occurred to me that there are very few degrees of separation between killing a bug and killing a human. All we need to do is see someone as alien and despicable. Then our minds can open to the idea of a can of bug spray. In those German camps of horror, how human were the Jews?

In the West, we don't like creepy things. Our Jewish and Christian Bibles tell us that God said:

Let us make man in our image, after our likeness: and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over the cattle and over all the earth, and over every creeping thing that creepeth upon the earth.

Be fruitful and multiply, and replenish the earth, and subdue it: and have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over every living thing that moveth upon the earth.

Clearly, we have the "fruitful" part down. But, doesn't the word "dominion" sum up a great deal of our Western mentality? Subdue the earth, including all creepy things. Whether it is pesky bugs spoiling our

evening barbeque or our own unconscious, which is far more pesky, we believe that happiness lies in the direction of control. We are the custodians of this earth, not you Mr. Bug. We love our yoga practice because it can offer us control over our bodies. We love meditation which expands the territory of ego control even into our own minds. This Eastern stuff is good! By the way, our religions do urge us to be responsible custodians of this earth but the point is that we must realize that we are in charge. After all, we are the ones made in God's image. We are the ones with the big brains.

How many people give those electronic bug killers a second thought? "This land is my land, and I have a right to stand on my patio at night without being tormented by bugs," many of us swear with conviction. As a child visiting relatives who lived on a farm, I saw my aunt take a chicken and wring its neck. It was dreadful. Couldn't she see that this was nothing but murder? Worse, we were having that chicken for Sunday dinner! When I protested that the chicken definitely knew that something horrible was happening to it, my aunt said with some exasperation, "Why, it's nothing but a chicken." At that moment I concluded that all chickens must be paranoid. My aunt and cousins must have wondered if I was in the wrong family. I wondered the same thing.

Do you believe that it is wrong to wring a chicken's neck? At the same time, do you believe it is okay to suction a living human fetus from its mother's womb? "Nothing wrong with that. It's my body and what is inside of me belongs to me." What do you believe when it comes to issues such as capital punishment? Always wrong? Sometimes wrong? Never wrong? Do you believe that some wars, for instance World War II, are justified while others, like the one in Iraq, are not? Many people who oppose the present war in Iraq seem to feel vindicated by the rising tide of popular opinion against the carnage, but how many Americans are opposed to the war for moral reasons? How many Americans are against it simply because we are not winning and it is lasting too long? Nowadays, if you're going to fight a war you need to do it within a reasonable time period. Since we aren't winning, we must be wrong.

I have personal knowledge of a family in New Orleans who barricaded their house after the devastation of Katrina. A roving gang with guns in hand, approached their door step. They pounded on the front door, angrily demanding that the family abandon their home. The father, who had a rifle, shot at and hit more than one gang member and the mob

fled. Was his act of protecting his family justified? What he did was violent, but was it “wrong action” according to precepts of Buddhism?

Who can answer such questions? The Buddha does not try to give us cookie cutter answers in Right Action, but he does give us a guideline to help us maneuver through this minefield of contradictions. He begins his teaching of Right Action with this very question of taking life.

What now is Right Action?

There someone avoids the killing of living beings, and abstains from it.

Without stick or sword, conscientious, full of sympathy, he is anxious for the welfare of all living beings.

How beautiful are the words “anxious for the welfare of all living beings.” The Buddha does not say that we have some God-given right of dominion over all living creatures. We are not lifted up to a position of superiority. Instead, we are asked to be with and toward, not above and away from; we are asked to be anxious for their welfare. There is no ambiguity in the Buddha’s teaching. He does not say that we should only be anxious for the welfare of human creatures such as the under-privileged, elderly or children. Buddhism includes all sentient beings (creatures with even the tiniest bit of consciousness) as deserving of our care. Do sentient beings include chickens and creepy things?

What about termites? How the hell do I feel anxious for something that is feasting on my house? What about the invasion of ants that comes to picnic in my kitchen every August? When I lived in New York City, I tried to practice non-killing by chasing the cockroaches instead of smashing them. If I caught one, I’d throw it out the window. Unfortunately, I lived on the 16th floor. I imagined that these guys were light enough to float down to some unsuspecting neighbor’s window sill or even to the ground below where they could then stroll over to Central Park and have a nice day. Were my actions in keeping with Right Action? Well, I was trying. Perhaps this is the only way to begin Right Action. At least, one can try.

The Pali words for Right Action are *samma* and *kammanta*, literally “right karma.” Earlier we discussed the Buddhist teaching that every act of volition leaves a “forming tendency” (*sankhara*) that will manifest someday in the future. When we remember that all beings are bound by the law of karma and couple this with the Buddha’s teaching that

consciousness is conditioned by delusion (nidana number one) the news is not very good.

This is the context of the fourth step of right action or right karma. It is rather silly to think that we can deepen our meditation practice while insisting on continuing self-destructive behavior. Eventually, we will have to integrate outside practice with our inner practice and perhaps we could think about giving it a try during this lifetime. The Buddha begins this teaching by telling us that we must take responsibility for what we think. Since karma refers to any intentional action and thinking is a mental action that can certainly be intentional, future consequences are inevitable. The Buddha tells us that speech is also an activity. When there is conscious volition attached to speech we incur even more serious consequences. With Right Action, the movement of increased consequence continues. Our physical behavior creates the most bitter harvest. It also creates the greatest abundance of good.

The foundation of Right Action and Right Livelihood sits upon the ancient ground of *ahimsa*, the Dharma of nonviolence. Do no harm. Ahimsa is like a touchstone. Rubbing against its fine grain reveals the gold within. Every question that we have about Right Action or Right Livelihood, at least from the Buddhist perspective, must be rubbed against ahimsa. This is not to say that a deep commitment to ahimsa will provide us with simple answers to extraordinary situations, but at least we will find ourselves pointed in the right direction.

Several years ago, Edward Whitmont posed this question at a seminar: If you were transported back to the 1930's and found yourself in a room where Adolph Hitler was sitting alone and you saw a loaded revolver on a table behind him, would you pick it up and fire a bullet through his head. If you knew, without a doubt, that this one violent karmic action would save the lives of over twenty million people, could you do it? Would you do it?

You can well imagine the discussion that followed. Most of our questions involved ahimsa. Even if Hitler was evil incarnate, would it not still be a terrible crime to kill him? It was clear that Dr. Whitmont, who escaped from Austria in the 1930's, had no such ambiguity. He said that life often forces us to come down from the ivory towers of intellectual discussion, where we sit and talk about love and nonviolence or the Eightfold Path. Sometimes our only choice is between the lesser of two

evils as Sophie had to do in the movie *Sophie's Choice*. The Nazi's forced Sophie to choose between her two children -- which one would live and which one would die. She could not run from the heartbreak and agony of conscious intention. No choice meant that both children would die.

Whitmont stood on the ancient truth of the Bhagavid Gita, one of the most sacred Hindu scriptures. It teaches us that life is not black and white where we get to choose between violence and nonviolence. We must stand and fight on life's battle ground. We must bear the ambivalence that is present in any true choice between two shades of gray. Whitmont once said that all true choices are nothing but a toss of the coin, in other words a choice between "two roads diverging in a wood." Hence the debates continue – this war is right; that war is wrong; women have the right to choose abortion; no they don't. It's tough because truth always resides on both sides of any issue.

Why can't truth be simple and one-sided? That way we don't have to bear the ambivalence of choosing between the lesser of two evils. My religion is God's truth and yours is a flat lie. But what if authentic living means that we must bear the ambivalence of accepting the fact that truth lives across the border in other lands and other religions as well as in our own country.

The question of whether any action (thought, speech or physical behavior) is skillful or not involves intention. Was my action volitional or was it innocent, in the sense that I did not have conscious intention? This is where Carl Jung offers an extraordinary insight into the East-West dialogue. Jung tells us that light always casts a shadow. The psychological truth of the shadow is as important to an understanding of Right Action as any Buddhist commentary we will ever read. Religions teach us that we are only responsible for acts that we have consciously intended. In other words, if our unskillful actions are "accidental," we are innocent and off the hook of karma. Thus is born the hidden, shadow side of our personality. Someone has to do the dirty work! The more we cling to an illusion of innocence the less chance we have to grow psychologically or spiritually.

I once read a story that wonderfully illustrates the reality of shadow. It is about a monk, Luang Ta, who had a problem. He craved meat. One morning on his walk to the lavatory, he spied a big turtle slowly moving down the road. Luang felt a deep craving for turtle curry, but he knew that

it is wrong to kill one of God's creatures for food. After he had walked back to his room in the monastery, he took out his scriptures and started to read out loud to his attendant. "Just now I went to the lavatory and saw a huge turtle crawling." His attendant (not the brightest light in the room) felt a pang of craving for delicious turtle curry. So he excused himself from listening to Luang's "sermon" and headed in the direction of that turtle. A little later he dejectedly came back to Luang Ta's room. "What's wrong?" asked Luang Ta? "The turtle is too big for the pot" came the sad reply. With this, Luang Ta turned to another passage and began to read out loud: "If the rice pot is too small, why don't you use the bigger one?"

The story is as funny as it is ridiculous but perhaps we should not laugh too hard at Luang Ta. He was able to fool himself into believing that he was a good Buddhist practicing nonviolence. What we see in this story is the problem of the shadow, the secret side that allows us to remain as innocent as a lamb. Do volitional acts include the shadow's actions? We push most gray issues such as violence, or stealing or sexual misconduct into our unconscious. See no evil, speak no evil, hear no evil. Thus we get to sleep at night convinced of our sincerity and goodness. The one glitch in our plan to avoid the consequences of our behavior is that Karma is our greatest teacher. If we continually and successfully escape taking conscious responsibility for our unwholesome actions, how can we ever hope to become free of ignorance?

I may pretend that exterminating termites has nothing to do with nonviolence because termites are "bad." I may spray my garden to get rid of aphids, and disclaim any reason for guilt because they have no right to destroy my flowers. But what living creature on this earth deserves to die? Every winter my mother used to feed the hundreds of birds that landed in her backyard. She loved to watch the moving swatches of brilliant red and blue and yellow against the stark white winter outside her kitchen window. There was only one problem. The squirrels! They always figured out how to climb into the bird houses that hung from the carefully placed clothes wires. My mother tried every way to outwit them, but the squirrels kept stealing her birdseed. One day I saw her in the yard putting out our rat poison. "What on earth are you doing?" I asked this very loving and gentle woman. "I'm getting rid of these squirrels," she muttered.

Can I destroy the termites while maintaining a clear awareness of the complexity of the situation? Rather than the mindless action of a machine that zaps bugs because that is its only function, can I refuse to act like a

machine? Can I practice some form of acknowledgement that I am taking life and that I wish it were not necessary? Can I send metta to those little critters? Can I keep my heart open and feel compassion even if my choice has to be one of violence?

Ultimately, nonviolence must begin at home. Ahimsa must find a place of honor in self-nurturing, in the attitude of metta towards our own heart. This is the teaching in the Isha Upanishad. What is the value of refraining from murder if we are intent on suicide?

Doing verily works in this world one should wish to live a hundred years. Thus it is in thee and not otherwise than this; action cleaves not to a man.

Sunless are those worlds and enveloped in blind gloom whereto all they in the passing hence resort who are slayers of their souls.

There is no greater crime than violence against one's own soul. An act of murder, as horrid as it is, does not condemn the other person to hell, but suicide is double murder. I have killed my own body and slain my own soul.

For me this is the bottom line of understanding ahimsa. Right Action must begin with the intention to self-nurture. Metta is the flower born of ahimsa. How can I practice metta if I visit upon myself a relentless and cruel voice of self-loathing? This is not violence? It is the place where violence is born. We cannot practice Right Action if we refuse to begin the deep bow of ahimsa toward our own little heart.

The second aspect of Right Action is the avoidance of stealing:

He avoids stealing, and abstains from it; what another person possesses of goods and chattels in the village or in the wood, that he does not take away with thievish intent.

If we apply the touchstone of ahimsa to non-stealing, we are pointed in the right direction. Stealing what belongs to another is an act of doing harm. I have heard it said that emotional abuse is far more damaging to a child than physical abuse. Indeed, I once wrote a song with the words, "sticks and stones can break your bones, but names can really kill." Countless people have had their house ransacked, their car stolen or

vandalized. It can be devastating. Now we even have something called identity theft. But the real harm is not to the bank account. It is the pain and suffering of having your world invaded by hatred. Your sense of safety has been damaged and in some cases lost forever. Stealing from another is a profound violation of ahimsa.

The Buddhist view of stealing goes deeper than not taking from others. We are asked to refrain from taking what is not given to us. If I were to see a diamond ring lying in the curb, only the shadow part of me would argue that it is mine because I found it. However, someone practicing Right Action feels “anxious for the welfare of every being.” She would not furtively look around to see if she is being observed. She would not quickly pocket that ring as if she just won the lottery. “At last! The universe has given me a present and I deserve it!” Instead, she would seek out the owner of that ring. She would advertise and make inquiries. She would imagine the heartache of someone who had worn that ring, perhaps for years and years. She would feel metta for the owner of that ring.

How do we steal from ourselves? We push ourselves beyond the limits of what is healthy for our bodies, sometimes for the sake of success, sometimes simply because we cannot stop ourselves from the relentless need to do. We dip into our core energy, taking from our reserves as if our supply is unlimited. We rob ourselves of our own power to grow or transform by constantly draining ourselves of the energy that transformation requires. The tragedy of youth is that we have all the energy we need to practice inner work but we don’t have enough wisdom to realize why we need to do inner work. The tragedy of old age is that we have the understanding but not enough energy to do the work. If robbing ourselves of time is not stealing, I don’t know what is.

The third and last part of right action is abstaining from unlawful sexual intercourse, also referred to as refraining from sexual misconduct. In today’s world, sexual behavior must surely be the most gray of the gray areas of Right Action. The Buddha’s words are plain and straightforward:

He avoids unlawful sexual intercourse, and abstains from it. He has no intercourse with such persons as are still under the protection of father, mother, brother, sister of relatives, nor with married women, nor female convicts, nor even with flower-decked girls.

Female convicts and flower-decked girls? What about male convicts and flower decked boys? Here we come face to face with the sexism of the patriarchal world in which the Buddha lived. In fact, the Buddha was initially opposed to allowing women into the priesthood because he was convinced that their presence would destroy the practice of the sangha. There is no way around the obvious and overt sexism in early Buddhism or the sad fact that women have remained second class citizens in Asia until recently as views have begun to change, not only in the East, but here in the West as well. Those who cling to the idea that the Buddha was perfect would be advised not to poke fun at the hundreds of millions who have a similar view of the infallible Pope in Rome.

Just as homosexual behavior is condemned in both Judaism and Christianity, Buddhist teachers also have condemned homosexuality for thousands of years. This is, to coin a phrase, an inconvenient truth. When the Dalai Lama was asked about the Buddhist perspective on homosexual sex he started to give the pat answer but then he paused and gently added that if it does not harm anyone then what is the problem?

This must be the answer to this question of sexuality. Does it do harm to you, to your partner or to a third party? And in the context of your meditation practice, the question is much more specific. Does your sexual life do harm to your inner work? What a question! There can be no other guide through the difficult questions about sexual behavior than the one suggested by the Dalai Lama. It is that same touchstone of ahimsa. Is my sexual energy harmful to another? Do I delight in seductive behavior? If I have sex with someone who is in love with me even though I am not in love with him or her, am I doing this person harm? If I am having sex with someone who is in a relationship with someone else, is it of no consequence if the third person is completely in the dark? If I have “recreational sex” at a bath house or with a “sex buddy” is there no harm involved? If I am “merely” having a sexual escapade in my own mind, say spending an evening with porn on the internet, is there no harm involved to my partner or to my own being? Just a little? If my body is the temple of my soul, does my sexual practice reflect that truth? Can you hear the faint footsteps of your shadow in the presence of such disturbing questions?

Obviously, the ultimate definition of what is or is not harmful or violent depends on where I am on the Path. As someone said during a recent discussion of Right Action “Our intention depends on the level of our conscious awareness.” This must be understood by each of us. As my

sensitivity to levels of violence becomes increasingly more subtle, my attitude toward sexual misconduct also becomes increasingly subtle. Some humans transcend human sexuality completely. In India, they are called brahmacharya, but most of us will never transcend sexuality completely. The point is for us to let ahimsa guide us through the gray land of all physical behavior: non-killing, non-stealing and non-sexual misconduct. From Right Action, the Path continues to the most external aspect of our lives, what we do every day when we go to work.

Right Livelihood

The fifth step of the Path is Right Livelihood and it concludes the sila or virtue section of the Eightfold Path. Right Livelihood marks the end of the outward movement of our practice and soon the ark will again turn inward. Since most of us spend the majority of our days doing some form of work, it makes excellent sense that the Buddha asks us to fold our daily work into our spiritual practice.

Here is a story that is not entirely fact and not entirely fiction.

Anne is a 47-year-old woman who lives in Louisville, Kentucky. Her husband died five years ago. She has two children still living at home and her oldest son Dan is starting college this year at the University of Kentucky in Lexington. She has worked at the same company for 20 years and has moved up the ladder until she reached a position of responsibility in Human Resources. She loves her job. She earns an excellent income and the company provides good health care benefits that cover the entire family.

For the past three years, Anne has been meditating in a Buddhist sangha in Louisville and says that she considers herself to be Buddhist although she has not taken formal refuge in the Buddha, Dharma and Sangha. She works for a large cigarette company in Louisville.

What advice would you give Anne if she came to you with concerns about Right Livelihood? She is very skillful and helpful to all the employees who come through her office. Should she focus on the fact that she is of benefit to others? Does it make a difference that she is not directly involved in making cigarettes? If Anne worked on the production line or if she drove one of the trucks that delivers hundreds of thousands of cigarettes to the

distributor, would that make a difference? Does it matter if she believes that it is not up her to decide whether someone should smoke or not? If she believes the product that her company sells and markets causes cancer, how can she keep working there?

These are the vexing questions that each of us face every single day if we're willing to stay awake. Buddhist scriptures say that it is wrong to deal in weapons or living beings (slave trade or prostitution). But are we to deny guns to policemen, many of whom live their lives on the front line and protect our homes and streets at night? What about the American men and women who gave their lives in World War II? Were they breaking this fifth step of Right Livelihood? You cannot be a soldier and be a Buddhist? As noted earlier "living beings" refers to all sentient life so Right Livelihood means that we must not slaughter animals nor sell meat products. No butchers allowed in the Sangha? Certainly, any profession that violates Right Speech is considered wrong Livelihood and if I practiced non-lying while working at a local bank wouldn't I have to say, "You don't want to bank with us; we give the worst service in town!"

Little wonder that the Buddha urged his disciples to join him in the forest and forsake the world! Since the days when the Buddha taught in India, his followers have made a nice distinction between eating meat and killing meat. It's wrong to kill an animal but acceptable to eat one if you are not aware that it was killed specifically for you. This is silly, and an open invitation for the shadow to come and have a nice visit, as in the case of Luang Ta. If Tyson Foods is not specifically wringing those chicken necks *for me*, am I free to have my frozen dinner in peace? I wonder how the Buddha would have felt about killing animals had he lived, say, near the North Pole? When last I heard, rice does not grow in ice. Must we now exclude the Eskimos from the Sangha?

Nisargadatta presents us with quite a problem when it comes to Right Living. He sold cigarettes! Even though he taught the most profound aspects of the dharma in a little room above his shop, he clearly violated Right Livelihood. Must we also exclude my favorite teacher from the Sangha?

Vivekananda, a disciple of Ramakrishna, and one of the great Indian sages of the nineteenth century in his own right, said that *the only sinner is one who sees a sinner in the other*. I do not know of any sentence much wiser than that one. The question "What is right living?" can only be answered

by each of us in relation to our own lives. I have no right whatsoever to say what is or is not right for Anne who works for the cigarette company in Louisville. Nor can I even say that it is wrong for the executioner to push the button that sends currents of electricity through someone's body. All that I can really know is what nonviolence means to me and all I can do is to practice it as best I can. I cannot tell you that you are wrong if you support our being in Iraq, let alone if you are a soldier protecting our country. Nor can I say that you are wrong if you march in opposition to our being in that war or any other war. I can only be a witness to my own level of right understanding, whatever that is.

Right understanding is the truth of my Right Understanding, not my high-toned ability to mouth Buddhist truths or preach my version of "the truth" to you. Perhaps Anne is doing more good work in that company and is more devoted to her meditation practice than I. The only question that she must ask is, "Am I walking a path that does not violate my own level of understanding." The question that each of us must ask ourselves is this: Is my spiritual practice internally consistent? That is the only real question.

The third division of the Eightfold Path is often called the concentration or *samadhi* division, but that is confusing since concentration is only one of the three aspects of this group. The other two aspects are Right Effort and Right Mindfulness, each of which is absolutely vital to the Path. I believe that it is more accurate to call this third division the meditation group of the Eightfold Path. Here the circle curves back to the interior, returning paradoxically to where it began with Right Understanding.