

CHAPTER SIX

RIGHT UNDERSTANDING

Zen Master Shoushan held up a bamboo stick and said, “If you call it a bamboo stick, you are clinging. If you do not call it a bamboo stick, you are ignoring.” This is the typical Zen conundrum. If our heads are stuck in discriminating consciousness - the Zen guys call it having our heads stuck in a bowl of glue - we are unable to see with our hearts. We see with the intellect. We name a thing, drop it into the memory bank, and dismiss it. The teacher says, “What is this?” and if the student says, “It’s a bamboo stick,” he may get a whack on his head from that same stick. But if the student is silent, he may also get a whack on the head.

After we break through the clouds of discriminating consciousness and can see from the heart of silence, we still must somehow “come back to life” and speak our truth. This is a perfect description for the dilemma we face when we presume to talk about Right Understanding or any other aspect of the Buddha dharma. If we think we can really capture subtle meaning in the net of words, we are calling it a bamboo stick. The intellect continually attempts to solidify and concretize the ineffable. And yet, we must try anyway. Ignoring mystery seems even more irresponsible than trying to capture it with our poor words and concepts.

In the scriptural language of Pali, the first step of the Eightfold Path is called *Samma-ditthi*. The English translation most frequently used for samma is “right,” which certainly rings a bell with our English minds. “I am right” usually means that you are wrong, unless you agree with me. Then we are both right, thank God. Furthermore, if there is a right side there must be a left side. In the Theravada and other Eastern traditions, men sit on the right and women on the left in the meditation hall. In English “left” and “sinister” both derive from the Latin *sinistre*. Thus, women are put on the left side of the hall so they won’t contaminate men, or in other traditions women are put in the back of the hall or in the balcony, just as we white southerners put the “coloreds” in the back of the bus when I was a child. To the time of this writing, after twenty five hundred years, a woman still cannot be ordained as a Buddhist nun (a *bihhuni*) in Thailand, a Buddhist country. “Christian Right” has a double

meaning: It connotes a conservative mindset, and at the same time it subtly implies that it really is “right.”

The Pali word “samma” has a more nuanced meaning. Think of the lyrics of the old Shaker hymn *The Gift to Be Simple*:

When true simplicity is gained
to bow and to bend we shan't be ashamed,
to turn, turn, will be our delight
till by turning, turning we come round right.

Samma is “coming round right;” it is more a *feeling* than a thought or rigid concept. It is a feeling of balance and harmony and simplicity. It is a feeling of being grounded. When we “come round right” we have found our center.

Ditthi, is also difficult to translate into English. As a verb it means “to see,” and as a noun, “sight.” In the Pali scriptures, “ditthi” usually refers to views or opinions, and often it has a negative connotation. For instance, the first of the ten fetters is our belief in personality, and it is called “sakkaya-ditthi.” We are literally weighed down by the burden of our many wrong views, or “miccha ditthi.” This is good, that is bad. Buddhism is good, Islam is bad. Democrats are good, Republicans are bad, or vice versa. The Buddha teaches that our attachment to wrong views is a nail hammered into the lid of a box called “me.” So the addition of the word “samma” is crucial. “Seeing right” means seeing from a center of truth. Many teachers prefer Right View as the correct translation of *samma-ditthi*, rather than Right Understanding.

There is a careful, heuristic quality to the Buddha’s sermons; each aspect of the dharma builds on what comes before, and each new aspect opens the door to what comes next. It is as if, in the beginning of his teaching, he taught slowly and carefully, laying the groundwork as would a good first grade teacher, patiently explaining the ABC’s to children who could not read or write. He began by explaining that suffering is the universal condition of humanity. Next, the teachings that suffering can always be traced to one common denominator, craving or *tanha*, and that there can be an end to craving. Finally, he explained the way to end suffering, the Eightfold Path.

The entire Buddha dharma is folded into Right Understanding. When thought of this way, it makes sense that many ancient teachers refused to teach a student meditation until he or she had gained a foothold in Right Understanding. Imagine a teacher insisting that you study the Buddha dharma for a few years before learning how to meditate. In today's world of instant gratification, that teacher would need a day job. Notice how the Buddha began his teaching of Right Understanding:

To understand suffering; to understand the origin of suffering; to understand the extinction of suffering; to understand the path that leads to the extinction of suffering. This is called Right Understanding.

This is an example of the careful, step-by-step and repetitive methodology of the Buddha's teaching. It isn't as if the Buddha were merely using this as an opportunity to review lessons previously learned. He integrated each new element of the dharma into the teaching that had already been established. If we embrace the truth that suffering is the inevitable result of living in the prison of our minds, then we have gained a crucial element of Right Understanding. Each element is intricately linked. The First Noble Truth is the foundation of Right Understanding, and at the same time Right Understanding is the foundation of the First Noble Truth. Each part of the Buddha dharma is a reflection of another, like a many faceted jewel. Lest we get stuck in the glue of intellectualization, the Buddha reminds his disciples in the Diamond Sutra:

Subhuti, that is why I say that the Dharma of all things can never be embraced within any arbitrary conception of phenomena however universal that conception may be. That is why it is called the Dharma and why there is no such thing as the Dharma.

Undoubtedly the Buddha would have said, "That is why it is called Right Understanding and why there is no such thing as Right Understanding."

After listing the Four Noble Truths, the Buddha presented the vast architecture of the Buddha dharma. He began by explaining that there are 10 symptoms of a diseased mind:

- 1) Destruction of living beings (ahimsa)

- 2) Stealing
- 3) Unskillful sexual activity
- 4) Lying
- 5) Gossip
- 6) Harsh, crude language
- 7) Silly chatter
- 8) Covetousness
- 9) Ill-will
- 10) Wrong views

We may not have all of these symptoms; indeed, we may not have most of these symptoms. Perhaps we never steal or tell lies. Perhaps we cannot comprehend why people are addicted to sex or can harm a living being. But some combination of these 10 symptoms is present in every diseased mind. What causes the mind to be diseased? Greed, hatred and delusion. The ancients often called them the three poisons. What is the source of greed? Where do hatred and delusion originate? According to Buddha, these poisons are not implanted into our minds from some evil spirit that exists “outside.” There is no Satan in the Buddha dharma – no one to blame. To find the source of greed, hatred and delusion all we need to do is find a nice clear mirror and take a good look. To understand the 10 symptoms of a diseased mind is Right Understanding. To understand that the cause of a diseased mind is greed, hatred and delusion is Right Understanding. To understand that these poisons are born from inside our own consciousness is Right Understanding. To put it mildly, Right Understanding separates one from the crowd. And what are the characteristics of life, once mind has been cured of disease?

- 1) A life of non violence
- 2) A life of non stealing
- 3) A life no longer addicted to unskillful sexual activity
- 4) A life of truth telling
- 5) A life of no gossip
- 6) A life of not speaking harsh, unkind or ugly words
- 7) A life of speaking of serious matters rather than idle chatter
- 8) A life of non greed
- 9) A life of lovingkindness
- 10) A life not caught in the “bramble bush” of opinions

This too is Right Understanding. The Buddha continued his teaching

by explaining the five aggregates of existence, often called the aggregates of clinging: form, feeling, perception, mental formations, and consciousness. We see, rather than intellectually grasp, that these five elements of personality are like a magic show; they are temporary and empty. The five aggregates of clinging are utterly brilliant. Shinzen Young once said that they may well be the Buddha's most original insight. For sure they are worthy of our study, and we will revisit them and see how they fall in the larger circle of the Twelve Nidanas in the following chapters.

At this point in his teaching, perhaps the Buddha saw that his disciples were ready to go deeper into Right Understanding. He said:

Whether Buddhas appear in the world or whether they do not appear in the world, it remains a firm condition, an immutable fact and fixed law that all formations are impermanent; that all formations are subject to suffering; that everything is without an Ego.

These are the three characteristics of all phenomena – the very core of Right Understanding:

- Annica – All formations are impermanent
- Dukkha – All formations are subject to suffering
- Anatta – Everything is without an Ego

A philosopher friend and I used to expound on the meaning of no self (anatta) over coffee and cigarettes in Hamburg, Germany. We thought that understanding the concept intellectually meant that we really grasped the meaning. Understanding the concept of anatta is not the same as *experiencing* it. In the same vein, we may all reluctantly agree that there seems to be a lot of pain in life (dukkha), but this is a far cry from the transformation that comes from the *experience* that all clinging leads inevitably to suffering. Right Understanding goes as deep into reality as the mind can bear. One *sees* anatta, anicca or dukkha; one *feels* them; one *knows* them. To deeply understand even one of the three is to be changed forever.

The Buddha then told his disciples that the mind is purified in four separate stages. Here he introduced one of the most beautiful phrases in

the language of spirit: “stream entry” or *sotapanna*. This is the stunning moment when consciousness has purified itself of the first three fetters: 1) belief in personality, 2) skepticism and 3) clinging to rites and rituals. This is that pivotal turn in the spiritual journey when consciousness leaves the cycle of rebirth behind. We don’t need to believe in reincarnation to understand stream entry. Decades later many Christians can still recount the moment they were “saved” in Christ. Many non-religious people remember a specific moment when their lives changed. A woman might recount the moment she knew that she simply had to go to her first AA meeting, or when she found the courage to leave an abusive relationship. All these are examples of some type of stream entry. In Buddhism, stream entry is the moment we enter the stream of the dharma.

From stream entry, the Buddha dharma teaches that consciousness can be further purified into an even more refined state: a *sakadagamin*, one who will only reincarnate in one more lifetime. Again, in the context of one life, as opposed to reincarnation, imagine that person who has undergone the metamorphosis of stream entry still has miles to travel and other transformations to experience in this very life.

In case we have started to over-intellectualize, the first grade teacher named Mr. Buddha reminds us that in truth there is no being to reincarnate nor a life to return to. He was relentless! Consciousness can be refined into an even more purified state: the *anagamin*, a being who will never return to this plane of existence. The final state of purification is that of an *arahat*, a state of complete and total liberation, a state of non-suffering.

All this and more comprises Right Understanding. You can see why this is the bare bones of the Buddha dharma. There is absolutely no question that a person who truly sees from the center of truth, who “sees right,” sees with Right Understanding. A person who sees with Right Understanding understands the Buddha dharma. You cannot have one without the other.

Impatient or precocious children often want to skip such elementary steps as the ABC’s. They seem too simplistic and boring to quick minds. We want to sit! We want to learn how to meditate! We want to fly; the hell with crawling! We may be willing to listen to a teacher drone on about Right Mindfulness and Right Concentration, particularly if we realize that there is simply no way to meditate without concentration and at least a

little mindfulness. Begrudgingly, we may even accept the necessity of Right Effort since we can see its importance to the last two, but that is as far as many of us seem willing to go. We want to calm our crazy minds and gain some control in our lives *now*. We'll get to the other stuff later; at least that is what our little ego tells us. But if we listen to the patient teacher, Mr. Buddha, he cautions us that that the journey of the Eightfold Path begins with Right Understanding, not fabulous skill in meditation.

Right Understanding begins with seeing glimpses of truth, perhaps no more than that, but how wonderful to be able to see glimpses of sunlight through a dark, cloudy day. Perhaps it begins with suffering, and a glimpse of the fact that you are not the only person on the block who is suffering (*dukkha*). Perhaps it begins with a growing awareness that you live with a zoo screaming in your head, and you begin to long for peace inside. Perhaps it begins with awareness that time is really running out, and you have a glimpse of impermanence (*annica*). Many people have been shocked by some trauma into a momentary awareness when they suddenly see that there is no real person in there (*anatta*)! There are a multitude of gates that open into Right Understanding.

In the Zen tradition, there are a series of drawings called the Ox Herding pictures which brilliantly capture the meaning of Right Understanding. They begin with a person looking for and finally spotting the footprints of an ox. Spotting footprints is a far cry from finding the owner of those footprints, let alone taming the creature. The most famous investigator of all, Sherlock Holmes, would remind us that we must begin with the evidence at hand. We have felt the existence of another reality, a way of seeing beyond this feedback loop of looking constantly for an image of ourselves in the distorted mirrors of "outside" reality. That glimmer of truth leads us toward the light of dharma.

No one gets very far in psychological work if he cannot first recognize the reality of the unconscious, if he cannot spot the footprints of his own shadow side, indeed if he cannot bear, even acknowledge, the existence of an angry, envious, shadow side. My analyst once said to me, and sternly, "It is as if you are standing there over a dead body, holding a smoking pistol and asking yourself who shot the poor idiot." I did not have the slightest idea what he was talking about! In fact, I was so convinced of my innocence and sincerity, so hurt that he could think such a mean thing about someone as nice as me, that I was unable to hear the wisdom in his

words.

Right Understanding is the beginning of true psychological work just as it is the beginning of true spiritual work. It suggests a startling new idea: Not only am I lost in this movie, I am creating this movie moment by moment. This is the underlying theme of all movement in the direction of maturity, psychological or spiritual: Our minds are creating what we are seeing! The Lankavatara Scripture says, “There is nothing but what is seen of the mind itself.” This is “coming round right” to *samma-ditthi*.

There is a legend that the Buddha used grains of rice or simply traced a large circle in the sand in order to teach the Dharma to his disciples. Inside the large circle he drew a smaller circle and within that one an even smaller circle. This is probably the most famous mandala in Buddhism, variously called the wheel of life, the wheel of becoming or the wheel of rebirth. Whether the Buddha came up with this *upaya* (skillful means) or not – and the evidence is that the mandala first appeared a few hundred years after his death – it is a marvelous visual aid to help us understand the chain of inevitability leading inexorably to suffering. He called this chain Dependent Origination, or the Twelve Nidanas. In a nutshell, it is a visual depiction of Right Understanding.

In the center of the mandala is a small circle with a rooster, snake, and pig chasing each other, each with its mouth biting the tail of the one in front. Round and round they go: greed, hatred and delusion, the famous three poisons. The rooster is bright yellow-red and represents greed (*lobha*). It is constantly driven to seek gratification of its desire and is endlessly restless. The rooster of desire is biting the tail of a green snake. In other words, desire, which always ends in frustration, has anger and hatred (*dosa*) in its mouth. The snake is green, which is the color of envy. Its poison can consume the human heart. In its mouth the snake bites the tail of a black pig, representing delusion (*moha*). The pig represents the polar opposite of Right Understanding. These are the three causes of the sickness that infects every human mind.

The small circle is surrounded by a larger circle which also turns round and round. This circle is divided into six sections which depict the six realms of existence: hell, hungry ghost, animal, human, titan, and deva. Chogyam Trungpa taught that these six realms are actually psychological states that each of us knows intimately. The mandala becomes ever more

clearly a mirror of mind. Finally, there is an outer rim that is divided into twelve sections. It turns as well. These twelve sections are called the Twelve Nidanas, and they function with blinding speed in each mind moment.

Every single aspect of Right Understanding falls explicitly or implicitly within this outer circle, and, as the great teachers of old said repeatedly, to understand the dharma is to understand the Twelve Nidanas. This will be our aim in the following chapters.

In the Surangama Sutra, the Buddha says:

This is like a man pointing a finger at the moon to show it to others who should follow the direction of the finger to look at the moon. If they look at the finger and mistake it for the moon they lose sight of both the moon and the finger.

This is our challenge as we continue a discussion of Right Understanding. It will be easy to lose sight of both the moon and the finger as we look at each of the Twelve Nidanas; they are challenging and difficult to understand at best. It will be easy to get lost in the thicket of words and concepts, and to lose patience with them, but shining behind the words and concepts is the unspoken meaning discovered only in the silence of the heart. This is the moon of Right Understanding.

Zen master Shoushan held up a bamboo stick and asked his students to “show” their understanding of the bamboo stick. May we open our hearts to silence; may we see right, may we know what is, and come back to life.