

## CHAPTER FOURTEEN

### RIGHT ACTION AND RIGHT LIVELIHOOD

#### Right Action

I remember a late summer afternoon many years ago, walking with a friend down the quiet sidewalks and perfectly manicured lawns of the New Jersey Shore. Evening was near, and the lovely stillness settling over the town was only interrupted by the frequent zap of bugs being fried as they flew into electric lamps hanging on patio eaves. Instant incineration. Buzz zap! Buzz zap! Pan-fried bugs. Such a stark contrast. While everyone was inside getting ready for dinner, having cocktails or, perhaps, listening to the evening news, the sound of those electric lamps kept breaking the lovely stillness. In that moment, it occurred to me that there really are only a few degrees of separation between the act of killing a bug and killing a human. All we need is to see someone as alien and uninvited. From there it is only a few steps removed to seeing him or her as despicable.

I remember an even earlier time when, as a child, I visited relatives who lived on a farm. I saw my aunt chase and catch 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." Surely, the folks on the New Jersey Shore would have chimed in, "and these are nothing but bugs."

Though there are plenty of legitimate arguments for vegetarianism and animal rights, these are not the matters we are considering at the moment. The question most cogent to this discussion is, “Are my actions skillful?” That question opens the door to the fourth aspect of the Eightfold Path, *samma-kammanta* or Right Action.

In the Pali scriptural language, Right Action literally means “Right Karma,” and, as with so many Buddhist terms, we would probably do much better to stay with the original Pali than its English translation. Perhaps we would consider our actions more carefully if we asked ourselves, “Is this 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. All acts of volition are karmic, and karma creates *sankhara*. We will reap the fruit of our karma in this life at least. According to the Buddha, we will reap the fruit of karma for lifetimes.

It is rather silly to think that we can deepen our meditation practice while insisting that we need to continue self-destructive behavior. Eventually, we simply must integrate our inner life with external behavior. The Buddha begins by telling us that we must take responsibility for what we think. Right Thought is radical and revolutionary. Since karma refers to any intentional action, and thinking is a mental action that can certainly be intentional, future consequences of unskillful thoughts are inevitable. From Right Thought we move to Right Speech, which tells us that there are also karmic consequences for the things we express through speech, writing, emails, etc. As William Blake says, “A truth that’s told with bad intent beats all the lies you can invent.” With the fourth aspect of the Path, Right Karma, the movement of increased consequence continues. Our physical behavior can create a most bitter harvest; it can also create a great abundance of good.

The Buddha mentions three fundamental “bodily actions” that comprise the fourth step of Right Karma. All three are grounded in the ancient teaching of *ahimsa*, nonviolence. Do no harm. This is

the foundation of Buddhist practice. Ahimsa is the touchstone against which we rub our questions about skillful behavior. It reveals the gold within. We may still make unskillful choices, but the touchstone of ahimsa has pointed us in the right direction.

And how is one made pure in three ways by bodily action? There is the case where a certain person, abandoning the taking of life, abstains from the taking of life. He dwells with his rod laid down, his knife laid down, scrupulous, merciful, compassionate for the welfare of all living beings.

Another translation says, “Without stick or sword, conscientious, full of sympathy, he is anxious for the welfare of all living beings.”

How beautiful are the words “full of sympathy, anxious, compassionate for the welfare of all living beings.” The Buddha does not say that we have some God-given right of dominion over this earth and all living creatures. We are not lifted up to a position of superiority. Rather than being above and away from we are asked to be with and toward; we are asked to be anxious for the welfare of all sentient beings. There is no ambiguity in this teaching. It isn't that we must only be anxious for the weak or under-privileged or the elderly or powerless children. The teaching of the Buddha-dharma says that we must be scrupulous, merciful, compassionate for the welfare of *all* living beings, and that would include the strong and over-privileged. Beyond being concerned for the welfare of our own species, doesn't the phrase “living beings” include those pesky bugs that can ruin your weekend barbeque?

What about termites? How can I manage to feel compassion for something that is feasting on my house? What about the invasion of ants that comes to picnic in my Southern California kitchen every August, or the ever-present apartment cockroaches who shared my space when I lived in New York City? My ahimsa solution to the cockroach problem was to chase them all over the

apartment, catch them in a jar and, instead of smashing them, I would throw them out the window! Unfortunately, I lived on the 16th floor. Truly, I pretended 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 Karma? Probably not, but at least I was in the ball park. Sadly, my actions were not far removed from those of Luang Ta, who we will discuss shortly. Is it possible to kill termites without cutting yourself off from the act of killing? Is it possible that one can feel compassion even if one must kill?

We read that Native American tribes only killed animals for food; they maintained a deep connection to what they had to kill. Contrast that to people riding on trains shooting out the window at a herd of wild buffalo just for the thrill of the kill. Surely these karmic actions did not have the same consequences.

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, with his back to you, 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 single doubt, that this one violent act would save the lives of over twenty million people, would you do it? Could you do it?

You can well imagine the discussion that followed. Most of our questions involved ahimsa. Even if Hitler were evil incarnate, would it not still be a violation of the law of non-violence to kill him? While everyone at the seminar expressed some ambivalence, the majority took the position that it is wrong to kill regardless of the circumstances. Dr. Whitmont - who escaped from Austria in the 1930's and who lost most of his relatives in the German nightmare - had no such ambivalence. He said that life often forces us to come down from the ivory towers of intellectual discussion, where we sit and talk about love, 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 decision. The law of ahimsa could not save her from the necessity of choice. Either she chose to have one child killed or her refusal to choose would result in both children being killed. What would a good Buddhist do in that situation?

Whitmont spoke of the ancient truth of the Bhagavad Gita, one of the most sacred Hindu scriptures. It teaches us that life is not black and white where we always get to choose between violence and nonviolence. Sometimes, we must stand and fight on life's battle ground, and sometimes that involves Sophie's choice.

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, and 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? Had he acquiesced to the gang's demands, and had his wife and children been harmed, would he escape karmic consequence through passivity? What of the soldiers who finally liberated the Nazi death camps filled with beings who had become despicable objects to be gassed or shot – of no more consequence than the bugs being incinerated on the New Jersey Shore? Was it wrong for American soldiers to kill those Germans?

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,” and we don't have the luxury of one choice being right and one choice being wrong. Sometimes, both sides of the question have varying amounts of right and wrong. Hence, the debates continue: This war is evil, that war is righteous. Women have the right to choose whether or not to abort a fetus, after all it's their body isn't it? The separate life growing in a woman's body is no more “hers” than the idea that a child “belongs” to its

parents. She has no right to choose whether it will live or die. Capital punishment is a sin; no it is not. Euthanasia is an act of mercy. No it is murder. We long to believe that there is a right way and a wrong way to live are lives, and all we need to do is memorize the rules. But the actual living of the dharma can be extraordinarily complex. This is the realm of the fourth step of Right Karma.

Western psychology adds another complication to the mix. Here is a Buddhist story that we can read through Jung's eyeglasses:

There was a monk named Luang Ta who had a problem. He craved meat. One morning on his walk to the lavatory, he spied a big turtle slowly moseying down the path. Suddenly, 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 within the hearing of his attendant, "Just now I went to the lavatory and saw a huge turtle crawling." His attendant, who was 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 once more took out his scriptures and again started 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. Perhaps he really was able to fool himself into believing that he was a good Buddhist practicing nonviolence. Perhaps he truly believed that he was innocent since he did not actually commit the deed. What we see in this story is the problem of the shadow, that hidden side of the

ego that allows us to remain feeling as innocent as a lamb. Do volitional acts as defined by Buddhism include actions that stem from our shadow side? See no evil, speak no evil, hear no evil? The Buddha indicated that it is far better to know you are committing an unskillful act than to cover yourself in a cloak of innocence. If we continually and successfully escape taking conscious responsibility for our unwholesome actions, artfully dodging the consequences of shadow actions, we may sleep well at night, but when will we ever rid ourselves of delusion?

The practice of non-violence penetrates into the deepest aspects of our behavior. We can smile at Luang Ta's simple-minded naïveté, but what about the "do no harm" aspect of ahimsa? What about the consequence of "without stick or sword, conscientious, full of sympathy, he is anxious for the welfare of all living beings?" Obviously, one who clings to the idea that cruelty is limited to the act of killing has missed the spirit of the Buddha's teaching. How much do we observe Right Karma in the way we treat our own bodies and minds?

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 one of the great teachings in the *Isha Upanishad*. What is the value of refraining from murder if we are intent on suicide?

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

Right Karma must begin with the intention to self-nurture, and metta is the flower that is born from that intention. We cannot practice Right Karma if we refuse to begin with a deep bow of lovingkindness 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.

Again, if we apply the touchstone of ahimsa to non-stealing, we are pointed in the right direction. Taking what belongs to another is an act of doing harm. Who has not had something stolen? Some of us have been fortunate, losing only wallet or purse, but think of the countless numbers who have had their house ransacked, their car stolen or vandalized. It can be devastating. Now we even have something called identity theft. The real harm is not to the bank account, certainly painful enough. It is the pain and suffering of having your world invaded by hatred and greed, your sense of safety 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 on the curb, the shadow part of me would argue that it is mine because I found it. Don't most of us have this tendency? However, someone practicing Right Action would feel "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, thinking (justifying, rationalizing), "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 decades. She would feel lovingkindness for the owner of that ring.

We also 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.

In psychology, we have learned through the study of child development something quite remarkable: emotional abuse is far more damaging to the child than physical abuse. “Sticks and stones can break your bones, but names can really kill.” Think about the consequences of taking away a child’s sense of the right to be loved and nurtured. Literally, many parents rob a child of its future by destroying its present life. This is a theft beyond comprehension.

The tragedy of youth is that, if our parents have not robbed us of it, we have 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 wisdom that we need to work on ourselves, but no longer do we have the energy to do the work. If robbing ourselves and our children of precious time is not stealing, I truly do not know what stealing is.

The third and last part of Right Action is abstaining from unlawful sexual intercourse. In today’s world, sexual behavior must surely be the most gray of the gray areas of Right Action. Unfortunately, the Buddha’s words are typically 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 or 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. There is no way around the obvious and overt sexism in early Buddhism or the sad fact that women have remained second class citizens until recently, as views have begun to change, not only here in the West but finally in the East 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 once 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? He applied the touchstone of ahimsa to the question.

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 better guide through the difficult questions about sexual behavior than asking yourself, "Is my sexual energy harmful to myself or 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 her or him, 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 to the third person? It is amazing how many people convince themselves that there is no harm if the third party is in the dark. If I have "recreational sex" with a "sex friend" is there no harm involved to myself or the other? If I am sitting at work, bored out of my mind, and get involved with porn on the internet, have I done no harm to my boss, or to my partner at home, or to myself? If my body is the temple of my soul, how does my sexual practice reflect that truth? Can you hear the faint footsteps of your shadow in the presence of such disturbing questions? I certainly can.

Obviously, the ultimate definition of what is or is not harmful or violent depends on where we are on the Eightfold 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. It is simply a fact that violence to one person may be a necessary and acceptable action to another. As our sensitivity to levels of violence becomes

increasingly more subtle, our attitude toward the meaning of non-killing, stealing or sexual misconduct also becomes increasingly subtle. Some humans transcend human sexuality completely. The point is for us to let ahimsa guide us through this land of gray.

## **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 arc will turn inward again. 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. Once again, we see that the actual experience of Right Living is extraordinarily complex.

Here is a story that is mostly fact:

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 Zen Buddhist sangha in Louisville. Although she says that she considers herself to be Buddhist, she has yet to take the formal refuge in the Buddha, Dharma and Sangha. She is considering doing so next year.

Ann works for a large cigarette company in Louisville, Kentucky.

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? Does that let her off the hook (like Luang Ta)? If Anne worked on the production line or if she drove one of the trucks that deliver hundreds of thousands of cigarettes to the distributor, would that make a difference? Does it matter if she believes that it is not up to 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). Slave trade is easy, but what about being a policewoman? Does anyone in his right mind want to take away weapons from the L.A. police? In this L.A.? What about the American men and women who gave their lives in World War II? Were they breaking this fifth step of Right Livelihood? They killed, they did harm. How can this be called Right Livelihood? Are we forced to say that you can either be a soldier or a Buddhist but not both at the same time? Certainly, any profession that violates Right Speech is considered wrong Livelihood, and if I practiced non-lying while working at a local bank, it seems I would be forced 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! Most of the really impossible questions are eliminated when we live in a forest with a Buddha. 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. If Tyson Foods is not specifically wringing those chicken necks *for me*, I am free to put my frozen dinner in the microwave and eat in peace. And what

would the Buddha have said about killing animals if he had been born an Eskimo living near the North Pole? When last I heard, neither rice, fruit nor vegetables grow in abundance in ice. Must we now exclude the Eskimos from the Sangha?

Nisargadatta would probably have told Ann not to worry about her livelihood when it comes to Right Living. After all, he *sold* cigarettes. Even though he taught the most profound aspects of the dharma in a little room above his shop, wasn't he violating Right Livelihood? Must we also exclude one of my favorite teachers 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.*" So perhaps we can begin to answer this conundrum of "What is Right Living?" by tending to our own business. I have no right whatsoever to say what is or is not right for Anne who works for a cigarette company in Louisville. Nor can I 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 would not accept the office of President of the United States because I simply could not order troops to kill. That does not mean that it is wrong for our President to do so! Nor would I vote for a President who had my sensibilities. For instance, I would not vote for the Dalai Lama for President of the United States. Would you if you knew that our country would go the way of Tibet? I cannot tell you that you are wrong to support a war in Iraq or Afghanistan, let alone if you are a soldier protecting our country. Nor can I say that you are wrong if you march in fierce opposition to our being at war with another country. I can only be a witness to my own level of Right Understanding, whatever that is.

Right Understanding is the truth of *my* understanding; it is not my high-toned ability to mouth Buddhist or Christian truths and preach my version of truth to you or to judge *your* understanding. Perhaps Anne is doing more good work in that company and is

more devoted to her meditation practice than I or most of us reading these words. The only question that she must ask herself is, “Are my actions skillful?” Or she might ask, “Am I walking a path that does not violate my own level of understanding?” This is the question each of us must ask: Is my spiritual practice internally consistent with my actions?

Now the dharma circle curves back to the interior, returning to where it began. We will turn to the next division of the Eightfold Path in the following chapters.