

# Right View

## Chapter Nine

### THE HEART OF THE BUDDHA'S TEACHING

The first practice of the Noble Eightfold Path is Right View (*samyag drishti*). Right View is, first of all, a deep understanding of the Four Noble Truths — our suffering, the making of our suffering, the fact that our suffering can be transformed, and the path of transformation. The Buddha said that Right View is to have faith and confidence that there are people who have been able to transform their suffering. Venerable Shariputra added that Right View is knowing which of the four kinds of nutriments that we have ingested have brought about what has come to be.<sup>1</sup>

Shariputra described Right View as the ability to distinguish wholesome roots (*kushala mula*) from unwholesome roots (*akushala mula*). In each of us, there are wholesome and unwholesome roots — or seeds — in the depths of our consciousness. If you are a loyal person, it is because the seed of loyalty is in you. But don't think that the seed of betrayal isn't also in you. If you live in an environment where your seed of loyalty is watered, you will be a loyal person. But if your seed of betrayal is watered, you may betray even those you love. You'll feel guilty about it, but if the seed of betrayal in you becomes strong, you may do it.

The practice of mindfulness helps us identify all the seeds in our store consciousness<sup>2</sup> and water the ones that are the most wholesome. When one person comes up to us, the very sight of him makes us uncomfortable. But when someone else walks by, we like her right away. Something in each of them touches a seed in us. If we love our mother deeply will feel tense every time we think of our father, it is natural that when we see a young lady who looks like our mother, we will appreciate her, and when we see a man who evokes the memory of our father, we will feel uncomfortable. In this way, we can "see" the seeds that are in us — seeds of love for our mother and seeds of hurt vis-a-vis our father. When we become aware of the seeds in our storehouse, we will not be surprised by our own behavior or the behavior of others.

The seed of Buddhahood, the capacity to wake up and understand things as they are, is also present in each of us. When we join our palms and bow to another person, we acknowledge the seed of Buddhahood in him or her. When we bow to a child this way, we help him or her grow up beautifully and with self-confidence. If you plant corn, corn will grow. If you plant wheat, wheat will grow. If you act in a wholesome way, you will be happy. If you act in an unwholesome way you water the seeds of craving, anger, and violence in yourself. Right View is to recognize which seeds are wholesome and to encourage those seeds to be watered. This is called "selective touching." We need to discuss and share with each other to deepen our understanding of this practice and the practice of the Five Mindfulness Trainings, especially the fifth, about the "foods" we ingest.<sup>3</sup>

At the base of our views are our perceptions (*samjna*). In Chinese, the upper part of the character for perception *jfe* is "mark," "sign," or "appearance," and the lower part is "mind" or "spirit." Perceptions always have a "mark," and in many cases that mark is illusory. The Buddha advised us not to be fooled by what we perceive. He told Subhuti, "Where there is perception, there is deception."<sup>4</sup>

The Buddha also taught on many occasions that most of our perceptions are erroneous, and that most of our suffering comes from wrong perceptions." We have to ask ourselves again and again, "Am I sure?" Until we see clearly, our wrong perceptions will prevent us from having Right View.

To perceive always means to perceive something. We believe that the object of our perception is outside of the subject, but that is not correct. When we perceive the moon, the moon is us. When we smile to our friend, our friend is also us because she is the object of our perception.

When we perceive a mountain, the mountain is the object "of our perception. When we perceive the moon, the moon is the object of our perception. When we say, "I can see my consciousness in the flower," it means we can see the cloud, the sunshine, the earth, and the minerals in it. But how can we see our consciousness in a flower? The flower is our consciousness. It is the object of our perception. It is our perception. To perceive means to perceive something. Perception means the coming into existence of the perceiver and the perceived. The flower that we are looking at is part of our consciousness. The idea that our consciousness is outside of the flower has to be removed. It is impossible to have a subject without an object. It is impossible to remove one and retain the other.

The source of our perception, our way of seeing, lies in our store consciousness. If ten people look at a cloud, there will be ten different perceptions of it. Whether it is perceived as a dog, a hammer, or a coat depends on our mind — our sadness, our memories, our anger. Our perceptions carry with them all the errors of subjectivity. Then we praise, blame, condemn, or complain depending on our perceptions. But our perceptions are made of our afflictions — craving, anger, ignorance, wrong views, and prejudice. Whether we are happy or we suffer depends largely on our perceptions. It is important to look deeply at our perceptions and know their source.

We have an idea of happiness. We believe that only certain conditions will make us happy. But it is often our very idea of happiness that prevents us from being happy. We have to look deeply into our perceptions in order to become free of them. Then, what has been a perception becomes an insight, a realization of the path. This is neither perception nor non-perception. It is a clear vision, seeing things as they are.

Our happiness and the happiness of those around us depend on our degree of Right View. Touching reality deeply knowing what is going on inside and outside of ourselves is the way to liberate ourselves from the suffering that is caused by wrong perceptions. Right View is not an ideology, a system, or even a path. It is the insight we have into the reality of life, a living insight that fills us with understanding, peace, and love.

Sometimes we see our children doing things that we know will cause them to suffer in the future, but when we try to tell them, they won't listen. All we can do is to stimulate the seeds of Right View in them, and then later, in a difficult moment, they may benefit from our guidance. We cannot explain an orange to someone who has never tasted one. No matter how well we describe it, we cannot give someone else the direct experience. He has to taste it for himself. As soon as we say a single word, he is already caught. Right View cannot be described. We can only point in the correct direction. Right View cannot even be transmitted by a teacher. A teacher can help us identify the seed of Right View that is already in our garden, and help us have the confidence to practice, to entrust that seed to the soil of our daily life. But we are the gardener. We have to learn how to water the wholesome seeds that are in us so they will bloom into the flowers of Right View. The instrument for watering wholesome seeds is mindful living — mindful breathing, mindful walking, living each moment of our day in mindfulness.

At a peace rally in Philadelphia in 1966, a reporter asked me, "Are you from North or South Vietnam?" If I had said I was from the north, he would have thought I was pro-communist, and if I had said I was from the south, he would have thought I was pro-American. So I told him, "I am from the Center." I wanted to help him let go of his notions and encounter the reality that was right in front of him. This is the language of Zen. A Zen monk saw a beautiful goose fly by and he wanted to share this joy with his elder brother who was walking beside him. But at that moment, the other monk had bent down to remove a pebble from his sandal. By the time he looked up, the goose had already flown by. He asked,

"What did you want me to see?" but the younger monk could only remain silent. Master Tai Xu said, "As long as the tree is behind you, you can see only its shadow. If you want to touch the reality, you have to turn around." "Image teaching" uses words and ideas. "Substance teaching" communicates by the way you live.

If you come to Plum Village for one day, you have an idea about Plum Village, but that idea isn't really Plum Village. You might say, "I've been to Plum Village," but in fact you've really only been to your idea of Plum Village. Your idea might be slightly better than that of someone who has never been there, but it's still only an idea. It is not the true Plum Village. Your concept or perception of reality is not reality. When you are caught in your perceptions and ideas, you lose reality.

To practice is to go beyond ideas, so you can arrive at the suchness of things. "No idea" is the path of non-conception. As long as there is an idea, there is no reality, no truth. "No idea" means no wrong idea, no wrong conception. It does not mean no mindfulness. Because of mindfulness, when something is right, we know it's right, and when something is wrong, we know it's wrong.

We are practicing sitting meditation, and we see a bowl of tomato soup in our mind's eye, so we think that is wrong practice, because we are supposed to be mindful of our breathing. But if we practice mindfulness, we will say, "I am breathing in and I am thinking about tomato soup." That is Right Mindfulness already. Rightness or wrongness is not objective. It is subjective.

Relatively speaking, there are right views and there are wrong views. But if we look more deeply, we see that all views are wrong views. No view can ever be the truth. It is just from one point; that is why it is called a "point of view." If we go to another point, we will see things differently and realize that our first view was not entirely right. Buddhism is not a collection of views. It is a practice to help us eliminate wrong views. The quality of our views can always be improved. From the viewpoint of ultimate reality, Right View is the absence of all views.

When we begin the practice, our view is a vague idea about the teachings. But conceptual knowledge is never enough. The seeds of Right View, the seed of Buddhahood, are in us, but they are obscured by so many layers of ignorance, sorrow, and disappointment. We have to put our views into practice. In the process of learning, reflecting, and practicing, our view becomes increasingly wise, based on our real experience. When we practice Right Mindfulness, we see the seed of Buddhahood in everyone, including ourselves. This is Right View. Sometimes it is described as the Mother of All Buddhas (prajna paramita), the energy of love and understanding that has the power to free us. When we practice mindful living, our Right View will blossom, and all the other elements of the path in us will flower, also.

The eight practices of the Noble Eightfold Path nourish each other. As our view becomes more "right," the other elements of the Eightfold Path in us also deepen. Right Speech is based on Right View, and it also nourishes Right View. Right Mindfulness and Right Concentration strengthen and deepen Right View. Right Action has to be based on Right View. Right Livelihood clarifies Right View. Right View is both a cause and an effect of all the other elements of the path.

1 See chap. 7, pp. 31-37. See also Discourse on Right View, p. 269.

2 See chap. 4, n. 1, on p. 12, for an explanation of store consciousness.

3 See Thich Nhat Hanh, *For a Future To Be Possible*.