

If I were a hammer

If I were a hammer, I would probably see the whole world as nails. I'd hammer them morning, noon, afternoon, night, and all day long. Any nail that I see sticking out, I would knock it in, so that the world would be well hammered. That "hammer" is our world-view, and the nails our views of others.

Many of us are fortunate enough to mature as we age: but there are more who age but do not mature. Our bodies grow and age, but our minds do not (Dh 152). We remain as hammers, better at hammering as we age. As time passes, we find that there are more nails than we can hammer; or perhaps we have hammered all the nails we can find, and are at a loss for a lack of nails.

But since change is the universal law, we have no choice but to change, painfully or easily, slowly or quickly. We realize we are more than mere hammers; in fact, we are not hammers at all; and the nails are actually very useful, after all, as they hold our world together.

We are maturing when we look back and tell ourselves that we should have known better. We are happier when we look at such follies and laugh at them for what they really are. We mature because we have let go of the past.

Then one day, something jerks us out of our rut of comfort. Maybe it is a loss of something we deeply treasure (such as our wealth); or we lose a loved one, or our job; or we fall seriously ill; or something we have taken for granted is not really so. Suddenly, we feel all alone – like the Buddha under the Bodhi tree, deserted even by the five monks who are supposed to attend to him.

For some of us, fortunately, this aloneness opens a window into a fresh new vista in our lives. For some of us, however, we begin to notice our hollowness. Either way, we realize that we need an inner vision. As we have been mostly outward looking most of our lives, we might find it difficult to make out the images that we see within, but somehow we feel inexorably drawn towards our inner spaciousness. So we rise to another level in our growing maturity.

However, as long as we are unawakened, we will be defined and limited by our senses. For they are all that we have to make "sense" of the world. The eye sees forms, but does not see itself. The ear hears sounds but cannot hear itself. The nose smells smells but knows not itself. The tongue tastes tastes but tastes not itself. The body feels touches, but senses not by itself. Only the mind senses everything, but it usually makes up what it senses: seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, feeling and thinking what it likes and is habituated to.

When an unawakened mind thinks, it often sees only itself, and thinks, "only this is right; everything else is wrong." The unawakened mind is like a fortune-teller who tells others their fortunes ("You have it all wrong; this is what you should do") but he himself does not even know his own real fortune.

To say that *only this is right* is to take a mind-shot of passing reality and declare that it is everything there was, will be, or is. But here it may be easier to understand the situation if we imagine our minds to be glass windows or lenses that we look through. If our windows or lenses are crystal clear, we might perfectly see outside. Then again, we might not get the whole picture. We tend to be selective at what we experience.

So we dislocate a piece of life's jigsaw and hold it up high to be life itself. But the piece we have dislodged is already dead in our cold fingers. We might scoop up a handful of water from the passing river of life, but it is no more the river. The best we can do is perhaps to follow its flow, whether joyfully walking along its bank, or calmly riding a boat on its waters.

As we follow the river on its banks or its waters, we pass various kinds of changing vegetation and landscape. We see mountains from afar, around which the river curves in a near circle, a huge ox-bow, so that we could view almost all the sides of the mountain. Is there one and only right view of a mountain? Our view depends upon where we stand and from where we are looking.

If life is a journey, we must keep on moving. No matter how fine or breathless the views might be, we must move on. No matter how we want them, or love to stay on to view them longer, we simply must move on, sooner or later. We need to reach down into the open sea and on to our true destination, whose beauty and peace surpass everything we have experienced or could imagine.

Sometimes we might think it is possible, or wish it so, *to take no stand at all*, but this, too, has its own difficulties. The brahmin Dīgha, nakha, for example, once approaches the Buddha and declares, "I do not accept everything!" that is, he rejects all opinions and claims to have no views. The Buddha's reply is short and clear, "That, brahmin, is a view, too!"¹

One way of understanding this interesting statement is that right view is not about *knowing* something, or even doing something (no matter how good or religious it appears to be), but it is bringing about *a wholesome change* in ourselves. Right view is the *non-clinging* or "letting go" aspect of wisdom. Right view frees us from our thoughts and views, and makes us better and happier people.

Wrong view is always "rooted in greed," always seeking and clinging.² Right view, on the other hand, is free from seeking and clinging, but it is a "seeing" that enhances understanding. Right view, as such, keeps our conscious processes detached (that is, in the present), free from extremes (that is, letting go of the past and the future).

The middle way, as such, avoids both the extremes of eternalism and annihilationism, of existence and non-existence, to be and not to be. We could generally say that this middle way is the most common approach that the Buddha uses in his teachings. This is understandable because his audience are all right and ready to receive his teaching, the truth that he has awakened to, with a minimum of skillful means, if any.

To them, "to be or not to be" is *not* the question, 'tis neither nobler in the mind to suffer the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune, nor is it worthwhile to take arms against a sea of troubles.³ It's just a mote "in the mind's eye,"⁴ a troubling speculation that is unnecessary and unhelpful. They have found the middle of the "middle way."

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[an occasional re-look at the Buddha's Example and Teachings]

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¹ **Dīgha, nakha Sutta** (M 74) = SD 16.1: <http://dharmafarer.org/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2009/12/16.1-Dighanakha-S-m74-piya.pdf>

² **Mahā, nidāna S** (D 15) gives an "dependent arising" cycle for the origins of social disorder, thus: "dependent on feeling, there is craving → seeking → gain → decision-making → desire and lust → attachment → possessiveness → avarice → safe-guarding → there arise various evil unwholesome state—taking up of the rod, taking up of the sword, conflicts, quarrels, disputes [strife], back-biting, harsh speech, false speech" (D 15.9/2:58 f) = SD 5.17.

³ A Buddhist response to Shakespeare's famous quote (*Hamlet* 3.1.56-83), 1602. Hamlet is basically wondering whether it is better to live or to die: he is deeply troubled by his life's issues, but his fear of death is even greater.

⁴ Cf *Hamlet* 1.1.112 (Horatio to Barnardo), 1.2.185 (Hamlet to Horatio).