

## Better wrong, then right

[Revised edition of fb180804 piya on Facebook]

Most of us do not like those who think that they are always right. A fate worse than death is perhaps to totally believe that someone is always right when he is actually almost always wrong—imagine who such a person can be?

Yet, we often think that we are always right. How else can it be? The “I” is always right: seems like good grammar but bad logic. The “I” is actually always wrong, simply because it puts itself first. This is the worst-case scenario when we are unlikely to learn anything. The “I” assumes that it already knows everything. This is what religion often teaches us by way of its dogmas.

Early Buddhism has no dogmas in the sense that we need to rely on ourself, and we need to learn things for ourself. Yet underneath it all, we are taught there is **no** self! Only learning. It does not make sense, for example, to merely **believe** that “life is suffering.” This is clearly pessimistic. On the other extreme, we may reject this belief (it is only a belief) and sing that “everything is beautiful.”

Religious mass killing is beautiful? Women being gang-raped in a religious country is beautiful? Mass flooding, death and hunger are beautiful? A religious building collapsing on its crowd of pious worshippers beautiful?

For practical purposes (not for philosophical discussion), to “suffer” means to face some kind of challenge that causes us pain, or prevent us from getting what we desire, or throwing at us what we do not desire. We don’t need to be religious or very clever to know this. And we don’t need to be religious or very clever to move away from such pain or the undesirable, or move them as far away as possible from us.

If all we do is simply to avoid suffering, but then it becomes an endless routine—THIS is suffering! This is the reactive life of a foolish, ignorant or powerless person. Our daily life and living moments are nothing but avoiding pain—this is suffering; a subhuman existence.

Early Buddhism defines 3 levels of **suffering** as follows:

- (1) pain as suffering (*dukkha, dukkhatā*);
- (2) change as suffering (*vipariṇāma, dukkhatā*);
- (3) formations as suffering (*saṅkhāra, dukkhatā*).

(1) may be seen as simply **physical** pain. This is the easiest to get rid of. We only need to change our posture; or eat when we are hungry; or go to the toilet; heal ourself when we are in pain or sick; and so on.

(2) is when we, for example, we lose friends, or break up with a loved one, or discover that someone is not what he pretends to be, or that people and situations simply change unpredictably.

(3) refers to how we “form” our own world of suffering with views, words and actions. We may feel self-satisfied about what we **are** (our body, youth, beauty, health), but these suddenly change. We can never be satisfied with what we **have** simply because nothing in this world is really ours. That’s why our millions make us suspect something big is still missing in our lives. That is why “prince” Siddhattha gave up even his family, palaces and kingdom. He wanted the real deal.

An important related idea of (3) is that we can and must learn from our mistakes. Suffering is our best teacher when we are willing to learn. 6 years of self-torture taught the Bodhisattva that it was not the way to awakening. If he took that long, what about us? Just take our time to learn. Not learning means that we are slaves to our views forever; stunted and blinded by our own views. Like king Lear of Shakespeare, even with eyes, we do not see—that is as long as we do not learn what the suffering is about.

Suffering means that something vital is missing in our life, that we can be better. We do not yet see this. We think we **know**, but knowledge is just another burden: our views when they agree with those of others. We need **vision**, too. A mountain has many views; even after viewing it all around, we do not really know it until we have climbed it and enjoyed its terrain, heights and views.

Life—in terms of awakening—is a journey without a goal, without a foreseeable end. The path well travelled is what we learn about ourself and life. Whether it is the path well taken or less taken, only we can make our own journey. Sometimes we journey with others, heading in the same direction, but often we must part ways, only to meet again maybe.

In a sense, our journey ends whenever we stop. It is not where, but when. When we learn deeper about ourself, it is like we’ve reached a delightful spot. We just love the view and the space. In an important way, our journey must be away from the madding crowd for the space of truth and beauty. **Truth** about what (not who) we really are, and the **beauty** this vision brings.

One powerful hint that we are heading the right way is that our life overflows with truth and beauty. What we think, say and do are beautiful because they celebrate truth which frees us from lies that we and others live. Since our suffering is rooted in our own hearts, no external power, even the almightiest cannot help us in any way. Only we can help ourself—by seeing our true self.

Meantime, nothing is more natural than making our own mistakes, nothing more precious than learning from them. The wise is not one who knows a lot, but one who has lived and learned from all his many mistakes. How else does a toddler learn to walk. Every fall and knock teaches him to walk better. He never gave up. We were that toddler.