

Better to be kind than right?

[Previously published as fb210618 Piya Tan]

When someone, especially a teacher, says this, we wonder if he has done something wrong. Or worse, he is promoting wrong things: that it's all right to be wrong (create bad karma), so long as we show kindness to others. What's going on here?

In both my academic and Buddhist training, there is one common spirit I am taught: respect your audience. They have come to learn Dhamma, not for our glory.

Suppose someone who habitually breaks the precepts, or even if he has broken one precept, and he gives us a nice meal of steak (satay) or some money, or does us a favour: does that mean it is all right for him to break the precept? There is something seriously wrong and bad reasoning here!

Would the Buddha say this?

Interestingly, in a culture with the highest Power Distance Index (PDI)—how lower-status people relate or react to higher-status people—being treated “nice” by those higher up (including monks and nuns) means we are accepted by them, and this is “good” for us. Hence, when we get a meal or some gift or benefit from those “atas” (higher up) means that we are in their favour. This is a kind of bribery or corruption in reverse.

My point is that a wise or good teacher would be very careful how he teaches. He would not say or do things that would confuse others, or disempower them, so that they like him more, or will depend on him for what is right or wrong, good or bad. When we depend on others in this way, we are then morally dependent on a PERSON, a teacher, not the teaching, not the Buddha Dhamma. This is wrong and bad.

The teaching guides us

The Buddha teaches us to study and practice the Dhamma so that we become SELF-RELIANT. This means, amongst other things, that we should know for ourselves WHY we keep the precepts, HOW to keep the precepts, and that we ACTUALLY keep the precepts.

Clearly, we should find out about this from wise and kind teachers. What we learn are called PRINCIPLES. For example, why it is wrong to kill. Reason: Life is precious. How we practice the precept depends fully on our own efforts. Hence, he should not ask the teacher: Is it all right if someone else kills for us? In other words, we should be accountable for our own karma. For generations some foreign monks have been teaching us bad Dharma.

Can you bear my karma?

However, say, when a soldier is ordered to kill local citizens (like in Myanmar), the brunt of the karma is on the powerful who ordered the killing. However, the soldiers also bear the karma, since they are the instruments of death, especially of the innocent and defenceless in their own homeland.

Killing, stealing, sexual misconduct, lying and drunkenness (clouded mind) are both morally bad and ethically wrong. In this case, “morally bad” refers to natural morality: it creates bad karma for the perpetrator. “Ethical” means right or wrong depends on the law and how society views it.

These 5 precepts have been singled out by the Buddha because they protect the values that make a wholesome and productive society possible. Such a society brings peace and prosperity, which is able to support good renunciants, monks and nuns, who keep the precepts, meditate, and gain wisdom for awakening. It also allows us to practice the Dhamma peacefully and effectively.

We cannot transfer merits

Some teachers, such as missionary monks from Sri Lanka seem very concerned about gaining financial and support (like living in their own house vihara) from the lay followers. They use Buddhism as rituals, which means we only need to follow what they tell us to do, and we gain “merits.” Another kind of religious bribery!

Then, they teach us (wrongly) to “transfer merits” to the dead. This is wrong and bad in two ways at least:

- (1) Merits (good karma) are our own wholesome mind (intention): it cannot be transferred!
- (2) The dead cannot receive anything from us: they have been reborn. There are NO dead. At best, we can benefit them with our regular cultivation of lovingkindness, if and when they remain behind as pretas (those beings whose bad karma (usually craving) keeps them stuck here because of their craving

Don't encourage monks to be bad

The Vinaya was introduced by the Buddha for at least 2 important reasons:

- (1) Some monks (out of ignorance or willfully) behave like laymen, like enjoying sensual pleasures, using money, etc.
- (2) Lay people suggested to the Buddha (such as getting the monks to assemble on full moon and new moon days), or lay people complained to the Buddha about the bad conduct of some monks.

The Vinaya also makes the sangha a “legal person” so that it can ordain those who want to renounce the world as monks and nuns. Any monks or nuns who reject or ignore the Vinaya automatically lose their ordination: the Buddha calls them “YELLOWNECKS,” skinheads in blankets who do not deserve our respect, and we should avoid them like the COVID virus: they are worse, since they will affect our minds negatively, too.

WE GET THE BUDDHISM WE DESERVE, work hard for it, protect our spiritual legacy from Cult Gurus and Yellownecks.

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

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