

RIGHT ACTION & RIGHT LIVELIHOOD

-by F.Mark Davis, Editorial Representative

WORLD FELLOWSHIP OF BUDDHIST REVIEW, Bangkok, Thailand

It seems that the fourth step of the Noble Eightfold Path, Right Action (*samma-kammanta*) can scarcely be separated from the fifth step, Right Livelihood (*samma-ajiva*). It appears, then, that the Tathagata placed them adjacently for no arbitrary reason--though there are some subtle differences between them.

Any person who has awakened from the sleep that has overtaken the majority of beings eventually comes to realize that he is bound to the Wheel of Becoming (*bhavacakra*), the life of cause and effect, for a very long time to come. Among other things, too, he realizes that his past karma-formations or volitional acts (*sankharas*) are bearing results (*vipaka*), right here and now; and, he is aware of the fact that his present volitional acts are creating more each day he lives. Knowing that he is powerless to escape suddenly from the process, he does his utmost to work within the present framework or state of things. Thus arises the problem as to how to carry on and, at the same time, move ever closer to final deliverance.



Vairochana Buddha

Viewed from a distance, man appears quite enduring, unchanging, and stable. In short, he seems to have an unchanging identity. But this is not the case. For upon a closer and more penetrating scrutiny, man actually appears to be something comparable to a whirl-pool that is moving so fast that it appears to be a solid entity. As it is with man, for the man at the present moment is not identical with the man of the preceding moment, so it is, too, with the rest of nature; and so it is with the picture we observe on the television screen. In the case of the latter, the miniscule dot of light, which travels the length and breadth of the screen in a fraction of a second, moves so rapidly that it creates the illusion of a complete picture when in reality it is nothing more than a series of rapidly moving dots.

Despite the whirlpool and the illusions, we are certain of one thing, and it is this: Since there is a certain amount of inevitability to the condition in which we find ourselves--it is conditioned as

explained in the Law of Dependent Causation--we had better work within its frame of reference and not seek for unlawful escapes.

The secret--if indeed it is a secret--or one of the secrets of freeing ourselves from the Wheel of Becoming, is Right Action; and it follows that Right Action, as we shall see, often accompanies Right Livelihood.

One of the phases of Right Action is right behavior, or morality. Moral codes are to be found in all religions, but in the Arya Dharma moral behavior is approached in a purely practical way. Cause and effect by rigorous law guide Buddhist thought and behavior. Thus there is no question here of one being punished for "sin" or rewarded for meritorious deed by an extra-cosmic God, for there are no punishments or rewards--only consequences. Such consequences, as we should know, are either painful or pleasant, depending upon the unworthiness or worthiness of the action.

One commentator on this topic has correctly said that the worst a man can think himself is a fool. If so, because he is not wholly determined by an extra-cosmic being, his environment, his heredity, by fortuitousness and a host of other factors, man has within himself the capability of altering the direction of his conditioning. He can, if he so wills, set about correcting his folly and can destroy its ill effects by Right Action in his day to day living as well as in his means of earning a livelihood.

Right Action, for upasakas and upasikas--laymen and laywomen--at least, is outlined in the Five Precepts, all of which are directed against

1. taking life
2. taking that which is not freely given
3. unlawful sexual behavior
4. lying and careless speech
5. the use of intoxicants, cigarettes, and drugs.

As we analyze each of these, we find that they are protective measures for oneself and others. The ultimate goal, it seems, is harmlessness (*ahimsa*), going beyond just a simple concept of brotherhood to the underlying basis that all life is one. Overlooking the truth of this and violating the precepts by committing demeritorious?? volitional acts greatly adds to the suffering of all beings. In the long run, too, they bind one committing such acts even more securely to the Wheel.

-concluded next issue