

Certainty in Buddhism

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– Why Things Happen to Us –

A Buddhist Perspective on Cause and Effect

– Edward Horner –



Mind of Peace Publications

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First Published August, 2016 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2

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The Publisher

Mind of Peace Publications

An imprint of Canadian Outdoor Press

Toronto, Canada

Canadianoutdoorpress.ca

Title

Certainty in Buddhism;

When Knowing, Becomes Our Undoing

ISBN 978-0-9698297-2-0

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Certainty in Buddhism

When Knowing, Becomes Our Undoing

We can all remember, at least one occasion, where we have been SO RIGHT, then proved SO WRONG. We held one idea that we were resolutely sure about, later, upon cross-examination we were proved absolutely, demonstrably, profoundly wrong. At best, it's a little embarrassing. At worse, it can be dangerous to ourselves and others.

If being wrong only happened once or twice, or on a rare occasion, it would be no big deal—an aberration in the data set perhaps—a quirk, oddity or a peculiarity. Yet, to many individuals, being wrong is more than just a passing occurrence, it becomes an event so onerous, so hideous and abhorrent, that it is to be avoided at all costs. Our desire to be right; our need to be certain has become an obsession for us.

One need only look to Donald J. Trump, current president of the United States to see such an individual. He is, for example, thoroughly and utterly convinced that Hydroxychloroquine is an effective treatment and cure for the COVID-19 pandemic that is ravaging his country—indeed, the world. No amount of debate, argument, cajoling, or confrontation with scientific fact or medical studies is going to convince him otherwise. If it were only his health at risk, it would be no big deal, but the health and safety of his 340 million fellow Americans are at risk.

Trump's medical advisor, Dr. Anthony Fauci, has been the director NIAID since 1984. He has been at the centre of disease control for over 40 years. His office successfully guided America through the SARS, MERS and the H1N1 virus events. He has advised four American presidents both Democrat and Republican. He is advising Trump now and his repeated advice is that people should not be using Hydroxychloroquine for treatment of COVID-19. Full Stop. Trump ignores him.

Trump is so afraid of being wrong, that he is willing to put the health of Americans at high risk by promoting a drug that is completely ineffective against the coronavirus—not only ineffective, but harmful with longterm health effects.

While there is considerable benefit to using the drug for the treatment of malaria and similar diseases, using it for COVID-19 is a colossal mistake with possibly deadly consequences.

So why does Donald Trump, the *Pandemic President*, continue to promote the product? For that matter, why does he mock people who wear a face mask to protect against the virus? The simple truth seems to be that Trump possesses a simple mind. He sees the world in one shade - his shade. He seems incapable of processing difficult problems. He lacks the *compound mind* which allows for other ideas. He believes that the people who voted for him, are just like him - simple-minded, and he panders to them. He's trapped in a delusion of his own making.

Certainty is a Trap

Certainty is an illusion. Certainty is a bubble we travel around in all day long, every day, day in and day out. We generate our own reality distortion field and it reaches out to include everything we see, feel, smell, taste, hear or think. It's insidious and it creeps into every corner of our lives, infecting not only ourselves, but those around us. It traps us in outmoded ideas and ways of thinking. It places people in labeled boxes with little time or need to examine them.

We see and hear certainty during elections. We see the candidates pounding their podiums with clenched fists and telling us *their* way, *their* view, *their* ideas are the clear way forward for the country. They are certain only *their* ideas can save us from ourselves. Rare is the politician who would stand and say, they were uncertain about a course of action or a set of principles that would take us forward — rare would be an understatement, extinct seems more like it. Maybe that's for the best. Who would vote for someone who was uncertain of their plans for the country? A plan, any plan, is better than uncertainty, even if the plan makes no sense what-so-ever. We crave certainty and definitive answers.

To be sure, there is an advantage to speaking in a manner that is certain - people know exactly where you stand on a topic. If you speak from the 'middle ground' or tell people you don't have an answer, then they don't know where you're coming from or where you stand on an issue. You'll

be accused of being a ‘fence sitter,’ “unable to commit” or unable to form an opinion.

Clearly being certain is a problem. It seems, we spend an inordinate amount of time avoiding even thinking about being wrong. It’s not enough that we are actually wrong, but we then get out the duct tape and start tapping over the errors so that we don’t even have to think about them!

Sure, we ‘get it’ in the abstract. We see people around us being wrong all the time. We understand that people make mistakes. Collectively, we know humanity has the ability to err. I suppose I could be wrong about something, but it just doesn’t translate into my everyday thinking. When it comes to our beliefs, our values, our ethics, that abstract regard for being wrong seems to come unglued.

When I’m right, it feels so much better than being wrong. Being wrong implies improper thinking, improper logic, improper conclusion-drawing. It suggest lazy thinking or poor homework skills. It invites ridicule and suspicion. It invites shaming.

We know all that to be true, but here’s the thing. Until we discover we’re wrong, we feel just the same as if we’d been right. The same. No different. The moon is made of cheese feels just the same as the moon not being made from cheese - at least until we discover it’s not made of cheese. It’s like that cartoon with Wylie E Coyote chasing the roadrunner off the cliff. The roadrunner is a bird, so it can fly, but the coy-

ote can't fly. It's not until the roadrunner points out that the coyote has run off the cliff, and can't fly, does the coyote feel any different. He looks down, realizes his error and then plummets to the ground - always to come back in the next scene - broken, but not out.

There seems to be no internal cues that we may be wrong, only embarrassing external cues.

I think back to grade nine. It was the first year in high school and one of my first math tests. I got such a bad mark. Algebra simply eluded me. I just didn't get it. It was so embarrassing. The teacher actually pointed out how wrong I was by putting the question(s) up on the chalkboard then making me try to figure it out again! In front of the class - while standing - chalk in hand - at the blackboard. I stood there looking stupid, powerless to do anything. I felt naked. I still didn't have the answer - how the hell could I? I only just got the paper back and didn't know my errors until two minutes earlier!

The lesson learned that day was not how to solve math problems, but that being wrong is going to result in embarrassment, false accusations of laziness, sloth, low intellect, poor reading skills and even some allusions about one's parentage. No sir, being right was far better than being wrong. Being right is how we succeed in life. I dare say that is a lesson we all learned, and learned well, at an early age.

When we get things wrong, we almost always feel that there's something wrong with us. The error becomes us and we become the error. There's an element of self-shame and self-cruelty when we learn we are wrong. That totally doesn't make any sense, of course. We don't actually become the error, but we take on that error as if we caused it. Having mis-read or mis-heard that Toronto is the capital of Canada can lead to self-examination, recrimination, shame or self-cruelty when we have our college paper corrected (complete with a red circle and large question mark) by professor Eugene in the second year of a business course. We become that error, that shame.

I read an article in the Boston Globe about a surgery performed at Beth Israel Hospital a few years back. Long story short, the surgeon operated on the wrong body part of the patient. Dr. Kenneth Sands, senior vice president of health-care quality at Beth Israel Deaconess, said "it had been at least several years since such an error had been made at the hospital," an affiliate of Harvard Medical School. Dr. Sands said, medical workers used a marker to correctly label the side of the patient that should have been operated on, but somehow the surgeon failed to notice the marking. "I think he began prepping without looking for the mark and, for whatever reason, he believed he was on the correct side," Sands said.

Believing too much that you're correct is very dangerous. Our internal feelings that we're right is not an accurate indi-

cator to what's actually happening in the world. Our internal cues are either undependable or completely missing.

We somehow imagine that our beliefs and conclusions perfectly reflect reality. How's that even possible? With so much happening around us, how is it even imaginable that we could always be right? Yet we do ... I do ... to my detriment.

Somehow, we need to rationalize or explain away, the fact that our perceptions don't match reality ... after all, I'm right so the others must be wrong. We tend to resort to a few mental tricks about other people that helps us to rationalize their wrong-headedness.

First, we believe they don't have enough information or they have incorrect information - basically they are ignorant of the facts. We believe that if they had the right information, they'd agree with us.

Secondly, if we get them the correct information and they still disagree, they must be just plain dumb. They have the correct information and data but just aren't smart enough to put two and two together and get four.

Finally, what if they do have the correct information and an IQ of 125 but they still don't agree with us? Then they must be hiding something, twisting the truth to their own nefarious ends ...

So, here we are now, viewing the world and the people who disagree with us as ignorant, dumb and nefarious. Wow. All that just so we don't have to re-examine our own conclusions or views about the world. That sounds like a recipe for disaster.



We See the World as it Isn't

To a large degree, I think that is what makes us human. We can remember what happened in the past (more or less) and we can look into and predict the future (more or less) and yet we almost always get it wrong! We tend to view the world not at it is, but as we *think* it is. We don't simply look out of our minds eye and describe the world as we see it, we look out and describe the world as we think it ought to be, at least the vast majority of the time.

The most entertaining stories I can remember involve the theme where someone goes to do something, but something else happens instead. That twist is what's so entertaining. We imagined one thing was going to occur, but something else happens to create the drama, comedy, romance or adventure story.

What's the point in telling a story of a man going to the store for a loaf of bread, then returning home, with a loaf of bread? What if he goes the wrong way on Main Street and ends up getting kidnapped by a gang of thugs who need him to drive the getaway car across the border at gun point? What if he stops into the book store on the way home and meets an old girlfriend who just won three million dollars in the lottery? What if he opens a green door and ends up in Narnia? What if Indiana Jones just came back with the crystal skull?

We tell these stories and eat them up because our lives are like this. Our lives are filled with twists and wrong turns. From one day to the next, we don't know what's going to happen ... we *think* we know, but we don't.

Getting things wrong seems to be a fundamental human quality. We, among all the animals of the world, are the only ones running around trying to, explain it all. We are unique in that one regard at least. We are obsessed with trying to get it right in a universe that couldn't care less what we think. Is it a surprise that we get so much wrong when there is so much to try to explain?

The Need for Re-Examination

In Buddhism, we are asked to constantly re-examine our conclusions. We are asked not to take anything at face value, but rather, to examine the teachings and see for ourselves if it is true or false. The Buddha is quoted as having said something to the effect that we should not believe what we hear or see, even if it's him who's saying or doing it. We need to do the work ourselves to learn of the nature of the world.

We need to see for ourselves why the first of the Four Noble Truths is true; that people suffer. We need to learn, for ourselves the second of the Four Noble Truths, that suffering has causes, most of which are our own making. We need to understand the third of the the Four Noble Truths, that suffering has an end or can at least be relieved and finally we need to understand and see the value of the fourth of the

Four Noble Truths, that the Eightfold Path is a proven way to relieve suffering.

Still, we can't discount faith completely. Faith's importance in the beginning of the spiritual practice and its counterpart, wisdom, is well summed up by Nagarjuna who says:

*"One associates with the Dharma out of faith,
But one knows truly out of understanding;
Understanding is the chief of the two,
But faith precedes."*

For all that, we still want to believe the world will perform in the manner that we expect. Sadly, it does not. The world we've come to know sometimes seems a dangerous place, a place where the good suffer. Efforts fail. Wrong doers escape justice. Dependable friends move away. We come to the end of a long standing relationship. Our job becomes redundant. We don't get to know what will end and when. We often try to play the odds so we can align ourselves with the maximum probability of a life of longevity, comfort, and ease.

We want assurances that things will be certain, if not in our lives, then perhaps after death. Many people want to know that things will get better after death, but who knows? Religion often steps in with such assurances, but with so many forms of religion, all promising one thing or another in the

afterlife, how can all be right? It seems as confusing as life itself.

To a lot of people, their religion is the most important thing in their life and the stakes are high, so they want to choose wisely. They don't want to pick haphazardly. There is a need to select a religion that provides the kind of certainty that the follower seeks. Buddhism is not that.

Buddhism appears unique among major world religions. The irony of Buddhism is, that if followed sincerely and with conviction, it sets us up to see the futility of seeking certainty. There is no ground presented upon which to build the answer-seeking machinery. The kind of answers we want can't really be found anywhere, certainly not in Buddhism for the practice centres around seeing uncertainty in all it's forms.



What Are We To Conclude From All This?

The most important take away from this discussion is that we need to constantly examine our assumptions about how the world is operating around us. We need to constantly re-examine our conclusions almost day-to-day. After all, our sense of “reality” is only what we make of it from our six doors of the senses; taste, smell, sight, hearing, touch and thought combined with the five skandhas of form, sensation, perception, mental formations and consciousness. If feeling wrong is just the same as feeling right, then we need to constantly be on the alert in our conclusions about reality.

~ Edward Horner

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About the Author

Horner has been a practicing Buddhist, in the Theravada tradition, since 2003 and enjoys talking and writing about his experiences and ideas. He has been hiking, skiing and paddling throughout Ontario and Alberta for over 50 years. He's an avid photographer, cyclist and keen outdoor enthusiast. He founded Friends of Dieppe Park and is a past member of the Harbourfront Parks and Open Space Project, in Toronto.



Fundamentals of Buddhist Practice



