

Views and Tolerance

By Ajahn Chandako

We all have views and opinions. That's normal. Forming them is a natural response to the attempt to make sense of a world that can feel out of control, threatening or nonsensical. The definition and purpose of good and bad, what happens or does not happen after death, the existence or not of gods or God—even if views and beliefs about such matters are not something that we often think about or even deem worthy of consideration, all of us still hold some basic views about the nature of reality—vague and unformed as they may be. Consciously held or not, these 'big picture' views then play a major role in directing the paths of our lives.

Whether things are the way they are simply due to chance or because of predetermined impersonal conditions or due to the wise or fickle emotions of a supreme being or some combination of the above, having an explanation for why things happen can provide a feeling of security and comfort. Most religious and political views are thus concerned with taking a fixed stance as a reaction to wishing that life, or at least some part of it, was certain, reliable and comprehensible.

We all have views, opinions and beliefs, but at times our relationship with them can become problematic, a source of conflict and pain. At these times it is beneficial to look at how we are holding our views. Whose ideas, holy scriptures, philosophy or politics *are* right? Are *any* of them right? Are 'right' and 'wrong' mere conventions and completely relative to the individual? Throughout history, people have been willing to kill and die to support their answers to these questions. Sadly, it continues to this day. How then can we live together in relative peace amidst this diversity of human perspectives—not to mention the conflicting views within our own hearts?

Views and the Dhamma

Individual exceptions aside, Buddhists generally have a different relationship with views and beliefs than other major religions. For example, questioning one's views and beliefs with objectivity is encouraged. It is seen as a sign of strength and integrity. Furthermore, clinging tightly to views—even true views—is seen as a cause of stress

and suffering, and therefore needs to be let go of. Finally, meditation leads to insight into the conditioned nature of the mind, untangling the knot of identification with views so thoroughly that one experiences a great sense of internal peace and freedom.

In Buddhism, beliefs are not of central importance. Effort and personal experience are considered far more crucial. People begin Dhamma (Sanskrit, *Dharma*) practice with a particular collage of beliefs, views and opinions, and hopefully through training and insight the beliefs adjust themselves to be increasingly realistic. In the beginning, if we are honest, we have to conclude that almost all of our beliefs are wrong to a certain degree. We simply can't help it. It's normal for perceptions to be skewed due to underlying misunderstandings born of incomplete or inaccurate information. This is as true in the international arena as it is when dealing with our own emotions or insecurity.

Dogma refers to a set of beliefs that one must adhere to in order to be considered a member of a particular group. In Buddhism there is no dogma. There are no prerequisite views that one must adopt and believe in order to practice Buddhist teachings. Views do play an important role and comprise the first step of the Noble Eight-fold path, but a wise relationship with those views leads to testing the hypotheses proposed by the Buddha and finding out for oneself. Taking refuge in the Buddha, Dhamma and Sangha is never meant to be a ritual of blind acceptance but an encouragement to contemplate life with sincerity.

It is not that the Buddha fell into a coreless relativity of views—where each view is considered no more or less valid than any other. He was very clear on what he considered to be views that are in line with the nature of reality ('right view' or *samma-ditthi*) and views that are not in accordance with the way things are ('wrong view' or *micha-ditthi*). (See the Brahmajala Sutta, DN1, for a comprehensive analysis of religious and philosophical views.) The Buddha thoroughly delineated what types of behaviour, speech, mental cultivation and, first and foremost, what views would lead to final enlightenment and which would not. However, he never asked anyone to believe something simply because he said it was true. In fact, he discouraged it. Only when a teaching was listened to attentively, contemplated, thoroughly digested

and then finally understood directly through one's own experience, should it be taken as true.

The Role of Faith

Faith can play a positive role as a motivator and a vehicle to opening one's heart through devotion. There needs to be a certain amount of trust and confidence in order to begin a life of spiritual practice and sustain it with perseverance. And yet, it is important to remember to take all teachings with a grain of salt, neither blindly accepting nor blindly dismissing them, until one knows and sees for oneself. Even once we think we know, we have to continually investigate with sincerity: 'Does this seem true because it actually is or only because I think it's true?' 'Do I consider this belief I have to be true simply because someone else told me it's true, because most other people I know believe it is true or because it agrees with what I already assume to be true?' 'Do I think this is true because of real insight or because of a misinterpretation?' It takes a great depth of integrity, a calm but unrelenting willingness to challenge and test the truth of one's own understanding, in order to transcend the superficial.

Often intelligent and rational people (Buddhists included) are willing to suspend their rationality when it comes to religion or politics. In many ways it's simply easier that way. Questioning the validity of one's beliefs can feel destabilizing, touch upon insecurity or open up whole new pathways entailing new responsibilities. Questioning might mean that we'd have to make changes in our lives. Not questioning might make it more manageable to maintain harmony with the particular group we live with, and in some circles, questioning itself is considered a blasphemous sign of weakness.

Questioning takes courage. For example, how do we know for sure that the Buddha ever existed? We don't, but there does seem to be a significant amount of historical and archaeological evidence to support the idea. Are the teachings attributed to the Buddha authentic? Independent scholars seem to generally agree that the four main Pali Nikayas, the Vinaya and the corresponding early Chinese translations have a very high degree of reliability as being the actual word of the Buddha. Whereas the Abhidhamma, some sections of the Khuddhaka Nikaya and the Mahayana Sutras, although all attributed to the Buddha, are considered to postdate him by a hundred to a thousand

years. Was the Buddha enlightened—that is, did he discover a way to fully purify human consciousness to the extent that one was freed from the cycle of birth, death and rebirth known as samsara? This can only be known through testing it in one's own life. No book will prove it either way. Even intelligent thoughts can only be trusted to a certain degree, because they too are bound up with delusion.

Many people believe that God exists. However, it's not a belief per se that makes a religious doctrine true. Many people are certain that God does not exist, but their certainty in and of itself does not make it so. Some people are convinced that God exists because they have experienced Him or Her or It directly. Of course, the next question is, 'What exactly did you experience that you interpreted as God?' A deep sense of inner peace, a feeling of oneness with nature or a 'message' in one's thoughts are likely to be interpreted in very different ways by a Christian, Muslim, Hindu, Buddhist, atheist or psychiatrist.

Just because we believe something does not make it true. It's helpful to remind ourselves of this. There are innumerable instances of people sincerely believing all manner of wacky ideas, and the sincerity or intensity of their belief did not make it any more true. In fact, it is when people begin to hold beliefs with too great an intensity or a compulsive enthusiasm to convert others that they begin to become a bit frightening. There are also many examples of people believing in ideas that seemed quite reasonable at the time but later turned out to be false. So a healthy but not paralyzing agnosticism, that is, a well-rounded and calm balancing of possibilities, would then seem to be a realistic stance for most people. This means being humble enough to admit that we don't really know for sure.

Interreligious Tolerance

In the spirit of interfaith harmony, the Buddha never suggested lumping all spiritual traditions together with the idea that all paths lead to the same mountaintop. This fuzziness actually does a disservice to all religions. The Buddha encouraged treating other spiritual teachers and paths with kindness, respect and discernment. He encouraged dialogue, and he frequently met with members of other traditions to pose and answer questions. The Buddha never encouraged denigrating other teachers, beliefs or religions, but it was important to clarify views, to distinguish views in terms of what leads to benefit, the

reduction of suffering, and most importantly, what leads to Awakening. We don't need to discard our discerning faculties in the effort to be non-judgmental. We don't need to be intellectually immobilized by a fear of not being 'politically correct'. It is possible to differentiate between what are and are not the Buddha's teachings and still be accepting and respectful towards other people's views. In fact, it is the duty of sincere Dhamma students to both continually refine their understanding of what the Buddha taught and develop compassion towards all beings.

Of the major world religions, one could safely state that for the last 2,600 years Buddhism has held the gold medal for tolerance and non-violence. Jainism and Taoism have been equally benevolent and non-life threatening but have had a smaller influence. Stains on the history of Buddhist non-violence exist, but are relatively minor compared to the Abrahamic or Hindu traditions. For example, medieval Japanese Zen monks would sometimes instruct samurai warriors on how to control their minds while killing in battle; or more recently some nationalistic branches of the Buddhist establishment in Japan and Sri Lanka have encouraged militarization. These, however, have been rare exceptions, and any resultant violence has generally had its roots in socio/economic disputes rather than to spread the Dharma. It has been the norm that Buddhist establishments have stood for peace, even when facing the violent destruction of their communities, temples and artwork at the hands of other religions.

Wherever there are strong attachments to views, violence follows easily. In a recent example, on September 29, 2012, in Bangladesh, 25,000 Muslims attacked the Buddhist area of Cox's Bazaar, burning down 11 monasteries and threatening the people. Local Bangladeshi news media reported that, "hundred-year old temples were attacked and looted, their artefacts steeped in history destroyed. The rioters burned homes, as well, leaving heartless destruction in their wake." Why? Reportedly a disrespectful photo of the Quran had been posted on a facebook page by a Buddhist boy, although the boy denies involvement. The media report continues, "What makes the situation worse is that many of the monks in these monasteries provided shelter and asylum to countless Muslims during Bangladesh's war of independence from Pakistan in 1971. They shielded war-weary, desperate Bangladeshi Muslims from the hands of the merciless

Pakistani army. If this is how the monks are being repaid for their compassion,” Apparently the local Buddhists remain under siege with little or no official protection and are in need of humanitarian assistance.

Additional reactive outrage is not the solution to the problem. Tolerance is a sign of maturity, and restraint of self-righteous anger is a hallmark of the wise. It has to be the responsibility of the moderate and reasonable members of a particular tradition to quell the fundamentalists within their own ranks. If the moderates remain silent, it is to be expected that other groups will stereotype, and the silent majority to some degree then becomes complicit in the violence done in the name of their religion.

Extremists

A fundamentalist’s vision of everyone holding *the* one right view is unrealistic. It is polarizing, not conducive to growth and, at its worst, outright dangerous. But on the other hand, it is a shame if people feel that any expression of a view is a sign of attachment. That simply leads to a waffling vagueness. It is important to be able to discuss views openly, to clarify differences and to recognize common ground.

In Buddhism, attachment to views is considered to be one of the most tenacious and pernicious of the mental defilements. The founder of our lineage, Venerable Ajahn Chah, said it’s easier to move a mountain than to change deeply held views. In one lifetime you could gradually blow up and truck away the rock of a mountain, but a person’s views can remain entrenched for much longer than that. The other extreme of tossing out one’s views altogether is not the answer, even if it were possible. We need a conceptual structure to navigate the conventional world. So views in and of themselves are not the problem. The difficulties arise when we cling to them.

The Buddha encourages us to avoid the extremes of, on one hand, holding views which are by their very nature simply inaccurate; and on the other hand, clinging to even accurate views so tightly that it is a cause for suffering. In the middle there is a practical area of sincere searching for truth where we hold views to the degree that it helps us further refine our behaviour and deepen our wisdom. As we gain first-hand experience, we gradually and naturally discard less realistic views for more realistic ones.

You could say that views are a tool, and like a tool there is a skilful way to handle them. For example, if you need to build a hut, but you are convinced that clinging onto hammers is un-Buddhist, you will very likely hurt yourself or somebody else as the tool slips out of your hand. A good grip is essential when using a hammer. But if you grasp it too tightly, it's exhausting: your hand hurts and you lose flexibility. To use a hammer effectively you have to be mindful and relaxed and pay close attention. You have to have focussed awareness, understand the overall purpose of the tool and know when to set the hammer down. You don't carry it to the dinner table with you. And you don't hit other people over the head with it—although it's very effective for that as well. However, interpersonal violence is not what a hammer is designed for. Ultimately, you want to get to the point where the hut is completed, and in the process you have mastered the use of the hammer. It was one heck of a useful item to have when putting nails into wood, but the objective was completing the hut, not grasping the hammer. Once you move into the hut, the hammer is still around in case you need it. You don't throw it out, but you don't worship it. A healthy relationship to views is similar.

A View is Just a View

A thought is merely a thought, and a view is just a view—not ultimate reality. It's easy to forget this. There can be the assumption that if we hold a view about something that it must be right, otherwise we wouldn't hold it. That makes it particularly easy to declare people with a different opinion as wrong. It can be helpful to remind ourselves, 'this opinion or view that I currently hold may be correct but maybe not.' Otherwise we might sometimes confuse being strong and independent with being pushy and bossy. But there is no real strength in being attached to views. Strength is found in a broad mind and an open heart. Independence means being free, and there is no freedom when we are a slave to our attachments. The more reflective among us may realize that our views modify with time, and in some cases change completely, as we mature and become better informed. However, there is still a strong tendency to see our current view as the best, wisest and most enlightened—in short, the truth.

All views, however, arise as a result of external and internal circumstances. Every thought, however individual or personal it may

feel, is a result of certain causes and conditions coming together in a particular way. Even the views of a fully enlightened Arahant, although revealing that which is unconditioned, came into being through causes and conditions. Conditioning comes in myriad forms: our culture, parents, spiritual training, and everything we have read, heard and seen in the past. Closely observing the conditioned responses of the mind, it would be easy to conclude that even our thoughts are predetermined through a fixed cause and effect relationship. That is, even what seems to be an independent choice made by free will on our part, upon closer examination, is so strongly influenced by our conditioning that it can look like we *had* to make that decision. We had no choice.

The Buddha taught that we do have the freedom to choose which intentions we follow. However, it is fair to say that without mindfulness, clear assessment, inner strength and skilful reaction to what is happening in the present moment, our life becomes very robotic. Our buttons get pushed, and we react. Programmed by our internal and external environment, even the most individualistic ‘free’ thinkers among us fall into a pattern of near deterministic fatalism. Acknowledging the degree to which our thoughts are merely conditioned responses can help us reduce attachment to our views and be more accepting of those of others.

A view is just a view—not *my* view. Within this matrix of thoughts, opinions and views, arising from past influences and conditioning future perceptions, where is the justification for even claiming that these views belong to us? If even our thoughts arise from an impersonal process of cause and effect, who’s to say that our views are actually ours? Or more precisely, where or what is this perceived sense of individual self that identifies with thoughts and clings to views? In actual fact, it is the views that give rise to our sense of self rather than our self holding views. Every identification with ‘my’ opinion shores up and reinforces a mirage of who we think we are. Seen in this light, getting angry or violent because of views seems utterly foolish.

If our thoughts and views are not ‘ours’ in any real sense beyond the conventions of language and expression, then what is the point of arguing over them? Discussion and a calm exchange of ideas can foster greater understanding, but identifying with a view and clinging to

it merely reinforces an already deluded ego. Usually the bigger the ego, the stronger the views and the more upset that person becomes. It is no accident that tolerance of others and reduction of attachment to self both have their roots in insight.

A Peace of My Heart

To transcend a rather ordinary drama of a life, it can be beneficial to undertake some form of contemplation; and yet if we can't be serious about contemplation and still be able to listen respectfully to others, learn from other viewpoints and, very importantly, laugh—well, then I think we have seriously missed the point. There is a certain element of the cosmic joke when we look deeply into life, and if we lose sight of that, we lose touch with one of the most lovable aspects of our humanity: our humour. When people of a particular religion or political party can no longer laugh at themselves, then it is time to look at how we are holding our views.

Attachment to views generally arises from the longing for certainty in a world where the essence of life is, at its core, uncertain. It is natural that when the world does not conform to our desire for reliability, we experience stress. This encourages us to cling even more tightly to views with the hope of finding a stable refuge. It is precisely the fear, insecurity and frustration arising from this existential conflict that fuels the inflexibility of fundamentalism.

Buddhist teachings are particularly helpful for understanding and accepting the world's unreliability. With the insight that all is unstable and uncertain, tension dissipates. Insight into the impersonal nature of conditioning allows conflict to dissolve. Seeing things as they actually are, particularly with the support of sustained and deep meditation, one's views no longer become a cause of suffering. This leads to a wise peace, and when peace is felt within one human heart, we are that much closer to peace in the world.

If we are going to live together harmoniously in modern pluralist societies, then having a mature attitude towards views and opinions is vital. With the destructive capabilities of the individual growing all the time, a balanced and peaceful relationship with views may mean more than simply a nice thought. It may ensure our survival. A peaceful heart is thus one of the greatest acts of service we can offer the world.

Footnote:

In the popular English translation of the Metta Sutta, the Buddha's words on Loving-Kindness, there is a line in the final stanza that reads, 'by not holding to fixed views.' The Pali word for views, *ditthi*, when used on its own without the prefix '*samma*' or 'right', is normally equitable with '*micca-ditthi*'. The usual translation of *micca* is 'wrong', as in wrong speech, wrong livelihood, etc. However, for many people, the English word 'wrong' can also carry with it unintended non-Buddhist connotations arising from modern conditioning, stimulating feelings of shame, guilt or lack of self-esteem.

When translating a chant, one sometimes compromises perfect accuracy for emotional evocation or ease of enunciation. However a more literal translation of this line might be 'by not clinging to wrong views' or 'not taken with views'. This point is significant because an overall understanding of the Suttas makes it clear that the Buddha never taught that all views have the same validity. At a certain stage of enlightenment it is said that insight penetrates so deeply that one's views concerning Dhamma practice are purified. They actually do become 'fixed', in the sense that one's understanding of the path leading to Awakening does not waver from that point on; and yet, for those individuals who experience such a depth of insight, attachment to their own views falls away, revealing a spacious flexibility of mind.