

Right Effort, Right Response

by Lisa Hoffman

How should a Jewish lesbian training to be ordained as a Zen priest give a talk on Buddhism to 23 conservative Christians in Ohio? They were part of a discussion group my mother chaired at her retirement community, and she had scheduled this talk months ago, as soon as I had planned my visit.

It was the day before the discussion group. I hadn't decided on my approach, although I was pretty sure that my desire to give the world's best and most thorough talk on Buddhism ever was probably not the way to go.

When I returned to San Francisco, I would be lecturing on Right Effort at my monthly meditation group, Awakening Heart Sangha. And here was a case study: what was Right Effort in this tricky situation?

Right Effort is part of the Buddha's Eightfold Noble Path -- among his first teachings after becoming enlightened. Committing to this path is committing to a way of living that causes no harm. It is also a path about connecting with others and myself, even when I want to crawl under a rock on a hard day, or put someone in his place for screwing up.

When I ask myself about Right Effort, I am looking at the focus and energy I bring to my life. What am I creating? What are my attitudes cultivating? What does a given situation call for? As I considered the group of conservative Christians, I imagined giving the perfect talk on Buddhism, its history, and fundamental precepts. I saw a quiet room, with me on one side, and them on the other. My focus on perfection would create a pretty talk, and little else.

I decided to take another path. I began by asking them about the heart of their faith. Most spoke about service, love, community, family, and making a difference. I was able to begin the talk by saying, "We have so much in common because the heart of Buddhism is compassion, and the truth that we are all connected." They nodded, and I began the story of the Buddha.

We had a discussion that was full of energy, peppered with questions, and respectful. Two or three of their questions were a bit charged. Like whether Buddhists worship Buddha like Jesus, whether we repent, and whether we are worried about going to hell. I answered each question with respect for the asker, both faiths, and myself. Sometimes the need to prove the asker wrong came up, and I knew immediately from how my body tightened that I needed to let this focus go. I was moved when several group members tried to help me respond to these questions from what they understood from my talk.

A classic teaching about Right Effort is that through this practice we can choose to cultivate what is wholesome and let go of what isn't. I felt this teaching strongly when I chose to let go of the impulse to show my questioners that they were wrong. By hearing them,

responding, and opening space for their neighbors to join in the conversation, I was living my faith and honoring theirs.

When I returned to San Francisco, I was immediately confronted with another Right Effort case study involving work. A vendor had completely botched an estimate, as well as the beginning of a related project for the tiny nonprofit that was my client. The organization was taking a risk, investing a huge sum, and its anxious executive director was about to have a stroke. We got on the phone with five of the vendor's managers, who reworked the estimate as we spoke -- we could hear the tapping on five in the background -- and insisted that the higher figures they were now quoting were correct.

The next day I heard from my client that the vendor had called him and acknowledged that their original estimate was indeed accurate, and that they had not referred to this original estimate and work order in beginning the project. During the next five minutes I was jubilant, vengeful, furious, and wanted to exact a pound of flesh from these screw-ups. My heart was racing, my face was hot, and I was sweating.

For a variety of reasons, my client and I agreed that we needed to continue with this vendor. While it was very tempting to deal with this company from my anger and self-righteousness, I found myself asking what this would accomplish (other than feeling *really* satisfying, at least for a little while...). The answer was tension, awkwardness and defensiveness. And these qualities would not be at all useful in a business relationship that needed to continue. Even if it was not going to continue, why not terminate it on a professional, even-tempered note? I could be clear *and* polite, even kind, about these problems and how we needed to move forward with this company. I was grateful to again choose the wholesome path of relationship and kindness.

And what is that tempting *unwholesome* path? It is the "three poisons" of greed, hate, and delusion. My impulse with the vendor was to communicate from a place of hate and aversion: anger, frustration, wanting revenge because of how incredibly upset my client was, and how much time has been wasted. And with my conservative Christians, my initial focus was delusion and greed: that the point was to give a perfect talk to satisfy my own ego, when the point was to give a down-to-earth talk that involved the audience.

Right Effort doesn't come with a guarantee. It doesn't cause a situation to become easy, or a problem to be resolved in the way I think it should be. I do notice that Right Effort increases the chance that I will respond in a way that is helpful, which encourages others to do the same. And then we can perhaps walk the path of compassion together.

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