

Right Attitudes

by

Professor Emeritus Dr. Asanga Tilakaratne PhD

Department of Buddhist Studies, University of Colombo.

Having right attitudes is a very important part of our daily life. It makes our life caring, compassionate and pleasant!

What is attitude, and what is right attitude? An attitude, first and foremost, may be described as a state of our mind. Unlike a mere thought in our mind, an attitude requires physical basis for it to be manifested. In other words, attitudes get manifested in action or behaviour.

It is our state of mind that shapes our behaviour one way or the other. Behaviour is mainly how we speak and how we do things, including, but not limited to, how we welcome others and greet them, how we talk to them, how we get dressed, how we walk, how we approach a group of people, how we sit, how we stand - in other words, our entire physical and verbal functioning is behaviour. In all these forms of behaviour, we display our attitudes to ourselves, to others, to the environment, to objects such as tables and chairs, and to animals.

If we understand our daily existence as comprising all forms of physical and verbal behaviour then it is plain that attitudes are an indispensable part of our daily life.

Attitudes matter mainly because we live a social and community life: we live with others, at home as members of family, outside home, as office-mates, as students in a school or college, as passengers in public transport, as pedestrians on the road, as members in a society or in a club, and in so on.

Even if we were living an isolated life like Robinson Crusoe still attitudes would matter. But, not to the extent as when we live as social beings. So, in this sense, attitudes have mainly to do with our behaviour toward others.

And what are right attitudes, and by implication, what are wrong attitudes? What are good attitudes and bad ones, pleasant and unpleasant, harmless and harmful, helpful and not helpful, compassionate and malicious etc.?

Because, as we already noted, attitudes originate initially in mind and are mind made, we may say that the nature of our intentions, motives and wishes have much to do with the right or wrong nature of our attitudes.

As the Buddha taught his own son, Rahula, if we intend comfort, peace, happiness and wellbeing of ourselves, others and both ourselves and others, then the resultant attitudes may be identified as right, good, pleasant etc. And if we intend harm, discomfort, pain, and misery of ourselves, others and both ourselves and others the resultant attitudes may be identified as wrong.

In the Noble Eightfold Path, although ‘right attitude’ is not directly mentioned, we find the mental basis of right attitudes in the first two aspects, right view (*sammā-diṭṭhi*) and right concepts (*sammā-sankappa*) and the physical manifestation of right attitudes in right speech (*sammā-vācā*), right action (*sammā-kammanta*) and right way of life (*sammā-ājīva*).

In order to develop right attitudes and to avoid wrong ones we need to reflect on our own state of mind, and we need to train our mind in such a way that our attitudes get better shape. There is no one hard and fast way or a quick fix for right attitudes to arise. It is to be developed with constant reflection and awareness.

In the course of this discussion to follow, we propose to look at various contexts in which right or wrong attitudes play a key role in our social behaviour. The next discussion will focus on our attitude to ourselves or ‘my attitude toward me.’