

Shoulds & Ideals

April 11, 2007

Ajaan Fuang liked to tell stories about his time with Ajaan Lee. And one of my favorite of his stories was the one of a group of people who wanted to go with Ajaan Lee into the forest. They were going to take a train from Bangkok to Lopburi, then go off into the forest from Lopburi. So everybody met at Hua Lamphong, which is the main station in Bangkok. When the lay people got there, most of them had a lot of luggage, figuring they could take the train and then hire somebody to cart their luggage into the forest for them. So a lot of people came with two or three suitcases.

Ajaan Lee took one look at everybody and he started walking down the railroad tracks. So when your ajaan walks down the railroad track, you walk down the railroad tracks, too. Of course, the people with all the suitcases started complaining: The suitcases were heavy, why was he doing this? And all Ajaan Lee had to say was: “Well, if it’s heavy, throw it away.” So as soon as they saw they couldn’t change his mind, people stopped and searched through their suitcases. Everything that was unnecessary, they threw out into the lotus ponds on the side of the railroad track. Many of them ended up actually throwing away some of their suitcases. By the time they got to the next station, Sam Sen, Ajaan Lee took a look at everybody, and saw that they had just one suitcase at the most. That’s when he allowed them to get on the next train.

There’s a Dhamma lesson here. Many of the things that we think are good for us, that we enjoy, that would be comfortable for us, are actually our burdens. We’ve got to learn how to let them go. We can’t have all the different forms of happiness we want in life. So we have to decide what’s really important and what’s not, to see which kinds of happiness are actually getting in the way of a larger happiness and be willing to make sacrifices.

This is what the principle of renunciation is all about. It’s not just an exercise in deprivation for its own sake. It comes from the realization that there are only so many things we can attain in life. We have only so much time, so much energy, so we should learn how to devote our energy to what’s really important, and put aside things that get in the way.

These are the “shoulds” in Buddhism. And where do the shoulds come from? From the Buddha’s teachings of the four noble truths, as in that chant we had just now: understanding suffering, what’s causing suffering, the end of suffering, and

the way to the end of suffering. This is where his shoulds come from, because each of these four truths has a duty.

Suffering is to be comprehended. You want to understand not only that it's there, but also exactly what it is, to be able to observe it. It's something we tend to run away from or try to push out of existence as soon as we encounter it, but you can't really put an end to it until you understand it. So you have to be willing to watch it for a while. So that's the first imperative, to comprehend suffering.

As for the cause, the imperative is to let it go. If you see anything that's causing you to suffer, you're willing to put it aside. It's not that these things you're putting aside are always obviously bad or undesirable. Many are precisely the things we desire. This is why craving is a cause of suffering. Or as Ajaan Suwat used to say, it's the things we like: Those are the cause of suffering, so we have learn which things we have to let go of. It's not always the case of seeing obviously bad things and putting them aside. Sometimes they're things we really like, we're really attached to because we see them as positive.

The cessation of suffering is something you want to witness, to see that there really is such a thing. But to see that, you have to develop the path—like we're doing right now, practicing concentration. That's one of the elements of the path and that's to be developed. You work at mindfulness, you work at concentration, you work at all the elements of the path. It's not that you simply sit here and watch things come and go in a state of choiceless awareness. You do make choices. They begin with your learning how to look at your experience in terms of these four truths. They're not just four truths about something. They're actually four categories for understanding what's happening, for focusing on what's really worth noticing in the present moment. We have four categories because there are four different things you can do in the present moment. You can either try to comprehend what's there, or you can try to let it go, or just verify for yourself that it's there, or develop it.

These four tasks are appropriate for different things. Sometimes you focus on what you can comprehend in terms of the stress or suffering; other times you have to focus on the qualities you need to develop. If your mindfulness is weak, if you have trouble keeping things in mind, well, you work at developing it, making it stronger. Every time you realize you've slipped off away from the breath, come back, come back. Remind yourself that this is why you're here, this is what you want to develop. Then as the mind settles down, you get excited about its settling down, and you find that *that* spoils it. Well, the next time it settles down, remind yourself that that's what happened when you got excited last time, so try to keep

things on an even keel. Watch carefully so that you can really develop the concentration.

These are the Buddha's imperatives. They're all very friendly imperatives. They're here for your own good—and not just for your own good in the sense that cod liver oil is good for you, i.e., it's good for you but it's miserable stuff. If you put these imperatives into practice, you'll find that the mind does get lighter, its burdens get lighter. You're not carrying around so much stuff. You don't have all those suitcases weighing you down.

In terms of Western psychology, these imperatives are the Buddha's superego. They're the part of the mind that tells us what we should do. And they're not arbitrary. They're not imposing Original Sin on us and then saying, "You need my grace in order to get out of this miserable situation that you for some reason are responsible for, even though it was something somebody else did." It's not that kind of unreasonable set of imperatives. And the imperatives aren't placed on you by some perfect god who doesn't understand what it is to be imperfect. They're imperatives that come simply from the desire for true happiness. If you want to be happy, this is what you have to do. They're imperatives that are on your side, and not the sort of imperatives from which you have to hide your desires.

We don't have to drive our desire for happiness down into the subconscious. We can be perfectly open and aboveboard about it. And when you're open and aboveboard, then you can see which of your strategies for happiness actually work and which ones don't. You can look at your ideas, and you can look at your goals in terms of how well they actually function. You don't have to get neurotic around them.

But still, they do require a certain amount of relinquishment, learning to let go. The Buddha himself said, as he got on the path, it wasn't the case that his heart leapt at the idea of relinquishing. But he got to a point where he realized that there's only one way to find true happiness, which is learning how to let go of the various things that are getting in the way of happiness.

This is one of the reasons why we have study, why we have Dhamma talks: to help us understand precisely where we have to let go, whether we like it or not, but because this is just the way things are.

While you're sitting here meditating, you've got to let go of the hindrances. Sensual desire: You can't sit here thinking about all the beautiful things that you'd like to listen to or look at or whatever, because that gets in the way of your concentration.

The same goes with ill will. You can't sit here thinking about how you'd like to see so-and-so get their just desserts, because again, that's an obstacle to your concentration. It weakens the force of the mind.

You can't indulge in sleepiness and drowsiness. You don't want to get involved in restless and anxious thoughts, or tied up in uncertainties: "Is this going to work? Is this not going to work? Am I up to it? Am I not?" Just learn how to put those thoughts aside. Just focus on the question of how you can stay with the breath in a way that feels really good, that enables you to stay even longer and more easily.

That's an area you want to develop. You want to think about that. It's not that meditation doesn't involve thought. It does involve certain kind of thinking, but thinking focused on this issue: How do you develop your powers of mindfulness? How do you develop your powers of concentration? How do you learn how to stay with the breath more continually? You let go of other things so you can focus on this, because this is the work that needs to be done right now.

All of those does assume that you want true happiness. This is how the imperatives make sense.

One time I was at a Buddhist study center where they were giving a course on the Karaniya Metta Sutta. I'd given a course the weekend before and was staying on to meditate and read in the library. I learned that at this particular course, they were going through the sutta line by line, first in Pali, and then through different translations of it, comparing them. So I sat in.

The sutta starts out: "This is what should be done by someone who aims at the state of peace." Immediately somebody raised his hand, "I thought Buddhism didn't have any shoulds." They spent the whole morning going over this issue of whether Buddhism has a should, or if it even should have a should. The discussion missed the point, which is that the Buddha said, "If you want the state of peace, this is what you should do." It's conditional, and it's a simple statement of cause-and-effect. It's not as if there's a god out there imposing something on you. Just, given the way things are, if this is what you want, you've got to do it this way. You don't have any alternatives.

So it's assuming that you do have a goal: You want that state of peace. That's your ideal. We were listening recently to some people talking about ideals in bad terms, as if having an ideal was something horrible, as if it were a horrible imposition on you, that you can't possibly be happy if you have ideals, and they're unrealistic anyhow.

They don't have to be unrealistic. Ideals are an important part of the path, learning how to be realistic about your ideals. You can check: Do they really help

in developing concentration? Do they help in learning to comprehend suffering? This ideal, the ideal of finding true happiness: If you look around you, you don't see that many people who are truly happy. So it's easy to wonder, "Is this really possible?" But you hear of the possibility: It is an ideal, a genuine ideal, something that human beings can do, through comprehending suffering, letting go of its cause, developing the path.

The important thing about ideals is that once you've chosen a good one and you understand it, and you understand how to get there, then you focus your attention on the steps: what you have to let go of, what you have to do.

You read Ajaan Lee's autobiography and you find that he would make vows many times. And it's interesting to look at how the Buddha analyzes vows, the quality of determination. It's one of the perfections.

There are four steps: First you use your discernment in deciding what's a desirable goal: both desirable and possible. Then you use your discernment to understand exactly what's needed to get there.

Once you've used your discernment, the next quality is truthfulness. You really stick with it, do whatever is required. Don't change your mind unless you start seeing that you misunderstood what you were doing or you misunderstood how to get there. With that kind of knowing, you can change. But otherwise, you stay true to this principle, that this is something you want to aim at and you do whatever you need to do to get there. You're not a traitor to yourself.

The third step is relinquishing. You realize that if something is actually getting in the way, no matter how much you like it, you have to give it up. It's like playing chess. You may like your pawn and you may like your queen, but that's irrelevant. If you can sacrifice your queen for the sake of checkmate, you do it. Or you sacrifice the bishop, the knight, whatever. No matter how much like or dislike the pieces, that's irrelevant. You're going to sacrifice the pieces whose sacrifice will get you to the goal. If you want to play chess without losing any of your pieces, you'll never get anywhere. So realize there are some things that you really like to do, some forms of happiness and pleasure, but they get in the way of a higher happiness, so you've got to be willing to relinquish them.

The fourth quality is peace, maintaining peace of mind as you're on the path, in other words, not letting yourself get worked up about the fact that you've got to let go of this, work at that. Learn how to be an adult about all this. Your inner child is going to complain, well, you don't just listen to your inner child. Train your inner child, educate your inner child, use all your ingenuity to make your inner child more mature.

In terms of the results of the practice, peace should be the result: a deeper peace, a peace that doesn't have to be nurtured or trained or worked at. It's just there, something you uncover in the course of following these four imperatives of the four noble truths. You verify, yes, true peace of mind, unshakable peace, unshakable release, is actually possible. The Buddha wasn't lying. He knew what he was talking about.

When you reach that point, you've completed the task with regard to the truths. You've thoroughly understood suffering; you've abandon its cause; you've realized the cessation of suffering because you've fully developed the path.

So those are the shoulds in Buddhism. They focus on this ideal: total happiness, untouched by any condition at all. But it requires that you use your discernment. This is another thing you have to develop. You develop your discernment as to what's working, what's not, letting go of whatever has to be let go, developing whatever has to be developed. This way, all the shoulds and ideals, instead of being a burden, actually become a means to true happiness.