

Who Are You Trying to Please?

September 30, 2009

Someone called this evening, to say he'd been reading the *Bhagava Gita*, and he said he finally understood the principle of not being attached to the outcome of your actions. And I had to tell him, No. There's one way in which you don't want to be attached, but there's another way in which you have to be very much attached. After all, you have to realize that not all religions teach the same thing. The principle of not being attached to the results of your actions makes sense only in this way: that we tend to be attached to the way we like to do certain things and we want those things to come out well, regardless of whether they really are skillful or not. That kind of attachment is unhealthy, because it gets in the way of your learning anything.

You do, however, have to be attached to the idea that you want to do things in a way that gives rise to skillful results. You've got to hold on to that. That's the raft that takes you across the river. And although ultimately you may get past needing the raft when you get to the other side of the river, as long as you're crossing over you have to hold on. You want to learn from your mistakes; you want to take your actions very seriously. And the results of your actions—you have to take those very seriously, too. Not to the point where you get depressed or discouraged, but you want to encourage yourself to keep on trying to do things in a skillful way. If you find yourself doing things in a way that's not skillful, you want to figure out what went wrong. Was it the intention? Was it the way you tried to implement the intention?

You've got to learn to read your actions from the beginning point, from when you first had the intention to act, and then while you're doing the action, and then after it's done. These are the instructions the Buddha gave to Rahula, and they underlie everything else he taught. As we know, it carries all the way through the practice of meditation. When the Buddha teaches about emptiness, it's an application of the same principle. You meditate and you want to figure out: How do you do it well? How do you get the mind really to settle down? Then, how do you see clearly where there's a disturbance, even in that state of concentration? You notice the areas where it's empty of the disturbance—that's what emptiness means—and where there still is a disturbance. You do this by comparing it to where it was before. So, there it is: comparing mind, but it's needed on the path.

The analogy the Buddha gives is when you leave a village and go into the wilderness, and you realize that all the disturbances you had being in the village—

having to worry about the politics, worry about this person's attitude and that person's attitude—when you finally get out in the wilderness, you can put all that aside. So there's this emptiness there, an emptiness of disturbance. It's a very positive sense of emptiness.

What disturbance is left? You've got the perception of wilderness now, and it's not totally a easeful perception, because there are dangers in the wilderness. There are animals out there. There are diseases out there. You're far away from any doctor. Back in the days before people were so thoroughly protected from the wilderness, the wilderness was a scary thing. They called it the "howling wilderness." So there are the dangers of being in the wilderness. To get past the disturbances of the perception of wilderness, you bring the mind to concentration. The mind is totally with, say, the breath, or any of the formless states. You can drop the concerns of being in the wilderness. When you've settled down, it's just you and the breath.

Or as the Buddha recommends in that particular sutta, you hold on to the perception of earth. Everything solid has earth. The trees are earth. The Earth is earth. The animals are earth. Your body is earth. It's all just earth. When you hold that perception in mind, then the disturbances of being afraid of being in the wilderness, of the dangers that may come to you physically, all get dropped. It's just earth with earth. Then, he says, you stretch that perception of earth out in all directions. You're not paying any attention to the ridges and hollows. He says it's like taking an animal skin and stretching it out with a hundred pegs so that it's totally flat and smooth. No more wrinkles. You can hold earth in mind that way.

As you can settle in, as he says, to enjoy and indulge in that perception, you can carry this through, through many subtle states of meditation, the infinitude of space, the infinitude of consciousness, nothingness, neither perception nor non-perception. In each state, it's the same thing. You settle in. You indulge in it. Then you see: Where is there a disturbance still there? And you always find the disturbance is with the perception. It's something you're doing. Ironically, the thing you're doing to create that state is also the disturbance there. So you let go, let go. Essentially, you're doing the same thing that the Buddha taught Rahula in the very beginning. You're looking at these things as actions, and you're seeing where there's still any harm. The harm here, though, gets very subtle, so it's just called disturbance.

The point of this is that when you get to these very subtle states, you don't start regarding them as the ground of being. This is particularly an issue when you hit the infinitude of consciousness. You say, "Wow! This must be it! Everything just arises from here and passes away, and this consciousness, this awareness

spreads everywhere, it's not touched by anything. Everything comes out of this consciousness and returns to it." If you forget that this, too, is an action, that this state is something you've created, then it's easy to come to all sorts of false conclusions about it. But you've got to keep this perception in mind: This is an action. You carry this perception all the way through.

In practice, what you're doing is simply raising your standard for what's skillful and what's not. This is one of the gifts that the Buddha gives us. He keeps raising our standards. It goes together with another gift.

I was thinking about this the other day. One of the gifts that Ajaan Fuang gave to me was that, in doing the practice, it wasn't to please him. As I child, I had always been very attuned to trying to please my parents. When I went to school, I tried to please my teachers. I lived my whole life trying to please people. In one way, it got me very well socialized, but in another way, it had its dangers. Because if you decide that you don't care for a particular person anymore, you don't care whether you please them. So it's not a very reliable standard for motivating people to do what's right.

So when I first went to stay with Ajaan Fuang I wanted to please him because I admired him a lot. I began to learn pretty quickly that whatever I did, it was never good enough. Which was frustrating. At first, I had the typical reaction, "Well if it's not good enough for him, then maybe he's just too picky or whatever." But eventually, I had to come back to the principle that "Wait a minute, I'm doing this to please myself. I'm suffering, and I need to get rid of my own suffering, and it's not for anybody else." As he would often say, we're not anybody's servants. Nobody paid us to be ordained. Nobody's paying us to practice. We're here because our suffering is pushing us into the practice, and we want to put an end to it.

The danger of course, if you're here just to please yourself, is that you turn into a sociopath. So that's the second gift that you get from the teacher—that I got from Ajaan Fuang—which was to raise my standards of how to please myself, what counted as making myself "happy enough." Part of it was realizing that there's a lot of suffering that goes on even in the mind that seems to be very still. You can't forget about other people, but your concern doesn't have to be about simply pleasing them, or whether they like you. Your main concern has to be: Are your actions causing any suffering? You have to make sure that your happiness doesn't depend on the suffering of others.

And on a more positive note, is there any way you can help them? Can that be part of your practice, too? Can you learn how to overcome your stinginess and your narrowness and your other antisocial defilements by going out of your way to

be genuinely helpful to other people? Again, not to make them like you, but because you see that they have something lacking, and you can help them learn how to overcome that lack. You're not doing it to make points; you're not doing it to advertise your kindness. It's simply part of your practice. You need to help other people sometimes so as to broaden your perspective. It's good for you, as in that analogy the Buddha gives of the acrobats. When you're kind to others, you're helping yourself. When you look after yourself—making sure that you're mindful, alert, careful in your actions, scrupulous in your behavior—you're benefitting, and the people around you benefit as well.

As in the story of King Pasenadi and his queen: One night, when he's in the mood, he turns to her and says, "Is there anyone you love more than yourself?" And of course, he's expecting her to say, "Yes, your majesty, you." But this was Queen Malika, and she was no fool. She said, "No. There's nobody I love more than myself. And how about you? Is there anybody you love more than yourself?" And he has to admit that there's no one he loves more than himself. End of scene.

The king goes down and reports to the Buddha what they said. And the Buddha says, "What she said is true. You could survey the whole world and you'd never find anyone you love more than yourself. In the same way, everybody else loves themselves just as fiercely." So the conclusion is not that you have to fight off everybody else. The conclusion is that you want to make sure you never harm anyone else.

You can read this in two ways. One is that you realize if your happiness depends on their suffering, they're going to do what they can to put an end to your happiness, so you've got to be careful not to step on their toes. On another level, though, there's empathy. You realize that you really want happiness, and you look at other people and they really want happiness, too. There's an empathy, a sympathy, that goes with that realization: one level where we can all resonate. One level where we can all connect.

Fortunately, there is a way to find happiness that doesn't cause harm to anyone else. It's through training the mind. But essentially your motivation remains the same. You're looking for happiness.

And in that question that the Buddha says lies at the beginning of wisdom—"What, when I do it, will be for my long-term welfare and happiness?"—notice the 'my.' It's for my sake. But also notice the 'I.' It's something I have to do. As you look for happiness that's really long-term, you inevitably find that it has to be a happiness that doesn't harm anybody else, partly because it just doesn't feel right harming other people, and secondly, because on a purely pragmatic basis, long-term happiness can last only if it's not harming anyone else.

That blurs the distinction between your happiness and other people's happiness. But again, you're not doing this to please anybody. You're doing it to please yourself.

So those are the two gifts you get from a teacher. One is realizing that you don't have to please the teacher. You're here to please yourself. But, the teacher also teaches you've got to raise your standards for what's pleasing to yourself, so that they do involve helping other people, so that your quest for happiness really does produce what you want: an ultimate happiness, a true happiness, a happiness that doesn't change. A happiness where your mind is safe. You're not exposed to the danger of being tempted to do any evil ever again.

The reason why people do evil is because their happiness depends on things that change. They're afraid that those things will change, so they fight off any possible change. Of course, that effort is doomed, but in the meantime they can cause a lot of trouble. And although we like to think that we're by nature good people, if your food source gets threatened—i.e., your source of happiness gets threatened—the fangs can come out. That's a scary thought.

So you are here to please yourself, but you want to make sure that your standards for pleasing yourself stay broad-minded and high.