

We're All Learning the Ropes

October 16, 2018

We express a wish that all beings be happy. So what are you doing here, sitting with our eyes closed watching our breath? How does that make beings happy? As Ajaan Suwat used to say, "We each have one person: one person that we're responsible for, and that's where everything begins." It's not the case we look out only after this one person without caring about other people, but we learn how to look out after this one person in a way that's good not only for us but also for the people around us. There's that passage in the Canon describing an acrobat with his assistant standing on his shoulders, and he's saying to the assistant, "Now, you look out after me and I'll look out after you, and that way we'll come down safely from our bamboo pole." And she says, "No, that won't do. I'll look out after myself and you look out after yourself, and that way we'll both come down safely." And as the Buddha said, "In that case, the assistant was the one who was right."

But he also goes on to say that sometimes the process works the other way around. It's by looking out after others that you develop good qualities inside. Developing goodwill is good for you. Developing patience, forbearance is good for you. Equanimity, kindness: These things are obviously good for other people, but they're also important parts of training your own mind. So there's a back and forth. You work on your inner work, and it'll have its impact spreading out into the world, and the good things you do in the world will have an impact on your own mind.

Right now we're focused on our breath, we're working on the inner work, but it's good to keep in mind some of the outer things we do. As the Buddha said, there's no way you're going to get into right concentration if you're stingy, there's no way you're going to get into any of the noble attainments if you're stingy. So generosity is a necessary part of the path. It develops a human quality, the quality of realizing that just as you love yourself, other people love themselves. And instead of taking that as an excuse to say, "Well, I'll just love myself as much as I want, to hell with everybody else, let them fend for themselves," use it as a jumping off place for a sense of fellow feeling, that we're all in this together.

Everybody wants happiness and, for the most part, we're pretty deluded about how to do it. Realizing that fact should help develop a sense of fellow feeling, kindness, goodwill, and also

some patience, realizing that you can't straighten everybody out because, after all, you're not yet straightened out yourself. There's a lot of work that needs to be done inside. Our desire to want everybody else to be perfect has to be tempered by our own reflection that *we're* not perfect. After all, the world you're experiencing, everything you experience through the senses—sights, sounds, smells, tactile sensations—all these things come from your past karma.

The world you're living in is the result of your past actions. Now, you can't see all of your past actions right now. You may have some really good things in the past and some really bad things in the past that you don't know about. They're not showing themselves at the moment. But when you get frustrated with the world, you have to remind yourself, "Well, it's just a reflection of what I've been doing." Sometimes, with actions you did a long time ago, it may seem unfair that you still have to still deal with the results of something that you did back when you didn't know anything at all, but that's just the way it works. So you develop patience and goodwill, so that you can act in ways that will get some good energy into the world, so that something good will come back.

There was a case years back. Ajaan Fuang had a student, a nurse. She was very good looking and she was often the target of a lot of people's gossip at the workplace. One day it just really got to her. She went and meditated with Ajaan Fuang during her lunch break and she had a vision of herself in a big hall of mirrors, seeing herself reflected back, back, back, back, back, who knows how many times. It got her thinking about rebirth. She began to have a sense that she'd probably been gossiped about for all those many lifetimes. So the thought got even more oppressive.

After she left meditation, she told Ajaan Fuang about her sense of frustration and hopelessness around this, thinking that he would give her some words of comfort and encouragement. But he said, "Well, *you're* the one who wanted to be born here." It shocked her but it made her come to her senses. After all, she was the one who chose this lifetime, this world as opposed to the better worlds that are out there. It may have been because she just didn't have the opportunity or because she consciously made this choice not to go to a better world, but again you have to realize you're not just the target of everybody else's misbehavior. You've been putting some misbehavior out there into the world yourself.

This applies to all of us. The Buddha himself had done a lot of unskillful things in his previous lifetimes. You can read about them in the Jataka tales. There are tales where he kills, steals, has illicit sex, takes intoxicants, breaks four of the precepts. It's important that he never

breaks the precept against lying, it was not in his nature, but as for the times when he breaks all the others, he's still learning the ropes.

So, just as you want to have some people have compassion for you in the fact you're learning the ropes, remember everybody else is learning the ropes, too. The image is of a young sailor on a ship. He still doesn't know which sails to put up, which sails to put down, which rope to pull on, which rope not to pull on. It would take a while to learn these things, especially in the days when sailing ships were quite complex.

The world, too, is a very complex place. We're all still learning the ropes. So we should have some compassion for one another, goodwill for one another, just as we'd like to receive some compassion and goodwill from others, too.

In other words, what you want from other people is what you should give. Now, this is not meant to place blame on you, but it is meant to give you a sense of power: By changing your mind, by changing your actions, you can change the world—not by going around and straightening everybody else out, but as you straighten out your own mind, you start doing better things, creating a better world, through your generosity, through your virtue, through your goodwill. And goodwill has to be paired with patience.

We want all beings to be happy, but it's not going to happen overnight. We want all beings to do the things that would lead to true happiness. That's certainly not going to happen overnight. In the meantime, they're going to be doing unskillful things to us, and we need to have patience so that we're not sending a bad reaction back. Just think, if somebody does something bad and sends it your way, just let it drop at your feet. Think of it not reaching you. You don't have to pick it up, so you don't have to continue the back and forth. And we meditate to find the strength within to do the things we know should be done, because it's often not easy. A lot of things we like to do give bad results, a lot of things we don't like to do that give good results, and we need strength—a sense of well-being coming from a place of nourishment, a place where we don't feel threatened—so that we can talk the mind into doing the things that give good results in the long term and to avoid the things that give bad results.

Long term is something of a luxury for most people. People who are really starving often can't think about long term. All they can think about is the next meal. It's when you're well fed that you can start thinking further out. Well, it's the same with the mind. As long as the mind is starving, feeling irritated and unhappy, all it can think about is immediate results, a desire for an immediate hit. To counteract this tendency, we feed the mind with concentration, we feed the

mind with comfortable breath sensations, work those sensations through the body so that we can feel bathed in a sense of ease, realizing that nobody can take this sense of ease away from us. We're not threatened. That lets us think in the long term, not only the long term into the future, but also thinking back long-term into the past and being a little bit more mature about our attitude about the bad things that come our way in the world, or bad situations in the world.

We realize that we've played a role in making things bad, just as we've played the role in making things good, but it's a mix. That's what the human realm is: a mix. So here's our opportunity to put some more good into the mix. Even though we're not planning to hang around in the world forever, we want to leave something good behind. Think about the Buddha. He's gone to a dimension totally outside space and time. He doesn't have to be involved in worlds at all, but look what he left behind: a Dhamma and a Vinaya that have lasted now for 2,600 years and have provided a lot of help to a lot of people.

Maybe we can't leave behind something quite so majestic, but we *can* leave behind whatever goodness we can muster. That way, when we leave the world, we leave on good terms, not out of aversion but with a sense of mature dispassion that comes when you realize that you've done enough. That particular job is done. The world itself will never be perfect, but we've paid off our debts. That's another good thought to keep in mind. We're all born into the world with debts. It's only when we gain awakening that we're totally debt-free.

As Ajaan Lee would often point out, "When we develop these four jhanas, the four elements in the body," he says, "that's our field. We can make it grow all kinds of crops and then we can sell the crops, That's how we pay off our debts." We do it by developing inner wealth that we then spread around.