

Unburdensome, Part 2

November 24, 2020

The other night, I talked on the topic of being unburdensome, one of the principles the Buddha taught to his stepmother Mahāpajāpatī Gotamī. I'd like to say some more on the topic tonight because the other night I just skimmed over it.

There's a lot of misunderstanding on what it means to be unburdensome. You have to put it in context. Remember that the goal of the path is dispassion, and so there are types of being unburdensome that are conducive to dispassion, and others that are not. That's the deciding factor as to whether they're in line with the Dhamma or not.

There's a story in the Canon, one of the origin stories for the rule against the storing of food. There's an arahant whose name was Ven. Velaṭṭhasīsa. He was Ānanda's preceptor. The commentary says he had been the leader of the Kassapa brothers, the 1,000 fire-worshipping ascetics. He lived alone in the forest, and he'd go for alms only about once a week. He'd get rice and eat some of the rice for today. As for the remaining rice in his bowl that he didn't eat today, he would set it out in the sun to dry it. Then on later days he would moisten it and have a little more rice. He was very frugal.

Word of this got to the Buddha, and the Buddha told him, "This is not inspiring, this is not to be done": one of those rare cases in which an arahant was the reason for rules being promulgated. The Buddha didn't tell his reasoning there, but he does talk in other places about how important it is that we have a monastic community where lay people provide food, shelter, clothing, and medicine, so that the monks can devote themselves fully to the practice and then teach the laity in return.

This way, you have full-time practitioners permeating society, where they can share their wisdom, share their example. And it's in the context of this mutual dependence between the monastics and the lay people that we have the opportunity to help one another. If we have time to practice fully, that's what we do; and if we don't have time to practice fully, at least we're *near* people who do.

Because the monks *could* go off in the forest, grow their own food, take care of themselves, and not have to depend on anybody—and that would be unburdensome in one way. But it would deprive the lay people of the opportunity to be near people who are devoted

to the practice. And it would deprive the monks of the opportunity to be good examples to other people, and to have opportunities for exercising their compassion.

Remember the chant we have: “Those who show respect in welcoming guests are right in the presence of nibbāna.” So the Buddha’s not encouraging people to be misanthropes, trying to run away from society. The way things are arranged by the rules, you have time to be alone, but you also have time to be respectful when people come to you with requests. So there’s a back-and-forth, and it’s in the context of this back-and-forth that dispassion can be developed in the proper way.

Recently I was reading a statement by a lay Dhamma teacher that it’s not convenient to have monks who don’t handle money, because if you invite them to your house then you have to take them to the airport. You can’t depend on them to take themselves to the airport. So this teacher wanted to have the rule rescinded—for her own convenience, I guess. Well, she’s not the first to make this complaint.

Back in Thailand, the lay people in the area where Wat Dhammasathit was located were mainly Mahanikai types. In other words, the men, when they were younger and had ordained, had ordained at Mahanikai village monasteries, where they handled money. They kept complaining that the Forest monks, in not handling money, were making themselves burdensome—needing to have somebody to carry their money for them when they went anywhere.

But again, the Buddha said that if you allow the monks to handle money, they can take on all kinds of unskillful things with the money. So that would be a way of being unburdensome that would not be conducive to dispassion.

It’s like cases of monks storing up food for themselves: Velaṭṭhasīsa, as an example, was doing that out of frugality, but there have been lots of other monks who would store up food for reasons that were not frugal at all.

This happened in the big Buddhists universities that developed in India: The monks were storing up food. There was no sense of connection between them and the local lay people. The monks had their own food; the lay people had their own food. The monks were getting their sponsorship from kings and other people like that. When the universities were destroyed, the local people didn’t see much need to reinstate them, because they weren’t getting much out of the monks in terms of their daily spiritual needs.

So when you talk about being unburdensome, you have to realize that some ways of being

unburdensome are conducive to dispassion, and others are conducive to passion. Which is why we have the rules as they are.

For example, the rules about building lodgings: If people have not offered material things, you don't ask for material things. You can ask for them to run errands and to do little jobs here and there, which they don't have to spend money for. Even there, though, you have to have a sense of how much is enough, and how much is too much.

The Buddha was constantly reminding the monks: Don't make yourself a nuisance with your requests. He gave a fine story about a monk who was living out in the forest, near a large marsh. Birds would come and settle in the marsh every night, and they would just chatter all night long. Otherwise, the forest was an ideal place to practice, but the sound of the birds was driving him crazy.

So he came to see the Buddha and said, "What can I do?" And the Buddha said, "In the beginning of the night, stand up and make this announcement: 'All of you birds here, I want a feather from each of you.' Then at the second watch and the third watch make the announcement again." So the monk did as he was told. The birds said, "This monk is asking for too much," and they all left. As the Buddha said when he told this story, even common animals don't like being pestered with requests, how much more so human beings.

So try to have a sense of how to read people, so that you can know when you've reached the point of enough, and when you're about to overstep the boundaries into too much. It's always good to stay away from that boundary. When you sense it coming, you can pull back.

These principles don't only apply to monks. They also apply to lay people too. The requests that lay people have for others may not have to do only with asking for help with a project. As with all the other ways we ask for help from other people, you have to have a sense of when you're asking too much—and learn how to read other people.

If you want something out of them, and they're beginning to give the signs that you're asking for too much, don't get upset. And don't say, "Well, something is wrong with them." Just realize, "Okay, this is their boundary; they're not here to serve my needs," and you pull back.

Obviously, this requires a lot of sensitivity, but that's what you're here for: to learn to be sensitive, and to be sensitive to the right things. You've got to be sensitive to how you're creating your own suffering, and it's going to be in areas where you're very much attached. After all, by definition: The suffering is in your attachments. And those are areas where we tend

to be very insensitive to where we're being burdensome, and insensitive to where our attachments are inappropriate.

So open your mind to this possibility, that where you're most dearly attached and you have the strongest feelings about how right it is to be attached there, that's precisely where you've got to question things. You've got to see that there's suffering there.

Without seeing the suffering, it's very hard to admit that you're doing anything unskillful. We all tend to live in our own worlds, our own ideas of what's right and what's wrong, and the only reason we're willing to listen to other people is when there are areas where we know that we're lacking something. Something's not quite right in the way we're doing things.

If you're fully convinced that what you're doing is right, then other people can have the best reasons in the world for how you can change, but they're not going to penetrate. This is why the Buddha says you want to be sensitive to where there's stress and suffering, and how it's being caused by your actions. Only then will you be willing to look for outside help.

Remember the Buddha's description of the normal reaction to suffering or pain: One is bewilderment, and the second is, "Is there somebody out there who knows a way or two to put an end to this pain?" It's because of our pain, because of our suffering and stress, that we look to others for help.

So in this case, when you see the stress and suffering you're causing, that's when the mind will be open to listen to what the Buddha has to say about how to put an end to it.

And he's saying to look at the areas where you're most attached, the areas where you can have the most justification for your attachments: Right there is where you're causing yourself suffering. But as I said, because we're so attached there, we tend not to see the burdens that our attachments are placing on other people, or the burdens those things are placing on us.

As far as we're concerned, this is the way things have got to be. And it's a good step in the right direction when you realize that, to put it in plain language, "They don't gotta be that way."