

For Goodness' Sake

December 27, 2019

A few weeks ago I was in Thailand. While I was there, I went to pay my respects to Ajaan Uthai, a student of Ajaan Funn. When I arrived, there was already a group of laypeople visiting with him. He asked me a couple of questions about life here at Wat Metta. And one of them was, "When Westerners come to the monastery, what do they come for?" He'd been talking about virtue and generosity to the laypeople, so I mentioned that a lot of people don't come thinking about generosity and virtue at the very beginning. Their first motivation for coming is to find peace of mind. One of the people in the other group said, "Ah, Westerners, they go straight to the top, right from the very beginning." And Ajaan Uthai's response was, "What do you mean *straight to the top*? Even common animals want peace of mind. If you want to be a human being, you have to develop virtue, good qualities of the mind, good qualities of the character. That's what differentiates us from common animals."

So what are those good qualities? There's a list in the ten perfections. They include discernment, which is primarily a quality of the mind, but the other nine are all qualities of the heart: generosity, virtue, renunciation, persistence, endurance, truth, determination, goodwill, and equanimity.

Goodwill stands out as good-heartedness. A lot of the others though, are qualities of strength, which we may not associate with a good heart, but for the heart to be truly good requires strength. If you start out with good intentions but you can't carry them through, they don't really mean much. Goodness requires strength to do good things that are hard: the ability to make yourself want to do things that you might not want to do but you know are going to be good for you in the long term, and the ability to say No to things that you like to do but you know are going to be bad for you in the long term.

In other words, your discernment points out the fact that the consequences are going to be good or bad for certain actions, and then you've got to look at your emotions. Are they on the side of what your discernment is telling you, or not? Sometimes they are; sometimes not. When they're on the side of your discernment then it's no real problem. It's when they're at cross-purposes: That's when it's a real test of your character. That's how we should measure our self worth. As the Buddha said, the sign of your discernment as a mature person is your ability

to make yourself want to do things that you don't like doing but will give good results in the long term, and to want to say No to things you like doing but are going to give bad results in the long term.

So notice, you're not just going against your likes. You're trying to change your likes: Try to make yourself *want* to do these things. This means you have to be able to point out to yourself the good consequences of difficult actions, and how happy you'll be when the good consequences come.

This is one of the reasons why we begin the practice with generosity. It's practice in delayed gratification and also in the realization that some pleasures are better than others. The pleasure that comes from seeing someone else enjoy something you gave to them is a better pleasure than simply enjoying it yourself; the simple knowledge that you've done something good is a better pleasure than the pleasure that comes from just gobbling up what you've got.

Notice that there is pleasure here. All too often we're told that to be a good person you have to deny your own happiness for the sake of other people's. But then after a while, you start wondering: Why is their happiness more important than yours? From the Buddha's point of view, the person who works for his or her own well-being and the well-being of others at the same time is the best sort of person, better than one who works only for the well-being of others. So you've got to learn how to find your happiness in being good at the same time. You do things for goodness' sake and also for happiness' sake, together.

We have that phrase in English, "for goodness' sake." It's been repeated so many times that it's become just a matter of emphasis. It's lost its real meaning. The real meaning is that you do something because it would lead to good results, for the sake of the goodness it would yield. That's your motivation. So ideally, you want to learn how to get your likes in line with what's good.

This is one of the reasons why we meditate: not just to give the mind a peaceful place to stay, but also to give it strength. The goodness of meditation is going to require endurance, determination, and persistence. If you don't have a source for internal strength like this, it's going to be hard to carry through with your good intentions. This is why concentration is not just one aspect of the path. The Buddha placed at the *center* of the path to give you strength to carry through with the rest of the path. You try to get your heart well rested, get your mind well rested, with a sense of well-being, a sense of ease, a sense of rapture so that it'll be strong enough to do the work that the rest of the path demands.

And these are things that you can do: You can make the mind settle down. As I mentioned last night, I was at a place in Malaysia where I was told that people had been taught that you can't *do* concentration. It just happens on its own—kind of comes up and whacks you across the head. You just have to sit there very patiently waiting for it to come. But actually, the first jhana contains directed thought and evaluation: These are things you do. You direct your thoughts to the breath and then you evaluate it. How does it feel? Does it feel good enough to stay with for a while? If it doesn't, how could it be *made* to feel that good? You experiment. You try things out. You ask questions. You look for answers. These are all things you do.

Then, when you find something that seems good, you can stick with it for a while to see if it really is good, or how long it's going to be good. And when you find a way of breathing that feels good, you allow that sense of pleasure to spread through the body: down the spine, out the legs, down the nerves of the arms, starting from the area around the heart down through the different organs, and down to the intestines.

Try to sensitize yourself. The more sensitive you are to this area of your awareness, the more satisfying it becomes. As you make yourself sensitive and then breathe in a way that satisfies that sensitivity, you develop a pleasure that's more and more refined. It's a pleasure that's good, in and of itself, but it's also good in the sense that it's not harming anybody, and it gives you the strength to look at the questions you're asking yourself as you go through daily life about what to do and what should be done.

This is a basic distinction in the Buddha's teachings. We hear so much about the Buddha's teachings on non-duality or his avoidance of dualities. But one of his duties as a teacher, he said, was to give you a basis for deciding what should and shouldn't be done, and underlying that duty is the basic principle that your actions really do matter. They make a difference. You have the choice to act in one way or another.

If you were to deny that choice, or to deny that your actions had consequences, then there wouldn't be any idea of "should" or "should not." You'd just act on your impulses, with no choice in the matter. But you do have choices, and actions do have consequences. So, if you want true happiness, those are the conditions for the Buddha's shoulds.

Then you want to be very careful about what you actually do. And ask yourself: Do I want to do what I should be doing?

This is where you have to learn how to talk to yourself. Make yourself see the goodness that comes, the happiness that comes, from doing the right thing. And part of that happiness is a

sense of self-worth. People who indulge in all their impulses find that, after a while, they have very little sense of self-worth at all—or they have to blow up an inflated sense of self-worth that doesn't really have anything to do with reality.

But if you can look at your actions and see, “I did this and nobody was harmed. I found happiness this way and nobody was harmed. I found happiness in this way and other people benefited, too”: That kind of realization gives you a sense of your worth as a person. And there's a lot of well-being that comes around that sense of worth. You want to learn how to appreciate it.

This means changing the balance of power inside. There are some voices in the mental committee that are rebellious, but when you follow them where do they lead? A lot of them are like the friends who try to get you to do something against the law and then, when the police come, go running away. In other words, something inside you wants to do something unskillful, and you give in, but that particular defilement is not the one that's going to suffer. *You're* the one that's going to suffer.

So you have to see the value of being able to look back on your actions and realize that nobody was harmed, and that there were cases where people were helped. And there lies your value as a human being. That's your value as a *mature* human being. This is one of the reasons why we come *for goodness sake*: to figure out what would be the good thing to do, so that we can regard ourselves as good people.

So look carefully at that list in the perfections: endurance, determination, renunciation.

Renunciation, here, doesn't just mean giving things up. Every case where the Buddha's talks about renouncing something, he adds that there's always something gained in return. The primary case of renunciation is just sitting here giving up your sensual thoughts, learning how to focus on the breath, to focus on the sense of the body as you feel it from within, and learning how to find pleasure there. Because that kind of searching for pleasure really is strengthening and is totally harmless.

The search for pleasures outside, or the fascination of thinking about what a wonderful meal you had, and how the next meal is going to be really good: That really weakens you. It makes your happiness depend on things being a certain way. You become a hothouse plant. You can live only under certain conditions. Your happiness can survive only under certain conditions.

Whereas if you learn how to find happiness with the breath, you can be anywhere: sitting

on a bus, in a doctor's office. They could throw you in prison, and you could still learn how to breathe well, and you'd have your own personal sense of well-being, a source of well-being that nobody can take away from you. That gives you strength, because you can put up with all kinds of conditions that you wouldn't be able to otherwise. And your goodness can survive all kinds of conditions because of that.

So we're here for peace of mind, but it's a peace of mind that's also goodness: happiness and goodness together. That's what makes it really special. Anybody can find peace of mind in just about any way, but when you add those extra conditions onto it, it makes it something of real value because you've learned how to find your happiness in a responsible way. You can look at your actions and see nothing that you would criticize yourself for. That means your peace of mind doesn't require putting up huge walls of denial. It's also peace of mind that can withstand all kinds of external changes, because you've made certain qualities in your mind unchanging.

So think of the all-around aspect of the goodness we're looking for—goodness and happiness together—and the deep peace of mind that comes from that. After all, release is the ultimate peace. That's the kind of peace that common animals can't find, but human beings can, because the release the Buddha taught depends on all the factors of the path. They include virtue and, as he said, they're founded on generosity. Stingy people, he said, can't attain jhana, can't attain nibbana. In other words it's the kind of peace that's available only to generous people, virtuous people.

So, yes, we are looking for peace of mind, but we've got some extra conditions. We're doing it for the sake of happiness, and we're also doing it for goodness' sake. Always keep these many dimensions in mind because they make the practice whole: an entire practice, a practice that really is worth giving your life to.