

More than Just Letting Go

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I've been to a couple of different places to teach this past year. And one of the most disturbing things I've heard in many of the places is the idea that being a Buddhist means that you have to be passive. Just put up with things as they are and don't try to change anything.

And it's applied on both levels, both inside and out. Outside, you're simply supposed to accept the way society is and not make any changes. Inside, you're not supposed to make any changes in your own mind. That's the stereotype.

It's disturbing because it's *so* different from what the Buddha taught. Look at the Buddha himself. He wasn't the sort of person just to sit around and accept things. If he'd sat around and accepted things, he would have stayed in his palace, and we wouldn't have had a Buddha.

It was because he saw that there was a big problem that had to be solved and he was willing to do everything he needed to do in order to solve it: That's why we have the Dhamma; that's why we're here practicing. He wanted to solve not only his problem, but also help other people solve theirs. So it's good to think of his example and how it might apply to our lives.

When he talks about ways of doing good in the world, there are basically three: generosity, virtue, meditation.

Generosity here can cover all kinds of things—not just giving material gifts but also giving your time to a particular cause, or taking on a particular issue that you think is important. The Buddha doesn't lay down any laws about what you can and cannot be generous about. He says to give where you feel inspired.

But, he says, for the gift to be good for you and for others, there are certain things you have to think about. One is that you want to make sure your gift doesn't harm anybody: doesn't harm other people, doesn't harm yourself. That means you have to observe the precepts as you're taking on an issue. At the same time, you have to look at what taking on the issue does to you. There are times when you realize you've been fighting and you're burning out. Or you're developing unskillful qualities of mind as you fight a particular issue, in which case you've got to back off. You can't just accept things happening in your mind that way. Because that's the big arena of importance for the Buddha: what's going on in your mind.

And here again, as Ajaan Fuang mentioned to me one time, there are a lot of people who say that what's going on in your mind is simply something you have to

accept and let go, accept and let go. He says there's more just than letting go. There are things you have to develop. You've got to develop skillful qualities. And it takes work. One of the ways you do that is through the meditation, of course, but you can also do it through generosity and virtue: seeing what's a good gift of your time, something that's going to take you out of yourself, and seeing what good what you can leave behind for the rest of the world. So the activity here goes in and out, in and out.

There's one point where the Buddha says that when you protect yourself, you're protecting others; when you protect others, you're protecting yourself. He gives the image of two acrobats. One's standing on the shoulders of the other one, and the lower one's standing on the tip of a bamboo pole that's been set vertically in the ground. As he says, each of the acrobats has to maintain his or her own balance. You can't maintain the balance of the other person. It's by maintaining your own balance that you help the other person maintain his or hers.

At the same time, there are other times when, in looking after other people, you help yourself. When you're being generous, when you're exercising goodwill and sympathy, when you're learning patience and equanimity in dealing with other people: That's to your own good as well.

But on both levels, both inside and out, we're not just passive. It's simply that we have to choose our battles. We may have infinite goodwill, infinite compassion, infinite empathetic joy, infinite equanimity, but we don't have infinite resources to act on all our desires to be compassionate or to have goodwill.

Particularly in the area of compassion: When you see that someone is suffering, there are areas where you can help and other areas where you can't. As the Buddha said, it takes wisdom to see what is your business and what's not your business. And how do you learn that? Through trial-and-error.

But at the very least you remember that generosity is a part of the practice. If you don't have a lot of material goods to give, you can give of your time, you can give of your energy, you can give of your knowledge.

But you also have to choose your battles. There are certain things outside in the world that you just can't change, or the change would entail too many drawbacks, and those are the things you've got to accept. But there are areas where you *can* change things for the good, and you don't want to just brush them off.

I was talking to a woman today who said she had a client who was very spiritually advanced: She didn't want to get involved in anything, she didn't want to work, she didn't want to do anything at all, she just let go of the world. And I said, "That's not spiritually advanced. That's lazy."

But once you've chosen the area where you're going to help, the other areas are

where you develop equanimity. This is why we develop infinite equanimity: Not that we're going to be infinitely equanimous all the time with regard to everything, but we have to be able to develop equanimity in places where it's difficult. You see some kinds of suffering and you realize you can't help, so you've got to be equanimous there. Otherwise, you waste your time, your energy, and your emotional strength on things where you can't make any difference. And other areas where you *could* have made a difference then get left behind.

So when you've found something that's good to work on, stick with it, and develop equanimity for the areas where you can't make a change. But there will come times when, even in the area where you've decided you want to work and to make a difference, either you begin to realize that your energy is not up to it, or you're not getting the results that you thought you could. Then you have to develop equanimity for that, so that you can turn around and look at what's going on in your own mind.

And don't wait until the point of burnout to start working on your mind. In fact, trying to work on your mind through the meditation as you help other people gives you the strength to keep on helping them. But it also enables you to gauge when you're giving too much to the others. If you begin to find that you're getting ragged and you can't meditate, okay, you've given too much.

This is another one of the Buddha's principles. He says your generosity shouldn't harm others or harm yourself: You don't want to give too much, you don't want to give so much that you waste yourself, and waste your strength.

So you work inside as well, remembering that that's where the top priority is. There are a lot of kinds of suffering in the world, and the Buddha says you have to focus on the kind of suffering where you can make a difference. It's the same principle applied inside. The suffering in terms of the three characteristics—in other words, the fact that things depend on causes that are unstable and will have to change, which means there's stress built into those things: That you will never be able to change.

But the stress that comes from your own craving and clinging: That's not necessary; that's not built into things. It may be built into the way you're acting, but it can be removed from the way you act. And tackling that kind of suffering is an area where you *can* make a difference.

That's where the Buddha focused. He didn't take on all the suffering in the world—which is another misconception you hear around: that the Buddha said he wanted to end all suffering in the world. Well, no. He wanted to end the kind of suffering that people cause themselves unnecessarily. That's what he focused on. He couldn't go out and erase their suffering for them, but he could teach them

how to solve their own sufferings themselves.

After all, each of us suffers from craving and clinging through our own lack of skill. And no one else can come in and make us skillful. They can set a good example of what a skillful way to live would be, a skillful way to think. And they can give advice. But beyond that point, it's up to you. What areas in your own life are you unskillful? What areas in your own mind are you unskillful?

The word *avijja*, which is usually translated as ignorance, can also mean lack of skill. So this is our problem. Our lack of skill is often in areas where we're ignorant—not only ignorant of how to do something, but simply ignorant of the fact that we're ignorant. We don't know what we're doing at all.

This is one of the reasons why we practice: to see what we're bringing to our experience. When you look at the Buddha's analysis of dependent co-arising, it's easy to get involved in all the intricacies of all the many different factors. But it's important that you step back and notice that half of the factors come before sensory contact. Even before you've seen things, or heard things, or smelled or tasted or touched or thought things, the mind has primed itself to suffer because of all the processes that come prior to the contact and that we do in ignorance.

What we're doing as we meditate is to turn our attention onto that area and bring some knowledge to it. Because if you bring knowledge to those same processes, you can convert them from a cause of suffering into the path to the end of suffering. That's an area where you really can make a difference, and nobody else can make that difference for you—which is why this has to have top priority, how you're looking after your own mind.

This is why we focus on the breath. Look at the Buddha's teachings on mindfulness of breathing. They include getting sensitive to bodily fabrication, getting sensitive to mental fabrication, and learning how to calm both. And in the course of dealing with the different steps, you're talking to yourself, which is verbal fabrication. All the three kinds of fabrication that he says we do in ignorance get brought up to the surface and become the center of our attention as we meditate.

What is bodily fabrication? It's the in-and-out breath.

Verbal fabrication, technically is called directed thought and evaluation. It's basically the sentences with which you talk to yourself. You direct your thoughts to a particular topic and you comment on it or ask questions on it.

Mental fabrications are feelings and perceptions. Feelings are feeling-tones of pleasure, pain, neither-pleasure-nor-pain. Perceptions are the images you have in your mind, either individual words or visual images, that the mind uses to communicate to itself with.

These are the processes that usually get shaped in ignorance, but now we're bringing some knowledge to them. We're trying to be aware of our breathing, aware of how we talk to ourselves about the breath. We train ourselves to talk about the breath in skillful ways. Instead of saying, "This is boring, this is boring, this is boring," you say, "Something's happening here that can have a huge impact on the health of my body and the health of my mind, simply by the way I breathe. And I can create a sense of ease here in the present moment by the way I breathe. How do I do that?" That's skillful verbal fabrication around the breath. How do you make the breath comfortable when there's a sense of comfort with the breath? How do you let it spread so that it fills the body? Once it's filled the body, how do you maintain that sense of fullness? Those are useful ways of talking about the breath.

You start examining the ease that comes from the breath, to make sure you don't get waylaid by the ease. In other words, there will come a sense of well-being, and it's very easy to slip off the breath and just wallow in the well-being, like you'd wallow in a big featherbed. But it turns out the featherbed is based on your attention to the breath. And so if there's no attention to the breath, then it all collapses. So you've got to remind yourself: Even though there is ease here, you can't let yourself get waylaid.

It's like Ulysses going to listen to the Sirens. You've got to tie yourself to the mast, and look carefully at the mast. What is this breath that you're holding on to? What is the perception that you keep in mind that tells you how the breath is going?

Because sometimes the perception can actually get in the way. We have some subconscious pictures in our mind about how the breath comes in or how it *should* feel when it comes in—what needs to expand and what needs to whatever as the breath comes in. And those pictures may actually be causing stress and discomfort. The breath becomes something that's not a friend. So you've got to turn that around. The breath has *got* to be your friend. If you're not on good terms with your own breath, you're in bad shape.

So how about thinking about the breath as the energy flowing through the nerves, flowing through the blood vessels, flowing through every cell in the body? Think of every cell in the body being full: no sense of lack, everything is connected inside. Hold that perception in mind and see what it does to the way you breathe. See what it does to the sense of well-being you can develop. See what it does to the sense of stillness and solidity you can develop.

This is just one of the processes that, when you did it in ignorance, didn't have much to offer, but when you do it with knowledge you find it is a basis for

concentration. And as you get to know the ways the mind deals with perceptions, that becomes the basis for discernment as well.

So that's the big problem—the processes of fabrication done in ignorance—and to solve it, you have to fabrication a lot of good qualities with knowledge. You're developing concentration; you're developing discernment. Eventually, yes, you will have to put the path aside, but you put it aside only when it's done its work.

It's like the image of the raft. You take the raft across the river, and when you've reached the other side of the river you don't need the raft anymore. But when you're in the middle of the river, you've got to hold on. And in the Buddha's image, you have to use your arms and your legs to swim the raft across the river. You're kicking and you're paddling. So you're not just letting go. If you let go of the raft, the river sucks you down into its whirlpools and waterfalls.

There's effort that has to be put in. There's work that needs to be done. But it's good work, work in the context of a sense of well-being, both the immediate visceral well-being that comes with the concentration, and also the well-being that comes when you know that you're working on a path that's noble. The things you're asked to do are things done with dignity and honor. Those are words we hardly even hear in our culture anymore—"dignity," "honor"—but that doesn't mean that we can't develop them within ourselves and value them within ourselves.

So it's a path that involves both letting go *and* developing. And, as the Buddha said, when you delight in properly letting things go and properly developing things, that's when you join the culture of the noble ones, which stands outside of our culture, stands outside of every human culture except where the Dhamma's really practiced. It's a good culture to belong to. So, wherever you go, remember that that's the culture that you want to aspire to. Then it's a culture that you can be a member of, wherever you are.