

Your Duty Lies Right Here

November 3, 2020

We spread thoughts of goodwill, wishing for all beings to be happy, to have good fortune. Then we look at beings who have good fortune, and in many cases, it's very dismaying. They gain wealth and then they do everything they can to hang on to their wealth with no thought of morality at all. They gain beauty, they gain power, and do everything they can to hang on. So it can get you very disillusioned with happiness, disillusioned with beings.

But then you have to look at yourself. You're a being, too. Can you guarantee that if you gained beauty, wealth, power, happiness that you wouldn't misbehave too? That forces you to look very carefully at yourself, and to realize the importance of training the mind.

As the Buddha said, a sign of a wise person is realizing what duties fall to you and what duties don't. And your number-one duty is to train the mind, which is why what you're doing right now as you're meditating is the most important thing you could be doing. There are other people in other places in the world doing things that they say are important, but that's not your duty. That duty doesn't fall to you—to keep track of what they're doing. You've got to keep track of what *you're* doing, because there's only so much you can do to influence other people's behavior. The problem is that when you spend all your time focusing outside, the areas where you could influence yourself in a good direction get neglected.

Time passes. Death gets closer, and the job doesn't get easier. So you've got to realize that this moment of awareness and this breath deserve your full attention. And it's not just bare attention. Bare attention is actually in many ways inappropriate attention.

Whenever the Buddha talked about attention, he talked about only two kinds: appropriate or inappropriate. Appropriate is when you see things in terms of the four noble truths and their duties, or on a more basic level, seeing things in terms of whether they're skillful actions or unskillful actions. Then, if they're skillful, how can you develop them? If they're unskillful, how can you abandon them?

This gets further elaborated in the four noble truths, with their duties: comprehending suffering, abandoning its cause, realizing its cessation by developing the path. So when something comes up in the mind, you have to ask yourself, "Is this an instance of suffering, is this the cause of suffering, or is this part of the path that I should be developing?" If you simply sit and watch things

coming and going, you're missing an important part of appropriate attention—and that turns your attention into inappropriate attention.

When the Buddha talked about gaining penetrating insight into arising and passing away, the *penetrating* there is the word you have to focus on. When you penetrate into these things, you realize what kind of causes they come from, what they lead to—and again, whether they're skillful or not. You also realize what should be done if they're skillful, and what should be done if they're unskillful. That's penetrating.

So these are the duties to focus on. This is where the Buddha focuses his teachings. When people would ask him questions about other issues that were irrelevant to the issue of suffering, irrelevant to appropriate attention, he would say, "What I teach is suffering and the end of suffering." That's it. You can look at a lot of other things in his teachings and say, "Well, he taught about rebirth and heavens and hells. What about those?" But they're all related to suffering and the end of suffering. If you don't train the mind, you'll do things that get you reborn into a lot of suffering. So it all comes back here.

What are you doing right now? What's happening in the mind? What choices are you making? Are you making them skillfully? That's where you're responsible. If you're not responsible for this, then can you be trusted with happiness? If your mind is out of control, it's like putting a crazy person in the driver's seat of your car. It may be a good car. It could be a good road, but the fact that there's a crazy person behind the steering wheel means that it's going to go off the road. You've got to pay careful attention to the driver. Who's in charge of your committee right now? Who's making the decisions, and on the basis of what? Can they be trusted? How do you know? You develop as much as mindfulness and alertness and ardency as you can. That's where your duties lie right now. Everything else is not your duty.

This division into what duties fall to you and what duties don't fall to you leads ultimately to the teachings on self and not-self. When it's an issue of what choices you're making, you want to be responsible. You want to create a self that you can depend on. As for the results of your actions once they've come, then you leave those to be anatta. You learn from them. If they're good, you learn from them. If they're bad, you learn from them. But you don't try latching on to them.

Ajaan Lee's image is of a person plowing a field. You have to allow the dirt to fall off the plow. If you go around gathering up the dirt, putting it in a bag, and tying the bag to the leg of your water buffalo, you're going to get bogged down. In other words, you have to learn how to do good and then you let it go, because the fruits of good actions, even though they are good, contain their poison. If you try

to hold on to them, they bite you. If you leave them in the world as your gift to the world, then it's perfectly fine. So you keep on focusing on, "What are the choices you're making right now?"

Learn from your actions. Learn from the results. Let them go, and then focus on the next choice and then the next choice. Keep on top of things. The people who get deluded into grasping after power and wealth and happiness and beauty are the ones who do some good but then hold on. They stick it in a bag, try to drag it around with them, whereas you want to travel lightly.

The noble treasures the Buddha talks about, the treasures that you develop from meditating, are things that don't weigh you down at all. They're good habits, and the good habits are focused on doing your duties properly, and seeing their importance. When the Buddha set forth the four noble truths, he wasn't simply giving you some information about suffering. He was also saying, "This is *the* important issue."

He started his teachings with the noble eightfold path. The first thing in the noble eightfold path is right view. In fact, in his first Dhamma talk, of the eight factors of the path, that was the only one he explained. But it was enough. The five brethren realized the implications as he listed the things that follow on right view. They were able to put the path together and gain the results.

So see the issue of the suffering that you're creating as the most important issue to deal with, and the training of the mind to get so that you can solve that problem as the most important thing you can do. This keeps coming back here, because the choices are being made here: skillful actions, unskillful actions, the clinging, the craving, but also the right view and the right resolve and all the other right factors of the path. They're things that happen right here, and to grow, they depend on the quality of your intentions and your attention right here.

When you can learn how to trust yourself in terms of your intentions and in your understanding of what appropriate attention is—i.e., what right view is—it's only then that you're safe. You can live in the world and enjoy the pleasures of the world but not be stuck on them.

The Buddha had a dream before his awakening—one of a series of five dreams—but in this particular dream he was climbing a huge mountain of excrement, but he wasn't soiled by it. The excrement stood for the results of all the good karma he'd done in the past: all the wealth and other good things that were going to come his way. But he had trained his mind not to be soiled by it. That's the only kind of person you can really trust. Otherwise, you get covered with shit. It seemed good when you made it, but you realize, "Okay, it's just shit." You can't hold on to it. You've got to let it go.

The goodness comes not in what you take in. The goodness comes in what goes out in your actions: what you choose to do and how you keep watch over what you choose to do. Make sure you're pure in that regard. When you're fully pure, that's when you know you've done what had to be done. That's why the Buddha says that when people have gained full awakening, the task is done. There's nothing more they have to do. Even he himself, when he gained awakening after all those eons of aspiring to be a Buddha, realized that he had the choice not to teach. So the fact that he *did* teach was a pure gift. It wasn't something he was obligated to do. It was his pure gift to the world.

So try to train yourself to be in a position where you can give some pure gifts, too, and you will have done everything that needs to be done.