

A Good Example for the World

June 21, 2014

We spread thoughts of goodwill every morning, every evening, making it our resolve that we want to act in a way that's conducive to everyone's true happiness. If there's anybody out there who's suffering, whom we can help, we'd be happy to help; anyone who's already happy or acting on the causes of happiness, we're happy for them. We don't resent them; we're not jealous.

But then there's also the reflection on equanimity: All beings are the owners of their actions. This is our reality check, because we realize that the suffering of the world is just too much for us to go out and solve entirely. There are limits on our time and our energy, and we have no control over other people. After all, people are going to be happy, they're going to suffer, *based on their actions*. Even in a small group of people, you can't get everybody to agree on what the path to happiness is going to be. Or even if they do agree, you can't get everybody to practice the way you think they should practice. The world is going to go its way. We can either make that a source of suffering or we can decide that we have to accept that fact and then focus on what we *can* accomplish.

After all, the Buddha couldn't teach everybody. There were lots of people who would listen to him and didn't agree and went off their own way. But he did something really remarkable. Instead of letting that get him down or depressed, he realized that at least he could be a good example in showing people how to find true happiness. If other people followed the example, that was fine. He'd be happy to explain how to do it, to talk about the difficulties that he'd encountered and how he'd overcome them, to give people encouragement.

There's one story where Tissa, who was a distant relative of the Buddha, had ordained as a monk and his practice wasn't going anywhere. He went to see the Buddha, and the Buddha gave him encouragement, saying, "Look, I'm here, you've got a Buddha right here. Take advantage of that."

We don't have the Buddha right here, but we do have his teachings. And so when you think of all the suffering out in the world, the appropriate response is one, *samvega*: the realization that the things that people are doing to cause suffering, *you've* been doing as well, and if you don't get your act together you're going to be contributing more and more to the suffering. You've got the opportunity now to practice the Dhamma. If we don't take this opportunity, then when we come back the next time we may forget all about this. And who knows how long it's going to take to find a way back to the Dhamma?

But when you see that there are people in the world who have been practicing—you read about the *ajans*, and can be inspired by their example—you realize, well, you can be an example, too. That's a real gift to the world.

It's like a street light. The post just stands there, the light's there, it doesn't go anywhere, doesn't do anything. But, it casts light. And so your example can be a light to the world.

So, as we're practicing here, we're not just saving our own hides and forgetting about the world, turning our back on them. We're doing something really important. We're setting an example, casting light.

I've heard people complain that Buddhism should get its act together: We should have charitable foundations, we should go out and actively work on this project, work on that campaign. Well, there are lots of other people out there doing that sort of thing. How many people are practicing the way to nibbana? It's a very small number. And they're offering an especially valuable gift to the world.

In my own case, in going to Thailand, I'd been looking for a meditation teacher for years, and had pretty much given up hope in finding a good one. Then I met Ajaan Fuang and that changed everything. Just one person can have that kind of an effect.

So given that the world is swept away and it's a slave to craving, it's not all that easy to get people to stop their craving, especially if your desire for them to listen to you to stop their craving is based on your own craving. Things just keep going around and around and around in a whirlpool. But if you can do your practice, you show that you can get out of the whirlpool.

Ajaan Suwat used to say that we're not here to get other people, we're here to get ourselves—in other words, to practice so that we can find release. As he said, if other people want to join us, if they like what we're doing, we welcome them, but we're not going to go out of our way to try to draw people in. And that's an attitude you can live with. You don't have to be concerned about how many people out there are going to follow your example, or how many people in the world are going to be able to overcome their suffering.

There's that story about the man who asked the Buddha, "This path that you're teaching: Will the whole world eventually go this way or half the world or a third?" and the Buddha didn't answer. Ven. Ananda, who was sitting nearby, got concerned that the man would think poorly of the Buddha—here was an important question and he didn't answer it. So Ananda took the man aside and said, "It's like a frontier fortress. The gatekeeper walks around the fortress and doesn't find a hole in the wall even big enough for a cat to slip through. And he doesn't know how many people are going to come into the fortress, but he does know that anybody who's going to come in or out of the fortress has to do it through the one gate. And it's the same with the Buddha. He doesn't know how many people are going to find release, but he does know that whoever's going to do it has to do it through this path: right conduct, establishing mindfulness, developing the factors for awakening.

So here we are, beneficiaries of the Buddha's teachings. This is what he wants us to do. Go into the fortress. And this is the path. This is how we show our gratitude for the teaching and it's how we keep it alive.

The fact that there are people who really are serious about practicing inspires other people

to be serious about practicing, too. Otherwise, you look around and a lot of the examples set by members of the human race are not all that inspiring. It can get very discouraging. You may wonder: Why should you put out extra effort to do anything special that will require sacrifice? But then you realize: The fact that most of the people aren't practicing doesn't have anything to do with the fact that you're suffering. You've got something you can do about the suffering, so go for it. You can say this one person – this *one* person – will make a difference. After all, when you come down to it, who are you responsible for?

Again, as Ajaan Suwat used to say, each of us has one person: one person whose thoughts, words, and deeds we can have some control over – in other words, ourselves. When you get that one person, you've taken care of your responsibility.

As for the good effects that come from that, they spread out like ripples in a pond. And how many people will be affected by the ripples or will *want* to be affected by the ripples? You have no control over that. Even the Buddha didn't have control over that issue. But he did make sure that what he was responsible for, he did as well as he could, and made the best ripples he could.

And that's what gives us inspiration.