

Only One Person

August 22, 2014

Ajaan Suwat was fond of saying that all the people in the world have only one person. In other words, each of us has ourself that we're responsible for. Now he didn't mean that in a narrow, selfish way. What he meant was that each of us should realize that we have to be responsible for our actions.

Most of us spend our time going around trying to straighten out other people. As a result, we tend to neglect the one area where we really are responsible: what we do, what we say, what we think.

The corollary of this is that we should treat every other person as a responsible person, too. This is why the Buddha said, to act for your own benefit, you should observe the precepts, be generous, and train the mind. To act for the benefit of others, get *them* to be generous, to observe the precepts, and to train the mind. In other words, you're giving them the dignity of being responsible people, paying attention to the fact that they're not just the recipients of your actions. They're also generators of their own actions. So if you try to get other people to break the precepts, you're really harming them. If you talk them into being ungenerous, you're harming them.

This is why we start with the mind when we meditate: because all our actions come out of the mind. And when we're meditating, we're setting a good example for others. After all, the best way to get other people to be generous, virtuous, and to meditate is to do these things ourselves, so that our actions go with our words, our words are backed up by the power of our own experience. And people can see the example. When they can see the good results, then they're more likely to do follow that example—which is why meditating is not a selfish activity. Observing the precepts is not a selfish activity.

Recently I read someone saying that, "You know, if you're preserving your precepts and, in doing so, you let other people get harmed by others people"—in other words, you don't go out and kill the people who are harming them—"then you're being selfish." Which is wrong on so many levels that it's hard to count them all.

First off, if you go out and kill, you're creating an example that other people will take, and you have no idea how many other people may take that example down the line. You don't really know how much evil you've prevented by killing a potentially evil person, but you do know that you've used your own body to kill, to do something evil. That much you do know, and you've been irresponsible. And you've set an evil example for the world.

So there's nothing selfish about observing the precepts. You set a good example—in the same way that being generous sets a good example. You hear dana talks a lot at retreats, but the best way to teach people generosity is not to talk about it. It's to be generous yourself.

The best way to bring about peace in the world is to get your own mind peaceful—because right here is where you're generating the world in which you're going to live. It does have an impact on other people, so you have to be careful about that, but you're the

primary recipient of what you're doing right now.

So be very careful about that. Give yourself the dignity of being an agent and not just a recipient, not just a victim of other people's activities or a recipient of their virtue. You want to be a generator of virtue, you want to be a generator of generosity, a generator of concentration and wisdom. That's how these things come out into the world. You've got the source right here. So grant yourself that dignity: that you're going to create a good source in every possible opportunity.

Now, generosity has its limitations. You can have only so much energy, so many material things to give, so much knowledge to share. You can be very generous, though, universally generous in fact, with your virtue. You make up your mind that under no circumstances are you going to break the precepts. As the Buddha said, you're granting universal safety in the sense that all the world is safe from at least your corner. And you get a share in that universal safety, too.

And again, never underestimate the power of the good example you create. This is how goodness gets spread around in the world: not by people talking, not by books, as much as by examples. When you see someone who's done something really unselfish, it's very inspiring. You realize, okay, the world is a place with good people, people who are able to overcome their defilements or their narrowness or whatever. The things that keep them bound up in the cycle of suffering and then revenge for suffering and then more suffering and then more revenge for suffering: That goes nowhere. We've seen way too much of that. But the people who stand up and say, "No, I'm not going to continue that way": Those are the ones who make the human world a good world to be in, and they inspire us all.

So you want your examples—the examples you set by your thoughts, words and deeds—to be good ones. That's one of the ways in which you're acting for the benefit of others.

Always keep that point in mind. The Buddha grants us the dignity of having freedom of choice. Kant, the German philosopher, said that this is what makes human beings worthy of respect: the fact that they do have that freedom. That's one point in which he was right. What makes us really worthy of respect, though, is when we use that freedom well.

There's another statement that Ajaan Suwat liked to make. There's a little drawing you see in books in Thailand. They take the words, "*Yaa hen kae tua*"—which literally means, "Don't look at yourself" or "only at yourself," and idiomatically means, "Don't be selfish"—and they form them into a picture of the Buddha. The head is *yaa*, the chest and arms are *hen*, and the legs are *kae tua*. And Ajaan Suwat commented several times that that's a misguided teaching. The Buddha never says that. He says that you *should* look after yourself, which is another way you can translate, "*Hen kae tua*." Look after yourself, but do it wisely.

As King Pasenadi said, the people who are skillful in their thoughts, words, and deeds are the ones who have themselves protected. In other words, you don't harm anybody, and that's your protection. You're generous with others, and that's your wealth. So you're looking after yourself in the proper way. And particularly when you meditate, because you realize the mind right here is the source of everything, so you want to get it well-trained.

All the teachings having to do with meditation are very closely related to the teaching on karma. When the Buddha teaches meditation, when he teaches mindfulness, he stresses three qualities: mindfulness, alertness, ardency. They all center on what you're doing.

Mindfulness is what reminds you what needs to be done, what works, what doesn't work. Alertness focuses not just on anything coming up in the present moment. It focuses on your actions and the results you're getting from your actions. And then ardency is what wants to get good results out of your actions, which means that if you're doing something that's not getting good results, you turn around and look very carefully at what you're doing to see what you can change.

The four noble truths are also teachings on karma. They give you a set of categories that tell you what to do in any given circumstance. When you're dealing with suffering, the duty is to comprehend it. When you find the cause, the duty is to abandon it. The path is something you develop so that you can realize the cessation of suffering. These are guides to actions. So it's important to remember that.

When the compilers of the Canon characterized the Buddha's teaching, they characterized it as a teaching on karma. The Buddha was a "karma-speaker," they said. And they were right. It's because this is a teaching on karma that it's also a teaching on your dignity, your responsibility.

So learn to look after this one person you've got. In that way you're providing protection for the entire world, and you're providing wealth for the entire world: the wealth of an inspiring example.