

## *Ajaan Suwat's Gift*

*April 5, 2017*

The Thai phrase, “Don’t be selfish,” literally means “Don’t look after yourself,” as opposed to looking after the common good. Ajaan Suwat always questioned that phrase, because, after all, who else are you going to look after? You’ve got to look after yourself. In fact, you’re the person you have to look after more than anybody else. But that’s not saying to be selfish. It’s saying that you have to look after yourself wisely—which means that you develop good qualities of mind, things like generosity and virtue, where you actually are helping other people. But you do have to look after yourself, because nobody else can do it for you. As the Buddha said, when you get yourself as a refuge, you get a refuge that’s hard to find. If you don’t have that refuge, he said, who else could your refuge be?

Or as Ajaan Suwat put it another time, we each have one person in the world, i.e., the one person we’re responsible for. And that person is us. We’re responsible for our thoughts, our words, our deeds. We can’t be responsible for anybody else’s. Yet all too often that’s what we’re concerned about. We want to stop somebody else from doing this, or encourage them to do that, without turning around to look, well, are we doing what’s right?

This is why we train our minds, because our actions come from here. This is the area for which you are responsible. We develop qualities like mindfulness, ardency, and alertness so that we can see what we’re doing and recognize what we’re doing, whether it’s right or wrong. And then we have the strength to admit a mistake, and do what we can not to repeat the mistake. In other words, if something that we like doing is going to give bad results, we have to figure out ways to prevent ourselves from doing that thing. If something we don’t like doing is going to give good results, we have to talk ourselves into doing that. A large part of the wisdom of ardency is right there.

One time Ajaan Suwat was asked why Buddhism didn’t have a god. If only Buddhism had a god, the person said, it would give people a sense of reassurance that there was somebody out there looking out for them when they couldn’t quite make it on their own. Ajaan Suwat’s response was, “If there were some god who could ordain that if, when I took a mouthful of food, everybody in the world would get full, I would bow down to that god.” But we’re not connected that way. For all that they say that we’re interconnected, the interconnections are actually a cause of suffering. We’re interconnected to people that can do a lot of harm. We’re interconnected to a world that can snuff us out very easily. All we need is an earthquake or a tsunami. It’s like the earth is shrugging a little bit, and thousands of people can die.

So it’s not the case that this interconnected system is designed for the wellbeing of everybody. It eats everybody up. And everybody else is eating everybody up, too. So our best contribution to the connected system is to get out, and to be a good example to others in getting out. It’s not like we don’t hope for other people to find the way out as well. We hope that they will. That’s why we spread

thoughts of goodwill every day, thinking, “May all beings be happy,” primarily so that we can keep watch over our own actions, and then realizing to whatever extent we can help others, we’re happy to help. But it has to start here. If you’re going to tell people the right way to cook an egg, maybe it’s good first to know how to cook the egg yourself.

So everything keeps coming back to your actions, right here, right now, right here, right now.

When the Buddha was talking about the evolution of the world, the devolution of the world—in other words, how society develops and then how it declines—he kept saying that it all comes from the actions of beings. Our interconnected actions are what create the world at large. But then, the world of your experience is the result of your actions, in a scenario that you don’t share with anybody else. You know that old question about whether the way you see blue looks the same way as other people see blue? You don’t know, and there’s no way you could ever know. Now, blue’s not a real issue, but pain is. The pain you feel, nobody else can feel for you. They can see the signs that you have pain and they can sympathize with you, but they can’t really feel your pain.

So when the Buddha says focus on the issue of why you’re suffering, he’s saying to focus on this area of your awareness, the area that you don’t share with anyone else. And look in here as well for the cause of the suffering, and also for the solution. In other words, it’s not the case that we suffer because of things outside. There can be bad things outside, but we don’t have to suffer from them. We suffer from them because of our own lack of skill, our own lack of understanding. So the cause is inside, but the solution can also be found inside, in the qualities you develop: virtue, concentration, discernment, based on a foundation of generosity and goodwill. Right here is where the real work has to be done. And when the work is done here, to the point where you have something solid inside, then you can share.

Up to that point, you really have to work on, as Ajaan Suwat would say, “getting” yourself. He would often comment, as we were getting the monastery started: “We’re not here to get anybody else. We’re here to get ourselves.” And by that he meant, we’re not going to go out of our way to make things attractive or to change things, to change the Dhamma or change the Vinaya, in order to appeal to people to get them to come. We use the Dhamma, we use the Vinaya to practice. And if anyone else wants to practice that way, we’re happy to have them come. But there’s no need to go running out and trying to get people to come in. As he said, it’s not that he couldn’t think of ways of attracting people to the monastery, but every time he did, if it had nothing to do with the Dhamma and the Vinaya, he felt ashamed. He would think of Ajaan Mun, of what Ajaan Mun might think.

But look at what we’ve got: We’ve got a monastery that’s grown. He died fifteen years ago, as of today, but the monastery is still going. So even though he was looking after himself, we’re benefiting from that. That’s how real helpfulness in the Dhamma happens: by looking after your own thoughts, words, and deeds, and specifically, looking after your mind. That’s how the Dhamma is spread. In other words, it’s spread by actual actions, not just by words.

There was a piece recently about how Buddhists ought to get off of their cushion and get out there in the world and deal with the real causes of suffering, which are out there in society. But the author

was totally missing the point. The real causes are in here. The Buddha himself saw that you could change the world, but it would never be enough for people. As he said, even if it rained gold coins, it wouldn't be enough for our desires. So the pursuit of an ideal world out there, or a perfect world out there, is never-ending. And a lot of people, in creating a perfect world, can create a lot of messes and harm for other people. The word for perfection that they use in the Canon applies to qualities you develop in the mind. *That's* where perfection can be found. The world is always going to be imperfect, but there is such a thing as perfect happiness. And it doesn't harm anybody. It doesn't place any burdens on anybody at all.

The Buddha gives us that test for what counts as Dhamma. First, in terms of the goal, to release the mind from fetters and to release it from passion—in other words, to induce dispassion. Second, there are the things you do to attain that goal. You have to learn how to be content. You have to learn how to shed all of your unhealthy conceit, unhealthy pride, any thoughts of getting back at other people, and you have to put forth effort. Third, you also have to think about how your practice has an effect on other people. You want to stay unentangled, unburdensome. That's how you test the Dhamma, by seeing its impact in these three areas. The true Dhamma is a Dhamma that makes you self-reliant and makes you less of a burden on other people, but the purpose here is really to get out.

You might say the Buddha was an escapist, but he was escapist in the best sense of the word. He saw all the dangers that we create for ourselves and for other people. As he said, this is a system where eating is built into the system. And so you want to look for the escape. And in finding it, you leave a trail behind for other people.

So, try to look after yourself in the best sense of the word, with wisdom and discernment, compassion, and all the other good qualities that are required to really look after yourself properly. Ajaan Suwat gave us an example, and let's hope that we can be an example to others.