

Volunteer Spirit

July 20, 2008

We're sitting here meditating because we want to be here. Nobody's forced us. We're not here with a sense of obligation that we *have* to be here.

But we've seen for ourselves that meditation is good. It's good for the mind and it spreads out its good influences in many areas of our lives—even to other people. There are other people who benefit—in blatant and subtle ways—because we're meditating. The most blatant way is that if we can cut down the amount of greed, anger, and delusion in our actions or motivating our actions, other people are going to be happier.

This is a common pattern throughout the Buddha's teachings. The practice is voluntary. After all, the Buddha didn't pretend to be a god who had created us or wanted to impose his will on anybody. When he taught, he wasn't teaching with a sense that other people were obligated to follow what he had to say. He never tried to say, "You should be a Buddhist," or, "Once you're a Buddhist you're obligated to do x, y, or z." He left it up to each person to take what he or she found in the Dhamma that was useful and to apply it in his or her life.

Sometimes you hear people berating people who sit and meditate, saying that they're not doing enough for other people, that once you become a Buddhist you're obligated to get yourself together as a decent self-respecting religion. After all, other religions have various projects by which they help the world, so why aren't the Buddhists doing that?

It's not that the Buddha didn't encourage generosity or helping other people, but he encouraged it that it be done with a volunteer spirit. Just as we're under no obligation to the Buddha, we're under no obligation to the world that we're going to help them.

The only obligation the Buddha talks about is your obligation to your parents, that you owe the fact of your life to them. You owe the fact that you're able to talk and walk and learn all the basic skills of being a human being. Whether they were good parents or bad parents, you still have a big debt to them.

But even in the monastic hierarchy: When a student becomes apprentice to a teacher, the student is allowed at some point, if he feels that the teacher's instructions are not in the student's best interests, to leave and find another teacher. This is why hierarchy in the Buddha's teachings is very different from hierarchy in some of the things we've seen in the West. The person at the top realizes that the people under him are there voluntarily, and that if his decisions are oppressive, people have the right to leave.

When we bow down to one another in line with seniority, seniority is not an expression that the person being bowed down to is better than anyone else. Seniority is a very neutral category. There are old monks who've been around for a long time who are not especially inspiring, but for ease of life in the community it's good to bow down, even to people like that.

It pokes at your pride.

The Buddha was once asked by a king, “To whom should a gift be given?” And the Buddha said, essentially, “Wherever your heart feels inspired or wherever you feel the gift would be well-used.” In other words, there’s no obligation that you have to give to this or that purpose or to this or that cause. It’s totally voluntary.

The king went on to say, “When a gift is given, where is it given so that it bears great fruit?” And the Buddha replied, “That’s a different question. If you want the gift to lead to the highest happiness, you give to those who are free from defilement or who are on the path of practice leading to freedom from defilement.” But again, it’s up to you to choose. The Buddha is simply making a statement of fact that this is where the most fruitful gifts are given, the gifts that lead to the highest happiness.

That’s the assumption underlying the whole teaching. The Buddha assumes that you want to be happy. He says, “If you want to be truly happy, this is how you go about it. If you want to maximize your happiness in this world, this is how you go about it. If you want to find a happiness that goes beyond this world, this is how you go about it.” The “if” is important there. He’s not imposing these things on you.

I’ve told you the story about the person who once complained about the first line in the Metta Sutta, “This is what should be done by those who want to aim at a state of peace.” He said, “Wait a minute. What’s this ‘should’ in here? I thought Buddhism didn’t have any shoulds.” The “should” there is conditional. *If* you want to aim at the state of peace, this is what you have to do, because this is the way things are. But the choice is yours.

So remember that as we go through the day, our generosity should be inspired by voluntary spirit. Even the precepts should be inspired by a voluntary spirit. The Buddha says at one point, “When you observe the precepts without exception, you’re giving the gift of unlimited safety to all beings.” And you’re one of those “all beings” made safe by your gift. You don’t follow the precepts because somebody up there said you have to. You follow the precepts because you see that they lead to happiness.

The same with the meditation: Meditation is a gift both to yourself and to the people around you. Now, there are times when it may not seem like the most pleasant thing to do. And the meditation can be a long haul. But even in cases like that—*especially* in cases like that—you have learn how to inspire desire.

This is what the Buddha said right effort is. Right effort is when you can generate desire to do what you know is skillful, so that you can maintain that sense of voluntary spirit.

In Thailand they use a pun when they’re talking about the practice. The word for practice, *patipat*, can also mean to look after somebody’s needs: You *patipat* that person. And many times the ajaans will say, “When you’re here practicing the Dhamma, remember you’re here to *patipat* your own mind, you’re looking after the needs of your mind.” Your mind needs training, your mind needs to find the source of true happiness if you want to be happy.

So you're not here under any obligation. You're not being forced to practice. You're doing it because the mind is going to benefit.

And so to stick with the practice, you keep looking for ways to remind yourself of that fact, so that you can keep the juices flowing, keep a sense of good humor as you're struggling through the difficult stages. This property of good humor is an important part of volunteer spirit or voluntary spirit. It keeps you alive.

There was a British explorer back in the nineteenth century who was staying in a fort on the Manitoba coast of the Hudson Bay. He had heard that there might be a source of copper up in the Northwest Territories, so he wanted to check it out. The only way he was going to get there was to go with a band of Dene Indians. So he was one of the few Westerners who actually gave himself over totally to the protection of the Indians, relied on them to get him there and to get him back.

And he noticed as they were going along there'd be days when, no matter how good their hunting skills were, there was no food. On days like that, they just tightened their belts—like the hobbits: They tightened their belts and kept on going. But he also noticed that on the days when there was the least food, that was when there was the most joking among the Dene. They realized that when things get tough, you've got to do your best to keep your spirits high and to learn to look at the whole situation with good humor.

So this quality of generating desire is an important part of the effort of the practice, to make it less effortful and more effortless, to keep remembering that you're here because you want to be here. At least part of your mind realizes that this is good for you and good for the people around you.

And when you can live this life with this voluntary spirit, this sense of giving a gift, it helps to break down barriers: It breaks down barriers inside; it breaks down barriers between you and the other people around you.

Our lives in the monetary economy are basically built around the idea that there are certain things you will do because you're paid to do them, and other things you pay to do. But the fact that there's payment going around there means that there's a barrier. If the payment doesn't pass over the barrier, nothing passes over in return.

But here we're living in an economy of gifts. You look around you: The whole monastery, everything here is a gift. As we saw this evening, the people who came to help build the shed, they weren't being paid to do it. Nobody's forcing them to do it. It's a gift of time and energy. Every building we have here, every little piece of decoration, every Buddha image: It's all a gift. The fact that it's a gift helps to break down barriers.

This is why the monks in Thailand often refer to their lay supporters in the same way they would refer to family, relatives, *yaat*, whether or not they're really *yaat* in the technical sense. There's a sense of extended family.

Now sometimes this may mean that the monastery's not run like a tight ship. I've known

people with military backgrounds who've expressed despair about how the monastery is run. But it runs on *naam jai*, the Thai word for voluntary spirit or good spirit in the heart, good humor in the heart. And that's a fuel that doesn't run dry—as long as we learn how to respect one another's *naam jai* and learn how to keep it going with good humor and the sense of voluntary spirit, the sense of gift-giving. We're doing good because it's a good thing to do. It makes us happy. Always keep that point in mind.