

The Duties of Compassion

December 21, 2008

“May all living beings be happy.” We chant that every evening. They say that Ajaan Mun would spread thoughts of goodwill to all beings three times a day: first thing in the morning when he woke up, then in the afternoon when he woke up from his nap, and then at night before he went to bed.

Goodwill for all beings: That’s the context of our practice. It’s the frame for what we’re doing. We want a happiness that everyone can share. Or at the very least, we want a happiness that doesn’t take away from anyone else’s happiness. Because you notice that *you* are included in *all beings*. The Buddha’s not asking you to sacrifice your well-being for that of others. He just wants you to think about the possibility that the best kind of happiness would be the happiness where everybody is happy.

Now, how are people happy? Through their actions. That’s another one of the contemplations we do every evening, “All beings are the owners of their actions. Whatever they do, for good or for evil, to that will they fall heir.” So when you’re wishing that all beings be happy, you’re wishing that they understand and act on the causes of happiness—in other words, act in skillful ways: in the way they act with their bodies, the way they speak, the way they think. So when you’re spreading those thoughts of goodwill, that’s the thought you’re spreading: “May all beings act on skillful intentions.” And skillful intentions are informed by right views, so: “May all beings have right views.”

This is why, when the Buddha taught the four noble truths, it was an act of compassion: to help beings—anyone who was willing to listen, anyone who was willing to learn—to understand where true happiness comes from.

This is a point that’s sometimes missed. Again and again, we hear about Theravada as being a small-minded practice where you’re only trying to look after yourself. And that the Buddha in teaching the four noble truths was talking to people who had limited hearts and limited minds, who couldn’t comprehend the idea of everybody’s being happy.

But that’s really a misrepresentation. The Buddha’s idea of happiness was that it’s possible for everybody to be happy, but because happiness is a matter of skill, you can’t push other beings into happiness, you can’t force them to be happy. You can’t simply sit there and think nice thoughts and expect the whole world to fall in line with your nice thoughts. You have to work on your skills.

And in working on your skills, it's not the case that other people are getting neglected. Because as the Buddha says in one spot in the texts, a person who's stingy cannot gain jhana; a person who's stingy cannot gain the noble attainments. So there has to be a generosity of heart, a generosity of spirit underlying the practice. When you find good things in your practice, you're happy to share.

But your method of sharing is indicated in that phrase we chant about the Dhamma every evening: *opanayiko*, you have to bring it into yourself first; and then *ehipassiko*, only then do you call other people to look. Of course, they can't look at the results you've gotten, but you can call other people to look and say, "Look, this is what I've done. I've found true happiness. Maybe you want to try it too." That's really how you help people in the best way. Maybe they can learn from your example.

It's like that old joke about if you give a person a beer you get him drunk for one night, but if you teach him how to brew you've got him drunk for life. Well, the same principle works with the Dhamma. If you're simply nice to people, they'll feel your niceness for a little while, but if you actually teach them how to be skillful—how to understand suffering, how to work with suffering in such a way that they can get beyond the suffering—you can get them released for life.

That's why, when the Buddha taught the four noble truths, he wasn't just setting out four ideas. He was teaching the compassionate way of dealing with these four categories. One, try to comprehend the suffering—that's the first noble truth—to the point where you can understand the cause. Once you see the cause in action, then you try to let it go—that's your duty with regard to the second noble truth, the cause of suffering. And then you try to realize what it's like when you let go of the craving, the cause of suffering—and that realization is the duty with regard to the third noble truth. And the way that you do that is to develop the path, which is the fourth noble truth.

So these tasks that the Buddha points out as appropriate to the four noble truths are also the tasks of goodwill, the tasks of compassion, both for yourself and for the people around you. Like right now, we're trying to work on developing the path: developing our mindfulness, developing our concentration, trying to foster the qualities of the mind that allow us to see suffering clearly. Exactly where is there stress right now? And what can we do to minimize the stress? What can we do to understand why it's there?

Ajaan Fuang once noted that one of the major turning points in his meditation was after he'd been suffering from chronic headaches for a long, long time. There was one night when he'd been sleeping—and his condition had gotten so bad that they would have other monks come and stay in his room to help him

when he woke up at night—well, he woke up one night and everybody else in the room was asleep. He said to himself, “Well, there’s no help from them.” So he decided to sit and meditate. And he realized one of his problems was that he had been trying to get rid of the headache, get rid of the pain, rather than trying to comprehend it. In other words, he’d been applying the wrong task, and that’d only made things worse. So he said, “Okay, let’s just watch the suffering.” And in doing that, he said, he came to some important understandings.

So it’s in understanding the appropriate tasks: That’s where you are kind to yourself and you’re kind to others. You can think of yourself, say, lying in the hospital and you’re sick. If all you can do is moan and groan, then you’re not the only person who’s suffering from your pain. The people around you are suffering from your pain as well. But if you can make up your mind that you want to comprehend the pain, that means you have to develop the qualities of mind that would allow you to comprehend the pain even when you’re sick.

This is why it’s important that we try to learn how to meditate in any situation: when we’re strong, when we’re weak; when we’re tired, when we’re not tired. You want to learn how to meditate both when you feel like meditating and when you don’t want to meditate at all. This is a duty not because somebody has imposed it on you, but because it’s one of the duties of compassion. If you really care for yourself, this is what you do. You try to find ways of maintaining your focus, regardless of how well the body is or how sick the body may be; regardless of whether it’s daytime or nighttime; regardless of any situation outside. You want to learn how to apply yourself to the appropriate duty at any time, in any situation. Because that’s the compassionate thing to do at any time in any situation.

We don’t like to think of the word *duty* combined with compassion. So maybe you might just call these four duties *tasks*, or *activities*. This is how compassionate activity works in your life right now, whenever the “right now” is. Figure out where you are on the path: Are you ready to comprehend suffering? Are ready to take it on? If not, work more on the path, on your powers of concentration, your powers of mindfulness, because this is the compassionate thing to do. It minimizes suffering, helps you get a proper handle on it, and at the same time, you act as a good example for others.

My teacher had an old woman who had come to meditate with him. She was already seventy, she hadn’t meditated ever in her life, but she quickly became very good at concentration. Her motivation for practicing was that she was suffering from illnesses, going through a lot of pain, so she learned how to sit with a lot of pain and yet not suffer from the pain, to separate her mind out from it.

So ultimately when she was on her deathbed... She went to the hospital, she was suffering from pains in her stomach. They opened her up to do some exploratory surgery and discovered that she had a very advanced case of liver cancer. They realized they couldn't do anything with surgery so they sewed her back up. And during her last days in the hospital, every morning the doctors and nurses would gather in her room and she'd them give a little Dhamma talk. She didn't ask for painkiller. They asked her, "Are you in pain?" They knew she was in pain. She said, "Well, I'd rather be alert than taking the painkiller." She had learned how to separate the pain from the mind, separate her awareness out from the pain. As a result, she was a help not only to herself but also to the doctors and nurses looking after her. That's an ability that's worth aspiring for, because it's how you show true compassion to yourself and to the people around you.

So always keep these duties, these tasks in mind: comprehending stress and suffering, abandoning its cause, realizing its cessation, and developing the path to its cessation. In practice, this means while we're meditating that we don't simply see states of concentration coming and going, or states of mindfulness coming and going, and say, "Oh, that's nice. It's a lesson in impermanence."

The other night I was reading one of the Dhamma talks by Upasika Kee, and she was making this point, that you've got to keep your awareness as solid and continuous as possible. If you find that it comes and goes, you don't just say, "Well, that's impermanence, that's inconstancy," and just let it go at that. You've got to do what you can to keep that awareness solid, keep that awareness continuous. That's the development part: so that you can use the path as a tool, you can use your concentration and mindfulness as the path to the end of suffering.

Because all of these teachings have as a single taste, as the Buddha says, the taste of release. Release is the most compassionate thing there is in the world, and this is why he taught it. After gaining his awakening, he could have done all kinds of things. After all, he'd taken care of his own issues with suffering. But he realized that the kindest thing was to teach people about suffering and the end of suffering. That was his gift. So it behooves us to take advantage of his gift, because it's the best way we can show compassion and goodwill for ourselves, and for all the people around us.