

The Thoroughbred Horse

July 19, 2015

There's a passage where the Buddha compares a meditator, a good meditator, to a thoroughbred horse. One of the characteristics of a thoroughbred horse is that the horse tells himself, "Whether or not the other horses are going to pull, I'm going to pull." In the same way, a good meditator says, "Whether or not other people are practicing, I'm going to practice." This is a quality we have to keep in mind.

There are two implications here. The first, of course, is that the horse has a duty and it's determined to do its duty regardless of whether anybody else wants to do the duty or not. This is an aspect of the Buddha's teachings that's often overlooked.

Years back, I was sitting in on a class when someone was explaining the Karaniya Metta Sutta. He came to the first line, "This is what should be done by one who aims at a state of peace." There was a hand. Someone said, "Wait a minute. I thought Buddhism didn't have any shoulds." The teacher spent the whole morning trying to explain how Buddhism might have a should. Actually, it's quite simple. It doesn't require a whole morning. The Buddha's shoulds are conditional. In other words, *if* you want to put an end to suffering, this is what you have to do. Now, as to whether you want that or not, he's not going to impose on you. After all, he's not your creator. He's simply someone who's found the path and recommends it. But his path is definite enough that he can say with complete confidence, "If you don't do it this way, you're not going to come to an end to suffering."

So it's not a matter of which aspects you like or which aspects you don't like. For the Buddha, this was an important part of his teaching. He said that if you felt that your actions didn't make a difference in your life, you were left without a refuge. In other words, you were left without an idea of what should and shouldn't be done. This is one of the aspects of taking refuge in the Buddha: taking on his shoulds, having the confidence he wouldn't lead you astray, he wouldn't recommend that you do anything unsafe or that wouldn't work for putting an end to suffering.

His two categorical teachings—the only two that he listed as categorical—have their shoulds. The first one is that unskillful behavior, whether in body, speech, or mind, should be abandoned; skillful behavior should be developed. The other categorical teaching is the four noble truths. and they're not just idle truths

or things to think about. They're truths that carry a should. Suffering should be comprehended. Its cause should be abandoned. The cessation of suffering should be realized, and the path to the cessation of suffering should be developed. These are shoulds that carry across the board. That's why they're categorical. It's not just a matter of fashion or style.

I was reading, just yesterday, someone talking about how the Buddha gave eight lifestyle choices, as if right view or right mindfulness and the others were on a par with right diet and right exercise. You take a diet, considering the style of life you want to live; you take up exercise, considering the style of life you want to live; but right view, right resolve, all the way down through right concentration: These have nothing to do with style. They're not aesthetic choices. They're things that should be developed. There's a moral aspect to them.

This may relate to the part of our modern culture that doesn't like the idea of moral rules, but again, these are rules that are stated conditionally: Given the way cause and effect work in your life, then *if* you want to put an end to suffering, this is what you've got to do, whether you like it or not.

The Buddha says that a sign of wisdom is being able to talk yourself into doing things you don't like that you know will lead to good results, and also to talk yourself out of doing things that you like to do but you know will lead to bad results. So we can't simply go by our tastes or our moods or the fashions that attract us at any one time or another. There are shoulds to be done.

That's the first implication of the analogy of the horse.

The second one, of course, is that you can't wait for everybody to get on board before you start. The world is made a better place not by getting everybody to agree to something, but by individual people taking on their duties: knowing what should be done and then carrying through. Whether other people carry through or not, that's not the issue. You stick with it. You know this is right. This is the way—or at least you have confidence this is the way. And there are results that come up in your practice that show that your confidence is not misplaced when you carry through.

I was reading recently a poll saying that 95% of Americans agree that national parks are a good thing. The pollsters were remarking that this is one of the few issues that you could get that large a majority of people agreeing. My question, of course, is what about that 5%? We can't wait for everybody to get on board with what's right and what's good, but we can set a good example. Even if other people don't follow our example, we ourselves can take comfort in the fact that we know we're doing what's right.

It may be that other people see our example and follow through, like that horse. The first horse to say, “Whether or not the other horses pull, I’m going to pull”: The strength of that horse’s determination is what can convince other horses that maybe this would be a good thing to do: “At least that’s what one horse is doing. I’ll help.” The good things in life, the good things in the world, are started by the attitude of that first horse. “Whether or not other people carry through, I’m going to stick with what’s right.”

So this should give us the encouragement to keep on going, because the world is composed of individuals, and individuals have freedom of choice. That’s a fact that we don’t often take into consideration.

We like to think that there are mass movements as a force is pushing the world toward what’s better and better, but the Buddha never took that as an assumption. Each of us has the choice to follow through with what’s right or not what’s right. In fact, that’s what makes the whole act of teaching a path something that makes sense. If people couldn’t make a choice, then why teach them a path? Or if the forces in the world would somehow move everything in the right direction, we could just kind of sit back and rest and just go with the flow. But you look around and you see a lot of the currents in the world going in really strange directions. You can’t trust what’s flowing. You have to have a clear sense of what’s right.

And even though the Buddha did talk a lot about change, he didn’t say that the Dhamma would change. The Dhamma is a principle that underlies everything else. It’s the laws about how things change. Those laws don’t change. As he said, this rightness of the Dhamma is something that’s always the same. Once you look at the Dhamma to see what’s right, then you compare it with your actions—your thoughts, your words, and your deeds—to see where you can bring your actions into line with this long-lasting principle. That way, you have a good foundation inside: that you can be confident in what you’re doing when you follow right action, right speech, right livelihood, all of the right factors of the path. You’re not just being blown around by the currents of the world or the latest fashion. This is something you know really is solid.

And look at what the Buddha has to teach: nothing but good things, things that have the solidity of goodness to them. When you’re suffering, if you place the blame on other people outside, you’re not going to see the real causes of suffering, because those causes happen inside. You’re acting on ignorance and, as a result, you’re doing things that are causing harm, causing suffering. Well, you can bring knowledge to that and turn your actions into a path to the end of suffering.

Right resolve—the resolve to go beyond sensuality, the resolve not to be harmful, the resolve not to have ill will: These are solid good things. The principles of right speech—no lying, no divisive speech, no harsh speech, no idle chatter: Those are principles of solid goodness. Right action—no killing, no stealing, no illicit sex; right livelihood—not gaining your livelihood in a way that harms anyone. Right effort: trying to give rise to what’s skillful and to abandon what’s unskillful and to get yourself to desire to do this. These are all solidly good things. Right mindfulness, right concentration: These are good qualities to develop in the mind. And that goodness doesn’t change.

When you look around and see other people are not doing it, you can’t let that set you back. You have to respect the fact that everybody has freedom of choice. If you wait until everybody agrees that this is a good thing, the world will probably come to an end before that. This has to start within each of us as we take responsibility for our actions. As Ajaan Suwat used to say, each of us has only one person—i.e., ourselves—that we’re really responsible for.

The best way to show respect for other people’s responsibility for their actions—or, as the Buddha said, the best way to benefit them—is to try to convince them that they should practice as well. Now, whether they follow through or not, there’s a lot there that’s beyond your control. But it’s interesting that when he talks about benefiting yourself, it’s when you abstain from harming other people. You tend to think of that as benefiting them, but he said that this is how you benefit yourself. When you get them to do something that is beneficial for themselves, i.e., to stop harming, that’s how you benefit others. In other words, you regard other people not just as objects of your goodness. You see them as potential agents of goodness themselves.

So in this world we all have the choice to follow the path or not. You can’t wait until you get the majority on your side. Remember, the world is made a better place not by everybody agreeing on something. It starts with a few individuals. After all, the Buddha—look at him: He was one person who gained awakening. If they were taking a vote at that point as to what was the best thing to do in life, the Buddha would have lost. He would have been by far in the minority. But he didn’t let that dissuade him. The first time he taught, he taught just five people. And then it grew to a few more, a few more. It got to sixty. He sent them out to teach. It was a small group of people at the beginning, but the solid goodness of their own attainments and the solid goodness of what they had to teach: This is what has allowed this teaching to last.

So as you meditate, think of yourself as a thoroughbred horse: “Whether or not the other horses are going to pull, I’m going to pull.” It may happen that other

horses join you, and it may happen that they don't. At the very least, you've taken care of what you can be responsible for. You've done something good for the world. Whether other people acknowledge that or not is not the issue, because that goodness is solid in and of itself.