

Is the Buddha's Wisdom Selfish?

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Wisdom begins, the Buddha said, with the questions, “What when I do it will lead to my long-term harm and suffering? What when I do it will lead to my long-term welfare and happiness?” And wisdom finds its highest expression in the four noble truths, which are also concerned with suffering.

You might ask, “This focus on your happiness and your suffering: Isn't this selfish? Isn't this a small goal compared to larger goals you can think of, such as working for the good of other beings?” Well, not according to the Buddha's analysis of what suffering is and how happiness is found.

Because one of the answers to the question, “What when I do it will lead to my long term welfare and happiness?” is that you develop compassion. After all, if your happiness depends on other peoples' suffering, it's not going to last. If you want it to be long-term, you have to take their long-term happiness into consideration, too.

And it's not the case that other people are suffering because of us. Each person suffers because of his or her own lack of skill. So it's actually an act of kindness to develop your skills because then, one, you're less likely to weigh other people down because you'll be more self-sufficient, you'll be able to take care of yourself better. And two, you become a better example for other people. Through your example they can see this is a happiness that can be found, and if they feel so moved, they'll follow the example—which is pretty much the best you can do for other people. You can help them with externals. But we have a way of suffering even when externals are nice.

You see children growing up these days with all kinds of advantages that older generations never had. But do they seem happy? Not at all. They're irritable, miserable, just like everybody else. For people to be happy requires that they develop skills in how not to suffer from good or bad things. And if you want to help other people develop those skills, you have to learn how to develop them yourself.

The Buddha talks about four kinds of people: those who work for both their benefit and the benefit of others; those who work for their own benefit but not for the benefit of others; those who don't work for their own benefit but do work for the benefit of others; and those who don't work for the benefit either of themselves or for other people.

And he ranks them in this way. The highest are those who work for the benefit of themselves and other people. Second is the person who works for the benefit of himself or herself but not for others. Third is the one who doesn't

work for his or her benefit but does work for the benefit of others. And the fourth, of course, is the person who doesn't work for anybody's benefit.

What's interesting is the ranking of numbers two and three there. And it's important to understand here what the Buddha is talking about. To work for your own benefit is to observe the precepts and to try get rid of any greed, aversion, and delusion in your mind. To benefit others is to get them to observe the precepts and to get rid of their own greed, aversion, and delusion. In other words, you respect the fact that they have their own karma. They're agents. They have freedom of choice. And it's because of their own actions, either externally or internally, that they're going to be happy or to suffer.

So if you're the type of person who doesn't observe the precepts but tries to get others to observe them, or doesn't try get rid of greed, aversion, and delusion but tries to get other people to do that, it doesn't make any sense. You could be doing it for selfish reasons. And it's certainly not going to have any power. People are going to mistrust your motives. You want them to behave well but you're not behaving well? You've got to work for your own benefit first. That way, your words will have power and people will trust you.

But the problem goes deeper than that. As the Buddha said in his analysis of suffering, we suffer because we feed. We feed off of form, feelings, perceptions, fabrications, and consciousness. We feed off other people, too. And if we don't learn how to get past this habit of feeding on other people, or our ideas of other people, it's going to taint any efforts we make to help them. If you want your help to be totally free and totally pure, you can't be feeding off of it.

So again, how do you learn how not to feed? You have to turn inside and look at what you're doing to create suffering. This is where the four noble truths come in. The Buddha's analysis of suffering itself is that we cling to the aggregates, and the word for "clinging" there can also mean that we feed on them. And the reason we feed on them is because they themselves are activities that are involved with feeding, too.

Take physical feeding, for instance. You have form in the form of the body you're trying to maintain and in the form of the food you're thinking of eating. There's feeling, which is the pain of hunger and then the feeling of well-being you're trying to gain by feeding. There's perception when you try to identify what kind of hunger you have and how you're going to find the food that's right for that hunger. There's fabrication when you get food and try to figure out what to do with it. After all, a lot of times you can't eat food as you get it, and it doesn't just come floating by on its own. You have to go out there and find it. All of which is fabrication. Then there's consciousness which is aware of all these things.

When we're dealing with other people, we deal with them through these activities as well. So if you're clinging to them, you're feeding on them. Whether you admit it to yourself or not, it's going to color the way you think about helping other people, in which case your help may not be all that beneficial. So the Buddha's solution is not to stop feeding with a sudden halt. It's to learn how to feed better inside by developing a state of concentration.

We've got form again: the form of the body or the breath. The feeling of pleasure we're trying to maintain as we focus on the breath. The perception of the breath that holds us here, how you picture the breath to yourself. Fabrication, how you talk to yourself about the breath; how you adjust it and get it so that it's a good breath to be with. And consciousness, which is aware of all these things.

You learn how to feed inside, and that takes a lot of the pressure off of feeding emotionally or physically off other people, other things. At the same time, you understand the process of feeding better. You begin to realize that even with this more refined version of feeding, there's still stress. There's stress in the clinging. There's stress in the feeding. But we tend to identify ourselves and define ourselves around the way feed, which makes it hard for us to see the suffering it entails. We have to learn how to step back.

First we learn how to feed on concentration so we can step back from our other forms of feeding and regard them with more objectivity. When we loosen the need to feed on people and things outside, then we can start turning around to look at this feeding inside, to see how the mind can go beyond that. Because ideally what you want is a mind that doesn't need to feed at all. Not because you tell it to stop, but because it's found something inside that doesn't require feeding: a happiness that's free from conditions.

Once you've found that, you've found long-term happiness. In fact, it's outside of time so even the word "long-term" doesn't properly apply. But it's a happiness that's not going to change. When you have this happiness, that means that in your dealings with other people you don't have to feed emotionally off of them anymore. In that way, your efforts to help them will actually be more helpful because they won't be skewed by your hungers.

So when the Buddha is talking about long-term welfare and happiness, it's a happiness that doesn't have boundaries. Wherever there's feeding, there are boundaries. There's the feeder and the fed on. And our stomachs—both our physical stomachs and what we might call our emotional stomachs—are separate. Once something goes into your stomach, it can't go into anybody else's.

But when you've found a happiness that doesn't require feeding, there's no need to take things anymore. And then your actions toward other people can

be totally pure. This is why we say that this happiness spreads itself around. It's not a happiness with boundaries.

So the Buddha's focus on discernment, on wisdom—on the topics of your happiness, your long-term happiness, putting an end to suffering—actually transcend the question of whether they're selfish or unselfish because they lead to a happiness where these boundaries don't really matter, and where the goodness gets spread around in the most effective possible way.

So as we meditate, we're doing this for ourselves and for others. There's nothing selfish about this at all. Like the precepts, like the practice of generosity, it's a universal gift.