

Peace Requires Character

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Sakka the deva-king once came to see the Buddha and asked him, “Why is there conflict in the world?” Because even in his heaven there had been conflict. The asuras and the devas had had a battle as to who was going to take over that particular level of heaven, and ultimately the devas won—to say nothing, though, of the conflicts we have on Earth.

The Buddha answered that conflict comes from within the mind. He traced the causes back through various factors and finally arrived at what he called the perceptions and concepts of *papañca*. Now, “*papañca*” is a word that’s hard to translate, but, basically, the concepts of *papañca* come from the sense that *I am the thinker*. In other words, you take on an identity as a being, someone who does things. And all beings need to feed. That’s what we all have in common. So we lay claim to our various skills for eating and we lay claim to the food that we want to eat.

The problem is that the food sources are limited, the range of food in the world—I’m talking not just about physical food, but also all kinds of things in which people take their mental nourishment—is limited. And yet the mind’s desires are unlimited. The Buddha said that even if it rained gold coins, it still wouldn’t be enough for one person’s sensual desires. Because to be a being comes from desire, it comes from attachment—and it’s voracious. Insatiable.

So the question is, how can we live in peace? We have to look within. And the beginning phase is to realize that our happiness cannot depend on the suffering of others. In other words, you have to eat with manners, to eat in a harmless way.

There are two passages in the Canon with the same message. One is directed to a group of little boys; the other, to a king. In both cases, the Buddha gives the same message. If you’re looking for your own happiness, you can’t harm other people. It’s interesting that kings are treated on the same level as little boys, just that kings tend to have a larger range of what they think they can feed off of. In fact, in Thai they talk about how a king “eats the kingdom.” So you learn manners in your eating when you realize that if you just eat without caring about anybody else at all, others are going to put up resistance. You have to see that your happiness cannot depend on their suffering, so you have to figure out how to find happiness that harms no one.

It ultimately comes down to three things: generosity, virtue, and meditation. You learn to take pleasure, not in eating all the time, but in giving things to other people. This may go against the grain, but when you begin to realize that there’s a happiness there, it raises the mind above its ordinary level. Similarly with virtue: You realize that there are ways of finding happiness that would cause harm to others, but you come to see them as beneath you. You’re beginning to raise the mind up above its feeding.

Especially with meditation: You find that you can feed inside. You provide yourself with a sense of well-being just sitting here with the breath. This doesn't have to take anything away from anyone else. You have your own independent source of food. Now, this source of food is not permanent, but it's a path to something that lies beyond feeding entirely. That's the only place where true peace is going to be found—in nibbana—when the mind is finally free from hunger entirely. But you notice how the path works: You lift yourself above your ordinary ways of feeding and you realize there's a part of the mind that doesn't want to have to keep feeding, doesn't want to have to keep on being a being, doesn't want to have to be driven by desires.

Think of that phrase in the reflections that Ven. Ratthapala gives to King Koravya: "The world is insatiable, a slave to craving." You don't want to be a slave anymore. You want some freedom. Generosity is the beginning of your sense of freedom. You don't want to have to give in to your immediate desires. Virtue also gives you a sense of freedom. You're not going to be a slave to the desires that would cause you to harm others. You can take some pride in the way you eat, in that it's not harmful. And meditation pulls you even higher, makes you even more free.

Now, what does this mean for world peace? It means that peace will have to be found inside, and we'll have to learn how to live peacefully in the midst of a world that's not peaceful. Because there's no way you can force people to be wise in their eating, but you can train yourself. But you're not the only one who benefits, though. For one, you're taking one more mouth out of the feeding system. And two, you're providing an example. There are people who tell me that simply knowing that the monastery is up here, with people living a life of virtue, gives them inspiration to lead a life of virtue wherever they are. It's true not of just this monastery but of all the places where people are genuinely practicing around the world. They provide an example.

Of course, all of this depends on developing what you might call qualities of character. In the Buddha's teachings, character is an important part of the practice. We tend to miss that as we come into contact with Buddhism here in the West, because we meet it either through an Internet chatroom, or in an academic setting when we're taking a class in school, or through a meditation retreat center where we're taught a technique. We may be taught a bit about loving-kindness, which comes across as a kind of a general niceness. But in none of these contexts is anything much taught about character, the principle that you have to be truthful and harmless in your search for happiness.

Notice that. The Buddha's not saying you shouldn't search for happiness. He's not saying that you should sacrifice your happiness for the sake of the common good. After all, when you're told that your happiness is worth nothing next to the happiness of others, the immediate thought is, "Well, what about their happiness? If I can't search for my own happiness, why should other people be happy?" What we're doing is looking for happiness inside in a way that promotes the happiness of others. We're doing it wisely, with heedfulness. We're doing it with a sense of character. We're truthful in what we do, truthful in what we say—"truthful" both in

the sense of saying true things and also in the sense of sticking truly to the path, truly measuring ourselves against the teachings—what Ajaan Mun called practicing the Dhamma in accordance with the Dhamma. He picked up the phrase, of course, from the Buddha. And the Buddha meant practicing for the sake of dispassion. Nowadays, it also means practicing the Dhamma as it exists and not trying to change it to suit ourselves. So that's the way in which you're true.

Another quality of character is being observant. This is not a matter of just watching things. When the Buddha taught Rahula how to be observant, it was basically being observant in looking at your actions to see whether they cause harm. So, being observant in this way is basically motivated by compassion. You want to make sure that your actions really do fall in line with your ideals. These are the qualities of character we need.

They come down to the same thing as the Buddha's qualities: wisdom, compassion, purity. Wisdom lies not only in knowing how to describe things properly, understanding the mind properly, but also in knowing how to be pragmatic and to realize that if you have certain tendencies that would be harmful to others, harmful to yourself, you have to learn how to say No. You have the wisdom of being able to psych yourself up so you *want* to drop those tendencies. As for things you don't particularly like to do but actually would be good for you and for others, you learn how to talk yourself into doing them. This is where the rubber hits the road in the path. It's the kind of discernment that really serves a purpose.

Then, of course, there's compassion. You want to make sure that in your search for happiness, in your eating habits, that you don't cause harm. And purity is making sure that you actually follow through with that. As the Buddha said, you know a person's purity by watching the dealings that that person has with others. In other words, you treat others well, you treat them fairly.

This is how peace is found—which means that peace is to be found through developing a strong character. It's nothing you can impose on other people, but it is something you can hold up as an ideal for yourself. Because it's ultimately right here where the Buddha focuses his teachings. Sometimes we hear that the Buddha wanted to get rid of all forms of suffering, but actually he was looking at, "Where does suffering come from? Focus on the cause." Stop setting fires that you then have to put out. Find a place where you're setting a fire, stop doing it, and then you're done. The suffering out there in the world that other people inflict on one another—that's the result of the cause of suffering, the end-point of the process. The beginning of the process lies inside the mind. And it's here where the problem is solved.

So, as Ajaan Suwat used to say, each of us has only one person. We have only ourselves that we can train. We can hope to have a good influence on others, but it's going to be up to them to choose to follow that influence or not. But at least we make sure that we're responsible and we take care of the corner of the world for which we're responsible: i.e., the thoughts, words, and deeds that come out of the mind.

And when we train those well, we can find the peace the Buddha talked about, the peace that doesn't require feeding, that doesn't even require being a being anymore. You don't have to

lay claim to things. You don't have to strategize. Everything is done. That can be touched right here, and it's the only true peace there is.