

The Buddha's Shoulds

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Years back, I sat in on a class where a teacher was talking about the Karaniya Metta sutta, the sutta we just chanted. He started with the first line, “This is what should be done by someone who appreciates the state of peace.” Immediately, a hand shot up. Someone in the class said, “I thought there weren’t any shoulds in Buddhism.” And I watched as the teacher spent the whole rest of the morning, trying to figure out some way of presenting the fact that, yes, the Buddha did teach some shoulds.

It’s strange, though, that that idea has gotten out that the Buddha taught no shoulds. From his point of view, one of the most valuable things he passed on was giving people a basis for deciding what they should and shouldn’t do. In some cases, it was in the form of the rules, like the rules in the Vinaya. In other cases, there were more general principles about how certain actions lead to happiness, and other actions lead to long-term suffering. Based on that, you can decide; he gives you principles for deciding. And he attacked any teaching that would not provide you with those principles.

So the shoulds are really important. You see them at the very beginning in the four noble truths. Each truth has a duty: Suffering is to be comprehended; its cause is to be abandoned; its cessation is to be realized; and the path to its cessation should be developed. If you appreciate the state of peace—in other words, if you believe that the cessation of suffering is something that really is worth going for—there the shoulds come in again.

I was talking the other day with an editor of a Buddhist magazine. He was saying that he thought the four noble truths were just an introductory teaching to get you interested in what the real issue is. In Theravada, we talk about things being inconstant, stressful, and not-self, and he said that’s what the real meat of the teaching is. The Mahayana version would be the teaching on emptiness and interconnectedness.

But those teachings don’t carry any shoulds. If you say that everything is inconstant, then—especially if you interpret “not-self” as being a teaching that there is no-self—there’s no basis for deciding what to do at all, no reason for making an effort. Who’s going to benefit? Nobody’s going to benefit from putting in extra effort, because inconstancy eats away at the results. This kind of thinking undercuts any idea that anything is worth doing or that anything lasting can be accomplished.

Another teaching on emptiness—I was reading some other pieces on emptiness the other day, too—was all about how emptiness means that everything is possible. There are no constraints, but there are also no shoulds. They try to temper that by saying we have to be compassionate and realize that we're all interconnected. But look at interconnectedness.

As the Buddha said, interconnection basically comes down to feeding. All the interconnected systems we have in the world: It's not that they're designed for the good of all their parts. Some sides benefit from it sometimes, and others benefit at other times. Look at the weather. When we're having a reasonably rainy winter here, other places are getting flooded out. When they have reasonable rain, we get drought. The systems are not designed for everybody's happiness. In fact, from the Buddha's point of view, the fact that things are interdependent like this is *why* there's suffering. And because the interdependence is inter-eating, the best we can do is get out, to leave one less mouth in the food chain.

Again, we're appreciating the state of peace and then realizing what we have to do based on that.

So the four noble truths are *the* basic teaching. And the three characteristics—or more appropriately, the three perceptions—are there to help you see what's worth holding on to and what's not, as you go along the fourth noble truth, the path. If you work on something and you find that it's inconstant, you have to ask yourself, "Is it stressful? Is this the cause of stress, or is it the path?" The path, after all, is inconstant, too. Some inconstant things, you have to develop. Other inconstant things, you have to comprehend, and other inconstant things you have to let go of. And the shoulds here are the Buddha's important gift. Now, he's not a god telling us what we *have* to do. His shoulds are conditional. *If* you want the state of peace, this is what you've got to do. If you want the cessation of suffering, this is what you've got to do.

I think a large part of the problem is that many people come to Buddhism, having had their first spiritual experience with drugs. The nature of a drugged spiritual experience is pretty passive. It's all about acceptance. Just let go, and everything's really already wonderful. That may be good when you're on drugs, but we can't live that way. We can't function that way. We're acting in the world. We have to realize that the mind is not passive.

When you start being passive like that, you can do it only for a little bit of time. Then you've got to get active again. Look what happens to people who are hooked on drugs. Anything! They'll do anything in order to get that drugged experience again. This is where the ugly side of the eating nature of the mind

shows itself, when you look for your happiness based on something that's impermanent like that.

You have to realize that the Buddha's vision begins with something utterly different: realizing the importance of your actions. We're all looking for happiness, and we're all going to have to be proactive in doing it. The question is, how you can do it in such a way that you're not harming yourself and not harming others? Because you do want your happiness to be long-term. And if your happiness depends on other people's suffering, they're not going to stand for it. It's not going to last.

So all the Buddha's shoulds come down to the four noble truths. That's his basic teaching. And the shoulds are his gift to us, pointing out that this is how action works. This is how the mind works. These are the ins and outs of true happiness. Again, he's not forcing us. It's something we take on of our own free will. But he's provided a map, a map to true happiness, and said, "This is the route. This is how it's followed." This is why he called it a path. It doesn't cause true happiness, but it does lead you there. In particular, all the factors of the path develop sensitivity of the mind so that you can see where in the mind is something of real value.

As we're sitting here meditating, we're engaging in one of the Buddha's shoulds. You should develop the path; you should develop concentration. Anything that gets in the way of your concentration right now, you let go. And when you do this, you find that we benefit. That's what the whole purpose of the teaching is. The Buddha's teachings are strategic. They're meant to bring people to that goal. They're not just a description of the goal or a description of the path. They're strategies for action. And the wise way of responding to the Buddha's teachings is to take on the path and follow the duties.

This why Ajaan Lee, when he's talking about mindfulness and the different qualities that work with mindfulness, says that ardency is the wisdom factor as you develop mindfulness in order to bring about concentration, realizing that the teachings are there to be followed. The shoulds are to be taken seriously because they give serious benefits.