

Being Responsible

April 25, 2020

One of Ajaan Lee's favorite teachings was that when you take refuge in the Buddha, the Dhamma, and the Sangha, the real refuge is when you internalize their qualities. If you take refuge simply on the external level, the Buddha is the person who lived 2,600 years ago, the Dhamma is the Dhamma in books, the Sangha is the noble Sangha—somebody else out there. Refuge on this level is not that secure a refuge. After all, the Buddha has passed away. The Dhamma that's just in the books is not going to jump out of the books and help you. And even if there are members of the noble Sangha still alive, they can do only so much for you.

The real problems of the mind are inside. It's only when you have good qualities inside that you can be safe from those problems. Taking the Triple Gem as a refuge means developing those qualities within you.

Tonight's the 59th anniversary of Ajaan Lee's passing, so it's good to reflect on this topic. He wrote two books on it: one fairly early in his time as a teacher, and one right toward the end of his life. And the teaching is as relevant today as it was back in those days.

Take the qualities of the Buddha. They come down to three: his wisdom, or discernment, his compassion, and his purity. And as the Buddha taught, wisdom comes from finding answers to the question, "What when I do it will lead to my long-term welfare and happiness?" In other words, wisdom begins with the realization that your happiness and suffering depend on your actions, long-term happiness is possible, and it's better than short term. These are all very basic principles, but they underlie everything in the path, from the very beginning to the very end. You find your safe refuge by searching for your happiness in a responsible way. You always look at your actions and then, seeing what the long-term consequences are going to be, you act on what you see is going to have the best long-term consequences.

Now, compassion relates directly to that: the principle that each of us loves ourselves dearly, and just as you love yourself very dearly, everybody else loves themselves that dearly. So if your pursuit of happiness is going to cause them suffering, they're not going to stand for it. If you want your happiness to be long-term, you have to take their happiness into consideration. So again, this is a good quality of mind that comes from searching for a happiness in a responsible way.

And then finally there's purity. This, the Buddha says, comes from looking at your actions before, while, and after you do them. Before you do them, you look at the intention, to make sure that the results you anticipate from the action are not going to be harmful. While you're doing the action, you check to make sure that unexpected bad results are not coming up. If they are, you stop. And finally when the action is done, you look at what the actual long-term consequences were. If you see that any harm was done, you resolve not to repeat the mistake and you go to talk it over with someone else who's more advanced on the path to get their insight into how you might best act the next time around.

It's in all these cases—wisdom, compassion, purity—the emphasis is on the long-term consequences of your actions. In other words, you're taking responsibility for your search for happiness. You want to do it in a way that doesn't harm anybody so that the happiness will be long-term.

When you think about it, these three qualities acting together—your wisdom and discernment, your compassion, your purity—pretty much define what it means to be a responsible person. This is especially important now as our society faces all kinds of dangers: not just danger from the disease, but the danger from all the unskillful things people are doing in response to it, and all the irresponsible ways in which a lot of people are acting.

If you look outside, are you going to find refuge in other people's being responsible? A lot of people are telling you by their actions: The answer is No. But that's no reason why *you* shouldn't be responsible, because after all, you are the owner of your actions. You make your choices. And the best way to create a good influence in the world is to make sure that you choose to be responsible in your search for happiness.

Take, for instance, the words you speak. You know the Buddha's three tests. Before you say something, you want to make sure, one, that it's true, two, that it's beneficial, and three, that it's timely. In other words, if you're going to say something pleasing, it has to be right for the time and place. If you're going to say something displeasing, it has to be right for the time and place.

Well, those three tests correspond roughly to the qualities of wisdom, compassion and purity.

Wisdom, of course, is the truth of what you're saying. Compassion relates to the intention that it be beneficial, and then purity, to the fact that you learn from your past actions how to read specific situations so that you're not simply well-meaning in your words. You have a clear sense of the power of your words. And you've learned this through trial and error, through paying careful attention to what you do and the results you get. This is what makes your wisdom and

compassion pure. Otherwise, they're just well-meaning, but if they're not right for the time and the place, they can actually cause harm. So be very careful, watching your actions and seeing the actual results that come, and then learning lessons from them.

This tendency we have to say, "Well, this is the sort of person I am," or, "This is what I feel like doing," or, "This is what I feel like saying": This is what stands in the way of purity. It's as if you basically don't care. You hold to the rightness of your ideas. And you can talk yourself into believing that they are beneficial—and in the abstract, out of context, they may be. But if you're not really careful about how you deal with specific people in context, then you're being irresponsible.

You have to care. You have to pay attention. This is one of the reasons why we meditate. Again, a teaching from Ajaan Lee: Meditation is a skill. You learn by doing it and then looking at the results, and caring enough that, if the results are not good, you've got to go back and change what you did. Like weaving a basket—if the first basket doesn't come out well, you don't just sit there and complain about the materials. You've got to pay attention to your own input. When you say *x*, what is the result? When you say *y*, what is the result?

This is one of the problems with the Internet. A lot of people spout off and they don't see the impact of their words on other people. When you say something directly to somebody's face and see their reaction, sometimes it tells you, "Okay, they're not saying anything. But the look on the face tells me that something is wrong with what I said." On the Net, of course, you don't see other people, or you see them in a blur, and you get used to spouting off. A lot of us have the habit of spouting off anyhow, but this just aggravates it.

Purity relates to the care which you take to being skillful. And when you take that kind of care, when you're responsible in that way, being responsible is not just a matter of purity. You could be saying things that would be right for the situation, or *seem* right for the situation, but they're not true, or they're not beneficial. Well, that's not really responsible. Being responsible requires all three qualities. In terms of the qualities of the heart: your discernment, your compassion, and your purity. In terms of the words you speak: that they be true, beneficial, and timely.

All these things together provide our refuge when we're responsible like this. We're circumspect. We look all around at the consequences of our actions. We care about the consequences of our actions, and we do our best to make them good in an all-around way.

That's when we're a good example for others. We become a refuge for ourselves and then, on the external level, we become a good example for others as

to how they can build a refuge for themselves as well. So even though we see a lot of people setting bad examples right now, it gives us all the more reason for us to set good examples. At the very least, it'll have an immediate impact on the world right around us. And it can possibly spread out to larger areas as well. It's by being responsible that your refuge is going to be secure.