

Duties

April 30, 2020

When you watch wildlife, you're struck by how willful and independent they are. They came into this world to not follow anyone's plan. They didn't ask anyone's permission. They just came. It makes you stop and think: It's the same with us. Even in cases where our parents wanted us, they didn't want us particularly. They wanted a child. They didn't know who they were going to get, and we happened to come out of their gene pool. And just as it is with animals, once you come into the world because you wanted to be in the world, you find you have a lot of duties, even if you're not there for anyone else's purpose. The simple fact that you've got a body means you have to take care of it.

There's an interesting sutta where a deva comes to see the Buddha and talks about how the mind is trembling, the mind is fearful and anxious because of its duties: duties that have already arisen and duties that have yet to arise. We don't usually think of devas as having duties. They're supposed to be up there in heaven just having a good time. But all beings have duties. As the Buddha said, everybody except arahants has debts. When we come into this world, we take hold of the body, and the body has its needs. And in meeting those needs, we have to depend on the suffering of others for our food, our clothing, our shelter, medicine. We have that chant every night to think about these things.

And now society has come to a halt, come to a pause, we can begin to see clearly how dependent we are on the suffering of a lot of beings just to keep going. As the situation changes, we find that our duties will change. And that's one of our duties: looking into what we need in order to survive. The mind's basic mantra way deep down inside is, "What's next? What do I have to do next? What do I have to do next?" There's a constant sense of "I have to do something." But you have to realize, *you* are the one who came into the world. And it was because you wanted to take on the identity of being a being—in this case, a human being: That's why you have these duties. You can't blame anyone else.

And the deva asked the Buddha, "Is there any untroubled state that's free from the disturbances of duties?" And the Buddha said, "Yes, there is a path." It involves sense restraint and it involves what he calls austerity: in other words, being frugal in the things you take in, in the necessities of life, and in terms of your sense experiences: the things you go looking for, the things you go listening for. In the old days, we had catalogs. Now we have the Net. When we want to want

something, we turn it on—in other words, we do this not necessarily because we need anything. Mostly because we want to want.

Now, sometimes there are genuine needs. The body needs a certain level of nutrition in order to survive, in order to practice, a certain level of shelter, clothing, medicine in order to be able to practice. But the reason we have those reflections in the evening is to remind ourselves of how much is enough, and how much is going beyond enough. If you want to lessen your duties, you don't go beyond “just right”—in this case, just right for the purpose of the practice.

We talk about the middle path. Lots of people have their middle paths, and their middles are all over the place. The way you define what's a genuine middle path is by asking yourself, “Well, the path to what purpose, the path to what goal?” If your aim is power or wealth, certain things will be necessary. But then you find you take on more and more debts that way. The ideal thing is to find a path that leads out, and to take on just enough debts in order to get out. And then, as the Buddha said, that's when you'll be free from debt.

So we try to keep our needs in line: in terms of clothing, just enough to cover the body, keep it warm when it's cold outside, keep it cool when it's hot, to make it presentable. Food: You're not going to eat food playfully or to put on bulk, but just enough to maintain the strength needed to practice. Shelter: again, enough to protect you from the elements. And enough medicine to keep the body functioning properly. Those are your needs. Anything beyond that is extraneous. The more you give in to your desires, the more debts and the more duties you'll have.

As for the rest of the Buddha's answer to the deva, he said the way to the untroubled state lies in developing the factors for awakening: mindfulness, analysis of qualities, persistence, rapture, calm, concentration, equanimity. In other words, it's the practice where you start with being mindful, and then you use your discernment to bring the mind first a sense of energy inside—that can be your food inside, your medicine inside—and then to calm it down. That's also a kind of medicine, also a kind of a food. And this you develop. This is a duty. It's one of the duties associated with the four noble truths.

You develop the path so that you can comprehend suffering, and find out where the cause is from. And you'll find that the cause is coming from your desires. All these duties are duties because of our desires. So you abandon the desire, and then the mind is free from having to have duties. That's the pattern that's set out.

And the pattern is so radical. The Buddha concludes his answer to the deva saying that ultimately you relinquish the All—the All here being everything

having to do with the six senses. You find that you've gotten involved in this world of the six senses because of your desires. You've taken on all these duties that are occasioned by your desires. The only way out is to drop the desires, and then you're free.

Now, for a lot of people this sounds like extinction, going out of existence. Actually, it's simply that you're no longer taking on the identity of being, a being within the world of the six senses. As for how you would be described at that point, the Buddha says, you're undefinable, immeasurable—you can't even be measured as existing or not existing, both, or neither—because people are defined by their desires: the desires that forced the duties on them. As long as you're involved in space and time, that's the issue. Time keeps coming, coming, coming. "What next? I've done this, but now what next, after I've accomplished this, but what next? That didn't go well. Well, what's next? What did go well? Well, what's next?" The things you do in space and time, as long as they point only into space and time, always have this "what next?" And there's always a duty that comes along with that.

It's when you can step out through disenchantment, that's when the duties are done. Ajaan Mun makes this point. In the four noble truths, often the third noble truth is equated with nirvana. Actually, it's the realization of nirvana. But nirvana itself, he says, is something that lies outside all four truths, because there's no duty associated with regard it. There's nothing you have to do at that point. That's why the Buddha said the task is done.

Until then, though, we have our duties. It's simply a question of where you focus your desires. That determines what duties you have to take on.

And although the path may seem long, the not-path is longer. The Buddha's image is of a person driving a cart. As long as you stay on the road, the cart will be okay. When you get off the road, you break your axle: more work, heavier work. So if the path of practice seems long and hard, think about how much longer and harder it is when you leave the path and go crashing through the brambles in the rough countryside around.

There's no way you're going to escape the fact that as long as you're in time, there're going to be duties. If you follow the path, though, that's a series of duties that will take you out to the point where the mind is totally undisturbed, totally free.

So think about the fact that you're here because you wanted to be: "here" meaning first, here in the human realm. Of if you're wise, you could also take "here" to mean you're here on the path. See the duties of the path as light, as opening the door. As long as they seem heavy or onerous, you're not seeing things

rightly, because this is the path to freedom. This is the way out, and it leads to a place of total rest, totally undisturbed, totally untroubled, not having to depend on anybody, not having to force your will on anybody. Again, you go there without having to ask anybody's permission. But, unlike being born into the world, you're not placing a burden on anybody—not on other people around you and not on yourself. It's where all the burdens get put down.