

The Buddha Teaches a Yakkha

September 2, 2020

There's a story from the Canon that Ajaan Suwat liked to tell. It was of the time when the Buddha went to stay in the haunt of the Alavaka Yakkha, a spirit who took offense at the fact that the Buddha was there and told him to get out. So the Buddha left. Then the spirit told him to come back in again, so he came in. Told him to get out a second time... this happened three times all together. Then when the Buddha came in for the third time and the yakkha told him to leave again, the Buddha said, "No, I'm not going to leave. You're asking too much."

So the yakkha challenged the Buddha. He said, "I'm going to ask you some questions, and if you can't answer the questions, I'm going to hurl you across the river Ganges and split your head into seven pieces." The Buddha replied, "I don't know anyone who can hurl me across the river Ganges or split my head, so go ahead and ask the questions."

So the yakkha asked him some questions, and the Buddha answered them to the yakkha's satisfaction. The final answer had to do with four qualities to develop in the mind: truth, self-control, endurance, and relinquishment or generosity.

One of the reasons Ajaan Suwat liked this story was because the Buddha was compliant. He wasn't stubborn, but when it came to what was proper, he stood his ground. This was very much the character of Ajaan Suwat: He was compliant in a lot of ways, but when it came to a matter of right and wrong, he stood his ground firmly. It wasn't because he was bullheaded, it was simply because he was very clear about what was right and what was wrong.

As for the Buddha's final answer, that's become a famous set of dhammas, or qualities. It's listed in a Dhamma textbook in Thailand as a set of qualities appropriate for lay people, but they're appropriate for everybody.

The late king of Thailand, Rama IX, when they celebrated the 200th anniversary of the founding of Bangkok, gave a talk to the nation, and the four qualities were the basic theme of the talk—saying that if Thai people developed these qualities, the nation would prosper. Of course, the same holds everywhere. Here in America, if our leaders followed these qualities, the nation would prosper. If the people in general followed these qualities, we'd prosper, not only in terms of material wealth but also in terms of the quality of life, the quality of our living together. Because they're all qualities in which you take responsibility for your actions, responsibility for your words. You stand by them.

The fact that you stand by them is not simply out of stubbornness, but because they're *right*. For instance, with truth: Truth is a quality not just of the words you say, although that is important. When people don't tell the truth, it's very hard to live with one another. But truth

is also a quality of the person—you have to be *true* to the practice if you’re going to get good results.

There are people who come and meditate and then go back home and say, “Well I tried meditation and it didn’t work.” The question is, did they really meditate? Were they true in doing the meditation? If you’re going to evaluate the Dhamma, you have to be true in your actions. You have to give what it requires. This, too, is an aspect of truthfulness.

There’s another quality the Buddha calls *safeguarding the truth* or *guarding the truth*, in which you’re very clear about why you’re holding whatever opinions you have. You don’t simply say that “I see it’s true, so it must be true.” You have to ask yourself: Is it because you reasoned it through and it fit in with what you already believe? Were you taking it on somebody’s authority? Those are not grounds for something’s really being true or false.

This reflection teaches you to have a certain humility about your opinions—which would be good in the world in general. People are very sure about their opinions, even though they’re based on flimsier and flimsier evidence. This makes it hard to talk to one another. But if you’re clear about where you get your opinions, then you begin to realize, “Okay, this is something I have to test. Just because it seems right to me, or it sounds good, or I believe the authority, is no proof.” Things like this have to be put to the test.

There a lot of opinions we have about things that we can’t test, so those opinions you should bracket. The important opinions are the ones you can test as to what’s going to give rise to suffering, what’s not going to give rise to suffering. If you’re true in that test, then the results of the test enable you to really know the truth that matters.

So truth is one quality that would help us prosper—and help the society prosper in terms of the quality of our life together.

The second quality is self-control—you restrain yourself. If something pops into your mind, you don’t immediately do it or say it. You ask yourself, “What would be the long-term consequences of following this particular idea?” This is especially important with defilements like greed, aversion, and delusion. You have to stop and ask yourself, “If I act on these emotions, what will the results be?” And you have to learn how to hold yourself in check when you see that the results would be bad.

This, the Buddha said, is a quality of discernment. In other words, when you see something that you don’t like to do but you know it would give good results, you can talk yourself into doing it. You know how to psych yourself up. Or if there’s something that you like doing, but it’s going to give bad results, you can talk yourself out of doing it. That’s discernment in the pragmatic sense, the kind of discernment that really matters.

You look throughout the Buddha’s teachings, and for him discernment is always strategic. Even the more abstract teachings on emptiness or dependent co-arising serve a strategic purpose. Learning how to use them properly is a sign of true discernment. You don’t just parrot what’s in the books. You know that a particular teaching has what the Buddha calls its

attha, its goal, its purpose, its meaning. What is it for? When you know, you apply it at the appropriate time, and then you put it aside at the times that are not appropriate.

There are only two teachings that the Buddha said are categorically true, or always true across the board. One is the principle that skillful actions should be developed, unskillful actions should be abandoned. And *actions* there covers not only physical actions, but also the words you say and the thoughts you think. The other categorical teaching is the four noble truths and the duties appropriate to them: to comprehend suffering, abandon its cause, realize the cessation of suffering, by developing the path to the cessation. Those are the only teachings that the Buddha said are true across the board.

With other teachings, he said, you have to know the proper time and place. So that's a sign that the discernment he taught, the concepts he taught, were meant to be strategic. You know when to use them. You know how to talk yourself into doing the right thing.

That's how discernment connects with self-control.

The third quality: stamina or endurance. You learn how to put up with difficulties. You put up with people's harsh and unpleasant words. You put up with pain. If you allow yourself to be easily influenced by these things, other people can know how to influence you. They know where your buttons are: They're all over your face, they're all over your body, ready to be pushed.

But if you have a measure of endurance, which goes together with self-control, you can hold yourself back even though people say things that are really provoking. You develop the equanimity to not get provoked, and that puts you in position where you can more clearly see what would be the most effective useful thing to say at a particular time.

The same with physical pain: When you're not afraid of physical pain, then you're not easily pushed around. That puts you more in a position of power, a position of strength.

If you don't react with knee-jerk reactions to difficulties, then when situations are difficult, you can smooth them out, calm them down. Instead of inciting people to further turmoil, you can take a situation and unravel it so that it can end peacefully. This is a good quality to have, again, for peace.

And then finally, relinquishment, *caga*, which can also be translated as generosity: You realize that you have more than enough in terms of your material wealth, in terms of your time, in terms of your energy. It may not be unlimited, but you have enough to share.

When people can share things like this, society becomes a useful thing. When people are just constantly grabbing for themselves, taking what they can, you begin to wonder: Why live together? What do we gain? Some people gain, some people are deprived, but even the ones who gain don't gain much in terms of the qualities of their minds. It's when we share with one another that life together becomes a better life, and we grow as individuals.

So these are the four qualities that the Buddha taught to the yakkha. Now, yakkhas are known for their anger and their impetuousness, which are precisely the qualities that get not only yakkhas but also human beings into a lot of trouble and create a lot of turmoil.

The Buddha's four qualities are precisely the qualities that counteract the tendencies that would lead to more turmoil. They're qualities that can take turmoil and turn it back to peace. If we sit around waiting for everybody else in society to develop them, it's never going to happen. These qualities have to start with us. We have to learn how to be truthful, how to exert self-control, how to develop our stamina and endurance, and how to learn to be more generous. In other words, we become mature, responsible human beings, the kind of human beings that make a livable society possible.

So we look at the news and see that it's pretty sad, but we shouldn't stop at sadness. We should realize there are qualities we can develop that can make at least our immediate environment a good place to be, by the way we develop these strengths within ourselves, so that our life together becomes conducive to the good things of the mind—the mind's genuine goodness, its genuine happiness: genuine in the sense that it's really lasting, and goes deep, deep into the mind, deep into the heart, and stays.