

## *One Person*

*February 25, 2021*

The Buddha once ranked people in four categories. On the top were those who assisted themselves and assisted others. Next were those who assisted themselves but didn't assist others. Below that were those who didn't assist themselves but *did* assist others. At the very bottom were those who didn't assist anybody, either themselves or others.

The ranking is interesting, and it has to do with what the Buddha meant by assisting. To assist others for him didn't mean you went around and did things for them. Basically it meant that you inspired them to observe the precepts, to try to develop their minds so that they could get rid of passion, aversion, and delusion. That's not an easy thing to do. So it's no wonder he said he would rank those who were able to assist themselves—i.e. those who did practice the precepts themselves and were able to get rid of their passion, aversion, and delusion—higher than those who had simply talked to others and somehow persuaded them, but didn't have any of those qualities or skills in themselves.

There are several things to think about here: one, what it means to assist yourself, to assist others; and two, why it's better to be able to assist yourself and not others, rather than not to be able to assist yourself but to assist others. Part of that has to do simply with the fact that if you can develop these skills in yourself, you know them for sure. If you haven't developed them yourself, you're not really sure. You can say things to others that may sound nice, but what does it mean? You don't know for sure, because you're not for sure.

As for those who *can* assist others and assist themselves, it's not that they can help everybody. Look at the Buddha himself. That passage we chant every day, *anuttaro purisa-damma-sārathi*: “unexcelled trainer for those fit to be tamed.” The Buddha couldn't tame everybody. There are many instances in the Canon where people would come to him with questions, and he could see that their motivation was wrong, and he refused to teach them. Even in his own family, he was never able to reach Devadatta. He tried many times, but there are just some people you can't help. So your ability to help and not help is not really a measure of your intelligence, it's simply more a question of their willingness to be helped, and whatever kamma you may have with them.

In this context, we have to think about two comments that Ajaan Suwat made. One was a point that he made many times, that each of us has only one person, i.e., ourselves, that we're responsible for. When we choose to do something it *is* our choice. When other people choose to do something or not to do something, it's *not* our choice. We can try to influence them if we can, but our main work is on our own greed, aversion, and delusion.

That relates to a comment he made once that we're not here to get other people. He was speaking about the monastery, but he's also speaking about the fact that we're practicing.

We're here to get ourselves. If other people are inspired by our practice and want to practice in line with what we're doing, that's fine. But we're not going to change anything to make the practice more appealing to them. We hold by that principle that the Dhamma is the Dhamma, and we're not going to abandon our practice to go running after them, because in that case nobody gets gotten, you might say. But if you're working on yourself, there is the opportunity for you to get yourself, and that's what matters.

We go through life after life after life, consuming the resources of the world. If you want to take someone out of this chain of feeding, how do you do it? You take yourself out.

Think about it like hurricanes. You see satellite pictures of hurricanes forming off the coast of Africa and then moving up across the Atlantic, sometimes hitting land, sometimes staying over the ocean. Those winds off the coast of Africa: Are they the same molecules as the winds, say, off the coast of Florida? Well, no. But there's a pattern that moves and changes and can do a lot of damage. In our lives we try to keep things off the coast, but still you can never guarantee that you go from one life to the next and you'll be a good hurricane, not cause any damage. The only way to guarantee that no damage would ever be done would be to put an end to the conditions for hurricanes. You can't stop other people's hurricanes, but you can stop your own, you can take it apart from within.

Like that old woman I knew in Thailand: She was beginning to meditate and she began to gain some psychic powers. One day, as she was sitting in her hut, news came over the radio that a big storm coming off the Gulf of Thailand was going to land near where she was. Now, a huge tree was leaning over her hut, and she was concerned that if the storm came and snapped the tree, then the tree would squash her, as she said, like a bug. So she decided to see if her meditation could teach her something about storms. She had only a fourth grade education, didn't know much about science, but she had a vision: a column of hot air rising off the water, and the rest of the winds swirling around that column of air. She asked herself, "What happens if I cut that column of air?" And so, in her vision, she cut, cut, cut, cut, cut, and everything dispersed.

A little while later, news came over the radio that the storm had dissipated and disappeared. Now, whether she had anything to do with that, she didn't know, but it's a good image. Your greed, aversion, and delusion are like winds rising up, and they create a lot of turbulence around themselves. So unlike her, you may not be able to cut the winds of other people's storms, but you *can* cut the winds that are causing your storms, and that's what you have to focus on.

If everyone were to take responsibility for him or herself, the world would be a very different place, a much better place. We'd simply be dealing with the results of past kamma and not have to worry about any current bad kamma and its future. The problem is, you can't force other people to be responsible. But you *can* make the decision that *you* will be responsible.

Think of that story of William James, the American philosopher. As a young man he wasn't planning to be a philosopher, he wanted to be an artist. But his father stood in his way, in such a thorough way that the young man went through a crisis, beginning to wonder if he had any free will at all. Then he began to wonder if any human beings had free will. It put him in a severe depression. What got him out of his depression was his decision one day that his first assertion of free will would be that he would believe in free will, that he believed that he had the choice. It was from that decision that he was able to pull himself together and lead a very productive life.

In the same way, this is where our practice begins. We make the decision—regardless of how other people are behaving, how responsible or irresponsible they may be—that we're going to take responsibility for our actions, we're going to do our best to make our decisions skillful. And as the Buddha said, even that first decision to act in a skillful way is, in itself, skillful. So you've got your toehold, and then you can build from there.