

Shoulds & Desires

May 24, 2022

I was leading a retreat on the brahmaviharas one time, and the question came up, “Given that the Buddha assumes that we’re all basically good, how does he explain the evil in the world?” And I had to say, “Wait a minute. The Buddha never said anything about people being basically good. What he assumes about people is something else: that we all want happiness.” Of course, it’s easy to explain why there’s evil in the world, because people have some very strange ideas about how to find happiness.

But that fact of desire: The Buddha said, “All things are rooted in desire.” All things skillful, all things unskillful are rooted in desire. His purpose in teaching was to show people how to find true happiness in line with their desire to be happy, laying out what they should and should not do.

Now, a lot of people don’t like the idea of *shoulds* and *should nots*. But the Buddha said that that was a teacher’s basic duty: to give you a framework for understanding what kind of things should and shouldn’t be done if you want to be happy. He’s not forcing this framework on you.

There’s a passage in the beginning of the Karaniya Metta Sutta: “This is what should be done by one who appreciates the state of peace.”

I was sitting in on another course on the brahmaviharas one time. They were going over this sutta line by line, and they started with the first line. As soon as they hit the word *should*, a hand went up. “I thought Buddhism didn’t have any *shoulds*.” The teacher had to spend the whole morning explaining why there could be a *should* in the Buddha’s teachings. But it’s not that difficult to explain. If you really appreciate the idea of peace as being the ultimate happiness, then this is what you should do. But it’s up to you to decide if that’s the path you want to follow.

Perhaps a lot of the problem about *shoulds* has to do with our background. Think about the Freudian analysis of the mind: You’ve got the id, which is your basic desire. And you’ve got the superego telling what you should and should not do, and the *shoulds* there have nothing to do with your happiness. The superego is not saying that you should do this if you want to be happy—simply, “You should do this.” And so, of course, there’s going to be conflict with the id. Then the ego, which is in the middle, has to negotiate between the two. You never find peace because there’s always going to be conflict.

Whereas the Buddha's *shoulds* are of a different order. There are the four noble truths with their duties. These are the things you should do *if* you want to be happy: You *should* try to comprehend suffering. You *should* try to abandon its cause. You *should* try to realize the cessation of suffering. And you do that by developing the path.

All that activity you should and should not do is also about directing your desires, because the craving that leads to suffering—craving for sensuality, becoming, and non-becoming—doesn't cover all the possible desires there are. There are also the desires to be skillful, to develop skillful qualities and abandon unskillful ones. That's in the other half of the four noble truths, the skillful half.

You can divide the four truths into two sides: There's the unskillful cause, craving, and the undesirable result, which is suffering. Then there's the skillful cause, which is the noble eightfold path. You can't say the cessation is the result of the path, but the path takes you there.

The important element in the noble eightfold path is right effort. And right effort is about generating desire to prevent unskillful qualities from arising, and if they have arisen, to abandon them; to give rise to skillful qualities that are not there yet, and if they are there, to develop them even further. The Buddha's basically saying: This is guidance for your desire for happiness.

Now, a lot of his analysis is counterintuitive. Take, for instance, his analysis of the first noble truth. He talks about the suffering of aging, illness, death, separation from what we love, having to be with things we don't like, all of which are things that we know. But then he boils it down to the five clinging-aggregates. The important word there is the "clinging." The Pali term for clinging, *upādāna*, can also mean "to feed." This is where things get counterintuitive, because for most of us, our relationship to the world is that we want to feed off it. We like to take in not only physical food, but also sights, sounds, smells, tastes, tactile sensations, trying to find some nourishment from them. We feed on our intentions. We feed on our awareness. We're constantly trying to take things in, and that's precisely why we suffer.

When the Buddha talks about ways to counteract this, you basically have to change your relationship to the world.

Start with generosity: finding happiness by giving things away. Of course, you'll be feeding off the happiness that comes from the act of generosity, but it's an initial lesson that with a lot of good things in life, the best ways to feed are to do the opposite of feeding: They're to radiate something good out. The same with the precepts: You're making a gift of safety for all living beings. Instead of taking things from them, you're giving them safety.

Then there's meditation. When they talk about meditation in the context of the acts of merit, they're talking about developing goodwill, and here again, you radiate. You're not taking in. You're producing goodwill from within that you can radiate out. It's a form of wealth that doesn't require that you take anything. You've got the resources inside. Simply by the way you think, you can create a good energy. You can create something that's a gift to others. Of course, you benefit. If you have goodwill for all beings, you're very unlikely to do unskillful things. You're very unlikely to harm them. In that way, you protect yourself.

So this is a basic pattern of the path: Instead of taking things in, taking things in, taking things in, we're learning how to radiate good things out, out, out. As when you're meditating here, right now: Focusing on the breath may seem as if it's just between you and your breath, and nobody else is involved. But when the mind settles down, it does have an energy. That energy goes out. And when the mind settles down, it's a lot less likely to be hungry to act on greed, aversion, and delusion. So again, you're giving safety to other beings.

We're looking for happiness in ways where there's no clear line between who benefits and who doesn't benefit. You, of course, are the prime recipient of the goodness of your actions in thoughts, words, and deeds. But other people benefit as well, which is why searching for happiness in this way is so good. People usually look for happiness in material gain, in status, getting praise from other people, looking for physical pleasures. But with those kinds of happiness, some people gain and other people lose. Yet in the happiness that comes from generosity, virtue, meditation, everybody wins.

So this is a pursuit of happiness that actually creates harmony in the world. We think about that phrase "the pursuit of happiness," and it sounds kind of grubby, especially if you're looking for happiness where people have to fight one another over what they're getting. But if you pursue happiness that's wise like this, you're actually generating more well-being in the world at large.

This is why I said that with the Buddha's *shoulds*—if the Buddha were to analyze the mind in terms of id, ego, and superego—it's not the case that there has to be a conflict in the mind between the *shoulds* and the desires. Now, there will be conflict in the beginning—that's for sure—because you have lots of other *shoulds* going around in the mind, based on what you've done in the past to find pleasures, and the mind may be addicted to those things. It resents being told, "There's a better way of finding happiness."

But the conflict isn't unending. As you go through the practice and you show to those parts of the mind that haven't been won over yet that you really can be happy being generous, you really can be happy being virtuous, meditating,

developing goodwill, developing concentration, gaining insight, then you can win the whole mind over. This is one of the ways in which we bring about unity of mind: by following *shoulds* that are aimed at happiness and really do work.

So that's what's special about the Buddha's teachings: The *shoulds* are designed for you to be happy. So if you find that there's any conflict in the mind as you're practicing, it's not because the Buddha's *shoulds* are unreasonable or punitive. It's because there's all that ignorance still in your mind about what actually would lead to true and reliable happiness. There are voices in the mind that can say, "Well, I can find some quick pleasures this way. Why bother with the long term?" But that's blindness right there, saying that you don't care about the long term.

We all want happiness. The question is, do we care about the long term? If you're wise, you'll say Yes.