Shoulds & Ideals

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Chan Fung liked to tell stories about his time with the John Lee. One of my favorite of his stories was the one of a group of people who wanted to go with the John Lee into the forest. They were going to take the train from Bangkok up to Lopburi. Then they would go off into the forest in Lopburi. So everybody met at Udom Phong, which is the main station there in Bangkok. A lot of the Lee people got there and they had lots of luggage. They figured they could take the train and then they could hire somebody to cart their luggage into the forest for them. So many people came with two or three suitcases. John Lee took one look at everybody and he started walking down the railroad tracks. So when you’re a John, you walk down the railroad tracks, too. Of course, a lot of the people with all those suitcases started complaining. “The suitcases were heavy. Why was he doing this?” All John Lee had to say was, “Well, if it’s heavy, let it go.” So as soon as they saw that they couldn’t change his mind, people would stop and search through their suitcases. Everything that was unnecessary they would throw out into the lotus ponds on the side of the railroad track. Many of the men ended up actually throwing away some of their suitcases. By the time they got to the next station, some seemed. John Lee took a look at everybody. Everybody had just one suitcase at the most. That’s when he allowed them to get on the next train. There’s a Dharma lesson here. Many of the things that we think are good for us, that we enjoy, that will be comfortable for us, are actually a burden. We’ve got to learn how to let them go. We can’t have all the different forms of happiness that we want in life. So we have to decide what’s really important and what’s not, to see which kinds of happiness are actually getting in the way of a larger happiness. Be willing to make sacrifices. This is what the principle of renunciation is all about. It’s not just an exercise in deprivation. It comes from the realization that there are only so many things we can attain in life. We only have so much time, so much energy. So we should learn how to devote our energy to what’s really important and put aside things that get in the way. These are the “shoulds” in Buddhism. Where do the “shoulds” come from? It comes from the Buddhist teachings in the Four Noble Truths, like that chant we had just now, “Understanding suffering, what’s causing suffering, the end of suffering, and the way to the end of suffering.” This is where his “shoulds” come from, because each of these four truths has a duty. Suffering is to be comprehended. You want to understand exactly what it is. You want to be able to observe it. It’s something we tend to run away from or try to push out of existence as soon as we encounter it. But you can’t really put an end to it until you understand it. So you have to be willing to watch it for a while. That’s the first imperative to comprehend suffering. As for the cause, the imperative there is to let it go. If you see anything that’s causing you to suffer, you’ve got to be willing to let it go and put it aside. It’s not that these things that you’re putting aside are always obviously bad or undesirable. Many times they are precisely the things we desire. This is why craving is a cause of suffering. As John Swat used to say, it’s the things we like that are the cause of suffering. So we have to learn which ones we have to let go of. So it’s not always a case of seeing obviously bad things and putting them aside. Sometimes they’re things that we really like or are really attached to. The cessation of suffering is something you want to learn how to witness, to see that there really is such a thing. But to see that, you have to develop the path. Like we’re doing right now, practicing concentration. That’s one of the elements of the path, and that’s to be developed. You work at mindfulness. You work at concentration. You work at all the elements of the path. It’s not simply that you sit here and watch things come and go in a state of choicest awareness. You do make choices. To begin with, you learn how to look at your experience in terms of these four truths. They’re not just four truths about something. They’re actually four categories for understanding what’s happening or what’s worth really noticing in the present moment. We have four categories because there are four different things you can do in the present moment. You can either try to comprehend what’s there, or you can try to let it go, or just verify for yourself that it’s there, or develop it. These four tasks are appropriate for different things. Sometimes you focus on what you have to comprehend in terms of the stress or suffering. Other times you have to focus on the qualities you need to develop. If your mindfulness is weak, if you have trouble keeping things in mind, we work at making it stronger. Every time you realize that you’ve slipped off away from the breath, come back. Come back. Remind yourself, “This is why you’re here. This is what you want to develop.” When the mind settles down and you get excited about it settling down and you find that that spoils it, the next time it settles down, remind yourself, “That’s what happened when you got excited last time.” Try to keep things on an even keel and watch it so you can really develop the concentration. These are the Buddha’s imperatives, and they’re all very friendly. They’re here for your own good, and not just for your own good in the sense of the way that cod liver oil is good for you. It’s good for you, but it’s miserable stuff. If you actually put these imperatives into practice, you’ll find that the mind does get lighter. Its burdens get lighter. You’re not carrying around so much stuff. You don’t have all those suitcases. They’re weighing you down. In terms of Western psychology, these imperatives are the Buddha’s superego, the part that tells us what we should do. It’s not arbitrary. It’s not imposing original sin on us and then saying, “You need my grace in order to get out of this miserable situation in which you, for some reason, are responsible for.” Even though it was something somebody else did. It’s not that kind of unreasonable set of imperatives. The imperatives are not placed on you by some perfect God who doesn’t understand what it is to be imperfect. They’re imperatives that come simply from the desire for true happiness. So they’re imperatives that are on your side. They’re not the sort of imperatives that you have to hide from. We don’t have to drive every desire for happiness down into the subconscious. We can be perfectly open and above board. When you’re open and above board, then you can see which of your strategies for happiness work and which ones don’t. You can look at your ideas. You can look at your goals in terms of how well they actually function. You don’t have to get neurotic around them. But it still does require a certain amount of relinquishment, learning to let go. The Buddha himself said that as he got on the path. It’s not the case that his heart leapt at the idea of relinquishing, but he got to the position where he realized that there’s only one way to find true happiness, and that was learning how to let go of the various things that we’re getting in the way of happiness. So this is one of the reasons why we have Dharma Talks, is to help us understand precisely where we have to let go, whether we like it or not, but this is just the way things are. While you’re sitting here and meditating, you’ve got to let go of the hindrances, sensual desire. You can’t sit here just thinking about all the beautiful things that you would like to listen to or look at or whatever, because that gets in the way. It gets in the way of your concentration. The same goes with ill will. You can’t sit here thinking about how you’d like to see so-and-so get their just desserts. Because again, that is an obstacle to your concentration. It weakens the force of the mind. You can’t indulge in sleepiness and drowsiness. You don’t want to get involved in restless and anxious thoughts. Or in tied up in uncertainty. Is this going to work? Is this not going to work? Am I up to it? Am I not? Just learn how to put those things aside. Just focus on the question of how you’re going to stay with a breath in a way that feels really good, that enables you to stay even longer and more easily. That’s an area you want to develop. You want to think about that. It’s not that meditation doesn’t involve thought. It does involve certain kinds of thinking. But focus on this issue of how you develop your powers of mindfulness, how you develop your powers of concentration, how you learn how to stay with the breath more continually. You let go of other things so you can focus on this, because this is the work that needs to be done right now. Because all of this does assume that you want true happiness. This is how the imperatives make sense. I remember one time I was at the Buddhist Study Center, and they were giving a course on the Garlandiya Metta Sutta. I’d given a course the weekend before and was just staying on to meditate and read in the library. I learned that at this particular course, they were going through the sutta line by line, first in the Pali and then going through different translations of it and comparing them. The sutta starts out, “This is what should be done by someone who aims at the state of peace.” Immediately somebody raised his hand. I thought Buddhism didn’t have a “should,” and they ended up spending the whole morning going over this issue of whether Buddhism has a “should,” if it should have a “should.” The discussion missed the point, which was that if you want the state of peace, this is what you should do. It’s a simple state of cause and effect. It’s not like there’s a god out there imposing something on you. Not given the way things are, if this is what you want, you’ve got to do it this way. You don’t have many alternatives. So it’s assuming that you do have a goal. You want that state of peace. That’s your ideal. I’ve been listening recently to some people talking about ideals in bad terms, that this is an ideal, it’s something horrible, it’s a horrible imposition on you, and you can’t possibly be happy if you have ideals, and they’re unrealistic. They don’t have to be unrealistic. Ideals are an important part of the path. Learn how to be realistic about your ideals, and also check, do they really help in developing concentration? Do they help in learning to comprehend suffering? The ideal of finding true happiness. If you look around you, you don’t see that many people who are truly happy. So it’s easy to wonder, is this really possible? But you’re here of the possibility. It is an ideal. It’s something that human beings can do, through comprehending suffering, letting go of its cause, and developing the path. So the important thing about ideals is that once you understand, your ideal, and understand how to get there, then you focus your attention on the steps. What do you have to let go of? What do you have to do? You read a John Lee’s autobiography, and you found that he would make vows many times. It’s interesting to look at how the Buddha analyzes vows, the quality of determination. It’s one of the perfections. Four steps. First, as you use your discernment, begin deciding what’s a desirable goal, both desirable and possible. Then use your discernment to understand exactly what’s needed to get there. Once you’ve used your discernment, the next quality is truthfulness. You really stick with it. Do whatever’s required. Don’t change your mind unless you start seeing that you misunderstand what you were doing. You misunderstood how to get there. With that, you can change. But otherwise, you stay true to this principle. This is something you want to aim at, and you do whatever you need to do to get there. You’re not a traitor to yourself. The third step is relinquishing. You realize that some things actually get in the way. No matter how much you like them, you may have to give them up. It’s like playing chess. You may like your pawn or you may like your queen, but that’s irrelevant. If you can sacrifice your queen for the sake of checkmate, you do it. You sacrifice the bishop, the knight, whatever, no matter how much you like or dislike the pieces. That’s irrelevant. If you’re willing to sacrifice the pieces, a loose sacrifice will get you to the goal. If you want to play chess without losing any of your pieces, you’ll never get anywhere. So you realize there are some things that you really like to do, some forms of happiness or pleasure, but they get in the way of a higher happiness. So you’ve got to be willing to relinquish them. The fourth quality is peace, maintaining peace of mind as you’re on the path. In other words, not letting yourself get worked up about the fact that you’ve got to let go of this or work at that. Learn how to be an adult about it. Without all this, your inner child is going to complain. You don’t just listen to your inner child. You train your inner child. You educate your inner child. Use all your ingenuity to make your inner child more mature. In terms of the result of the practice, peace should be the result. That’s a deeper peace, a peace that doesn’t have to be nurtured or trained or worked at. It’s just there. It’s something you uncover in the course of following these four imperatives of the Four Noble Truths. You verify, yes, true peace of mind, unshakable peace, unshakable release, is actually possible. The Buddha was not lying. He knew what he was talking about. You’ve reached that point. You’ve completed the task. You’ve thoroughly understood suffering. You’ve abandoned its cause. You’ve realized the cessation of suffering because you’ve fully developed the path. So those are the “shoulds” in Buddhism. They’re focused on this ideal of total happiness, not touched by any conditions at all. But what it involves is that you use your inner child. You develop your discernment. This is another thing you have to develop. You develop your discernment as to what’s working and what’s not, letting go whatever has to be let go, and developing whatever has to be developed. This way, all the “shoulds” and ideals, instead of being a burden, actually become a means to true happiness. Thank you.

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