Look Out for Yourself Wisely

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There’s a Thai phrase for “don’t be selfish,” which might best be translated as “don’t look out for yourself.” And it’s regarded with such respect that you even see pictures of the Buddha made up of the words “don’t look out for yourself.” “Don’t” is the head. “Look” is the neck, “for” is the body, and “yourself” is the legs. And Ajahn Swaye used to comment that it was really wrong. When we’re meditating, when we’re practicing, we really are looking out for ourselves in an intelligent way. Of course, when they’re saying, “Don’t be selfish,” they mean “Don’t abuse other people for your own sake.” Of course, he’d agree with that. But he’d also comment that you really do have to be responsible for yourself. You really do have to look out after yourself, for yourself. Because if you don’t, nobody else is going to do it for you. The statement that he liked to make very often was, “Each of us has only one person. We may live in families with lots of people and lots of relatives, but the only person you’re really responsible for, the only person whose thoughts, words, and deeds you can actually control, is you.” And yet all too often we’re not looking after ourselves. We’re looking after other people, trying to force them to be the way we want them to be. And we neglect our own responsibilities. So it’s in this way that ego is an important part of the practice, an intelligent ego, a healthy ego. You have to exercise restraint because you have to think about yourself down the line in the future. Where are you going to be? What situation are you going to be in? You have to prepare for that now. People who don’t have a healthy ego can’t do that. And if you don’t have a sense of yourself, you can’t do that. There’s no sense of being responsible for where you’re going to be down the line. So that’s the first part of having a healthy ego. In Buddhist terms, it’s heedfulness, realizing that there are dangers. And there are dangers that you can prepare for, dangers you can prevent through what you do and say and think. And that, the Buddha said, is the beginning of all that’s skillful. In other words, our skillfulness doesn’t come from some natural sense of compassion or natural sense of interconnectedness, that you’re good to other people because, actually, they’re part of you. That’s not what the Buddha said. You’re good to other people because you realize that in doing so you’re creating good karma, and that way you’re good to yourself. It’s the principle of karma that connects us. It’s not some universal self which each of us is just a little part. There’s a network of connections. The Buddha doesn’t celebrate it. He just says that’s a fact that you have to work with. So the connections can also be very, very, very harmful, very conducive to suffering. So you start out by being heedful. And you realize that part of heedfulness is that your happiness cannot depend on the misery of others. That’s where compassion comes in. That’s partly due to the fact that we realize that if our happiness depends on their misery, they’re not going to stand for it. They’re going to do what they can to destroy our happiness. And secondly, it’s just not fair. You want to be happy, but other people want to be happy, but you’re going to make them miserable. So the beginning of compassion is also from heedfulness, realizing that you can’t just step over other people. You’ve got to take their needs into consideration. Now, the Buddha’s not saying that you have to give in to their feelings all the time. There’s a difference between harming someone else and hurting their feelings. Some things you may do and say and think may be skillful, but they’re going to hurt somebody’s feelings, but they’re not really harming them. You have to learn how to make that distinction. Otherwise, you become a slave to their feelings. And again, you have to look at what is for your true benefit, what is for their true benefit, and work for the genuine benefit of both sides. That’s mature compassion. At the same time, you realize that you can’t do what you want to do. There are certain urges you have that are not going to be for your own best interest. That’s where you have to exercise restraint. This is another theme that Ajahn Suwat would teach over and over again. I think part of it was because he saw so many Thai people coming to the States and just kind of letting themselves go. The idea that many of them had was that if you come here to America, you can do what you want without thinking about the impact it would have on other people. That’s not what freedom is about. Freedom has to be used with responsibility. And it’s the same with restraint. It’s not that you’re holding yourself back from what you want to do. You’re just holding back the unskillful desires that are going to cause you misery down the line. And as I was saying this morning, it’s not like exercising restraint is forcing you into a confining space. On the one hand, it’s opening things up in the mind. Because all too often when we just speak or act or think through the power of our desires, we’re just going along with the flow without really seeing clearly what’s happening, or how these things are going to have an impact on us, or where they’re coming from. But when you exercise restraint, you want to look at where is this particular desire coming from? Is it coming from something skillful or not? Is it heedful or not? And if you see that it’s not heedful, it’s leading to danger down the line. You’ve got to stop it. When you exercise restraint, then you’re opening things up in the mind. And at the same time, you’re freeing yourself from the confinement that comes from having done something really unskillful. This, too, is a healthy ego function—the ability to say no to your desires, especially the unskillful ones, being able to make the distinction. Some desires are actually conducive to true happiness. Those are the ones you want to encourage. And you try to direct your activities toward those desires, toward those forms of happiness. This is sublimation. The Buddhist teachings are simply a mark of discernment. As the Buddha once said, when you see that there’s a greater happiness that comes from giving up a lesser happiness, being willing to give up the lesser one for the sake of the greater one. It sounds like basic common sense. What’s the basic common sense of a healthy ego? So these are all ways in which you look after yourself in an intelligent way. Another way that Ajaan Swat really exemplified was the principle of respect. Ajaan Foong used to say that respect is a sign of intelligence. When you show respect to other people, they’re more willing to share what they’ve learned. They want to share what they know with you. All too often we think if we can catch somebody saying something dumb or something we don’t agree with, we want to show our disrespect to show our disdain for them. That’s really dumb. You can disagree with other people. You don’t have to show contempt. You don’t have to show disrespect. A couple years back I was working on a project on the Vinaya book. I was getting comments from other people, and I began to notice that when people were well-argued or well-based in their criticism, they could present it in a matter-of-fact way. But if their point wasn’t well-based, they tended to get really nasty, as if somehow through their nastiness they could force something on you. But it had the opposite effect. So respect is also a healthy ego function. For the monks, there’s even a rule that if someone comes and criticizes you, you don’t show disrespect to that person, even if what the person has to say is totally off the mark. You can state your reasons when you’re being reasonable, but you don’t have to show disrespect. As the Buddha said, regard the person who points out your faults as someone who’s showing you treasure. After all, we are here to improve ourselves. That’s probably the most healthy ego function you can think of. And all too often we can’t see our own drawbacks, our own shortcomings. And if someone takes the time to point them out to us, whether that person’s doing it out of good intentions or what, it doesn’t really matter. But you want to show respect to that person, especially if the intentions are good. Because if other people have the good intentions and they make the effort to point this out to you and you show them disrespect, they’re not going to point out any more treasure ever again. And as for people who may have a limited knowledge of the Dhamma, you never know at what point they actually may know something you don’t know. There are cases where crazy people have pointed out treasure to people who listen to them. So respect is also a healthy ego function, another way of looking out for yourself. So when Ajahn Suwat was saying, “You should look out for yourself,” he wasn’t saying to be selfish or to tromp all over other people. He was saying, “Look after your genuine interest in an intelligent way. And in doing so, you’re also going to be working for the good of other people.” Finding a happiness for yourself that’s not harmful—not harmful for yourself, not harmful for others—that’s the only kind of happiness that can last. [BIRDS CHIRPING]

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