A Happy Tradition

January 20, 2025

When the Buddha taught people how to put an end to suffering, he never asked them first, “Do you deserve to suffer?” You look at the people he taught, in many cases there were people whose karma was such that they were going to die soon. But he would teach them how to become awakened. Even his foremost disciple, Moggallana, he who had some pretty bad karma, in his past, that was going to follow him all the way into this lifetime. But again, he taught them how to become awakened, so they wouldn’t have to suffer from that karma. There’s a case of King Ajatashatru, who killed his father, King Bhimvisara. One night he comes to see the Buddha and asks him some questions. The questions are kind of dumb, but the Buddha takes compassion on him. He teaches him one of the longest discourses in the Canon, one of the most complete pictures of the path of practice. Ajatashatru’s karma was such that he wasn’t going to be able to understand the teaching, and he had a bad destination after this lifetime. But the Buddha still taught him in a lot of detail. That would benefit him. At the very least, he admitted the fact that he had killed his father. There’s remorse around that. As the Buddha saw, this teaching would save him a lot of suffering, in spite of all the suffering he was destined to have. He eventually would come out, get awakened in a much later life. So the question of deserving or not deserving to suffer comes up. Even when people have bad karma, the Buddha teaches them how not to suffer from the karma. Think about his analogy of the salt crystal, or the analogy of the stolen goat. If a poor person steals a goat, he goes to jail. A rich people steals a goat, may pay a little fine, nothing much, and he certainly doesn’t have an impression on him, because he has so much more money. It may not sound fair, but what he’s illustrating is the principle that if you make your mind wealthy, then whatever past bad karma you have, when it comes to hit you, it’s not going to be felt very much. Now you make your mind wealthy, you develop the Brahma-viharas, goodwill for all, compassion, compassion for all, empathetic joy for all, equanimity for all. You train your mind not to be overcome by pleasure, not to be overcome by pain. You develop your virtue, you develop your discernment. So there are skills that can teach you how not to suffer, no matter what your past karma is. For a lot of us, that takes a lot of getting used to, either the culture of our families, the culture of the religion we’re raised in. Don’t always have a low opinion of ourselves, but they make a virtue out of humility, out of low self-esteem. But they’re basically putting you in a position of powerlessness. You have to wonder why. You read about God, God and some of the monotheistic religions. He doesn’t sound very happy. He seems to be pretty miserable. He takes his misery out on other people. And some of us have had parents like that. We have, that’s the background we have, we have to learn to unlearn it. To learn that happiness is something that is available. The path is there. And it’s open to anyone who wants to follow it. No questions asked. And some people, because of their past karma, are going to have a more difficult time than others. But that doesn’t mean they’re hopeless. Simply that it’s going to take longer. Because you have to learn how to talk to yourself in a new way. This is why we develop a new sense of self to go along the path. If you’ve been trained to think that yourself is not competent, undeserving, you have to learn not only to talk to yourself, to convince yourself that yes, you can do this path, but you also have to master some of the skills to go with self-esteem. This is one of the reasons why the Buddha, as you practice generosity, and virtue, as a foundation for meditation, because you look at your actions, you can see that there are good things you’ve done, bad things that you’ve avoided, and there’s a sense of joy that goes with that, a sense of self-worth. So the question of deserving never comes up. Every time they use the word “deserving” in the Pali Canon, it’s for arahants. In fact, that’s what the word “arahant” means. And it’s related to an old custom from the Vedas, that when they would have a sacrifice and they would make a cake. I don’t know what went into the cake, but they were what they called the “sacrificial cake.” And then after the whole sacrifice was done, you wanted to find somebody who was worthy to partake of that cake. As the Buddha said, there’s no one more worthy than the arahants to receive gifts. Because when they receive a gift, they’re not placed into debt to anybody. And those who give gifts to arahants gain a lot of merit. But the ability to become someone like that is open to anybody, including you. Think about that. We read about the Noble Ones and they seem so far away. We have to remember, they came from a position very much like ours. They had their defilements, they had their greed, aversion, and delusion. Sometimes we read the biographies of the Ajahns and it sounds like they were born arahants. It’s not the case. They had a lot of defilements they had to fight against. And they came from a society in which they were very low on the ladder. You read some of the recordings, not the recordings, but the recorded teachings of Ajahn Mun, that some of his students wrote down. A lot of them have to do with reminding his students, okay, you’re a human being, you’ve got all 32 parts of your body, you’ve got all you need in order to gain Awakening. The fact that you are a human being means that you’re in the best position for gaining Awakening. So whatever your status in society, whatever ideas have been placed in your head about your value, either through your family or through your religion, past religion, you’ve got to shake them up. Remember Ajahn Mun’s teaching, the fact that you’re a human being means you’re ready, you’re in the ideal position to take on the practice, to follow it through. Because here these were mainly sons and daughters of peasants, in a very poor part of Thailand. Yet they were the ones who revived the practice. In a lot of cases in the Canada, people from very low positions in society, who thought very little of themselves. They too could practice, they too could gain Awakening. There’s one story of a leper who was taught by the Buddha. Soon after he was taught, he gained a Dhamma eye, and then he died. He was reborn as a Deva, and as a Deva he outshone all the other Devas in heaven. That’s a story that’s told in one Sutta. There’s a story told in another Sutta where the Devas are kind of snooty. Here’s this Deva they feel is undeserving. He outshines them. They’re pretty upset. Isn’t it amazing? Isn’t it astounding? Said in a sarcastic way. But as the case happens in the heavens, the more the other Devas get upset, the brighter the Deva who’s being looked down upon begins to shine. So no matter how much people have been looking down on you, or getting you to look down on yourself, the path is open. All you have to do is learn how not to fall back into your old patterns, thinking that humility is a good thing, or low self-opinion is a good thing. Humility in the sense of realizing you’ve got to find what you’ve got to work on, that’s good. But humility in the sense that you are incapable of doing this without outside help, that’s not good. Learn some skillful humility, and some skillful pride. We have traditions that tell us not to take any pride in the fact that we’ve done good, that somehow all the good we’ve done has to be attributed to somebody else working through us. Again that comes from a very unhappy tradition. The Buddhist tradition is a happy one, where everybody deserves to find true happiness. The Buddha was happy, he wanted to spread his happiness around. That’s the figure we bow down to. That we take refuge in. Because he wants us to be happy too.

<https://www.dhammatalks.org/Archive/y2025/250120_A_Happy_Tradition.mp3>