

Ajaan Suwat's Gift

April 5, 2017

The Thai phrase, “don’t be selfish,” literally means, “don’t look after yourself,” as opposed to looking after the common good. And Ajaan Suwat always questioned that phrase. After all, who else are you going to look after? You’ve got to look after yourself. In fact, you’re the person you have to look after more than anybody else.

And that’s not saying “be selfish.” It’s saying to look after yourself wisely, which means that you develop good qualities in mind, things like generosity and virtue, where you’re actually helping other people at the same time you’re helping yourself to develop your perfections.

But you do have to look after yourself, because nobody else can do it for you. As the Buddha said, when you get yourself as a refuge, you get a refuge that’s hard to find. If you don’t have that refuge, he said, who else could be your refuge?

Or as Ajaan Suwat put it another time, we each have one person in the world, i. e., the one person we’re responsible for. We’re responsible for our thoughts, our words, our deeds. We can’t be responsible for anybody else’s.

And yet all too often that’s what we’re concerned about. We want to stop somebody else from doing this or encourage them to do that, without turning around to look, well, are *we* doing what’s right?

This is why we train our minds: because our actions come from here. This is the area for which you are responsible. We develop qualities like mindfulness, ardency, alertness, so that we can see what we’re doing, so that we have the strength to admit a mistake and to do what we can not to repeat the mistake.

In other words, if something that we like doing is going to give bad long-term results, we have to figure out ways to prevent ourselves from doing that thing. If something we don’t like doing is nevertheless going to give good long-term results, we have to talk ourselves into doing that.

That’s a large part of ardency right there.

Another time Ajaan Suwat was asked, “You know, if only Buddhism had a God, it would give people a sense that there was somebody out there looking after them when they couldn’t quite make it on their own.”

Ajaan Suwat’s response was, “If there were a god who could ordain that if, when I took a mouthful of food, everybody in the world would get full, I would bow down to that god.”

But we're not connected that way, for all that they say that we're interconnected. The interconnections are actually the cause of suffering. We're interconnected to people who can do a lot of harm. We're interconnected to a world that can snuff us out very easily. All we need is an earthquake or a tsunami. It would be like the earth shrugging a little bit, and yet thousands of people could die.

It's not the case that this interconnected system is designed for the well-being of everybody. It eats everybody up, and everybody else is eating everybody else up, too.

So our best contribution to the connected system is to get out, and to be a good example to others.

It's not like we don't hope for other people to find the way out as well. We hope that they will, which is why we spread thoughts of goodwill every day—"May all beings be happy"—primarily so that we can keep watch over our own actions, realizing to whatever extent we *can* help others, we're happy to help.

But it has to start here. If you're going to tell people the right way to cook an egg, maybe it's good that you know how to cook the egg yourself.

So everything keeps coming back to your actions right here, right now, right here, right now.

When the Buddha was talking about the evolution and devolution of the world, in other words, how society develops and then how it declines, he kept saying that it all comes from the actions of beings. Our interconnected actions create the world at large.

But then the world of your experience is the result of your actions, and that's an area you don't share with anybody else.

You know that old question, "Does the way you see blue look the same way as other people see blue?" You don't know and there's no way you could ever know. The pain you feel—nobody else can feel that for you. They can see the signs that you have pain and they can sympathize, but they can't really feel your pain.

So when the Buddha says, "Focus on the issue of why you're suffering," he's telling you to focus on this area of your awareness, the area that you don't share with anybody else. At the same time, he's telling you to look in here as well for the cause of the suffering and for the solution, too.

In other words, it's not the case that we suffer because of things outside. There can be bad things outside—really, really bad—but we don't have to suffer from them. We suffer from them because of our own lack of skill, our own lack of understanding.

So the cause is inside. But the solution can also be inside—the qualities that you develop: virtue, concentration, discernment, based on a foundation of generosity and goodwill. It's right here that the real work has to be done. And when the work is done here, to the point where you have something solid inside, then you can share.

But up to that point, you've really got to work on, as Ajaan Suwat would say, "getting yourself." He would often comment, as we were getting the monastery started, that "We're not here to get anybody else. We're here to get ourselves."

And by that he meant we're not going to go out of our way to make things attractive or change the Dhamma or Vinaya in order to appeal to people. We use the Dhamma, we use the Vinaya to practice, and if anyone else wants to practice that way, we're happy to have them come. But there's no need to go running out and trying to get people to come in.

As he said, it's not that he couldn't think of ways of attracting people to the monastery, but every time he did, if it had nothing to do with the Dhamma or Vinaya, he felt ashamed. He would think of Ajaan Mun, and what Ajaan Mun might think.

But look what we've got now. We've got a monastery that's grown. He died fifteen years ago as of today, and the monastery is still going.

So even though he was looking after himself, we're benefitting from that. And that's how real helpfulness in the Dharma happens: by looking after your own thoughts, words, and deeds, and specifically, looking after your mind.

That's how the Dhamma is spread: by actual actions, not just by words.

There was a piece recently about how Buddhists ought to get off of their cushion and get out in the world and deal with the real causes of suffering which are out there in society. But that's totally missing the point. The real causes are in here.

The Buddha himself saw that you could change the world but that it would never be enough for people. As he said, "Even if it rained gold coins, it wouldn't be enough for our desires."

So the pursuit of an ideal or a perfect world out there is never-ending. And a lot of people, in creating their idea of a perfect world, can create a lot of messes.

The Canon, though, uses the word "perfection" to apply to qualities you develop in the mind. That's where perfection can be found.

The world is always going to be imperfect, but there is such a thing as perfect happiness. And it doesn't harm anybody. It doesn't put any burdens on anybody at all.

The Buddha gives us that test for what counts as Dhamma. One, in terms of the goal, to release the mind from fetters and to release it from passion, in other words, to induce dispassion. That's what true Dhamma aims at.

And then, two, there are the things you do to attain that goal. You have to learn how to be content. You have to learn how to shed all of your unhealthy conceit, unhealthy pride, any thoughts of getting back at other people. And you have to put forth effort.

Then, three, you also have to think about the effect your practice has on other people. In other words, you want to stay unentangled, unburdensome, and modest.

That's how you test the Dhamma. That's how you can decide what's genuine Dhamma and not.

The Dhamma makes you self-reliant, and it also makes you less of a burden on other people, with the purpose of getting out.

You might say the Buddha was an escapist, but he was an escapist—an escape artist—in the best sense of the word. In other words, he saw all the dangers that we create for ourselves and for other people. He said this is a system where eating is built-in to the system—so the best thing to do is to look for the escape.

And in finding it, you leave a trail behind for other people, so they might be inspired to escape, too.

So try to look after yourself in the best sense of the word, with wisdom and discernment, compassion, and all the other good qualities that are required to really look after yourself properly.

Ajaan Suwat gave us that as an example, and let's hope that we can be the same example to others.