

## *You Can't Eat the Buddha*

*August 7, 2008*

When you come across a situation where a friend is in pain or suffering, in mental distress, and you can help the friend overcome the pain, get over the distress, it gives rise to a very good feeling in the heart. The problem is that there are other times when we're with other people who are in pain and we can't reach them.

This is especially true around issues of birth, illness, and death. Sometimes you have a newborn child and the child is crying and crying and crying. No matter what you do, the child won't stop. It seems hard to believe that there can be so much pain and anguish in such a little tiny body. But there it is. And you can't reach the child. Or when someone is very ill and demented, you often can't reach that person. They're in their own private world, suffering their own private pains and torments. And especially at death, there comes a point where even before the actual moment of death, you realize that the person is beyond you. You can't reach in and help, no matter how much you might want to.

That's when you realize the extent to which pain is a very private matter, the extent to which anguish and suffering are private matters. We'd like to think that we can help one another through these things, but there's a lot that each person can do only for him or herself. Even the Buddha couldn't save other people; there were many people he couldn't even teach. He taught only those who could be taught—in other words, those who were willing to take responsibility for their own sufferings.

The pain of aging, illness, and death is one of the first topics the Buddha brings up in his first sermon, which we chanted just now. And he says that our suffering doesn't come from a lack of help from other people; it comes from our own lack of skill inside. Our knowledge isn't skillful; our desires aren't skillful.

And this is something that only we can take care of ourselves, because no one can teach another person to be skillful. You can teach people how they might try to train themselves to be skillful, but you can't take your skill and put it in somebody else's head or hands. They have to learn how to observe from within what kind of thinking is skillful, what kind of acting, what kind of speaking is skillful, and what kind is not. If they find themselves engaged in unskillful habits, they've got to learn how to overcome those habits and replace them with more skillful habits. We can't do this for one another. It's a personal, individual matter.

This is why the Buddha taught the way he did. He had developed the skill, and he explained to other people how they could develop the skill as well. He acted as an example, he showed the way, but that was as far as he could go. From that point on, it was up to the people he taught to develop the skill on their own.

Someone once asked the Buddha why some people, when he taught them, got the results and gained awakening, while other people didn't. Was there something wrong with his teaching? Was he playing favorites, giving the right teaching to some and not to others? The Buddha responded, "Have you ever

given directions to someone on how to follow the road to Rajagaha from Nalanda?"

The man said, "Yes."

"And did everybody get there?"

"Well, some people didn't follow my instructions," the man said. "They went astray."

"Was it your fault that they went astray?"

The man said, "No. I gave the same instructions to everybody."

And the Buddha said it was the same in his case. He gave the right instructions to everyone. Some people followed them, some people didn't, but it was beyond his power to force them to.

In this way, the Buddha keeps throwing the practice back at us. It's up to us to deal with our own lack of skill, to figure out where our thoughts are unskillful, where our attitudes are unskillful, where the way we look at things is unskillful, and then make a change. He wants us to make ourselves skillful. He wants us to make ourselves strong.

The most common image at the front of every Buddhist meditation hall is of the Buddha sitting there meditating. He's not nailed to a cross. He doesn't offer himself as food. Basically he's showing us: This is how you learn how to feed yourselves so that you eventually reach the point where you don't need to feed anymore. You develop internal strengths: conviction, persistence, mindfulness, concentration, and discernment. These are qualities we all have to some extent, but we've got to learn how to strengthen them, and they in turn make the mind stronger.

So our food here isn't bread and wine. Our food is concentration. The Buddha compared the different levels of concentration to different types of food. The first jhana, he said, is like grass and water. As you work up through the other jhanas, you get rice, beans, and finally honey, sugar, and ghee. These are our foods on the path. They're foods we have to learn how to fix within ourselves. We have to become our own cooks. The ingredients are all here. It's simply a matter of putting them together and learning how to nourish ourselves with them.

So instead of promising us an unending source of food from outside, he's teaching us how to feed from within, strengthening the mind ultimately to a point where it doesn't need to feed anymore. When you're in that position, you're not the only one who benefits. The people around you benefit as well. You're no longer forcing them to provide you with the food you want.

I remember once hearing a Dhamma teacher saying he didn't want to live in a world where there was no suffering, because he wouldn't be able to exercise his compassion. He apparently didn't stop to think of what a selfish attitude that is. You want the gratification that comes from exercising your compassion, so you need other people who suffer. What kind of compassion is that? Ideally you should want a world where no one is suffering—where, as we chant every night, they can "look after themselves with ease." And the only way to do that is to teach people how to fix their own food and learn to be more skillful inside. Some people will want to comply and some people won't. That's where you have to develop equanimity. You don't grasp onto them saying, "Please stay here and suffer so I can feel good about being compassionate." That's just another way of saying, "Even though it hurts you to stay, please be here for me when I need you."

The Buddha's final nibbana was the opposite of that, and it was an amazing act of kindness. He showed us that the best thing a person can do is to find true happiness within and then get out of the food chain. That's the example he left for us. In effect, he was showing that your pursuit of true happiness is not something to be ashamed of. It's not a lowly or a childish or a hedonistic pursuit. It's something noble—because the pursuit of true happiness is not a grasping kind of pursuit. It involves developing qualities of wisdom, purity, compassion: the wisdom to realize that you're going to have to depend on yourself for your happiness, and that the happiness that's worth working toward is a long-term happiness, not a short-term. From that realization grows compassion: the understanding that other people want happiness, too, and if your happiness depends on their suffering, they're not going to let your happiness be long-term. They're going to try to cut it short. So if you want a long-term happiness, you can't harm other people. And then purity comes from actually looking at your actions—your thoughts, your words, and your deeds—to see where your action cause harm either for yourself or for others, and then learning how to avoid that harm.

So the pursuit of happiness, if you conduct it properly, leads to noble qualities in the mind. That way you become a refuge, both for yourself and for others. You join the noble Sangha and become a refuge to other people in the sense that you become an example to them as well, so they can learn how to feed and strengthen themselves. This is how the Dhamma is passed on.

So even though our pursuit may be for something very private and individual—the way we pursue this happiness, this skill that enables us not to suffer even through illness or death—we take care of a part of ourselves that no one else can reach. If we don't take care of this, what do we do? We thrash around, placing burdens on other people and leaving them miserable because they see ultimately that they can't help our suffering either, deep down inside. But if you learn how to take care of that part inside you, you've taken care of your responsibility. And then whatever gifts you have for other people, you can offer them freely. They're not offered in exchange for, "You take care of me, and I'll take care of you." The attitude is, "Here, look, take this. I don't need it anymore."

That's a very different kind of relationship. It doesn't come with a *quid pro quo* of, "Okay, I'll be nice to you, and you'll be nice to me." It's simply: "Here, take." But the Buddha goes beyond even the "Here, take, this is my body offered to you." He says, "Come and look. This is how you can learn how to feed yourself from within, how you can learn how to grow strong so that ultimately you don't need to feed anymore."

It's probably the greatest gift there is.