

Raise Your Standards

November 7, 2014

“May all living beings be happy”: We chant that every morning, every night. Not that we expect that they all will be happy. After all, each person’s happiness, each being’s happiness depends on his or her actions, and we have no control over that. But we should have some control over our own actions. After all, as the other chant says “I’m the owner of my actions.” Where the Pali’s even a little bit more extensive, it says “I’m the owner of actions, all beings are owners of actions,” This can also be translated as “I’m the doer of actions. All beings are doers of actions.”

This is how we shape our lives, even right now as we’re meditating. We’re making a choice to stay with the breath, to make the breath comfortable. We’re doing that so that the mind can have a good place to settle down and see its actions more clearly—in particular, to see where we’re creating unnecessary stress and suffering so that we can put a stop to it.

One of the ways of doing that is to remember that we’re motivated by the desire not to harm anybody. We want a happiness that doesn’t place any burdens on anyone else.

When the Buddha listed the qualities that help you know whether a teaching is Dhamma or not, one of the qualities is unburdensomeness. If a particular practice makes you more burdensome, it’s not really Dhamma. So we’re looking for a happiness where we can sit here and create the happiness ourselves without having to depend too much on other people, and without having to impose any hardships on them or require that they do anything unskillful.

This is a lesson we have to keep remembering over and over again: that the worst harm that you can do to somebody else is to get them to act in an unskillful way, to get them to break the precepts. You harm yourself by breaking the precepts. In other words, if you kill someone else, you’re harming yourself, because by killing them you’re not necessarily sending them to a bad destination, but you’re creating a bad destination for yourself. The same with stealing, illicit sex, lying, taking intoxicants: Each of us is the owner and doer of actions. And so you don’t want to cause people to do things that will make them suffer, and at the same time you don’t want to do anything that is going to make yourself suffer. It’s a pretty radical view of our relationships.

We like to think that we can make other people happy by being nice to them, and there *is* a certain pleasure they can get when we’re nice to them, but that doesn’t necessarily make them happy. You’ve probably seen many cases where

you've tried your best to be nice to somebody and they're not happy. They've got their own karma.

This is especially clear when people are suffering from a mental illness, when they're getting old and sick, or when a baby is newly born. You can't talk to the baby and make things okay. You realize that what we experience is our own actions. We do have an impact on other people, but the major impact is through what we get them to do.

So we want to look for happiness in a way that inspires other people to look for happiness in a way that's skillful too. If everybody could meditate, if everybody could develop good qualities of mind and find a sense of well-being inside, then there would be a possibility that all living beings would be happy. That's the only way it can happen.

So we have to start right here because it's through our own actions that we inspire others. You can talk to people. Look at all those Dhamma talks out on other places on the Web: How many people actually practicing in line with them? Who knows? Just the talking doesn't inspire. It's the example you set. That's what inspires other people to look for happiness in the same way.

So we're sitting here with our eyes closed, breathing comfortably.

Ajaan Lee tells a story of a king who'd been in a battle. After the battle was over, the troops were returning home and they came across a group of monks sitting in a forest, all very quiet. In fact, the king didn't realize there were monks there when he first went in. There were no sounds. They were living there, several hundred of them, along with the Buddha. The king was inspired by the sight.

So he sent the troops home and he stayed on with the monks. I don't think he became a monk himself, but he practiced. In particular, he developed concentration based on goodwill and all the brahmaviharas. After eight or nine years of that, he returned home. And it was because of his example that the country in which he lived became a peaceful country, both through his instructions and exhortations, and through his personal example.

The point being that the way we look for happiness is teaching a lesson to the people around us.

Our society, of course, wants us to look for happiness in things or experiences that they can sell to us—"The Ford experience" or whatever—and look what it's doing to the world. It's placing a huge burden on other people, other beings. Whereas the happiness that comes from looking within leaves a really light footprint. So whether people follow our example or not, we want to make sure that we look for happiness in a skillful way. Anyone else who's inspired is welcome to join in the practice.

Ajaan Suwat had a nice comment when we were starting the monastery. He said “We’re not here to get anybody else. We’re here to get ourselves. If other people are inspired to look after themselves in the same way, they’re welcome to join us.” That makes life here very light. We don’t have to be worried about who’s going to like us, who’s not going to like us, or how much support we can attract. We each focus within. Because this is the source where happiness comes from: a mind that’s very clear, very still, so it can be very discerning, seeing clearly where the actions are.

These movements of attention, now focusing here, now focusing there: Ask yourself, what caused you to change focus? When you frame things to yourself, what are the terms you use to frame them? You encounter this immediately when you’re working with the breath. You start out with the assumption that the breath is the air coming in through the nose, but as you get more sensitive to what it’s like to breathe, you begin to realize there’s a whole pattern of subtle energies going through the body, with many layers of subtlety: the coarse in-and-out breath, the subtle in-and-out breath that runs through the nerves and the blood vessels, and the still breath that lies deep within.

We look for these different levels of stillness because when the mind has a good solid basis in stillness, it can see its own actions a lot more clearly. That way, when there’s a rise or fall in the level of internal stress, you can immediately connect it with the action that caused it. What did you do? What was the perception, the change in perception, change in mental fabrication? What caused the stress to go up? Letting go of what caused it to go down? Things you didn’t even realize you were doing suddenly become clear.

That’s how you can see where you’re causing unnecessary stress. A lot of it we simply assume to be a natural or a necessary part of the background. But as things settle down, these background things begin to stand out. And you see them as choices. They’re actions. When you see them as actions, then you can assess them. And you find that the less stress you’re imposing on yourself, the less you’re going to be imposing on other people.

That old dichotomy—are you going to go for your own awakening or are you going to work for other people’s awakening—is a false one. In going for your awakening, you’re setting a good example and that’s all you can do for other people, because they have to follow the path themselves. There’s nobody out there you can save, but there are people you might be able to inspire. But you first want to make your primary focus getting your own mind in order. Because at the very least, if your mind is in order, you’re not placing a burden on other people, because you’re less weighed down. When you’re less weighed down, if there’s

something you can do to help, you do. This is why when the Buddha said his own internal work was done, that was it, that was all the real work he had to do. Everything else was optional. This is the task, right here: What are you doing right now?

I was reading a letter yesterday from someone who was down on Buddhism because it was a form of self-improvement. But it's not about self-improvement, it's about action-improvement. Can you learn to be more skillful? Can you learn to raise your standards for what it means to be skillful? Do you want to slough along with your idea of what's good enough or would you rather take yourself to task and say, "Look, it can be better"?

The Buddha said that the secret to his awakening was discontentment with skillful qualities. It's interesting because we ordinarily think about Buddhism as being all about contentment, Now, there *are* areas where you're supposed to be content: content with food, clothing, shelter as you have it. But in terms of the good qualities of the mind, the Buddha says, "Never rest content, because otherwise you get complacent." Complacency is the root of all things that are unskillful.

So learn to inspire yourself, to hold yourself to higher standards. That's your best gift to yourself, as it is your best gift to everyone around you.