

Nobody's Servant

January 26, 2017

That chant just now, “The world is swept away. There’s no one in charge”: There’s one way you can listen to it that’s very depressing, but another way you can listen to it that’s liberating. It’s depressing if you think you’re trying to find happiness in the world, in worldly things. But it’s liberating when you realize that you have the right to search for happiness that really satisfies you. There’s nobody who can tell you that you can’t.

As Ajaan Fuang often liked to say, “We’re nobody’s servant. Nobody hired us to be born, nobody hired us to practice. We’re here of our own volition. And we can do with our lives what we want.” Now, that may sound selfish but it’s not. If you think about it with some wisdom and discernment, you realize you’ve got the choice to do something really good with your life in the course of your search for happiness.

The Buddha offers refuge: a happiness outside of the world. You can choose to go there, you can choose to do the practice that leads to refuge. And the refuge isn’t only at the very end of the path. The path itself provides refuge. When we take refuge in the Buddha, the Dhamma, and the Sangha, as a first step we’re taking refuge in the example they set. That’s one of the reasons why we chant those chants about the Buddha, the Dhamma, and the Sangha every night, to remind ourselves of that example. For instance, the example of the Buddha: someone who through his own efforts was able to find true peace, true happiness by watching his efforts and learning from them. He did learn some things from his other teachers, but there came a point where he had to learn for himself. And this is how you learn for yourself: You look at your actions. That’s the whole point of these refuges. We look at the Buddha’s example and we try to follow it in our lives; the example of the Dhamma, we follow that in our lives; the example of the Sangha, the Noble Sangha, we follow that in our lives. And in so doing, we turn ourselves into a refuge.

Think about the good qualities of the Buddha: wisdom, purity, compassion. They were all qualities that he developed because he wasn’t anybody’s servant. He decided to look for a true happiness, a happiness that was totally satisfactory. And whatever obligations the world was trying to place on him, he didn’t fall in line with them—which meant, of course, that he had to leave home, go into the wilderness, and find his way. But it was for the sake of true happiness, not just ordinary, everyday happiness. And in the course of his search, he developed those three admirable qualities.

The first was wisdom. As you know, the question for the beginning of wisdom or discernment starts with, “What, when I do it, will lead to my long-term welfare and happiness?” That question is wise because, one, you realize that happiness is going to have to depend on your actions, and two, you want long-term. That goes together with another question, “What,

when I do it, will lead to my long-term harm and suffering?” Your actions do make the difference, so you want to be careful. In other words, the wisdom there also lies in the principle of heedfulness: that you have to choose your actions well.

But the underlying motivation is happiness. The search for happiness is nothing to be ashamed of. There are some schools of thought that say you’ve got to put everybody else’s happiness ahead of yours. But the Buddha said No, when you do that, how do you know what happiness is? How can you give guidance to other people in happiness? If you can find it for yourself, then you can give guidance. So this is not a selfish thing.

Then, following that, is the principle of compassion: realizing that your happiness, if it’s going to be long-term, can’t depend on the suffering of others.

This issue comes up in that scene between King Pasenadi and Queen Mallika. They’re alone in the palace one evening, and in a tender moment the king turns to the queen and asks, “Is there anyone you love more than yourself?” And you know what he’s thinking. He wants her to stay, “Yes, your majesty. I love you more than myself.” But the queen is no fool, and of course this isn’t a Hollywood movie, it’s the Pali Canon. So she says, “No, there’s nobody I love more than myself. And how about you, is there anybody you love more than yourself?” And the king, put on the spot, has to admit, “Well, no.” Here he is a king and he can’t even get someone he’s raised to the position of queen to love him more than herself. It’s impossible.

So he leaves the palace, goes to see the Buddha, and reports the conversation. And the Buddha says, “You know, she’s right. You could search the whole world and find nobody you loved more than yourself. At the same time, everybody else loves themselves just as fiercely.” So instead of drawing the conclusion that it’s a dog-eat-dog world out there, the Buddha says, “You should always be careful never to harm anyone and never to get anybody to harm anyone else.” In other words, you should make sure your happiness doesn’t depend on harming anybody. If it harms others, it’s not going to last. So here again, the principle of compassion comes from the search for happiness.

And then finally purity. This comes in the Buddha’s teachings to Rahula, when he has Rahula look at his actions. If Rahula sees that he’s planning to do something that’s going to cause harm, he should stop. If he’s doing something that’s causing harm, he should stop. If he’s done something and only afterwards realized that it caused harm, then he should talk it over with someone and determine that he’s not going to repeat that mistake. He should have a sense of shame around that mistake—in other words, be ashamed of repeating it. That’s a healthy kind of shame, the shame that goes with a sense of honor, the honor that comes from wanting to do what’s right. After all, you’ve made up your mind you want long-term happiness. Well, look at what you’re actually doing to make sure that you’re actually doing it well, doing it right, acting in line with that principle.

So there they are: discernment, purity, compassion. All admirable qualities, and they all come from looking for happiness in a wise way, looking for happiness that’s going to be secure.

And the Buddha says it is possible. One of the worst misunderstandings about Buddhism is that it's pessimistic. People say, "Ah, those four noble truths are all about suffering." They even interpret the truths as saying, "Life is suffering." They interpret the three perceptions as saying, "Well, there really is no self, it's just events happening, so you might as well give up, there's nothing you can do to find a lasting happiness. Just content yourself with the little pleasures of the present moment."

That's all a misperception. There are four noble truths, there are not just one. In other words, life isn't just suffering. It also contains the possibility for the cessation of suffering, and there's the path to the cessation of suffering. And the cessation of suffering is something unfabricated. Once you've found it, it's not going to change on you. Even the three perceptions—the perceptions of inconstancy, stress, not-self— don't apply to what's unfabricated. The unfabricated lies beyond self and not-self. We use those perceptions to test anything that's possibly a source of happiness, to check and see, "Is this the real thing?" If it's inconstant, No. Stressful? No. If you see that anything is inconstant and stressful, is it worth calling yourself? Is it worth calling yours? No. Then there must be something better.

So actually the Buddha's teachings are extremely positive. The possibility of a true happiness, an ultimate happiness, a happiness that's not touched by anything, is there. And if we want it, we can do what's needed to get there. There's nobody stopping us. People might *try* to stop us but they have no right to. We're free to follow this path. The only real slavery out there is our slavery to our cravings. That's what you've got to watch out for. Those are the things that pull you back.

So remember, as you practice, you're nobody's servant. You're doing this voluntarily. And when you come to the end of the practice, you're not anything's servant, you're not the servant of craving at all anymore—the craving that pretends to be your friend and is actually ordering you around.

The image they use in Thailand is of a water buffalo. When you have a water buffalo, you put a ring in its nose and then you tie a rope to the ring. When you want to pull the buffalo wherever you want it to go, you pull the rope and the buffalo's got to go because its nose hurts. That's another image that Ajaan Fuang liked to use: Craving has a ring in our nose and it's pulling on it. You've got to learn how to cut the rope and take off the ring.

Then that principle of being nobody's servant will apply all around, not only outside but also inside, where it really matters.