

Anti-slacker Dhamma

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There's a book that came out recently that promotes what might be called Slacker Buddhism, the idea being that life is suffering, everything is impermanent, therefore there's no point in trying. We suffer because we try to be happy, so if we just stopped trying then everything would be fine.

You can understand this kind of teaching as a corruption of the Dhamma that happens when people try to sell the Dhamma. Salespeople like to sell things that are popular, and there are plenty of slackers out there that would like to hear that the Buddha was on their side. But the problem is that this line of thinking didn't start just with the people who are selling books on Buddhism. I was reading a monk who was trained in one of the branches of the Forest Tradition the other day saying that, "You have to realize that suffering is no big problem. Once you realize it's no big problem, then you're okay with it."

And when you compare this with what the Buddha had to say, and what his quest was, and what kind of person he was, you realize that he had no time for slackers. When he started out, even though he had no guarantee that he was going to be able to find the Deathless, was willing to give up everything to see if there was such a thing, and whether it could be found through his efforts. He kept running into disappointments. He tried to find teachers who could teach the way, he was disappointed in the teachers. He practiced austerities, the austerities were a disappointment. But he never gave up. He kept asking himself, "Maybe there's another way."

And as he said, the secret to his awakening consisted of two qualities. One was discontent with skillful qualities. In other words, he didn't rest content with the state of his mind until it actually attained the Deathless. With anything else that was short of that, he would look for something more. He never told himself, "Well, maybe this is as good as it gets. I might as well give up at this point." That was not his line of thinking at all. His attitude was: "If what I have is not the Deathless, I want something better."

His second quality was relentless effort. He was willing, as he said, to let his body dry up until it was just bones and skin, everything all desiccated, if that was going to be required to find awakening. He was what I'd call the Anti-slacker.

So how did Slacker Buddhism get started? It can be traced back to a tendency that you find in the Commentary, where they say, "What is the Buddha's categorical teaching, the teaching that's true across the board?" And, in response, they identify the three characteristics.

There are several reasons for not accepting this response. The first is that the Buddha never taught them as characteristics. He taught them as perceptions. And second, he never stated

that they were categorical. The only categorical teachings he had were, one, skillful qualities should be developed and unskillful ones should be abandoned. And two, the four noble truths, which carried duties as well. You try to comprehend suffering and stress, abandon their cause, realize their cessation, and develop the path to that cessation. These are all truths with shoulds. They're all truths with duties. And it's within those duties that the Buddha taught the three perceptions, because comprehending stress means that you have to develop dispassion for it, and those three perceptions are for inducing dispassion.

It sounds strange that we'd have passion for stress and suffering, but we do. We cling to these things. Where there's clinging, there's going to be stress and suffering. And the quality of passion is there in the clinging. So if you really want to understand suffering and stress, you have to see that wherever you're suffering, you're holding onto something, you're feeding off something. So you need to develop dispassion for it if you're going to get past it.

As for the cause of suffering, or the origination of suffering, you have to develop dispassion for that as well. And the third noble truth is, in and of itself, dispassion toward craving. So you're trying to apply the three perceptions of inconstancy, stress, and not-self as a way of developing dispassion for these things.

With the path, however, the dynamic is a little different. You first need to have a passion for the path in order for it to develop. Which means you don't apply the three perceptions to everything right off the bat. You hold back on applying them to your practice of virtue, concentration, and discernment. What that means is that you don't apply the three perceptions to the path just yet. You apply them to everything else that would pull you away from the path.

In terms of virtue, if you find that your attachment to your relatives or your wealth or your health would prevent you from observing the precepts, you've *got* to let go of that attachment. So you apply the three perceptions to your wealth or your relatives or your health. In terms of concentration, anything that comes up in the mind that's going to pull you away from your object is fair game for applying the three perceptions. As for discernment itself, every way of thinking that's not in line with discernment, you've got to develop dispassion for that. Only then, when all these factors of the path have done their work, do you turn the three perceptions on them as well. And then you're free.

So what this means is that the Buddha didn't start with the three characteristics. In fact, when he talks about his awakening experience, he never mentions them. When talking about the realizations that led to his finding the Deathless, he always talks about the four noble truths or dependent co-arising, which is an extension of the four noble truths. Or This/that conditionality, which covers the basic causal principles underlying the four noble truths and dependent co-arising.

So the four noble truths, as he said, is the framework. The image in the Canon is that it's like the elephant's footprint that contains the footprints of all the other animals. All the other teachings are contained in the four noble truths. And so the three perceptions find their duties and their function within the context of the duties of the four noble truths. Not the other way around.

Once you've got that point clear, then you realize suffering *is* the big problem. This is why the Buddha focused all of his teaching on solving that problem. If it were no big deal, that's what the first noble truth would be: Suffering is no big deal. But that's not the truth. Suffering is aging, illness, and death; it's sorrow, lamentation and despair. All of these things are a big deal. And what use would there be in a teaching that said suffering is not a problem? For people who are not suffering that much, it might be okay. But there are a lot of people in the world who are suffering really horribly, and for them, that teaching would be totally useless. In fact, it would be worse than useless. It would be harmful.

So here we are in a relatively comfortable place, with relative comfort in our practice, so we can't let ourselves be slackers. We have to realize there's work to be done, because things are not always going to be this easy. The world could change. Your body's going to change for sure. And you have to take a lesson from the Buddha: relentless effort, discontent with skillful qualities.

What this means is that as the practice goes along, you'll find it has ups and downs. There are times when it's encouraging, and your enthusiasm seems to be getting lots of results. There are times when it's not getting results so much anymore and you begin to fall away. In cases like that, you've got to find the reserves within yourself to pick yourself up, dust yourself off, and keep going again.

That's how the Buddha himself gained awakening. As he said, awakening is a matter of realizing the as-yet-unrealized, attaining the as-yet-unattained. In other words, it's something you've never experienced before and it's going to require doing things you've never done before. A large part of that is learning how to develop a sustaining enthusiasm or a sustaining conviction, so that when things go really well you don't get complacent, and when things get discouraging you don't let yourself get discouraged.

In particular, watch out for people who say, "There's nothing to attain," or "Just learn how to be accepting of everything, be okay with everything." Those ideas have waylaid a *lot* of people on the path. You've got to realize that your suffering is a genuine problem and you've got to take it seriously. Not in the sense of being grim, but in the sense of being heedful of its importance—so that when things do go well in the mind you don't get careless about your concentration. You're sitting here and concentration's going really well, then when the time comes to end you don't just toss it off for the evening, say, "I'll pick it up tomorrow morning at

5:30.” You try to carry it with you as much as you can back to the place where you’re resting. You meditate some more, see if you can recapture that if you lose it, and do your best to maintain it.

Ajaan Lee’s image is of having a really good piece of food and doing everything you can to make sure no flies land on it and nothing else spoils it.

The Buddha’s image is of the man with a bowl on his head, filled to the brim with oil, walking between a crowd on the one side and a beauty queen on the other. Behind him, though, is a man with his sword raised, ready to cut off his head if he spills a drop of oil. You have to be that meticulous and that attentive to your concentration, because it’s your path out of suffering.

And even in the relative comfort we have here, when you actually gain a taste of the Deathless, you realize that ordinary sensory experience is extremely painful compared to what the Deathless is. So even the pleasures we have here have pain built into them. We use those three perceptions to remind ourselves of that, so that we don’t get complacent, say, “Well, what I’ve got is good enough as it is.” You look around. It’s unstable, whatever wellbeing you have that’s short of the Deathless. And because it’s unstable, it’s going to be a cause for suffering. So why identify with it? There must be something better. That’s the discontent with skillful qualities.

So our teacher is the Anti-slacker or what you may call an Unslacker. If we want to do well on the path he laid out, we have to be anti-slackers and unslackers as well.

Because our suffering is our problem. No matter how much someone else may tell us it’s no big deal, we know for ourselves that it is a problem. And no one else can cure it for us. So take your suffering seriously. Take the potential to *not* suffer seriously as well. And don’t let the slackers pull you astray.