

Playing by the Buddha's Rules

June 25, 2018

Part of being a human being, living in human society, is that you get domesticated. You learn how to live in your family, you learn how to live with the people around you in the neighborhood. There are certain rules, some of which are spoken, some of which are unspoken, that you learn how to follow. Some of those rules may be wise and some of them can be very unwise. And a lot of us come to meditation from having suffered from the unwise rules.

When we come here, we find that the rules are different. Out in society, the trade-off is, say, you play by the rules and you get protection from other people, they look after you in different ways. But here the basic rule is you have to learn how to look after yourself.

At the end of the Buddha's life, he would repeat a teaching many times telling people they had to be an island to themselves, and they could do that by establishing mindfulness.

Mindfulness of what? We're remembering to stay with the body, say, in and of itself, ardent, alert and mindful, putting aside greed and distress with reference to the world—the whole shebang, the whole formula. Mindfulness is not just being aware of the present moment. Mindfulness is remembering. And basically what you're remembering is the Buddha's rules.

The first rule is that skillful qualities—i.e. qualities of the mind that don't harm anybody—should be developed. Qualities that are unskillful should be abandoned.

This means not harming yourself or other people. This is very different from the rules of society, some of which ask you to harm yourself, or others, as part of a trade-off. In fact, there are many cases where the more they ask you to do harm, the more they pay you and protect you. But the Buddha says it's possible to find a happiness where there's no harm to anybody, and in that way you protect yourself.

The second set of rules are the duties of the four noble truths: to comprehend suffering, abandon its cause, realize cessation of suffering, and develop the path to that cessation. These rules and duties are very different from the rules and duties that the world places on you.

So as you engage with the world, engage with your family, with people around you, especially outside of the monastery, you have to remember that you're playing by different rules from theirs, and they may not like it. They've got a particular game in mind that they're playing. They expect you to know those rules and play by them. There's going to be some friction when you don't. But then the question is, the people you depend on around you: How far can you depend on them?

I think I've mentioned that when I was in Thailand there were times when I'd stay at a Bangkok monastery where they had cremations. One of the customs in Thailand is that when somebody dies, a book is often printed to be distributed at the funeral, either a Dhamma book

or a book about some topic that the dead person liked when he or she was alive. The hut where I stayed had a whole pile of these. Almost always, there'd be a little biography at the beginning of each book. I found the biographies fascinating, but they always came to the part where they would say that as this person got older, traces of a disease would begin to show themselves. At first the doctors were able to help, but then there came the point where the doctors couldn't help anymore.

The question, of course, is that when you get to the point where the doctors can't help anymore, what are you going to do? What are you going to depend on? It's not just the doctors who can't help. Nobody around you can help. The people who love you, the people who care for you, the people you've been associated with: There are pains inside that they can't help you with. There's suffering inside that they can't help you with.

So the Buddha's offering you tools to deal with that suffering, to free yourself from it, but they require that you play by different rules. When you play by the Buddha's rules, you're making an island for yourself, a place of protection. You're above the flood. But there's going to be resistance, so you have to be really confident in what you're doing. And remember, we're doing this so that we can find true happiness that's not going to harm anybody.

The people who complain about the fact that you're not playing along with their games are not being harmed by what you're doing, it's just that they have certain expectations and you're saying No, for your own protection—and, ultimately, for their good, too.

So create an island for yourself. Stay with the breath. The whole point of using mindfulness as your protection is that you remember the duties that the Buddha laid out. If anything unskillful comes up in the mind, you're going to try to abandon it. If anything skillful comes up, try to develop and maintain it. And he gives you techniques and recommendations for how to do these things, and you need mindfulness to remember them.

It's all too easy when you find yourself in a different group that you remember *their* rules and you start forgetting the rules the Buddha laid down. But if you're going to find happiness, his way is how it's done. And his rules are not arbitrary. They're the result of his observation as to what works and what doesn't. There are a lot of things out there that don't work.

So you take the breath as your refuge, as a way of reminding yourself to be alert here in the present moment. Because this is where skillful and unskillful qualities arise: right in the mind, right next to the breath. As for influences coming in from outside, think of the breath as your shield. Get good at filling the body with your good breath and filling the body with your awareness. If you occupy your space in this way, nobody else can invade.

One of the rules of society is that in order to understand people you have to open yourself to their energy. This is one of the unspoken rules. Some people are extremely good at sensing the energy of other people, but then they find themselves invaded. And there are people who take advantage of the ones who like to open themselves to other people's energy as a way of showing sympathy. But even when you're not playing those games, you can see perfectly well

what's going on in the other person, even as you don't let their energy into you. In fact, you can see things a lot more clearly, because you're right there in the present moment. The other person has a mind ping-ponging all over the place, while you're the one occupying the present. That it puts you in a position of power. But again, you're not going to abuse that power. You're trying to use your inner power to figure out what's the most skillful thing to say, the most skillful thing to do, the most skillful thing to think right now.

Then you learn to associate the Buddha's teachings with your breath. As long as you stay anchored with the breath, that's your conduit to what you've learned about how to comprehend suffering and how to abandon its cause. It's as if your mind has lots of file drawers. As you stay with the breath, you're in the open spot where you can access them all. If you're running around to the past and future, you can't access all the drawers. And when you're still and with the breath, not only do you remember things more easily, but you're also in a better position to come up with new solutions if none of the old solutions are working.

This is how you create an island for yourself. Human society is like a flood. No matter what pleasures it promises us, there comes a point where it can't withstand aging, illness, and death, try as people might. You read about those people up in Silicon Valley who've decided they don't want to die, as if that were something new. What's new is that they feel they have the *right* not to die. But they're going to die anyway, and they're not going to be prepared.

Here we're preparing ourselves. There will be death, there will be aging and illness. The way to solve those problems is not to not get ill or not die. You solve them by looking at the mind: Why does the mind create suffering around these things? Through its clinging. Where is the clinging?

You often hear it said that the Buddha says that life is suffering, which is not a very useful message. He actually says that clinging is suffering. And that's useful, something you can do something about. And he gives you the tools. It's important simply that you don't forget them. All too often in the heat of the moment you switch back to the old rules, the old ways of interacting. This is what mindfulness is for, is to say, "No. We've got new rules, remember? Rules that make sense, rules that, if you stick by them, will actually lead you to a true happiness, take you to something that doesn't age, doesn't grow ill, doesn't die."

These are rules for your own good, your own true well-being. Which is why they should take priority over the rules of society at large. Because their rules are for what? To keep society going. But that's not necessarily for the good of the individuals. Here are some rules that *are* good for you as an individual, so that you can find your own true goodness, your own true happiness, in a way that doesn't harm anybody, doesn't inflict anything on anyone. People may not like it, may not be happy, but you're not harming them.

That idea that's floating around a lot right now, that if you say things to people they don't like or feel offended by, you're harming them: That's a very dangerous idea. That's another one

of the ways of trying to domesticate people. “You’ve got to do things *my* way,” they say, without really thinking what the long-term consequences of “my way” might be.

Your response is, “I’m trying things the Buddha’s way.” Because the Buddha’s way has been tested, it’s been found to work. And as long as the Buddha’s way is followed, then nobody gets harmed, which is why it’s for everyone’s benefit.

So when you’re dealing with the world, it is kind of like a culture clash. And in some cases, you’re acting as if you’re undomesticated. But nobody gets harmed that way. So learn to put up with a little bit of friction, and put a Thai smile on your face, with moderation.

I think I’ve told you about the time when my older brother was going to give me some advice on how to run a monastery. And of course, he has no experience running monasteries, so I smiled. He said, “Stop giving me that Thai smile!”

So use the Thai smile in moderation, and have lots of compassion for everybody. Because a lot of people are following rules they learned from other people, and they’re not really benefiting from them, but that’s all they know. Sometimes you can help and sometimes you can’t. The clash or the area where the different sets of rules don’t fit which each other is going to be normal. It’s to be expected. But as the Buddha said, when you’re protecting yourself through mindfulness, you’re also protecting others.

Remember the image of the acrobats: As long as you maintain your balance, you make it easier for other people to maintain theirs. That’s what you’re doing when you’re developing skillful qualities: maintaining your balance.

And what are the skillful qualities the Buddha recommends? Equanimity, patience, goodwill: all good things. It’s just that his explanation of them doesn’t quite fit with other people’s ideas of what goodwill or patience may be. But who are you going to trust? We’ve trusted society at large for who-knows-how-many lifetimes. It’s time to give the Buddha a try.