

Loving Yourself Wisely

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One of my favorite stories in the Pali Canon is when King Pasenadi and his Queen Mallika are alone in the bedroom and at one point he turns to her and asks, “Is there anyone in the world you love more than yourself?” And, of course, being a king, he’s expecting her to say, “Yes, your majesty, I love you more than myself.” Now, if this were a Hollywood movie, that’s probably what she would have said. But this is the Pali Canon, and she says, “No. And how about you? Is there anybody you love more than yourself?” And the king has to admit that there’s nobody he loves more than himself. So that’s the end of that scene.

The king leaves the palace, goes to see the Buddha, and reports the conversation. And the Buddha affirms what Queen Mallika said. You could search the entire world and there’s nobody you can find that you love more than yourself. Now, you could take that realization in lots of different directions, but the Buddha takes it in a really wise one, which is that as a result of this realization you should never harm anybody or cause them to do harm. In other words, you should love yourself intelligently.

Ajaan Suwat would make this point many times. There’s a phrase in Thailand, “looking after yourself,” which is the Thai way of saying “being selfish.” But he said that it doesn’t have to mean being selfish. It can also mean that you look after yourself intelligently; you behave in a way in which you make yourself deserving of your self-esteem.

And that’s what the practice in generosity, the practice in virtue, and the practice in developing the mind are all about: looking for happiness in ways that you can take pride in.

I received a strange letter from a young guy the other day saying that he saw the big flaw in this approach to the practice, which is that you can develop pride. Well, there’s healthy pride and unhealthy pride. Healthy pride comes from seeing that your actions are blameless. It doesn’t have to come from comparing yourself to someone else. The comparing pride is the kind of pride that the Buddha said was unhealthy. If you start comparing yourself to other people, the goodness of your actions and the goodness of your meditation disappear. But if you look at yourself and see that you’re getting better in the practice, that’s a healthy pride, healthy self-esteem.

That’s the kind of pride the Buddha encourages. When he was teaching Rahula he said that if you look at your actions and see that you didn’t harm yourself or harm anybody else, take joy in that fact and then continue training. Because a lack of self-esteem doesn’t come from the fact of not loving oneself,

it comes from loving yourself but then having a sense that you're not deserving of that love. And so you have to act in a way to make yourself deserving of it. You're not automatically deserving.

There's a misunderstanding that you often hear when people attribute to the Buddha the idea that you could search the world and find no one who's more deserving of love than yourself—which is not what he said. You're not automatically deserving of your love. You have to *act* in a way that's deserving of self-esteem.

This is why the Buddha places generosity right at the beginning of the path. You find happiness in helping others either with material goods or with your time, your energy, your knowledge, or your forgiveness. When you're able to be generous in these ways, a sense of self-esteem comes from that, that you're not just grubbing around and grabbing what you can. There's a sense of inner wealth that comes with generosity, too, that you have more than enough. You're not constantly scrounging around and worried about things running out. You realize that you have more than enough energy to give. And the funny thing is, as you give that energy, you find that more energy comes.

The same with the precepts: When you follow the precepts, you find that you can look at your behavior and see nothing to criticize about it. And there's a sense of well-being, a sense of self-esteem that comes from that. You look at the world around you and you see all kinds of behavior, sometimes pretty awful, and you realize you don't have to give in to those standards. You have your own higher standards. And although there may be a little bit of comparing yourself with others in that thought, what it comes down to is that you realize that your goodness doesn't have to depend on other people's goodness.

There was a debate recently over the question of whether there are times when it's justified to go out and kill people if they're really evil. Well, that's making your goodness depend on *their* goodness or badness. It's not an independent value; it's not an independent principle. But as the Buddha pointed out, your goodness has to be generated from within. It comes from your wisdom, seeing that regardless of how bad other people are, you're not going to behave in that way. And that gives rise to a sense of self-esteem.

So the self-esteem that they're trying to teach our kids—simply by the fact of existing, you should have self-esteem—doesn't really work. Self-esteem comes from the fact that you love yourself and you want to behave in a way that you feel you're worthy of that love.

And this is why we have that reflection that we're the owners of our actions, because our actions are basically what make us. Our actions make us, just as we make our actions.

Think of the reflection the Buddha has you make every evening: “Days and nights fly past, fly past, what am I becoming?” What you’re becoming, of course, comes from your actions, from the habits you develop. So what kind of person are you creating through your actions, through your thoughts, through your words, through your deeds? You want it to be a good person, someone who really is deserving of your love. And that requires that you have an independent source of goodness inside—“goodness,” here, in the sense of the worth of your actions.

So this is one of the reasons why we train the mind in meditation. It’s not just for relaxation; it’s for gathering strength. On the one hand, as the mind gets more still, you see things in the mind a lot more clearly, you can understand when there’s an unskillful impulse and you can see what it’s coming from. When there’s a skillful impulse, you can see that it’s there as well.

The second gift that comes from the meditation is the strength to let go of the unskillful impulses and to develop the skillful ones. And to remember these things: what’s skillful and what’s not, and what you should do with these things as they arise. That’s what mindfulness is all about—understanding mindfulness as a quality of memory, your ability to hold things in mind.

Because you’re constantly shaping your experience. This is the kamma that the Buddha had you focus on most intently: what you’re doing right now. As for your past kamma, that’s going to come willy-nilly. When it meets up with good kamma in the present, sometimes past bad kamma can be dissolved.

The image the Buddha gives is of a big lump of salt. If you try to dissolve it in a little tiny cup of water, the water’s going to be too salty to drink. If you dissolve it in a large river—assuming that the river’s not polluted otherwise—you can drink the water.

So you want to make your mind expansive, make it into that river of water, which he defines first as expansive through the development of the brahmaviharas, your goodwill, compassion, empathetic joy, equanimity. You want to make those large. As he says in another place, you make them large like the river Ganges, large like the element of space, large like the earth, bigger than anything that’s coming your way.

And then, secondly, you want to have the quality that the Buddha calls being developed in body and developed in mind. Developed in body means that pleasures can come and your mind isn’t overwhelmed by them. Developed in mind means that pains can come and your mind isn’t overwhelmed by them. In other words, your mind is larger than these things.

So your experience of what your past kamma is very much dependent on the quality of your mind right now. This is the aspect of kamma that the Buddha wants you to focus on. As for where your past kamma is coming from

and where all the details of what you're experiencing right now came from, he says those things are inconceivable. They're just too complex to tease out, and it's not worth it. What's worth it is realizing that by creating a good state of mind right now, you're getting more and more in charge of what you're experiencing right now. And as long as you're a living human being, you're going to be creating kamma, so do it well. And in creating the kamma, you're creating yourself.

Of course, ultimately, we want to create the kind of kamma that goes beyond having to be a self, beyond having to experience these things. There is a dimension that lies beyond all this, and it's only through our efforts that we can arrive there. We're not creating it.

This was another issue that was raised in that letter, the idea that if you're working on your path, then you've got the wrong assumption that somehow you can create the unconditioned. That's not the case at all. Ajaan Lee's image is of salt water. There's fresh water in the salt water, but just relaxing and letting the water sit there is not going to get this fresh water out of the salt water. You've got to distil it. The effort we put into acting skillfully with our thoughts, words, and deeds: That's the heat of the distilling and that's what gets the salt away so that we can see, "Oh, the fresh water's been here all along." And when you've found that, that's when you've done the best thing you can for yourself and for other people.

It's a false dichotomy to think that by finding awakening for ourselves we're narrow and unconcerned about other people. Actually the fact that there are people working for awakening in the world is what gives hope to humanity. Otherwise, we'll just be grubbing around, grabbing this, grabbing that as in the Buddha's image of fish fighting over water in a puddle that's shrinking all the time. That's what the world is like if you're not trying to make yourself worthy of your self-love.

So when you find people who are suffering from self-hatred, it's not so much that they don't really love themselves. They love themselves, but there's a conflict. They're disappointed in themselves.

And the Buddha's right: If you just go looking for your immediate pleasures without any concern about the consequences, there's very little to respect. And it gets very dismaying, looking at the world that way. But if you decide you want to love yourself intelligently, wisely—in other words, you behave in a way that's worthy of your self-love—you find that it's a gift not only to yourself but also to the people around you.

And it's a gift whose effects just keep rippling out. So—realizing that you love yourself more than anybody else—act in a way that's in line with intelligent self-love, wise self-love, wanting the best for yourself. And that means wanting the best for all your thoughts, words, and deeds. That's why

this teaching on self-love is so tied up in the teaching on kamma, because it's through your actions that you create yourself. And so it's going to be through your actions that you can create a self that's worthy of your love and that can take you beyond yourself in the end.