

You Are Not Redundant

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There's a phrase in the Maṅgala Sutta, the discourse on blessings, that one of the blessings is when your mind is not shaken by the ways of the world. The ways of the world are what? Material gain, loss; status, loss of status; praise, criticism; pleasure and pain. That's what the world has to offer. And for a lot of people, that seems to be not only what the world has to offer, but also what makes them have value as people to the extent which they can gain material gain, status, praise and fame, sensual pleasures. But these things come and go, and it's not the case that everybody can have them all at once. If your view of your worth as a person depends on these things, you're setting yourself up for a fall. The world keeps pushing that idea: that this is what's really worthwhile in life, this is what makes you have value as a person, the extent to which you can gain power and wealth and status and whatnot. Yet they do their best to withhold these things from you.

They're talking now even about how some people are redundant. When artificial intelligence takes over the labor market, many people won't have jobs, and they'll just be excess people of no worth—which is a horrible idea.

It's no wonder that the ajaans keep contrasting the ways of the world with the ways of the Dhamma, saying that they're two totally different things, two totally different sets of values. In terms of the Dhamma, everybody has worth, and that worth is augmented by things that lie within your control. Wealth is not under your control; status is not under your control. Other people's praise or criticism of you: You can't control those things, but you *can* control what you choose to do. This is how your worth is augmented. You can choose to be generous, you can choose to be virtuous, and above all you can choose to train the mind. This is something you are directly responsible for. The better the training you give to the mind, the more important you are.

There's an interesting Dhamma talk by Ajaan Mahā Boowa that I translated one time. It was one of the few for which he wrote a little introduction, saying that this talk was given to one of the important monks of our day and age. When I first read that, I thought he was referring to someone with a high ecclesiastical

rank, but then I found out later it was one of the ajaans in the forest tradition who was not famous at all, but who was reputed to have had a very high level of attainment. In fact, it was as a result of that talk that he was able, apparently, to become an arahant. That's really what makes people important: the extent to which they can cleanse their minds.

So when you're meditating, you're asserting your importance as a person. It can be an act of defiance. The world may say that you're worthless, but you're showing that you're not. You see so many young people now who are committing suicide because the world seems to be telling them that they're worthless, redundant. It's horrible that the world has gotten into people's minds so thoroughly. It's time to not let yourself be defeated by the world, time to exert your importance by looking for happiness in ways that are harmless.

This is something of inherent value. Wealth doesn't have inherent value, nor does status, nor does praise, nor do sensual pleasures. Generosity has inherent value. Your virtue has inherent value. The development of good qualities in the mind has inherent value, and so you can choose to take part in that value yourself.

There was a famous thinker in 19th to early 20th century America, William James. He went through a very bad depression when he was young. He wanted to be an artist, but his father did everything he could to prevent that from happening. So James went into a pretty severe depression. He began to wonder if he had any free will, if anybody had any free will. He finally got himself out of the depression by deciding that his first act of free will would be to choose to believe in free will—that he had the power to choose his actions and to make a difference in his own life. Then, building on that, he became a very famous thinker, psychologist, philosopher.

So it does require an act of will, and to strengthen that act of will it's important that you believe that you can make a difference in your life by training the mind. This is one of the reasons why, even though the Buddha was not the sort of person to go out and pick fights with people over matters of doctrine, he *did* go out and challenge people who taught that you had no choice in the present moment, or that the present moment was totally shaped by forces coming in from the past—either actions you've done, or actions of a creator god—or that it's totally random. Those teachings, he said, left people unprotected and bewildered.

Bewilderment is our normal state when we're faced with suffering and pain, and those teachers were basically saying, "If you're suffering right now, there's nothing you can do about it." But no. One of the Buddha's most basic teachings is that, yes, there *is* something you can do about it. That's what the four noble truths are all about.

You wonder what the Buddha would think about teachings that are said in his name nowadays: that you don't do the practice; that there's no "you" there to do the practice, it's just conditions happening. That sort of thinking defeats any sense of your worth as a person, or of the worth of your choices. The Buddha was very clear that what you choose to do right now—what you choose to focus on, what you choose to think about, which intentions you choose to act on—is of prime importance. He started Rahula, his son, on the path of the Dhamma by having him look at his actions to see the extent to which his actions do have an impact, and trying to make that impact harmless.

That theme carries all the way through the practice. When you're meditating, you're trying to find a happiness that's harmless. To do that, you have to reflect on your actions: how you focus on the breath, how you adjust the breath, how you create a sense of pleasure—a sense of rapture, even—through the way you breathe, how you get to know the way you shape your mind. Then you can shape your mind in ways that gladden it, concentrate it, release it. This is all within your power.

So each of us has an inherent power. We're already shaping our present moment experience. It's just that for the most part, we're doing it in ignorance, and as a result we suffer. If you can learn how to look at what you're doing and see the extent to which your feelings and your perceptions shape the state of your mind right now, you can do something about it. As the Buddha says, basically, you can take that principle all the way to the ultimate happiness. But even if you don't go that far, the fact that you do decide to be as skillful as you can in how you run your mind: That's taking a huge step right there.

So it's important that we not let ourselves be defeated by the world, especially when we see that the leaders of the world don't seem to care about anybody except themselves and their friends. We have to keep reminding ourselves that what other people think about us, whether they esteem us or not, is not the issue.

What's important—and what makes *us* important—is the fact that we take responsibility for our actions and we try to do them as skillfully as we can.

So as you meditate, it's an assertion of your worth in defiance of the world.

Think about the forest ajaans. Many of them were born at the very bottom of the social ladder in Thailand. It was bad enough that they were peasants, but they were also peasants from the Northeast, and the rest of the country tended to look down on the Northeast. So the fact that they found the Dhamma and practiced the Dhamma in a way that called into question a lot of the official versions of Dhamma that were coming out of Bangkok at the time: It was very bold. But it was their honesty that guaranteed the truth of what they were doing. Bangkok was saying in those days that not only was nibbana no longer open, even jhana was not available. In spite of the fact that the Buddha said that the Dharma is timeless, very sophisticated arguments were given to support the official line. But the forest ajaans were not swayed by those arguments. They claimed their right to practice the Dhamma in accordance with the Dhamma. And they shaped themselves to be in line with the Dhamma. That was what gave power to their teachings.

So the practice of the Dhamma in line with the Dhamma is a defiant act. We're saying, in effect, that we're not going to be swayed by the ways of the world—what the world has to offer. After all, you know what the world has to offer: the possibility of material gain, status, praise, and sensual pleasures. But as the chant we recited just now reminds us, the world really offers no shelter. It lures us with these things but it can't provide us with any real protection. Whereas the Dhamma protects all those who practice the Dhamma. There's an inherent worth to the Dhamma. And as we turn ourselves into Dhamma, we give ourselves a heightened inherent worth.