

Lesson 27 – SELFLESS SERVICE

Opening chants, meditation and review of last lesson.

Question to think about before the story: Have you ever been asked to help clean up something and you thought it was too messy to clean up?

Story: The Sick Monks

There was once a bhikkshu who had an illness called dysentery, which causes terrible uncontrollable diarrhea. The bhikkshu was extremely weak and always thirsty because of the illness. Because the diarrhea became uncontrollable, and he was too weak to walk to the bathroom, which was not close to his room, he had accidents. So, he lay on the floor on a mat in his soiled robes.

The Buddha, along with Ven. Ananda, visited the monastery where the sick monk was staying. Ven. Ananda was the Buddha's attendant, who stayed near the Buddha to attend to whatever need the Buddha had. He often traveled with the Buddha. The Buddha walked through the monastery with Ven. Ananda and saw the sick monk lying on his mat. The Buddha asked him, "What sickness do you have?" The bhikkshu answered, "Dysentery, Bhante." The Buddha asked, "Isn't there anyone to help you?" The bhikkshu answered, "No, Bhante." The Buddha was surprised, and asked, "Why don't the other monks help you?" The bhikkshu looked uncomfortable, and said, "I don't help them, so they don't help me."

The Buddha turned to Ven. Ananda, and said, "Ananda, get a bucket of water. Let's wash him." Ven. Ananda immediately brought the water. The Buddha arranged the sick monk so he could be washed, and then he poured water from the bucket onto the sick monk, and Ven. Ananda washed him thoroughly. They made a clean bed for him, and lifted him up onto the bed.

The Buddha called all the bhikkshus at the monastery to a meeting, and asked them, "Bhikkshus, is there a sick monk in this monastery?" They answered that there was. He asked what his illness was, and they knew it was dysentery. The Buddha asked whether there was anyone to take care of the sick monk, and they said, "No, Bhante." He asked why they didn't take care of him, and they admitted, "Bhante, he is of no use to the monks, so that is why they don't take care of him." The Buddha said, "You don't have your parents to take care of you, so if you don't take care of each other, who will take care of you?" The Buddha concluded, "If you would take care of me, then take care of anyone else who is sick."

Questions after the story:

1. What very special job did Ven. Ananda have?
2. What was wrong with the monk laying on the mat?
3. What did the Buddha do when he saw him?
4. Why do you think the Buddha himself and Ven. Ananda washed the monk?
5. Why didn't the other monks take care of him?
6. What did the Buddha teach the monks?

Quotation of Buddha about the moral of the story:

**“Hitva ratim ca aratim ca, sitibhutam nirupadhim,
sabbalokābhibhum vīraṃ, tamaḥaṃ brūmi brāhmaṇaṃ.”**

“He who has given up likes and dislikes has become tranquil, and is like a hero who has conquered all the worlds - he is a true holy man.”

Dhammapada 418 (26:36)

Application of the moral(s) in the story to our daily lives:

The monks in the story probably did not want to be bothered with caring for the sick monk, because it would take a lot of time and effort, and it was disgusting to clean up. They thought that since the monk isn't any help to them, they don't need to help him. Those are selfish feelings. What do we mean by “selfish feelings”? Selfishness means to do only what you feel like doing, to avoid doing what you don't want to do, to ignore someone who needs help, or to only help when it will get you what you want. We might pretend we didn't see something that should be done, something that should be cleaned up, someone who could use some help. Or we might complain if we are asked to do something that we don't feel like doing. We might think that someone else should do it. We might think, like the monks did, that we won't get anything in return for our service. Or - the famous excuse - we might say we're too busy. Can you think of some other excuses you or others make to avoid having to help?

How can we stop those selfish thoughts? The Buddha said “if you would take care of me, then take care of anyone else.” So when we see something that needs to be done, we should think that if we would help the Buddha to do it, then we can help our family members, teachers, friends, and others to do it. If someone in our family is sick, we can offer to help in whatever ways we can. That is what the Buddha would expect us to do. We can think about the merit, punyakarma, that we must do so that we can have a good future. But even better, it is good to help because we have loving-kindness (metta) and compassion (karuna) toward others. We serve them and help them because we want them to be happy. That means we don't think about how others are going to “pay us back” and help us in return. This is “selfless service,” doing something helpful, some service, for someone without wanting something in return.

What if we really don't like to do it at all? What if there is a really unpleasant service that needs to be done? When you are disgusted with something, what do you say? Maybe you say “eew” or “yucky.” Maybe Ven. Ananda could have thought, “I don't want to clean up or even get near that smelly sick monk.” But he did it anyway. How can we also overcome feelings of disgust or unpleasantness? The Buddha teaches that “he who overcomes likes and dislikes becomes tranquil” (peaceful), and is a hero and a holy person. How do we do that? We learn to think good thoughts instead. For example, if we see a dead animal, we can notice its nice fur or wish it a good rebirth. That does not mean we touch or get near something that might harm us - a dead animal may have harmful bacteria that

can make us sick. If we see a sick person, instead of thinking “you look awful,” we can think compassionate thoughts, wishing the person feels better, and offer to bring him a drink of water. If we see a very old person, instead of staring at her missing teeth, bent back or bony hands, we can notice how soft her hands are, how kind her eyes look, how gently she talks, or feel compassion that she can’t walk, can’t eat easily, or has sad eyes. If we see something that needs to be done that we normally would rather not do, such as arranging people’s shoes neatly at the temple, cleaning up baby sister’s or brother’s mess, or picking up any trash spilled in the yard - we do it anyway, remembering the Buddha’s advice, that if you would do it for him, then do it for others. This gives us a good habit of doing selfless service.

Activity to reinforce the lesson:

Take the students to visit with the elderly in a home for the aged or, if the group of students is very small, to visit with a lonely elderly person or a bedridden patient in a hospice.

If planned in advance with the facility, and if appropriate, students can sing devotional songs or chant some religious verses, and/or may make and/or bring small gifts, cards, or snack food items.

Closing chant: Sabbe sattā bhavantu sukhitattā
May all beings have happy minds!

We can especially wish all the people in the world who have illnesses to feel better and be happy.