

Lesson 27 – SELFLESS SERVICE – The Sick Monk

There was once a monk who had an illness called dysentery, which causes terrible diarrhea. The illness is caught from touching contaminated surfaces like door handles and tables, especially when hands are not thoroughly washed, or from contaminated food or water.

The monk was extremely weak and dehydrated and was always thirsty because of the illness. The water he drank just passed through his body. He was suffering terribly and becoming more and more weak.

The diarrhea became severe and uncontrollable, and the bathroom was not very close to his room. He was so weak that he could barely walk. Sometimes he couldn't make it to the bathroom, so he had accidents. He became much too weak to clean his clothes or bathe. So, he lay on the floor of his room on a mat in his soiled robe.

The Buddha, along with Venerable Ananda, visited the monastery where the sick monk was living. Venerable Ananda was the Buddha's attendant who stayed close to the Buddha's side to attend to whatever was needed by the Buddha. They often traveled together visiting different monasteries to check on how the monks were doing and to give advice, guidance and teachings.

When they arrived, the Buddha walked through the monastery with Venerable Ananda. They saw the sick monk laying on his mat. Immediately they felt great compassion for him, suffering alone with no one to help him.

The Buddha asked him, "What is your sickness, monk?"

The monk answered, "It is dysentery, Blessed One."

The Buddha asked, "But, monk, have you no one to help you?"

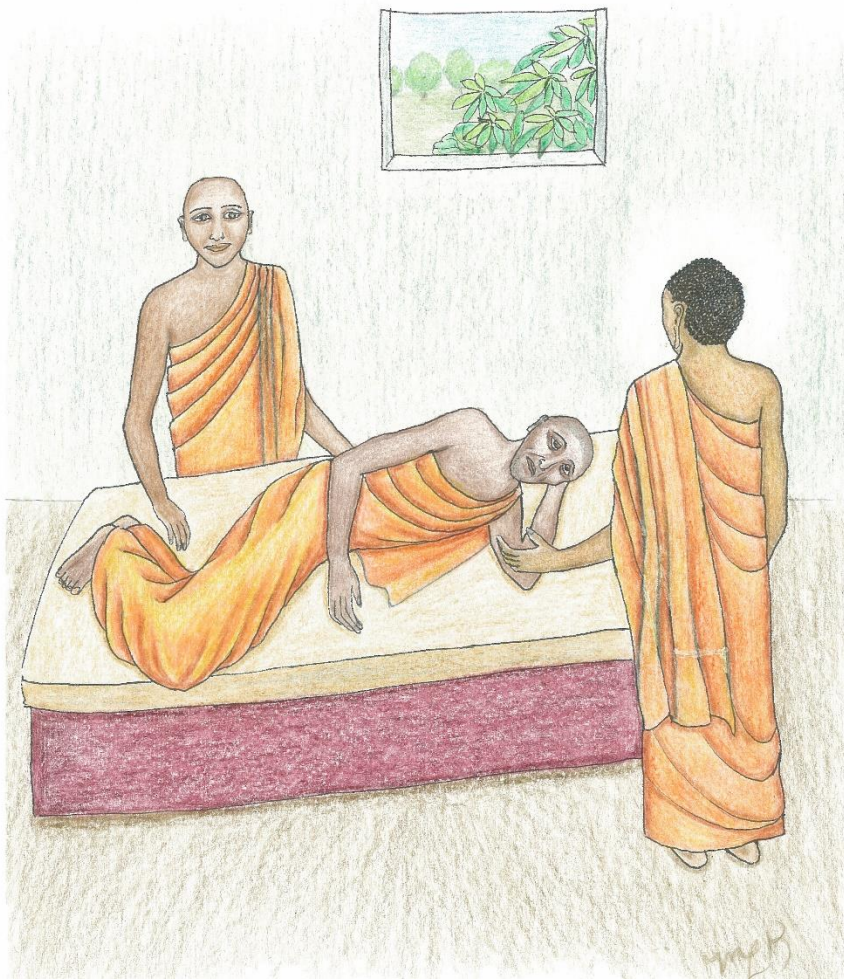
The monk answered, "No, Blessed One."

The Buddha looked surprised and asked, "Why don't the other monks take care of you, monk?"

The monk looked uncomfortable, and said, "I am of no use to the monks, Lord, that's why they don't take care of me."

The Buddha turned to Venerable Ananda, and said, "Ananda, go and get a bucket of water. Let's wash this monk."

Venerable Ananda replied, "Yes, Lord" and immediately brought the water.



The Buddha arranged the sick monk's body so he could be washed, removed the soiled robe, and then poured water from the bucket onto the sick monk as Venerable Ananda washed him thoroughly.

Then the Buddha held the upper part of the sick monk's body and Venerable Ananda held the lower part of the monk's body and together they lifted him and put him on a bed. They put a fresh robe on him.

Later, the Buddha called all of the monks at the monastery to a meeting. When they all had assembled in the meditation hall, he asked them,

“Monks, is there a sick monk in a room here?”

They answered, “There is, Blessed One.”

“What is that monk's illness?” he asked.

They replied, “He has dysentery, Lord.”

The Buddha asked, “Does he have anyone to take care of him?”

They said, “No, Blessed One.”

He asked, “Why do the monks not take care of him?”

They admitted, “Lord, that monk is of no use to the monks, so that is why they don't take care of him.”

The Buddha pointed out, “Monks, you don’t have your father or mother to take care of you. If you don’t take care of each other, who will take care of you?”

The monks didn’t know what to say.

The Buddha instructed them, “If you would take care of me, then take care of anyone else who is sick.”

He gave more specific instructions to the monks: “If a sick monk has a teacher, then the teacher should take care of him until he recovers. Or his roommate, or his student, or his classmate should take care of him until he recovers. If he has none of those, then the community of monks should take care of him. Failing to take care of a sick monk is wrong.”

Questions:

1. What was Venerable Ananda’s job and responsibilities in working for the Buddha? (he was the Buddha’s attendant, and he stayed close to the Buddha and traveled with him to attend to whatever need the Buddha had)
2. What was wrong with the monk laying on the mat? (he was very ill and weak with diarrhea)
3. Why didn’t the other monks at the monastery take care of him? (he was of no use to them)
4. How did the Buddha and Venerable Ananda take care of the sick monk? (they washed him, changed his robe and lifted him onto a bed)
5. How do you think the monks at the monastery felt when the Buddha asked them why they didn’t take care of the sick monk? (embarrassed, ashamed)
6. What did the Buddha teach the monks? (as they would take care of the Buddha, they should take care of anyone else who is sick; it is wrong not to take care of someone who is sick)

What the Buddha said:

**“Hitva ratiṃ ca aratiṃ ca, sītibhutaṃ nirūpadhiṃ,
sabbalōkābhibhuṃ 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)

Dharma discussion – selfless service:

How would you feel if you had to take care of someone who was very sick with dysentery, like the sick monk?

Maybe you would feel afraid of getting sick yourself, because it's contagious.

You may feel disgusted by the smell.

You might not know what to do; you may feel unsure of how to take care of someone who is very ill.

Maybe you wouldn't want to touch the soiled clothing or bedsheets.

It's uncomfortable to see someone who is suffering.

There are many other things you would rather do.

The monks at the monastery probably had the same thoughts.

And, they weren't going to get anything in return for helping the sick monk.

Typically, people think that if they help someone in need, then someone will help them when they are in need - an exchange: if I do for you then you will do for me.

They didn't even consider that. They just thought that since the sick monk isn't of any use to them, they don't need to help him.

The Buddha and Venerable Ananda didn't think that way.

What kind of feeling did they have for the sick monk?

They had compassion – they were focused on relieving the suffering of others.

They didn't limit themselves to doing only what they liked to do, or doing only what gives them some reward or benefit.

They weren't thinking about themselves and what they want or don't want.

Instead, they opened their hearts to care for someone who was suffering.

Helping others, or doing a service for others without thinking of what you will get in return is called "selfless service."

It means helping without thinking of what you like or don't like, or of getting a reward. It's the opposite of selfish service, helping only if you get something in return.

It means helping because you want others to be happy.

If we don't get any benefit for ourselves, then why do selfless service?

Actually, there are benefits. Can you think of any?

One benefit is that we become happier when we do selfless service.

Most people think that they are happier when they do what they like to do, and when they do something that gives them money or another kind of reward.

That may give us happiness for a little while.

But we get a much more satisfying and lasting happiness when we help others, or when we help relieve the suffering of others.

For example, what would make you happier, watching a person get saved on TV or actually saving a person's life? Eating a favorite food or feeding a starving dog?

On the other hand, when we always think about ourselves, we become miserable because we think about our disappointments and problems.

The other benefit of selfless service is that we earn merit.

What is merit? Good karma, is the cause of good fortune, good circumstances in the future, such as being healthy, successful, and safe from danger.

We all miss opportunities to do selfless service sometimes.

Can you think of reasons why we don't help when there is an opportunity to help?

We wait for someone else to do it,

or look away from something that should be done,

or ignore someone who could use some help,

or we're not sure exactly what to do to help,

or we think it's someone else's job or someone else's fault,

or we think we can do it later,

or we don't feel like doing it,

Or we are too busy.

We can develop a good habit of helping others, and finding ways to help, by helping people in our family.

Can you think of some examples?

Clearing away all the dishes after meals.

Putting away clean dishes.

Setting the table.

Cleaning up baby sister's or brother's mess.

Helping sister or brother with homework.

Taking out the trash.

Putting away clean laundry.

Putting away groceries.

Taking care of a pet.

If someone in our family is sick, we can offer to help in whatever ways we can, such as bringing them water, or serving them food.

Do you do any of these tasks at home? If not, think about why not.

Maybe it's because your parents have done them all your life.

But if you volunteer to help them, it's a wonderful act of gratitude to your parents for all they do for you, and it shows compassionate to your parents who have to work hard to support your family. And you earn merit by helping them.

Remember the Buddha's advice to the monks, that if you would do a service for him, then do it for others.

Activity: Make a list of ways you can help at home.