

# *Benefits of Unselfishness*

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Interpreted into English by Santikaro Bhikkhu

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*In the late 80s and early 90s, until his health deteriorated too much, Ajahn Buddhādāsa gave regular talks during the monthly international retreats held at Suan Mokkh and then Suan Mokkh International Dharma Hermitage. Usually, Ajahn spoke in Thai and Santikaro Bhikkhu interpreted into English live. Audio recordings are now available from [www.suanmokkh.org](http://www.suanmokkh.org) and [www.bia.or.th](http://www.bia.or.th). The following is a transcription generously made by a Dhamma volunteer. If you noticed possible improvements to the text and would like to contribute, please kindly contact the Buddhādāsa Indapañño Archives in Bangkok ([suanmokkhbkk@gmail.com](mailto:suanmokkhbkk@gmail.com)).*

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In the first talk we talked about the dangers of selfishness, and then in the second talk we discussed the cause of selfishness as well as the foundations of selfishness. Yesterday's talk we talked about the extinguishing of selfishness. Today we will discuss the benefits, the values of extinguishing selfishness.

When we speak about the fruits or benefits of extinguishing selfishness, we'd like to bring up one Thai word which ought to be of interest to you. In Thai this word is *anison* which comes from the Pāli word *ānisaṃsa*. The meaning of this word is 'the flowing milk.' When we milk a cow, then the milk, the nutritious milk flows out from the cow's udder. This is the literal meaning of the word *anison*.

Today we'll talk about the anison of extinguishing selfishness. When we talk about the anison of getting rid of selfishness, the most simple way to put it is to say that happiness is the benefit of extinguishing selfishness. But when we use this word 'happiness' we must be a bit careful because happiness is a very vague and an uncertain word. People give it all kinds of different meanings. So we will clarify what it's meant by the word 'happiness.' We'll take a good look at this word. At first, we can at least see there are two kinds of happiness: the happiness of everyday people language and the happiness of Dhamma language.

The word 'happiness' in people language – by 'people language' which

we mean the common everyday meaning in terms of people and persons. In people language happiness is something that we can get drunk on, we can become infatuated with it, go crazy over it, get lost in it. This is very important – it bites its owner. This is the happiness of people language – the happiness that is intoxicating, infatuating, very tricky, and which in the end bites its owner.

If we look closely this happiness in people language, this common ordinary happiness, is it true happiness? What it really is, is a kind of pleasure which deceives and tricks. It's a kind of entertaining luscious attractive pleasure which deceives. This is what most people take to be happiness.

This tricky pleasure, this deceiving pleasure is always ready to become a bait. It's always ready to become bait to catch us and trap us. So all the worldlings who are chasing after these deceptive pleasures are being trapped by this bait. This is the state of worldlings being deceived and lured by the bait of worldly pleasures or deceptive pleasures. This is happiness in people language.

This worldly happiness is always something material and physical. It depends on bodies and material objects. It's not a mental or spiritual kind of happiness. Therefore these kinds of deceptive pleasures are very expensive. They're very difficult; they're real pain in the neck to acquire and to keep; so lead to all kinds of busyness, competition, and problems for the worldlings who are chasing after this worldly happiness.

The last point to be made about this people language happiness is that it is the basis of selfishness. As soon as people indulge in these deceptive pleasures, it becomes selfishness and creates all the problems associated with selfishness.

Now let's look at the opposite kind of happiness. This happiness is not intoxicating or infatuating. It doesn't make us crazy and it doesn't bite the one who possesses it. It doesn't bite the one who has it. Be very very careful about this point.

This kind of happiness is not a deceptive pleasure, it doesn't trick or deceive but the ordinary worldling overlooks it. Common people overlook this genuine true happiness. So let's take a good look at it.

This kind of happiness is not a bait. It doesn't lure us and trap us. This genuine happiness is pure, bright, clear, calm, and leads to peace. It's not a bait

which entraps and deceives.

This kind of happiness isn't at all expensive. It doesn't cost any money or any material difficulties. There are no hassles and problems associated with this kind of happiness. It's free.

The most important point is that this type of happiness does not lead to selfishness. It does not support or nourish selfishness.

In Thai there is a very nice pun. The word *sukh* which means happiness has two spellings. One spelling means 'happiness' and the other spelling means 'well-done.' Both kinds of *sukh* have the same sound and pronunciation but the meaning is different. So we use this to point out the difference between the two kinds of happiness. Genuine happiness is cool and calm, it doesn't lead to selfishness. The false kind of happiness which means well-done is hot. So the best way to translate this into English is 'hot' happiness and 'cool' happiness.

This 'hot' happiness is dependent on the defilements – greed, anger, delusion, and so forth. It needs their help in order to be happy. 'Cool' happiness has nothing to do with the defilements. It doesn't need their help at all. For 'hot' happiness to realize its aim, it needs to use and get help from the defilements, and this is why it's hot. But genuine 'cool' happiness has nothing to do with these defilements. It doesn't need their help. So it can be very cool and soothing.

This 'hot' happiness depends on all kinds of material goods and when people become infatuated with this kind of defiled happiness; then they set about trying to acquire possessions, material objects, and all kinds of luxuries. This is the kind of happiness with which the world is infatuated, or everyone chasing after various kinds of luxuries, spending all kinds of money in pursuit of what they take to be happiness – this 'hot' deceptive happiness. The other kind of happiness, 'cool' happiness, doesn't cost a penny, or a pfennig, or a mark, or whatever currency. It costs absolutely nothing for this kind of happiness. It's a mental, spiritual happiness which has nothing to do with material things. So when one overcomes selfishness, when one is able to concentrate the mind correctly, when one practices mindfulness of breathing correctly and properly; then there arises this genuine 'cool' happiness that doesn't deceive and trick and it doesn't cost a penny. So if we talk in economic terms – there is the happiness that costs money and the happiness that doesn't

cost a penny. Which one are you interested in?

Now that we've made the clear difference between 'hot' and 'cool' happiness, we'd like to focus on the happiness of Dhamma, this 'cool' happiness. Even though we can say 'the happiness of Dhamma,' there are difference levels to it or there are different kinds of Dhammic happiness with different qualities and characteristics. So we'd like to talk about these different levels of true happiness.

The first level of Dhammic happiness is the happiness that comes from non-harming or non-violence. When there is no harm being done, then there arises this first kind of happiness. In Pāli there is the phrase

*“Abyāpajjaṃ sukhaṃ loke, pāṇabhūtesu saṃyamo,”*

this means that,

‘Non-harming is happiness within this world.’

When we live here with awareness, we are not harming ourselves, any other people, any other creatures, or the environment. When we are aware of a life and lifestyle that is not harming anything, not exploiting or violating anything; then there arises this first kind of happiness.

With these words 'non-harming' or 'harming' we have to be very careful. Many people take a one-sided view of it. When we talk about 'harm' there are two sides of it: one is we can harm ourselves and the other is harm others. When there is genuine non-harming, neither side is harmed or violated. There is nobody is being afflicted. Sometimes we get confused on this and in order to help others we harm ourselves. Then of course there is often the kind of helping oneself by harming or exploiting others. But in true non-harming, true non-violence, there is no harming of either ourselves or others. When there is this complete non-harming, then there arises genuine happiness.

We'd like to say that the more one loves oneself, the more one harms oneself. Or the more one is selfish, the more one harms oneself. When one loves oneself, this love makes us blind, and then we indulge in those deceptive pleasures which lead us astray. We go through all kinds of ridiculous difficulties to get some trifling pleasure, and this is how we harm ourselves – because of this self-love. The more stupid we are, the more we harm ourselves; and when

there is this stupid foolish self-love; then we harm ourselves immensely wasting our time on these trifling deceptive pleasures and overlooking true happiness. So the more selfish we are, the more we harm ourselves.

When we come to harming others we probably don't have to say very much about it because the world is full of this – people's selfishness leading to people harming others for their own selfish benefit. When we selfishly see something as beneficial or advantageous to ourselves, then we're completely willing to go and take advantage of someone else, to exploit or harm another for our own advantage. The world is full of this. There is this exploitation all around – underground, above ground, in small ways, and in big ways, such that people are even trying to take advantage of the whole world. Sometimes we cut the world into two halves and each half is trying to harm the other half. Or sometimes we try and harm the whole world and this exploitation and affliction sometimes even starts to think about other worlds, to go over and conquer other planets and worlds in order to take advantage of those worlds. This kind of selfish harming knows no limits. It's limitless.

When there is no selfishness, then nothing is harmed. Merely by removing selfishness, all these violence and exploitation can be destroyed. When there is no selfishness, we don't harm ourselves. There is no harming of others. Even the animals are not harmed. We can even go so far as saying that even the ground, the soil, the earth is not harmed when selfishness is removed. When this selfishness is extinguished, there is none of this harming. Then it becomes very natural to relate to others in terms to what are called the 'divine dwellings' – friendliness, compassion, sympathetic joy, and equanimity – and then this is the basis for Dhammic happiness.

Those of you who value this teaching of the four divine abodes – *mettā*, *karuṇā*, *muditā* and *upekkhā* – you should focus on this one thing of removing selfishness. If you are interested in *mettā* (universal love or friendliness), *karuṇā* (compassion), *muditā* (sympathetic joy), and *upekkhā* (equanimity); then all you need to do is direct your attention to unselfishness or selflessness. When there is no selfishness, then there is *mettā* automatically, there is this very spontaneous love for everything. There is spontaneous *karuṇā*, the desire to help, to be of service or compassion. There is spontaneous joy at happiness of others and there is *upekkhā*. When it is not possible to help at this moment; then *upekkhā* is to wait, await an opportunity to help and serve the others. Some people understand this last divine abode incorrectly. They take *upekkhā* to mean

to be indifferent when we can't do anything to help. But true *upekkhā* is to observe and wait, await an opportunity to help if there is no opportunity right at this moment. So if you value these four *brahmavihāra*, these four divine abodes, then focus your attention on not being selfish.

This last *brahmavihāra*, *upekkhā*, is often a source of confusion. *Upekkhā* means 'to look at, to observe, to watch.' Some people think it means to close our eyes and not pay attention, to be indifferent. That's silly and of no value or benefit. *Upekkhā* means 'to look at, to observe.' If everyone in the world would keep looking for opportunities to help others, for opportunities to serve others; then there wouldn't be any of these crises in the world that there are these days. So please be especially interested in *upekkhā* – looking, observing for opportunities to help and serve.

This is the fundamental of basic level of happiness that arises when there is no harming, neither harming oneself or anyone or anything else; then there arises this fundamental kind of happiness. This happiness arises when there is no harming, and that comes from not being selfish. At first this may seem illogical to you that by not being selfish there arises happiness. Many people have the warped kind of logic that by being selfish we become happy, by being selfish we help ourselves. This betrays a fundamental ignorance about life. It may sound illogical but by removing selfishness, when there is no selfishness, this is what benefits us, this is to our advantage. If we look carefully, we see that it's selfishness which burns our minds so that even if we are all by ourselves this selfishness is constantly disturbing us so that we can't even sleep well at night. This constantly thinking of oneself, thinking in terms of oneself, this egocentricity, gives us all kinds of headache, it leads to all sorts of neurosis and it makes us go crazy, even to the point that many people are killing themselves because of selfishness. This sounds strange to many people that suicide is essentially a selfish act. This is because selfishness in itself is very stupid and so it leads to all kinds of stupid and ignorant results including suicide. If you study all the suicides in the world, if you look beyond the superficial causes and look really deep, you'll see the fundamental cause of suicide is selfishness. Selfishness leads to not being able to sleep at night, egocentrism leads to headache and neurosis. Selfishness even leads to harming ourselves in such extreme ways as suicide. The only way to stop harming ourselves is to end selfishness. As long as there is selfishness we harm ourselves and others. This is something you really ought to examine as carefully as you can.

Now we will talk about the second level of Dhammic happiness. This is the happiness that comes from being without lust. When there is no lust, the absence of lust is a higher level of happiness. Everyone knows what ‘lust’ means. To remove lust, to remove sexual greed and sensual greed, is a higher kind of happiness. In Pāli there are the words

*“Sukhā virāgatā loke kāmānaṃ samatikkamo,”*

which means,

‘By eliminating lust within the world (or towards the world), the happiness that comes from being free of lust towards the world surpasses the happiness of sensuality.’

This is a higher kind of happiness. When the mind is free of this sensual lust, then it is even happier, calmer, and cooler.

This word ‘lust’ has a broader meaning than most people understand. Although this a little bit maybe beyond your immediate need, we’d like to mention it. Most people think that lust has only to do with sex or things related to sex. This is the narrow understanding of the word ‘lust’ or in Thai the word *rakha* [Pāli: *rāga*] which can mean lust, also passion, a very passionate excited kind of love. Actually lust has a much broader meaning than that. Sexual lust is only the first level. There can be also lust towards material objects which isn’t so much a sensual lust, which is just the lust to possess, to have material things. Then there’s an even third level of lust which doesn’t have much to do with material physical things – the lust for power, for influence, for fame, for honor and things like this, for immaterial things. This is also a kind of lust. So try to understand lust in this broader way and when all three kinds or levels of lust can be removed then there is a very great happiness of being free of these levels of lust. But even if you can just remove the crudest sexual kind of lust, by being free of that lust is in itself a great deal of happiness.

The stronger selfishness is, the stronger lust will be. As selfishness decreases and lessens, then lust also abates and decreases. So the more powerful and strong selfishness is, the more powerful lust is and all its agitation. The more powerful and strong selfishness is, the more powerful lust is and all the agitation. But by lessening and eliminating selfishness then there can arise the happiness of being free of lust. Once again, by lessening and overcoming selfishness, then there comes the higher level of happiness – that is being

without, that is to live without lust.

Often people teach that the way to remove lust, to overcome lust, is to contemplate repulsive thing, to contemplate ugly and loathsome things. So it is often advised to people with a lot of lust to go to a cemetery or cremation ground and contemplate corpses or the remains of corpses. These various quite unattractive and repulsive things are a traditional technique for lessening lust. That's right in its own way and it's correct that it can help, but the most efficient and powerful way to eliminate lust is to remove selfishness. Because even going to the cemetery, if that includes any selfishness; then still there will be kinds of lust, there will be some lust remaining. So the best way to eliminate lust is to eliminate selfishness. If you want to contemplate corpses or other unattractive repulsive things to help the removing of selfishness that probably would be a good idea, but the essential thing is to remove selfishness. By removing selfishness then there is nothing on which lust can stand. Selfishness is the basis, the foundation of lust. If we take away that basis then there could be no lust. This is the best way to be free of lust by becoming free of selfishness.

So the second kind of happiness which comes when we are free of lust. This is the kind of happiness that arises because the mind or life is no longer disturbed and hassled by lust. Often we can't sleep well at night because of lust in either a cruder or more refined form. Lust keeps us from sleeping well at night. Sometimes it prevents us from sleeping at all, and it can disturb us, hassle us throughout the day. This kind of lust exists and there is also a way of removing it, merely by removing selfishness. Then there arises this second level of happiness, the happiness of being without *raka*, without lust.

Now we come to the third of happiness or the last level of happiness. This is the happiness of being completely free of all selfishness, when all selfishness is absolutely and completely removed, eliminated, extinguished. This is the kind of happiness that surpasses the world. This happiness is above the world. It is not trapped within worldly conditions. When there is absolutely no selfishness, then there can arise no defilements. When there is no selfishness then the mind is beyond the world. It's no longer caught within the world and worldly conditions. There's nothing in the world that can have influence over the mind. There's nothing in the world that can make the mind greedy, or angry, or hateful, or afraid, or worried, or any other kind of defiled reactions. The mind is free of all these things and this is the kind of happiness which is above the world or which surpasses the world.

The Pāli sentence which expresses this third kind of happiness is

“*Asmimānassa yo vinayo, etaṃ ve paramaṃ sukhaṃ.*”

What this means is,

‘By leaving or by removing *asmimāna* completely is the highest happiness, *woei!*’

We’ll have to explain some of these words. *Asmimāna* you have been hearing about, over and over again. This is to regard things as ‘I’, as ‘me’, as ‘mine’, as ‘self’. So by removing self-view, by removing the idea that there is a ‘self,’ ‘personality-belief’ or whatever you want to call it – ‘I’, ‘self’, ‘soul’ or ‘ego’, no matter what name you call it – it’s the basis of selfishness, by removing the belief in self, the view of self, this is the highest the supreme happiness, *woei!* The word *woei* means something like hooray!, hoorah!; it’s a cry of victory when a supreme accomplishment has been accomplished. When there is the highest kind of victory and success, then in Thai the kind of call would be *woei!*, something like that. So removing all self-view is the highest happiness, hooray! but *woei* is a lot more than hooray, it’s the supreme kind of triumph of victory. This is the highest kind of happiness –

“*Asmimānassa yo vinayo, etaṃ ve paramaṃ sukhaṃ.*”

*Sukhaṃ* means happiness. *Paramaṃ* means supreme, the highest happiness.

This *woei* is a little more than hooray because it’s also a challenge, it’s like shaking one’s fist at selfishness in triumph at having defeated selfishness.

We’d like to discuss the word *lokuttara*. *Lok* or *loka* means ‘world.’ *Utara* means ‘to be above or beyond.’ So *lokuttara* means ‘above, beyond the world.’ This doesn’t mean getting into a spaceship and flying off into space because no matter where we went, that would still be the world. Anyplace, no matter how far away, it’s still the world. *Lokuttara* (above the world) doesn’t have anything to do with our body. This means for the mind to be above worldly conditions. We can’t escape the world. We must live in it but the mind needn’t be trapped under the influence of good and bad, winning and losing, getting and missing, positivism and negativism, and all those worldly qualities and values. Living in the world, even if we were under the ground, the mind can

still be above the world, can still exist beyond the world. This is the meaning of *lokuttara*. It's something mental and spiritual. It is not physical being above, floating around in some spaceship.

To make it even more simple or short, we can just say that 'I,' the ego is the world. This concept of 'I,' of ego, this is the meaning of the world. To be above that egoistic idea, that concept, is to be above the world.

Another way to explain *lokuttara* is to be above the misunderstanding of duality. The world is full of dualistic things because the world is full of foolish people. Foolish people understand that there are dualistic things – good and bad, winning and losing, positive and negative, and so forth. This is a misunderstanding. In reality all things are the same. Good and bad is the same, positive and negative is the same. It's just a process of the law of *idappaccayatā*. *Idappaccayatā* means 'because this exists, this arises; because this disappears, this disappears.' More simply it's the law of cause and effect or the law of conditionality. Because of this process, this flow of causes and effects, of *idappaccayatā*, this is all there is. There is really neither good nor bad, positive nor negative. But fools misunderstand this fundamental reality and discriminate things as positive and negative and then are trapped by this misunderstanding. To be *lokuttara* (above the world) is to realize how things truly are, that good and bad is the same thing, and then to be free of all those dualistic misunderstandings which lead to attachment, indulgence, selfishness and all of the problems which we have discussed. So *lokuttara*, being above the world is being above the misunderstanding of dualism, of duality that there are pairs of opposites such as positive and negative.

A simple example that should be easy for us all to understand is the example of hot and cold. Hot and cold are really not a dualistic opposite or dualistic opposition as most people think. If we have learned anything about science we realize that hot and cold are just differences in temperature, and that hot and cold are not absolutely true. In a lump of ice, for example, there is just a certain degree of temperature, there is just certain amount of temperature. And then in the sun there is just a different level or degree of temperature. The words 'hot' and 'cold' are not absolutely true, they only have relative meaning. There're really just differences in temperature. Or even day and night. A child thinks that day and night are completely different but really day and night are just the same thing, it's just time, just differences in time, changing time. There's no absolute truth to day and night.' When someone sees the world this

way, instead of getting caught in the dualisms and making things into opposites, one is no longer trapped in left or right. The mind is in the middle, free and unattached. This is the mind or the life that is above the world, to be no longer caught up in duality, no longer caught up in hot and cold, left and right, and so forth; but to be in the middle, to be above the world, to be free of worldly conditions. Then none of these conditions can trick or deceive the mind into attachment, selfishness and suffering.

Or such as the pair as gaining and losing. This is another dualism that exists in worldly minds, that there is gain and loss. But such a thing does not really exist. There is merely the stream, the flow of *idappaccayatā*. When certain conditions exist then this result arises, or when these conditions exist then there will be this result or this effect. It all just depends on conditions and causes which lead to certain effects and this flow of cause and effects, this process, just keeps flowing onward and onward. There's nothing that is really gaining or losing. These are just words, dualities, illusions created within worldly minds. People go and say 'Oh, this is profit! That is loss!' and then they get all excited about these things but it is really just the flow of cause and effect. Seeing things in this way is to be above the world, no longer be trapped in these dualistic conditions.

What about when you laugh and when you cry? When positivism makes you laugh and negativism makes you cry, have you ever examined this matter? When we really see things as they are, there is no longer these positives and these negatives to make us laugh and cry. We can just observe whatever takes place without laughing and crying. Or are you worried that that wouldn't be any fun, that it wouldn't be very enjoyable, that it might be boring or something? Take a good look. This is the happiness that is *lokuttara*, above the world, to not have to laugh and cry at positive and negative, to no longer laugh and cry about worldly conditions. Is this the kind of happiness you are interested in?

When there is no positivism and no negativism, then there is what we call *suññatā* (voidness). Voidness is when there is no more positive and negative, when there is no more dualism. When the mind is free of all those dualistic illusions, then there is voidness (*suññatā*). Can any of you fit, or can any of you classify voidness as positive, or can you classify voidness as negative? In fact *suññatā* (voidness) is neither positive nor negative. It is beyond, above, surpassing both positive and negative. This is the meaning of Nibbāna [Pāli] or Nirvana [Sanskrit], which is unsurpassed voidness. Nibbāna is the supreme

voidness that absolutely transcends positive and negative, that is free, void, empty of all dualism.

When the mind perceives, when the mind sees or realizes voidness; then the mind itself is void; because when the mind is realizing or seeing voidness, it doesn't see anything that it can be attached to as good or bad; there is nothing to grab onto as positive or negative and so the mind then is void as well. When the mind is void, that is the supreme happiness. There is no happiness which comes even close to this truest most genuine happiness – the happiness of voidness. This is the happiness of freedom, when the mind is completely liberated from all the things which have power over it, which influence it, which trap it, which push its buttons, and so forth. This is the highest happiness, the happiness of voidness. This kind of voidness doesn't just happen after many many years of practice, of training. You probably haven't noticed it yet. In fact in everyone's life there are moments, if only a very short moment, when the mind is free, when the mind is void of any feeling of positive or negative, when the mind is not clinging to anything as good or bad. This is a sample, a free sample or specimen of Nibbāna, of the complete perfect voidness. But people tend to overlook these, they don't pay any attention because they are too busy chasing after the deceptive pleasures. So please start to pay attention. Be on the look for these moments when the mind is free, when the mind is void of positive and negative. Once we begin to see just a split second of this voidness, when we begin to really realize what it is; then we turn our lives towards this voidness and set out, truly and genuinely set out on the path to Nibbāna, to a life that is void, that is above worldly conditions. So don't overlook these free samples of Nibbāna which nature gives to us. Then you will begin to understand this highest most genuine happiness.

To summarize, when there is selfishness then the mind is not void; when there is no selfishness the mind is void and free. So please start to be very interested in this matter that we've been discussing. These moments of voidness when the mind is completely free of selfishness is something to be very concerned and interested with. These momentary little samples of voidness that occur coincidentally in life, generally these are ignored so we need to pay attention to them. Often this happens when we are asleep so we just keep on sleeping and don't notice them. But we can also learn and practice to be aware of them but not only just these coincidental moments of emptiness. But through the practice of concentration and insight, through correct meditation in concentration and insight, then there will be deeper and further understanding of

these moments of voidness. Please take special interest in this matter of the mind being void of selfishness. Understand what it means to be void, to be empty of selfishness, in a way that doesn't depend on using drugs such as heroin or LSD. There are much more refined ways than that. Please be very interested in this.

Finally we'll wrap this up with the rather amusing, quite funny truth – that 'self,' that 'I,' that wants to be happy must disappear for the mind to be happy. Until we let go of that 'self' that is trying to be happy the mind will never be happy. By merely letting go of the 'I,' the person who wants to be happy, then there arises true happiness. This may sound quite illogical but we hope you are beginning to understand. May we end today's talk on this amusing truth.

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