

## The Buck Stops With Me

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The following entry appears in the on-line encyclopedia, *Wikipedia*:

*"When poker became a popular saloon game in the United States in the middle of the nineteenth century, the integrity of the players was unreliable and the honor codes that had regulated gambling for centuries became inadequate. Because the dealer has the greatest opportunity to cheat (by manipulating the specific cards that players receive, or by inspecting the dealt cards), the players would take turns in this role. To avoid arguments about whose turn it was to deal, the person who was next due to deal would be given a marker. A knife was a common object used as such a marker, and the marker became generally known as a buck as an abbreviated reference to the buck's horn that formed the handle of many knives at that time.....When the dealer had finished dealing the cards he "passes the buck"....."Passing the buck" soon became a metaphor for dodging responsibility. U.S. President Harry S. Truman was noted for a sign in his office reading "The buck stops here." It was a gift from his crony, Fred Canfil, who found a similar sign in the warden's office at the Federal Reformatory at El Reno, Oklahoma."*

I wrote a first draft of this article over a year ago, not knowing what would come about this year—that I would be acting prior of the temple for a period of time in order to give Rev. Master Phoebe a break from the pressures of the job. So I am not writing here as a way to make a statement about that; I was and am writing purely to make a point about the Buddhist attitude of mind towards training oneself in the Way (Dharma, or training and enlightenment).

We are all familiar the phrase *passing the buck*, and we all know its meaning—that of dodging responsibility. In the context of Buddhist training and this article, I would like to narrow down that definition thus: *to dodge responsibility for one's own suffering*. This is something that we all do from time to time. Most complaining has a subtext of feeling that we should not be experiencing the upset or discomfort that we currently feel, and thus we look for someone or something to blame. If someone else can be blamed, then we are relieved of that piece of responsibility, no matter how small or insignificant, and don't have to do anything. We have an out for not grasping our will right at that moment, which is to take responsibility and/or do something about ourselves.

No one ever does Buddhist training seriously until they decide not to pass the buck. I remember when I entered into training at Shasta Abbey, my master told a story about a sailing ship whose captain would regularly, if something went wrong, blast his first mate about it and tell him to go do something. The first mate would then go find the boatswain and do the same thing. The boatswain would find someone below him like a common sailor or deck hand, and blow him up. Finally, this chain would come down to the captain's parrot. But being a parrot, the parrot loved to mimic people and so it would blow up the captain. Thus, the buck passing had come full circle.

When I heard this story, I decided, 'well, all this means is that somebody, somewhere has to decide to shut up and just do the training, and that really should be me.' I can't say I have been 100% successful, but I did make a fundamental change in my attitude of mind about life; without that change it can't be done at all. Dodging responsibility is what many people do as much as they possibly can—whether out of fear or laziness—but with the decision not to pass the buck comes an awareness that the Law of Karma is inexorable, meaning that there is an enormous amount of shared karma in the world, in which all people take part, and there is nothing for it but to take responsibility, decide to do something about yourself, stop blaming other people for your supposed misfortunes, and get down to business.

Here is a short list of things to be avoided in order  
to take full responsibility:

1. Do not blame other people for the circumstances in your life as you presently experience them.
4. As much as possible, stop complaining. Even though things might be difficult, or not as you would like them to be, don't put energy into being negative.
5. Never indulge in self-pity. We are all on this earth for a reason, and have a spiritual challenge or task

to fulfill. Self-pity blocks a person from going forward.

6. Do not wish for things to get better, as if by a turn of fortune, luck or magic. Rather, put your internal energy into accepting things as they are.

5. Do not project your own problems onto others.

This is as far as one's own personal taking on of responsibility and karma needs to go—in other words, we do not also have to save the world. If we try to save the world, we find out very quickly that the world, on the whole, does not want to be saved. We are left with an inescapable reality, a balancing act, in which we see a compelling need to do something about ourselves, decide to train as best we can, and do it with a recognition that we are not in control of anyone else, and whether or not anyone else does the same thing is up to them. We do not have to get in there.

Regardless of the form that your training takes, whether you are called to be a monk, or to remain in the world and train as a lay person, there are times when things will be difficult, challenging or downright excruciating. At these times, it is only human to succumb to the temptation to complain about how difficult your life is, how you've been dealt a crummy hand of cards, that no one loves you, and so on. Some people feel the need to blow off steam about these feelings in the presence of another person with whom they feel relatively safe, and are free to vent their frustrations and trials. It is particularly seductive to do this if the other person agrees with you. Other people feel that they shouldn't blow off any steam about life's difficulties—that is, if they are to continue to be good people—and so they bottle up the steam. In the first case, it is easy to carry the blowing off too far and “dump” on another person; the second case is a recipe for repressed anger, which can occasionally explode, or for depression.

What I have described are in essence the opposites of aversion and grasping, which are the twin sources of suffering for humanity. It is vitally important that a Buddhist comes to recognize grasping and aversion for what they are, see how deeply they permeate our thoughts, our speech and our acts, and work in the direction of not indulging in either one, which is to let them go and learn to be still in a neutral position in between them. In light of this, it is possible to learn how to talk openly about one's difficulties in life without either turning it into a personal issue, riddled with blame, which is what aversion is; and it is also possible to learn to open up, if you are a grasping type, letting go of the bottled up frustration in a way that doesn't focus blame or guilt on oneself. In both cases, we can see that the secret is to stop blaming, accept that there is difficulty in life—which is to accept the *First Truth of the Buddha, that Suffering Exists*—and with a gentle heart, do the best you can within this world of suffering.

In taking responsibility for one's own suffering, the best policy is to see suffering as an inescapable facet of human existence, but simultaneously not to be resigned to it in a way that partakes of apathy. Yes, there is suffering, and yes, I am responsible for it. No, it is not all my fault, and no, I am not condemned to suffer forever. There is a delightfully free, happy and neutral middle ground. We can do something about it—there is a lot we can do about it, actually—and we need to recognize that, on our own, as an individual small personal self, we can only do what we can do. The willingness to step aside, like a bullfighter with his piece of red cloth, while the bull charges, is part of the skill that we need to develop. In stepping aside, we can learn to let go of our attachment to life's difficulties. After all, to quote a cliché, ‘difficulties are opportunities in work clothes.’

A member of our congregation has a friend who she quoted as saying, on one or two occasions, “Why doesn't somebody just buck up and do it?” This is a different meaning and slant on the word “buck”, one that implies a belt-tightening or the act of gathering up one's will and getting down to work. This is the kind of buck I'd like to be associated with. Life isn't easy, and why should we expect it to be so? Training isn't easy, and the sooner we can get over complaining about that, the better it is for ourselves and everyone around us. Bowing to suffering, bowing to life's challenges, however, immediately transforms our attitude toward them. Bowing immediately takes away the “I” that feels like it is in a position of needing to complain, and in that moment one can glimpse that there really isn't an “I”, there are only conditions. Bowing, which is the internal act of acceptance, is the key to serenity in the midst of conditions. This is what we all truly long for in the depths of

our hearts: accepting life deeply, accepting our limitations, doing the best we can in the midst of the conditions around us, and learning to be utterly content within all of this. This is the meaning of “being one with the Buddha in everyday life.” This is the deeper meaning and goal of everyday life, and nothing else in life compares with it.

Conditions come and go; happiness of the everyday sort comes and goes—this is the nature of human existence. In the Zen tradition, there are phrases that have been used for centuries, such as: “As long as bowing lasts, Buddhism will last”; and “We should practice endless bowing to attain the Way of the Buddhas and Ancestors.” These are very important, dead accurate statements. Whenever the ego kicks up its habitual complaining, its disagreement with the way things are, we have to go back to the bowing mat either literally, using our entire body, or internally, making a small prayer in the heart: “Yes, I bow to things as they are. Please help me to accept.” Every time this is done, a gate opens and we can take a step forward. One step out of thousands, one step out of millions. This is deep acceptance within training and enlightenment.