

The Source of Goodness

January 22, 2005

There is a story that the Buddha told one time about an acrobat and his assistant. The assistant's name was Frying Pan. The story goes that the acrobat had set up a bamboo pole and said, "Okay, I'll get up and stand on top of the pole." Then he said to his assistant, "You come up and climb up my shoulders. I'll look out after you, and you look out after me, and that way we'll be able to perform our tricks and come down safely from the bamboo pole." But she said, "No, that's not going to work out at all. I have to look out after myself, you look out after yourself. In other words, I'll maintain my balance, you maintain your balance, and that way we'll be able to perform our tricks and come down safely from the bamboo pole." The Buddha commented that in that case it was the assistant who was right.

He then used this as an example of how, when you look out for yourself in the practice, you're also looking out for others. But he went on to say also that when you're looking out for others, you're looking out for yourself. In other words, as he saw it, when you really look after your true well-being and welfare, it's not taking anything away from anyone else. It's actually helping them. And when you look out after their true welfare, you're not taking anything away from yourself. This way, he didn't see any clear-cut line between your own well-being and the well-being of the people around you.

It's important to keep this story in mind as you take the practice out into your normal daily life. As you develop the qualities we're working on—mindfulness, alertness, concentration, discernment, tranquility and insight—you find you become a steadier person. Your mind has a good grounding and a good home. You're not so open to influences from outside, especially negative influences. In that way, you develop a greater solidity. And the solidity is in and of itself a gift to the people around you.

I recently saw an old *New Yorker* cartoon: a very chaotic office with one person in the middle of the office who seemed calm. The boss was talking to another of the workers, saying, "George over there: He's a center of calm in the midst of chaos. Get rid of him." But we don't think that way. If you can be a center of calm in the midst of chaos, it really is a gift to other people. Whether they appreciate it right away or not, eventually they will. And it's a gift.

So as you're working with your breath, realize that your ability to stay with the breath, be grounded in the breath, developing a friendly relationship with the breath, is a gift not only to yourself but also to the people around you. Not only

that, as you develop a good relationship with yourself inside, it's going to spill out to other people. I heard a group of people discussing how they felt about the idea of goodwill or the idea of equanimity, and for them the idea in the abstract was intimidating. How can you have goodwill for everybody? How can you have equanimity in the midst of all situations? Is it something really worth having?

The Buddha's solution to that problem is not to deal with the ideas, but actually to imbue your relationship to the breath with these qualities. Be friendly with the breath. When the breath isn't going well, have compassion for it. When it is going well, appreciate it. When it gets to the point you can't do anything about it, develop a sense of equanimity toward it. When you develop these relationships inside, they're going to spill out to the way you relate to the people around you. If you have a chaotic or abusive relationship inside your mind, that's going to spill outside, too. So look after the inside, and the quality of your inner relationships is going to affect all your relationships in every aspect of your life.

So try to stay in touch with the breath, appreciate the quality of the breathing, try to sensitize yourself to that. For so much of our lives, we learned to desensitize ourselves to what was going on with the breath, because there seemed to be so many other things outside that were much more important.

But this is your foundation. This is your basis. This is your grounding. If you learn to be at ease with the breath, sensitive to the breath, you know what's going on in the mind, because the breath does mirror the events in the mind. That puts you a lot more in touch with what's going on inside. Thoughts and emotions will show up in the breath. You can use the skills we've been talking about: learning to breathe through the tension, finding the parts that are the comfortable, letting that comfortable sensation spread. This gives you a sense of nourishment throughout the day, a sense of strength.

This is one of the ways in which, by your maintaining a sense of balance, you help other people maintain their sense of balance as well. This gives you the strength to develop other good qualities in your relationships, too. Several questions that were addressed in that group of people focused on the issue of the Dhamma of relationships, or relationships as a path. Although the Buddha never said that that path was equivalent to the path of meditation, you can't just meditate and hope that it's going to straighten out your life. You have to work on developing certain qualities in your relationships, a greater sense of mutual respect, mutual support, mutual caring. Sometimes the ideal qualities are placing a lot of demands on you, but if you've developed that inner strength from having a good foundation inside, it's a lot easier to develop the qualities you need to develop in relation to other people.

There's a list of four that the Buddha recommended. The first is generosity, giving. Be generous with your time. Be generous with your forgiveness. Be generous with your knowledge—although you should have a sense of time and place for how you share your knowledge. I was once thinking of writing a humorous piece on how you can use Buddhism to ruin your marriage. "Honey, could you be a bodhisattva and take out the garbage for me?" Or, "Stop being angry, let go of your anger." Making yourself the teacher of the other person is something he or she is going to resent. Just as people who learned to use Freud's theories tended to ruin their marriages with Freudian insights, you can start using Buddhist insights to ruin your marriage. But try not to do that. Try to find the right time and place to share what you know of the Dhamma.

That comes under the next item on the list, for which the Pali term means kind speech, endearing speech. This doesn't mean just using sweet words. It also means being very careful about how you talk to the other person. If you have something critical to say, find the right time. Find the right place. Find the right words to express what you have to say, so that it really is helpful criticism. The other person will sense that you have respect for them, because you're careful about the time and place and the appropriateness of your remarks. At the same time, when you have positive things to say, don't be embarrassed about saying the positive thing.

The third quality is when you're helpful to someone else, really help them in ways that genuinely benefit them. Don't just go through the motions, don't make a show of being helpful for the sake of scoring points so that you can make a trade. In other words, look to see what the other person really needs, and provide what help you can, so that the help you give really is something appreciated.

The fourth quality is consistency. In other words, the way you behave in front of that person's face is the way you behave behind his or her back, and vice versa. There's a consistency to your behavior that becomes a foundation for trust.

So generosity, kind words, genuine help, and consistency: These are the qualities that make for good relationships, relationships in which it's easier and easier to for both parties to practice the Dhamma.

Another way that you can be of help to the people around you is when people are sick or dying, you can be a solid presence, a steady presence. There's a story in the suttas where a husband seems to be on his deathbed. His wife goes to console him. And her way of consoling him is one, she said, "Don't worry about me. I'll be okay." And she points out in various ways that she'll be able to fend for herself. It turns out she's a stream-enterer, so there is no way she's going to abandon the Buddha, the Dhamma, or the Sangha. And she says over and over as she points

out the issues that put his mind at ease, that the Buddha says it's not healthy to be worried at death. So she said everything she could to console him, to give him a sense of confidence. It turns out that he didn't die. He recovered from his disease. So he goes and tells it the Buddha about what his wife said, and the Buddha told him, "You're really lucky that you have a wife so wise."

So this is a gift you can give to people as they're going through difficult times: your steadiness. If you can teach the techniques for dealing with the breath to someone who's sick, so much the better. There are sure to be cases when you can't. It can't happen all the time. But some people are receptive, some people are ready for you to give them something to hold on to. But again you have to be very sensitive to what that person needs, and what that person is capable of understanding.

I know a Dhamma teacher who was telling me that when his mother was dying, he was beside her bed, holding her hand, telling her, "Okay, you don't have to hang on to things, you don't have to be attached to things. Feel free to let go." And the more he said, "let go," the more she held on tightly to his hand, gripped his hand. It was only as he said, "We love you, we love you, we love you," that she finally relaxed.

So have a sense of what teachings are appropriate. If the person is in a situation where he really can't accept the teachings, or can't understand them, can't use them, at the very least make sure that you provide a solid presence. And in that way, again, by maintaining your balance, you help other people maintain their balance as well.

On top of that, as you develop an attitude of the attitudes of goodwill, compassion, appreciation, and equanimity, you're putting good energy into the world as a whole. I've noted circumstances where people can pick up the fact that somebody is wishing them well. There's a current that goes from the mind. So try to put that positive energy into your life, into the world around you. In this way, your practice is a gift, both to yourself and to everybody else.

As the Buddha once said, all things come from the heart and mind: In Buddhism, they're the same thing. So that fact you have a heart and mind means that you have the source right here, like a radio transmitter sending out messages, sending out energy into the world. As you keep the source in good shape, the energy it sends out will be good energy. That type of goodness is never lost.