

## *Put the Other Person's Heart in Yours*

*March 30, 2020*

You probably know the Buddha's simile of the acrobats. One acrobat is standing on top of a bamboo pole, his assistant is standing on his shoulders, and he tells her, "You look out after me, and I'll look out after you, and that way we'll come down safely after having performed our tricks." And she says, "No, that won't do. I look out after myself, you look out after yourself, and that's how we'll come down safely."

In that instance, the Buddha said, the assistant was right. He went on to say that as your practice, when you look out after yourself, you look out after others. When you protect yourself, you protect others. That's the message we tend to take away from that passage because that's the message illustrated with the simile.

But the Buddha then went on to say that in protecting others, you protect yourself. This is a quality, a fact, that has to be emphasized. The Buddha never saw a clear line distinguishing your well-being from the well-being of others. Ideally, your well-being and their well-being should go together, so that in looking out after them, you benefit.

There are four qualities you develop as you help protect others: endurance, goodwill, equanimity, and the Pali term for the last one is *anukampa*, which can be translated as sympathy or kindness. In looking out after the welfare of others, you develop these qualities. And in doing so, you protect yourself from a lot of bad kamma, a lot of unskillful attitudes in your own mind.

Endurance, of course, has to do with putting up with people's foibles: the little things they do that drive you crazy. You remind yourself they don't have to drive you crazy. They're not unbearable. What's unbearable is your thought, "This is unbearable." That weighs you down. But if you can focus on what's good in that person, and you can focus on what's bearable in the situation, then you're not going to react out of anger.

Now, the Buddha's not saying that you don't try to correct people when they do something wrong. He's simply saying you learn how to do it with endurance. In other words, come from a place of peace, a place of solidity in your own mind, a place that isn't fearful. Then you can deal skillfully with the situation. And the other person will sense that you're coming from a skillful place, too. If you come from ill will, a sense of being oppressed, the other person will pick that up, and that'll block that other person from wanting to cooperate with you.

So try to focus on things that you can endure and on your ability not to let yourself get in the line of fire of other people's words, other people's actions.

That way, the situation is more and more endurable. And that way you benefit. You build up an inner strength, and you protect yourself from reacting to situations out of anger and desperation.

The same with equanimity: The difference between endurance and equanimity is very subtle. Endurance has to do with the fact that you don't react in word and deed to things you find hard to stand. Equanimity has to do more with staying neutral: keeping the mind on an even keel in spite of the ups and downs in any situation.

Here again, you're learning how not to weigh yourself down with emotional baggage. When there are some things you can't change, then if you're focused on the things you can't change and get frustrated and upset about them, you waste your energy. There are things in the world you *can* change that you *can* make better, but you waste your ability to be helpful there if you focus on the things you can't. So don't let your emotions get in the way when you deal with other people. Focus on where you can make a difference, and the situation will be a lot easier to handle skillfully.

This, of course, has to be coupled with goodwill, that you wish for the other person's happiness. The biggest danger that faces you in the world is that you might do something unskillful under the influence of ill will, because that then becomes your own kamma and it becomes a habit in the mind. It bends the mind, as the Buddha said. When your mind is bent in that direction again and again and again, your views are going to be warped, your attitudes, your further actions are going to be warped. They're going to incline in the direction of being unfair in a situation either because you like somebody or because you don't like them or because you're confused or because you're fearful. These are the four wrong courses. We tend to fall for them from lack of endurance, lack of equanimity, lack of goodwill for all. So learn to spread thoughts of goodwill around for all. In that way, you protect them from your unskillful actions and you protect yourself from your unskillful actions.

The fourth quality, *anukampa*, we translate as kindness. It goes together with empathy, sympathy, having a sense of how other people feel, putting yourself in their place—or as the Thais say in one their nice idioms: Take the other person's heart and put it in your heart and see how it feels. Take their feelings into account. In these days of intersectionalism, we're told that people of different genders and different races and different combinations of genders and races can't understand one another. That kind of thinking divides us, and makes it impossible to live together. To counteract it, try to develop this quality of empathy, sympathy, kindness, putting the other person's heart in yours and seeing how it feels.

So many people nowadays are consumed by in their own emotional wounds. This has been the effect of psychotherapy: Get people talking and

they talk about their wounds from the past, and that becomes *the* big fact in their lives. Then everybody else has to take that into consideration, put up with it: the fact that this person is going around wounded and is fixated on his or her wounds. But when we're fixated in this way, we don't understand one another. We lack empathy for one another's feelings. Everybody's wounded in one way or another. But everyone has strengths. Everyone has their good qualities, their bad qualities. If we want to learn how to live together, we have to learn how to take the other person's heart and put it in ours and see how it feels.

This is one of the principles underlying the precepts. We were talking a while back about the precept against killing and someone said, "Well, I guess the Buddha made this precept because life is sacred." And I said, "No. No, the Buddha never said life is sacred." That idea came from wanting to understand the precepts without ever having to think about kamma. Kamma underlies everything the Buddha taught. Virtue, concentration, discernment: These things are all kamma. The path is a kind of kamma. And you have to understand it that way. As for the rationale behind the precepts, as the Buddha said, "Do you want to be killed? Do you want to have people steal your things? Do you want to have people have illicit sex with people who are dear to you? Do you want to be lied to? Do you want to live in a society where people are drunk?" "Well, No." "Well, then don't do those things." "Do you like to be spoken to in a harsh and malicious way?" "No." "Then don't go do those things." The precepts are there to keep you from creating the kind of bad kamma that will cause bad things to happen to you. In this way, you protect yourself as you protect others.

So as we live together—and we're always living together in one way or another—make sure that you take the other person's heart and put it in yours and see how it feels. That way you stretch your heart, and it will grow. And in having empathy for that other person, you're benefiting yourself.

Years back, a Buddhist magazine was doing a series on the bodhisattva vow. They asked me to contribute. So I wrote a little piece on the sutta of the acrobat, saying how, ideally, looking after your well-being and looking after the well-being of others should not be in conflict. They didn't like the passage; they didn't run it. Theirs was the idea that you had to sacrifice your well-being for the well-being of others and that that was noble. But the Buddha knew something nobler than that: that it is possible to look after your well-being and the well-being of others at the same time. And that's the vision we should keep in mind.