Helping Others Is a Battle

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We have that chant that we repeat regularly, that the Buddha was the unexcelled tamer, with a qualification of those fit to be tamed. Even he couldn’t tame everybody, couldn’t train everybody. He realized that there were his limitations. Here he had attained the ultimate awakening. When he contemplated what would be involved in teaching other people, his first reaction was discouragement. There’d be so many people out there who would be resistant. We had a case in Thailand recently. One of the forest Dajans was reputed to be an Arahant, fully awakened. Somebody tried to kill him. You can imagine what he thought. Here he had done all the work required to become awakened, and he was willing to teach everybody. And there were people who were offended at what he taught. Even the Buddha had people who tried to kill him. He realized that, taming himself, he had to do battle with his own defilements. And taming other people would involve having to battle with their defilements. And in some cases the people would be willing to receive his help. In other cases not. They’d be very resistant. They’d resent him. So here he is, the person who has helped more people than anybody else in the world. And even he had to face the limitations. And the best way to battle with those limitations was for him to clean up his own act first. The image he gives for helping other people. It’s like two acrobats. One is standing on the shoulders of the other. And as you said, one of them, each of them has to look after his or her own balance. And that protects the other. Because you can imagine, if one of them loses balance, it’s going to pull the other one. It’s going to pull the other one down. But if you can maintain your balance, to that extent you’re helping the other person maintain his or her balance. Which is why the emphasis in the practice is so much on cleaning up your own mind first. Because if you’re going to help other people, you have to be reliable. One, to set a good example. And then two, to understand what’s involved in being reliable. As the Buddha said, the mind is quick to change. So quick that there’s no adequate analogy. Even the twinkling of an eye is too small. You can change direction 180 degrees. Very fast. If you haven’t trained your mind so that it’s not going to be that way, you can’t depend on yourself. Other people can’t depend on you. They can’t depend on you either. The other reason you have to straighten out yourself is that sometimes you tell yourself that you have good intentions, you have goodwill for all. But then you dig down a little bit deeper and you find there’s something else. Something that goes in the opposite direction. And most of us don’t like to see that. That we do have unskillful thoughts, unskillful emotions. And so we cover them up with what we think is skillful. And to face up with those things, you have to get the mind in a state where it’s really at ease with itself. Where you feel comfortable in your own skin. And not easily knocked over by unskillful thoughts that come through the mind. Then you can deal with them. Not so much emphasis on getting the mind into concentration. Focus on your breath. Breathe in a way that feels good. Nourishing for the body. Soothing when you’re feeling frazzled. Energizing when you’re feeling tired. Relaxing when you’re feeling tense. Use the breath as medicine. And begin to realize that you do have good points inside, good potentials inside. This will be an important lesson for dealing with the unskillful things that come up. Because when something unskillful comes into the mind, it’s so easy to say, “Well, my intentions are corrupt. I’m a bad person.” But if you know that you have some good potentials you can fall back on, then you’re not so easily knocked over. Work on that sense of well-being inside. And some confidence that you do have good potentials. It’s just that you haven’t fed them properly yet. So you learn how to feed them. You feed your mindfulness with observing the precepts and developing goodwill. You feed your discernment by noticing what’s happening in the mind. Sorting your thoughts out into two sorts. Skillful and unskillful. The skillful ones come from thoughts of renunciation, thoughts of goodwill, compassion. The unskillful ones come from thoughts of sensuality, ill-will, harmfulness. Even the Buddha, when he was on his path, noticed that his thoughts fell into those two categories. This is one of the comforting things about the Buddhist teachings. They come from a person who knows what it’s like to be impure. Knows what it’s like to be imperfect. But also knows how to develop your potentials for purity and perfection. So he’s been where you are. And he can show you the way to develop the good potentials. To have that confidence that yes, there’s something good inside you. But it needs to be protected and it needs to be developed. And you have to watch out for your other potentials inside as well. So when you have a balanced view like this, that you begin to trust yourself. So that when an intention comes up that looks pure and looks compassionate, seems to have the happiness of others inside, you’re going to look down and say, “Well, what else is going on there?” Because some people are good to other people because they have a sense of inadequacy inside and they try to make up for it. Or they’re trying to cover up something else. Or it’s a kind of ego trip sometimes. So you want to watch out for that. Because intentions really are good. So again, this is why you have to get your own balance established. So you’re not knocked off by unskillful thoughts. And you’re not deluded by your skillful thoughts that are hiding something else. When you have a good sense of balance like this, then you can help other people find a sense of balance as well. You don’t want them to want to accept your help. And you have to provide a good example that convinces them that yes, you are a worthy person to learn from. So learn how to teach yourself first. And as you think of taking on others, you notice again the example of the Buddha. He didn’t go around teaching everybody. The tradition is that he would survey the world in the morning. Early morning. 4 a.m. And see who was ready to be taught. And not everybody in the world came to mind. Just specific individuals sometimes. So he would choose his battles. Again, helping other people is a battle. Because they have their reasons for being the way they are, the unskillful ways they are. And sometimes you can overcome their defilements, and sometimes you can’t. Or put it another way, sometimes you can get them to want to overcome their defilements. Oftentimes you can’t. A lot of people are perfectly satisfied with their view of the world, their view of themselves. They have all sorts of reasons for justifying to themselves the ways they behave. And it usually takes some insight into how they’re suffering for them to be able to change their ways. But look at yourself. If there were no sense that you’re suffering, that there’s something wrong, you wouldn’t try to train yourself. You’d just stay as you are. So even though when we’re spreading thoughts of goodwill, there’s a lightness to it. In the sense that we have thoughts of goodwill going out in all directions, and our mind is radiant. Nothing seems to be getting in the way. And especially if you have gone through all the people you might find difficult, and convinced yourself that it is possible to have goodwill for them, in other words, to wish that they would behave in skillful ways. And if they’ve been behaving in unskillful ways, that they see the error of their ways voluntarily, and be willing to change. Now that’s a thought you can extend to anybody. There may be some cases where you found that they were particularly cruel, or thoughtless, or irresponsible. Or your mind says, well, I’d like to see them suffer a little bit first, so they can get a sense of the wrong that they’ve done. A lot of people don’t equate their sufferings with the wrong they’ve done. Sometimes they get even more entrenched in their ways. So you hope that all beings will come to their senses, basically. But then you look around you. How many people are coming to their senses? They’ve got their reasons for not doing that. Now they may be really bad reasons, but they’re holding on to them. You have to ask yourself, is this a battle worth fighting? Is this a battle that you have a chance of winning? If you can see the prospect of helping other people as being like a battle, you’re prepared. And if you learn how to do battle with your own defilements, you’re really ready. So have some goodwill for yourself. It’s one of the reasons why the chant on goodwill starts, “May I be happy.” I.e., may I understand the causes which are happening. May I understand what’s skillful and what’s not skillful, and be willing to drop any unskillful behavior I’ve been doing. When you can have goodwill for yourself in that way, bringing some more light into the processes in the mind by which different emotions take over. As we discussed today, looking at the way you breathe, looking at the way you talk to yourself, looking at the images you hold in mind of what’s going on. And if you see that any of those are unskillful, think of skillful alternatives. The breathing is important because really strong emotions have gotten into the body. They get to the hormones. And they can really mess up with the balance in the body. And you need to work with the breaths to restore balance. When you can bring some light into yourself, then you have some light to share with others. It’s not the case that you have to be totally awakened before you help. Think of the Buddha in the many lifetimes leading up to his awakening. He was very generous to help goodwill. Very virtuous. And his generosity, he helped people in all kinds of ways. Not just with material things, but with his discernment, with his forgiveness, with his knowledge, with his energy. But he knew how much to give and how much was too much to give. As the Buddha said, one of the principles of generosity is you learn your limitations. You don’t give in a way that you harm yourself. You give in ways that harm other people. Otherwise you don’t give them things that would induce them to do unskillful things. So even though our goodwill is unlimited, there are limitations on our energy. On our ability to help. Just as there were limitations on the Buddha’s ability to help. And he was much more prepared than we are. So start with goodwill for yourself. And as you show goodwill for yourself in the practice, you’re learning how to maintain your balance. That automatically has a good impact on the people around you. Now the extent to which they will pick up on that impact, that’s their choice. You work on what you can choose. you

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