

## *Helping Yourself by Helping Others*

*August 1, 2019*

You may know of the sutta where the Buddha talks about how when helping yourself you're helping others. In other words, by sticking with the practice of developing your mindfulness, you're developing good qualities in mind, and other people will benefit from that. The Buddha gives the image of two acrobats. One acrobat's standing on the shoulders of the other one. They've climbed up to the top of a bamboo pole, standing on the tip of the pole. And the one below says, "Okay, you look out after me and I'll look out after you, and that way we'll come down safely from the pole after we've shown our tricks." And the acrobat on top says, "No, that won't work. You look out after yourself and I'll look out after myself, and that way we'll help each other maintain our balance and be able to come down safely." In other words, if you're concerned about the other person's balance all the time, you're going to lose your own. But if you look after your balance, you help the other person maintain his or her balance, too.

The image is so vivid that you tend to forget that there's another side to the sutta as well: when the Buddha says, "When you help others, you're helping yourself." He doesn't give an image. He basically lists four qualities to develop in your dealings with other people. This will be good for them and it'll be good for you, too. The qualities are:

- goodwill;
- sympathy—which can also be translated as kindness, the Pali word is (*anukampa*);
- patience or endurance; and
- equanimity.

If you can develop these qualities in your relationships with other people, then you benefit.

In all cases, these are qualities you have to develop when you're being irritated by other people or angry at them. You've got to hold that irritation and anger under control, because all too often we feel that when other people are misbehaving, it gives us license to misbehave in return. Or we're afraid that if we let them "walk all over us," they'll get used to treating us like a doormat. So we feel we have to show that we're not doormats.

There's a passage in the Canon where one of the asuras basically says, "If people see that you're not fighting back when they mistreat you, then they'll think that you're weak and they'll mistreat you even more." And Sakka, the king of the devas

replies, “No. How they see you is not the issue. The issue is your own behavior, because that becomes your karma. If other people misbehave and you misbehave in response, then that misbehavior becomes yours. If they think you’re weak, then they know nothing of the Dhamma”—because you have to remember that qualities like goodwill, patience, equanimity, and kindness are forms of strength.

There’s that story where Lady Vedehika is famous for being kind, generous, and mild-mannered. And she has a slave woman, Kali. And Kali starts wondering, “Why does she have this good reputation? Is it because she really is that kind of person, or is it because I’m neat in my work?” So she starts getting up later and later and later in the morning every day. And every day Lady Vedehika gets more and more angry, until she finally takes a rolling pin and whacks her over the head. Kali then goes out and shows off the handiwork of Lady Vedehika, the “kind, mild-mannered” Lady Vedehika. From that point on, Lady Vedehika gets a reputation for being harsh and cruel.

The point is that if you’re good only when people are good to you, that doesn’t really count for much. It’s when you behave with equanimity and patience and goodwill when other people are mistreating you: That’s when you show your strength.

In that same sutra the Buddha talks about having goodwill as solid and large as the earth, or as large and as cool as the River Ganges. In other words, you have to think of your goodwill as being too big to fail—i.e., too big to be affected by irritation—and that goodwill and kindness are not weaknesses.

All too many people make that mistake, thinking that when you show goodwill and kindness to others, it’s because you’re weak and you have to, out of fear of their misbehavior. But you need to look at it in another way. When you develop these qualities as strengths, they become your good qualities from that point on—and you’ve learned restraint, the ability to control your anger skillfully. And the ability to control your anger is really important. It’s a skill you want to master, because we can harm ourselves so much by the way we give into our anger and express it.

Now, goodwill and kindness are not the same thing. Goodwill is wishing for happiness for everybody. Kindness is when you go out of your way to be gentle. You sympathize. That’s why that word *anukampa* can be translated both as kindness and sympathy. You sympathize with the fact that everybody else is suffering. You’re not the only one suffering. Everyone else is suffering. And the best way to respond to somebody that you have difficulties with is to try to be kind to them. And whether they’ll respond properly or not is not the issue. It’s simply the fact that you’ve learned to spread your sympathy so that you’re not

thinking about just your own sufferings in life. You open your mind to the fact that everybody else is suffering.

In mindfulness practice, this is called focusing on the topic of mind states both internally and externally. It's not that you can directly experience other people's mind states, but you can infer them from your own. You've got this body. You're living as a human being in a society. There's going to be suffering. Other people have bodies. They have the same problems. Their sufferings may be different in their details but the basic principles are the same. We're all suffering. And so nobody gains anything by piling more suffering on other people.

And notice that goodwill and patience go together. The word for patience in Pali is the same as the word for earth. So when the Buddha says that goodwill is like the earth, for someone who knew Pali, that would automatically lead to the connection that goodwill is a form of patience. The more you're able to endure other people's misbehavior, the more goodwill you can have. And the more you have goodwill for them, the more you are willing to forgive them for their misbehavior, which makes it easier to be patient.

Now, whether they'll respond properly or not, again that's not the issue. That's where equanimity comes in. We can't control the behavior of other people. The best we can do is to make ourselves a good example in hopes that they'll pick up our example at some point. And even if they don't, well, we've earned the good karma of having done what's right.

Remember all the Buddha's teachings come down to the dichotomy of what should and should not be done. The Buddha's not forcing his shoulds on you. After all, they are conditional. *If* you want to put an end to suffering, then this is what he recommends that you do. And his recommendation comes from a lot of experience on his part. But he's not telling you that you *have* to do these things, simply that it's in your best interest to do them. And so when difficult situations arise, ask yourself, "Well, what really should be done here?" And give the Buddha's recommendations a try.

We live in a society where people feel that if someone misbehaves toward them, that becomes their justification for misbehaving back. And things just go spiraling down, as we've seen too often all around us. The current culture doesn't take seriously the idea that maybe with some restraint and some equanimity, a lot of these problems could be solved, or the idea that your behavior is your most precious possession. You don't want other people's behavior to pull you down, so why do you have to go down to their level?

You have to keep repeating these values in your head and in your heart so that they become real, not just words in some book from India. Even though 2,500

years have passed since the Buddha passed away, human nature is pretty much the same. Our predicament, the suffering we cause ourselves, is the same. And the way out is the same. If you give the Buddha's recommendations a fair hearing and a fair try, you'll find that you benefit and the people around you benefit too.

So the benefits work both ways. When you focus on your practice of mindfulness, you benefit directly and other people benefit, too. When you focus on developing goodwill, sympathy, patience, and equanimity in your dealings with others, other people may be the immediate recipients of the benefit, but you also benefit in the long run.