

Kindness in the Light of Karma

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In most people's eyes, the idea of being kind to yourself means indulging yourself, like the wisdom, quote unquote, on wrappers of Dove chocolate: "Go ahead, be kind to yourself. Have another chocolate." From there, the idea of being kind to others becomes basically indulging them, doing things they like. But if you think in terms of karma, kindness is something else. Being kind to yourself means looking at your thoughts, looking at your actions, and figuring out where they're still lacking in skill, so that you can do something about it.

A lot of us don't like to do this. We feel we're coming down hard on ourselves if we look at our shortcomings. But this is why the Buddha prefaced his instructions to Rahula on how to meditate with the teaching on making your mind like earth. People spit on earth, but earth doesn't react. Make your mind like water. Water is used to wash away dirty things, but the water doesn't react, doesn't shrink away. Make the mind like wind. Wind blows dirty things around, and yet it's not disgusted by them. Make the mind like fire. Fire burns disgusting things, but it's not disgusted by them. Make your mind like space. No one can write on it. In other words, the words of other people or the actions of other people don't have to stay inscribed in your mind. Even as you're sitting here right now, the pain you had in the body just a second ago, that doesn't have to be held onto. Think of it as something written in space.

When you can make the mind like this, that's when you're ready to look at what else is going on in the mind, so that you can look at things in terms of cause and effect, and figure out which thoughts you should side with and which thoughts you should try to get out of. That's why the Buddha talks to Rahula in another sutta about being ashamed of thoughts that you realize give rise to harm to yourself or to others. "Shame" here is not the opposite of pride. It's the opposite of shamelessness. There should be an underlying sense that you are competent, but you should also look at your mind from the point of view of karma: Things come into the mind from the past, and they're going to be skillful and unskillful because you've done skillful and unskillful things in the past. Everybody has. But the question is, do you want to keep on doing the unskillful ones? What can you do to foster the more skillful ones? When you think in these terms, that's when you're really being kind to yourself. You're creating a brighter present for yourself and a brighter future.

As for being kind to others, again it's good to look at the issue in terms of karma. If you can get them to do skillful things, that's the kindest thing you can do for them. In some cases, you can't tell people or recommend to people what to do. Say they're your parents: You have a debt to your parents, but they're the hardest people in the world to teach, the least likely to want to listen to your teachings. But you can be a good example, and that's the way you repay your debt to them.

In fact, the practice is one of the ways we repay our debts to all the people who've made it possible for us to practice here. Think of all the people who gave so that this building could be built, so that there would be food every morning. We have shelter here. All kinds of good things. Everything down to the pipes underground. For years we had to collect money for the water mains and people kept saying "When are we going to see something built with this money?" We replied, "Well, all the money is going underground, going into pipes, all the infrastructure down under there." There are a lot of things that make it possible for us to be here that we don't see. It's good to think about them and also to think about the fact that it was all given. It all came from somebody's generosity. How do we repay that generosity? By practicing, by being a good example.

A forest monk once said that people who practice are like lampposts by the side of a road. The lamppost doesn't have to do anything but shed light. It does its own thing and—in so doing, by giving light—helps a lot of people. If your actions are admirable, they give light to the world.

Think about all the bad examples out there. And all the crazy things where people, even so-called Dhamma teachers, say how you should just learn how to accept your base motives and be okay with them. But then, of course, if those base motives are okay, people will act on them. That's why the world is in such a mess. You look around and it's not very inspiring, but every now and then you see people who are inspiring, and it's heartening. It makes you realize that the human world does have potential and can do good things. That thought makes it easier to live with the human world. So think of your practice as a good example for others.

When the Buddha talks about harming yourself, it's basically breaking the precepts or trying to give rise to passion, aversion, and delusion in your mind—or if they're already there, encouraging them further. If you want to harm others, again you get them to break the precepts or encourage them to give rise to passion, aversion, and delusion in their minds. The way to help other people, of course, is to encourage them not to break the precepts or at the very least you can be a good example in what it means not to break the precepts and what good people are like.

So having gratitude for the goodness of others doesn't necessarily mean doing what they want you to do or pleasing them. If you're really kind to the people who helped you, you want to be a good example, so that at some point they'll be inspired by the fact that they helped you and this is the kind of person you became. I've seen a lot of cases where parents, for instance, were not originally happy that their sons became monks, but then they began to see their sons becoming admirable people, and some of the sons' new habits rubbed off on the parents. That, of course, became a real gift to the parents, because they're now creating good karma, which is going to be for their long-term welfare and happiness.

So doing the practice is not just running away and looking at your navel. You're actually doing something good for yourself and something good for the world. The world needs more people practicing. And what's the best way to get people to practice? Practice yourself. And that way your practice becomes a gift to everyone.