

Helping Yourself by Helping Others

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You probably know the sutta where the Buddha talks about the two acrobats. They get up on the end of a bamboo pole, the assistant gets on top of the teacher's shoulders, and then the teacher says to the assistant, "Okay, now 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 done our tricks." And she says, "No, I have to look after myself and you have to look after yourself"—the meaning, of course, being that if she maintains her sense of balance it'll help him keep his balance; when he maintains his sense of balance, it'll help her keep hers. By keeping your balance, you assist one another. So the message there, of course, is that if you do your practice properly it'll be helpful to other people.

However, the Buddha goes on to say that by helping other people you also help your practice. Unfortunately, he doesn't give an image, but you might think of when you polish a mirror: As you put energy into the polishing the mirror, your reflection in the mirror becomes brighter. The Buddha talks about four qualities that are important to bring to your relationships with other people that are helpful to *you*. They're endurance, harmlessness, goodwill, and a mind of kindness or sympathy. When you develop these qualities in your treatment of other people, those qualities will come back and help your meditation.

For example with endurance: If you have trouble enduring other people's faults, you're not going to be very patient with your own. Now, patience here doesn't mean that you just sit with them and say they're okay. It means that you don't get worked-up. You look at them frankly and you look at them with the idea that "There's someplace there that I can make a difference, but I have to be very calm about this in order to see it." It's the same with endurance with other people. The Buddha's not saying you simply put up with other people's foibles. You put up with them, you don't feel like you're threatened by them, but at the same time, when your mind can be calm and balanced in the face of other people's faults, you're more likely to see the opportunity where something could be changed or a comment could be made and it would actually have a good effect. If you learn how to treat other people that way, it's going to be easier to treat your own defilements that way as well.

One of the main problems you often hear in meditation circles is that if you tell people they have to change, they get really upset. They get very critical of themselves, very upset very quickly. So instead, you have to teach them how to

learn how to accept themselves. Now, that's true up to a point. You have to accept the fact that you do have your faults, but you also have to accept that your mind can be changed. You accept your faults with a calm mind so that you can actually see where they are, what causes them, and how they can be turned into something good. So by showing some endurance in your dealings with other people, you're going to develop some endurance in your own meditation: a positive kind of endurance.

Think of it as the endurance of a warrior. The warrior doesn't practice endurance by giving up on the battle and accepting defeat as the final word. The endurance of the warrior is there so that the warrior can eventually win. But before there can be victory, the warrior has to put up with a lot of hardships, a lot of harsh words, painful feelings. But he doesn't just sit there and take them. After all, if you're a warrior, you're here for a victory. You endure the difficulties, but you keep fighting. So when you find yourself getting irritated by one another, remember that endurance is a virtue, and it helps you see clearly where something might be positively changed.

All too often we think of patience or endurance as a weakness—it's the virtue of people who have to put up with things because they can't do anything else. But that's not the Buddha's attitude. Remember he was a noble warrior. For him, the endurance of a warrior is necessary for victory. It means that on the way to victory, you have to put up with a lot of negative things and not get knocked over by them.

Similarly with harmlessness: It's not a virtue only for the weak. You want to be very careful about how you treat the people around you and to see that carefulness as a strength. The Buddha says basically that the worst way of doing harm to others is to get them to break the precepts. Of course, if you're careful not to get them to break the precepts, it'll help you keep your precepts, too.

Goodwill and sympathy, or goodwill and kindness: These are attitudes you want to bring to your dealings with others because they allow you to have goodwill for yourself, and to be kind to yourself, and to realize what kindness is. It doesn't mean you just indulge yourself or indulge your whims. To treat someone else with kindness means that you see where they have work they have to do and you want to help a little bit here, help a little bit there. You do favors for one another, but you don't do it in a way where you're showing off. Sometimes the secret favors are the ones most appreciated. You see there's a job that somebody else has to do but they're tired, so you look for a time when you can sneak in and do it and then get out, without their having to know who did it. But they *will* see that the job is done, and that creates a better mood in the group as a whole.

And as you learn how to sympathize with other people's desire for well-being, it makes it easier for you to sympathize with your own. You realize that other people would appreciate your skillful actions, and you learn how to appreciate yours.

Appreciation of your skill is an important principle in the practice. When you're sitting here breathing, sometimes it gets mechanical and it feels like a chore. You have to remind yourself: You're here doing something skillful. You're getting the mind to settle in, you're giving it the opportunity to be sensitive to what's going on in the body, what's going on in the mind, and then learn how to develop some skill. If you can appreciate your skill—when you develop just the right touch as you adjust the breath, and you learn how to enjoy that—the meditation becomes much more pleasant, goes deeper into the heart.

The Buddha talks about trying to develop a sense of ease, a sense of fullness or refreshment in the concentration. Sometimes it's there but we don't appreciate it, and when we don't appreciate it, it just sloughs off and it doesn't have that much of an effect. But if you allow yourself to appreciate your skillful actions, then it begins to soften up the mind—softening it in the sense of making it more sensitive—and when it's more sensitive, things will open up inside that have been closed.

Sometimes, when you're working with the breath energy, there are parts of the body that seem to be recalcitrant. They don't respond to your efforts to make things comfortable. Well, you work around them. The reason they're not responsive is that they've learned not to trust you. You've been abusing them by pushing energy here pushing energy there, often subconsciously. But if you make it clear that you're going to treat them now with kindness and gentleness, it'll take a while but eventually they'll open up. And when the knots of breath energy open up, often something hidden in the mind will open up as well, and you'll be able to deal with it skillfully.

You learn this principle in your dealings with other people. You learn how to be kind to other people, even people who have been difficult. Especially with people who've been difficult, you want to be very sensitive to what ways you might do a little something for them here and do a little something for them there. At the very least it softens your attitude and it very well may soften up theirs.

This way, the benefits of treating one another with kindness will seep back into your own mind, seep back into your own meditation.

I was reading a while back some stories about the Southern Paiutes. They talked about how important it is to listen to the land, but they also noted that if you're going to get a message from the land, you first have to give something to it. One of the recommendations I really liked was that if you wanted to get a message

from a stream, you had to find a nice rock to put in the stream, something it would like to flow over. The same principle goes with your dealings with other people. Learn to be generous first: generous with your endurance, generous with your harmlessness, generous with your goodwill and your kindness. And the results will come back in two ways: one, from the other people; and two, in your own dealings with your own mind.

Because all too often the problems we have in dealing with our own mind come from the fact that we've picked up bad ways of interacting with other people—maybe from our families, maybe from friends, maybe from the media—and we bring them in and we treat ourselves in harsh and insensitive ways because that's the kind of treatment we've seen around us. But when you consciously try to bring these attitudes of endurance, harmlessness, goodwill, and sympathy or kindness into your dealings with other people, you find that you start dealing with your own mind in that way as well. And that makes the meditation go a lot better. You can put up with dry periods in your meditation and not feel defeated. You can develop the attitude that you just keep at the meditation and not get discouraged. And when things *do* go well, you learn how to appreciate it. This way, the meditation becomes an activity that you really look forward to, and you do develop the kind of sensitivity that's going to be an important part of your discernment into suffering and its causes.

So the outside helps the in; the inside helps the out. Sometimes Theravada is criticized for being focused solely on getting your mind in shape and not caring about others, but that's not the case. From the Buddha's point of view, there is no clear line between the goodness you do to your own mind and the goodness you do to others. They nurture one another. So try to develop goodness in both directions.