

Sanity for the Holidays

December 11, 2020

In the past, we used to have people coming into the monastery at this time of year to escape the holidays. Here there's no mention of the holidays, no mention of Christmas, almost nothing to remind you that there is such a thing. No Christmas carols, no Santa Claus. People found that more than just refreshing. It was an island of sanity.

This year, of course, they can't come. But in dealing with our relatives, dealing with friends at this time of year, we have to maintain our own island of sanity.

It's good to think of that image of the acrobats, the one where the Buddha says when you're doing your practice by looking after yourself, you're looking after others; and when you're looking after others, you're looking after yourself. The principle of looking after others by looking after yourself is illustrated by the acrobats. Each acrobat maintains his or her own sense of balance and, in that way, helps the other.

Unfortunately, there's no image for the other side, the principle of looking after yourself by looking after others. But the Buddha does give an analysis. He talks about the four qualities you've got to bring to your dealings with other people that are also strengths in your own mind. When you regard them as strengths, it makes it a lot easier to deal with difficult people.

Sometimes we think the Buddha doesn't appreciate the difficulties of family life. But after all, he escaped. As he said, household life is dusty, confining. He wanted to get out. When he gave that image of the fact that no matter who you meet, it would be very hard to meet somebody who hadn't been your mother at some point, hadn't been your father, hadn't been your sister or brother, your son or your daughter, he didn't make it a reason for compassion. He made it a reason for samvega. Think of all those different family lives and all the difficulties of family lives. It's enough, he said, to make you want to get out. So he did appreciate the difficulties of family life.

In fact, two of the qualities he talks about being exercised in dealing with other people suggest that it's normal for you to be dealing with difficulties. One is patience and the other is equanimity. They work together but they're not quite the same thing.

Patience is when you don't react to other people's outrageous behavior. You show forbearance.

There's a passage in the Canon where the devas and the asuras have been fighting for control of heaven, and they finally decide to have a debate to settle the issue. And the debate is precisely on this: Should you show forbearance when other people are mistreating you? The devas say Yes, and the asuras say No. The asuras' reasoning is that other people will see it as weakness. But the devas say, "It's your karma, and whether other people see it as weakness is not the issue. You have to maintain your own purity." The devas won.

It's in this way that dealing with other people, showing patience and showing equanimity, actually do benefit you. These qualities become your guarantees that you're not going to overreact and you're not going to react in unskillful ways. Patience is the not reacting, whereas equanimity is maintaining an emotional even keel. Both of these require talking to yourself, reminding yourself that when you came into this world, if you didn't have your family, didn't have someone to look after you, say you were just lying on the street someplace, you'd die. It's only in the heavens and the hells that beings are born without parents and can survive perfectly well. But here we need parents, we need relatives, we need people to look after us. As they say, it takes a whole village to raise a child. It's from your family that you learn how to speak, how to walk—all your basic skills that you now take for granted.

So when members of the family are difficult, remind yourself that you do have a debt of gratitude to them. That makes it easier to put up with some of the outrageous things that people will do and say. In that way, you can maintain your inner stability and not react in unskillful ways, in ways that you're going to later regret.

The other two qualities the Buddha talks about are a mind of sympathy and goodwill. Goodwill is a simple wish for happiness. Of course, from the Buddha's perspective, that means wishing that other people will behave in a skillful way. Sympathy is when you go more out of your way to show kindness. So when there are opportunities to show some kindness, remind yourself that you're developing a good quality in yourself.

The same with goodwill: One of the reasons we develop goodwill is that it enables us to trust ourselves around difficult people, to make sure that we don't end up saying things and doing things that would be harmful. As long as you're acting on goodwill, if you *do* say something that ends up causing trouble, it's a lot easier to live with yourself. If you were acting on ill will and you said something that caused trouble, you'd tend to get very defensive, and then you wouldn't learn. But making goodwill as your default motivation, if you make a mistake, you

realize it didn't come from any ill will, it was unintended. Then it's a lot easier to learn.

So as you develop these virtues—patience, equanimity, goodwill, sympathy—they make it a lot easier to deal with other people, and they strengthen good qualities in your own mind, qualities you're going to need in the practice.

I was reading an interesting passage today where the Buddha's talking about good people living together and bad people living together. Bad people living together don't want to correct other people, because they're afraid they'll get corrected, and they'll be corrected out of a mind of no sympathy.

This is a theme that comes in the suttas again and again: that one of the benefits of living in a community like this is that if other people see that you're doing something that's unskillful, they can talk to you about it. But they have to talk about it in the right way, again, with a mind of sympathy, goodwill, patience, and equanimity. Then you benefit. You've got the advantage of someone else's pair of eyes. As the Buddha said, if wise people point out your faults, you should see it as another person pointing out treasure to you. Because if you don't see your faults, how are you going to solve them? How are you going to make up for them? So learn how to take criticism well.

This is why we have the rule for the monks that if someone criticizes you, you have to show respect to that person. Now, whether that person's criticism is valid or not, that's another matter. You're not obliged to follow what they say if it has nothing to do with the rules, nothing to do with the Dhamma. If it's just that person's feelings spouting off, you learn how to let it go. If you can't let it go, there's a lot of trouble.

I was talking to someone the other day who was saying, "If someone says something wrong, how can you not correct it? How can you just let it go?" If you go around straightening everybody out, one, are they going to be willing to be straightened out? And two, you have no time for yourself.

I know in my own case, Ajaan Fuang gave me more criticism than anybody else I've ever been around, and it took a while to develop the right attitude toward it. But I found that I learned. And having gotten criticism from him made it a lot easier to listen to criticism from other people. Again, I may not have agreed with what those people had to say, but simply the fact that other people were seeing me in a critical light didn't get me all worked up. This is a good habit to develop, so that when you go out from the monastery or are dealing with other people in your family, in your work, you can take criticism a lot more easily. That helps with your patience and equanimity.

Now, they may be giving you the criticism not with goodwill and not with a sympathetic mind. But you never know: Maybe they mean well. When you can let the fact of criticism go past you, while you try to take what's valuable from it and leave the rest, that makes it a *lot* easier to deal with difficult people in all kinds of difficult situations.

Because one of the hardest situations in which to maintain your equanimity or patience is when people start yelling at you, saying very unpleasant things. You have to learn to turn off the vacuum cleaner in your mind, the part that takes up the dirt. Then you find you can just let the dirt go past. There's almost a physical feeling of sucking it in when you're ordinarily getting upset, and then turning off that vacuum so that things can go past, you can see them go past.

So for difficulties, let them go past. Maintain your even keel. In that way, you benefit, and the people around you benefit as well.