

Even a donkey can be wise¹

One day, a farmer's old donkey (or ass) fell down into a well. He brayed loudly and piteously as the farmer tried to figure out what to do. Finally, he decided that the animal was old and useless, and the well needed to be covered up anyway.

The farmer called out to his workers and neighbours to help him. With shovels and hoes, they began to throw dirt into the well to fill it up. At first, the donkey panicked and brayed even more loudly.

Then, to everyone's amazement, he stopped braying. Thinking it was dead, the people shovelled and pushed the dirt harder and faster into the wall, to make sure that the carcass is well covered up. Moreover, it was getting dark, and they hurried up to finish the task.

Finally, the farmer and his workers could hear that the dirt level was well near the top, so that they were close to covering up the well. When he stopped work for a moment to look at the well, he was shocked to see a dark shape standing where the well was. It was the donkey!

He had been shaking off all the dirt as it fell on his back, and stepping on it. As the level of dirt quickly rose, so too did the donkey reach nearer the top of the well. Finally, when he was near enough to the opening, he exerted all his strength, despite his age. His will to live did the rest. As soon as he came out of the well, he happily trotted off into the dark, hee-hawing happily away into the silent distance, never to return.²

This story may mean different things to different people. The basic idea is that in a difficult situation, if we examine it carefully, we would find a way out. Don't fight it, but work with it, as it were. A problem is simply an opinion about a difficulty before us. The solution begins with thinking rightly about it. Since it is an opinion, we can any time change it, and re-look at the whole situation again, and again, until we know just what to do.

While a problem might seem to involve an external situation that seems to be beyond our control, we can decide how to think about it. Here are four guidelines on how to do this:

(1) When people need help – Give

People always need some kind of help, whether they know it or not. The best help we can give others is by being kind to them, at least to communicate happily with them. Very often, it is not *what* help we give, but *how* we give it that counts. Material gifts have a limited life-span, but when we touch the lives of others, it is forever, as it were.

The best gift we can give here is perhaps by listening wisely. Carefully listen to what the person has to say. At the right time, we can apply "the four-step problem-solving" method:

- (a) ask him to clearly define how he feels;
- (b) ask why he feels that way;
- (c) invite him to look at all the possible scenarios or alternatives available to him;
- (d) help him to work out a clear guideline for action.

¹ The modern fable is found in a number of places on the Internet, but is here retold as a problem-solver.

² A humorous version of this story adds that the donkey, angry at the farmer's unkindness, bit him as soon as he got out of the well. Moral: When you've done a wrong and try to cover up your ass, it might come back to bite you.

(2) When we fail – Forgive

Often enough, we feel that we have failed, or that we are not good enough. We should apply the same “four-step problem-solving” method here. Ask ourselves what exactly is troubling us. Define the problem, the “enemy” is clearly seen: what is seen is easier to deal with.

Next, we should ask why we feel this way. Is it because we are comparing ourselves to someone else (or perhaps because of something someone said to us)? If we take someone else as our standard of happiness, we are looking away from our own hearts wherein lie the roots of our problems and their solutions.

Even when we feel that we have really failed, things are never as bad as we make them to be. To admit failure, even privately, is to begin to work out of it. We need to carefully reflect on these four questions. *Where did we really fail? Why did we fail? What should we have done? What have learned from this failure?*

Spend quiet time alone in a peaceful place that you like. Sit quietly and recall a very happy moment in your life (such as a very happy event, or a beautiful place you have been to). Once you feel some level of joy, let go of the images. Now tell yourself, “I forgive myself completely. I accept myself unconditionally.” Go on repeating this until it becomes natural to you. In time, you will see the value of this unconditional self-acceptance.

(3) When others fail us -- Forget

No matter how kind others may be to us, they cannot always help us in every way. They have their lives, their inclinations, and limited resources. Just as we are, so are they. As we know people better, this understanding deepens.

Sometimes some people can be really nasty to us, or are very uncaring. Again, we cannot always know all the true reasons for this. Even if we do know the reasons, but cannot do anything about it (at least for the moment), we must forget such negative aspects of others. The rule is simple: just as we want others not to remember our failures, so too we should not remember theirs.

Make extra effort to remember the goodness of others. When we have a chance to chat with them, we can then do so positively. Our relationships with people, even the worst of them, can change for the better – if we allow time to heal. Once the event is over, it should be left in the past. Notice how our views of the past change with time. The secret is to look at it with lovingkindness, no matter what.

(4) When the situation seems bad -- Forbear

We all at some point want to change the world, or see it change. Yet we would change our minds in time. Imagine if everyone’s prayers were answered! The world would simply be devastated. The point is that we might not be able to change the world, but we can change our view of it. Or better, we can change our selves: for, we are the real world.³

So we need to give, forgive, forget, and forbear, each in its own time. Meantime, *when life shovels dirt upon us, let us plant flowers and fruits.*

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³ See “Worlds of our own”: <http://dharmafarer.org/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2009/11/091216-Worlds-of-Our-Own-rev3.pdf> & “We are the world”: <http://dharmafarer.org/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2009/11/48-We-are-the-world-110629.pdf>