

Self-destruct or self-construct?

The papers in recent years often report on self-destructive behaviour. A couple of years back, a young local high-IQ medical student studying in the UK lost his scholarship and career after he was discovered being involved in child pornography. A growing number of promising successful professionals (even an MP) in Singapore were scandalized for having extra-marital affairs.

In Jan 2012 a student at a local university killed herself in her own dorm by covering her head with a plastic bag. Another university student ran amok, attacked his lecturer, and then jumped off a high building, killing himself. A breadwinner who faced financial disaster, killed his wife and children, and then himself. There are many other reports of such tragedies and self-destructive cases.

We might never know exactly what triggered such self-destruction in those who have died. Those close to the ones who survived might, in private moments, get some precious insights. There is a lot we can learn from all this by way of healing ourselves and preventing such self-destructive conduct. To keep our reflection short and sharp, let us ask a meaningful question: Why do very good people do very bad things? Let us try to put ourselves in the shoes of these self-destructive people.

One point stands out clearly: worldly success is not a guarantee against self-destructive acts. People who know these self-destructors often confess shock and surprise at their self-destructivity. Let us try to put ourselves into their shoes. Perhaps many of us (as self-destructors) do not share our deepest feelings or pains, for fear of rejection. So we have secret lives.

Or perhaps, we do try to find people to share our troubles with, but either they dismiss them, or are simply unable to help us.¹ More often, it is impossible to find someone kind or wise enough to listen to us in such moments. So we suffer alone: in trying to drown our sorrows, we actually drown in self-destruction.

The underpinning question is who, or better, what conditions lead to such self-destructive conduct? One key notion is how we define happiness. Very often, we are reminded that money, things and titles – what we *have* – define us. But almost everyone in the game seems to be grasping at the same grapes. We seem to be measured by how much grapes we have, or don't.

Perhaps our parents, teachers, leaders or peers frequently compare themselves or us to others who are perceived as being "successful." But people's tastes keep changing: we are only keeping up with "Simon says." The point is: what we "have" only works externally in a physical way. What we "are," works with our minds and hearts. We may "have" things, but to "be" happy is a matter of our whole being.²

Some well-intentioned people might tell us what to "have" and what to "do." For, they claim, if we "have" things, then we "are" happy. But, if we are what we have, and we lose what we have, then what are we? We have nothing, we are nothing! On the other hand, if we *are* really happy, then what we have, even if a little, we are still very happy – because we are in touch with ourselves.

¹ See Piya Tan, "How self-healing works" (R87), *Simple Joys*, 2009: ch 2.1: <http://dharmafarer.org/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2009/11/09-0624-How-self-healing-works-2.1.pdf>

² Piya Tan, "To have or to be" (R166), *Simple Joys 2*, 2011: ch 43: <http://dharmafarer.org/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2009/11/28-To-have-or-to-be-101208.pdf>

My greatest blessing is to know the true Buddhist spirit of self-acceptance and spiritual friendship. The first thing the Buddha teaches us is to build up our moral fibre, which begins with fully accepting ourselves as we are, warts and all. This means we must honestly accept our weaknesses and lapses, and check their true nature regularly in our quiet moments.

Next, we need some "heart culture," that is, doing what we are good at and what we love doing. I love the suttas (early Buddhist teachings), and have been studying them for the last 40 years. Translating and teaching the suttas keeps bringing out the best in us. My loving wife, too, loves the suttas, and through our common love, we are able to draw more people worldwide happily to the Dharma.

A lot of people with troubles talk with us. We try our best to listen to them. Often, just listening is healing. More often, they need some guidance to destress themselves and to sort out their issues. Many such problems are deep-rooted or chronic, so we need to be true-hearted friends: good listeners and smilers.

People often thank us for sharing their lives. The fact is that we should thank those who bravely and honestly share their pains with us: we are the ones who actually learn more about life without having to taste their bitter fruits. Many of these reflections I have written celebrate their hearts' triumphs or echo their struggles. Suffering is a great teacher if we are willing to be good students.

One of our greatest failures here might be the feeling that we are unable to help others. Then we should re-examine the meaning of "help." Helping others is not a thing or event, but a *relationship*, a spiritual friendship. Our friendliness tells others, "I accept you just as you are. I'm here for you." Often, merely such an assurance is good enough to value-add to another's self-esteem.

"Someone cares for me," or "Someone loves me," are great boosters to the self-respect and moral growth in others. In our kindness, no matter how awkward, we often surprise ourselves in a fulfilling way. We should grow and age like a big tree, providing fruits and shade for others. Remember the Buddha sitting radiantly under the bodhi tree, waiting for us whenever we need someone to heal us.

As the evening of our lives sets upon us, we should not mind too much matters; for, the mind matters more than. To age gracefully is to smile at our follies, and to unconditionally accept others. Those who hate us for our follies probably have not resolved their own, or have yet to learn from their own sufferings.³ We should with compassion be ever ready to catch them when they fall. For, compassion is kindness to them even when they do not deserve it: it is nurturing the unborn good in others.

If we keep on stretching our arms out to others in need, they (our arms and others) only become stronger. In being kind to others, we become kinder to ourselves in the long run. We should not be disappointed by those who let us down or reject us, because they sadly lack love in the first place. Those who compassionately and wisely listen to us are our true-hearted friends. If we cannot find any, let's start being one ourself. Self-cultivation begins that way.

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³ See Piya Tan, "Falling in love, staying in love" (R225) 120201: <http://dharmafarer.org/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2009/11/71-Falling-in-love-staying-in-love-120201.pdf>