

Freeing pain

When an acquaintance honestly tells us how she's suffering, she's no more an acquaintance: she's truly a friend, even a relative. For, mutual trust makes us the truest relatives (Dh 204).¹ If we are good listeners, even if we have no advice to give, we are true-hearted friends.² If we are able to give wise advice or helpful healing, then we are spiritual friends.³

Being true-hearted and good to one another, we are friends "through thick and thin," as **the Sigāl'ovāda Sutta** says, that is, we are constant to each other in joy and in sorrow, in wealth or in dearth. Such a true friend tells us her secrets; she keeps our secrets; she does not abandon us in our troubles; she would even give up her life for us.⁴ These are teachings given by the Buddha to the busy or worldly lay person, as a sort of first aid and last resort to a happy life, as far as busy worldly lives go.

One "secret" a close suffering friend once told us (my wife and I) was that although we had been so compassionate and comforting to her, deep down, she still felt some anger towards those who had hurt her and towards her own failures. She knew this was bad but was working on it.

The phrase "deep down" is very significant here, because these are the latent tendencies. As unawakened beings, we should hold them down there so that they do not infect our lives, by reminding ourselves to stay human, that is, keeping to the five precepts with lovingkindness. Indeed, without lovingkindness, we will not be able to fully or truly keep to the precepts: we need the power of love to be kind to ourselves and to others.

She used to tell us how the lack of love in her family stunted her own emotional growth. We told her that this knowing meant that she was calling a spade a spade: she was courageously accepting the realities of her life. This is where self-healing, even if slow, surely begins. In fact, she worked part-time in various places and also did her own business to support both herself and her dysfunctional family. "Labour of love" takes on a rich living meaning here.

Her compassion was clearly there. As her friends, we tried to regularly remind her of this (such as in this reflection). When we see others as constantly hurting us, we tend to lose touch with our own goodness. It's like when we are in the dark and we curse the darkness; instead we should light a candle, or look for the switch to turn on the lights.

We are more likely to notice our dark shadows in the absence of the joyful light of our kind and happy true friends. When such friends are absent, we often become distracted, and so anger easily manifests itself. We are caught up in thinking, "She abused me! She beat me! She defeated me! She stole from me! She rejected me!" Each time we do this, we are only opening up old wounds, making them fester. This is a "victim mentality" (Dh 3-4).⁵

There are those amongst us who sometimes fall into the asura plane even here and now.⁶ They are really helpless as they are compelled to hurt others, mainly because they have fallen into the rut of their own past pains. We are not always strong enough on our own. So we

¹ See **Spiritual friendship: a textual study**, SD 34.1 (2.2): <http://dharmafarer.org/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2010/02/34.1-Spiritual-friendship-a-textual-study-piya.pdf>

² See **Sigāl,ovāda Sutta** (D 31,21-26/3:187 f), SD 4.1: <http://dharmafarer.org/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2009/12/4.1-Sigalovada-S-d31-piya.pdf>

³ See **Spiritual friendship**, SD 8.1: <http://dharmafarer.org/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2009/12/8.1-Spiritual-friendship-piya.pdf>

⁴ **Sigāl,ovāda Sutta** (D 31,23/3:187), SD 4.1: <http://dharmafarer.org/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2009/12/4.1-Sigalovada-S-d31-piya.pdf>

⁵ See "Don't own the pain" (R122), in Piya Tan, *Simple Joys 2*, Singapore, 2011:59 (ch 19): <http://dharmafarer.org/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2009/12/100203-Don't-own-the-pain.pdf>

⁶ See "We are not born human" (R216): <http://dharmafarer.org/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2009/12/RB44-Not-born-human-111130.pdf>

feel victimized. In feeling so, we are only feeding the darkness in the inner asuras. Only in our moral strength – especially learning to say “No!” to them -- that we actually help ourselves and humanize the asura, even if in a small way at first.

One way to overcome the victim mentality is to understand the nature of karma and compassion. The bad that we do tail us, lurking in the darkness of our lives, and haunt us even in our after-lives. Notice how the lives of such people are never really happy despite their appearing so. The saddest part is that they are unable or unwilling to see what really ails them, so that they can't climb out of their deep rut. That is why we must keep on sending our lovingkindness to even those who have hurt us. They are more helpless than we are.

Compassion, as exemplified by the Buddha, is kindness shown to even those who do not deserve it. We do not deserve the happy and liberating teachings of the Buddha. He has nothing to gain from our calling ourselves Buddhists. We “use” Buddhism to help and heal ourselves. Boundless is the Buddha's compassion.

We do not deserve the bad that others try to hurl at us. These bad people, too, do not deserve to do any bad, for dirt soils those who hurl them, too. Either they do not know that their actions are bad, or they are helpless in doing so. Either way they are generating enormous bad karma, and suffering its consequences, whether they know it or not.

In **the Mūla Sutta** (A 3.69), the Buddha declares that when a person is overcome by greed, hate or delusion, he “wrongly inflicts suffering on another by killing, or by binding and confining, or by incurring losses, or by blaming, or by banishing, thinking, ‘I'm powerful! This is for the sake of power!’” This is clearly very bad karma.⁷

If we are not mindful or strong enough, **the Maṅgala Sutta** (Sn 2.4) advises that it is for our own true blessing to avoid such people.⁸ To ward off such darkness, we should keep our loving light burning bright. The secret is to be simply happy with the good we feel and the good we are doing.

The flowering plants and fruit trees welcome the rains and storms, and rise refreshed after that to stand in the sunshine to flower and fruit. The tall proud trees, once they fall, never rise again. Let us be like the gentle fruity trees and flowery plants, joyfully giving shade to others in their pains.

Even when people do not thank us for our kindness nor show any appreciation, we should never look back at our actions as being in vain or regrettable. We are not them. When we are able to help others, this shows that we are moved by compassion. By the same token, we could be the one at the other end, one being shown that compassion. Here, it is meaningful to say that it's better to give than to receive. For, the more we give, the more we are.

Often, negative people are too hurt or lost in themselves to be able to see the goodness in others. Yet, for ourselves, we need to be more mindful and show our appreciation in the good that others show to us. This is called “gladness”: we rejoice in the goodness and happiness of others. This is like the colourful fragrant plants flowering and the fertile trees fruiting looking up in the bright sun.

May those who inflict pain upon us, see their own suffering, and be free from it.

May those who are suffering, see that there are many others in even greater pain, and so accept themselves with compassion.

⁷ A 3.69/1:201-209 = SD 18.2: <http://dharmafarer.org/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2009/12/18.2-Mula-S-a3.69-piya.pdf>

⁸ Sn 2.4/258-269/46 f.

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When we see others in pain, let us see our own good karma as a sweet well under a shady tree giving them comfort and wisdom, even when they don't deserve it.

When we are unable to help others, or fail to do so, let us blame no one, but understand the conditions that prevail. May we learn from all this and be happily wiser.

As the storm rages around us, let us keep a still centre in the eye of the storm. It will all soon pass.

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