

## **Dont' try to stop changing**

A single mother had serious problems with the violent behaviour of her only son, a young teenager. Her husband tragically passed away when their son was midway in primary school. The mother approached Buddhist counsellors for help as she could not afford professional help, and she was afraid that her only son might be taken into a “structured environment,” that is, sent to reform school.

The Buddhist counsellors were a husband-and-wife team, so while the wife counselled the mother, the husband befriended the son. “Do you like curry puffs?” he asked him. “Yes!” his eyes lit up (rapport at once established). Then, he took him to the snack store in the building, and walked around with him. So the mentoring had begun.

“See, there are three lifts here, but only one goes to the 7<sup>th</sup> floor.” The young boy’s curiosity was piqued. He was of course curious where it led to. They took that the lift and reached the 7<sup>th</sup> floor. It was mostly open and unsheltered, with a great view. They could see the sky and stars. He looked at the night skyline and the wide roads below. “It’s beautiful! And there’s very few traffic!” said the boy.

He seemed to be very attentive and positive. So their friendship deepened, and the mentor casually asked him about school and his family. Feeling relaxed and cordial, he freely answered the questions in a forthcoming way. “I like English and maths. I’ve three close friends in school, and we often meet and play during recess.”

The mentor then gave him copies of his own book of reflections and one of sutta translations. He readily accepted the gift, as he loved books.

When his mother’s counselling session ended, she was surprised to see her son chatting warmly and playing Lego with the mentor. She intimated to the counsellor that he had simply clammed up during his session with a clinical counsellor; now he was so open!

After that one session of Buddhist counselling, the boy changed remarkably. Early in the morning the very next day, the boy’s mother phoned up and excitedly told the counsellor that her son had browsed the books and was fascinated with the teachings on the 4 elements (earth, water, fire and wind)!<sup>1</sup> His Dharma journey has begun.

He even owned up that he was wrong in being angry and violent to his mother. She was overwhelmed with joy, and became close friends with the counsellor, as there was no more need for counselling. Buddhist counselling works wonders when properly applied and the conditions for healing are right.

The “right conditions” here include the boy’s formative age, attentiveness and a growing EQ. All he needed, it seemed, was a father-figure he could relate to. This is a true story, and a very happy one. However, not all cases are so serendipitous.

In an earlier case, the husband-and-wife Buddhist worker team was running a before-and-after-school care centre. One of the most difficult cases they had to deal with was that of an abusive mother and her only son, a mischievous but intelligent boy. Since the boy was adopted, her husband simply neglected him. Hence, he lacked a much needed father-figure at such a formative young age.

On account of his habitual mischiefs, he was made to confess them in church every Sunday. Whenever he fell into mischief, his mother would cane him hard. When that was not enough, she would also force-feed him with hot chili. There were occasions when the mother would even come over to the student-care centre with a cane, and openly caned him before every-

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<sup>1</sup> See Reflection “[Emotional independence or emotional alienation?](#)” R180 2011.

one else, despite the protest of the care-giver and terrifying the other children and parents. Such abuses came to a point where the boy understandably refused to go home one day, fearing that he would be abused again.

By this time, the situation was so much out of control that the care-giver had to call up the authorities for the safety of the boy and the sake of his mother. After interviewing both the mother and her son, and other assessments, the boy was taken into the “structured environment” of a children’s home. In less than a year, he was discharged and reconciled with a gentler mother.

Such cases remind us of the need for positive parental guidance and love during the child’s formative years. No children are born the same, but they all share some growing pains. Often, the pains arise from the parents’ neglect or unwise guidance.

Basically, parents use either the power-mode or the love-mode in raising their children. The “**power-mode**” is to impose authority – which may be cultural, ethnic or religious – to force or mould the child into a set pattern of behaviour, essentially to shadow the parents.

The power-mode – as in power-based God-religions – is likely to produce persons who tend to dominate others. Such a mindset also later contributes to a marriage or partnership where one partner tries to dominate the other, and end up with a lop-sided, unhappy coupling. In work, a power-mode person is an asura<sup>2</sup> who exploits others, so that the working environment becomes stressful and negative, to say the least.

The situation becomes even worse, if such a person were to become a religious teacher or leader. He would be caught in the power rut of narcissism. Sujato Bhikkhu shares his familiar experience and valuable insight here:

“Narcissists, perhaps alone among those with serious mental issues, are often not dysfunctional at all, and in fact their conviction and forcefulness make them very effective in jobs that require authority. Politics, business, celebrities, and yes, religions, are full of narcissists. They are singly focused on getting and maintaining power, and are often much more successful at it than people with a more balanced approach to things. And when someone with a clinical narcissistic disorder is, say, running a country or a corporation or a Buddhist organization, trouble is never far away.

What struck me recently, though, is how *predictable* narcissism is. The same thought patterns, same ideas, same obsessions. If you’ve been bullied by one narcissist, you’ve been bullied by them all....

A narcissist will always want power over others, who are inevitably seen as a threat, unless they acknowledge the narcissist’s unquestionable superiority. One way they assert power is to make some kind of criticism of the other. It doesn't really matter what, anything will do...

They just make the criticism and move on. While the other party is responding, they just make another criticism. The lack of factually is irrelevant. A true narcissist can never be wrong, for truth is defined by their utterance.”<sup>3</sup>

Whether it is child-raising in a family, or teaching Buddhism (an extension of child-raising beyond the biological family), it must never be power-based. We will then only add on to perpetuating a pathological individual, a pathological community, a crowd of loose ego bal-

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<sup>2</sup> As a psychological state, the asura is an embodiment of a violent narcissistic demon: [SD 40a.1](#) (11.2.2). On their mythical origins, see [Isayo Samuddaka Sutta](#) (S 11.10) @ SD 39.2 (1). This state is overcome by charity, lovingkindness and wisdom: [Yava, kalāpi Sutta](#) (S 35.248,6-7), SD 40a.3 & [Myth in Buddhism](#), SD 36.1 (4.3.1+2).

<sup>3</sup> <http://sujato.wordpress.com/2014/07/31/narcissim-and-absence/>

loons flying helter skelter in life's clouded thunderous sky and bursting as they climb into the thin air of the religious stratosphere.

The fault of our human frailties lies not in the stars nor in our parents or families or societies, but in the conditions we have chosen or created for ourselves. So we must first recognize these conditions. This may be the way we think or the work we are doing. How we think may be rooted in the crowd we keep or the kind of religion we follow.

When we understand the conditions that define our problems, we begin to see what brings them about. If we have difficulty seeing these conditions, we should search the suttas or seek the counsel of those rooted in the Dharma. For, the suttas and the Dharma are all about conditions: how things arise and how they end. Everything changes, but we can all change for the better.

Seeing change alone brings us pain, especially if we are full of desires and narcissistic tendencies. We suffer because we only love our self (we may not even know this), but the pain remains that we are unloving. Hence, we must switch to the **love mode**. To truly love is to accept change within ourselves, in others, and in everything else. True love is unconditionally accepting ourselves and others.

When we accept that it is in the nature of persons and things to change, we begin to value and respect them (to respect basically means to accept others as they are). To love, then, is to accept change, to know that even our children, our spouses, our relatives, our friends, our neighbours, those we know, even those whom we do not know, will change, become other, become better. We too will change, become other, become better – if we don't try to stop changing.

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