

Can I help?

At some point in our lives, or even right now, we wish that someone would help us. We have this nagging problem with someone, or with a job, or with love, or with a religion, or maybe we just don't feel right about ourself, our life, our destiny. We simply do not know where to turn to.

Our friends, who have a lot to tell us, seem to only see the "big picture," their private order of things, into which we never really fit. In fact, they are unable to think about real people, individuals with real problems. They are themselves really helpless when we truly need help.

"Come to me any time you need help," they proclaim. But when we do ask for help, they switch wavelengths and tell us how "fortunate" we are because they know someone else who have a bigger problem. Or, they might relate some long tale of their own personal misfortune to show how insignificant our own suffering is. In short, they are not even listening.

The point here is that when someone tells us his problem, we should know at least two vital things. Firstly, he looks up to us as someone who is able to help. Secondly, he is in some kind of difficulty and at least needs active listening.

Imagine someone drowning in a river, precariously holding on to a tree-root. And we tell him, "It's all right! There are others who have been swept away!" A wise and compassionate person, however, would at once stretch out his hand or a strong branch to help him out.

A person may not be drowning, but his problem is real and troubling enough to him. We have been such a person at some point in the past. The roles are now switched around, but still the other person is not us. So we need to accept him just as he is.

We do not know enough of this person to write him off. (Even when we know a person well, we should not write him off.) It's more helpful, however, if we tell him, "Never mind," meaning that he should not think too much about the problem. Instead, he should be told to examine the conditions that brought about the problem in the first place. There are four basic stages to this self-help process.

First, help the person to state the problem clearly: what really is troubling him. Then identify the conditions bringing about the problem. Thirdly, which conditions can he resolve to begin lessening, even solving, the problem. Finally, teach the person to see positive aspects of the whole situation, some happy moment in his life, as the seeds for inner joy, a still centre in his life's storm.

Sometimes, someone we know well might try to unload his problems onto us. However, if we for once try to put ourselves in that person's shoes (to empathize him), we may appreciate his situation better. So it helps to remember that compassion is kindness shown to others even when they do not deserve it.

Gratitude, on the other hand, is kindness we "owe" someone who has been kind to us and we need to "return" it at some point. Some of us have a sort of numerical or measurable idea of kindness: "You help me once, I help you once, so now I owe you nothing." But karma is not measurable; its fruits have surprising potentials.

If we examine our own lives, more people than we can remember or know have helped us at different times so that we have arrived at the good that we enjoy now. It is really impossible to pay back such kindness shown to us. And if we believe in rebirth, we know that we are all somehow related and connected. Often, we are friends who have not yet met. As such, it makes sense to be kind to anyone who really needs help.

Yet, as our wisdom grows, we would realize that no one else can really solve, or should solve, our personal problems. The reason for this is simple enough: we are the person who

knows our problem best. Notice the “who” here is not a fixed person (there is none), but a relationship between our mind and the issue (what our mind is yet unable to see or resolve). So, let us forget about “who” is right, “who” is wrong, at least for the moment.

In other words, do not own the pain. This begins with our not using, at least minimizing, the usage of the pronouns “I,” “me” and “mine.” For example, if we are angry, instead of thinking or saying, “I am angry,” simply note or accept the fact, “This is anger.” Since it is something negative, we must reject it: “This anger is bad. It is harmful. It is not mine. I don’t want it. I’m letting it go.” Try this simple exercise when you do feel angry.¹

Although this exercise applies best to anger, it could well work for other negative emotions, too, if we are focused enough, and use the language of “not owning the pain.” The point to understand here is that it is when we “locate” the pain upon our self, it reifies itself: we make it more real that what it really is. (In this sense, too, the early Buddhists do not locate the mind anywhere in the body.)²

Here, it helps to understand that there are two kinds of realities, at least in terms of problem solving. There is a worldly reality and a mental reality. “Worldly reality” here refers to the working of our five senses. Our senses are our world, that is, our eye, ear nose, tongue, and body.³ They literally create our world of sight, sound, smell, taste and touch. This is our physical world. It is a constantly shifting world. Only this shifting is constant: true, this is a play on words, but it helps us understand our world’s true nature.

Our five physical senses are like five phones ringing at the same time, each demanding our attention. We might try to answer as many of these phones as we can. Often we would look at the caller ID and decide whether to answer them or not, or to answer right away or to call back later.⁴

The fact is that we can only effectively answer one phone at a time. Of course, we could have a sort of phone conference, where we connect with a number of persons. Still, we can only effectively listen to one person at a time, if we are to make any good sense of what is being said or done.

Perhaps, we are trying to please a lot of people. However, if we try to please everyone, we really please none. Notice how absurd it sounds (to the careful thinker) to declare that “we are praying to save everyone” or for “world peace.” The most practical “world peace” we can have is to cultivate it with all our senses. When our world is at peace, we inspire others to feel the same, and so peace grows.

So here we have the second kind of reality: the “mental reality.” In important ways, how we *think* defines how we *sense* things. In other words, the world out there is real all right but we cannot really change it. We may not be able to change the world (or others), but we can change ourselves.

To change ourselves means to understand ourselves better. This is a good tool for testing the vitality of a religion. Some guru or priest or pastor might actually numb or deaden our

¹ On not owning the pain, see “Don’t own the pain” (R122) in *Simple Joys 2* no 19: http://dharmafarer.org/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2009/10/Simple-Joys-2_2011_PiyaTan-ebook.pdf

² See **Meditation and consciousness**, SD 17.8c (7): <http://dharmafarer.org/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2009/12/17.8c-Meditation-consciousness.-piya1.pdf>

³ See **Sabba Sutta** (S 35.23), SD 7.1: <http://dharmafarer.org/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2009/12/7.1-Sabba-S-s35.23-piya.pdf>

⁴ See **Bhāvanā**, SD 15.1 (1.5.4): <http://dharmafarer.org/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2009/12/15.1-Bhavana-piya.pdf>

minds by thinking for us: all we need, we are told, is to have faith in some external or higher agency (such as God, deity, etc).

Some kinds of Buddhism, too, might numb and deaden our thinking and feeling. We are conditioned to obey or fear the priests, to chain ourselves to a ritual, or take refuge in some “perfect” guru. Just like the God-religions, our lives are defined by the priests and gurus. We have become their captive audience, unaware and uncaring of others.

In such a situation, we are not really happy. Such a sense of joy or euphoria is dependent on an external agency (a monk, a nun, a guru, a priest, a pastor, a God-idea etc). Or worse, our happiness is dependent on external things (objects, property, money, power, popularity, pleasure etc). We are emotionally dependent on them. We have not learned to be truly happy for ourselves, that is, a happiness not limited by our senses.

We need not be limited by our senses; we should not. Only when we really use our mind and cultivate it, do we begin to be liberated from our sense-defined worlds. Indeed, when we see with our heart, our senses serve us best: this is a way of defining creativity -- feeling frees what thinking freezes. We often painfully think up a problem; we joyfully feel a solution. We have happily helped ourselves.⁵

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⁵ Further see “Stop, thinking! Welcome, feeling!” (R235) in *Simple Joys* 3 no 50: <http://dharmafarer.org/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2009/10/Simple-Joys-3-Loving-Words-by-Piya-Tan-2013.pdf>