

## Sutta teaching on the vulnerable narcissist

Source: *SD 60.1f Handbook of Meditation in Society 6: A psychopathology of Mindfulness*

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**5.3.5.1 The vulnerable narcissist** [5.3.3.2] is alluded to in **the Dhammapada**, which advocates its avoidance, thus:<sup>1</sup>

“He abused me! He beat me!  
He defeated me! He stole from me!”  
those who harbour such thoughts  
their enmity [anger] does not subside. (Dh 3)

“He abused me! He beat me!  
He defeated me! He stole from me!”  
those who harbour *not* such thoughts  
their enmity as such subsides. (Dh 4)

Although these verses seem to reflect the Buddhist ideal of non-violence, **Dh 3** actually serves as a warning against **brooding**: it only feeds and festers one’s enmity. **Dh 4** is an admonition that what we brood over are really just *thoughts*, some past memories. When we let go of those thoughts, they no longer have any hold on us. We are free from enmity, and are able to live happily and productively.

**5.3.5.2** On a deeper level of practice, the Buddha admonishes renunciants to eschew violence and practise **non-violence**. The rationale behind non-violence is explained by Sāriputta in **the Mahā Hatthi, padōpama Sutta** (M 28). Sāriputta begins his teaching with a reflection on **the 4 elements**: earth, water, fire and wind [air].

First, Sāriputta (as does the Buddha in **the Mahā Rāhul’ovāda Sutta**, M 62),<sup>2</sup> explains how our physical body is made up of the earth element (the first of the 4 elements): “head-hair, body-hair, nails, teeth, skin,” and so on, these are the *internal* earth elements. There is also the *external* earth element: *both* the internal and the external earth elements are simply “earth element.” We should see them “as it really is with right wisdom thus: ‘This is not mine, this I am not, this is not my self.’” In this way, we see our body (its solid states) as composed of solid matter that is all around us, and become detached from it, especially when parts of our body decay or are lost, just as solid matter outside us changes and vanishes. (M 62,6 f)

The other 3 of the 4 elements (water, fire and wind) are in turn reflected on in the same manner. Sāriputta explains the form and nature of each of these elements by way of the 31 body-parts.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> On Dh 3 f, see also SD 26.9 (4.1.2); SD 32.12 (1.3); SD 5.18 (Dh 3-6).

<sup>2</sup> M 62,8-/1:421 (SD 3.11).

<sup>3</sup> Also called “the impurities” (*asubha*). M 62,8-17/1:421-424 (SD 3.11), where the Buddha explains the 5 elements: earth, water, fire, wind and space. See also **Giri-m-ānanda S** (A 10.60,6), SD 19.16. On the 32 body-parts: **Dva-t,tiṃs’ākāra** (Khp 3); **Kāya,gata,sati S** (M 119,7), SD 12.21.

**5.3.5.3** With this understanding [5.3.5.2], when others “abuse, revile, scold or harass” us, we (especially a renunciant) understands thus:

“The painful feeling born of ear-contact has arisen in me. It is dependent [conditioned], not independent.” (M 28,8.1/1:185), SD 6.16

We then reflect how each of the 5 aggregates arises on account of dependent arising, thus:

- (1) It is dependent on **contact** (*phassa*), that is, results from sense-impression (the meeting of the ear, sound and attention).
- (2) With contact, there arises **feeling** (*vedanā*) (liking or disliking), due to:
- (3) **Perception** (*saññā*), that is, recognizing the sense-object based on memory (our construction of the past).
- (4) Following perception (when we pursue the feeling), we are creating **formations** (*saṅkhārā*); that is, driven by greed, hate or delusion, we are reacting according to our karma, and also feeding that karma (which habituates us to react in the same way in a similar future situation).
- (5) All this happens because we are **conscious** (we have a mind): yet, every act we do, consciously or unconsciously (unmindfully or habitually), feeds our unconscious (*anusaya*), as explained under “karma” above, conditioning us to become creatures of habit.

We thus reflect that each of these 5 aggregates (as we notice it) is “**impermanent**.” When we do this properly (mindfully), our mind “plunges into that very object that is that element [earth, that is our body], brightens with faith, becomes steady, and is resolute.”<sup>4</sup> (M 28,8)

**5.3.5.4** Next, in the **Mahā Hatthi, padōpama Sutta** (M 28), Sāriputta instructs us how to deal with physical violence and abuse—“through the touch of fists, the touch of clods of earth, the touch of sticks or the touch of knives”—that is: “this body is of the nature that it is assailed by the touch of fists, the touch of clods of earth, the touch of sticks, or the touch of knives” (M 28,9). Sāriputta then reminds us of the Buddha’s teaching on **the parable of the saw** (in the **Kakacūpama Sutta**, M 21):

*“Bhikshus, even if robbers or low-down people<sup>5</sup> were to sever you limb by limb with a two-handed saw, whoever [a monk or nun]<sup>6</sup> gives rise to a mind of hate towards them would not be a doer of my teaching.”<sup>7</sup>*

So tireless energy shall be roused in me, undistracted mindfulness shall be established, my body shall be tranquil and unagitated, the mind concentrated and unified.”

So even when we are assailed by abusive words and violent acts upon this body—let it be: “for this is just how the teaching of the Buddha is practised!”<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> M 28,8.2/1:185 (SD 6.16). See **Mahā Rāhul’ovāda S** (M 28), where Rāhula is taught the meditation of the 4 “element-like” meditations (M 28,13-17/1:424 f @ SD 3.11).

<sup>5</sup> “Low-down people,” *ocarakā*, also “informers, spies, secret service agents; robbers” (DP) (V 3:52; M 1:129; S 1:79; U 66).

<sup>6</sup> Comy to **Kakacūpama S** (MA 2:102).

<sup>7</sup> **Kakacūpama S** (M 21,20/1:129), SD 38.1.

<sup>8</sup> M 28,9/1:185 f (SD 6.16).

We then reflect on any of the 3 jewels—the Buddha, the Dharma or the sangha—until we truly feel mentally equanimous. Whenever, we are unable to do so, or are troubled by violence, we should turn our minds to arousing “spiritual urgency” (*sarīvega*): we remind ourselves of the true purpose of being Buddhist—to follow the Buddha, his teaching, and the path of practice—so that we feel equanimous in spite of the violence that assails us. When wholesome equanimity arises within us, we rejoice in the truth that we have kept the faith in the Buddha’s teaching. (M 28,9 f)

This is the essence of the early Buddhist ideal of **non-violence** (*ahimsa*), the very antithesis of narcissism. Difficult as the practice of Buddhist non-violence may be, this ideal reminds us of those who have shown such great fortitude, such courage. We should at least try our best to stand up against violence of any kind, inspired by this supreme example.

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