The Acrobat

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The Buddha tells a story of an acrobat and his assistant. Back in those days, acrobats would climb up on bamboo poles. The pole would be set upright. They’d climb up to the top of the pole and balance themselves on the top. In this case, the acrobat was going to have his assistant standing on his shoulders. So he told his assistant, “Look out after me, and I’ll look out after you, and we’ll come down safely.” And she said, “No, that won’t do. You have to look out after yourself, and I’ll look out after myself. That way we come down safely.” In other words, each of us has to maintain our own inner balance. You can’t go looking out for the balance of other people. So one way of being happy is to make sure that your own inner balance is fine. The Buddha very rarely talks about the idea that you can’t be good to yourself and other people at the same time. In fact, he never says that. He says there is a way of being kind to yourself, of looking out after your own happiness. It also takes the happiness of other people into account. It is possible to work for your own true happiness and to help other people work for theirs. So it’s not a question of either/or. It’s learning how to find that point where it’s both/and. You look out for your mind at the same time you’re creating a good environment for the people around you to look out after their minds as well. So it’s important to keep this thought in mind. When you’re meditating, oftentimes it seems like you’re working only for your own good. It gets lonely and you get self-centered, and it seems to, if anything, increase the narcissism that’s endemic in our culture. So it’s important to remember that while you’re meditating here, it’s also a gift to other people. If you cut out the greed, anger, and delusion in your mind, you’re inflicting other people with less greed, anger, and delusion. That’s good for them right there. You maintain your balance. You don’t knock other people off their feet. You maintain their balance, and sometimes you provide a basis for them to find their balance. This is the Buddhist description of mindfulness practice, establishing a frame of reference, the body in and of itself, or feelings, mind states, mental qualities in and of themselves, and learning to stay there. Keeping those things in mind, that’s the concentration element in mindfulness practice. Being alert, mindful, and ardent. In other words, mindful means you keep your frame of reference in mind, and you keep in mind the idea that you’re going to do whatever is skillful. And then you’re alert to see how things are going with the body scene. If that’s your frame of reference. And how things are going with the mind in reference to the body. What things arise in the body and what effect they have on things outside, arising and passing away. And the arising and passing away of things outside in terms of feelings or words that people say or whatever. Try to relate everything to the body. And then be ardent in pursuing this practice and trying to be as skillful as you can. And then, as the Buddha said, putting aside greed and distress with reference to the world. When you’re here, you don’t want to have to get involved in anything. Don’t think of what you want out of the world. And don’t get upset about how the world is going, because that knocks you off your frame of reference. When you’re knocked off your frame of reference, you go out of balance, and lots of things then come toppling down. So try to establish this as your basic frame. When the mind goes out to issues of the world, what’s this person thinking of me? What’s that person thinking of me? Remember, you’ve lost your balance. Come back in. Your main concern should be what’s skillful right now. And that’s where the principle of doing what’s right for yourself is also going to play a role in what’s good for other people. What’s interesting about that discourse on the acrobat is that the Buddha doesn’t stop there. He goes on to say that what’s good for other people is also good for you. In other words, learning to be compassionate and considerate in your dealings with other people is healthy for you as well. You benefit, too, because it takes you out of your self-centeredness. You focus on the issue of what do these people really need? How can I help them? Not with the idea that you want to get something out of them, but it’s part of your own training. If you can maintain this frame of reference inside with this issue of what’s the skillful thing to do, that can then translate into what’s the skillful thing to do while I’m dealing with this person. You try to maintain your frame of reference and be compassionate at the same time. But the question of skillfulness being the connection between the two. This way, your dealings with other people augment the training of the mind as well. The Buddha lists four qualities that are really helpful. One is generosity, which doesn’t only mean being generous with things, but also being generous with your time, generous with your help, generous with your forgiveness if that’s called for, and, in general, having a giving attitude in every relationship. Instead of looking to the relationship for what you can get out of it, you look for what you can put into it. That’s the first quality. The second quality is kind words. Try to speak in ways that the other person would like to hear. That doesn’t mean just saying nice things to be polite. Try to say things that are actually helpful. There will be times, of course, when the helpful thing is going to involve criticism—things they don’t want to hear. That means you should show some consideration. What’s the best time to mention these things? What’s the best way to frame the issue? How do you bring up the topic so the person doesn’t feel threatened? Even though the words may be unwelcome, the fact that you’ve shown some consideration in finding the right time, the right place, the right wording, the person can’t help but notice that. This creates a better atmosphere for everybody in the practice. The third quality is being genuinely helpful. When you help somebody, don’t just go through the motions. Think of things that are actually useful. Several years back, I gave a Dhamma talk. After the Dhamma talk, people came up and presented little things like a leaf. The leaf is what sticks in my mind. Some of them were useful, and some of them were just sentimental little things that I was going to have to throw away as soon as I got them after they’d left. I asked one of the people about this, and they were told, “Well, this is a custom that they’ve been taught by other monastics, that it didn’t matter what the object was or whether it was useful, just find something to have a little heart connection.” That’s not the kind of thing the Buddha recommended. If you’re going to help somebody, give somebody. Give them things that are actually useful. The leaf, I found out, was something that had fallen against this guy’s doorway. That was the first thing he found that morning when he came out, so he wanted to share that with me. But as I said, you get something like that, what can you do with it? You just throw it away. Or either that or you let it clutter up your room for a while, which isn’t helpful either. So when you’re being helpful to other people, do things that are genuinely helpful. That creates a really strong connection. Not just a sentimental connection. The final principle is consistency. You stick to your word. You promise to do something, you do it. This also means being consistent in your behavior in the person’s presence and in the person’s absence. What you say and do in the person’s presence is the same sort of thing you say and do toward that person in his absence, or her absence. If you provide some help, you try to be consistent in providing that help. In this way, you train yourself to be a reliable person. When you’re reliable on the outside level, you become more and more reliable as a meditator. John Fung had very little use for unreliable people. He didn’t like to teach them, because he felt that the way they behaved outside was an indication of how they’d meditate. So these qualities connect—the way you treat people outside and the way you treat yourself. The habits you develop in one area become habits in the other area, too. So keep the image of that acrobat in mind. Your primary consideration is that you maintain your balance. This is why we’re meditating—to give rise to a sense of solidity in some way. Once you’ve got that sense of solidity, that sense of ease and well-being that comes as you work with the breath, as you develop a good, solid center inside, then in relationship with other people, you’re less grabbing. You’re not looking so much at what you can get out of the other person. You’ve got some things to give. And then as you give, with your generous choice of when and where to speak to the person, you develop the actual helpfulness of your help and the consistency of your help. That’s not only good for the other person, it’s good for you, too. It builds character. It builds the strengths that you need in order to strengthen your balance. It helps get you out of this “me, me, me” problem we often find in the meditation. It helps pull you out of your rotten old narratives and get you down to the question, “What’s skillful right now?” If you’re alone, what’s skillful right now? And when you’re alone with your other people, what’s skillful in dealing with these other people? That’s the point at which everything gets balanced.

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