Help Others, Help Yourself

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There’s a famous Sutta where the Buddha talks about how in helping yourself you help others. The analogy he gives is two acrobats. One acrobat is standing on the shoulders of the other and the one below says, “Okay, look out after me and I’ll look out after you. Now we will come safely down from our bamboo pole.” And the one on top says, “No, that’s not going to do. I have to look after myself, you have to look after yourself. That’s how we’ll come down safely.” The point being that one acrobat takes care of his or her sense of balance, and I’ll skip the other one to maintain his or her sense of balance as well. The Buddha uses this as an analogy for the practice of mindfulness. Of course, mindfulness doesn’t just stop with mindfulness. It goes into concentration. You train your mind to stay with one thing, like the breath in and of itself. And you try to maintain a steady focus there, so you stay away from any thoughts about the world. And you’re ardent, alert, and mindful. Ardent, you’re trying to do this well. Alert and watching what you’re doing. And mindful and remembering what you should be doing. Something comes up in the mind, you have to learn how to recognize what it is. Is it something skillful? Is it something not? Is it going to help the concentration or get in the way? You’ve had some experience with meditation, so you should be able to remember and then apply that knowledge here. That’s what mindfulness is all about, remembering. But it’s an act of remembering, not just sitting here thinking about the past. You’re thinking about what you’ve learned from the past that you can apply now. That’s the ardency. As you do this, you start developing skillful qualities in mind and abandoning unskillful ones. You learn how to see when something unskillful comes up in the mind. What pulls you to it? If you’re really alert, you’re going to see. Most of us don’t know we have something whispering in our ears. We’re really good at forgetting what just got whispered in our ears, the ears of the mind. We just go with whatever the impulse is. So you have to be alert to see what’s going on, why the mind goes for unskillful things, how you can get it away from those unskillful things. Like right now, anything that’s not related to your breath counts as unskillful. Whatever is related to the breath, that’s what you want to focus on. Stay focused. And as you do this, developing more skillful qualities in your mind, the people around you are going to benefit. Greed, aversion, and delusion don’t go prowling around in the neighborhood, disturbing other people. No, other people benefit too from your practice. But in that sutta, the Buddha isn’t just talking about how helping yourself helps others. He also talks about how helping others helps you. Unfortunately, there’s no image to illustrate the principle. Which is why that part of the sutta tends to get neglected. But the Buddha says when you’re helping others, you’re developing four qualities. There’s goodwill, kindness. Those are two separate things, by the way. Goodwill and kindness. And then patience and equanimity. Goodwill, of course, means you want to help them, want them to be happy. Kindness means you go out of your way to do good things for them. And going out of your way, you learn how to develop right effort. You don’t just see somebody working and you say, “Well, that’s their job, so let them do it.” If it’s a struggle for them, you help. That’s what kindness is all about. You go out of your way. And in going out of your way, you develop a lot of good qualities. But then again, there’s the patience and equanimity. Because when you help other people, there are a lot of things that you just can’t help, or it’s going to take a lot of time. We’re talking today about how often it’s difficult to say things to people, to give them good advice. You have to get them at the right time, the right place. You have to choose the right words. There’s a Jon I knew in Thailand one time, who commented on how easy it was to teach other people, how hard it was to teach yourself. I mentioned that to Jon Furman. He said he’s got it backwards. Teaching yourself is easy. You go on the basis of the principle that you know that you want to be happy. Then you’re willing to listen to what your mind has to say. But teaching other people, you have to bring out what their mood is, what their mode of thinking is, what their attitude is toward you, what your past is with them. It gets very complex. So sometimes we have to be patient. Realize that if you want to be helpful, it’s going to take time and effort. Of course, that willingness to take time and effort will pay you off in a lot of other ways as well. As I said, if you want to find a good teacher, it’s going to take time. It’s going to take effort on your part. So it’s good to have developed that quality. And there are times when you just can’t help. After all, as the Buddha said, the true source for suffering is inside. And the suffering we feel, of course, is inside. And sometimes you just can’t get into somebody else. Either because they’ve put up a wall, or because they’re getting to that stage in life where they’re just not able to register things. There was a time when I was in France. I had to go to an emergency room. And while I was waiting for some stitches, you could hear this woman moaning down in the hall. They put me in a wheelchair to take me to another part. As I went past her room, you could see she looked really lost. I asked the doctor about her, and she said she was kind of in her own world. All of us are in our own worlds. And sometimes those worlds can be pretty bad, and they can be pretty impermeable. In other words, they don’t allow outside influences to come in. That’s the whole thing about the Buddha. How is he going to teach people to find awakening? A lot of people resisted. He realized that the best approach was to point out the fact that they were causing themselves suffering. When they could see that they were causing suffering, then they realized, “Okay, I’ve got to change.” When people have that realization, “Okay, I’ve got to change.” Then you can talk to them. But if they don’t see anything wrong with what they’re doing, and they’re perfectly fine, then they’re impossible, at least for the time being. Years back, I was riding on a plane with John Sawatt. And the third person in the row suddenly turned to us. He must have known that we were Buddhists. And the Buddha talked about life being, at least having, suffering. The first thing he said, he didn’t even say, “Hi,” he said, “I have no suffering in my life.” And they proceeded to tell his life. And it was pretty bad. He was stuck out in blight of all places. His daughter had gotten pregnant with a junkie and had a cocaine baby, which she couldn’t raise, so the grandparents had to raise her. The son was off in prison someplace. And he said he was perfectly fine. Now you just can’t talk to. You meet all kinds of strange people on planes. There was one guy who turned to me one time and said, “Okay, teach me something.” And I’d heard him talking on the phone to a friend about how he had met with a high-ranking government official. And he said, “Well, you really have to be careful about not harming anybody.” He said, “Oh, that’s where people live in monasteries. I live in the real world.” Again, someone who puts up a wall. In cases like that, you have to have equanimity, realizing that you have limitations. We don’t like to think of that. There can be limitations in what we can do to help other people. Sometimes the limitations are a matter of our own capabilities, and other times it’s just the fact that they’ve got walls put up around them. So you have to learn how to accept that. The same qualities of goodwill, kindness, patience, and equanimity in treating yourself. After all, this practice is a practice of goodwill. We want to find happiness. We want to find happiness in a way that’s harmless. It’s good that we’ve developed goodwill for others, because then it’s a lot easier to have goodwill for ourselves. Same with kindness. As for patience, it doesn’t mean just saying, “Okay, someday it’s going to happen. I’ll just sit here and wait for it.” Patience can also mean endurance, in the sense that you keep at something, and sometimes the results are not coming as you want them yet. But you’re headed at least in the right direction. It’s just a lot slower than you want it. Or the times when the practice progresses, and then it regresses, and it progresses again, regresses again. You can’t let yourself get knocked over by that. You have to stick with it. You have to figure out there’s something here you’re not getting, which means you’re going to have to go through the back and forth, back and forth, maybe many times, before you suddenly see, “Oh, this is what causes things to regress. I get sloppy. I get complacent.” Whatever the cause may be. So sometimes there are a lot of setbacks. You have to be willing to learn from them. And there’s equanimity. Sometimes there are things you simply can’t change about your environment, about the people around you. You’ve got to practice in an imperfect world. We develop perfections, but we do it in an imperfect world. And sometimes you have weaknesses of your own that you have to be patient with. In the meantime, you have some equanimity. “I’m not able to do X yet, but I’ll work at it.” In other words, you don’t let your setbacks get you down. When you develop those four qualities in dealing with other people, then you’re better positioned to deal properly with yourself as you practice. So as you help others, you help yourself. As you help yourself, you help others. It shows that that old Mahayana issue of having to help others first before you help yourself, is a non-issue. The Buddha found a way in which you do both at the same time. Because when you practice both ways, then everybody benefits. Helping yourself, you help others. Helping others, you help yourself.

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