Resilience Plus

June 19, 2021

I have a student who lives near a state forest. She and her husband have made themselves stewards of the place, in the sense that they try to keep it clean. And they’ve noticed that since the pandemic began, a lot of people who had no other place to go start going into the outdoors. People who’ve never been to the outdoors don’t know the etiquette of being outdoors. They’ve been trashing the place. It’s just one of the many signs we see of people behaving badly. Society is being put through a stress test right now. There’s a lot of misbehavior from the top of the society on down, some of it very, very bad. Of course, the obvious answer is don’t respond in kind. But getting down to nitty-gritty, this means beginning with the way you respond to other people’s speech and their behavior on a personal level. It’s all too easy to focus on the misbehavior of others and then to use that as an excuse for our own misbehavior, which simply adds more fuel to the fire, more weight to the oppression, more stress to the stress test. Here’s where it’s good to think about the Buddha’s instructions on how to respond to what he calls vajanapada, which we translate as “courses of speech” or “pathways of speech.” It seems to be an idiom for criticism. He said there are five ways in which people can engage in this kind of speech. It’s either timely or not timely, true or not true, spoken gently or spoken harshly, dealing with things that actually are beneficial or not, and then with a heart of loving-kindness. A heart of goodwill with an attitude of inner hate. This is the way human speech is in the world. These are the categories. We’re going to be meeting up with these different kinds of speech as we go through life. This is the human realm. And in every case, whether it’s timely or untimely, true or untrue, gentle or harsh, beneficial or not, it’s spoken with goodwill or with inner hate. The Buddha says you have to make up your mind. Your heart will not be altered. Your mind will not be altered, jitta in both cases. You try to remain sympathetic to the welfare of the other person and develop a heart of goodwill. In other words, the first requirement here, however bad the situation is, is to make sure your heart and mind are not altered. Remember what you’ve learned in the Dhamma, what you’ve gained from the meditation, and you try to keep that solidity in mind, the image that the Buddha gives to illustrate this principle. Or rather, the images he gives are all images of immense size, resilience, and strength. In one image, you’ve got the whole earth, and a man comes along with a shovel, and he’s going to dig in the earth and spit on the earth and urinate on the earth, trying to make it be without earth. But the earth is much too big. In another image, there’s the River Ganges. A man comes along with a torch and he tries to set fire to the River Ganges. Of course, he’s not going to succeed. In other images of space, a man comes along and tries to paint pictures in the air, but there’s nothing for him to land on. In other words, when you’re presented with people behaving badly, make your mind a mind which none of their behavior lands on. And make sure you don’t feel oppressed by what they’ve done or what they’ve said. Being as large as the earth, as inflammable as the River Ganges. If we were to stop right there, that would be simply a lesson in non-reactivity. But the Buddha doesn’t stop there. He says you’ve got to have that person’s welfare in mind, and you have to have an attitude of goodwill, which means that you have to stop and think. What would be the most useful thing to say or do in this case? You have to turn around and look at yourself. What are your strengths? All too often, when people misbehave, we think of our strengths in terms of how we can misbehave in response, or how we can complain in response. But when the Buddha talks about reflecting on your strengths, neither of those come into any of the equation. As you think about the four qualities that make you an admirable friend, your conviction in the principle of karma, that you’re not going to do anything harmful, and you want to see what you can do to influence the other person to be inspired to act in that way. You think about your virtue, that you can hold by your virtue in your response, and your generosity. You’re coming from a place of giving rather than being a place of being. You’re being threatened. And finally, your discernment. What’s the most skillful thing to say or do at this time? Your discernment, then, is aided by two other qualities that the Buddha recommends. He mentions those strengths. One is your learning, your learning of the Dhamma. What have you learned from what the Buddha taught, from what the Ajahns have taught, that would give you some good advice on what to do? What should you do or say or think in these situations? This is why some of our Dhamma books are just very short things, like the Dhammapada, the Udana, very short poems, very short ideas, very short principles, because they’re easy to hold in mind in a difficult situation. This is why those books of the Ajahns’ teachings, in short quotes, are also popular. They’re handy for keeping in mind when things get difficult. In fact, that was the source of awareness itself. The collection of Ajahn Fung’s teachings, the year after he died, was a very difficult time at the monastery. Things were topsy-turvy. There was really no one in charge. And when difficult situations came up, I kept finding myself remembering, “Oh, Ajahn Fung said this or he said that.” So I’d hold by it. In the very least, it got me through the difficulties. And many times it helped come up with a solution. That’s why I started writing those things down. So try to find short statements of the Dhamma, basic principles and behavior. And as they say in Thai, “Decorate your discernment.” So if you can’t think of something on your own, at least you’ve got something else to fall back on. Because that sixth quality is another way of decorating your discernment. In other words, develop your quick-wittedness, your ability to see similarities where similarities have not been pointed out to you, connections where connections have not been pointed out, solutions in one area that you can apply to another. These six qualities are the strengths that you can fall back on, that you can use, as you deal with a difficult situation. In Thai, they often like to talk about looking at yourself before you say or do something. And in some cases what they mean is, “Well, look at your position in society.” But I think what the Buddha would mean in a case like that is, “Look at your strength and see your strengths in these terms—your conviction, your virtue, your generosity, your discernment, your learning, your quick-wittedness, and the kinds of strengths that are good for fighting off people. Put those aside.” Try to build on these things. These are the strengths of the Dhamma. At the very least, you can maintain your resilience. Your mind can stay unaltered. Your heart can stay unaltered. And when it’s unaltered, then you can see clearly what would be for your benefit and the benefit of the other person. What would be a good expression of goodwill for both? It’s in this way that you don’t have to be stressed by the stress test around us, and you don’t add stress to the situation. It’s in this way that your practice of the Dhamma is a positive event in the world. Things may be falling apart. We see politicians being paid to make sure that there are no agreements, that problems are not solved. When that starts at the top of the society, that attitude trickles down and it’s bad. We want to have something radiating up from each individual heart. You can’t get all the hearts in the world to work together like this. But you’ve got your heart, and you can be responsible for that. And when it’s in tune with the Dhamma, then it really is a gift to the world.

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