

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 poles would be set upright, the acrobats would then climb up to the top of the pole and balance themselves in the top. In this case, the acrobat had his assistant stand on his shoulders as he stood on the top of the pole. Then he told her, “You look out after me, and I’ll look out after you, and that way, we’ll perform our tricks and 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’ll perform our tricks and come down safely.”

In this case, the Buddha said that the assistant was right. 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. One way of being helpful is to make sure that your own inner balances is fine. The Buddha never says that you can’t be good to yourself and to other people at the same time. He says there’s a way of being kind to yourself, of looking out after your own happiness, that also takes the happiness of other people into account. It is possible to work for your own true happiness and, at the same time, to help other people work for theirs.

So it’s not a question of either/or, it’s learning how to find a point where it’s both/and. You look out for your mind at the same time that you’re creating a good environment for the people around you to look after their minds as well.

It’s important to keep this thought in mind. When you’re meditating, often it seems as if you’re working only for your own good. It gets lonely, and you seem to be getting self-centered. It seems, if anything, to increase the narcissism that’s already 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 and you don’t knock other people off of theirs. Sometimes you provide a basis for them to find their balance.

This is the Buddha’s description of mindfulness practice: establishing a frame of reference—such as 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 ardent, alert, and mindful.

Mindfulness means that you keep your frame of reference in mind, and you keep in mind the idea that you're going to do whatever is skillful within that frame.

At the same time, you're alert to see how things are going with the body—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, what effect they have on things outside arising and passing, and the arising and passing away of things outside in terms of feelings, or words people say, whatever: Try to relate everything to the body.

And be ardent in pursuing this practice, trying to be as skillful as you can.

And, as the Buddha said, you put aside greed and distress with reference to the world. When you're here, you don't have to get involved in anything outside of here. Don't think of what you want out of the world; don't get upset about how the world is going, because that knocks you off your frame of reference. When you're not in your frame of reference, you go out of balance. 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?"—you've lost your balance. Come back in. Your main concern should be, "What's skillful right now?" That's why the principle of doing what's right for yourself is also good for the people.

What's interesting about that discourse on the acrobat is that the Buddha doesn't stop there. It goes on also to say that when you do what's good for other people, it's also good for you, too. In other words, learning to be compassionate, considerate in your dealings with other people: That's healthy for you as well. You benefit, too, because it takes you out of your self-centeredness. You focus on the issue, "What do these people really need? How can I help them?" not with the idea that you might get something out of them, but because 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 preference inside and be compassionate outside at the same time, with the question of skillfulness being the connection between the two. This way, your dealings with other people augment the training of the mind.

The Buddha lists four qualities that are really helpful in this regard. One is generosity, which means being generous not only with things, but also with your time, with your help, with your forgiveness if that's called for. In general, it means

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 are actually helpful.

There will be times, of course, when the helpful things are going to involve criticism, things they don't want to hear. That means you should show some consideration: What's best time to mention these things? What's the best way to frame the issue? How do you bring up the topic so that the person doesn't feel threatened? Then, even though the words may be unwelcome, the fact that you've shown some consideration in finding the right time, the right place, and the right wording: The person can't help but notice that and appreciate 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 or do it for show. Think of things that are actually useful. Several years back, I gave a Dhamma talk to a small group, and after the Dhamma talk, people came up and presented little things, like a leaf: The leaf was what sticks in my mind. There were other things, 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 left. I asked one of the people about this, and I was told that this was a custom that they'd been taught by other monastics: that it didn't matter what the object was, whether it was useful or not, just find something to establish a little heart connection.

This is not the kind of thing the Buddha recommended. If you're going to help somebody, give them things that are actually useful. The leaf, I found out, was something that had fallen against the guy's doorway. It was the first thing he found that morning when he came out the door. So he wanted to share that with me. But what does it say? When you get something like that, what can you do with it? You just throw it away. Either that, or you let it clutter up your room for a while, which isn't helpful, either.

So in being helpful to other people, do things that are genuinely helpful. That creates a really strong connection, not just a sentimental one.

The final principle is consistency. You stick to your word. You promise to do something and 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 or her absence. If you provide some help, you try to be consistent in providing

that help. This way, you train yourself to be a reliable person. When you're a reliable in the outside level, you're become more and more reliable as a meditator.

Ajaan Fuang had very little use for unreliable people. He didn't like to teach them, because he felt the way they behaved outside was an indication of how they would meditate.

These qualities connect: the way you treat people outside, the way you treat yourself. The habits you develop in one area become habits in the other area, too.

So keep that image of the acrobat in mind. The primary consideration is that you maintain your balance. This is why we're meditating: to give rise to a sense of solidity inside. Once you've got that sense of solidity, the sense of ease and well-being that comes as you work with the breath and develop a good solid center inside, then in your relationships with other people you're less grabbing. You're not looking so much for what you can get out of the other person. You've got something to give.

As you give, you're generous in your choice of when and where to speak to the person. 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 and builds the strengths you need to steady your balance. And 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 gets you down to the question of: What's skillful right now? If you're alone, what's skillful right now when you're alone? If you're with other people, what's skillful in dealing with these other people? That's the point where everything gets balanced.