

Friends & Enemies

April 17, 2022

Today, we're celebrating Songkran, the Thai New Year. Actually, it's an Indian New Year that the Thais borrowed. The Thais are wise. They start the new year four times each year: January 1, Chinese New Year, the traditional the Thai new year—which was during the last new moon—and now Songkran, which is an Indian New Year. This gives you a chance to get the new year started right. If you miss it the first time around, you start again with the second or third opportunity. This is the fourth time, so this is your last chance to get it right.

Each year is an opportunity to look back in the past year: to reflect on what we did to see where we did it right and where we didn't do it right. If we did it right, we want to make sure that we continue in that way. If we made mistakes, we want to learn how to not repeat them. That's how we develop our discernment. Then we want to remember those lessons, because our real enemy lies in our lapses of mindfulness and lapses of discernment.

Several people have noted that the Buddha image we're going to be blessing this year is called the Destruction of Enemies. People have asked which enemies we have in mind, and the answer is the enemies inside: greed, aversion, and delusion. Those are our real enemies. Enemies outside are nothing compared to the ones inside. The ones outside can harm your body and can harm your material possessions. But the internal enemies can harm your heart and mind, and the harm they do to the mind and the heart can last for a long time, even beyond death. So do what you can to destroy those enemies.

You start out by looking at your behavior. You want to make sure that, at the very least, these enemies inside don't bother the neighbors, running around, causing trouble.

The Buddha said there are four ways in which we can learn how to live together peacefully in a way that's conducive to happiness for everybody all around. As we act in these ways, we get training in getting some control over internal enemies, too. So when we develop these qualities, we benefit, and the people around us benefit as well.

The four qualities are these: giving, kind words, genuine help, and consistent and appropriate treatment of other people.

Giving, of course, starts with giving material things. When you give a gift it erases a barrier. When we place a price on things, we create a barrier between ourselves and others. We treat one another as strangers. But when we give a gift, we erase that barrier. We treat one another as part of a large family.

At the same time, when you give a gift, your own mind becomes a broader and more spacious mind as a result. Of course, the people around you are happy to receive gifts from you. This applies to gifts of material things but also to making a gift of your time, a gift of your energy, a gift of your knowledge, and a gift of your forgiveness. When you can give in these ways, life together becomes a much happier life, much more conducive to well-being.

Second, kind words: Even when you have critical things to say, you learn how to say them in a way that's sensitive to the person's situation. Try to speak in a way that shows at the very least that you have some respect for the person. You don't despise the person or hold him or her in contempt. One of the worst things for human relationships is contempt, and contempt comes so easily. Especially now with the social media: You can say something nasty and push a button and think nothing about it. But that contempt reverberates around the online universe and it creates more and more divisiveness.

So to avoid contempt, you want to make sure that if you're going to say something critical, you do it in a way that shows that you still have respect for the other person. At the very least, show that you feel it's worthwhile to help that person correct his or her ways. As the Buddha said, when we can correct our own ways, that's how we gain knowledge of the Dharma: committing ourselves to try to do things rightly and then reflecting on what we've done. If, in the other person's reflection on their actions, they don't see anything wrong, but *you* see it, it's your opportunity to point it out as a gift. Just make sure that it is meant as a gift or not just as a put-down. Ideally, you give a gift attentively and with empathy for the recipient. So make sure you give your criticism with the same attitude. In that way, you can really be helpful, in that that kind of criticism can actually help make things better, help make society more sociable place to live.

As for genuine help, you don't do favors just for show. Instead, you try to think about: What does this person really need? In what way would this person really appreciate receiving help? Sometimes you want to do it in ways that that person might not expect, to show that you really are really giving some thought to that person's feelings and needs. That kind of help really goes to the heart. If it's just help for show, it washes off very quickly. But when you really help somebody with their genuine needs, it goes deep into the heart and stays there like a dye that seeps into cloth and stays there. It can't easily be washed out.

Finally, there's the appropriate and consistent treatment of other people. You treat people appropriately according to their station: You treat your parents in the way parents should be treated. You treat your children in the way children should be treated. In other words, you're fair in your treatment of other people.

At the same time, you're consistent. The things you say to someone's face are the same things you say behind that person's back. You don't gossip about them. In this way, if the words you said behind their backs get to their ears, they don't harm their hearts.

To act in these ways—being generous, being kind in your words, giving genuine help, and treating people appropriately: This is what creates unity in the group, harmony in the group.

It also works on your own defilements. The Buddha said that when you help other people, you're helping yourself. And he pointed out four qualities that helping other people should develop.

First, of course, is goodwill. You really do wish for other people to be happy. And you realize that you have to make that a permanent part of your mind. Goodwill is something that we normally feel for some people but not for other people. That's human goodwill. But the Buddha's saying you should lift your goodwill to the level of a Brahma's goodwill. In other words, make it universal, immeasurable, limitless, all-around. When it's all-around like that, then you can begin to trust yourself in your interactions with other people. If there are gaps in your goodwill, there will be gaps in your skillful actions. So you want to make sure your goodwill is all-around constantly. You make this a constant practice.

The second quality you develop is empathy. You get a sense of how other people are feeling, and that becomes one of your own virtues. As you get more sensitive to

their feelings, you get more sensitive to your own feelings. This is going to be an important part of the meditation: being really sensitive to what's going on in the mind, not just brushing off your feelings as being irrelevant. So empathy for others is will be good for you in your practice.

The third and fourth qualities are patience and equanimity. When you're dealing with other people, you have to develop patience and equanimity. The ajaans in Thailand noticed that for Westerners these are our two weak points. We're very impatient and we don't have much equanimity. But if we're going to have peace in the world, we have to learn how to put up with things and not simply react. We have to be willing to forgive and to be patient with other people. We have to learn how to see patience not as a weakness but as a strength.

The same with equanimity. Equanimity, the Buddha said, is the ability to make your mind like earth. Disgusting things are thrown on the earth, pleasant things are sprinkled on the earth, but the earth is not disgusted by the disgusting things or pleased by the pleasing things. When your mind is like earth, it knows that disgusting or pleasing things have happened—it knows that the contact is made—but there's no reaction. This doesn't mean that you never respond at all or never try to improve situations. It just means that you want to make sure that your first response to something is not just to give into your emotions. You first want to see the situation for what it really is, and then you can organize a response.

In other words, you're responsive rather than reactive. This is what makes us human: We can organize our responses. Material things simply react. You hit a billiard ball and it goes in a certain direction. That's its reaction. But as a human being, you can organize your responses in what you think is the wisest and most useful way to improve a situation. That requires that you look objectively at the situation first, to see what's really going on. This is where equanimity comes in: It allows you to see the reality of a situation.

So equanimity is an important part of being proactive in a skillful way. We all too often think of equanimity as indifference, not caring about anything. But the Buddha's type of equanimity is the equanimity that's part of wanting to do something well, and to keep on wanting to do it well. You have to have the observer in your mind that can admit mistakes when mistakes have been made. It can see what's right and admit that it's right, and then look to see whatever adjustments or further improvements need to be made.

As for patience, again you must make your mind like earth, and combine this with your goodwill, so that even though other people may mistreat you, you don't let that affect your goodwill toward them. The image the Buddha gives is of someone trying to dig in the earth and spit on the earth and urinate on the earth, saying, "Be without earth. Be without earth." As he said, that person is never going to succeed, because the earth is so much vaster than that person's puny efforts could ever be.

In the same way you want to make your patience vast, your goodwill vast. And see other people's efforts to hurt you as puny. Otherwise, if your goodwill depends on other people's behavior, it's not dependable at all.

So see patience as a strength, and not as a weakness. When you can put up with a lot of things, that means your patience and goodwill are going to outlast your enemies. Because that's the important part of all this: As you develop these qualities inside, then you can start dealing with your enemies inside as well. If you have goodwill for your genuine happiness, you begin to realize that greed, aversion, and delusion are not your friends. As the Buddha said, we go around with craving as our companion, but it's misled us so many times. It's about time that we began to realize we've been hanging around with a false friend.

If you really have goodwill for yourself, you realize that your equanimity, your patience, and your empathy are your real friends inside. Greed is not much of a friend. Your anger is certainly not a friend. Look at all the destruction that anger can do. The reason we don't see it, of course, is because of our delusions. So we have to work on our delusion as well. These are the real enemies inside. So make up your mind that you're going to weaken these enemies as much as you can in the course of the year.

As for enemies outside, they're going to do their thing, but that's their karma. Your karma is what you do, say, and think. Anything inside that would make you do, say, or think something that would cause suffering: That's not a friend. That's a traitor. When you realize this, then you can keep yourself on the right track. You can make up your mind as you go through the year that this is the year you're finally going to take a stand against these false friends and to cultivate your good friends instead. Some of these true friends are very unassuming: Patience is a very unassuming friend, but it's really reliable when you have it on your side

So remember that of the things people outside do to you, the very worst is that they can kill you. But the things you do to yourself inside can go beyond your own death. So you want to make sure that you side with your genuine friends inside and do your best to overcome the enemies inside. When you can do that, that's a year well spent. However much you're able to do that is a well-spent year.

You may say, "How can I possibly get rid of all my greed, aversion, and delusion?" Well, do your best. Just because the job is large doesn't mean you can't tackle it. Learn how to make it a smaller job by dividing it into little pieces. Focus on each moment of the mind as you breathe in and breathe out. Tell yourself, "I don't know about the future, but I do know I'm not going to let these things take over my mind right now." If five minutes later they come back, say, "I don't know about the future, but I do know that I'm not going to let these things take over my mind right now." As you keep control over *right now* like this, at the very least you can keep them at bay. And that's a major accomplishment right there.