

The deceptively 'simple' art of forgiveness:

Discussion notes from Ralph Catts, Unitarian Pastor.

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I start with a disclaimer: I am not a Buddhist but I draw on my understanding of Buddhist teachings for my daily spiritual practice.

In this session we first considered the notion of anger and whether it is justified in some situations. We heard a tale of a cat with a hatred of dogs, and then saw a short vignette played by some accomplished actors that portrayed a specific example of the consequences of anger brought on by poverty in a family setting. Through these examples and some reflective exercises we reminded ourselves that we all experience anger from time to time. In my presentation I then proposed the benefits of forgiveness, and I presented a Buddhist inspired approach to forgiveness and how this can enable the authentic self. I focused on the role of loving kindness meditation, and we concluded with an adaptation of the loving kindness mantra to a community setting.

Anger is an emotion that we all encounter but many people do little to avoid their angry moments, even though anger often leads to outcomes we regret. Even when our thoughts turn bitter we can develop the capacity to arouse positive feelings to overcome or resolve anger. Loving-kindness is a meditation practice that aims to develop the mental habit of selfless or agape love. In the Dhammapada it is written: "Hatred cannot coexist with loving-kindness, (it) dissipates if supplanted with thoughts based on loving-kindness." As was pointed out to me in the discussion session which followed this presentation we need to become self-aware of the potentially destructive impact of anger on both others and especially on our own well-being in order to seek to overcome angry impulses.

I find loving-kindness meditation practice enables positive attitudinal changes as I develop the quality of 'loving-acceptance'. It is a way of healing my troubled mind and I find also that this helps me to achieve 'right effort'¹ in moments where otherwise anger might emerge. Loving-kindness, if practiced regularly, can change habitual reactive behaviour. Here is an extract from a Buddhist source about 'loving kindness meditation'. *To put it into its context,*

¹ See the eight fold path outlined below

Loving-kindness is (a) meditation that produces four qualities of love: Friendliness (metta), Compassion (karuna), Appreciative Joy (mudita) and Equanimity (upekkha).

The quality of 'friendliness' is expressed as warmth that reaches out and embraces others. When loving-kindness practice matures it naturally overflows into compassion, as one empathises with other people's difficulties; (but) on the other hand one needs to be wary of pity, (a) near enemy, as it merely mimics the quality of concern without empathy. The positive expression of empathy is an appreciation of other people's good qualities or good fortune, or appreciative joy, rather than feelings of jealousy towards them. (Loving kindness) meditations come to maturity as 'on-looking equanimity'. This 'engaged equanimity' must be cultivated ... or there is a risk of it manifesting as its near enemy, indifference or aloofness. So, ultimately you remain kindly disposed and caring (agape) toward everybody with an equal spread of loving feelings and acceptance in all situations and relationships.

Does this mean turning the other cheek?

The Buddha taught that one can be strong and hold to justice and truth while also being compassionate toward the person whose actions are disturbing or disruptive. I have found that sometimes when people act in an aggressive or provocative way they are seeking to provoke a reaction which they can then use to justify what they intended to do (perhaps sub-consciously). This may be an employer seeking to provoke an employee into an angry response of resignation; it could be a student seeking to get a reaction from a teacher (or vice-versa), or it could be a family member seeking an outcome like the one in our small drama². If the expected reaction does not come, it can be quite disarming for the person who initiated the issue and sought confrontation. It can lead to a breakthrough to a new understanding of the situation and a shared outcome.

Recovering from sorrow or anger

I practice loving kindness meditation on a daily basis. For me it is important to have this as part of my daily spiritual practice both to maintain a mindful way of living (Hanh, 1991) and also so that I can employ this in times of stress. I do this daily practice by offering to myself and others forgiveness for those small things that were done, or not done, during the day. In addition, each day I strive to address in particular one person toward whom I have felt

² A scene from a short story by Steele Rudd (When the wolf was at the door).

negative thoughts. Whether this helps the recipients of my loving kindness is for them to say, but for me it offers peace of mind and a way to strive to apply the Buddha's four noble truths in my life.

The Four Noble truths

The Buddha's insights were as follows:

1. We all experience suffering. This truth is termed Dukkha).
2. The origin of suffering (Samudāya) is misplaced desire which is experienced in three forms namely greed, ignorance, and hatred. Loving kindness meditation especially addresses the third of these evils. There are also positive forms of desire for enlightenment and for good will for all.
3. The cessation of suffering (Nirodha) is achieved by being free from attachments. For those of us who are not ascetics, I take this to mean that we do not assume things are ours by right, and hence if they are taken away or lost we do not experience a personal sense of loss and suffering.
4. The path to end suffering (Magga) is to incorporate the eight fold path³ into daily living. Note that this is a path or journey not a destination. The eight fold path is one to be followed day by day as part of the way of living.

Managing to love one's enemies

All of us as well intentioned people have forgiven others for things that have happened. We would be a sorry lot if we did not have that capacity. It is easy therefore to consider that you have no need to practice loving kindness because you consider yourself to be a kind and considerate and compassionate being. There may be other ways to achieve the cessation of suffering associated with anger or hatred and if you are able to do that then all is well for you. But before you dismiss loving kindness take a deep look into your past. Think about the exercise you undertook during the theme talk on examples where you experienced anger. Most of us suppress our deepest grievances, and there they lie until someone either intentionally or accidentally pokes you in the spot you had forgotten existed, and the old grievance comes spilling out.

With people who have caused me real suffering it has taken a long time to achieve fulsome loving kindness but when it comes I can move on and so can third parties such as children who can be deeply affected.

³ See appendix

The Loving Kindness Mantra

I use a four part model. I apply it to myself, then to one I love, next to a neutral other, and then to someone toward whom I feel anger (this is the hard part). I do a long sit (an hour) once a week and then I replicate the process briefly on other days by taking the opportunity while on a bus or when waiting for a train, or when I take a moment to rest⁴. I try to hold the same person in the fourth stage for as many sessions as it takes until I see their divinity within. If something triggers negative feelings toward someone to whom I have previously gifted loving kindness, I make a further effort to gift them loving kindness and seek a deeper level of forgiveness. I find it can be hard at first to offer loving kindness to someone who you feel has injured you, but I know that the harder it is the more I need to achieve the outcome for my sake. There are many forms of the loving kindness mantra. The words that I use and repeat in my mind while visualising the person in a happy state of being are:

May you be well

May you be happy

May you be free of suffering

Conclusion:

Mindfulness and especially practice of loving-kindness has had transformative effects in my life because I now apply these practices in anticipation of challenges to my sense of well-being in daily living. By way of example I told the story of how in Birmingham there was a bus every four minutes from near my home to the city, which meant in practice three buses every twelve minutes. As I walked to the bus stop it was common to see two or three buses pass, and I became accustomed to welcoming that event because it meant I could do a short loving kindness meditation while waiting at the bus stop.

Another example was when travelling on an airport bus on a motorway there was an accident which blocked the traffic. While others around me became increasingly anxious, I practiced mindful meditation. After some time we moved forward and all made our flights.

Reference:

Hanh, Thich Nhat. (1991). *Peace is Every Step*. London: Rider.

⁴ In this daily practice I follow the teachings of Thich Nhat Hahn and also a Buddhist monk who I attended part-time for three years.

Appendix

The Eight Fold Path

The eight fold path is a wholistic approach – not a linear route. All the eight elements are practiced in each moment of being. (This summary is adapted from a BBC web site).

1. Right Understanding – practicing the Buddha’s teachings and judging for yourself whether they are true from your experience (very Unitarian?).
2. Right Intention – by cultivating the right attitudes.
3. Right Speech - Speaking truthfully, avoiding slander, gossip and abusive speech.
4. Right Action - Behaving peacefully and harmoniously; refraining from stealing, killing and overindulgence in sensual pleasure.
5. Right Livelihood - Avoiding making a living in ways that cause harm, such as exploiting people or killing animals, or trading in intoxicants or weapons.
6. Right Effort - Cultivating positive states of mind; freeing oneself from evil and unwholesome states and preventing them arising in future.
7. Right Mindfulness - Developing awareness of the body, sensations, feelings and states of mind.
8. Right Concentration - Developing the mental focus necessary for this awareness.