

Buddhist Teachings on Relationships

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THE Buddhist Temple here at Adyar was constructed at the suggestion of the Mahatma KH who even sent a little sketch to indicate what kind of shrine it should be. The full project was the result of Brother Jinarājadāsa's deep interest in it. It was he, who as Vice-President, and as deputy for Dr Besant got the plan made, the structure put up, brought the original Bodhi tree branch from Ceylon (Sri Lanka) and planted it there.

We are told that the Buddha gave useful and helpful teaching to a cultivator who said: 'I cannot understand the profound things that you talk about, please teach me something simple.' The advice which followed about relationships is suggestive. We can all brood over and explore the essentials of relationship. Krishnaji said life is relationship, for we are all the time related.

It is obviously the responsibility of the parent to help the child (maybe a grandchild, an adopted child) to be virtuous, to set an example, and to take opportunities of pointing out what is right and wrong. How to avoid moral pitfalls of life must be included as part of the education which the parent should give to the child. Then, the child, the son or daughter, must take care of the parents, give them due respect,

support them if necessary, and cherish their memory. Even an ignorant parent has done something good.

Then we come to pupils and teachers. The pupil must learn well; he must have the attitude of learning. This is sadly lacking in many schools, and teachers are discussing what to do about it; students are also not ready to heed the advice of teachers. But the teacher, like the parent, must train the student in righteousness, in what is good or not good, which may cover a whole range of life, from looking after the physical body to nourishing the soul. It is the duty of the teacher to encourage students in all that they do which is good, and let them develop their faculties and their talents. We need not take the Buddha's words literally, because we have biological parents, because there are others who are like parents. There are people who have helped us to learn, who are not necessarily teachers in the strict sense of the term. Even small children at times help us to learn because they look at things so innocently.

Then we come to the relationship between husband and wife, and one of the important things to notice is that the husband must respect his wife. Perhaps that was lacking in India in those days, as

The Theosophist

it is now. A good man must respect his wife, cherish her, be faithful to her and so on, and see that she is honoured and not looked down upon. When a husband makes disparaging comments about his wife in front of the servants, for example, he does the opposite. And the wife must run a well-ordered house, be thrifty as a housekeeper, have a very hospitable attitude to friends and kinsmen and be generally a support, and of course, chaste.

Now we come to the other three types of relationships the Buddha dealt with; for example, the relationship between friends and close companions. They must act as true friends, friends who seek the welfare of a companion. This is not just physical welfare, helping him to invest his money or something like that. If the friend perhaps has false notions, it is necessary, gently, affectionately, to point it out and not say 'he is a friend and I support him in everything whether it is right or wrong'. This does not mean that we go round interfering or presuming that we alone know what is right. Advice must be taken with common sense. Also it means the need to share with friends, in prosperity or poverty, be generous, discuss and receive help. Help must be given courteously, acting as one does to a true equal. Friends should watch what is happening to each other, because a person may sometimes be off his guard, may be unaware of what he or she does, and through that kind of inattention be acting foolishly. A true friend should be watching and help the other not to get into difficulties. The Buddha's advice is good

advice; it extends one's relationship a great deal because it is not only one's own family but the families of one's friends whose welfare and prosperity we must have at heart.

As Annie Besant said, more than once, progress in realizing unity through attitudes of affection and responsibility start on a small scale as the individual evolves. So to begin with one should have the right feelings, perform right actions in relation to one's family and one's friends. Then the capacity for affection, for responsibility, for caring, grows. The whole world becomes one's family, and everyone is a friend. This is generally a question with even non-personal problems. As a community can face great problems because of foolish ideas and foolish actions, we see that there is much left for every individual to take care of. The kind of apathy which exists nowadays must be reduced, where nobody bothers what is happening to society as a whole. Although this advice was given to a simple man, in very simple terms, on pondering over it, we can realize that there are much larger implications which we must learn for ourselves.

Then there are relationships between masters and servants. In our present-day society, so complex in comparison with the kind which existed in earlier times, when there are many countries where there are no servants, it does not mean that this category of relationship does not exist. It can be said to include those who are supposed to be superior, dealing with so-called subordinates. To those who have power over others, economic or political

Buddhist Teachings on Relationships

power or any other kind of power, sometimes even some kind of psychological domination because of being cleverer than the other person, much can happen. Suppose, one is in a position to twist somebody around one's finger because of being cleverer than the other, what can happen?

So let us consider what is right action. Most of our Theosophical leaders gave a wonderful example in their life; for they had a very different attitude from that of the worldly person, with great consideration when the other person was weaker. The master should apportion worth even to the servant or inferior. To ask the servant to do what he cannot, and then blame, scold or punish him, would be wrong, because people have their limitations owing to the inherent evolutionary stage. There are many housewives who shout at a servant, because the latter has been unintelligent, never thinking that if the latter were so intelligent he would not be your servant. So it is just a cruelty. In many relationships we are thoughtless, and we expect the other to be what he might not be or cannot give. My father used to say that Dr Besant (he was very devoted to her like many people who knew her closely) disproved the theory that familiarity breeds contempt. Not all those who came near to her had profound love and respect for her, although she was so exceptionally noble a person. But she, I believe, used to say that you must not demand from somebody more than what that person can do. Give that person some type of work which is suitable to his level

of understanding and capacity. If the wrong work is given, if you put a square peg in a round hole, and blame the other person, the fault is really yours.

Sometimes you see a thin, half-nourished man being asked to carry a big load. The same is done to animals, and there is little consideration of what happens to the other person or animal — a man who has worked all day long, who is half-fed, straining at pedalling when several people sit on the rickshaw never considering what physical strain is put on him; or it may be a factory worker out of whom the last little bit is extracted. Animals and servants are often treated like this. But we must remember that from a spiritual point of view it is completely wrong. All those who are weaker than ourselves must be protected; who is to protect them, except ourselves? We all have that kind of responsibility.

Sometimes a very poor person, and there are many poor people in this world, takes something which is not his right. We take a very serious view about this and say he must be punished. But there may be rich people, who behind the scenes, are doing much worse things and we laugh it off and say this is how these people behave. So we must watch our own attitude in all these relationships. Give suitable food and wages, the Buddha says, but he also says to share your delicacy with them; Krishnaji used to say the same thing; I suppose people who reach a certain level of unity cannot but say similar things. Krishnaji has more than once, in the presence of all of us, said: 'Do you give

The Theosophist

the same food as you eat to your servants?' In many households they give the barest minimum to the servant and that may indicate a general attitude of inequality.

But the spiritual life, which is essentially the realization of unity, brings about a different sense. The respect we feel for someone, possibly an ignorant person, is because he or she is also a human being on the way, on the human journey, perhaps further away from the goal than we are. We also at some time were in that position, and there are people ahead of us who may look at us as we look at them. *Light on the Path* says: Do not think you are apart from the bad man or the foolish man. There may be a difference between you, but the difference between you and the teachers is far greater than that between you and the foolish man. So, treat them with consideration, with respect. You must not address them in a way that we will not at all think of in relations of importance.

The Buddha mentions this and says: Give them holidays. Even now, except for those who are recognized labourers, there are a lot of people working in private homes, etc., who never have holidays, and if they ask for leave they are frowned upon, as if they are deserting. All people require some rest, they have their needs. If it is a man he needs time to shave, women need time to do some work in their own households, and one must not keep them labouring for oneself all the time, but be considerate to them.

One of the things the Buddha mentions is to work cheerfully, contentedly. If the

relationship is good, and if the master is generous, the servant should not go on grumbling. If we think of employees in some companies, however much they get they are not contented; they want still more. To work when conditions are reasonably satisfactory, contentedly, cheerfully, so that society itself functions peacefully, in an orderly way, is very important. We should speak well of the master, not go behind his back and say various things about him.

Brother Raja somewhat changed the wording, but the original Buddhist text speaks about the relationship of the ordinary person to one who is living a religious life, not pretending to be religious like many who are only beggars or rascals in disguise. But presumably it was the custom to honour all those who lived the religious life, at whatever level, who are sincere about coming to know the truth.

Our relationship to all of them must be one of great goodwill and affection in thought, word and deed and they should always be given a ready welcome. This was traditionally done in the Eastern countries, very much so. In the old days to be religious enabled people to follow their religious path without worry.

Nowadays there are some people who have become famous because they make jokes and they know how to entertain their audience. But that is not the real work of the religious people; their work is to put forward certain thoughts in an appealing way, dissuade the people from doing evil things, and guide them to be virtuous, to be kind, and show the way by their own

Buddhist Teachings on Relationships

example, living very simply, not being greedy for material things. Being gentle, and good and kind, religious people must offer a certain kind of leadership. There are new problems in the present day, for instance the environmental problems. They are man's relationship with the elements, the earth, and so on. But we must think about all these relationships in depth, something reciprocal, because we cannot be isolated; we live in a network of relationships.

The Buddhists say, because they believe in transmigration, the dog on the street may be your grandmother. These words must not be taken literally; they must be taken in a symbolic sense. All the animals are our grandparents and

great-grandparents, because the physical body which we have inherited has its origin in the beginnings of evolution, and its components are all derived from a vast number of sources. So we owe something of whatever talents, capacities and characteristics we have to almost all of creation. We are related to all, and so we can think of this relationship as universal.

What is our duty in this network of relationships? How should we live our everyday life where we meet with all these different kinds of people? This simple lesson that the Buddha gave can be converted into a profound relationship, and if we can come to the truth of relationship we have come to the truth about life itself. ✧