

**Buddhist Life,
Buddhist Path**

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5. Harmony

“... although they wish to live without hate, harming, hostility or malignity, and in peace, they yet live in hate, harming one another, hostile and malign ...” (DN 21)

We are a social species; we live in relationship to others, occupy social roles and obligations and are in constant negotiation with one another. But our interpersonal and communal lives are all too often marked by discord, ruffled feathers, infighting, argument, insult, exploitation, violence and war.

Still, it is substantially within the realm of interpersonal and communal relations that the practices of generosity, harmlessness and purity of mind that we have discussed in previous chapters play out. As we perfect our generosity, our harmlessness and our purity, our relationship with our fellow social beings improves. We treat them with more kindness and compassion, we take care not to step on their toes nor harm or insult them in other ways, and we do what we can to help them rather than to exploit them. Imagine what the world would be like if *everyone* developed in this way!

Nonetheless the interpersonal/communal realm has its own peculiarities and pitfalls that most of us are slow to master. Fortunately the Buddha has given us provided abundant wise advice about these. That is the topic of this chapter.

Be careful of what you say

A primary conditioning factor of interpersonal and communal harmony or disharmony is how skillfully we wield the instrument of speech. The Buddha has a lot to say about this skill; we will see later that one of the eight factors of the Buddhist Path (the topic of Book Two) is Right Speech, which in particular censures *false*, *harsh*, *divisive* and *frivolous* speech. Here are the primary requisites for speaking skillfully in a nutshell:

“Bhikkhus, possessing five factors, speech is well spoken, not badly spoken; it is blameless and beyond reproach by the wise. What five?”

1. It is spoken at the proper time;

2. what is said is true;
3. it is spoken gently;
4. what is said is beneficial;
5. it is spoken with a mind of loving-kindness.

Possessing these five factors speech is well spoken, not badly spoken; it is blameless and beyond reproach by the wise.” (AN 5.198, enumeration mine)

We notice all three systems of ethics intersect here; avoiding harm, producing beneficial consequences and a checking the purity of one’s intentions come into play. Furthermore, finding the right time and speaking gently harmonize with the sensitive nature of human receptivity.

For instance, a common, and one of the most awkward social situations, arises when there is need to reproach someone for doing something felt to be inappropriate or harmful – someone is stepping on your foot, for example, or failing to complete an agreed task –, without causing offense and in such away that the proffered advice is actually usefully accepted. Considering the right time takes note, for instance, of whether the person to be admonished is now in a good or receptive mood. Sometimes a bit of friendly small-talk will serve to set the mood before the more topic is broached, “It’s good to see a familiar face. By the way, can I give you some friendly advice on that project you are doing?”

Nonetheless, most people are difficult to admonish, easily offended and some fly off the handle no matter how skillfully we present the situation. If no benefit is likely to accrue, then discretion suggests saying nothing, thereby cutting our losses and preserving harmony. Incidentally, the monastic code includes a rather important precept¹ that *prohibits* monks or nuns from being *difficult to admonish*, for instance, from being argumentative or conjuring up counter-admonitions, as many people do by nature. Our practice typically makes us more thick-skinned, such that our egos are not so easily bruised, so that we begin to see admonishment as advice, which may be either useful or useless, but which demands no emotional response.

One of the greatest dangers to communal harmony that the Buddha warns us about is speaking *divisively*. Rather than attempting to admonish someone for his perceived errors, this person speaks about them to others, generally in his absence. Unfortunately such speech is often repeated by others and may even go viral.

Having heard something here, he repeats it elsewhere in order to divide [those people] from these; or having heard something

elsewhere he repeats it to these people in order to divide [them] from these Thus he is one who divides those who are united, a creator of divisions, one who enjoys factions, delights in factions, a speaker of words that create factions. (AN 10.176)

Divisive speech may target individual people or entire groups of people. It can occur quite frivolously, often as an attempt at humor or wit. Or it can be used as a way of building countervailing group solidarity. Many people routinely speak ill of others in an attempt to build self-esteem or to reassure themselves of their own righteousness. Increasingly, particularly with the rise of mass communications, it arises deliberately and with great precision as a way of controlling populations. Consider that racism and ethnic cleansing begin with divisive speech and colonial empires could not have been built without the policy of “divide and conquer.” Divisive speech is poison to both large societies and small communities. It undermines our trust in the targeted people and populations and ultimately our trust in each other. We should take great care not to divide with our speech, nor to repeat divisive speech we have heard elsewhere.

The error of retribution

Much of natural human behavior is based on reciprocation. Friendship is reciprocated, our economy is based on the principle of mutually agreeable exchange. It is not surprising that our natural response when someone harms us is retaliation. “An eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth,” is a pervasive ethic to this day. Much of American criminal justice, not to mention foreign policy, is based on retaliation.

Nonetheless, Buddhist ethics is different. Recall that generosity is not pure if some kind of payback is expected, and an equal exchange is two missed opportunities for merit-making. Harmlessness is practiced toward all living things across the board, just as mental qualities of of renunciation and kindness are not selective.² We don't exclude some as not deserving of our practice. This makes our practice simple: our job is to embody generosity, harmlessness and kindness toward others in all circumstances, regardless of how they behave. Their practice is their own, ours is our own; we cannot do it for them.

The *Dhammapāda* wisely states in this regard:

Hatred is never appeased by hatred in this world.
By kindness alone is hatred appeased.
This is a law eternal. (*Dhammapāda* 5)

Hatred is both cause and result of abuse. Where hatred is alive, bringing more

hatred to bear only adds fuel to the fire. Yet foolish people think and behave this way. Kindness is that which seeks benefit and is therefore most capable of correcting disharmony.

He practices for the welfare of both,
His own and the other's,
When, knowing that his foe is angry,
He mindfully maintains his peace. (SN 11.4, SN 7.2)

The famous simile of the saw presents one of the strikingly gruesome of the Buddha's images. Through this vivid image the Buddha challenges us to give up the error of retribution even under almost impossible circumstances.

“Monks, even if bandits were to sever you savagely limb by limb with a two-handled saw, he who gave rise to a mind of hate towards them would not be carrying out my teaching.” (MN 21)

We should, in brief, bend over backwards in our effort to maintain harmony even in the most adverse conditions.

Anger, a kind of hatred, is our great retributive emotion and one of the primary and most immediate conditions of disharmony. Anger has no wisdom; it knows only one thing. Yet many of us are so afflicted by anger that ridding ourselves of its grip becomes a primary focus of our practice. In one of the Buddha's discourses he describes three kinds of persons: The first is like a line etched in *stone*; he gets angry and anger persists for a long time. The second is like a line etched in the *ground*; he gets angry, but his anger erodes quickly. The third – and this is what we should aspire to be – is like a line etched in *water*; even if spoken to harshly he does not anger, but “remains on friendly terms with, mingles with and greets,” the one who would make the first two types of people angry. (AN 3.132) The last has a mind most conducive to harmony.

We reserve our most virulent anger for fellow humans. We do not, for instance, generally get angry at gravity or rain, no matter how implicated these may be in our personal hardships. Yet even a hint of disregard or an unskillful word from a human can put us into an instant rage. Anger also has a tipping point, past which the object of our vexation becomes dehumanized, demonized, becomes – at least temporarily, for this same person might, paradoxically, at other times be one of our dearest friends – a source of irremediable evil, rather than a conditioned complex of pleasing virtues and vexing faults like the rest us. This is the great delusion anger evokes.

Anger is a conditioned response that can be unlearned as a part of purification of mind. However, there are also a number of reflections or thought experiments that many find useful in this regard. The Buddha suggests that we put ourselves in the shoes of others (SN 55.7), fully recognizing our common

humanity, our suffering, our desire for happiness. He also points out, in view of anger's *kammic* implications, that in responding by anger we are doing to ourselves just what our most ill-intentioned foe would want for us (AN 7.64).

In the end, we should be able to echo Sāriputta's lion's roar, spoken to the Buddha:

“Just as they throw pure and impure things on the earth – feces, urine, spittle, pus and blood – yet the earth is not repelled, humiliated or disgusted because of this; so too, Bhante, I dwell with a mind like earth, vast exalted, and measureless, without enmity and ill will.” (AN 9.11)

This is how we learn to harmonize in a disharmonious world.

Respect

Another condition for harmony in the Buddha's thought is *respect* (*gāraṇa*). The larger ascetic tradition to which the Buddha and Buddhism belonged in ancient India, quite readily rejected prevailing cultural norms, as often did the Buddha. The ascetic tradition was generally also characteristically raucous and disrespectful.³ The Buddha was different: he placed great emphasis on the social lubricants of courtesy, etiquette and respect. The *Saṅgha* met with mutual respect, was expected to meet “in concord, with mutual appreciation, without disputing, blending like milk and water, viewing each other with kindly eyes,” (MN 31) and to adjourn in harmony. A large part of the monastic code consists of rules of etiquette. The attention Buddhist monastics characteristically give to proper attire and grooming, in contrast to matted-hair ascetics, is a further example.

Respect has two aspects: a mental attitude and a physical or verbal expression. As an attitude it is most essentially to regard something or someone as *matter*, to keep in mind the *value* of something or somebody. Literally the English word *respect* means “see again.” It is what we do when we refuse to dehumanize or demonize someone who annoys us. There is wisdom in respect. We don't have to agree with someone, or find them agreeable, to respect them as a human, someone who is in the most essential respects just like us. It is easy to appreciate that respect can contribute to harmony. And, as a matter of fact, as we practice non-harming and develop qualities of kindness towards living beings, we find we naturally come to respect them increasingly. As we respect them more, it becomes harder for us to harm them, feel anger toward them or speak divisively about them. In fact, respect puts to rest the dehumanizing quality of anger discussed above.

The most basic physical expression of respect in India was, and still is, placing

one's palms together in *añjali* (in Pali or Sanskrit), much like the Christian prayer posture. The fact that *añjali* has been preserved in all the diverse Asian cultures into which Buddhism has been transmitted indicates the importance accorded respect. Just as practicing ethically toward living beings encourages respect for them, acknowledging people and even things in this way encourages respect for them. This coming together of attitude and expression is not unfamiliar to us in the West, though perhaps not so ubiquitous as in Indian or Buddhist culture: a handshake, a hug or a wave is an expression of attitude.

The famous *Sigalovada Sutta* (DN 31) tells of a young man, Sigala, the son of a householder, who rises early in the morning, leaves town with wet clothes and wet hair, and then bows to the East, the South, the West, the North, up and down. Then the Buddha comes along with a valuable lesson for young Sigala.

Then the Exalted One, having robed himself in the forenoon took bowl and robe, and entered Rājagaha for alms. Now he saw young Sigala worshipping thus and spoke to him as follows:

“Wherefore do you, young householder, rising early in the morning, departing from Rājagaha, with wet clothes and wet hair, worship with joined hands these various quarters — the East, the South, the West, the North, the Nadir, and the Zenith?”

“My father, Lord, while dying, said to me: 'The six quarters, dear son, you shall worship'. And I, Lord, respecting, revering, revering and honoring my father's word, rise early in the morning, and leaving Rājagaha, with wet clothes and wet hair, worship with joined hands, these six quarters.”

“It is not thus, young householder, the six quarters should be worshipped in the discipline of the noble.”

“How then, Lord, should the six quarters be worshipped in the discipline of the noble? It is well, Lord, if the Exalted One would teach the doctrine to me showing how the six quarters should be worshipped in the discipline of the noble.”

“The following should be looked upon as the six quarters.

The parents should be looked upon as the East,
 teachers as the South,
 wife and children as the West,
 friends and associates as the North,
 servants and employees as the Nadir,
 ascetics and brahmins as the Zenith.” (DN 31)

Now, although Sigala's practice was motivated by respect for his father and

involved a lot of bowing, the six quarters toward which Sigala was bowing had no particular significance for him. The Buddha's reply is a primary example of the Buddha giving a non-Buddhist conceptual scheme a Buddhist interpretation, in this case turning of what to Sigala was an empty ritual into a valuable teaching about living harmoniously and responsibly in the world. The Buddha provided an interpretation of each of the six quarters as a distinct social relation that would, or at least should, matter to him. And the Buddha did not stop there, as we will see momentarily.

Respect is the primary of an escalating series of attitudes that *honor* others in one way or another which includes *deference*, *reverence*, *homage*, *veneration* and *worship*. We find veneration for the Buddha himself clearly expressed physically in the early sources through full prostrations sometimes touching the Buddha's feet, by circumambulation while keeping the Buddha on one's right, by covering one's otherwise bare shoulder with one's robe, by sitting on a lower seat than the Buddha, by standing when the Buddha would enter the room, by walking behind the Buddha or not turning one's back to the Buddha and by proper forms of address. He also asked that monastics refuse to teach lay people who do not express a sufficient degree of deference.

It seems that these honoring attitudes have a harmonizing role in two ways: Externally we thereby make ourselves subject to the influence of another. We cannot learn from a teacher, for example, that we do not respect, and we learn all the more quickly from a teacher that we revere or venerate. Internally we thereby develop humility, with the higher attitudes even knocking the ego out of its accustomed position at center of the universe. (In fact this might be a basic function of the worship of God in many religions.) We will have more to say about reverence and veneration in the context of refuge later.

Social responsibilities

Two other conditions of harmony in the Buddha's thought is how we fulfill our social roles and what we expect of others concerning their social roles. Where fulfillment and expectation are in accord, harmony results. Reading further in the *Sigalovada Sutta*, we find that each of the six quarters actually corresponds to two reciprocal roles, each of which carries five responsibilities, except for six responsibilities in the last case.

“In five ways ... a child should minister to his parents as the East:

- (i) Having supported me I shall support them,
- (ii) I shall do their duties,
- (iii) I shall keep the family tradition,
- (iv) I shall make myself worthy of my inheritance,
- (v) furthermore I shall offer alms in honor of my departed

relatives.

“In five ways ... the parents thus ministered to as the East by their children, show their compassion:

- (i) they restrain them from evil,
- (ii) they encourage them to do good,
- (iii) they train them for a profession,
- (iv) they arrange a suitable marriage,
- (v) at the proper time they hand over their inheritance to

them.

“In these five ways do children minister to their parents as the East and the parents show their compassion to their children. Thus is the East covered by them and made safe and secure.

“In five ways ... a pupil should minister to a teacher as the South:

- (i) by rising from the seat in salutation,
- (ii) by attending on him,
- (iii) by eagerness to learn,
- (iv) by personal service,
- (v) by respectful attention while receiving instructions.

“In five ways ... do teachers thus ministered to as the South by their pupils, show their compassion:

- (i) they train them in the best discipline,
- (ii) they see that they grasp their lessons well,
- (iii) they instruct them in the arts and sciences,
- (iv) they introduce them to their friends and associates,
- (v) they provide for their safety in every quarter.

“The teachers thus ministered to as the South by their pupils, show their compassion towards them in these five ways. Thus is the South covered by them and made safe and secure.

“In five ways ... should a wife as the West be ministered to by a husband:

- (i) by being courteous to her,
- (ii) by not despising her,
- (iii) by being faithful to her,
- (iv) by handing over authority to her,
- (v) by providing her with adornments.

“The wife thus ministered to as the West by her husband shows her compassion to her husband in five ways:

- (i) she performs her duties well,
- (ii) she is hospitable to relations and attendants,
- (iii) she is faithful,
- (iv) she protects what he brings,
- (v) she is skilled and industrious in discharging her duties.

'In these five ways does the wife show her compassion to her husband who ministers to her as the West. Thus is the West covered by him and made safe and secure.

“In five ways ... should a clansman minister to his friends and associates as the North:

- (i) by liberality,
- (ii) by courteous speech,
- (iii) by being helpful,
- (iv) by being impartial,
- (v) by sincerity.

“The friends and associates thus ministered to as the North by a clansman show compassion to him in five ways:

- (i) they protect him when he is heedless,
- (ii) they protect his property when he is heedless,
- (iii) they become a refuge when he is in danger,
- (iv) they do not forsake him in his troubles,
- (v) they show consideration for his family.

“The friends and associates thus ministered to as the North by a clansman show their compassion towards him in these five ways. Thus is the North covered by him and made safe and secure.

“In five ways should a master minister to his servants and employees as the Nadir:

- (i) by assigning them work according to their ability,
- (ii) by supplying them with food and with wages,
- (iii) by tending them in sickness,
- (iv) by sharing with them any delicacies,
- (v) by granting them leave at times.

“The servants and employees thus ministered to as the Nadir by their master show their compassion to him in five ways:

- (i) they rise before him,
- (ii) they go to sleep after him,
- (iii) they take only what is given,
- (iv) they perform their duties well,
- (v) they uphold his good name and fame.

“The servants and employees thus ministered to as the Nadir show their compassion towards him in these five ways. Thus is the Nadir covered by him and made safe and secure.

“In five ways ... should a householder minister to ascetics and brahmans as the Zenith:

- (i) by lovable deeds,
- (ii) by lovable words,
- (iii) by lovable thoughts,
- (iv) by keeping open house to them,
- (v) by supplying their material needs.

“The ascetics and brahmans thus ministered to as the Zenith by a householder show their compassion towards him in six ways:

- (i) they restrain him from evil,
- (ii) they persuade him to do good,
- (iii) they love him with a kind heart,
- (iv) they make him hear what he has not heard,
- (v) they clarify what he has already heard,
- (vi) they point out the path to a heavenly state.

“In these six ways do ascetics and brahmans show their compassion towards a householder who ministers to them as the Zenith. Thus is the Zenith covered by him and made safe and secure.” (DN 31)

I quote this at length because of the importance of this teaching. It provides what we could consider a fourth system of ethics alongside generosity, precepts and purity. Although elements of all three of these are found in this itemization of responsibilities, this is, like precepts, a kind of duty ethics, a code of obligations. However, like the Confucian code, its focus is on the harmonizing or ordering of human affairs. This code is often referred to as a lay *Vinaya*, corresponding to the monastic code of conduct.

We can note a few qualities of this itemization. First, it is balanced, allocating equal responsibilities to each side of each reciprocal relation. In this way, it is not exploitive as long as all adhere to their own responsibilities. I think the point is that if the reciprocal relation is out of balance, as when slaves or wives are simply treated as property, harmony suffers. Second, this itemization focuses on responsibilities, not on rights. A common modern tendency is to see

the social landscape in terms of *my* rights but *their* responsibilities. Finally, although the specifics might require some adaptation to modern cultural circumstances, this allocation of responsibilities speaks remarkably well, and very critically, to our modern circumstances.

The Ideal Society

An important conditioning factor in communal harmony or disharmony that goes beyond individual interactions and relations is certainly governance or the institutional structures of the society. This also was not beyond the Buddha's purview, for the Buddha was the architect of a community, the *Saṅgha* of monks and nuns. It is instructive to see what kinds of choices the Buddha made to form this ideal society writ small.

In Gotama's time, the Gangetic plain encompassed a number of small kingdoms and republics. The two dominant kingdoms of the region were Magadha and Kosala. The republics were largely lined up along the northern edge of the Gangetic plain in the foothills of the Himalayan mountains, which were coming increasingly under the dominance of the kingdoms. The westernmost of these was the Sakyan Republic where the Buddha-to-be was grown up. These republics were generally governed by an unelected assembly of elders from the *khattiya* or warrior/administrative caste. It is likely that the Buddha, as a *khattiya*, was familiar with matters of governance. This was also a patriarchal society that would become more patriarchal with time, such that spiritual practice and education were widely (though not entirely) considered masculine pursuits and women were generally subject in all stages of life to masculine authority.

Although there were ascetics in India before the Buddha, "... among all of the bodies of renunciators it was only the Buddhists who invented monastic life,"⁴ that is, who provided an organized institution capable of sustaining its practice and teachings. The Buddha never attempted to organize the lay community except indirectly by putting the monastic community in their midst and letting them sort out what to do about it. The monastic *Saṅgha* is a multi-functional institution, defined in the *Vinaya* with a mission statement, a code of conduct, rules of governance, guidelines for handling grievances and many other features.⁵

Some of the notable hallmarks of the *Saṅgha* as conceived by the Buddha are as follows: The *Saṅgha* observes no class distinctions and an exemplary level of gender equality.⁶ It is regulated in a way to avoid conflicts and maintain harmony, and observes procedures to negotiate disagreements should these arise. It rules by consensus of all monastics in a *local* community and, as such, is only minimally hierarchical. For instance, there is no system of pope and

bishops, so that although monastics live under the code of the *Vinaya*, they are not subject to any distant centralized authority. Serious transgressions of the monastic code entail no corporal punishments, but rather sanctions, none more severe than expulsion from the local community. Rectifying transgressions is much dependent of acknowledgement of guilt. Committing one of the most serious offenses, for instance killing another person, is simply *by definition* no longer to be a monastic; if one hides the offense, one is impersonating a monastic. Aside from limited coercive control over each other, monastics have no coercive power whatever over the laity. There is, for instance, nothing like excommunication. Their authority derives entirely from the respect they receive as teachers and role models for those committed to the *Dhammic* life. In fact, the laity has significant coercive power over the *Saṅgha*, since a displeased laity can at any time withdraw the support on which the *Saṅgha* depends.

The constitution of the *Saṅgha* embodies so many social ideals that it might seem rather pie-in-the sky. But keep in mind it has outlived every other system of governance in existence at its birth, and almost every one that has arisen since. It has seen great empires come and go and persists to this day. This in evidence of the practical understanding with which the Buddha carefully constituted the monastic *Saṅgha*. It just keeps going.

The Buddha did not actively champion the similar reformation of civil society, but did have a bit to say about responsibilities of kings toward their subjects, sometimes describing the *righteous* or *wheel-turning king* as a kind of ideal. In DN 26 he even recommended that such a king seek ethical guidance from wise monastics:

“Whatever ascetics and brahmins in your kingdom have renounced the life of sensual infatuation and are devoted to forbearance and gentleness, each one taming himself, each one calming himself and each one striving for the end of craving, from time to time you should go to them and consult them as to what is wholesome and what is unwholesome, what is blameworthy and what is blameless, what is to be followed and what is not to be followed and what action will in the long run lead to harm and sorrow, and what to welfare and happiness. Having listened to them, you should avoid evil and do what is good.”

This passage is significant in view of the common understanding that monastics should not get involved in political or social matters, and are perhaps ill-equipped to do so. It clearly opens a nonpartisan role for them as moral advisors. In DN 5 the Buddha describes a chaplain offering wise advice to a king concerning the relationship of crime, poverty and general prosperity:

“Your Majesty’s country is beset by thieves, it is ravaged, villages and

towns are being destroyed, the countryside is infested with brigands. ... Suppose Your Majesty were to think: ‘I will get rid of this plague of robbers by executions and imprisonment, or by confiscation, threats and banishment’, the plague would not be properly ended. Those who survived would later harm Your Majesty’s realm. However, with this plan you can completely eliminate the plague: To those in the kingdom who are engaged in cultivating crops and raising cattle, let Your Majesty distribute grain and fodder; to those in trade, give capital; to those in government service assign proper living wages. Then those people, being intent on their own occupations, will not harm the kingdom. Your Majesty’s revenues will be great, the land will be tranquil and not beset by thieves, and the people, with joy in their hearts, will play with their children, and will dwell in unlocked houses.”

We do well to note here and elsewhere a characteristic feature of the Buddha’s method of ethical scrutiny: its uncommon tolerance and forgiveness. He thereby maintains unwavering kindness for *all* common participants in human society, even thieves and brigands, whose worldly actions he sees as almost unavoidably conditioned by circumstances and as controllable to the extent that conditions can be changed, at least by kings. The advice to the king here is also an instance of the practice of *appropriate attention* (*yoniso manasikāra*), literally, “thinking from the origin”), a hugely important practice in early Buddhism which we will encounter a number of times in this textbook. The plague addressed in this passage arises directly from observable social conditions, not from some unseen unconditioned evil of thieves and brigands, which would be a more commonplace assumption, but one that would lead to a counterproductive and hateful response.

Practicing Harmony

The skill of harmonizing with others is developed on top of the skills of generosity, harmlessness and purity. It adds to these the specialized skill of dealing with the complexities of the common human personality as we interact with others, including respect for their humanness and acknowledgement of a conditioned complex of faults and virtues that we all possess (aside from the *arahants*). It also adds to these a handle on some of our most deeply rutted inclinations, for we commonly reserve a particularly pronounced capacity for harshness for our fellow humans.

As we practice harmony we may often be frustrated at the limits of our control over the consequences. Harmony is something shared by people in relationship or in community, and our practice, yet we exercise control over only one side of the relationship, and over one locus in the dynamics of a community. The

best it can do is to uphold in our practice from our side the conditions conducive to harmony and leave the rest up to others, who may have entirely different understandings and intentions than our own. At least that way we do not contribute to the disharmony when it does arise. Recall that our practice and its results are our own.

We must resist the urge to extend our control over the consequences by admonishing others, for unless done with great skill, as we have seen, this risks greater disharmony. There are ways, however, in which we do influence others in the direction of greater harmony. For one thing, others begin to realize that we consistently refuse to participate in the kinds of games that precipitate disharmony, such as responding to insult with insult. We become a kind of refuge from such behavior, a safe space in which they do not have to be so defensive. And soon, they begin to emulate our behaviors. We produce role models.

Also, within any culture certain people enjoy a degree of authority as wise advisors or teachers, either by social role or reputation. In the Sigovada sutta, parents, teachers and ascetics and brahmins may enjoy this status. Granting reverence or veneration to another is an act of trust or faith that opens others up to their advice. The Buddha, to take the primary example, certainly received that degree of veneration from his thousands of disciples and could freely admonish others all day long. It is only through granting this level of respect or trust to the wise that the Buddha's *sāsana* has grown. Reverence or veneration in the Buddhist context is the topic of the next chapter.

As we interact with others a range of unskillful thoughts come up, involving anger, resentment, envy, arrogance, vanity, personal insult, conceit and so on. Our practice of purification is gradually to let go of our tendency toward such thoughts. But our first line of defense is not to act bodily or verbally on the basis of such thoughts. It is to remain harmless whatever the mind might be doing. If we can do this, we are already to a degree accomplished in not contributing to disharmony. The speech precepts in particular – not speaking falsely, not speaking harshly, not speaking divisively and not speaking frivolously – take us far in this direction.

One of the most dangerous ways we can act on the basis of such thoughts is through divisive speech. It is helpful to guard against this with a further rule of thumb: Do not speak ill of others.⁷ There will be cases in which this rule of thumb cannot be sustained, for instance, where we need to warn others out of compassion of the angry man around the corner who is swearing and brandishing a knife. But consider: in general speaking ill of others it is a huge responsibility:

First, in the situation where it is likely to come up, we may well be

speaking falsely; if there is anger involved, there is almost certainly some degree of misperception on our part.

Second, the consequences of our speech might easily get out of hand. Even if our intentions are relatively pure, how about the intentions of those we speak to, who are likely to repeat it to others, and so forth? Furthermore, if we are talking with someone who lacks familiarity with the person or group we speak ill of, what is said may produce is likely to color their impressions for a long time to come. The recipient of the disparagement may then repeat it much less skillfully than we will, and with quite impure intentions.

Third, it is difficult to maintain kindness in a mob: Even if we speak ill of another in all kindness for that person, others who agree with us may be of questionable kindness. Another rule of thumb: Never take sides in interpersonal disputes, even if you are friends with one party; don't become part of a coalition set in opposition to some other person or group.

It is advisable to become familiar with, and participate in, the use of gestures of respect and general etiquette in whatever local Buddhist community you might belong to. It should be noted that although these go back to common Indian roots in virtually any Buddhist community, these have evolved into somewhat different forms through different Asian cultures. It is also wise to become skilled in the modern gestures and etiquette of the prevailing culture. Although these are generally different from those found in most Buddhist communities, they generally served much the same function.

Further Reading

The Buddha's Teachings on Social and Communal Harmony: An Anthology of Discourses from the Pali Canon, Bhikkhu Bodhi (editor), 2016, Wisdom Publications. This is a systematic look at the Buddha's teachings on harmony with valuable commentary by a renowned American monk and Pali scholar.

Working with Anger, Thubten Chodron, 2001, Snow Lion. This highly regarded work, by an American nun, focuses on reconceptualizing situations that normally lead to the arising of anger. It is strongly based on the insights of the great eighth-century Indian monk and scholar Shantideva's *Guide to the Bodhisattva Way of Life*.

1 *Saṅghadisesa* 12.

2 There is a kind of reciprocation in kammic results, but this is not reciprocation between agents, rather a personal balancing out. In fact, when we keep karma and its results in mind, we are likely to be less

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- concerned with reciprocation between agents.
- 3 ... as Thanissaro (2001b) points out.
 - 4 Gombrich (2006), p. 19.
 - 5 These same features are common in modern organizations, surprisingly, given that the monastic *saṅgha* has following all these years essentially the same regulations codified in the *Vinaya* (discipline) in the early Buddhist era.
 - 6 See Cintita (2012) on the issue of gender equality in Early Buddhism.
 - 7 The seventh of the *Bodhisattva Precepts*, originating and widely followed by Buddhists in East Asia, is more complex, but often interpreted as saying just this.