

The Meditative Culture of Heart

– Interpersonal Relationships as a Kammatṭhāna

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“I shall protect myself” with that thought
the foundations of mindfulness should be cultivated.
“I shall protect others” with that thought
the foundations of mindfulness should be cultivated.
By protecting oneself one protects others;
by protecting others one protects oneself.

And how does one, by protecting oneself protect others?
By repeated practice of mindfulness, by its meditative development,
and by frequent occupation with it.

And how does one, by protecting others protect oneself?
By patience, by a non-violent life, by loving-kindness and compassion.
(*Samyutta Nikāya* 47, 19)

Steadfast success in everyday life, particularly in its social field, may seem improbable, miraculous and incomprehensible to an uninstructed worldling. Nevertheless such a steadiness of success in social life is attainable. Successful life coping belongs to the culture of heart both on the mundane and supramundane levels. It is, indeed, an expression of competence and skills that can be learned and trained; it is a result of skilfully handled situations that are, after all, despite of all eventual difficulties, brought to wholesome ends.

Thus the aim of this text is to show that the clear comprehension (*sampajañña* – cf. Nyānaponika: *The Heart of Buddhist Meditation* 1962, page 45ff) of “know-how” and the skilful use of suitable means is in Theravāda neither a secret magic nor a subject of esoteric teachings. In some other traditions though, this would be the case, as the teacher confines the secret only to his favourite disciples at his final parting (cf. *Milinda-Pañhā* 144). The success intended in this present treatise depends solely upon the competence resulting from the study and practice of Buddha-Dhamma.

This is not to doubt the occurrence of supernormal and magic powers (*abhiññā, iddhi*) due to the practice of both Buddhist and other meditation methods, nor to deny the efficacy of protective runes (*paritta-gāthā*) and acts of truth (*saccakiriya*) used to influence the course of events. The logistics of these practices are explained e.g. in *Milinda-Pañhā* (120f, 150f); these methods are found throughout the canonical scriptures and the detailed instructions for their cultivation are given comprehensively by Ācariya Buddhaghosa in *Visuddhi-Magga* (1975, 40, 375ff, 414, 429ff etc.). Professor Gombrich, in comparative study of cognitive and affective aspects of the Buddhist practice, elucidates these methods in the living context of the contemporary Sri Lanka and also shows that their logic can be harmonized with the doctrine of karma (Gombrich 1971, 225) which is a crucial part of the Dhamma and, notwithstanding the deference to some famous Buddhist scholars, cannot be seen as separate from the so-called “nibbanic” orientation.

The ethical training (*sīla-sikkhā*) is the most important basis for all successful coping with the realities of everyday life and, particularly, for the mastering of interpersonal relationships. To teach this life coping skill (*āyu-kusala*), the third of the magical powers (*iddhi*) as enumerated by the Buddha is the most relevant one, namely the “genuine wonder of instruction” (*anusāsantī*), which is well explained by venerable Saddhatissa in *Buddhist Ethics* (1970, 186f). From another point of view, Gombrich opens the question how fruitful are magic practices due to their being conditioned by personal qualification of “being holy enough to bring it off” (Gombrich 1971, 227). This problem of holiness and personal power in attaining worldly success is not specific for Buddhism alone; the Yaqui–Indian teacher of American anthropologist Carlos Castaneda (1974, 227) says:

At this precise point, a teacher would usually say to his disciple that they have arrived at a *final* crossroad. To say such a thing is misleading, though. In my opinion there is no final crossroad, no final step to anything. And since there is no final step to anything, there should not be any secrecy about any part of our lot as luminous beings. *Personal power* decides who can or who cannot profit by a revelation.

While training psychologists and medical doctors in psychotherapy and group counselling in Switzerland since early nineteen seventies, we could observe that personal power and competence in interpersonal relationships are significantly interconnected. The successful ones amongst our psychotherapists did not have to become Buddhists, nor did they have to realize supramundane spiritual path, yet they differed in efficacy of their work according to their personal power. For the scientific definition of personal power, we have used the three constituent attitudes of successful psychotherapist, namely (1) being congruent and genuine, (2) giving unconditional positive regard to others, and (3) communicating empathic understanding of other’s experiencing, which have been discovered by a foremost psychotherapist Carl Ransom Rogers (*On Personal Power* 1977, 10f). These three attitudes are in fact skills conforming to the Buddhist notions of truthfulness (*sacca*), kindness (*mettā*), and compassion (*karunā*); undeniably all of them have to be cultivated in daily life out of mindfulness (*sati*). There have been developed strategies of instruction (*anusāsana*) to train all these skills within a holistic psychotherapy method, which is based on Abhidhamma and which became already known in Europe as Satithery (see Frýba: *The Practice of Happiness – Exercises and Techniques for Developing Mindfulness, Wisdom and Joy* 1995).

Here we leave aside the interests of spiritual teachers, meditation instructors, and psychotherapists, in order to concentrate upon the skills of life coping and mastering of interpersonal relationships in a way that is accessible to any serious practitioners of Dhamma, whether in monastic or lay life. In Dhamma, we have the basic notion that there is no holiness attainable and, in this sense, also no personal power possible without training in wisdom (*paññā-sikkhā*), no wisdom is possible without meditative mind–training (*samādhi-sikkhā*), and no real progress in meditation is possible without training in virtue (*sīla-sikkhā*). According to the Buddha’s Higher Teaching of Abhidhamma (*Vibhanga* 220f), which contains the exact explanations how to work, the training in virtue is the fundamental precondition for the meditative cultivation of the roads to power (*iddhi-pāda*). And it is also said, that “whosoever has missed the four roads to power, has missed the right path leading to the extinction of suffering” (*Saymutta-Nikāya* 51, 2).

Although we give here some consideration to the conceptual meanings and textual background of our topic, we do not really bother about philological analysis of the employed terms, which is usually the only concern of western Buddhist scholars. We duly stress the importance of the training in virtue (*sīla-sikkhā*) that includes not only “taking of the precepts” and “performing the rituals”, which is usually the only concern of eastern Buddhists, not losing however out of view its instrumentality for the meditative mind–training (*samādhi-sikkhā*). The Pali term *iddhi-pāda* is rendered into English as “basis of success” in the translation of *Visuddhi-Magga* by venerable Ñānamoli (1975) or as “basis of accomplishment” in the translation of *Vibhanga* by venerable

Thittila (1969). In venerable Nyānatiloka's *Buddhist Dictionary* (1972, 64f), which surveys all canonical scriptures and can be considered the most reliable source of doctrinal definitions, we find the following description:

“Roads to Power” (or Success) are the four following qualities, “for as guides, they indicate the road to power connected therewith; and because they form, by way of preparation, the roads to the power constituting the fruition of the path”, namely:

“Concentration of Intention (*chanda-samādhi*) accompanied by effort of will, Concentration of Energy (*virīya-samādhi*)..., Concentration of Consciousness (*citta-samādhi*)..., Concentration of Investigation (*vīmaṃsa-samādhi*) accompanied by effort of will (*padhāna-sankhāra-samannāgata*).” (*VisM XII*)

“These four Roads to Power lead to the attaining and acquiring of magical power, to the power of magical transformation, to the generation of magical power, and to mastery and skill therein.” (*PtsM II, 205*)

Now, what constitutes the effort of will (*padhāna*), which is repeatedly stressed for developing the roads to power? Abhidhamma definitions of *padhāna* include “the effort to avoid and to overcome unskilful (*akusala*) states, as well as to develop and to maintain the skilful (*kusala*) states” (*Vibh 208*), which is a concise instruction for control of mental states within the training in virtue by means of the five precepts that is in detail analysed elsewhere (*Vibh 285*). It is also shown that all these precepts for training “are expressible in psychological terms by the classes of wholesome consciousness” (Nyānatiloka 1971, 45) and all are put in relation to meditative accomplishment (*jhāna*) thus being decisive for future entering or rebirth at corresponding planes of existence (*Vibh 290f*). However the effort of will (*padhāna*) generally, and also the controlling faculty of effort (*virīya-indriya*) in meditation particularly, should not overdo the mind's tranquillity (*samatha*) or outdo its controlling faculty of concentration (*samādhi-indriya*). In the practice of concentration then, the “meditation subject” or literally “the place of work” (*kammatthāna*) is formed according to the predominance of any of the four above phenomena, namely intention, energy, consciousness, investigation. Besides that, the *kammatthāna* includes always some central image (*nimitta*), or perception (*saññā*), or concept (*paññatti*), which endows mind with a proper consciousness object (*bhāvanā-ārammana*) during the practice of meditative absorption (*jhāna*).

It should be only mentioned here, as this is not the place to elaborate upon the theme, that there is a lot of confusion about the meditation subjects and objects amongst the contemporary meditation teachers both in the West and in the traditionally Buddhist countries of the East. The most widely used subject of Buddhist meditation in the West seems to be the perception of breathing, which may also lead to arising of various images or concepts more or less apt for cultivating tranquillity (*samatha*). Less common yet more suitable for this purpose are the images developed out of the perception of colour discs. The development of loving kindness (*mettā-bhāvanā*), upon which we concentrate in this treatise, is well suitable also for attaining the meditative absorption (*jhāna*), yet we shall elaborate upon it here in detail only as relevant for the base of success (*iddhi-pāda*) in the context of culture of heart and mastery of interpersonal relationships.

Before starting to work with the *kammatthāna* itself, the person wishing to develop the roads to power or the basis of success should make sure that “the chosen meditation subject is suitable to his temperament” and that “he carried out the preparatory tasks as otherwise his progress would be difficult” (*VisM 87*). He should make sure that he is going to work “with a sincere inclination of heart and sincere resolution” (*VisM 116f*) and “what is particularly recommended is balancing faith with understanding” (*VisM 129f*) so that various impediments such as doubts about the above theoretical issues do not disturb the proper work on *kammatthāna*. *Kammatthāna* literally means “the working ground” and includes the object of consciousness and the instruction how to deal with it. For both development of *iddhi-pāda* and for dwelling in *jhāna* the continuity of the one and same meditation object (*ārammana*) is essential. Yet in our working with loving kindness (*mettā*)

and compassion (*karunā*) for the mastering of interpersonal relationships, we use also technique of wise apprehension (*yoniso–manasikāra*), which includes thinking and thus requires alteration of the consciousness objects.

Mettā is the highest and most authentic form of love. It is paraphrased in English as the “loving kindness”. In its original context of Dhamma, it is one of the four so-called divine dwellings (*brahma–vihāra*) that have to be primed by wise apprehension (*yoniso–manasikāra*) and then developed in meditation, before they can be relished in everyday life. *Mettā* has to be meditatively developed in three stages: first is “zeal consisting in desire to act (*kattukamyatā–chanda*)”, second is “suppression of the hindrances (*nīvarana–vikkhambhana*)”, third is “full absorption (*appanā*).” In all four divine dwellings, “their object (*ārammana*) is a single living being or many living beings, as a mental object consisting in a concept (*paññatti–dhamma–vasena*)”, whereupon “the extension of the object takes place” (*VisM 320*). The meditators, who are instructed by us in this way, report often the merging of their one luminous being into many others and many luminous beings becoming one with them. There are corresponding passages in *Iddhividha–Nidesa (VisM 384f)* that refer to these experiences, identifying *chanda–samādhi* with *kattukamyatā–chanda*. These experiences can be integrated into the progress of meditation from the tranquillity of divine dwellings (*brahma–vihāra–jhāna*) towards the mindfulness and insight meditation (*satipatthāna–vipassanā*) as recorded in *Anguttara–Nikāya VIII, 63* (cf. Nyānaponika 1962, 182f).

Thus having briefly shown various possibilities how to develop meditation of loving kindness, let us now return to our proper theme of success in everyday life based on the use of interpersonal relationships as a *kammatthāna*. Although working with verbal means in the wise apprehension (*yoniso–manasikāra*), we have to use also images of both the starting points and the goals to be reached. For instruction of our students, including the above-mentioned psychotherapists, counsellors, and clients, we do not have to tell them what the healing and protective runes (*bhesajja–paritta*) and the acts of truth (*sacca–kiriya*) are all about. Yet we have to teach the learners how to make a “resolve” (*adhitthā*) and to help them with developing a “clear basic image (*pādakajjhānacitta*) of the intended object (*nimittārammana*). And these latter are objects as appearances (*vannavasena*), not as concepts (*pannattivaseṇa*). ... direct knowledge (*abhiññā*) next to the preparatory consciousness that have occurred... has the name ‘resolve’ owing to its making the decision” (*VisM 387*). This procedure follows basically the same steps for developing *jhāna* and *iddhi–pāda*, only the phrasing is different.

To start with the practical exercise of *mettā*, we ask the learner to remember two situations that really happened. One situation should be laden with the feeling of well-being, the other with the intention to do good to someone. Besides the clear basic image of each situation, one should also know the basic paradigm of *mettā*:

Never in this world can aggression be pacified by aggression.
But kindness puts it to rest. This is Dhamma, timeless in virtue.
(*Dhammapada 5*)

Similarly, for the practical exercise of *karunā*, the learner should select one situation, in which he managed to compassionately understand a suffering person, and another situation, in which he could see that an aggressive person has acted aggressively due to not feeling well. And one should also know the basic paradigm of *karunā*:

When this person is hateful and angry, things are not going right for him.
If I respond with hate, his suffering may increase. And, moreover, I defile my mind by hate.
May this poor person become happy!

It is certainly not necessary to be reminded that the full-fledged usage of *iddhi*, whether for purposes of healing or for harmonizing social situation, requires many years of regular *jhāna*

practice. Anybody can however, profit from whatever benefits are gained by simple exercises of the basic stages in work on interpersonal relationships as *kammattthāna*. As even a very limited practical experiment, which has been made with an international group of politicians, has brought some good fruits, it should be mentioned here. In November 1981, United Nations Organisation in Geneva has invited the present author to deliver a lecture on the *Uses of Meditation to Improve Interpersonal Relationships* and to give also a practical instruction on the subject. This instruction has been given also on a hand-out paper, otherwise used in our regular workshops for group leaders. Few weeks after the mentioned lecture, we have met again in the same group of UN officers and evaluated the experience of those who did manage to carry on with the simple technique instructed during that lecture. As most of them claimed to have profited even from the brief instruction, we reproduce here the contents of the hand-out:

Drawing upon your memories of real events, imagine that you are involved in a rather heated discussion, for example in a group trying to clarify some problem or settle some business. Such a situation can be psychodramatically staged. But you may also imagine the dramatic sequence just in front of your inner eye. To solve the problem, try to do the following steps:

- 1) Withdraw from the situation that has gone wrong. You may move out even physically.
- 2) Relax if you are tense; rouse yourself if you are listless.
- 3) Remember your capabilities, become aware of your range of choices.
- 4) Make a brief mental note of every arising intention to act. But do not act yet.
- 5) Become aware of your particular aim in this situation and your ultimate goal as well.
- 6) Check the suitability of the strategies possible. Can you act out of compassion or kindness?
- 7) Decide, make a resolve, and begin meaningful action.

These seven steps are known as wise apprehension (*yoniso-manasikāra*), they are not just steps of thinking, but truly “moves of attention, will, and decision.” It is especially mindfulness of the intention to act (as noted in the step 4) that, if cultivated, leads to increasing freedom to choose actions in accordance with the reflected purposefulness. With growing mastery of these steps, this method of mindful and wise apprehension becomes a powerful instrument to control destructive, antisocial, and even pathological tendencies, as well as to fence off their aftermath on the group level.

An adjunct use of paradigms of the so-called divine attitudes (*brahma-vihāra*) procures (in the step 6) healthy alternatives, which can be methodically trained up to the level of spontaneity. The four attitudes of *brahma-vihāra* are usually described in distinction to their opposites, which are called “distant enemies”, and to their corruptions, called “near enemies”:

Mettā, love or loving kindness, is opposite of hate, anger, and ill will; it should not degenerate into either subservience or possessive adoration, which are its near enemies.

Karunā is compassion based on sympathy and understanding; it is opposite to cruelty and vengefulness; it should not turn into sentimentality or dejection.

Muditā is sympathetic joy in the welfare and success of others; it is opposite to envy and jealousy; its near enemy is uncontrolled frivolity.

Upekkhā, or equanimity, is an uplifted independence of flattery and threats; its near enemies are arrogance and indolence.

Since more than ten years, we are discovering the hidden potentials of the Buddha's teaching on interpersonal issues. During our search in traditionally Buddhist countries, we came across many persons who are very kind, hospitable, compassionate, and able to conciliate their next ones. Yet we have not met anybody amongst the Buddhist monks and laymen, who could share the know-how for attaining these skills. For these aims, they refer either to general training in the Dhamma or to the magic practices using runes etc. Even in the monastic conciliatory practices (*vinaya-kamma*), there seem to be more of a magic ceremony than practical help to overcome interpersonal problems, as far as our informants report. What comes closest to the know-how we look for, is the program of nongovernmental organisation Sarvodaya in Sri Lanka, but it functions on the macro-social and political level only. Nevertheless in the field of politics, we meet some personalities who are sincerely interested in improving interpersonal relationships by means of specific Dhamma practices. An example of excellence is the former prime minister of Sri Lanka Mrs. Sirimavo Bandaranaike, who has invited us to conduct a seminar on *Meditation to Improve Interpersonal Relationships* for the Sri Lanka Vipassana Meditation Center in Colombo in March 1979, in which she herself also participated.

The system of training interpersonal skills based on Buddhist meditation, which is described in the present treatise, has been developed out of both Buddhist and Western sources. Besides the already mentioned texts of the Buddha's so-called Higher Teaching of Abhidhamma, we draw the know-how also from the research on Buddhist healing rituals (Frýba 1982, Vogt 1999). In collaboration with doctors Ernst Blum, Zerka Moreno, Beatrice Vogt, and others, we have developed the method of psychotherapy, which uses mindfulness (*sati*) as its chief principle and is therefore called satitherapy (Frýba 1992). Thus Buddhist meditation is a part of the training of satitherapy, which is available not only for medical doctors and psychologists but for any academically educated persons who work with people. The three already mentioned psychotherapist's attitudes of congruent genuineness, unconditional positive regard, and empathic understanding, as developed by Carl Ransom Rogers (1977) within the client-centered therapy, are fully compatible with the principles of Dhamma. Also the psychodrama of Jacob Levi Moreno (1959) and particularly its theoretical founding in the concepts of relativity (*anattā*) and transience (*anicca*) come close to the Dhamma.

There are quite a few other Western psychotherapists who come close to the Dhamma. The most relevant aspects of their approach to interpersonal relationships can however be subsumed under the attitudes of patience, non-violent life, compassion, loving-kindness, and, of course, especially mindfulness.

The mindfulness in all realms of relationships, as well as in its broader context, must be cultivated in order to stay truthful, congruent, and thus to prevent any unnecessary crises and suffering. To be mindful means to be empathic and patient also with oneself, and also to be able to communicate both what is problematic and what is joyful in such a manner that empathically respects the state of mind of the other.

Mindfulness seasoned with authentic love is thus the most powerful road to success in everyday life.

Note

There have been added, to the original text of the lecture from 1982, the following references to the relevant books that have been published later on:

Frýba, Mirko (1995)

Vogt, Beatrice (1999)

References:

All Pali Canon quotations are from the books of PTS.

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