

## Sariputta in the City

One morning in the city of Savatthi (also called Shravasti), there was a group of men gathered together, talking about Venerable Sariputta. Having heard him teach the Dharma, they were very happy with what they had learned and admired him very much. They talked about his noble qualities, such as his kindness, intelligence, vast knowledge and clear way of teaching. One of them said,

“Oh, our noble master has such a high degree of patience that even when men abuse him and strike him, he never gets the least bit angry!”

Standing nearby was a man, a brahmin who didn't believe in the Buddha's teachings, who asked, “Who is this that never gets angry?”

One of the men in the group answered, “Our elder.”

The brahmin said, “It must be that nobody ever provoked him to anger.”

A man in the group responded, “That is not the case, brahmin.”

The brahmin said, “Well then, I will provoke him to anger.”

A man in the group replied, “Provoke him to anger if you can!”

“Trust me,” said the brahmin, “I know just what to do to him.”

Just then, Venerable Sariputta entered the city with his bowl, seeking donations of food for his meal. When the brahmin saw him, he stepped up behind him and with tremendous force, struck him with a staff on the back.

“What was that?” said Venerable Sariputta. Without even turning around to look, he continued on his way.

The brahmin felt a pang of remorse that sprang up like fire throughout every part of his body.

“Oh, how noble are the qualities with which the venerable elder is endowed!” exclaimed the brahmin. He ran up to Venerable Sariputta and bowed reverently at his feet, saying,

“Forgive me, reverend sir.”

“What do you mean?” asked Venerable Sariputta.

“I wanted to test your patience and struck you,” said the brahmin.

“Very well, I pardon you,” responded Venerable Sariputta.

The brahmin said, “If, reverend sir, you are willing to pardon me, then sit and receive your food only in my house.”

The brahmin then took Venerable Sariputta’s bowl, according to the custom of guiding a monk to one’s house, and Sariputta willingly gave it to him. The brahmin took him to his house and served him food.

People who had seen what happened were filled with anger. One of them said,

“This guy hit with his staff our noble monk, who is free of any offense. He must not be allowed to get away. We will kill him right here and now.”

They took clods of earth and sticks and stones into their hands, and stood waiting at the door of the brahmin’s house.

Meanwhile, inside the house, Venerable Sariputta got up from his seat and placed his bowl in the brahmin’s hands so the brahmin would lead him out the door. The people waiting near the door saw Venerable Sariputta and the brahmin walk outside, and one of them said,

“Reverend sir, order this brahmin who has taken your bowl to turn back.”

Sariputta responded, “What do you mean, lay disciple?”

The man responded, “That brahmin struck you and we are going to treat him as he deserves.”

Sariputta said, “What do you mean? Did he strike you or me?”

The man replied, “You, reverend sir.”

Sariputta said, “If he struck me, he asked forgiveness; go on your way,” and told the people to go back home. He told the brahmin to turn around and go back home, and then he went back to the monastery.

At the monastery, the monks had heard what happened. They were highly offended, exclaiming,

“What sort of thing is this? A brahmin struck the Venerable Sariputta and he immediately went to the house of the same brahmin who hit him and accepted food from his hands! From the moment he struck him, for whom will he any longer have any respect? He will go around pounding everybody right and left!”

At that moment, the Buddha approached and asked, “Monks, what is the subject that draws your attention now as you sit here all gathered together?”

They told him what they were discussing.

The Buddha said, “Monks, no brahmin ever strikes another brahmin; it must have been a householder-brahmin who struck a monk-brahmin; for when a man attains the third level of enlightenment, all anger is totally destroyed in him.” Then he said the following stanzas:

“One should not strike a brahmana,  
Nor for that should he react,  
Shame on one who hits a brahmana,  
More shame on him should he react!

Nothing is better for the brahmana  
Than restraining the mind from what is dear.  
When he turns away from the wish to harm,  
Thus does his suffering subside.

(Dhammapada 389, 390)

### ***Dharma Discussion – When Others Are Aggressive, Hostile or Abusive:***

We all have experienced someone attacking us—behaving in a hostile or aggressive manner toward us, or intentionally doing or saying something harmful or abusive to us. This usually happens when someone gets upset with something we’ve said or done; it’s not very often that a stranger suddenly attacks us for no reason, as the brahmin attacked Sariputta. So, this discussion will address generally the situations in which someone is abusive or unfairly aggressive or hostile to us, verbally or physically.

What do we ordinarily do in such situations? Our immediate impulse is to defend ourselves and prevent further attack or abuse. We feel fear or anger, our adrenaline is triggered; our body is in defense or counterattack mode. We shout, scold, or strike back with hostility. This is a protective survival mechanism, a primal reaction, a deeply ingrained habit that we all have carried with us over countless lifetimes, including as an animal, to repel the attacker.

Venerable Sariputta had overcome this habit; he wasn’t at all angry or afraid, but only said, “What was that?” without even turning to look at his attacker. Then the attacker, praising him and bowing at his feet, expressed remorse and invited him to lunch, and he graciously accepted.

This seems like such an unlikely scenario nowadays that we might dismiss it as overly idealistic and thus irrelevant to us. Even in the time of the Buddha it was unlikely: the brahmin who hit Sariputta expected that any holy man would become angry or afraid if viciously attacked, and the monks thought Sariputta’s kindness would only encourage further attacks. They thought it

was wrong to give in to an attacker's desires and that one must do something to make him learn to respect others and not attack people. A scolding or show of power might accomplish that.

In today's world especially, people generally are admired for hitting back hard when attacked, and ridiculed for weakness or cowardice if they don't stand up for themselves.

When one "stands up for themselves," whether by hitting, scolding, speaking harshly, threatening, or otherwise showing power, one generally feels anger and resentment along with a wish to punish or hurt the attacker in return, to "teach him a lesson."

But the Buddha taught the monks that reacting with a wish to harm is the wrong response.

So, are we supposed to not react at all, like Sariputta, to an attacker?

As the monks suggested, not reacting might invite the attacker to continue attacking.

We must consider that Sariputta was not an ordinary person; he had such a level of wisdom that he was free from fear and anger, detached from a sense of self, and understood his attacker and what response would be the best to bring him to the Dharma.

We likely don't have that same level of wisdom and freedom from all anger, which, as the Buddha pointed out, doesn't happen until the third level of enlightenment.

Also, the situation with Sariputta was unusual; his attacker was just testing him and therefore probably didn't have strong negative emotion or other motivation to continue attacking people.

So, responding like Sariputta might not be our best option to stop someone from further attacking us or others, especially when the attacker has strong negative emotions or evil intent. In such situations, we may have to take countermeasures to protect ourselves and deter hostile, aggressive, abusive or harmful words or behavior.

Yet we can still do that while following the Buddha's teaching, by doing it without ill will or wishing to hurt the attacker.

How do we do that? It's not easy, as a verbal or physical attack is often sudden and unexpected, and we have no time to think about how to respond—we must react lightning-fast to protect ourselves or stop the abuse. And we have a strong tendency to react with hostility not only if the attacker is an enemy but also if they are a family member, partner or friend, with whom we feel less inhibited.

But if we react with a wish to harm, we risk escalating the conflict, maybe resulting in injury or other damage. Additionally, we create negative karma—more suffering for ourselves. As the Buddha said, when we turn away from wish to harm, our suffering subsides.

To avoid reacting with ill will or wish to harm, we need to prepare ourselves well in advance by developing wholesome habits consistent with the Dharma that naturally diminish our feelings of ill will. Then we are better able to respond in a manner appropriate to the particular situation when someone attacks us verbally or physically, or otherwise behaves in a hostile, aggressive or abusive manner.

The following preparation and habits are helpful:

1. Develop healthy perspectives about ourselves and others.

It's difficult to develop compassion, patience or respect for others when we don't have much respect, compassion or patience for ourselves. The first step is to work on healing ourselves from past trauma. Until we have made some progress in healing, we might be hypervigilant to threats or very sensitive to any level of hostility, aggression or abuse, and can't avoid reacting with intense emotions. Healing might involve therapy, stress reduction, mindfulness, and/or meditation techniques.

2. Set and maintain boundaries.

We don't want to accept or normalize disrespectful or abusive behavior by ignoring or tolerating it. So, reasonable boundaries are necessary in relationships—such as with family members, friends, partners and colleagues—in order to avoid misunderstandings, disrespect and abuse. Making agreements on house rules and office policies, and communicating about each other's particular expectations, needs and sensitivities are ways to set boundaries. Of course, we should carefully respect others' boundaries.

Clear, immediate, open and skillful communication when we feel someone is using, abusing or disrespecting us, or otherwise violating our boundaries, is important to maintain them and prevent hostility.

In addition, we should set boundaries on ourselves in terms of whom we choose to associate with, selecting people who share our ethical values and avoiding people with selfish or questionable values, behaviors and habits, regardless of how fun and entertaining these people may be.

3. Avoid escalating conflict.

The more we practice avoiding an escalation of conflict—or deescalating it—in various situations, the more likely we will respond in a way that is appropriate to the situation instead of just impulsively reacting with overwhelming emotions to all provocations.

For example, when you let a person know that they have done something wrong, rather than apologizing, they reverse the blame (placing it on you, for example by “gaslighting”) or respond with insulting words. Although that might provoke you to shout and escalate the conflict, you can instead explain how their words or action made you feel and then remain silent, avoiding eye contact, to signal that you're not going to argue and prolong the conflict. You can resist any provocation to continue arguing by saying that you don't feel ready to discuss it right now. This creates a cooling-off period without totally refusing to address the issues. Then later, when both of you are more composed, you can discuss and resolve them.

4. Practice compassion.

One of the most effective ways to avoid ill will—indeed an antidote to ill will—is to practice compassion. How do we do that? Wherever we are, we try to see how we, as well as others, are always suffering—at least mildly—in some way, such as feeling uncomfortable, tired, stressed, annoyed, disappointed, dissatisfied, anxious, worried, frustrated or bored. That might

seem like a depressing or negative attitude, but whenever we see suffering, we can wish that they feel peaceful, happy and free from suffering, and these wishes generate kindness and connection that we wouldn't have felt otherwise.

The more we understand that we all are suffering, more or less, every day, the easier it is to see that a person's suffering is a motive for their misbehavior.

And, we can remember that a person who harms others is creating more negative karma, and thus more suffering, for themselves. It's a vicious cycle. Remembering this can generate compassion in us and reduce our hatred and ill will.

When someone attacks us, verbally or physically, ordinarily we counterattack with an intent to hurt them, or hope they get due punishment or suffer the horrible results of their karma as soon as possible. But their karma operates automatically; we can't change how or when it should happen. So, those thoughts don't help anything.

Instead, we can take a strong stand, express our views, and take countermeasures to stop them from continuing and yet remember that we are helping them avoid making more negative karma and thus more suffering for themselves and others. Then, we are acting out of compassion rather than from a wish to harm.

In other words, we can show anger or take whatever actions are necessary without feeling ill will, like a parent shows anger and disciplines their child but doesn't wish him any harm.

We can try to remember that "hurt people hurt people"—the attacker's suffering drives him to aggressive behavior—and consider with compassion that he may be "having a bad day," or suffering from a mental condition such as anxiety, depression or post-traumatic stress disorder.

It may be very difficult to remember any compassionate thoughts when we're attacked, but later, or over time, we can reduce our bitter thoughts about the attack by applying compassion. While we hate the person's misbehavior, we can remember that it's the result of their ignorance and delusion and it leads to more suffering; so, with compassion, we can wish that they soon find a path to a peaceful, less deluded life, which will reduce their tendency to harm others.

Additionally, we can practice compassion by wishing that all others in the world who have been attacked like we have, be happy, peaceful and free from suffering.

## 5. Remember karma

Not only should we remember karma on the part of the aggressor, but should remember karma on our part as well. The Buddha teaches that everything in the world arises from causes and conditions. Our suffering is the result of negative karmas that we have created in our past, including in past lives. Therefore, attacks that we suffer are the results from our past actions, perhaps from lives in the distant past.

This is hard to accept for many of us, particularly when we've suffered psychologically and/or physically damaging attacks. People console us by telling us that it wasn't our fault, that we're innocent, and that we didn't deserve it. This may be true from the perspective of this current life, but we all have negative karmas from our countless past lives. Even the Buddha had to suffer a severe injury from an attack by his cousin Devadatta as a result of having committed a

negative act in a distant past life, and the Buddha's enlightened chief disciple Moggallana (also called Maudgalyayana) was violently murdered as a result of his karma of having killed his parents in a distant past life.

When we counterattack our attacker with an intent to harm them, we are creating some degree of negative karma for ourselves, although less than if we were the initial aggressor.

Even when we only wish someone harm, with thoughts such as revenge or punishment, we are creating imprints of ill will in our mind that collectively form a habit of harmfulness, the seeds for negative karmic results.

Also, dwelling on thoughts of unfairness, hatred or revenge toward an aggressor harms us by prolonging our stress and thus compromising our health and happiness.

So, it's important to try to drown out such thoughts with constructive ones such as thinking about how to prevent and deescalate future attacks, and generating compassionate and kind thoughts toward all beings.

In addition, we can consider that we are all working out our karmas during our lives on Earth, and if it wasn't this attacker who delivered the results of our karma then it would be another one who must do so, and now that we have experienced the attack, this particular negative karma is now gone, exhausted.

#### 6. Practice patience and tolerance.

When we practice compassion and remember karma, we naturally become more patient and tolerant with others. But there are times when our patience is extremely challenged. If we think we were too patient and tolerant and thereby abused, we may feel resentment and ill will. On the other hand, if we lash out aggressively during a conflict, the other person might feel ill will and resentment. The challenge is trying to find the right balance of tolerance and self-protection that fits each circumstance, in order to avoid generating ill will and ongoing conflict.

To do that, we distinguish between instances when we truly need to protect ourselves from harmful, abusive behavior, and instances in which behavior isn't truly harmful or abusive but still incites anger and conflict.

In the latter instances, to prevent conflicts exploding into hostility, we need to patiently express our concerns, be tolerant of the other's concerns, and, with an understanding that people cannot simply change their personalities, work together toward a fair outcome and achieving a peaceful and stable relationship.

Also, we can try not to take verbal aggression too personally. If we haven't done anything wrong, if we haven't said or done anything either intentionally or carelessly that was offensive, then the aggressor is in the wrong and we can ignore the aggressive words as unwarranted and not accept them; they're not ours, they don't belong to us. Similarly, if we are given a gift and we don't accept it, then the gift belongs to the giver.

If, on the other hand, we have said or done something wrong, committed some offense, and someone criticizes us, then we can patiently accept it as constructive criticism.

#### 7. Let go of unhealthy relationships.

If a friend or partner isn't willing or able to cooperate, compromise and negotiate fairly, or is too controlling, intolerant or demanding, we can't maintain a peaceful, stable relationship. In those circumstances, it's better for us to let it go, and release ourselves from bonds that are not helping us.

It helps to remember that everything is impermanent, and that too much attachment and desire lead to more suffering.

Friends sometimes become enemies, and enemies sometimes become friends.

When we are too attached to a certain social life, social reputation or attention from others, we might pursue friendships with those who are self-centered, opportunistic or don't share our ethical values. Such relationships eventually lead to disappointment and negative emotions.

We can more easily let go of unhealthy relationships and friendships, those that are "toxic," or "love-hate relationships," when we develop a healthy degree of detachment from social desires. We develop detachment over time as we study and practice the Dharma, integrating the concepts into our daily life.

#### 8. Learn from experiences.

Every experience that we have can be taken onto our spiritual path as something to learn from, and as a way to develop good qualities such as patience, tolerance, and compassion.

For each conflict, we can reflect on how we could have better handled it.

We can consider aggressors as our teachers and testers who help us learn to handle negative emotions such as hatred and ill will, give us an opportunity to develop patience and compassion, and show us how we're progressing in our practice and how we can improve.

With such thoughts, we can transform feelings of ill will to feelings of appreciation or even gratitude.