

Sutta Stories – The Lady and Her Servant

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SUMMARY KEYWORDS

Kālī, Vedehikā, Buddha, anger, analogy, speak, speech, shovel, wheelbarrow, dirt, earth, paint, brush, painting, dye, Ganges River, kindness, empty, trigger, concentration, resolve, uproot, underlying, loving-kindness, kind

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I will continue today with stories from the suttas, the ancient discourses of the Buddha. The Buddha was a wonderful storyteller. He told innumerable stories as part of his teachings. Some may represent events that the Buddha experienced. Some he may have made up. The Buddha also made up many analogies and metaphors. He had a rich vocabulary of storytelling techniques for helping us better understand his teachings.

It seems there was a monk who got easily upset and angry whenever someone pointed out that he was not behaving properly. So the Buddha told the following story.

Once there was a lady, Vedehikā, who had a reputation in town for being gentle, kind, and peaceful. She had a servant by the name of Kālī. Kālī was very clever, competent, and neat in her work. Every day, she would wake up before the lady and get everything ready for the day. Kālī worked hard. She cooked delicious food and did everything to make the household run smoothly.

One day, Kālī, the servant, thought to herself: “It seems that people think the lady is kind, gentle, and peaceful. I wonder if this is the case. Let me find out.”

The following morning, Kālī slept in instead of getting up early. When the lady woke up, she found that her servant was still sleeping. She said to her, “What is the matter, Kālī, that you are sleeping?” Kālī said: “Nothing is the matter. I am just sleeping in.” The lady got angry and spoke harshly to her: “You should not do that. You have to do your work. Do not do that again.”

The next day, Kālī slept in again. The lady asked, “What is the matter?” Kālī replied: “Nothing is the matter. I am just sleeping in.” The lady got more upset and spoke more harshly.

The following day, the same thing happened again. This time the lady got very upset. Taking a rolling pin from the kitchen, she started hitting the servant over the head. “Terrible, you are wicked, you are bad. How could you do such a thing?”

With blood running down her face, the servant ran out into the street and said: “Look, everyone, you thought that the lady was kind, gentle, and peaceful. But it does not take much to provoke her. She carries a lot of anger underneath, and that anger – given half a chance, even a mild chance – will surface. Look what she is capable of doing.” From then on, the lady’s reputation in the town was no longer one of kindness, gentleness, and peacefulness.

I imagine the Buddha made up this story. We may not like the story much, but it is an example of him using a story as an analogy.

The Buddha goes on to say to the monastics that there are five ways that people might speak to you:

Either someone may say something true or not true. Someone may speak in a timely or not timely fashion. Someone may speak gently or harshly. Someone may speak with loving-kindness or not with loving-kindness. Someone may speak to benefit others or to harm them. These are the five ways it is possible to speak.

Regardless of how they speak to you, you should have loving-kindness for them. You should have kind regard for them. You should care for their welfare and happiness.

In other words, do not succumb to anger, bitterness, or resentment if they speak to you in a way that is not kind, not beneficial, harmful, untimely, or false. That is no reason to get angry or upset. You should always maintain a heart of kindness.

It does not mean that you are a pushover. Nor does it mean that you go along with whatever people want. It means you find your way without getting angry.

The Buddha goes on to make some analogies. He says:

What do you think? If a person comes along with a shovel and a wheelbarrow and starts digging up the dirt from the earth to take it away – could that person succeed at hauling all the dirt away from the earth?

I imagine those listening laughed and said: “No, you cannot take the dirt away from the earth. Where are you going to put it?”

The Buddha continues:

In the same way, you should make your mind like the earth. No matter what comes your way, you are undisturbed. You are balanced. You are unchanged by harshness or people speaking to you in unkind or untruthful ways. You continue to spread loving-kindness.

Suppose that a person comes along with beautiful colored paints and a paintbrush, dips the brush in the paint, and starts painting in the air. Would that person make any kind of painting?

The monastics reply: “No, you cannot paint that way. You paint on something. You cannot just wave your brush in the air.”

The Buddha says:

In the same way, make your mind like empty space. Whatever words come your way, they do not paint a picture on your mind. Your mind does not react. It does not take the colors thrown at you when people are unkind or speak harmful words. Maintain loving-kindness. Stay concerned and care for the welfare of this person. Start with that person and then spread that care and goodwill to everyone in all directions.

If you put a bit of dye ...

(I think this is right. I am not 100% sure, so you have to be a bit generous. I am being a storyteller with some of the details.) The Buddha says:

Imagine someone putting a few drops of dye in the Ganges River. Would that change the river? Would it color the river?

The monastics reply, “No, a few drops might change the color in a small glass of water, but it has no impact on the Ganges River.”

The Buddha says:

In the same way, make your mind like the Ganges River: broad, wide, and flowing. Let the words that other people say to you be like those few drops, so they have no impact on you. So you can maintain a heart of kindness, goodwill, and loving-kindness for the other person. Stay caring for their welfare and happiness – even if they want to harm you. Cultivate your loving-kindness with that person, then spread it out to all beings everywhere.

The first story of the lady and Kālī is about our underlying tendencies. We can behave one way, but there may be triggers – deep in our minds – for us to get angry, upset, hostile, or even violent. The point of Buddhist practice is to touch and transform the deeper place – so that our kindness is not superficial or feigned, so we are not in danger of causing harm.

This is one of the reasons for developing concentration in meditation. Concentration can sometimes bring us deeper to the place below our surface concerns, preoccupations, and stories. It can bring us deeper down to really see what is there.

Sometimes we find underlying layers of resentment, anger, upset, fear, and greed. These are good to touch and see so that we know they are there. Then we can practice with them – and resolve them, dissolve them, solve them. These words with the Latin root “solve” have to do with releasing and untying.

To cultivate loving-kindness – not just being neutral as we untie the knots of the heart. To cultivate loving-kindness no matter what people say to us – even if they are speaking difficult words for us to hear.

It is a tall order. It is a challenge with the lives that we live. But here, the Buddha is pointing to the role of practice. We practice because this is a valuable way of living. It is a valuable way of living – not because it is a moral obligation to be kind or to uproot our anger. But rather, it works for the welfare of ourselves and others.

To uproot our underlying tendencies to be angry. To cultivate our ability not to succumb to anger or hostility, no matter what people say to us. This preserves our peace and well-being – it is for our welfare. As we do this, we are also creating the conditions that help other people work for their welfare – so they may relax and be at peace if they know how to allow for it.

Thank you. We will continue with a few more stories this week.