

Oneself (3 of 5) Not Harming Oneself

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SUMMARY KEYWORDS

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This is the third talk on the theme of oneself. We began on Monday with the topic of self-respect. Perhaps self-respect is easier to come to than self-love or self-compassion. When we deeply respect something, maybe we try to understand it better and make ourselves available to know it better, so yesterday's topic was self-understanding. This means to really understand the person that we are – what drives us, what attitudes, beliefs, attachments, desires, and aversions we have – understand ourselves so that we can be free.

Today the topic is not harming oneself. I find that the idea of non-harming – not harming others and not harming ourselves – is such a profound topic. But it is easy to eclipse it with more inspiring topics of the Dharma or spirituality. Ideas of love, compassion, generosity, wisdom, and freedom are inspiring. But it is possible to be focused on them without really understanding the nature of harm: how the mind and the heart work. We can harm ourselves and others through impulsive speech and actions that we never would have consciously planned or wanted to do, but it just blurts out of us. We also harm in subconscious ways, where we are not really aware that we're speaking in a way that pokes fun at someone, expresses our hostility, or is a little mean towards someone.

So we value non-harming as a foundation. Appreciate that non-harming is a profound topic because it applies to so many areas. A life without harm (self-harm or harming others) is a phenomenal life. It's a really good life. People learn to trust us; we can trust ourselves. We can go anywhere we want without having to feel self-conscious about causing harm. It is the foundation for a peaceful life and a peaceful world.

There is a verse in the suttas where the Buddha says: "Traveling in all directions with one's thoughts, nowhere can one find anyone dearer than oneself. In the same way, to each individual, one's self is most dear. Therefore, whoever loves oneself most doesn't harm others."

Sometimes the idea of holding oneself dear as valuable or precious is seen as being selfish. But there is a way in which it is not. The more we respect, care for, appreciate, and value ourselves, the more we see the value of not being harmed by anyone – having no one steal from, lie to, or attack us. Then we can appreciate that this is true for other people as well. We can allow them to be the person who is most precious to themselves, and imagine that they also do not want to be harmed. One of the wonderful principles of Buddhism is the combination of seeing oneself as being valuable and translating this into not causing harm to and caring for others.

There is a verse in the *Dhammapada* that can be quite challenging to read or deal with. It begins with something that's maybe not so difficult – it says: "Don't give up your own welfare." But the next line says: "Don't give up your own welfare for the sake of others' welfare, however great." The idea that you wouldn't sacrifice your welfare for your children, your neighbors, people you know, or people who are suffering more than you – this goes against the grain for many people I know.

But I think that as we understand ourselves deeply, it isn't that we're trying to be comfortable, but that we have access to an inner sense of peace, an inner sense of non-harming. We don't harm ourselves through anger, contraction, attachments, expectations, or biases. This is where our real welfare is.

The real welfare, the profound welfare, is to keep the heart at peace, happy, and contented even when we are uncomfortable. We don't give up that welfare for someone else's welfare. This does not mean don't benefit others or don't do things for others. It just means don't sacrifice what is greatest and most beautiful in yourself for them. Keep that peace *and* help others.

For example, a neighbor has an emergency and you haven't eaten, but for your welfare you should eat, otherwise you'll get a headache. But your neighbor needs to get to the emergency immediately. So I hope you would sacrifice your meal, and sacrifice the absence of a headache, to save the life of your neighbor. But in doing that, you don't have to sacrifice your heart. You don't have to give away your peace. You don't have to get agitated or contracted.

This is where self-understanding is so important: where we really understand deeply where the refuge is within – how we hold ourselves in safety in our hearts by not getting caught in our attachments. Not harming ourselves requires a lot of self-understanding, a lot of sitting quietly and still – any way we can really get underneath the surface layer of how we think – our desires, our wishes, our preoccupations, and concerns.

To this day, I can be in the labyrinth of my concerns and thoughts – “What should I do? What is happening here? I have a lot to do, and I have to figure this out.” I call this a labyrinth because sometimes there is no way to get out of it on its own terms. But if I sit and meditate, I can drop down into a deeper place of knowing, a deeper understanding, a deeper way of thinking that is not in the labyrinth of superficial, surface thoughts, where I'm lost in preoccupations. In that deeper place, there is no labyrinth. Now I can understand myself and what needs to happen, and what the priority should be.

We have the ability to know ourselves by dropping below the surface chatter of the mind and feeling deeply what's really happening in the heart, in the body, and in the mind. Eventually, we discover and understand the large or small movements within us of self-harming – being mean to ourselves, being judgmental, being in conflict with ourselves, or getting caught in desires that will come back and harm us if we pursue them. For example, some addictive desires might be pleasurable in the short term but can ruin a life in the long term. Certain desires that we pursue are pleasant in the short term, but in the long term, they cause problems. When we overeat, it's pleasant, but then we are groggy afterward. Or we have an affair because it's pleasant, but afterward, we realize how much harm that has caused other people.

The idea is to understand deeply how we get caught in desires, how we get caught in cravings and judgments, and learn how to give ourselves a phenomenal break. We learn that there is no need to be caught in the grip of desires, and no need to be caught in the grip of hostility towards ourselves. There is a place of respect deep within where it's okay to relax. It's okay to just be. It's okay to be here just breathing, below the surface level, below the chatter, and below the level of desire and hostility. That is just a level – just a labyrinth we get caught in.

We can sit quietly, learn to let go, quiet the mind and the thoughts, and drop down to this place that's deeper. The more deeply we can experience calm, the more we'll understand ourselves. When the little impulses arise, we will understand that even the slightest one that involves self-harm has an ouch in it. Then we learn, “I don't have to do that. I can let go of that.”

We practice non-self-harm partly because we cherish ourselves and value ourselves, and partly because it's so painful to harm ourselves. Then we know that discovering the well-springs of non-harming within is a foundation for caring for the world, caring for others. We come into the world and meet others in a very different way when we have learned the skill of minimizing, and eventually stopping, the ways we bring about self-harm. We don't sacrifice that absence of self-harm. We don't sacrifice that peace. But it is a foundation from which to meet others, care for others, and care for the world. This can be done tirelessly. This can be done with tremendous dedication.

“Don’t give up your own welfare for the sake of others’ welfare, however great.” – Yes, don’t do that. If you don’t do that, maybe you’ll have a lot more energy to care for the people in your lives, known and unknown, throughout the whole world. Thank you.