

Dharma Reflection 7 -- Our Precious Life
Kim Grose Moore, July 2015

This story's main message is the paradox at the heart of Buddhism that by loving oneself, taking care of oneself, working to liberate oneself is integral, maybe even one and the same as caring for others, working to liberate others. At one level you can say this is the Buddha's version of the Golden Rule -- if you love yourself, then knowing that others love themselves in the same way, you will not wish to do them harm. At a deeper level, you can also say that there is no distinction at a fundamental level of truth between us and them. Although you are a distinct set of molecules that looks separate from me, if I take some action to hurt you, there is also a negative reaction in me -- something arises -- anger, fear, perverse satisfaction, guilt -- that is unwholesome, that clouds my ability to see truth and free myself from the causes and conditioning of suffering. Thus, in this way, we are connected and harming you also causes harm for me.

For me, there are two parts of the story that are challenging to our mainstream culture, and perhaps also to mainstream values/culture from back in the Buddha's day as well, which is why this story has such provocative teaching value. First is the teaching about "holding oneself most dear" -- that the King and Queen were not only in sync with their answers, but also fine with each other's answers: neither seemed to feel ashamed or defensive about answering the way they did, as probably most people would in contemporary American society; and neither seemed hurt or angry by the other's response, they didn't expect their partner to tell them that they were who their partner held most dear. When I shared this story with my parents and asked them if they could imagine saying these things to each other, my father began to argue with it, and my mother said she would start to cry. Exactly.

The similar principles that I learned and have subsequently taught in community organizing are, "who do you love?" and "self-interest moves people." The idea in this is that you need to be clear about your own self, your own interests and identity in order to serve others and organize for their benefit; and that there are concentric circles of people you care about, who you will be willing to "fight for" -- starting with self, then usually family, community you know, etc. We would teach that self-interest isn't something bad, it isn't the same as selfishness; it is actually something important to be clear and honest about, and a good thing to seek to meet; as people become more politically or socially conscious, they often extend their concept of self-interest to more common interests, communal interests, out of a recognition of connectedness. We would have to engage people's resistance to these principles, because of a lot of conditioning, often religious conditioning, that led people to aspire to selflessness, and to believe that thinking about and taking care of themselves was bad.

The second challenging, unexpected part of the story is when the Buddha extended the teaching to say that anyone who truly held themselves most dear would not harm another. Is this a natural outgrowth of understanding the value of oneself? How does this seeming leap to non-harm of others happen? For me, it feels like a growing edge to hold onto the teaching of

nonduality, that anyone who truly inquires into the nature of reality will awaken to the truth of not-self. There isn't a real separation between self/other. So, loving and caring for oneself will be no different from loving and caring for others. Avoiding harm of others will be no different from avoiding harm of self. I mostly hold this as a studied piece of Dharma, rather than an experienced Dharma. But there have been a few instances over time in which I have experienced some expanded sense of being -- beyond the boundaries of my skin and body; merging into something larger without a sense of time/space. Each of these instances I have been either alone out in nature, or on retreat and in silence. Interacting with other people, however, would always pop me back into an embodied, solid and separate me-identity. Just like my parents, I can't really imagine being free to both give and receive this answer in an important relationship without fear, resistance, other stuff clouding the interaction. I shared this story yesterday as my family was hiking up a mountain, and my husband and I laughed as we tried to imagine ourselves having this conversation and then giving each other kisses as we went on with our business. It helped me to see just how conditioned I am to expect/want something from others, and also to not fully even believe what I used to teach about self-interest and self-care being OK. I could feel this subtle churning in my chest and abdomen, muddying up the space between myself and those whom I love. Also, I could see there was a line I could go right up to in my mind around caring for myself, but moving beyond it would require some self honesty that would be uncomfortable, that I shy away from. Hmmmm, what's over there? When will I be willing to give myself the time and space to go there? Helpful to just notice, breathe, hold it all lightly.

What about in my chaplaincy experience -- perhaps this is where I have gotten a taste of both holding myself dear and naturally extending to an intention or action of non-harm of others. It is less fraught with expectations and history/identity than the deeper relationships in my family. I can slow things down, be embodied and in relationship as well as practice a kind of expansiveness that comes from an open heart and an honesty about what's happening right now. Perhaps this is where I can experience Our Precious Life.

Oh dear, I just reread the story and realized I had read the Buddha's actual words differently than how they are stated here:

If you surveyed the entire world, you would find no one dearer than yourself. Since each person is most dear to him or her self, Those who love themselves should not bring harm to anyone.

I had read the last line as "shall not bring harm" -- as if it was a natural extension, whereas this could also mean an injunction: "if you love yourself, you had better not harm another." Enough for now -- there is no good ending here, but rather the beginning of further reflection...