

Disparities

'You cruel little devil!' shouted our neighbour over the wire netting that separated her back garden from ours. The reason for her wrath was that I had just 'shot' a cat with my water pistol. It was not that I wanted to hurt the cat but only to stop it scratching up my father's bulbs, and in any case, a few drops of water would do it no harm.

Recollecting this incident years later, it occurred to me that the good woman was right in assuming that only a devil would wish to inflict suffering. I had certainly no wish to hurt the cat, whether because of instinct or education, but I did have the ability to hurt it. I could have thrown a stone at it or, if I had met it in the street, I could have given it a kick or pulled its tail. I could have done any of these things because I was stronger than the cat, just as the cat was stronger than the mouse. In other words there was between me and the cat an imbalance of power. Such an imbalance is found both within the natural world and throughout human society. The state has more power than the individual citizen, the millionaire more than the pauper, the employer more than the employee, the teacher more than the student, the master (or mistress) more than the slave, and the parent more than the child. The last is especially the case when the child is a baby. The balance of power between them is then virtually absolute. The parent can beat the child, starve it, confine it, abuse it sexually or emotionally. All this the parents can do, unless they live in a country in which there is a law against such behaviour, and even where there is such a law it may well be broken. During the last few decades there have come to light horrifying stories of parental cruelty, as well as of abuse of children by other adults, including in institutions meant for their protection. Some years ago there was even a case in which two small boys tortured and killed an even smaller boy.

Whatever the form parental abuse may take, it will almost certainly have a traumatic effect on the development of the child, so that as adults they may be still struggling to deal with the psychological problems to which the abuse has given rise. In some cases the damage may be irreparable, even with the help of a whole army of therapists and psychoanalysts, and in the end the unfortunate sufferer may feel that the only solution is suicide.

But why should any parent torture their own child? Why should one human being, indeed, want to inflict pain on another? In some cases, it may be that they themselves have suffered at the hands of their parents or other adults. They may also be unduly influenced by one false ideology or another, perhaps even against their own better instincts. Be that as it may, there is only one other imbalance of power that parallels the imbalance between the parent and the child, especially when the child is an infant. This is the imbalance that exists between master and slave, whether sanctioned by law, as in Ancient Rome or pre-Abolition America, or with the sanction of society. The slave, no more than the infant, has no will of his own, and his owner may do with him as he will.

To the extent that one human being deliberately inflicts pain on another, or on an animal, he or she is evil. They are under the influence, so to speak, of the Māra of Defilement (*kleśa māra*), as they are when they are acting under the influence of intense craving, hatred, or delusion. They have become, at least for the time being, a devil. If they are often possessed in this way, or if such possession becomes habitual, they will become a devil in human form, and on death they may be reborn in one of the lower heavens as a Māra Son of a God (*devaputra māra*). So far as I know, only once in my life have I encountered a devil in human form, as I have related elsewhere. Fortunately such devils are extremely rare, though occasionally we may see a person working himself or herself up into a state of such intense craving, hatred, or delusion that they are in danger of allowing themselves to be possessed by *kleśa māra*.

Most people are subject to one or other of the *kleśas* from time to time, and an angry mood or a feeling of frustrated craving may last for quite a while, sometimes for days or weeks together. At

the same time, the intervals between these states may be filled with experiences of love, joy, and peace. This will be especially the case when one deliberately cultivates such emotions through the regular practice of meditations like the *mettā bhāvanā* or respiration-mindfulness (*ānāpānasati*). It is amazing, however, how quickly a positive mental state may be followed by a negative one, and *vice versa*. It is a practice in itself to observe how fickle the mind is and how easily it is distracted. The more the mind is filled with skilful mental states the more the individual is transformed into an angel, so to speak, or into a *brahmacārī* or *brahma*-farer in the sense of one who has their being in a higher plane of existence and who at the time of death will already be on that plane, so that there is little or no sense of transition, apart from the fact that the physical body is no longer there. Violent negative emotion will distort the features and may even lead to bodily convulsions, conversely strong positive emotion will transfigure the features, however ordinary, and make one attractive to others.

Exercise of power is pleasurable. One can enjoy the feeling of strength that one experiences in playing a game of tennis, one can enjoy influencing an audience through one's oratory, and one can enjoy the mental capacity that enables one to solve a crossword puzzle. More importantly, one can use whatever power one possesses either negatively or unskilfully, on the one hand, or positively and skilfully on the other. One can harm other living beings or help them. In the case of a child the parents may treat it in the horrifying ways I have described or bring it up in such a way that it grows into a happy and healthy member of society with no childhood traumas to resolve. Education is thus of extreme importance. For the Buddhist parent it is not so much a question of teaching a child Buddhist doctrines as of bringing it up in a loving, peaceful, and supportive atmosphere. Not that there should not be a degree of moral guidance, if only by example.

There is an imbalance of power not only between the parent and the child but also between a younger and a much older person. The disparity can sometimes be very great, as when the older person is bed-ridden or suffering from dementia. In such cases, the older person is at the mercy of the younger generation and he or she may be badly treated by members of their own family or by workers in care homes. Stories have come to light that parallel the horrifying behaviour of parents towards their own offspring.

The 'cruel little devil' is now an old man of 92, and although I am neither bedridden nor suffering from dementia there is still a disparity of power between me and the people with whom I live. In practice this disparity works to my advantage, one might say, as my carers now do for me many of the things that I no longer have the strength to do myself. They do them willingly, even joyfully, which has helped to make the last year or more one of the happiest periods of my life. Nor am I alone in this respect. One hears of sick or aged members of the Triratna Order being cared for by fellow community members or friends in the same way. Indeed, not a few have been lovingly cared for, month after month, even year after year, up to the time of death. It would seem that my talk, 'A Case of Dysentery', has been taken to heart by members of the Triratna Buddhist Order and become an integral part of the way we do things.

Monday 9th April – Monday 17th April