***The Sixteenth Vow
February 2024***

***Oh Blessed One, may I not come to the complete awakening if, when I have done so, beings in my land should ever so much as hear the suggestion that someone is non-virtuous.***

When something goes wrong, it is all too easy to point the finger and blame. We each have our rules of engagement, our social contract and our expectations like colouring within the lines. If we, and everyone, made the effort to keep within the lines then all would be well. However, when those lines are crossed, all the good Buddhist qualities that we are trying to cultivate tend to go out the window. These are rules that psychologically connect us to our sense of safety so that when those lines are crossed we feel it so intimately.

Even if lines haven’t been crossed, and we haven’t been triggered, one of the easiest things for us to do is to judge. It’s so easy that we often compare, criticise, or condemn without even realising just how opinionated we are. When we want to separate and distinguish ourselves as different from the other, it is all too easy to use language that defines the other negatively.

With effort and guidance, we can learn to notice some of our rules and prejudices. With time and patience, we can learn how to be compassionate and understanding to all others, including people who do bad things without condoning or excusing criminal, hurtful, or violent acts.

I recently had a call from someone enquiring about counselling but they wanted to know if I would judge them if they did something that would be considered bad and shameful. I prided myself on being warm and accepting, so that nothing was off the table, but as the conversation went on I began to understand that the client wanted to know whether they could act on their impulse and not be judged.

On one level, I was stumped. The truth was that I wouldn’t be able to handle that particular behaviour if it were carried out in the therapy room. I felt okay talking through all the conditions that might lead a person to feel compelled to do something but to actually endure experiencing someone acting out pushed me to rethink when and where a non judgemental attitude was beneficial.

Dr. Gwen Adshead is a forensic psychiatrist and psychotherapist who works with some of the most violent criminals in the UK and has co-written ‘The Devil You Know’ in order to help the average person understand how and why listening and compassion can make a difference. In that book she also writes about the importance of places such as high secure psychiatric hospitals because she has seen first hand how recovery and rehabilitation is possible if the right conditions are in place.

She starts the book by introducing the idea of thinking about a group discussion that a therapy group might have. We might start by talking about devils we are all familiar with and then moving to the question of who or what might be the devil that we don’t know? She would hope that we might discover that this devil might live within you and me as something cruel or mean spirited, thus opening up the possibility that we are made up of the same components as everyone else around us, including those who have committed an act of criminal violence.

This vow is very much encouraging the attitude and role of people like Dr. Adshead. Amida is creating a place where virtue isn’t simply about following the precepts for the sake of being seen as a virtuous person. There are plenty of good reasons to train our minds to keep the precepts, however, there might also be some negative consequences if we become judgemental and angry at others who do not keep them.

The ego is a master at climbing the vertical axis of virtue and success, always interested at looking how much further they need to go to feel like they are doing well, and never failing to look down upon the other, so that they can justify their feelings of self worth.

It requires effort to ground ourselves in the reality of who and what we are, so that when we look around we can see that we are spiritually equal; worthy of love, no more, no less, than those around us. Compassion and loving kindness is the horizontal axis of equal spiritual acceptance.

Amida is especially there for bad people with bad karma who suffer badly. Dr Adshead frames the work that she does as a first responder to the scene of a disaster, where the survivors are the disaster. Amida views us in the same way.

In the Pali Canon, there is a story about an arahant ‘enlightened monk’ who is not very well. Even the Buddha’s senior disciples are worried for the monk because he has been talking about ending his life. Shariputra, who was one of the leading disciples, begs the monk not to commit suicide, but the monk is so ill that he takes his life.

The Buddha asks Shariputra to tell him about this monk, and Shariputra said that the monk was very clear that he had done everything to help himself relieve his pain, but no food or medicine was helping him.The monk could see that he would not get better with any kind of intervention, which was why he wanted to end his life. The Buddha replied that this monk was not to blame for what he had done, nor was his virtue and enlightenment damaged.

The Buddha doesn’t just go straight to a judgement that this monk was non-virtuous because he broke the first precept of not taking a life which includes one’s own. Instead, the Buddha wanted to know more about the monk, and learned that his suffering was so great and interminable that to not empathise, and force him to continue living with that amount of pain, would have been cruel.

This vow is about understanding the role that a compassionate attitude can have in society, that does not, however, encourage or excuse harmful activity.

Love,

Susthama