

## **Beyond Blame** - In the Sigalaka Sutta by Paramabandhu

Going for alms one morning, the Buddha meets Sigalaka. They get into conversation and by the time the Buddha goes on his way, Sigalaka's life is changed for good. Sigalaka is worshipping the six directions - north, south, east, west, the zenith and the nadir. On his deathbed, Sigalaka's father had instructed him to do this. Respecting his father's wishes, each morning Sigalaka worships the six directions, with no real understanding of the significance of his actions. The Buddha explains the real meaning of 'worshipping the six directions'. Each direction refers to a different type of relationship: parents, teachers, spouse and children, friends, workers and spiritual teachers. The Buddha teaches Sigalaka how to act in each relationship. The Sigalaka sutta is remarkable for giving a detailed account of how to conduct our relationships skilfully with other people.

The Buddha suggests to Sigalaka that if he behaves in this way, each relationship will be at peace and free from fear. Each relationship is seen as being valuable and worth treating with respect - hence 'worshipping'. The Buddha describes what each party can do. Sigalaka can act skilfully towards others and out of sympathy they may reciprocate. But the Buddha does not advise Sigalaka to expect or demand anything from others.

Demanding something or expecting something from others is like picking up the wrong end of the stick. We are liable to be let down and then besmirch our minds with unhelpful thoughts. The Dhammapada reminds us that 'Those who entertain such thoughts as 'He abused me, he beat me, he conquered me, he robbed me,' will not still their hatred.' Falling into blame fuels ill will and leads to suffering. Yet blaming is such an attractive option. Whenever there is some pain or discomfort there seems to be an instinctive aspect of our mind that wants to know who is responsible. Either it is me or it is you (or them). We want to know whose fault it is. If we decide it is ours then we chide ourselves and can fall into a pit of despondency. If it is their fault, then anger or righteous indignation arises.

The Buddha taught something different. He showed that actions based on skilful mental states lead to our and others' wellbeing and that those based on unskilful mental states lead to suffering. The first part of the Sigalaka sutta is devoted to describing how to act skilfully in general. Or is it how to be good? The well-known lines from the Dhammapada are often translated as 'Cease to do evil, learn to do good, purify the heart. This is the teaching of the Buddha'. The 'good' in 'learn to do good' translates kusala, which means skilful rather than good. But is this just a sleight of hand? The same thing disguised under a different name? If someone steals something from us are we not right to blame them for their 'unskilful' behaviour? Or if I speak harshly to someone is this not wrong and am I not right to blame myself?

I think the difference is subtle, but real and important. Polarizing into right and wrong is not helpful. Blaming is not helpful. If I do something unskilful that leads to my suffering, I have an opportunity to learn. I do not wish to suffer, nor to inflict suffering on others. How could I do this differently, more creatively? Blaming myself is likely only to obscure this, as I drop myself into a mire of self-castigation. Similarly if I am hurt by someone else's actions, I have an opportunity. I can try and empathize with the other person to understand what they were trying to communicate - they may not have intentionally

wanted to hurt me. I can try to communicate my hurt and ask that they behave differently. But pointing the finger of blame does not add anything of value.

So what is the difference? In blame we locate the source of our pain and then condemn. Blame comes from the Latin meaning to blaspheme. Blaming is futile like cursing a non-existent god. Sometimes we may get what we want, but only through bullying (with ill will) or playing into others' feeling of guilt (using righteous indignation). By contrast the Buddha recommends we simply focus on our end of the stick, on what we can do that is helpful. This is more likely to elicit a helpful response from others. But even when it does not we can still work creatively with our own responses and this keeps us in the driving seat of our life. Letting go of blame and following the advice of the sutta, we can like Sigalaka make our relationships at peace and free from fear.