

NO VICTIM NO PERPETRATOR

By Ven. Gyalten Mindrol

“No anger inside means no enemy outside.”

—Lama Zopa Rinpoche

I WAS SEXUALLY ABUSED by a daycare worker the year before I started kindergarten. It was one of those situations that are often reported in newspapers, except this time no one was caught and there was no story. I forgot all about it until I was in my early thirties, yet it colored every aspect of my life, and when I started to remember the abuse, it ruled my life.

Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) is when a traumatic event continues to affect a person long after the event is over. Memories of the abuse overpowered me while I was sitting in my living room, driving my car, and working. The

memory became more real than the sitting, driving, or working. I was at times unable to function at all, lost in the grip of the memory or paralyzed by its accompanying fear or grief. When the memories hit, the four-year-old me, caught in an abusive situation, was more real than reality. The shift in perception of who I was, and the overriding of my life-long defense mechanisms by emotion and memory, almost drove me past sanity. Although I was fortunate to find a deeply gifted psychotherapist, who gave me a place to talk and didn't overload me with theory and advice, it was the Dharma that helped me assimilate the abuse into my conscious life, and it was the abuse that radically deepened my understanding and practice of the Dharma, my faith in it, and my longing for it.

A Karmic Punch in the Nose

About a year after I started remembering the abuse, when the worst of the remembering was over, I happened to attend a teaching by Ven. Robina Courtin. During the course of the talk, which was on karma, a young woman in the audience mentioned that she had been sexually abused as a child. As this young woman talked, her question turned into self-exploration and she began to cry in a way that shows realization, a deep change in the heart. Ven. Robina had been explaining karmic causes and results in her inimitable way, saying that if someone walks up to you on the street and punches you in the nose, there is a reason and a cause. Somewhere and sometime in a past life, you must have harmed that person. The karma ripens and that person harms you. The young woman said through her tears that she couldn't believe that in a past life she must have sexually abused or harmed another being in the same way that she had been abused. Ven. Robina reassured her, saying: “It's okay, darling. There is no victim and no perpetrator.”



Art: Shirley Dodge

I, the Innocent Child, had done the same thing to him, the Very Bad Man. If I had harmed the being that became the Very Bad Man in some past life, then that being must have harmed me in some life even before that, and this being that is me must have harmed him in a life even before that life and.... Where did it end? Looking in this way, who was the victim and who was the perpetrator?

The law of karma does not condone the act. Karma is not punishment or retribution or reward, but a natural law. It is not that I deserved to be abused when I was four years old. It is simply that the karma existed and ripened and then it was over.

The Story

But that karma wasn't over for me. It became a part of me. When I remembered what happened, I could then tell others and I could tell myself the story of the abuse that happened in Madison, Wisconsin in 1974. That was my problem.

We are storytellers. We use our stories to invent our lives, as Sogyal Rinpoche says, to create this complete fiction that is the "I." We cling and hold on to these stories and we allow them to determine who we are. We do it with sad stories and with happy stories. We do it with past stories and current stories and even stories about the future. I slowly came to see that it wasn't the fact that I was sexually abused that was the problem; it was what I was *doing* with the fact that I was sexually abused that was the problem. As Ven. Sarah Thresher says, I was clinging to my sad story, and I was defining myself by this story. By clinging to this story of events that ended long ago and perpetuating that story, I became my own abuser.

I also realized intellectually that this karmic cycle of abuse could not be the only story. In other lifetimes, this man had been my mother or friend and cared for me in many ways. Why was I clinging to this one story, instead of taking the whole truth into account?

Ven. Sarah often quotes an Irish diplomat who said forgiveness wasn't condoning what happened in the past, it was not allowing the past to affect the present and the future. Easier said than done! How do I stop defining myself by that story? Who would I be without that story? How do I stop the power of these events to control my perceptions and beliefs? How do I let go? How do I heal?

The first step for me was the tiny gap I finally found between my overwhelming memories and reality. As the pictures and emotions and body memories flooded my consciousness, I managed to find a small part of my mind that wasn't buying into the whole movie, but was simply watching. That mind became my refuge. I was not always successful, but slowly I learned to find that little bit of observing mind, and it was as if I climbed into that place and just watched until the movie ended. Slowly, the observing mind grew stronger. The confidence that the movie was only memory, a figment of the mind, not really happening, increased. The understanding that the "I" which I was constantly inventing was actually just an elaborate story became clearer. Eventually, the movie lost its power and then it ran out of film. I didn't lose the memory, but the memory lost its grip.

There was no one to be angry at, no pain, no child victim inside, no Bad Man outside, no one to forgive, and no one to do the forgiving.

Never Again

The Dharma teachings showed me it was possible to stop harming and being harmed. Delusion is merely a mistake in the mind, and therefore, there is no reason to feel victimized by the mistaken actions of others, no reason to be afraid, no reason to feel different in any way. As Ven. Sarah says, "If I had the same delusions, I would do exactly the same thing." As the great masters have shown us, we can see our own and others' deluded actions as a mis-

take or a sickness, and rather than feel anger or hatred, we can use these events to move toward genuine compassion.

If I really practice in this life, I can become the line in the sand, the point beyond which there is no harm to others. When my abuser meets me again, this time he will not be harmed. Our meeting will be the cause for him to meet the Dharma and the seed for his own freedom. In this way, every moment I was abused by this man becomes infinitely precious and infinitely inspiring. ❁

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