

In another person's shoes

By Sharon Werner



I'm sure I must be like many Dharma students – constantly lamenting the fact that so much of my precious human rebirth is spent in making a living.

As a wife and mother, I have a responsibility to my family, including helping to support it financially. Right now that means working full-time. But while obstacles to retreat abound, along with obstacles to as much daily study and meditation time as I would like, I have found ample opportunity to practice right here, right now, right in the thick of my life.

My work in a non-profit health-access organization brings me into contact with many suffering individuals on a daily basis: people with problems far vaster than I or my organization will ever be able to address. Every week I talk to drug addicts, some who willingly threw themselves into the grip of illegal drugs, and some who were prescribed painkillers who will now spend their lifetime trying to escape their grip, or enduring the suspicions of people who assume they are just waiting to get out on the street with their medications in order to turn a profit. I work with people with closed head injuries who used to lead normal lives, who now struggle every day to complete the most basic tasks; women who have been abused and are fleeing their abusers, trying to take care of themselves and sometimes their children, who have restraining orders filled out but not yet used because “I don't have any bruises yet”; men and women newly released from jail or prison, angry or humiliated, whose health care needs have barely been addressed during incarceration. I also work with students who are simply in low-paid jobs; and people who are victims of yet another factory closing: different types of suffering, but suffering, nonetheless.

As I interact with these different people, and with my co-workers (who, I must remind myself, endure the various types of suffering as well), my question to myself is: What do I want to do with my precious human rebirth? As I go through the hours of my day, what is my deepest underlying purpose? Clearly, it is to achieve enlightenment for the welfare of all living beings. But saying the words is easy, and I'm not an evolved bodhisattva, so I try to keep it simple. I do

this by bringing to mind the words of Ven. Robina Courtin:

“Start thinking that you've got to create virtue in relation to your money. That means, be generous with it. You have to create virtue in relation to your lover. That means don't fight, don't get jealous, don't be depressed and anxious, don't grasp. You have to create virtue in relation to your reputation and use it to benefit others. Suddenly everything shifts. It doesn't mean you have to give up anything, make this paradigm shift. Just see that you have a different set of priorities” (Module Three, Discovering Buddhism at Home).

I remind myself, then, repeatedly throughout the day: “The only purpose of this relationship is to create positive potential.” The only purpose for my relationship with my son, my husband, my pets, my clients, my colleagues, the cashier at the store, the bank teller, the person who is tailgating me, is to create positive potential so that I might continue to move in the direction of my ultimate goal. It's a simple phrase, easy to remember, and at the very least it keeps me from creating the types of gross transgressions that I am sadly still all-too-prone to commit. I can't strike back verbally at a snide comment from a co-worker if I want to create positive potential. I can't see the most angry, aggressive client as less precious to me than my own mother, my own child.

And really, I am no different from the felon sitting across the table from me. I've felt the grip of anger and rage, of helplessness, that might lead me to pick up a weapon and harm another being. Because I'm fortunate enough to have met the Dharma, I have tools I can use in such a situation. While I may not keep a gun or knife handy, cutting words will suffice and have sufficed all too often in my lifetime. Knowing this, feeling the pain and mutual suffering of this, it's a little easier to feel kinship with this other person, who has not only caused suffering, but who has suffered so much as well.

The deepest aspiration that I bring to my daily life, then, is that we will all recognize this kinship and in so doing will no longer feel the need to make ourselves or others suffer. ☸

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