

“A Life of Mutual Benefit”

by Gil Fronsdal

“A wise person is motivated to benefit oneself, others, and both self and others.”

—The Buddha

Some people live focused on benefiting themselves and those to whom they feel close. Some people are devoted to benefiting others, sometimes at the expense of themselves. To the Buddha, a wise person is someone who wishes for the good of all. Our lives are so interconnected that it is not possible to benefit oneself while neglecting others. And one can't be of much benefit to others if one neglects oneself. The path of liberation the Buddha taught neglects neither oneself nor others; it is a path that lies at the intersection of oneself and the world.

One significant place to see how Buddhist practice balances caring for oneself and others is the Eightfold Path. Four of the path factors are practices aimed primarily at benefiting others. Part of the second factor, Right Intention, is to live motivated by goodwill and compassion for others. The next three factors, Right Speech, Right Action, and Right Livelihood, are all concerned with being in the world so that our speech, action, and livelihood benefit others.

In the practice of speech the Buddha encouraged people to speak in ways that are truthful, reliable, and trustworthy and in a manner that “reunites those who are divided, promotes friendship, and speaks words that promote concord.” He also encouraged speaking about what is good and beneficial.

Right Action is defined as not killing, not taking what is not given, not engaging in sexual misconduct, and not lying. While just following these guidelines provides others with the gift of safety, the Buddha went further by saying that in living a life that doesn't harm practitioners, one should “abide compassionate to all living beings.”

For many people, one's livelihood is how one has the most impact on the wider social world. The practice of Right Livelihood aims at being thoroughly ethical in how one works and supports others. Exploiting or harming others through our work is antithetical to Right Livelihood.

While Right Speech, Right Action, and Right Livelihood are practices that benefit others, we also benefit when we practice them. One of the great sources of well-being and peace is a clean conscience. Our own ethical integrity can become a meaningful refuge.

The last three factors of the Eightfold Path—Right Effort, Right Mindfulness, and Right Concentration—are usually understood to emphasize caring for oneself. All three factors focus on improving the quality of our minds and hearts. Right Effort involves learning to do those things that increase our wholesome states of mind. Right Mindfulness gives us the presence of mind to differentiate between the wholesome and unwholesome. Right Concentration brings calm, ease, and peace.

The wholesomeness and well-being that Right Effort, Right Mindfulness, and Right Concentration bring is a wellspring for both self-care and care for others. It shows us how meaningful and beautiful the developed heart can become. It is knowledge that strengthens empathy and appreciation of others. This is probably why the Buddha often presented concentration practice as an approach for cultivating goodwill and compassion for others.

Caring for others and for oneself are not distinct from each other. When we benefit others we are benefited in return, not least because it strengthens wholesome qualities in ourselves. When we benefit ourselves through developing our integrity, hearts, and wisdom, we will inevitably benefit others. Conversely, if we harm others we will sooner or later see how this also harms us. Even if others don't retaliate, we cannot escape our own conscience forever.

The Buddhist approach to living a wise life can be called "a life of mutual benefit." By benefiting others we are benefited ourselves; by benefiting ourselves we are benefiting others.

However, some people may feel that any emphasis on benefiting oneself is selfish. The Buddhist response is that selfishness harms the person who is selfish. If we understand what brings and supports personal well-being, we will avoid being selfish. We will not pursue our own well-being at the expense of others.

In Buddhism, benefiting oneself is not the same as acquiring pleasure, status, or wealth. It is developing beautiful and wholesome qualities of heart. It is cultivating the kind of inner wellbeing, love, and peace that helps make *how we are* in the world as helpful for others as *what we do*.

For similar reasons, we would not want to benefit others if it harmed our self in any significant ways. How can we really touch the hearts of others if our own heart is being harmed?

A person focused on mutual benefit does not view life as a competition that only some people can win. Rather, one considers what is best for the greater good, something the Buddha described in the above quote as benefiting both self and others. This is not the greater good that sacrifices some for the welfare of the majority. It requires creatively seeking ways to improve the lives of all.

In practice, a life of mutual benefit does not mean that everything we do has to benefit everyone. It means that when we care for ourselves in healthy ways, we can be reassured that this is for the greater good. And when we care for others in healthy ways, this is for our own benefit as well. At different times, in different situations, we will act on different ends of the self/other spectrum.

At times it is appropriate, and even important, to care for oneself. Meditating every morning may be immensely helpful for the meditator. It can be as important a form of self-care as making sure one eats healthily, gets enough sleep, and keeps one's body healthy. At the same time, daily meditation may prepare us to care for others in calmer, wiser, and more compassionate ways.

There are other times when it is appropriate to care primarily for others; their needs may be greater than our own. However, one task of mindfulness practice

is to help us care for others without giving in to attitudes and reactions that are harmful to ourselves. It is important to learn how to benefit others without harming ourselves.

A life of mutual benefit embraces a wider perspective than any stance that supports conflict. Without shrinking from conflict, it searches for the common ground that can work for the common good.

To understand Dharma practice as a life of mutual benefit clearly places our practice within the context of our social life. Even if one spends long periods of time in mostly solitary meditation practice, there is always a social dimension to one's practice. We don't walk the path of liberation for ourselves only. We practice for the sake of all beings.

