

Question:

Buddhism stresses having compassion for others, trying to reach the “soft spot” in their hearts in order to communicate with them. However, recently, in my own life, I have come to realize that there are people who do not wish me well and, in fact, actively pursue harming me in some way.

Devious and manipulative people do exist and being in their presence can feel truly toxic. In fact, I’ve experienced real physical symptoms of illness and weakness when I am in the presence of such people for too long a time. Is it ever permissible to stop trying to connect with this type of person and just remove oneself as much as possible from their negative influence?

Narayan Liebenson Grady:

Yes, it is. What is required in the situation you describe is genuine compassion combined with wisdom. To remain in an unhealthy situation is not wisdom. An example would be of a person in an abusive marriage. To use the Dharma as a reason to try and remain in such a situation is to be misguided. This is false equanimity. Our intention is to wake up, not to be naïve or foolish. As well, it is important to remember that co-operating with the unskillful actions of another benefits neither you nor the other person.

Please remember, however, that the intention with which we take action is of utmost importance. If contact is broken off out of aversion, the result will be a greater degree of aversion, suffering, and contraction. If actions come out of wisdom, the result is more wisdom, clarity, and compassion.

The Buddha, recognizing how easily influenced we are by others, said that we should spend time with those who have the qualities that we want to have: If we seek to learn patience, be with people who are patient. If we want to cultivate wisdom, be with those who are wise.

Of course, this does not mean judging or shunning those whom we perceive as not having the qualities we admire. Nor do we want to delude ourselves into thinking that our happiness lies in the hands of those who possess those qualities. If we think that someone else can make us happy or unhappy, we are caught in delusion.

Every relationship tests our limitations. We practice remaining inwardly free even in the face of provocation. We may let go of physical contact with those whom we feel are toxic to us yet find that we are still inwardly in contact because of our negative thoughts and emotions. So letting go of the outer contact doesn’t negate the need for inner work. If we don’t do the inner work at some point or another in our lives, the cost to our hearts is very high. Some of the most difficult work in life is to take complete responsibility for each and every reaction that we have – without blaming ourselves for the fact that reactions do arise. The inner work is to learn how to love all beings unconditionally.

This is not easy!

As the teacher Neem Karoli Baba said, “Don’t throw anyone out of your heart”.

Sometimes the only way we can remain loving is to let go of the actual contact and send loving kindness from afar.