



Barre Center
for Buddhist Studies

149 Lockwood Road
Barre, MA 01005
(978) 355-2347
www.dharma.org
bcbs@dharma.org

NON-PROFIT ORG.
U.S. POSTAGE
PAID
PERMIT NO. 183
GREENFIELD, MA



No Harmful Thought

by Saṃkicca Thera, *Therāgathā* 602 & 603

vasitam me araññesu
kandarāsu guhāsu ca
senāsanesu pantesu
vāḷamiganisevite.

I have lived deep in the forests,
In canyons and also in caves,
Upon wilderness seats and beds,
—All haunted by predator beasts.

ime haññantu vajjhantu
dukkhaṃ pappontu pañino
saṃkappaṃ nābhijānāṃ
anariyaṃ dosasaṃhitāṃ

“May these creatures be slain or harmed,
Or come to pain in any way.”
Such a hateful, ignoble thought
—Has never occurred to me once.

Is it really impossible to imagine that such an attitude is attainable? We so often hear such sentiments dismissed as idealistic or impractical. It seems taken for granted that humans are just hateful creatures, that animosity is an adaptive instinct, and that “of course” we will hate those who threaten us. Who could blame us?

The Buddha was showing us a more noble way of being human. Yes, the impulse to lash out against those we fear does lie within us all as a latent tendency, and it is all too easily provoked. But if we indulge that reflex without awareness, we are operating at the level of the most primitive animal. The freedom to be human begins with the understanding that we need not act out all the inclinations arising within us.

Just behind that first impulse towards greed, hatred and delusion lies a capacity for non-greed, non-hatred and non-delusion. When we let the first response blow through our mind and body as a breeze might blow through an empty house, perhaps noticing that it is occurring or even reflecting upon its texture and effects, we give a chance for other, more wholesome qualities to follow: generosity and non-attachment; kindness and compassion; insight and wisdom.

According to the commentary on the *Therāgathā*, from which these stanzas are taken, the elder Saṃkicca modeled this noble attitude in quite dramatic ways. Once, when a gang of robbers came upon his forest-dwelling community demanding a victim for sacrifice to a local forest spirit, Saṃkicca insisted they take him. He submitted willingly to their sword, and we can assume from his verses above that he did this with a mind free of animosity. The robbers were so moved by his example that they renounced their murderous ways and wound up ordaining as Buddhist monks under Saṃkicca.

I know it sounds a bit implausible, but I see this as a story of hope, honoring the better part of human nature. Not only did Saṃkicca himself demonstrate astonishing courage and altruism, but more significant was the transformative impact this had on the robbers. Perhaps we are not in a position to take things to this extreme, but I can't help but wonder what incremental, cumulative effect ten thousand little acts of good will and lovingkindness might have on bringing out the best in ourselves and others.

—A. Olendzki