Bhante - excerpt from the Buddha's Philosophy of Personal Relations, a commentary on the Sigalovada Sutta

Available to listen to on FreeBuddhistAudio at www.freebuddhistaudio.com/talks/details?num=93 or as a text file at www.freebuddhistaudio.com/texts/read?num=093&at=text&q=Philosophy+of++Personal+Relations

… Now, all this is in a sense by the way, but it does illustrate this general principle of non-exploitation, that one shouldn't use people or pander to people in this way, but we may say that one of the commonest fields of exploitation in the whole range of human life is the economic.

We find in the economic sphere employers exploit employees if they can, and vice versa, the employees exploit the employers. We tend to think that this is a rather modern sort of problem, relationships between capital and labour, employer and employee, between office and factory, and so on. But it's interesting that the Buddha himself has given considerable attention to this matter. There's a very very famous Sutta or discourse of the Buddha in the Digha Nikaya. This particular Sutta is called the Sigalovada Sutta. Sigala is a young Brahmin of the Buddha's day, and ovada means advice, so it's the Sutta of the Buddha's advice to the young Brahmin, Sigala. And in this particular Sutta the Buddha has laid down a sort of pattern of relationships for different kinds of persons. He has explained what should be the relationship, for instance, between father and son, what should be the relationship between friend and friend, what should be the relationship between husband and wife, and also he has explained in some detail what should be the relationship between employer and employee. All this is set forth with great clarity and succinctness and it is of considerable interest to us today. The Buddha says there are five duties of the employer towards the employee, and five duties of the employee towards the employer. This gives us a sort of business code of economic ethics, we may say, of capital and labour relationships. First of all the five duties of the employer. The Buddha says the employer must give the employee work according to his bodily and mental strength, give him the sort of work he can do without injury to himself. I'm sorry to say that this principle is not observed in India today. Though the Buddha gave this instruction twenty five centuries ago, it is not observed in India today. You can see in India today, unfortunately, hundreds of thousands of people who earn their living as koohlis. A koohli means just an ordinary labourer who carries a great load on his back, or rather on his head, from place to place, and these people are the poorest of the poor and the lowest of the low, as anybody who has been to India will know. They usually manage to earn about two rupees a day, which is about half a crown a day, and on that they have to live and support themselves and their families. But what you very often see is that a well-to-do merchant, say, will hire a number of koohlis, say, to carry bags, carry sacks of rice. Now, he may get a very thin weak old koohli, who can just about stagger along with a small bag, but if the employer, if the merchant allows him just to carry a small bag that will mean that he will take double the time to do the job. Instead of the job, say, lasting one day, it will

last two days, and he will have to give the man two days' wages. So he loads him double. So you see the wretched koohli staggering along under a load which he has no business to be carrying at all. You see the veins standing out, you see the muscles absolutely stretched like whipcord, and the perspiration streaming down, and this can be a very very pitiable sight. This is the sort of thing which one sees every day in India, that the koohli and the ordinary workman is given work to do, loads to carry, far in excess of his strength. It's the same with the rickshaw pullers - they're trying to do away with them now - but formerly the life of the rickshaw puller wasn't more than a few years. They started pulling rickshaws when they were fifteen or sixteen; by the time they were twenty five they were finished. They usually had TB, and you see them spitting blood, and that would be the end of them within a few months, because at the same time that they were doing this work they had a minimum sort of diet, no proper nutrition, so the work quite literally killed them. But no one bothered. I remember the first time I was in Ceylon, and I took a ride in a rickshaw, rather against my will. I was quite horrified and I kept telling the koohli to go slower, because it seemed so terrible that he should be pulling me along at top speed, obviously at great injury to himself. But he didn't understand what I was saying, and he thought I was telling him, as anyone else would have done, to go faster. So the more I said go slower the more he went faster. So in the end I had to stop. But thereafter I used a rickshaw only when I absolutely had to in some sort of emergency, trying usually to pick someone fairly strong and sturdy, and not make him go very very quickly. You can't stop using them altogether, because they've got no means of livelihood apart from pulling the rickshaw.

So this is the sort of thing that's done, even now, in India, probably hardly at all in western countries. But this is the sort of thing that happens in the East very very much, that people are given work, given labour, far in excess of their strength, so that they are quite literally, in the long run, killed by it. So, it's very significant that the Buddha so many centuries ago laid down this precept, that the employer should give the employee work according to his bodily and mental strength.

Secondly, the Buddha said the employer should give the employee food and sufficient pay. This is still the custom in India. If you employ someone you give them food, you give them clothes, plus some cash. It's not usually a salary. So here the operative principle is give food and sufficient pay, that is sufficient to meet the needs, sufficient to enable the employee to live decently as a human being, not sufficient in relation to the work done. There shouldn't be any correlation, as I said earlier, between the amount of work done and the amount of pay received. We've got accustomed to thinking in these terms: so much work done, therefore so much pay received, but it shouldn't really be like this at all. The employee should work as faithfully as he can, and the employer should give him simply what he needs for a good and decent human life, not a minimum, not just a bare subsistence, not what he needs in that sense, but what he needs for a full and adequate and decent human life. I read in a paper recently that the suggestion had been made that on the attainment of majority every man and woman in this country should be given by the state a sort of basic stipend just enough for food, clothing, and shelter, regardless of whether they worked or not. This seemed to me quite an excellent idea, and the idea

was further that anyone who wanted more than this, who wanted to buy a car, or a radio, or a television set, they should have to work. You should have to work only for luxuries, but the necessities of life were provided to everybody free. I'm quite sure that we could work out some sort of system of this kind. If you wanted to study, or meditate, well you could. You draw your -3 or -5 a week from the state and make do with that, but if you wanted more you'd have to work. There'd probably be quite a number of people who would want more, who would in fact love to work, but no doubt quite a number also, especially Buddhists, who'd be quite content, I hope, to live very very simply, without a radio, without a television set, without all those other wonderful things, but without having to work, devoting themselves entirely to Buddhism, like a sort of vast secular Sangha or monastic order of one kind or another. Anyway, the basic principle here is that the employee should get what he needs, quite apart from the actual amount of work done. Even if he's very weak and can do very little work, he should still get what he needs fully, and even if he's very strong and healthy, and his output, his turnover, is enormous, he shouldn't get extra, he should just get what he needs by way of remuneration.

Thirdly, the Buddha says the employer should give the employee medical treatment and support after retirement. Now look at this principle. 2500 years ago this was enunciated: that the employer should continue to look after the employee, even when he was no longer working, either due to age or to sickness, should continue to support him, continue to pay him, and continue to allow for his medical treatment. You could hardly have anything better than that, even in the welfare state.

Fourthly, the Buddha says, the employer should share with the employee any extras. In other words if the employer that year makes an extra profit, share it with the employee, let him participate in it. It shouldn't be kept only for the employer. In other words the principle of bonus.

Fifthly, and lastly, it is the duty, the Buddha said, of the employer to grant the employee holidays and special allowances. It has a very modern ring, doesn't it? holidays and special allowances.

So these are the five rules, five precepts, laid down by the Buddha for the guidance of the employer in relationship to the employee. But the employee also has certain duties. It isn't one-sided. There are five duties for the employee also.

And the first one is very significant. He should be punctual. I don't know why the Buddha put this first. In India everyone is unpunctual. Even the trains aren't punctual. Sometimes they're two or three hours late. People never come punctually. They say, as anyone who has been in India will know, and I can see Miss Castle is smiling, they say I'm coming to see you at three o'clock. You see them the following week. This is what happens. They say that the meeting will begin at 8 o'clock sharp. You turn up at 8.00, no one in sight, nine o'clock the organisers come, ten o'clock the platform is erected or the stage. Eleven o'clock they assemble the audience, and at half past eleven you start speaking, and this is your 8 o'clock meeting. So they're not very punctual, so perhaps it isn't surprising that the Buddha laid down as the first duty of the employee towards the employer punctuality, turn up for work on time,

principle of clocking in, or rather of clocking being made unnecessary. And the Buddha says show a good spirit by starting work before the employer. The employee should be up and working before the employer.

Secondly, he should finish work after the employer. In most places, factories and offices and so on, people work with one eye fixed on the clock, and the minute the clock strikes, down they fling their pens or typewriters if they haven't flung them down before. And this is the sort of spirit in which they work. So the Buddha says this is no good, as it were. Let the employee carry on working after the employer.

Thirdly, the employee should be sincere and trustworthy. This is quite obvious: sincere and trustworthy.

Fourthly, perform his duties to the satisfaction of the employer. This is also very simple, very obvious, and still very relevant.

And fifthly, and this shows the Buddha's psychology, he should speak in praise of his employer. Now, you may find the man is a very good workman, he does his duty, doesn't cheat the employer, but when he gets outside what he says about the boss, well it isn't anybody's business. Sometimes, as we know, the air is blue. I remember listening only a few days ago to a radio programme in which a trades union representative had something to say about employers in general, and it certainly wasn't very complimentary. He certainly wasn't speaking in their praise. The Buddha, of course, had in mind a good employer, the employer who is observing the five precepts of the employer. It's only right, it's only natural, and it's psychologically good and healthy that the employee should speak in praise of such an employer.

So in this way we see that there is no exploitation. The employer doesn't exploit the employee, the employee doesn't exploit the employer. There's a happy, harmonious working relationship. Each takes from the other, without harming, what he needs and gives what he can. The employer takes the labour, the skill of the employee, and gives what he can to the best of his ability in terms of cash and so on. And in the same way the employee gives of his best and takes what

he needs. So in this way, as I've said, there's a happy, harmonious working relationship. There's no question here, as we have in modern life, modern society, in modern states, no question of a grim, protracted bargaining between employers and unions for instance, as though they were in two opposite camps, or even like two hostile armies arranging a truce. This sort of thing is very unhealthy.

Now, we've dealt with the principle of non-exploitation in our economic life, but this principle can be extended. We can say that the significance of non-exploitation extends far beyond the field of economics. It has its ramifications, we may say, in the psychological, even in the spiritual fields. In fact we can say that the principle of non-exploitation can be extended to cover the whole field of personal relationships, and especially the closer and more intimate personal relationships. So, let's look at this for a few minutes. Let's take it, for instance, that we happen to meet someone. We're always meeting people, so this is a very ordinary illustration. We meet

someone. So it so happens that we start liking the particular person that we meet. So the question arises, why do we like them? Obviously, we like them because they satisfy a certain need in us. This need can be conscious, but more often it's unconscious. We start liking people, but we don't know why we like them. Really we like them because they satisfy, or fulfill, a certain unconscious need of ours, a need of which we are not usually conscious, though we can become conscious of it if we try. Usually, of course, we don't try. We rationalise the situation, and we say, for instance, I like them because they're considerate, or I like them because they're kind, or I like them because they love animals as I do, or I like them because they're interested in Buddhism, and so on. But the real source of the liking, the base of the liking may be something quite different, in fact, usually is something quite different. That particular person whom we say we like for such-and-such reason, satisfies a certain need, perhaps a very deep need in us. They may, for instance, satisfy our need for attention, satisfy our needs to be at the centre of things, if not THE centre of things. So if we get this sort of attention which we need psychologically from someone, then we shall naturally start speaking in terms of our liking for them. So if they satisfy a need of ours of this sort, then obviously we shall want that situation, that relationship to continue. They've started satisfying a need, and obviously as long as that need continues we shall continue to want the satisfaction of that need. We want to go on being satisfied in that need. So the question arises, how can we ensure that the need is being satisfied by that person? So how can we ensure that this state of affairs doesn't come to an end? Now, the best way of doing this, the best way of ensuring this, is finding out what the other person needs, and satisfying that need. This is what people usually do, whether consciously or unconsciously. Now the other person for instance, may have a need, a craving for appreciation of some kind or other. Suppose they've written a book, or painted a picture, and they feel they're not sufficiently appreciated, no one recognises their literary genius or their artistic talent, so we, as it were, latch on to this. We start saying, what a wonderful writer you are, or what a beautiful picture. We give them all this appreciation and encouragement that they feel that they need. So they become dependent on us for the satisfaction of their need, just as we have become dependent on them for the satisfaction of our need, and in this way a situation of mutual dependence and exploitation is created. One depends on the other for attention, and he depends upon the first person for appreciation. So a sort of mutual, but largely unconscious, bargain is struck, and this is the basis of most human relationships. In other words, you give me what I need, and I shall give you what you need. In other words the basis is mutual exploitation.

Neither person, neither party to the bargain, questions whether the need is a real need and ought to be satisfied, or whether it's an artificial and unhealthy need and ought not to be satisfied, or were better not satisfied. The whole process, as I've said, is more or less unconscious. So a further question arises, people might well ask, should we never then take what we need from another person? And the answer lies in our original verse of the Dhammapada. Yes, we may take what we need from another person, whether it's material, or psychological, or spiritual, but we must take it like the bee, without injuring the flower, without injuring the person from whom we take. In other words, we must take non-exploitively.

We may say there are two kinds of needs. The first kind is based on exploitation. It's a sort of bargain. You give me; I'll give you. But the second kind of need is free from exploitation: it isn't so based. And we usually find that a relationship which is based on exploitation or mutual exploitation either terminates catastrophically, or it settles down into a routine of ever-increasing boredom. If you are involved in a relationship with anybody where you give him because he's giving you, and he's giving you because you're giving him, well, for some time the need is satisfied and this sort of exchange goes on, and this sort of bargain is continued to be honoured, but eventually it becomes very very repetitious, and very very boring indeed.

But the second kind of satisfaction of need, that which is conscious, that which is more aware, which is not exploitive, which is not based on any kind of bargain, this can go on, we may say, continually deepening, becoming more and more meaningful, when the relationship is based upon what we may call a full and free, not exchange, but a sort of mutual giving without any thought of return, just as we get ideally between parents and children at their best. The parents give freely to the children without thinking that the children are going to give back to them later on. They just give, because that's right and that's natural, and in the same way the children also give to the parents to the best of their capacity, not thinking that they are giving in return for what their good parents have done, but simply because they love the parents. So in this way the parents give, the children give. It's mutual. But no giving because you are given to, or given to because you are giving, nothing like that, nothing exploitive, nothing of the nature of a sort of bargain. So this is the basic principle, this is the Buddha's philosophy, we may say, of personal relations, that personal relationships should be based on this principle of non-exploitation, whether it's in the life of religion, whether it's in the field of economics, or even we may say politics, or even of more intimate personal relationships. Still non-exploitation, mutual generosity is the guiding, is the fundamental principle. So this is the sort of philosophy which the Buddha exemplified in his own person. The Buddha, as we know, spent five and forty years going about in North Eastern India simply teaching. So what did he get? All that he took from people was one meal a day, was a few yards of yellow cloth, was a little hut in somebody's garden to stay in the course of his travels, and occasional supplies of medicine. This was all the Buddha took from other people in the course of his whole life. Nothing more than this. He didn't even have any books, because there were no books in those days, just food, clothing, shelter and medicine. That is all the Buddha took from other members of the human race. But then if you think what the Buddha gave, not in exchange, there's no question of exchange, no question of a bargain, but what he gave. Gave out of compassion, or gave out of understanding, or gave out of sympathy, gave his teaching, gave his guidance, gave his compassion, gave his love, gave his understanding without any thought of return. So you see here a perfect example, one may say, of this right personal relationship, the Buddha taking just what he needed, but giving all he possibly could, so there's no sort of commensurability between them whatsoever. If you look at what the Buddha took it's infinitesimal, but if you look at what the Buddha gave then it is simply incalculable. There's no relationship between the two. So this is the principle we may say of human life, the principle upon which, the philosophy upon which human relationships should be

based. Take simply what you need, whether material, whether psychological, emotional, spiritual, take just what you need without exploiting, and give whatsoever you can on all levels, again material, cultural, educational, moral, spiritual, religious, every level, but don't try to connect the two, so much given therefore so much taken, so much taken therefore so much given. This sort of bargaining, this sort of shopkeeper's mentality, we may say, is the absolute bane and curse of the human race. So we can even go so far as to say that only when our life is based firmly on this principle of non-exploitation can there be any peace, any real progress, any real large-scale human upliftment in the world. So it's this sort of philosophy that the follower of the Buddha is expected to exemplify in his own life, the philosophy of non-exploitation, the Buddha's philosophy of personal relations.
