SN 47.19 — Sedaka Sutta: The Bamboo Acrobat

English translation by Andrew Olendzki.

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Completeness: UNKNOWN. Entire protected source unit, including notes and verses, preserved; canonical completeness has not been independently established.

Text

[The Buddha addressed the monks:]

Once upon a time, monks, a bamboo acrobat, setting himself upon his bamboo pole, addressed his assistant Medakathalika: "Come you, my dear Medakathalika, and climbing up the bamboo pole, stand upon my shoulders." "Okay, master" the assistant Medakathalika replied to the bamboo acrobat; and climbing up the bamboo pole she stood on the master's shoulders. So then the bamboo acrobat said this to his assistant Medakathalika: "You look after me, my dear Medakathalika, and I'll look after you. Thus with us looking after one another, guarding one another, we'll show off our craft, receive some payment, and safely climb down the bamboo pole." This being said, the assistant Medakathalika said this to the bamboo acrobat: "That will not do at all, master! You look after yourself, master, and I will look after myself. Thus with each of us looking after ourselves, guarding ourselves, we'll show off our craft, receive some payment, and safely climb down from the bamboo pole. That's the right way to do it!"

[The Buddha said:]

Just like the assistant Medakathalika said to her master: "I will look after myself," so should you, monks, practice the establishment of mindfulness. You should (also) practice the establishment of mindfulness (by saying) "I will look after others." Looking after oneself, one looks after others. Looking after others, one looks after oneself. And how does one look after others by looking after oneself? By practicing (mindfulness), by developing (it), by doing (it) a lot. And how does one look after oneself by looking after others? By patience, by non-harming, by loving kindness, by caring (for others). (Thus) looking after oneself, one looks after others; and looking after others, one looks after oneself.

Translator's note

What a vivid image of insight meditation!

The practice of mindfulness requires the focused attention of an acrobat balancing on a bamboo pole. One lapse, one moment of distraction or carelessness, and he tumbles to the ground. The picture is one of intensive inner awareness and concentration — almost a matter of life and death.

But the Buddha's parable goes even further, for the safety and well being of the bamboo acrobat's beloved assistant also hangs upon the master's successful practice of mindfulness.

The story is telling us that ultimately we are responsible for our own balance, and would be foolish to direct our attention to others while neglecting our own inner focus. And yet others are directly affected by how well we do this. Insight meditation is not a selfish undertaking, because the quality of our interaction with all those around us depends on the degree of our own self-understanding and self-control.