

IT TAKES TWO TO TANGLE

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In my experience, perhaps the most common problem presented in a counseling session has to do with partners at odds and hurting one another. It is more common than it is rare. Couple-bickering gives a new meaning to the word recursive. We react and then we react to the reactions, and set each other off in a domino-effect, retro-ending in a tail-spin, with hours or days of the cold-shoulder routine, if not a full stand-off. And don't imagine you are immune to this scenario because it is pretty much as common as marriage is common. Sooner or later it happens to the best of us. What triggers it?

Well, the simple answer is our inability to give, as in to "give-in" and expose our vulnerability to the other when we feel we are under attack or criticism. It is difficult for us not to offer a hard edge to what we feel is a hard edge from our partner. Thus we protect ourselves and even that protection is seen as aggression by the other, and away we go.

If we try to point anything out to the other person, this is seen as an aggression and it gets flipped right back at us and before we know it a DEFCON-5 situation becomes DEFCON-1, and we had best find a way to just walk away, unless that too is considered an escalation. Sometimes we just have to wait it out, eyeball-to-eyeball, at full boil.

And if we take offense, the moment that happens the peace is broken. It is seldom about what our partner did or did not do; it is always about our reaction. We don't control our partner's actions. We can only control our own reactions. When we take offense and react, we have broken the peace within ourselves, and our emotions are already out of our control. The battle for self-control is already lost. We would have to catch it far earlier than that.

I need to be aware enough to respond to whatever my partner does before I simply react and set a series of reaction-echoes ping-ponging back and forth. Once again, it is awareness that is key. Without it, we are already into recursive reactions. With enough awareness, we can, instead of reacting, see clearly what the cause is, and respond in a way to stabilize and calm the situation rather than inflame it. This takes practice, but more important, it takes awareness to catch these reactions as they first arise, rather than cope with them after they become a full emotional whirlwind.

It does not take much encouragement on our part to turn the spark of an angry emotion into a forest fire, one that we can no longer put out on our own. It will have to die out in its own time, be that hours or days.

In summary, it all pivots on our being aware enough in any situation to see why a knee-jerk reaction on our part would not benefit anyone (including us), and the ability to instead respond

with a more-skillful action that will help the situation rather than inflame it. Only you know how much knee-jerk reacting and labeling you do. In difficult situations, most of us do it most of the time.

If you want to change that, this involves developing enough awareness to intercept our tendency to react involuntarily (or voluntarily) before we get carried away by the moment. Years ago, my dharma teacher introduced me to this concept using the following analogy:

We have a vegetable garden with a nice picket fence around it and a pig who wants to crash the garden and eat the food. The time to smack the pig on the nose with a stick (and thus keep the him out of the garden) is when he first sticks his nose through the picket fence, when he is just thinking about it. Once he breaks through the fence and into the garden, all that will happen is that we chase him around and around while we both thrash the garden. It will be very difficult to get the pig out.

Similarly, the time to be aware of our actions (and reactions) is when an impulse comes up to blindly react in anger or whatever. Once a reaction takes hold, it is pretty much a foregone conclusion that it will morph into something much worse and just run its course.

Full-blown anger, jealousy, pride, hatred, and a host of other nascent emotions are only a millisecond away from taking control of us. Just observe your mindstream for one day or one hour when confronted by problems. Watch your own reactions. The dharma provides methods to become aware of these labels and reactions as they arise, recognize them for what they are, and respond to them appropriately to minimize their effect. With some practice this awareness-recognition can prevent the accumulation of the extensive karma they otherwise will bring.

I am not fond of the Old-Testament tone to all this, the idea that if we encourage what we could agree are negative emotions, we will not only have to withstand the emotional shocks out-breaking, but our reactions also accumulate karma that itself will eventually ripen in the future, causing still further suffering. There is some tough love here. It is not the big-bad things that we do that accumulate the most karma, but the endless recursive reactions that, day-in and day-out, imprint our mindstream.

A little awareness training can lessen and eventually remove our tendency for labeling and knee-jerk reactions and replace it with the ability to respond skillfully to emerging difficult situations.