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Blame

Listen Atula. This is not new.
 It is an old saying –
 “They blame you for being silent.
 They blame you when you talk too much
 And when you talk too little.”

Whatever you do, they blame you.

The world always finds
 A way to praise and a way to blame.
 It always has and it always will.

*The Buddha*⁹²

Walk in your brother’s moccasins for a mile before criticizing him.
Ancient American Indian Proverb

In the few seconds it takes to read this sentence, many relationships will be embittered and many acts of violence committed on this planet because someone blamed another. Before the sun rises tomorrow, many human beings will be injured or killed by fellow human beings on this planet, because some person or a group of people felt it necessary to blame another person or group of people. With that being the immense cost of blame, let's then ask the basic question: “Is blaming in touch with reality or is it a meaningless and groundless practice?” The objective of this chapter is to search for an answer to that question.

It will be best to start the discussion of the subject of blame with an example. For that purpose, we will borrow the story of Adeline and Barnaby from Chapter 1.

To briefly recap the story, we have an initially happy marriage that turns into a sour relationship for Barnaby and Adeline and the fallout is distress not only for the two adults but also for their two lovely

children. Each blames the other for the distress. Divorce proceedings are looming.

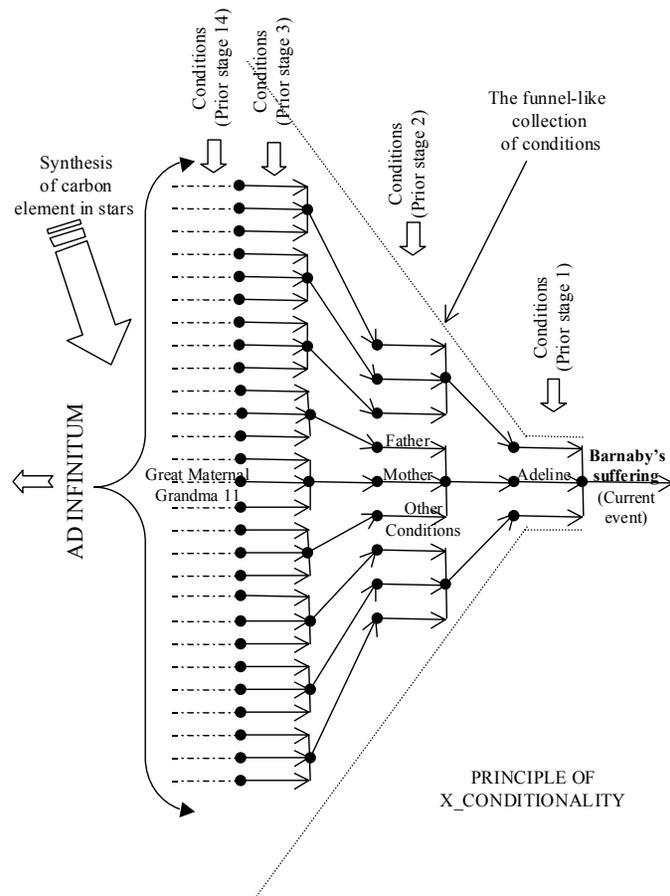
For our present purposes, we will pursue the story as perceived and presented by Barnaby, wherein he blames Adeline for his distress. Is Barnaby in touch with reality in taking this position? If he is not, then first and foremost it is in the interest of *his* emotional health to take corrective action. That would be to discard his present view and substitute that view with what is in touch with reality. This is the stuff of Insight Meditation practice, and in Barnaby’s present predicament, the essential therapy for him. Let's continue.

First let's consider Barnaby’s present perception realized via his truth-distorting senses, which, as we have seen earlier, scan no further than the immediately preceding set of conditions, and often considers only one condition. In the Barnaby case, that one condition is Adeline. To Barnaby, who has not pursued the transcendental approach yet, the ‘convincing’ truth is that Adeline is blamable for his distress. This, then, is the worldly perception, a perception appearing through truth-distorting senses.

Next let's pursue the transcendental view, first in respect of conditionality, then in respect of the self-view. We will use the principle of x-conditions to facilitate our analysis and also to emphasize the unfathomable vastness of conditions that collectively determine Adeline’s situation. Three examples will be sufficient to establish the reality. The first addresses conditions immediately preceding Adeline, the second illustrates a condition some steps back and the third, a condition closer to infinity back in time. The second and third are conditions *arbitrarily* picked from the funnel of conditions, simply to help us with our analysis.

1. The conditions immediately prior to Adeline are many and include the influences of her mother and father. So, her mother and father are (direct) conditions for her existence.
2. Let's arbitrarily consider Adeline’s maternal Great-Grandma #11. On an ancestral line we have to go back over a dozen stages to ‘meet’ her. If Great-grandma #11 did not exist, Adeline would not be existing. So Great-Grandma #11 is an *indirect* condition for the existence of Adeline, as significant as her mother is.

⁹² The Dhammapada verses 227 and 228.



If Great-Grandma #11, as a lass of sweet seventeen did not by 'chance' meet a comely young visiting foreigner at the harvest dance, the latter would not have become Great-Grandpa #11 and there would be no Adeline. So that harvest dance is also an indirect condition for the existence of Adeline.

- All living things – plants and animals (including human beings) – are carbon-based, meaning the key element of which these organisms are made is carbon. Planet earth received its carbon from material that was synthesized from lighter elements in the first generation of stars, millions of years before our solar system spun out into existence. Not only were lighter elements essential for the synthesis of carbon, but also needed was a *rare* coincidence (now well known to scientists) involving the energy levels of the atomic nuclei of these lighter elements. Now just imagine what it

would be like on our planet if the rare cosmic coincidence had not occurred and therefore the carbon supply was unavailable – it will be a barren planet with no life forms (including of course Adeline!). Thus, the cosmic coincidence, the lighter elements and carbon synthesis are (indirect) conditions for the existence of Adeline.

Likewise, we can easily show that Adeline's *emotional* make-up (be it anger, hatred, jealousy, depression or any other) at any given moment is also determined by the corresponding x-conditions applicable at that moment. The same for Barnaby. The same for the rest of us.

Armed with the above information, let's now move towards a closure on the Adeline-Barnaby case.

Firstly, we can conclude that, due to his truth-distorting senses Barnaby perceived Adeline's behavior as *the* cause of his distress. The truth is that a myriad of conditions (direct plus indirect) collectively caused it. The immediately preceding condition (Adeline) was the 'delivery person' for a multitude of preceding conditions. Blaming Adeline for his distress is like blaming the delivery person for a parcel of spoilt chocolates. Or, like blaming the last runner in a cross-country relay race, for losing the competition.

In view of what we have discussed, the reader will now be able to see the reasons for the following comment that appeared in Chapter 1.

".... Dhamma would point out to Barnaby that Adeline is not the *root* cause of his marital chaos. Whatever Adeline may have done, whatever she may be as a person, all that Barnaby went through emotionally was created by how he *perceived* Adeline and her actions. Adeline's actions, at most, are to be *associated* with what Barnaby has gone through, but *letting* her actions ruin him happened totally within his own mind. To Adeline, Dhamma will bring the same revelation, in principle. So the work both have to do, if they want to eradicate their mental distress, is to learn how to change the way they perceive the world, so that they can be in touch with reality; in Dhamma terms, purify their minds. And showing the way to do it is essentially what Dhamma is all about."

Now for a different analysis using the no-self principle. The entities Adeline and Barnaby ("selves") do exist as seen from the truth-distorting senses (as discussed in detail in the chapter titled 'Anatomy of the Self'). However, seen from Truth, they do not exist. Both are ever changing aggregates of processes. Hence, in Truth, assigning blame to entities Adeline (or Barnaby or any other) is impossible.

Furthermore, we saw in Chapter 27: Birth and Growth of the Self, the notion of self was wired into us by nature and nurture both at times when we had no control over our destinies. And the errors committed by us or others in life resulted, in the final analysis, from that notion of self – a case of deep-rooted ignorance. Therefore, in reality, we cannot blame anyone⁹³ (including ourselves) for errors committed. However, what is incumbent upon us is to *take action* to eradicate the belief in a self (i.e., practice Dhamma) so that we will not continue to make the same errors during the rest of our lives.

The same principles discussed above in regard to assigning blame to people apply to blaming anything else, be it such targets as the lousy weather, the misuse of taxpayer's money by the government or the dog next door that barks at 2 am.

We can now answer the original question we posed in paragraph 1: “Is blaming in touch with reality or is it a meaningless and groundless practice?” The clear answer: *blaming is **not** in touch with reality and is a meaningless and groundless practice.* Yet, virtually all of us do it to some degree. Why? Because our ‘shortsighted’ and truth-distorting senses create illusions of blameworthiness (as in the Adeline-Barnaby case) and life-long conditioning has made it yet another human habit, though erroneous. One who realizes the shortcomings of the sensory mechanisms and transcends the senses by insightful thinking as outlined in this chapter becomes a person with wisdom (on the issue of blame). Such a person blames neither others nor oneself for any happening. All things happen because of x-conditions – the continuous flow of nature from beginningless time to the present event.

Now let's see how a rational and meaningful approach can be developed to resolve the Adeline-Barnaby case using the Triple-A method (from the chapter on x-conditions), with the spotlight on Barnaby.

I. *Accept all that has happened up to now as the way it is, the reason being x-conditions.*

Barnaby (having contemplated the manifestation of x-conditions) accepts all that has happened up to now as the way it is. He does not blame Adeline any more.

⁹³ Coming from a different angle, but emphasizing the same principle of non-blame on account of ignorance, recall Christ's statement in respect of the men who were about to crucify him: “Father, forgive them, for they know not what they are doing.”

It is important to recall from Chapter 29: X-Conditions, the difference between blame and accountability. Blame is a meaningless and groundless practice because of x-conditions which run backwards to beginningless time, and which give rise to involuntary actions in an individual. On the other hand, the individual is accountable for willed unwholesome acts committed by him/her and the pay-back happens under the karmic law of volitional action-consequences (*karma-vipaka*). It is an accountability that takes place between a human being and Nature, not between one human being (e.g., Adeline) and another (e.g., Barnaby). Factors such as partiality, hatred, revenge and vindictiveness that influence the act of blaming do not occur in accountability.

II. *Act to improve things from now on, where feasible, with past happenings contributing towards formulation of this action.*

Barnaby, anger gone and calmer with his new attitude (item I above), is able to convince Adeline to attend a joint session of counseling, which includes the principles discussed in this chapter on blame. Adeline too is now convinced that blaming is a meaningless practice. They agree to give their marriage another try.

To completely overcome the ignorance that gave rise to blaming in the first place, both Barnaby and Adeline decide to diligently pursue Insight Meditation

III. *Accept what cannot be done to improve things from now on, also, as the way it is, the reason again being x-conditions.*

Both accept the uniqueness of human beings, by virtue of x-conditions, and therefore the right of each to continue to be different, particularly in matters of the mind.

The above process applies to any other situation where blame is involved. As one other common example let's briefly look at the case of a person (say, Angelica) blaming the ‘poor nurturing’ provided by a parent for all her present misfortunes. Applying the Triple-A formula, Angelica learns to accept all that has happened as the way it is, also acknowledging that the parent was merely the ‘delivery person’ for the relevant x-conditions. That the nurturing environment left much to be desired is not questioned, but there is no more finger-pointing at a single, immediately perceivable condition, the parent. With the blame

and anger gone, and a mind that is calmer, she takes responsibility for her own life. Angelica draws out a plan of action depending on her unique circumstances and identifies what she cannot do, also as the way it is. The result: much peace for Angelica.

Finally, before we close this chapter, we need to touch on the subject of *praise*, being the opposite of blame. If blame is a meaningless and groundless practice (as we have clearly established) in reality, then so is praise. Most of us would not like that. We like to be praised but not blamed. But nature, truth, does not exist for the sake of being liked by humans. We cannot have one side of a coin without the other. Any ‘praiseworthy’ happening is primarily due to manifestation of x-conditions and not due to any single immediately preceding condition. For example, Einstein did not attain the praiseworthy scientific heights he did all because of his mother or father (who were merely ‘delivery postmen’ like any parents) but primarily because of x-conditions relevant to his achievements. Any contribution made by the parents was limited to willed action conducted by them, through wisdom and not ignorance. That contribution is only one of a myriad conditions that comprise the funnel of x-conditions pertaining to Einstein’s achievements.

The Buddha’s recognition that both blame and praise are meaningless and groundless comes clear in the Dhammapada 81: “Even as a great rock is not shaken by the wind, the wise man is not shaken by praise or by blame.”

We close this chapter with an interesting digression on the next page.

► *Digression*

OUR NEAR-IMPROBABLE EXISTENCE

Investigation of the principle of x-conditions leads us to numerous supplementary revelations, one particularly interesting case which we will examine here. We started the analysis by saying that a direct condition for Adeline’s existence was her parents. Now, in accordance with the principle of x-conditions, the condition ‘parents’ branch off into other conditions in a limitless fashion. The near improbability of Adeline’s existence and, for that matter, the existence of all of us on a mere single condition is brought to light in the following analysis.

When a man and a woman get together to create a new life, about 300 *million* sperms partake in a competitive swim and just one sperm penetrates the single ovum, starting the new life. Had it been another sperm that won the competition, the result would be another person, with unique physical and emotional characteristics. In our example it would be not Adeline but another. Our existence, based on this one condition alone (of a specific sperm from 300 million penetrating the single ovum), is so near improbable that we may *perceive* it as ‘miraculous’ and therefore ‘precious’, though in reality there are no miracles and the cause of our being here is x-conditions.

In view of the foregoing revelation, we can make an important practical conclusion: each human life almost did not come to be. Therefore, the life of each one of us is too ‘precious’ to be wasted on unwholesome practices such as blame, anger and hatred. Those with wisdom will instead use every possible moment in it to practice Dhamma and realize inner peace.

Chapter Insights and Highlights

- 1) Human beings are prone to assigning blame, often with disastrous consequences.
- 2) Seen from truth, blaming is not in touch with reality and is a meaningless and groundless practice.
- 3) A meaningful alternative to blaming can be realized by application of the Triple-A formula.