

# Villains and Victims

Mitchell Ratner

*At its core, blaming is about separation, about seeing ourselves as separate from those we are blaming. But we are not truly separate, says Mitchell Ratner. We are both wave and water, simultaneously separate and not separate, both individual and part of the greater whole.*

In June 2003, I was in Israel and the West Bank as part of an initiative exploring ways the practice of mindfulness might contribute to the lessening of conflicts there. In talking with people, I was struck by how often Israeli Jews and Palestinians used the same language of blame in explaining their view of the conflict:

- This is the suffering we have endured, and are enduring, because of the actions they have taken.
- They do not value our way of life.
- They are criminal, inhumane.
- If we are weak, they will take advantage of us.
- The only way our way of life will be safe is to eliminate them from this territory, which by rights is ours.

Within this framework, there was little room for a peaceful resolution of the conflict. Mostly people talked about their hope that their side would prevail.

Counterbalanced against the deadlock of mutual blaming was another approach we talked about during our retreats: that one should not blame anyone, ever; that man is not our enemy, ever. In *Peace Is Every Step*, Thich Nhat Hanh explains: “When you plant lettuce, if it does not grow well, you don’t blame the lettuce. You look for reasons it is not doing well. It may need fertilizer or more water or less sun. You never blame the lettuce. Yet if we have problems with our friends or family, we blame the other person. But if we know how to take care of them, they will grow well, like the lettuce. Blaming has no positive effect at all, nor does trying to persuade using reason and argument. That is my experience. No blame, no reasoning, no argument, just understanding. If you understand, and you show that you understand, you can love, and the situation will change.”

My time in Israel sensitized me not only to the blaming others were doing but also to the blaming I was doing, in terms of how I talked about social problems, such as the conflicts in the Middle East, and in terms of how I lived my daily life. I began to see, also, why blaming is so attractive and how hard it can be to let go of it.

## WHAT IS BLAMING?

The word *blame* has two distinct usages in English. In one usage, blame is simply about attribution of responsibility. Something was the cause or source of something else. This led to that. A fire inspector might, for example, blame the house fire on the faulty wiring in the kitchen. In this sense, blaming is problematic only if it is not accurate or comprehensive enough.

A second usage of blame, however, identifies an individual or group as responsible for a condition that distresses us. This usage adds censure, reproach, disapproval, or anger to the attribution.

- It can be very emotional: “You are a real jerk. You only think about what you want. Because of that, we never get anywhere in this relationship.”

- It can be analytic and pseudocompassionate: “The problem is that because of the pain that you suffered in your childhood, you are unable to form a mature loving relationship with me or anyone else.”
- It can be very subtle: “You should know better than to talk to your sister like that.”
- It can be vague, with many unstated implications: “It is all your fault.”
- It can be directed at ourselves: “I am so terribly disorganized, I was not able to tell you I could not make our appointment.”
- It can be directed at whole groups: “The reason the behavior of those people is so uncivilized is because of their upbringing” (or history, or genetics, or misinformed religion, or lack of discipline, and so on).

In this usage, on which I will now focus, to blame is not simply a consideration of actions and consequences but a psychological attack on an individual or group. Often it is an attempt to punish others, or to force others to change a behavior that is distressing us, by undermining their sense of themselves as whole, competent persons. As Thich Nhat Hanh points out in the paragraph above, when we blame like this, it almost never gives us the results we really want. Usually the individual or group reacts to the attack and responds defensively: “No, I’m not,” or counterattacks: “It is really all your fault.” Or there may be external submission, accompanied by hostility, “I’ll do it, but I won’t like it or you”; immobilizing self-blame, “I really am irresponsible”; or later acting out, “If I’m an irresponsible jerk, then to heck with it, I’ll show you how irresponsible I can be.”

## WHY DO WE BLAME?

Even though it doesn’t work, there are powerful forces in most of us leading us to blame others in a hostile way. One “benefit” in blaming this way is that it reduces complexity. A group conflict, or a conflict in a relationship, almost always has a long, complicated history of contexts and

actions that condition other contexts and actions. In highlighting one cause and ignoring a multitude of contributing causes, we create a world of villains and heroes, or villains and victims.

Another “benefit” of blaming others is that it takes responsibility for the distressing condition away from us and makes others (or a shadow side of ourselves) responsible. Often, in our distress, we simply ignore the ways we have acted that have conditioned someone else’s actions. In a relationship, we may have grown distant, pulling back from emotional engagement, but then, during a dispute over a miscommunication, blame it all on our partner for not bringing up the issue earlier. Group dynamics can be even more complex. We can decry individual acts of illegal behavior, or institutional violence (such as the brutal behavior of guards at checkpoints), without seeing how we are linked to the systematic deprivation or inciting actions that condition these responses.

At a more subtle level, often when we blame we implicitly make others totally responsible for our emotional response. It is what they did that caused us to be angry, frustrated, sad, fearful, or disappointed. We ignore or play down the power we have to create our own emotional reality, through the way we frame a situation, through the way we work with the hurts we have suffered in the past. I may come down hard on the assistant who is late with an assignment, criticizing his work habits, blaming him for bringing more stress into my life. Someone else may respond with compassion rather than anger, discussing with the assistant the difficulties encountered in this assignment and working out ways to resolve difficulties earlier.

Blaming others for that which distresses us allows us to create a self-satisfying narrative about our lives that preserves a morally superior self-image. Our shortcomings are explained away by the actions of others. Erica Jong writes in *How to Save Your Own Life*: “How wonderful to have someone to blame! How wonderful to live with one’s nemesis! You may be miserable, but you feel forever in the right. You may be fragmented, but you feel absolved of all the blame for it. Take your life in your own hands, and what happens? A terrible thing: no one to blame.”

Self-blame is another way of maintaining a self-satisfying narrative. When we blame ourselves, we split off the cause of our problems from an idealized self-image. We separate the “good me,” the “real me,” from the “bad me,” the “not really me.” We are able to maintain our image of

the “good me” by explaining to ourselves and others that the outcomes that distress us are due to the actions and attitudes of the “bad me,” who is not really me.

In perhaps its darkest aspect, blame is used to justify force, violence, and punishment. Once we have established that the situation that causes us distress is “their” fault, because of their evil actions or evil natures, if “they” don’t agree with us and change their ways, then we feel justified in taking action. We may seek to forcibly prevent others from acting in certain ways, to hurt them as they have hurt us, to teach them to see it our way through punishment, or to destroy them.

Why do we use blame? Perhaps the simplest answer is that we blame because we are not able to envision a more productive way of dealing with situations that distress us. Many of us grew up in families in which we were taught to blame, by parents and adults who modeled blaming as a way of dealing with frustrations. Schooling, movies, and celebrities reinforced the lessons. Implicitly, we perceive blaming as a way of protecting ourselves and those we care about. If we did not blame others, we would feel passive, ineffective, and taken advantage of. There is something poignant and tragic about blaming others: We are aware of the symptoms, but we have misdiagnosed the disease, and we persist in using inappropriate treatments that are destructive rather than helpful.

## ENDING OUR BLAMING

Buddhist psychology teaches that deep in our consciousness are internal knots, caused by our misperceptions, that cause us to act in ways that bring suffering to ourselves and others. The practice of mindfulness allows us, at deeper and deeper levels, to become more aware of our actions and our mental processes. When we see an internal knot and know it for what it is, it begins to loosen. Over time, we are able to untie some of our knots, and life flows through us more freely.

If we understand blaming in this way, as an internal knot, then our blaming decreases as we are able to see it for what it is each time it arises in our lives. Not long ago, a friend in a workshop related the untying of our internal knots to the process of toilet training. There are, she noted, three stages a child goes through. The first is when he is aware that he has soiled his diaper. The child tells the parent, the parent commends the

child, and the parent cleans up the mess. The next stage is when the child is aware that he is soiling his diaper. The child tells the parent, the parent commends the child, and the parent cleans up the mess. In the third stage, the child is aware that he is about to soil his diaper. The parent commends the child and introduces the potty.

So it can be with blaming. Sometimes we recognize the blaming only much later. Insofar as we can, we clean up the mess the blaming has caused. Over time, as we become more sensitive to it, we can catch ourselves in the act of blaming another (or ourselves). If any mess has been created, we clean it up and proceed with another way of addressing the condition that is distressing us. With more practice, we become aware of the urge to blame before we have said or done anything. We note the urge, look deeply into its roots, and use this insight to work out an appropriate and compassionate response.

Making it sound as if letting go of blaming were as simple and straightforward as cleaning up after a child, however, reminds me of a story about Shunryu Suzuki Roshi. A student asked: "You teach us to just sit when we sit, just eat when we eat. Could a Zen master be just angry in the same way?" Suzuki Roshi replied, "You mean to just get angry like a thunderstorm and be done when it passes? *Ahh*, I wish I could do that."

Letting go of blame is not easy, because it forces us to confront many of our misperceptions and develop a very different way of being in the world:

- We become more open-minded, recognizing that every frustration, every conflict, can be seen from multiple vantage points.
- We accept responsibility for the ways we may be directly or indirectly contributing to the conditions that distress us.
- We understand that our happiness, contentment, sadness, and ill ease always arise out of our response to the stimuli we receive.
- We recognize that everyone else exists, with hopes and fears, strengths and weaknesses, just like us.
- We understand that conflicts end and reconciliation begins when we can mutually recognize our hurts, fears, needs, and wishes.

At its core, blaming is about separation, about seeing ourselves as separate from those we are blaming. The Buddha taught that we are not as separate as we usually believe ourselves to be. Even though our tendency is to construct a separately existing self from the stream of sensations, feelings, emotions, and thoughts, life is more subtle than that, more mysterious, more wonderful. When we are truly present, we live closer to life, with less reliance on, less clinging to, the constructed self. We learn bit by bit, glimmer by glimmer, that we are both wave and water, simultaneously separate and not separate, both individual and part of the greater whole. Each time the energy of blame arises in us, it is a reminder that in some way we are still holding on to our separate selves, still looking for security by separating ourselves from life.

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