

A Network of Goodness

May 8, 2021

When the Buddha explained karma, he said two things that seem on the surface very strange. One is, “There is what is given,” and the other is, “There is mother and father.” But in both cases, the message is very similar, and actually straightforward. It’s because we have choices that giving has meaning, and that we have a debt to our parents, and a debt to all those who’ve been helping us: a debt of gratitude.

So even though, as we’re meditating, we’re meditating alone, and no one else can do the meditation for us, we still have to remember that the fact we’re here means that we have a lot of debts, because there were people who chose to help us arrive at this point in life. Even our parents: There are cases where we know that parents don’t want an extra child, and yet here comes a child. Your parents had the choice. They could have aborted the child. They could have snuffed it out. But they didn’t.

In Thailand, when a young man is about to be ordained, he first has to sit through a long chant in Thai about the debt he has to his parents. I’ve heard these chants go on for two hours, and for a good one hour and forty-five minutes, it’s about the mother’s pregnancy woes: the fact that you moved into her body and took her blood and flesh, and she had no choice in who you were. She didn’t even get to interview you for the position. We tend to forget that.

So it’s good to remember that however good or deficient our parents were, still we owe our lives to them. As the Buddha said, they introduced us to the world. So if they’ve passed away, dedicate tonight’s meditation to them. If they’re still around, think thoughts of gratitude, and think about how you might respond to their goodness.

The Pali term for gratitude, *kataññu*, means having a sense of what was done; *katavedi* means having the feeling that goes along with that sense, wanting to repay, and if nothing else, wanting to carry on the goodness. Whatever goodness we’ve learned from our parents or our teachers, we realize that they had the choice to help us or not. If we have gratitude for that, it’ll inspire us to be helpful to others, to choose to be helpful in cases where we see it’s going to be beneficial. So, to have the strength to be helpful, we meditate. It’s not the only reason why we meditate, of course, but it is one of the reasons.

There’s that common Mahayana picture of Theravadins as being selfish, concerned only for themselves, but when you read the Buddha’s explanations of the different motivations we might have for wanting to practice, one of them is that those who have helped us will benefit. If we gain any of the noble attainments, the benefits go back to those who helped us. There is this

principle: Goodness spreads around; true happiness spreads around. It doesn't have clear boundaries.

There's the happiness of the world, which does tend to have clear boundaries. When somebody gains something, it usually means that somebody else has had to lose it. Your gain in status means somebody else didn't get that particular status.

But with the goodness of the Dhamma, nobody loses. You practice generosity. When you choose to give, you benefit. Your mind gets more expansive, and you realize that you're not a slave to your selfishness. And of course, the people who receive your gift benefit as well.

The same with virtue: There are a lot of people out there who are very happy that you're not breaking the precepts. Otherwise, you'd be oppressing them one way or another. Other people, other beings, and, of course, you, benefit.

And with meditation, the fact that you're getting your mind under some control means that you're going to be the primary beneficiary, but of course, it's going to spill out to other people, too. The less greed, anger, and delusion you have roaming around in your mind, the less they're going to go out and bite other people.

Part of the Buddha's genius was in realizing that happiness can be found in such a way that the fact that you make yourself happy increases the happiness of others.

So, when we think of the goodness that has been done for us, one of the desires should be to pass it on, so that we can repay those who helped us. That's good. If they're not around to repay, we pass it on to somebody else. This is a way in which our goodwill becomes more expansive, because we have a sense of this network of goodness.

It's not something that's naturally there on its own. It's there because of choices. Remember *kataññu*: a sense of what was done. What was done was chosen. Somebody chose to do something good. They didn't have to. It wasn't built into their nature. It was a choice. When you appreciate that, you realize that you have the choice to do something good as well. And you don't want that goodness to disappear from this world. There seems to be so much that's moving in the wrong direction in the world. People are getting more and more divisive. So, the best way to counteract that divisiveness is to try to continue this network of the goodness that has been done so far. Make sure it doesn't die out.

Remember it is a choice, so try to be wise in choosing how to pass on that goodness. We have goodwill for everybody. There's no reason for any restraints on our goodwill, but in terms of our generosity, there is a limitation on our strength. When you're going to be generous with material things, there'll be a

limitation in how much you can give. There'll be limitations on the knowledge you can share. All the things you have to share do have their limitations, so you have to choose the best way to be generous.

But try to keep that limitless goodwill going even in cases where you can't help other people. Still have goodwill for them because maybe someday there will be the possibility that you can, or that they can help you.

So, think of goodness as a choice. After all, that's why the Buddha brings up these topics in the context of karma. He's making the point that we have choices. Our actions are not determined by the stars, and not everything is determined even by past karma. We have fresh choices every moment. It's because we have those fresh choices that generosity has meaning, that gratitude has meaning.

So, we're part of an extended network. In Thailand, they have you think not only about your parents, but also about your teachers. I tried that one time, thinking of all the people I'd had as teachers in school and spreading goodwill to them, one by one. It took all morning. Of course, when you realize how much help you've received—here you can add people whose books you've read that you benefited from, people you've learned from in other ways—the numbers grow even larger. So think about this network of goodness, this network of good choices. It's what makes human life valuable, bearable even. So, do your best to keep it up.