A Happiness that Benefits Others

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When the Buddha introduces the topic of karma, some of the ways he expresses it are to be expected. There are fruits and results of good and bad actions. There’s this world and the next world. In other words, there is rebirth. But there are some passages that are a little strange. He says there is giving and there are mother and father. The question is, how does that relate to karma? In the terms of giving, he’s basically pointing out that giving does have importance. It is a virtue. There were contemplators of his time who said that because people were totally determined by forces outside of their control, that giving had no meaning. Others said that because everybody died, and just disappeared at death. The people had no meaning. Therefore, there was no meaning in giving anything to them. So when the Buddha was saying, “There is giving,” he was contradicting both of those teachings. In other words, you do have freedom of choice, and the people to whom you give do have meaning, because they keep on existing after life, after life, after life. So that’s one of the consequences of giving. The other consequence is that it’s teaching on karma, which, as you remember, is not deterministic. People have choices. Their choices matter. The other phrase that’s strange is “there is mother and father.” Even in a deterministic world, there would be mother and father. But the contemplators of that time who were deterministic said, basically, there’s no virtue in what your parents did for you. They were made to give birth to you and to raise you and everything by forces outside of their control. So there’s no need to recognize them or owe them any special debt. So again, the Buddha is contradicting that teaching. It’s because they did have the choice to raise you or not to raise you. They did have the choice to let the little fetus grow, and so they let it grow. So you should be grateful for that. So this means the way the Buddha teaches karma is specific and underlies the meaning of generosity and the meaning of gratitude, saying that these really are worthwhile emotions to have. They have meaning, because people have choices. You have to be grateful for the good choices that people have made that have helped you. The Buddha takes that as a sign of integrity. He says there are two kinds of people who are hard to find in the world. One, those who are your benefactors, and then there are those people who are great people. So by being grateful, you make yourself a rare person. Then you show that you appreciate what goodness is. To be a person of integrity means that you realize that goodness is something that takes effort. And if you appreciate other people’s goodness, you’ll be a lot more likely to make the effort to be good on your own. Good here means at the very least looking for your happiness in a way that harms no one. This is one of the basic principles of the teaching, that we all want happiness and it’s nothing to be ashamed of. There are some teachings out there that say that you shouldn’t try to be aiming for happiness, that you should just give your life over to service to others. Well, if their happiness has meaning, then why doesn’t yours? The Buddha is basically saying that you look for happiness in a way that doesn’t harm anybody else. And ideally, when you’re generous, you can help other people toward their happiness. In fact, if you’re not generous, you’re not going to find happiness at all. So he encourages the wise pursuit of happiness. That includes generosity and gratitude. So when you’re spreading thoughts of goodwill, it’s good to think of the people who’ve helped you in life. When I was first ordained, I had lots of time on my hands. I had hours and hours and hours alone on a mountainside. And one day I decided to make a list of all the people whose lives had touched my life in a positive way. And it went on for a long, long, long time. People I’d met, people I hadn’t met. I included authors, artists, my own teachers, my family, anybody who’d had a positive influence. And it was a very long, long list. So it’s good to think about all the people who’ve touched your life. To make up your mind, you’re going to practice as a way of repaying that debt. Some of those people are not around anymore, but you want to keep the idea or the principle of goodness alive. You don’t want it to die with you. At the same time, you realize that because you are dependent on the goodness of other people, there are other people who are going to be dependent on your goodness. So look around and see who might benefit from your goodness. This is what makes human society worth living in. In fact, the word for gratitude in Pali comes from the word for acting. You know what was done. You realize that was a choice. That focuses you on your actions as well. What are you doing? Who’s benefiting from your search for happiness? In the Buddhist teachings, it’s one of the rare ways in which your search for happiness can benefit other people. There’s someone who once asked Ajahn Suwat why we didn’t have a god in Buddhism. And Ajahn Suwat’s answer was, “If there were a god who could decree that by my taking a mouthful of food, everybody else could get full as well, I’d bow down to that god.” But obviously there is no such god. And if our happiness depends simply on eating and eating and eating, all it does is create a kind of dog-eat-dog world. But there is a way of searching for happiness that doesn’t have to take things away or doesn’t have to use things up. And that’s through the practice of generosity, virtue, and meditation, particularly the meditation like we’re doing right now. We’ve got minds that we can train, and by training them so they can see that their search for happiness doesn’t have to be selfish, that it can be of benefit to others, that’s a training that’s really worth undertaking. So this is one of the ways in which you can benefit the long line of people who have helped you. By taking advantage of their help and focusing it on developing your own mind, you can dedicate the merit to your parents, friends, family, all the way back as far as you can think. May they benefit from your practice. This is called dedicating merit. And it’s good practice in realizing that you’re doing this not just for yourself. You will gain your happiness, but other people should benefit too. Given the fact that we’ve been born many, many times, that means we’ve had many, many people as our parents and benefactors. In fact, that’s one of the contemplations the Buddha has you reflect on. But it’s interesting, in the early teachings, they have you reflect on this not for the sake of spreading goodwill to everybody who’s been your father or mother, or whatever. They do that in other branches of Buddhism. But for the Buddha, it had a different meaning entirely. You start thinking about it just endlessly. You said you could never meet anyone who hadn’t been your mother at some point. Or you said it would be hard to meet someone who hadn’t been your mother at some point, or your father, your brother, your sister, your child. Instead of making that as a basis for thoughts of goodwill, it’s to develop sangmega. In other words, realizing that the more you think about that, the more entangling everything starts getting. That’s your motivation to get out. Because even though we have to be grateful to our parents for all the help they gave us, we realize that they were not perfect and the relationships were not perfect. There’s probably a lot of suffering involved on both sides. And just the fact that it’s been going on for such a long, long, long time, that should induce sangmega, accompanied by the desire to get out. Now the practice is some way that we can get out. We do it not by turning our backs on everybody. We do it by developing goodness that we can spread around and dedicate to everybody. So the teaching on gratitude is not meant to tie you down. It’s meant to make you think. When you’re looking for happiness, you want it to spread around. The happiness that does have a good impact on everybody else. That’s our rare happiness. For most of us, our happiness is our own personal possession. We may be happy with a few other people, but it doesn’t spread around that much, especially material gain or status. These are things you can’t share with a lot of people. But the well-being that comes from generosity, from virtue of meditation, that is something you can share. And as you develop it, it’s your present that you leave behind, your gift that you leave behind, for all those who have helped you, for all those on whom you’ve had to depend. Here in America, we like to think about being fiercely independent people, self-reliant. It’s good to think about the extent to which we have had to depend on all kinds of people, just to be alive and to be functioning members of human society. It’s nothing we’ve figured out on our own. A lot of people had to help us. But ironically, the best way to help them in return is for us to depend on others. To get out of this whole interdependent tangle. But we leave it not by trashing it. We leave it by taking good care of it. Through our generosity, through our virtue, we develop qualities of mind that are expansive, not selfish. In other words, we learn to be happy not by just taking things for ourselves. We learn to be happy by developing qualities like restraint, self-control. But these things don’t hem us in. We find that they open entirely new vistas, new possibilities, new dimensions in life that are not possible if your happiness is dependent on day-to-day things. So remember this as you practice. This is an act of compassion. It’s a way of repaying your debts. We’re born into the world, we’re born into debt. But this is our way of repaying those debts. So do it with a sense of gratitude. Gratitude that you have the opportunity to find happiness this way. The Buddha, after all, went through an awful lot to find this path. And the people who followed him have passed it on to us. They’ve made lots of sacrifices. Grateful that this is such a good way to repay your debts. You benefit, and everybody else benefits around you. After all, the Buddha’s request in repaying our debt to him was simply that we practice the Dhamma in line with the Dhamma. He didn’t get any benefit out of that directly. We’re the ones who really benefit directly. But a lot of the benefit then goes on to the rest of the world. It shows how compassionate he was, making sure that his own search for happiness would be of benefit to the world.

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