Repaying Your Debts

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As we live in this world, we’re heavily indebted to others. In fact, as the Buddha said, the only people who are not indebted to others are Arahants. As for everybody else, we’ve got our debts. As children, we have to depend on our parents. When we get old, we have to depend on the younger people to look after us. When we’re sick, we need to depend on healthy people. At least, we live in human society. Whatever skills we haven’t mastered or haven’t been able to master, we have to depend on other people who have. On top of that, even when we’re skilled and able-bodied, able-minded, we still have to feed. That’s the primary activity of being a being. The Buddha talks about a type of thinking he calls papanca, which all too often is translated as mental proliferation, given the impression that papanca is a matter of how much you think, or how much your thinking overcomes the mind. But for the Buddha, that’s not the issue. The issue is the kind of thinking, the thinking that starts with “I am the thinker, I take on an identity, I become a being, and then beings have to feed.” He says once you engage in this kind of thinking, there’s going to be conflict. So given that we’re taking so much, we have to think about paying back. And strangely enough, meditating is one of the best ways to pay back. Because what you’re going to be giving is through your thoughts and your words and your deeds, and you’ve got to train the mind for it. So it’s willing to look for the long term, so that what it pays back to the world is high quality. That’s one of the first things we think about when something is of high quality. It’s going to last a long time. It’s well put together, it’s well made. You want your actions that you give to the world to be well made as well, offering something that lasts a long time. So think about that. What you do, you think it’s your way of paying back the debt, and you want to do it well. So we bring the mind to one. When the mind is one, it has a higher quality than when it’s scattered all over the place. We tend to think that the mind with a lot of ideas, a lot of creative ideas, is a fertile mind, a mind of high value. But from the Buddha’s point of view, it’s when you make the mind one that it’s valuable. Think of items in the market. If there’s only one pair of shoes in the entire market, those shoes are going to command a high price. All the more so if they’re well made. But if there are shoes all over the place, and a pair of shoes are poorly made, just slapped together, they’re not going to have any value at all. That’s the first principle of putting some quality into your gifts to the world. It’s getting the mind trained to be one. And then from there you look at what you have to offer. What can you do to make sure that your thoughts, your words, and your deeds are skillful and of high quality? The Buddha talks about virtue as being a great gift. So you want to make sure that your actions don’t involve anything that would go against the precepts. No killing, no stealing, no illicit sex, no lying, no harsh speech, no divisive speech. Try to avoid idle chatter as much as you can. No taking intoxicants. And look at the mind. The mind is one that doesn’t have any inordinate greed. The mind has no ill will. And the mind has right view. All of these are skillful actions, actions of high quality, because they give happiness that’s long-term. That’s the essence of wisdom, the essence of discernment. What I do will lead to long-term welfare and happiness. You ask that question to the right people, and these are some of the things they’ll start you out with. The precepts, what they call the kamapada, the guidelines for skillful action. Then, of course, there’s the gift of the Dhamma, when you not only provide a good example to others, but you also show them how they can gift themselves. It’s like that old saying, “If you give a guy a bottle of beer, he’ll be drunk once, but if you teach him how to make beer, he’ll be drunk again.” But we’re doing it the other way around. We’re doing something good. You can be good to other people, but when you teach them, “This is what goodness is,” then they can learn how to look after themselves. That’s when we show real goodwill for them. That phrase we chant, “May all living beings look after themselves with ease,” that’s what goodwill is. We can’t always be there for them, but if we can help them be there for themselves, that’s a great gift. Then we look at the world around us and there are a lot of people just taking, taking, taking, and it gets kind of discouraging. You give a gift and there are people who just take and don’t return anything. We have to remember, it becomes your karma that you gave. And that’s what you’re going to be living with for a long time. It’s because we look at the world and we see there’s just a lot of oppression, there’s a lot of abuse of one another. We can’t let ourselves get discouraged. We may not be able to stop all the oppression. The Buddha never said that it would be possible to someday see the human world without any oppression at all. But we can make sure that our contribution to the world is not oppressive, that we’re actually giving more than we take, and we’re giving better than we get. That’s how we can begin to repay our debts. So as you approach the meditation, think of it as a matter of workmanship. Make sure the quality is good, the way you attend to the breath, the way you trust the breath, the way you take whatever pleasure comes from the breath and learn how to use it well, learn how to maintain it, spread it through the body, and then use that as a basis for understanding what goes on in the mind. All this is a step in the right direction. So take that skill and try to do it with as much craftsmanship as you can bring to the process.

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