

Bless Yourself

June 2, 2018

There was a famous meditation monk in Bangkok—his name was Chao Khun Nor—and people would come to him on their birthdays and ask for a blessing. And his blessing always was, “Choose to do only the good. That way,” he said, “you bless yourself. You don’t need anybody else to give you a blessing.”

It’s good to think about this. A blessing, of course, is something that brings bliss, brings happiness. The wish for happiness is an important part of the practice of metta, or goodwill. And it’s interesting to note that when the Buddha talks about goodwill, it’s almost always in connection with the precepts. He never uses the word goodwill when he’s teaching generosity.

He says that when you’re being generous you should try to develop a mind of sympathy for the recipient. But goodwill is something else. It’s something, like virtue, that you want to make universal. It’s a wish for your own happiness and a wish for happiness of all other beings. The way the Buddha expresses this, in what might be called his metta phrases, always includes the fact that people are going to be happy not because you wish them happiness, but because they behave in ways that avoid harm. There’s one metta phrase that says, “May no one despise anyone or cause anyone any harm.” And another one that says, “May all beings look after themselves with ease.” In other words, may you look after yourself without harming yourself, without harming others.

There’s another passage where the Buddha says that if you realize you actually have harmed somebody, you don’t beat yourself up with remorse. You just remind yourself that, yes, that was a mistake and you make up your mind not to repeat the mistake. Then you spread goodwill for all beings, yourself and all others.

Goodwill for yourself in the sense that you don’t want to beat yourself up, because if you get really down on yourself, thinking that you’re a horrible person, it takes away the strength you need to be confident that, yes, you can do something good. All too often when you start thinking about your own bad points, you try to push the thought out of your mind by focusing on the bad

points of other people. And when you're focusing on their bad points, it becomes harder to treat them well.

So you have goodwill for yourself, and then you have goodwill for others, reminding yourself that the behavior you engaged in was harmful. You don't want to harm others. And so you want to strengthen your resolve not to repeat the mistakes that you made, and you do that by making a wish for other people's happiness.

Here again, it's an issue of the precepts, an issue of virtue. Then it connects with the fact that the Buddha said that if you want to benefit yourself, you follow the precepts. If you want to benefit others, you want to get them to follow the precepts to avoid harmful behavior. In the case you're a parent and you're dealing with your children, this means you that have to be quite firm with them when you see that they're lying, or cheating, or doing something you know will cause harm. Goodwill does not mean gentleness or being soft on people or just being nice to them. It means thinking about their genuine welfare, and then trying to figure out what you could do that would contribute to their genuine welfare by getting *them* to act for the sake of their genuine welfare.

The Buddha never measured welfare in terms of material wealth as much as he did welfare in terms of having the treasure of good kamma. So when you're thinking thoughts of goodwill for others, you ask yourself, "What can I do to help these people create good kamma and avoid bad kamma?" That's an act of kindness and an act of goodwill.

But, of course, the precepts are only one way of finding happiness. Generosity is another, as is meditation. These are the areas where the Buddha said that if want to find happiness in a way that's genuine and harmless, this is how you do it. There are a lot of different pleasures you can find in life that involve harm to somebody, but these don't harm anybody. And here the field is wide open. Try to be generous without causing harm. Now, it is possible to give too much. That's why the Buddha warned, "Don't harm yourself with your generosity"—but virtue is something you can do all the time, and it's harmless all the time.

When you feel tempted to lie, remind yourself that your speech is a valuable property, a valuable treasure. Ajaan Lee's expression is, "Bow down to your mouth

every day. You've worked hard to become a human being, to have a human mouth that can express truths." Think about that *Far Side* cartoon where a guy has invented a machine that interprets what dogs are saying as they're barking. It's all "Hey! Hey! Hey! Hey! Hey!" But human beings have the ability to say a lot more than that, so make good use of that ability. You worked hard to develop it, so use it well. The same with your hands, the same with all the parts of your body: Use them to do things that are good. You worked hard to gain these abilities, so use them well. This way, you show respect for your desire for true happiness.

This is one of the reasons why we respect the Buddha: He told us that true happiness is something we can find, and he showed us how to do it. We live in a world where there's no plan for the world. There's nobody who's created it and can say, "The world's going to serve this purpose and so you have to sacrifice your happiness for the purpose of the creator." Remember the Buddha's knowledge in the second watch of the night on the night of his awakening. He saw beings dying and being reborn in line with their kamma, and he realized that this applied to everybody, from the highest levels of the cosmos all the way on down. It included even the gods who thought they were creators. Everybody is subject to kamma. And the universe is not the result of any one plan. It's the result of everybody's search for happiness—which can get pretty random and chaotic. This is one of the reasons that things break down, and then reform, and then break down again, and again, and again. It's because we're very unskillful in our search for happiness and we look for it in so many conflicting directions.

So what the Buddha wanted to teach was the skill where people could find genuine happiness. That skill starts with his realization that you are free to choose this path. In a world where there's no purpose, no meaning, you can give yourself a purpose; you can give yourself a meaning. Otherwise—I think it was Kafka who said it—"the purpose of life is that it ends." From the Buddha's point of view, then it starts up again. That's the part Kafka didn't know about: It starts up again, and then ends again. It goes up and down, up and down, up and down. And there's no meaning there, but there's a meaning you can give to it. You can decide that you want to find a happiness that's secure, a happiness that's harmless. And the Buddha's discovery is that it is possible through your actions.

This is why, when he talks about his awakening, he talks about principles related to your ability to do things with your actions. His shortest precis or synopsis of his awakening was the principle of causality: “When this is, that is. From the arising of this, comes the arising of that. When this isn’t, that isn’t. From the passing away of this comes the passing away of that.”

Sounds pretty abstract, but what he’s saying is that there are several causal principles working together at the same time. It’s a complex system, and the thing about complex systems is that you can manipulate them to go in the direction you want. It’s not like a machine where, once you turn on the motor, it just goes around and around and around, and there’s no alternative. You can push the causal pattern in the direction that you want. To make an analogy, it’s closer to a video game than it is to a TV show. In a TV show, everything is already planned out, and you’re just watching it. With a video game, though, you’re participating and you’re making things happen. Things get changed as a result of your choices. In a similar way, the Buddha’s awakening was all about action, and the power of action.

I was watching a TV show just the other day, a French TV show where they interviewed people on the topic of Buddhism, and the person being interviewed was saying that the Buddha’s awakening was that things are impermanent, unsatisfactory, and impersonal, so the whole message was that you can just sit back and let things do their impersonal thing, without trying to change anything. Which is not what the Buddha taught at all. It’s certainly not what he awakened to.

When the Buddha described his own awakening in his autobiographical accounts, he never taught about the three characteristics as being part of the awakening. It was all about the four noble truths. And the four noble truths are about what your desires can do. There are desires that can lead to suffering; there are desires that can lead to the end of suffering. The Buddha deals with the problem that you feel within—suffering—but he also says the cause of the problem is also within. And the ability to put an end the problem by attacking the causes: That comes from within, too. So his awakening was not about powerlessness. It was about the power you have to make change for the sake of

happiness.

So this is how we bless ourselves. We give ourselves purpose. We're free to do that. We have the freedom, we have the power, and the teachings are here for us to learn how to take advantage of that freedom and that power, for the sake of a happiness that's satisfactory—that more than just satisfies. It overwhelms us with well-being.

This is how we show goodwill for ourselves in a really profound way, and it's showing goodwill for others as well. When your behavior is noble—which is what this path demands—it provides an inspiring example to other people, so that they may feel inspired to look at their own actions and see what they can do to find happiness, too.

If this were a world where we could take everybody else to nibbana, the Buddha would have done that a long time ago. Actually, it's something each of us has to do for him or herself alone. But it's something each of us *can do* for him or herself. That's the good news.

And it was a sign of Buddha's goodwill that he spent so much time formulating a teaching, formulating community, to keep this path open. If each of us follows this path—as is the case with any path—the more people who follow the path, the fewer the weeds that will grow up in it, leaving it clear for the people who come in the future. It's in this way that our goodwill is all around.