

Forgiveness

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Right view comes in many levels. There's mundane right view, which deals mainly with action and the results of action, the principle of rebirth, and the conviction that there are people who know these things from direct knowledge; it's not just a theory. Then there's transcendent right view, which deals more with events in the mind: suffering, its cause, the end of suffering, and the path to its end. Many of us make the mistake of wanting to go straight to the transcendent level. Who wants to muck around in the mundane? Especially when you hear the theory about two levels of truth, that there's just conventional truth and then there's the Real Thing, so who wants to get stuck on conventions?

But the Buddha never taught that way. He would lead people into transcendent right view by starting with mundane right view. It provides the context for understanding every stage of the practice, because the more refined parts of the practice have to build on the basics. If you can't get the basics right, things are going to get skewed by the time you get to the end.

Like the issue of forgiveness: Forgiveness seems to be such a basic human activity that we forget that our ideas about forgiveness are picked up from our culture and our view of what's going on in the world. If you want forgiveness to be a helpful part of the practice, you have to look at how your ideas of forgiveness are tied up with your views about the world.

Many of us in the West have a feeling that we've picked up from the culture, that there's a plan for everything: The universe had a beginning point, it's going to have an end point, there's a story, and it's going to come to closure. Now there are different ideas about what exactly that story is and where it's headed, but just the idea that there is a beginning point and there is an end point, that there's a purpose to the universe at large: That right there has a big impact on how we think about forgiveness. If there's a beginning point, you can tally up who did what first: how many times you've been wronged, how many times you've wronged the other person, who owes a debt of forgiveness to whom. If the plan for all of this is that we're going to become one loving community, we need to get back on good terms with everybody else. Especially if we're going to be divided into two communities for eternity—those who are on loving terms and those who are not on loving terms—everyone would want to be on the loving-terms side. This is why we believe that forgiveness has to involve learning how to love the person you forgave.

Then there's another view about the plan for all of this, which is that each person has his or her own independent inspiration from within and that we're not in any position to judge anybody else. In a universe like that, forgiveness is inappropriate. How can we judge someone else's behavior? Who are you to decide that you're in a position to forgive somebody else when you can't judge anyone's behavior at all?

We see this not only in modern Western culture but also in the Mahayana. Several years back, a scholar who was working on an early Mahayana text got in touch with me and wanted to know where the principle of not judging others appeared in the Pali Canon, because apparently it's all over the Mahayana: the idea that each bodhisattva has his or her own independent inspiration or path to follow, so no one can judge anyone else's behavior or teachings. I looked around in the Canon and I couldn't find it. There is actually a lot about judging people in the Pali Canon—what principles you should use, what principles you shouldn't use—but the idea that you're in no position to judge anybody else does not appear in the Buddha's teachings at all.

In other words, you *can* judge when you've been wronged. Now, you may have some misperceptions about the other person's intentions or about the actual long-term impact of that person's actions, but there are times when you know you've been wronged. So what are you going to do about it?

You look at it in terms of the Buddha's mundane right view. He says that this process of wandering on comes from an inconceivable beginning and there's no way to make sense of it. He never comes down for sure on whether there was a beginning point or not, but either way you simply can't conceive it. It's too far back; it's too bizarre. As for the endpoint, again, he doesn't make any statements about whether there's going to be an endpoint to all this. But his picture of how the universe goes through its cycles is pretty random. You get a lot of people improvising. There's no big plan. There's no one narrative about all this, which means that if you stop to ask yourself that question—who was the first person to do wrong, you or the other person—you don't really know.

There's a story of Somdet Toh, who was a famous monk in 19th century Thailand. He was abbot of a monastery right across the river from the Grand Palace. One evening, a young monk came in to complain about how another monk had hit him. Somdet Toh's response was, "Well, you hit him before he hit you." And the young monk said, "No, he came up and just hit me out of nowhere. I didn't do anything to him." And Somdet Toh kept saying, "No, you hit him before." The young monk got really frustrated and went to complain to a monk higher up in the hierarchy, and Somdet Toh had to explain himself. He said, "Well, it must have been in some previous lifetime. The complaining monk hit the other monk first." Of course, that might not have been the first time. It could have been just the latest installment of a long back and forth.

So there's an inconceivable beginning and no real closure. Different people decide that they've had enough of the wandering-on and they figure out how to stop, but that doesn't keep the other beings in the universe from continuing to wander on and on. There's no real plan. As one of the chants we recite in the evening says, "There's no one in charge." There's no overall narrative.

What there is, though, is the question: What kind of kamma do you want to create? If the answer is "skillful kamma," then one of the things you've got to learn how to do is not to get focused on how you've been wronged by other people. You don't want to go around getting revenge because that just keeps the bad kammic cycle going on and on and on.

This is what forgiveness means in the context of mundane right view: You decide that you're not going to hold any danger to that person. You're not going to try to get back at the other person. You'll let the issue go. Whatever unskillfulness has been going on between the two of you, you want it to stop—and it has to stop with you.

And that's it. It doesn't mean you have to love the person or go and kiss and make up or anything, because there are some cases where the way you've been wronged is so heavy that it's really hard even to be around the other person, much less to interact. You're not called on to love the person and there's no forcing of the issue that you have to come to closure, that you have to continue weaving the relationship. You can just leave the frayed ends waving in the air, and you're done with them.

Now if you want, you can go for a reconciliation, but that requires the other person's cooperation as well. Both of you have to see that the relationship is worth continuing. But there's no sense that every wrong has to be reconciled, because there are lots of cases where reconciliation is impossible. One side just doesn't want it or won't admit to having done wrong.

You see this even in the Vinaya. The Buddha places a heavy emphasis on harmony within the Sangha but he never advises trying to achieve harmony at the expense of the Dhamma. If someone is advocating a position that's really against the Dhamma, and you can't get the person to change his or her mind, then that's it. The Sangha expels the person. Or if the conflict is between two groups of people, one of them will just leave. If you figure out that the other side's motivation is just too corrupt, then the Buddha says you can't achieve reconciliation in a case like that. You can't achieve harmony. To try to force harmony by pretending that there's no difference or that both sides are okay, is against the Vinaya; it's against the Dhamma.

So again, there's no master plan that everything's going to have to get resolved in the end. It's up to you to decide exactly where you want to take the relationship. Now, it's for your own good to give forgiveness, and forgiveness is something you can give from your side alone, regardless of whether the other person accepts

your forgiveness or even thinks that he or she did something wrong that merits forgiving. But for the sake of your own training of the mind, for the sake of gaining freedom, you have to forgive. You don't want to pose a danger to anybody, yourself or the other person. You don't want to get back, for it will force you to keep coming back.

As for being forgiven, you have to accept there are times when people will not forgive you for something you've done—but that doesn't mean that what you did was so awful that nobody could ever forgive you. Again, it's the other person's individual choice. As the Buddha once said, there are two kinds of fools: one, the fool who never admits having done wrong; and two, the fool who, when presented with a righteous and sincere apology, refuses to accept it. Now, a sincere apology means not only that you really are sorry, but that you're also sincere about trying not to do that again in the future, whatever it was. Some people are wise and they'll accept that kind of apology. Other people are foolish. You can't make your happiness depend on trying to get them to forgive you, to overcome their foolishness.

So keep that phrase in the back of your mind: "There's no one in charge." There's no overall narrative that says everything has to be tied up into nice neat packages. Not every story has to come to closure. Think of yourself more as an author just tossing out story ideas. If the story gets to the point where it's no longer good, it's not going to go anywhere, so you just throw the story away and start a new story.

This is one of the advantages of mundane right view: It allows you to start new stories all the time, stories in which you learn how to develop skillful qualities. However bad your upbringing or however bad you've been behaving in the past or however poorly you've been treated in the past, you overcame the difficulties; you took charge of your life. You realized that whatever happiness was going to be true and lasting was going to have to come from training the mind, giving up any desire to settle old scores, or to go around loving everybody or being loved by everybody. You give those attitudes up.

Now you do develop goodwill. Goodwill is not lovingkindness. Goodwill is the desire that all beings be happy. In some cases that happiness can be found by continuing a relationship; in other cases you have to say, "Well, that's it as far as this relationship goes, but may you be happy wherever you go." Like the chant the Buddha gave for wishing goodwill for snakes and scorpions and rats and creeping things: May all beings be happy, whether they have no legs or two legs or four legs or many legs, may they meet with good fortune and may they now go away.

There are some cases where a continued relationship is not going to be a good thing for either side. Like the story of Ajaan Fuang with the snake in his room: The snake moved in—I don't know whether it was during the day or the night—and Ajaan Fuang realized he had a snake in the room but he decided to take it as a test. So he continued living with the snake in his room for three days to see how much fear might come up in his mind and whether he really could spread goodwill to snakes. And he was spreading goodwill to the snake all the time. Finally, on the third night, he sat and meditated, and in his mind he addressed a message to the snake, which was basically, "We come from different branches of the animal kingdom, like people from different societies. Our language is different, our attitudes, our backgrounds are different. It's very easy to misunderstand each other. I might do something that you would take offense at. It'd be much better if you went someplace else. There are many nice places out there in the forest." And the snake left.

Remember that one of those passages in the phrase for goodwill is, "May all living beings look after themselves with ease." It's not that you're going to go around to look after everybody else and clean up after them and take care of them and try to please them and always have a close intimate relationship with them. There are some beings, some people, where it's really hard and it's too much to ask. You want to focus instead on your own mind, making sure that you have no ill will for anybody and that, at the very least, you're harmless in your behavior.

When you understand forgiveness in this way, then the practice of forgiveness is a lot easier. And it's a lot more conducive to becoming free.