

All Winners, No Losers

February 3, 2018

In the chant on goodwill, one of the phrases is, “May all beings be free from animosity.” *Avera* is the Pali term there. And it’s important to understand what *vera*, or animosity, means. It’s a particular kind of animosity. It comes when someone has beaten you—either at a game or at war or in any kind of contest where one side wins and the other side loses, or one side has been behaving unfairly—and you’re the loser, and the loser wants to get back, to settle the score.

The state of mind that animates the person looking to settle the score, that’s *vera*. And from there, it can grow into a type of relationship where both sides have *vera* for each other. Both sides tend to target each other, especially when you think about the long course of time in *samsara*. There’s been a lot of back and forth. There are some particular relationships that can get pretty nasty this way, where you focus on the feeling that you can’t find happiness until you’ve gotten back at this person. This animosity contains not a small touch of revenge. And, of course, this feeling doesn’t lead to any genuine happiness.

So one of the purposes of our practice is to get beyond *vera*, beyond animosity. And we do that first through forgiveness. Recently, there was an article that came out saying that in the teaching on karma there’s no room for forgiveness, because you’re not in anybody’s debt, so nobody has the right to say that you’re indebted to them and they have the right to call back their debts or call off their debts. But that’s not really the case. When you’ve been wronged by somebody, there’s an innate sense in a lot of us that you’ve got to get back at the person who wronged you. But when you forgive someone, you basically renounced your rights to that payback. At the same time, you tell yourself that you pose no danger to that person. You don’t have to love the person, but at least you pose no danger. You’re not going to try to get back.

And, as the Buddha said, it’s only through non-*vera*, non-animosity, that the animosity is ended and grows still. This can help both sides. To begin with, you’re no longer tied in that kind of relationship. No matter what the other person may do to you, you’re not going to react. This attitude of non-*vera* or forgiveness is also one of restraint, just as goodwill is a form of restraint. And it may happen that you set a good example for the other person, too. You’re not taking up the battle. That may inspire them to drop the issue, too. Even if it doesn’t, and they say that you’re a coward and that they won, let them have their victory. It’s not much of a victory, nothing worth begrudging them.

But then, what do we do to substitute this sense of having been wronged? This is where the Buddha proposes that we start looking for happiness in other ways—in other words, in areas in which there are no losers, where everyone wins. These areas start out with something very simple, generosity, and go on through virtue and the practice of meditation. All of these are areas in which you gain happiness in a way that inflicts no pain or harm on anyone else. In fact, you can actually help them gain some happiness, too.

When you're generous, you give a gift. You acquire a magnanimous heart, which is a large, open heart, and the other person receives something from you. Ajaan Lee has a nice analogy. He says it's like squeezing the juice out of a fruit. You take the juice and they get the remaining pulp. That's for you to think to yourself. You don't tell that to the person who's received the gift. But it's for you to think to ensure that you have no sense that you've lost something or that you miss the gift. If you dwelled on that sense of loss, you wouldn't get the full rewards of the generosity. So it's important to realize that both sides benefit.

The same with virtue. When you're not harming anyone, you gain the perfection of virtue. At the same time, the people around you don't have to be harmed by you in any way, which contributes to their happiness.

And when you meditate, you're gaining some control of your aversion and delusion, which means that other people don't have to be victims of your greed, aversion, or delusion.

So you're looking for happiness the way that doesn't have any boundaries. It's not a case where you win and somebody else loses. Everybody wins. This is not like the happiness that is based on wealth or status or praise, where there have to be winners and losers. And in developing the Buddha's kind of happiness that doesn't have any losers, you also change your sense of yourself.

Our sense of self is basically a strategy for finding happiness. If your happiness is the kind where you have to win out over people, you develop a very unhealthy kind of self, one that can survive only by competing with others and beating them. Many of us come to Buddhism in hopes that we can get rid of our sense of self because we know that it's unskillful. But you can't get to the point of not needing any sense of self unless you've straightened out your sense of self, or the senses of self that you bring to your activities. And because your sense of self is defined by the kind of happiness you're looking for, the best way to develop a healthy sense of self is to look for happiness in healthy ways, where nobody's going to lose, and where the happiness actually spreads around. This is why when people say, "How do I put into practice the teaching on not-self?", one of the best ways is to learn to be generous and to be virtuous in addition to meditating.

All too many people focus on the meditation in hopes that by meditating they can see their unhealthy sense of self simply dissolve away. But you need day-to-day practice in looking for a sense of happiness that harms no one, where there are no losers, only winners. That way, you don't have to develop the kind of conceit where you need to compare yourself with others. Ajaan Maha Boowa has a nice phrase for this kind of comparison. He calls it the fangs of ignorance, where you've got to beat out somebody else, or you have to be more outstanding than other people, or more special than other people. Those are fangs because you're looking for happiness in a way that, if you think of it as a kind of food, is pretty miserable food, where you're feeding on other people's losses.

To help get rid of those fangs, you're going to find a sense of pride and honor in finding happiness in a harmless way. Find it in being skillful, in your search for happiness in a way that harms no one. Think about the Buddha teaching Rahula. He said, "Look at your actions. Before you do something, ask yourself, 'Is this going to harm anyone?' If the action is going to harm them, you don't do it. If you don't foresee any harm, you go ahead and do it. While you're doing it, look for the results that can sometimes come immediately. If there's any immediate harm that comes, you should stop. If not, you can keep on going. When the action is done, you look at the long-term results. If you find out that there was harm even though you thought there wouldn't be any harm, resolve not to make that mistake again. Talk it over with someone who's more advanced on the path to get some ideas on how not to repeat the mistake." In other words, don't be so proud that you're not willing to admit your mistake to others.

But when you look at your action and see there was no harm, you can take pride, a healthy sense of pride, in the fact that you're progressing on the path. You remember, Rahula, like the Buddha, was raised in a noble warrior culture, where the sense of honor was very strong. Here, the Buddha's re-defining what honor means. It means not being a slave to your defilements. It means taking pride in the fact that you're harmless.

All too often, in the world now, there's this doctrine of winners and losers. People take pride in winning no matter how they win. And that creates a very unhealthy sense of self that's going to harm them in the long run. But if you take pride in the fact that you're harmless and that you can actually be beneficial to other people around you and to yourself, this kind of honor should be encouraged.

So the Buddha's not teaching you to be totally humble in the sense of thinking that there's no good to you at all. That's not the kind of humility the Buddha's looking for. His humility is in the willingness to learn. When you come to an

activity or a situation, you don't assume immediately that you know everything. You realize: "I've got to learn here." You show gratitude to the people who teach you. You don't assume that it's your entitlement.

In this way, your sense of self loses a lot of its fangs. And as for the selves in your stable that do have fangs, you can put them out to pasture. You don't need them. Use the ones that are skillful. Learn to dis-identify with all the selves that have been unskillful.

Ultimately, of course, you get to the point where you don't need a sense of self because you've found a happiness that doesn't need any more actions, doesn't need anything more to maintain it. And just as your sense of self was a strategy, your sense of not self was a strategy. Both of them were strategies for happiness. At that point, though, you don't need either. You can let them both go. But in the meantime, you want to make sure that you're training your selves in skillful activities, looking for a happiness that doesn't create divisions, that doesn't have winners and losers—a happiness where there are all winners and no losers.

That's when your sense of self, instead of being an unskillful strategy for happiness—in other words, finding a happiness with a lot of drawbacks—can actually lead to find a happiness that's really good, trustworthy, reliable. And your self becomes trustworthy and reliable as well. That's the kind of self you can use on the path. Like the raft: You hold onto it as you go across the river. When you get to the other side, that's when you let it go. But, in the meantime, make sure the raft is good and hold on tight. Look for happiness in a way that doesn't divide the world into winners and losers—one that lets everybody win.