

the precepts? Does “not killing” always mean nonviolence, or can the use of violence, in particularly dire situations, sometimes be justified as less harmful than nonviolence? There are no absolute answers to any of these questions. In a complex world, many ethical dilemmas offer no good options, only less bad ones. No one who lives in a violent and unjust world can claim ethical purity or even semipurity.

Despite these many questions and more, the clear practice of ethical conduct is essential. If specific issues can sometimes be befuddling, the basic thrust of ethical conduct is not. Fundamentally, avoiding harm, doing good, and benefiting others always serve as a moral compass, even in sticky situations. Committed to these principles, we will have to decide, in any given situation, what can best be done. As long as we are always working to develop clarity, kindness, and love, and trying to reduce self-obsession, we can be confident that we will be able to decide what’s best, from our present viewpoint. If our best decision turns out to be wrong, we apologize, practice regret and repentance, and go on to the next choice, wiser than we were before.

REGRET AND REPENTANCE

Regret and repentance are key elements in the bodhisattva’s practice of ethical conduct. Bodhisattvas know that they have made and will make mistakes. Walking the path of perfection, they know they have a long way to go. The point is to understand the path and to be honest about what they actually are doing at any stage of the journey.

So, when we see our mistakes, we don’t justify or deny. Instead, we feel regret and remorse. We cultivate these feelings. We *want* to feel terrible when we’ve hurt someone. Feeling terrible feels good, because it’s good to feel bad when we’ve caused harm. It would be far less good to hurt someone and go on with our business, as if it didn’t matter. Regret and remorse keep me honest and lead me to repen-

tance, which includes apology, making amends if I can, and committing myself to not doing the same thing again.

Probably in some matters we will go through this process repeatedly, because we will make the same mistake many times, even though we intend not to. As long as we are willing to feel regret and repent, we know it's all right. Practice simply goes on, as is, and we are committed to continuing to take steps in the right direction. Nothing helps the journey more than mistakes. Even though we work hard not to make them, and even though when we do make them, we suffer a lot! Bodhisattvas are not trying to avoid suffering (we will hear much more about this in the next chapter). They know that suffering and difficulty drive the heart deeper and strengthen compassion. In this sense, feeling terrible is good for bodhisattvas.

But there is a big difference between regret for having done a harmful action and jumping to the conclusion that we are inherently bad people doomed to do bad things. It is a deeply held Buddhist perspective that there is no such thing as a fixed person, let alone an inherently bad or inadequate person. There is only what happens, arising and passing moment by moment according to conditions. There are tendencies, habits; there is responsibility for action. But none of that is a basis for feeling guilty for being who we are, as if some substantial seed of evil or inadequacy were lodged inside us. If we feel that way about ourselves, we know that's just a feeling—personal, psychological, and arising from cultural habit. It's true only in that sense, not based on any self-evident fact. When we find ourselves indulging in profound self-denigration when we've made a mistake, we remember what's true: We did something that hurt someone. We regret it. We take responsibility, because it is good for us and others to do so. But there's no blame. And the sense of shame or self-loathing is extra. There is no real reason for it, and it isn't helping. Probably, if we have conditioning like this, we will have to repeat this lesson many times before we are finished with it.

FORGIVENESS PRACTICE

True as this may be, it's too easy to leave it at that. Let's be honest: self-recrimination, self-blame, and shame are compelling feelings. They condition much of how we feel and think about our lives. We have to address them. The only thing that heals them is love.

The bodhisattva path is a path of love. Bodhisattvas need love, give love, can't live without love. Love is always available. The flow of love, life's inherent abundance, is constant.

Yet that flow sometimes seems blocked. Sometimes the world doesn't seem like a loving place. What happened?

We've been hurt, and we've hurt others. Even if we haven't been hurt too much or hurt others too badly, so much hurting has already happened in the human past that it's engraved in our DNA. No one escapes the scars. They occlude the flow of love. These hurts that echo through the human past keep coming back on a daily basis. We feel them every day in our present engagements. The world consists of wounded people who have become hardened, alienated, estranged.

So forgiveness practice is basic. We don't need to have had something done to us or to have done harm to others. The hurt is always there. We have to forgive the world for being as it is, others for being as they are, ourselves for being as we are. And we need to be forgiven by ourselves, others, and by life. Those who feel close to God seek forgiveness from God. Forgiveness is a basic practice for bodhisattvas. It comes from the depth of their sorrow and from their loving understanding of the painful world we live in.

Forgiveness clears the heart of resentment and blame. Resentment literally means "to re-feel," to replay the hurt over and over again. This is unpleasant, so it is natural for us to want to find someone to blame. Because of him, because of her, because of them, this happened to me. It may be true. But blame clatters and chatters in the heart, making it nearly impossible to hear the clearer, gentler

tones that inspire us to practice kindness. To practice forgiveness is to quiet things down so we can hear ourselves better.

We can't practice forgiveness aggressively. We can't grab hold of it. We practice it by simply being willing to notice the pain and then the blame and resentment we've added to it; to admit to ourselves that we actually don't want to forgive or be forgiven, that we're addicted to the pain that we're covering over with our hard-heartedness.

So you notice the pain. You let yourself feel it. You stop blaming and bemoaning your fate. You take a breath and say to yourself, "Yes, yes, this is how it is."

When you do this repeatedly, the noise quiets down and you feel the grief and shame behind the pain. You come to accept it. You don't have to blame anyone. It happened, it was just like that. You don't have to go over it again and again. It's done.

This feeling of "it's done" is forgiveness. You can't get to it any other way than by slogging through the difficult feelings. Forgiveness isn't so much something as a lack of something: your resentment and bitterness. When you forgive, your heart is relieved, you can grow, and you are free. Whether or not you actually go to the person who has hurt you (if this is the case) and "forgive" him or her depends on the situation. But whether or not it makes sense for you to do this, you have practiced forgiveness, and it has deepened your empathy and understanding.

KARMA

Behind the bodhisattva practice of ethical conduct is the idea of karma. Karma is action. Action matters, it's effective. Action includes intention and volition. The quality of your thinking and feeling is important.

Actions produce results that rhyme with them. Good actions produce good results; bad actions, bad results. You know this is true: when you think, speak, and act with kindness, you feel good and the