

Open to All

Blake and the Gates of Paradise

For the last few days the word forgiveness has been hovering about in my mind. As it hovers it is joined by such sentences as 'The cut worm forgives the plow' and 'Drive your cart and your plow over the bones of the dead', both of which are from 'The Proverbs of Hell' in William Blake's *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*. In my mind's eye, the word forgiveness is written in a cursive, flowing hand against a background of white clouds and rainbows.

For Blake the plough has a very positive significance. It stands not just for the cultivation of the earth, important as that is, but for the cultivation of the soul. The ploughshare digs deep, reaching down into the rich, accumulated humus. There the worm lives, and the plough cannot help cutting it in two. But the worm forgives the plough, for it knows that the work of the plough is necessary to human wellbeing, even to human existence. The worm does not think of itself or its own life. It is content to be part of a wider productive and creative endeavour. If you cannot paint, you can at least grind the artist's colours for him. If you cannot write, you can at least type the author's manuscript for him. For Blake the humble worm has a positive significance, and he surely loved the worm no less than he loved the plough.

The worm is a living being and it feels pain when cut by the plough. The bones of the dead feel no such pain, however rudely you drive your cart and your plough over them. Eventually they will crumble and become part of the soil, and we should have no compunction about driving over them. The bones are the remains of animals and human beings that once were alive. They are the remains of dead cultures, dead civilisations, and dead religions and Blake exhorts us to drive our cart and plough over them for they are dead and we are alive, and the living should not be sacrificed to the dead. This makes Blake a revolutionary. He was a revolutionary in politics, in religion, and in morals. He was a revolutionary because he was an idealist, and wanted to build Jerusalem in England's green and pleasant land.

When I was a child, one of the first things I learnt by heart was the Lord's Prayer. At that time I did not think about its meaning, but in later years I reflected on it, especially on the fact that in the prayer we asked for forgiveness on the grounds that we had already forgiven those who had trespassed against us. I find it interesting that we have, it seems, to forgive others their trespasses against us before we can ask for forgiveness for our trespasses against them. Only too often nowadays people want to be forgiven before they forgive. Blake goes much further than this. In a famous verse he speaks of a 'Mutual Forgiveness of each vice', and declares that 'such are the Gates of Paradise'. We have all been guilty of indulging in this or that vice, great or small, and we all have to forgive those who have trespassed against us before asking for forgiveness for ourselves.

Alexander Pope (1688–1744) was a very different kind of poet from Blake (1757–1827), but he too had something to say on the subject of forgiveness. In an oft-quoted line, he says, 'To err is human, to forgive divine.' Here he lifts the whole subject of forgiveness onto a higher level, from the ethical to the spiritual. When we forgive another who has trespassed against us we become ourselves divine, at least for the time being. Pope speaks of human error rather than of vice, but the meaning is much the same. We all commit errors, and those errors only too often bring us into conflict with other human beings. But if we suffer as a result of someone else's error, instead of reacting with anger, we should do our best to forgive.

What Blake, the Lord's Prayer and Pope are all, in essence, saying is that true forgiveness is unconditional. There should be no question of our laying down terms and conditions, such as that we will forgive the person their trespasses against us only if he or she repent and apologise for

what they have done. Otherwise our so-called forgiveness is no more than a sort of bargaining. The granting of forgiveness is a free act of the true individual, and it has nothing to do with the reactive mind.

When I was in hospital last year, and close to death, I not only confessed my unskilful actions but asked for the forgiveness of those I had harmed. Reflecting on this recently, I realised that I had been wrong to ask for forgiveness. It was enough that I had confessed and that I had also forgiven all those who had offended me. My confession covered a wide field, as my unskilfulness had done, from being disrespectful to my father as a teenager to some of my sexual activity with Order members and Mitras.

There is a sutta in the Pali scriptures in which the Buddha describes himself as ploughing. It is sowing time and he has come to the place where the wealthy brahmin Kasibharadvaja is ploughing with a team of oxen, and he stands to one side with his begging bowl for alms. On seeing this, the brahmin tells the Buddha that he, Kasibharadvaja, ploughs and sows, and then eats, adding that the Buddha should do likewise, for brahmins do not love homeless, wandering ascetics who live on others. To this the Buddha replies that he too ploughs and sows and having ploughed and sown, he eats. Kasibharadvaja is taken aback and tells the Buddha, perhaps sarcastically, that he does not see the Buddha ploughing and would like to know what sort of ploughing he does. The Buddha thereupon explains (Andrew Olendzki's translation):

'Faith is the seed, practice the rain,
And wisdom is my yoke and plow.
Modesty's the pole, mind the strap,
Mindfulness my plowshare and goad.

Body and speech are guarded well,
And food and drink have been restrained.
Truthfulness I use for weeding,
And gentleness urges me on.

Effort is my beast of burden,
Pulling me onward to safety.
On it goes without returning,
Where, having gone, one does not grieve.

This is how I plow my plowing —
The crop it yields is deathlessness!
And when one has plowed this plowing,
One is released from all suffering.'

Deeply moved by these words, Kasibharadvaja throws himself at the Buddha's feet and goes for refuge to him, as well as to his teaching and his community. Afterwards he becomes a monk and eventually attains liberation.

Faith (*saddhā*) is one of the five spiritual faculties (*indriyas*) and the first of the positive 'links' (*nidānas*), and it is therefore not surprising that in his response to Kasibharadvaja, the Buddha should speak of it first. Without seed there is no crop, and without faith there is no true spiritual life. From the golden germ of faith there spring all spiritual flowers and fruits, including the sweetly scented flowers of confession and forgiveness. Like each of the other *indriyas*, faith has the support of the other four. Having the support of wisdom (*pañña*), it is clear-sighted, not blind. Having the support of energy (*virīya*), it is active, not passive. Having the support of mindfulness (*sati*) it does not get distracted. Having the support of concentration (*samādhi*) it has both depth and focus.

Over the years I have often turned to Blake for inspiration, and have found some of his utterances as very much in accordance with the Dharma. In particular, I have found what he says on the subject of forgiveness helpful both to the individual and to the spiritual community. What he says about mutual forgiveness could hardly be more suitable as a motto for a spiritual community like Triratna. If we could all forgive one another our trespasses, it would bring us nearer to the realisation of Blake's Jerusalem or, in Buddhist terms, to the creation of a Pure Land on earth.

Sangharakshita

Adhithana

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