

Harmlessness

September 25, 2015

When the Buddha defines right resolve, he defines it in three terms: resolve for renunciation, resolve for non ill will, and resolve for harmlessness. The first one is obviously different from the other two. And the question often comes up, “How are the other two different from each other?” If you have ill will for someone, it’s very close to wanting to see them harmed, wanting to do them harm. And there actually is a close relationship, but there is a distinction.

Ill will is the opposite of goodwill. Harmfulness is the opposite of compassion. Goodwill is a general wish for happiness, for your own happiness and for others. Compassion is what you feel when you have goodwill for someone else but you see that they’re suffering or they’re acting on the causes that would lead to suffering. This can apply to yourself as well as to other people. Harmfulness is when you see somebody’s down and you want to harm them. In other words, they’re suffering, they’re poor, they’re in a position of weakness, and you want to take advantage of that weakness. That’s what harmfulness is.

So when we resolve on harmlessness, we don’t pile on other people—and we don’t pile on ourselves. Sometimes when we’re feeling weak in the practice, part of the mind will jump on us and say, “That’s a sign that you should give up.” This doesn’t necessarily mean giving up entirely but just, say, giving up for tonight. You can start telling yourself all kinds of stories about how the meditation’s not going well. You sit down. Your mind is all over the place and you tell yourself, “Gee, I shouldn’t be meditating. My mind is a mess.” That’s harmfulness right there, that thought. And as Ajaan Lee once said, “If you can do harm to your own goodness, it’s very easy to let it spread out and you start thinking about doing harm to other people’s goodness, too.”

It’s interesting that when the Buddha talks about benefiting others and harming them, it’s not a question so much of what you do to them. It’s what you get them to do that’s going to make the difference between benefit and harm. If you get people to observe the precepts, that’s for their benefit. If you try to dissuade them from practicing, if you try to tell them that the precepts don’t have to be held to all the time, or there are times when it’s justified to kill or to lie or whatever, that’s doing harm to those people. You’ve found them in a position of doubt or weakness, and you take advantage of that.

So when we practice on right resolve, we start first by learning how to appreciate our own desire for happiness and doing what we can not to harm that desire. We learn how to encourage ourselves, how to give ourselves the morale we need in order to practice. Being resolved on harmlessness for other people means that you try to encourage them, too, whenever it’s appropriate. Now, there are a lot of times that people will not want to take your

advice, in which case Ajaan Lee would say that if you continue to try giving them advice, it's a form of idle chatter. But if you can see that either through advice or through example you can be a good influence on others, you're carrying out right resolve.

The whole function of right resolve is to remind yourself that knowing about the four noble truths, knowing about the teachings on karma, is not enough. These are types of knowledge that demand action. They point out possibilities and they also point out dangers. In other words, the possibilities for the good things that come from training your mind and developing your goodness, along with the dangers of not developing your goodness.

Right resolve acts on that knowledge, realizing that it's meant to be a guide for action. Sometimes you develop goodwill for yourself and encourage yourself to practice, especially when you're down. This is when harmlessness comes in. You don't jump on the weakness or the discouragement or the times when you have an off night to pull yourself further away from the path.

Even if you find you have other responsibilities that don't allow you to be practicing all the time, you don't use them as an excuse not to practice. You try to find the little cracks in the time of the day, the openings where you can get the mind to settle down at least for a short spell of time. Give yourself meditation breaks here and there, and you find that once you've taken a break like that and then you anticipate the next one, there's a possibility that you can make a link between the two—to be with the breath all the time, continuously, as your grounding.

I received a phone call this evening from someone who asked, "How do I stick with the breath throughout the day? Do I just not care about other people? Do I not take in what they're saying?" I said, "No, that's not the case at all." When you're with the breath, you're giving yourself a solid place to stand as you take on your other responsibilities. And you're actually more able to be sensitive to other people when the basis of your attention is your breath, rather than what it normally is: your moods, your preoccupations.

So you look for whatever opportunity there is to practice. There's a common phrase that you try to bring your practice into your life. Actually, it's the other way around. You try to bring your life into the practice. In other words, the practice is the container. Your awareness of the breath should be the container for the day.

And even when you can't focus entirely on the breath, or give it your 100% attention, you can still make it the framework. Even though you're aware of what's going on outside, you're responding to what's going on outside, you can still be aware of the breath energy in the body. It may be too much to ask yourself to be conscious of "in and out" in the breath, but you can be attuned to simply the general quality of the breath energy. That's something you can sense immediately and deal with immediately, especially if you've been working in your formal meditation on how to breathe through tension in the body, breathe through blockages in the body, expand your awareness, expand the sense of the breath throughout the body. As you get

better and better at that, it doesn't take all that much to bring that skill into the rest of your life. And if you do it well, you find that, yes, it is a grounding. It does provide you with a good foundation.

So your breath is the container of the rest of your life, as it should be. After all, without the breath, you wouldn't be dealing with anything at all, doing anything at all, having any contact with the outside world at all. You'd be dead. So spread your awareness around—a larger awareness, a larger sense of what you can do. And this is how you have goodwill for yourself. This is how you have compassion for yourself: You hold yourself to a higher standard, realizing that you have these potentials. If you deny the potentials, if you put them down, that's treating yourself in a harmful way.

So an important part of the path is learning how to keep yourself encouraged, to give yourself the morale to stick with the path, to stick with the practice even when it gets difficult, even when you seem to be backsliding in terms of the results. Make sure at least that the causes don't backslide, because, after all, the mind is a complex phenomenon.

There's not just one mind in there. There are many minds with lots of different agendas, lots of different attitudes. Sometimes you can deal with one mind and everything seems to calm down. But tomorrow another comes up. It's not that you've been defeated by the first one. It's just that another one has come moving in. It's like a large organization—a big bureaucracy or a big corporation—and everybody's firing emails at one another all the time. You can take care of some of the unskillful emails from some quarters and that seems to calm things down, but then tomorrow, another faction will come up with theirs. Well, don't be surprised. Don't get discouraged. It's going to take a while to clean out the whole corporate culture inside here.

So when you think about the principles of non ill will and harmlessness, remember that you should be the beneficiary of them, along with other people. You don't want to harm yourself. Again, keep that point from Ajaan Lee in mind. If you harm your own goodness, it's very easy to harm other people. So maintain your goodness. Regard it as your most precious possession. The Buddha talks about protecting your goodwill as a mother would protect her only child. Well, try to protect all your goodness in the same way, because it's all you've got.