

Goodwill & Heedfulness

December 21, 2011

The Buddha once said that all skillful qualities are rooted in heedfulness. And this applies to goodwill as well. It's always important to keep that perspective in mind, that context in mind, when you're developing goodwill as a meditation practice. We're developing goodwill because there are dangers if we don't. You can see them in the principle of karma: If you act on ill will, you'll create back karma. In fact, when the Buddha talks about people developing goodwill, it's often in the context of realizing that you may have done something that's harmed other people, or harmed yourself, you've broken the precepts, and you realize it's harming not only them but also you. You want to make sure you don't do that again. You want to make sure that you act on skillful principles, skillful motivation. So this is why you develop goodwill, along with the other brahmaviharas, as a way of strengthening your motivation to act skillfully.

There's a famous sutta where two acrobats are up on the end of a bamboo pole, and the teacher, who's standing on the pole, says to his student, who's standing on his shoulders: "Now, you look after me and I'll look after you, and in that way we'll both come down safely." And she says: "No. You look after yourself and I'll look after myself, and in that way we'll both come down safely." In other words, you take care of your sense of balance, I'll take care of my sense of balance, and that's how we'll be able to help each other along. And the Buddha says, in that particular case, the student was right. He goes on to state as a general principle that by looking after yourself, you look after others, but also that by looking after others, you look after yourself. By being kind to others, thoughtful, compassionate, and treating them with goodwill, you're also looking after your own best interest. This is why we develop goodwill.

There's that famous story where King Pasenadi is alone in his bedroom with his queen. He turns to her and says, "Is there anyone you love more than yourself?" Of course he's hoping she'll say: "Yes, your majesty, you." But she doesn't. She says, "No. And is there anyone you love more than yourself?" And the king has to admit, "No."

That's the end of that scene. So the king goes down to see the Buddha and reports what happened. The Buddha responds, "She's right. You could survey the whole world over and you'll never find anyone you love more than yourself. And at the same time, if you think about other people, they love themselves just as fiercely." And the Buddha's conclusion here is interesting. It's not that this is a

dog-eat-dog world. He simply notes that if you love yourself then you don't want to harm anyone else or get them to harm anyone. Because if you harm others, they're not going to be happy. If your happiness depends on their misery, they're not going to be happy, and they're not going to stand for it. That harm is going to come back at you one way or another.

So this is our primary motivation for developing goodwill. It's not that the mind is naturally compassionate, benevolent, or kind. It has the potential for kindness, but there are all kinds of other potentials as well. We do have the potential to be cruel. Our tongues are like knives, our arms and our hands are like guns: We can do all kinds of good or harm with these things. So this is why heedfulness lies at the base of goodwill. It's a question of getting your motivation straight.

So how do you do it? In the texts, the Buddha simply says that you extend thoughts of goodwill to the east, south, west, north, in all directions, in the same way that a trumpet player would play a note and the note would go in all directions. And you try to make it totally limitless. That's all he says. In later works they expand on this idea. They say you should start with yourself, telling yourself: "May I be happy and free from suffering. May I look after myself with ease." Then you spread that thought to people who are close to your heart. And then gradually work outwards in ever widening circles: to benefactors, good friends, people you're more neutral about, and people who are actually your adversaries, until you finally get to all beings everywhere.

So you might want to start with yourself first, although not necessarily always. Some people actually find it easier to start with thoughts of goodwill for someone who's been a benefactor, a person who has helped them. Whoever you find it easiest, start with that person first. Think about what it means to have goodwill for that person. It doesn't mean that you're going to be there for that person all the time, simply that whatever you do or say or think that's going to have an impact on that person, you don't want it to harm them. If possible, you want them to act to skillfully, too. Because it's not that the case that your wishing them happiness is going to be like a magic wand that will light up a little light someplace in their head. After all, there is that phrase: "May they look after themselves with ease," in other words, may they know how to behave in such a way that actually does lead to true happiness.

This is where goodwill goes deeper than just hoping that people have a nice life. You hope that they, too, will act on skillful intentions. Is there any way that you can help that person act on skillful intentions? Think about this.

In other words, metta is not just a process of repeating a phrase over and over in your head. You contemplate the quality of goodwill and what it really means to have goodwill in the context of karma, in the context of that principle of heedfulness.

The same applies when you extend thoughts of goodwill to yourself. You say to yourself: “May I be happy.” So what kind of happiness do you want? There’s a lot that has been written on people who feel they don’t deserve to be happy. In fact, I was reading recently a Dhamma teacher saying that most people don’t have enough time when they’re weeklong metta retreats to think about anybody else, so they should focus all of their goodwill on themselves as a healing process. And if you have trouble wishing for your own true happiness, then you may want to spend extra time here.

But you can’t stop here. Because, remember, the whole purpose of this is to be skillful in your actions, and try to develop an attitude that there’s nobody out there that you’d like to harm. So spend some time on yourself and think about what it would mean to truly have a goodwill for yourself. It doesn’t mean eating a lot of Dove chocolates or indulging little pleasures. It means trying to act in a skillful way, realizing that your actions are going to have consequences that can go many times farther than you might even think. So in this case, having goodwill for yourself means being mindful, being alert.

It’s not always the case that you start with people who are close to your heart or with yourself. There’s one case where the Buddha says that if you’re being cut up by saws by a group of bandits, you should start with spreading thoughts of goodwill to them: May they find true happiness. This is going to be hard. But the reason that you’re doing this is because you don’t want to act unskillfully in that case. You don’t want your mind to be obsessed with thoughts of revenge. Because suppose they kill you with those saws, do you want to be a spirit coming back to haunt those people? Do you want that to be your reason for living? Your purpose for taking on another life? It would be a miserable life. So again, it’s for your own true happiness that you spread thoughts of goodwill to people who are really being harmful to you, hurting you, hurting people you love, hurting large numbers of the human race. If you’re heedful, you can’t let yourself feel ill will for these people.

So one of the important exercises in goodwill is to ask yourself: Is there anybody out there for whom you really do have ill will? In other words, are there any people you would like to see suffer? Then try to think it through. Remember you’re not just thinking, “May they be happy as they continue to do harm.” You’re wishing: “May that person see the error of his or her ways, and stop doing

that harm, realizing that it's not in his or her best interest. May that person understand what true happiness is, and what the causes of true happiness are."

Now, is that something you can't wish even for evil people? Part of the mind might say, "Well I'd like to see them squirm a little bit first." But think of that story of Angulimala in the Canon. Angulimala had killed almost 1,000 people and then suddenly was converted by the Buddha, ordained, and became arahant. A lot of people were upset that he was getting off scot free. Here he was, after murdering all those people, and now it seemed like he had a free pass out of jail. So they threw things at him. He'd be on his alms round, and they would throw pottery at him and break his head open. He'd come back from his alms round all bloody. And the Buddha said, "Well, remember, it could have been a lot worse."

So those are the people who continued to have ill will for someone who had changed his ways. They were upset that the way karma works doesn't mean that you have to die for every time you've killed somebody. Karma is a lot more complex than that. But the fact that he became an arahant meant that he was no longer killing anybody. The world was a lot better place because he had seen the error of his ways and stopped. They should have appreciated that.

So go through your list of the people you don't like. Remember we're not asking you to like the people, just learn how to develop goodwill: "May that person see the error of his ways, may he stop that unskillful behavior, may he learn how to behave in a skillful way instead, may he understand true happiness, and how to find true happiness." Every time you detect yourself thinking thoughts of ill will for other people, stop and remember these points. Make it part of your practice of developing goodwill. You want to get to the point where you can feel this sort of goodwill for anyone you think about.

Now, it is important that you also have a sense of well-being as you do this. This is why, if you find that the goodwill meditation is getting dry, you stop and you work on your breath, trying to develop a way of breathing that feels good inside, nourishing inside. Ajaan Lee once said that if you don't have any sense of well-being or pleasure inside, then it's hard to wish for other beings' happiness. He gave the image of a large water tank. If there's water in the tank, then when you open the faucet, cool water comes out. If there's no water in the tank and you open the faucet, then nothing but air comes out. And it's the same with your goodwill. There has to be a sense of well-being inside for it to really have force.

So breath meditation and goodwill meditation help one another along. There are times when you need to develop goodwill in order to just be able to settle down with the breath, and other times where you need to work with the breath so the goodwill has a felt sense of well-being inside. So you practice these things

together. If you find the breath meditation is getting dry, stop and remind yourself why you're here. It's for the sake of true happiness—not just your own true happiness, but also the happiness of others too.

Back when I was in Thailand and going for alms round every morning, there were days when some really poor people would put food into my bowl. I'd come back, and the thought would really strike me: "Here I am, the beneficiary of a poor person's generosity, I've got a lot to repay." And so I would dedicate my practice to that person.

So remember when you're meditating here it's not just for you. Other people are going to benefit. It begins with the example of more meditators in the world, more people trying to train their minds, and the fact that as you get your mind more and more in shape, you're coming from a position of strength, a position of well-being. You're more likely to act in a skillful way, and in that way everyone benefits.

This is how we practice goodwill meditation in the context of the Buddha's teachings on karma, and in the context of the principle of heedfulness. You're doing this because if you don't, there's a lot of danger, a lot of trouble ahead. But if you are able to develop goodwill for all, the world is a lot safer place. And you're a lot safer person in that world.