

Understanding Goodwill & Equanimity

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The sublime abidings start with goodwill and end with equanimity. And in a sense there's a hierarchy there. Equanimity is more peaceful than goodwill. But without the goodwill, equanimity turns into indifference and coldness, which I don't think is what the Buddha had in mind when he was teaching equanimity.

You have to start with goodwill, a desire for happiness, a happiness that's lasting, a happiness that's harmless. And part of being harmless is that you realize if your happiness does harm somebody else, they're not going to stand for it, so it's not going to last. So "harmless" and "lasting" go together.

You have to think about what that means, goodwill. It's not that by spreading thoughts of goodwill to others we say, "May you be happy simply as you are, whatever you're doing." If people are doing unskillful things, you hope that they can change their ways. And if you're able to help in that endeavor, you're happy to help.

This counteracts the ill-will we sometimes feel when we see someone harming people we love or people we're concerned about. There's part of the mind that says, "Well, I'd like to see them suffer a little bit, to get a taste of what they've been handing out to other people." But think about it: Sometimes when people are suffering from their unskillful actions they don't stop. They can often become even more and more unskillful. So ideally you're hoping that they develop an understanding and the willingness and the ability to act on the understanding. But at least the understanding is the important part. So think about what that means. We're wishing for happiness and what it comes down to is that we're wishing that people develop understanding.

All too often, the sublime abidings are treated as something separate from the four noble truths. There was a book years back, *What the Buddha Taught*, that treated the four sublime abidings as an addendum tacked onto the end, because they didn't seem to fit in with the rest of the discussion, which was on the four noble truths. But that's not the case. Goodwill is intimately connected with right view. As the Buddha said at one point, if you have ill-will, you've got wrong view. So where there's any sense of resentment, any desire for revenge, that's wrong view.

One of the phrases we chant is, *Sabbe satta avera hontu*: May all beings be free from animosity. The word animosity here, *vera* in Pali: It's hard to get a precise equivalent in English. It's basically the animosity that comes when two people have been mistreating each other, and they just keep going back and forth, back

and forth, back and forth. “You did it to me, now I’m going to do it to you”: that kind of attitude. It’s very closely related to the desire to get revenge. And this can go on for lifetime after lifetime.

This is why an important part of goodwill is also forgiveness. There was an article recently saying that forgiveness has no role in the teaching of kamma. And it’s true that your forgiving someone else for having abused you is not going to erase their karma. You’re not the *owner* of their kamma. But forgiveness does help avoid future unfortunate actions. In other words, you realize that this back-and-forth has gone on long enough, you’re not going to try to continue it, you’re not going to try to get back at the other person. So you forgive them for the last instance, and make up your mind that you’re going to pose them no danger. The word *abhaya*, at least in Thai, is used to mean forgiveness. It literally means danger-free.

So forgiveness, goodwill, understanding: All these things go together. And then as they get applied to specific cases, they turn into compassion and empathetic joy. In other words, if you see someone who is doing something really unskillful or is suffering the results of unskillful actions, you feel compassion for them. If you see someone who’s doing things that are skillful, that will lead to happiness, or is already experiencing the happiness, you’re happy for them. There’s no resentment, no jealousy. So all these attitudes go together.

Equanimity stands a little bit apart. It’s the realization that if all you want is for happiness but it’s not happening, there’s going to be pain. The Buddha describes that as renunciate pain, especially when it’s related to your own practice, but also when you’re feeling goodwill for others and you see that they’re simply not going to be happy. We say, “May all beings be happy, be happy, be happy,” but when you look at people, you see that they’re doing a lot of things that are not going to lead to happiness—and they’re not going to change. If you don’t develop equanimity, there’s going to be a lot of suffering. This is for your own protection and for the protection of the other person.

Sometimes your efforts at helping can get pretty desperate and can do more harm than good. Or in your desire to get along, your desire to do what people want, you can do harm. Because there are times when what they want is not the right thing, and so you have to pull out and have some equanimity for the fact that they may resent your pulling out or not helping them the way they want to be helped.

But again, equanimity, like goodwill, has to be based on understanding: the realization that you’re not giving up on the search for happiness, simply that you’re focusing it on areas where it’ll have an effect. The primary effect, of course,

is going to be in your own actions. If you find that you're doing something unskillful, that's not an area where you can have equanimity, to be content with it, or to say, "Well, this is the way I have to be." You've got to do what you can not to give in to those unskillful habits.

I've met a lot of people who say, "Well, give me some time. It's going to take me a while to sort of start getting more skillful in my actions." But it's not a question of our giving those people time. The question is: Do they have that time? That figure of death that we see in cartoons doesn't wait around and say, "Well, this person has had enough time to get their act together, so now I'll come and visit." They come at any time, unannounced, unbidden.

In terms of your own actions, if you see that you're doing something unskillful, you need to have lots of goodwill for your desire for true happiness. Tell yourself, "I'm just not going keep on giving in, giving in, giving in to my unskillful desires. I've got to do something about this." Where the equanimity comes in in terms of your own experience is when you're dealing with the results of past bad actions that you can't change. You have to accept, okay, this is the way things are. There are certain things you can't work your way around. But even there, you've got to figure out, "Well, how do I not suffer from this?"

You need to have some acceptance for what you can't change. Then there's the next step, which is that "Even though there's pain, and I've learned to accept that there's going to be pain, how do I not suffer from the pain?" That's something different. It requires more wisdom, more understanding. Learning how to separate the pain, if it's a physical pain, from your awareness and to separate the pain from your sense of the body: that's when you can free the mind, again, through understanding.

So you use less willpower in terms of generating equanimity there, and use more understanding to cut through the connections that would cause suffering.

As for your dealings with other people, you focus on the people you *can* help, having equanimity for cases where you can't.

So all the brahmaviharas, all the sublime abidings, require understanding so that they really lead to the happiness we want.

And the happiness we want is one that spreads itself around. It's not like the happiness of the world—based on gaining status, gaining fame, gaining wealth—where when one person gains, somebody else has to lose. With the happiness that comes from the practice, we gain, the people around us gain. As we gain in wisdom, as we gain in compassion, we gain in purity of our actions, we cause less suffering to others and can actually bring them a measure of happiness.

I've talked to some people who've said that simply knowing that there's a monastery here in Southern California where people are practicing warms their hearts, even though they can't come. So you never know to what extent your practice is going to have a good effect on somebody else. But just be confident that the goodness does spread around. Some people are more receptive, some people are less, but it does spread around.