

Good Heart, Good Mind

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Goodwill for all beings: It's a quality of a good heart. Wishing that all beings be happy. Not holding any grudges against anyone, not wishing to see anybody suffer.

But a good heart requires more than goodwill. On the one hand, it needs guidance. It can't simply go on good intentions and hope that that will take care of everything.

Think of the Buddha's instructions to his son. You look at your actions before you do them in terms of your intention, but then also *while* you're doing them to see what actual results you're getting. And then *after* they're done, to check and see if your good intentions really were good enough, that they really were skillful in leading to good results. That's a quality of discernment.

In other words, a good heart needs a good mind.

But it also needs strength. Think of that image of the mother and her child. Sometimes it's interpreted to say that you should love all beings in the same way that a mother loves her only child. Which may be a nice sentiment, but it's totally impractical—and it's not what the Buddha said. He said that just as a mother would protect *with her life* her only child, that's the same attitude you should have to your goodwill for all beings. Think about that: protecting your goodwill even with your life.

It's illustrated by that story of the man pinned down by bandits. They've overpowered him, there's nothing he can do, and they're going to saw off his limbs with a two-handed saw. As the Buddha told the monks, if that man were to have any ill will for the bandits he wouldn't be following the Buddha's teachings. In other words, even in a case like that, he has to start with goodwill for the bandits and then spread it out to all beings.

Simple goodwill on its own won't be enough in a case like that. You need endurance, you need persistence, a lot of strength of character. You need the discernment to realize that there are things in the mind that are more important than the survival of the body. The survival of your goodness is more important. And your ability to put up with pain: That, too, requires endurance and discernment. Your determination to make sure that your goodwill stays in place. All these things are perfections, which is one of the reasons why the list of perfections isn't composed just of discernment or goodwill: It also includes endurance, determination, truth, virtue, strengths of character.

This is one of the reasons why we meditate: to develop some strength of character. We're working on a skill that requires patience, it requires a lot of discernment, and it requires determination. Some people find it easy for the mind to settle down; other people find it a lot harder. But because it's a skill that everybody should master, the fact that it doesn't come easily should not be an obstacle. You have to learn how to get past an obstacle like that.

Learn how to give yourself pep talks. When the Buddha would give Dhamma talks, he wouldn't simply instruct people. He would also urge, rouse, and encourage them. So when it seems as if getting the mind to stay with the breath is like putting a marble on the tip of a pin, you have to encourage yourself. He says it's not *that* difficult, not that impossible. But it's going to require some discernment, the discernment that comes from sticking with it.

When Ajaan Lee explains the different factors of mindfulness, for him the discernment faculty is ardency, which is another word for persistence, realizing that the ability to get your mind to settle down is *so* important that you should keep at it regardless of how long it takes. And also find ways of making the mind *want* to settle down. That's discernment in action, the kind of discernment that counts.

This is one of the reasons why we work with the breath. Find a spot in the body that's especially sensitive to how the breathing comes in, goes out. Find a spot in the body that's especially sensitive to the in-and-out breathing, and keep your attention right there. Be very careful to breathe in such a way that it feels open, relaxed. And then from that spot, think of that sense of openness spreading through the different parts of the body, so that it's more and more pleasant to stay here. You've got something to do here, something to engage you so that it's not only pleasant but also interesting. Keep in mind the fact that if the breath feels good, it's going to be good for the body. And the mind, when it's dwelling in a comfortable body, is much more likely to do skillful things.

So here's one way in which you can give yourself some strength. You exercise qualities of persistence, endurance, determination that give strength to your desire for true happiness. What this means is that a good heart is not simply a well-meaning heart, but it's a heart that's determined to see that its good intentions get turned into good realities. So bring whatever quality of discernment, persistence, truth that you need in order to see your desire for true happiness through. Bring them to bear on your meditation, because the meditation gives energy to all of those perfections.

Goodwill is really good only if it sticks to its highest aspirations. It's so easy for us to settle for less, especially when we're feeling tired, weak, or overwhelmed. When we're dealing with people who are really difficult, it's so easy to take their misbehavior as an excuse for our own, but then that becomes our own bad karma and we've thrown our highest aspirations away.

So develop the qualities both of a good heart and a good mind, a strong heart and a strong mind. Goodwill's not simply sentimental. And it's not a weakness. Especially when it's supported by all these other qualities, it becomes a strength that makes true happiness possible. That way, it turns it from a wish for happiness into the actual experience of happiness. And when you can do that, that's when both your heart and your mind have shown how good they can really be.