

A Skillful Heart

April 3, 2020

Start with thoughts of goodwill. That's the beginning phrase for many meditation instructions. But it should apply to all your activities as you go through the day. You want to act on intentions of goodwill. Always have that as your original motivating force. After all, that was the Buddha's basic motivation. After he gained awakening, he was totally free. He could do anything he wanted. And then he thought of all the beings who were suffering. As he said, they were burning with the fires of greed, aversion, and delusion. He knew the way out, he could teach them the way out, so that's what he decided to do.

You look at the four noble truths: The whole idea of focusing a teaching on the problem of suffering has to be motivated by goodwill. You look at all of his teachings, and you can see that there's goodwill underlying them all. When you look at a particular teaching, you should always ask yourself: "If I have goodwill for myself, goodwill for other beings, how will I act on this teaching?"

Like right now as you're meditating, you want to do the meditation well because you know it's going to make the difference between suffering and not suffering. That's goodwill for yourself. You also know that with the lust, greed, aversion, and delusion you have in your own mind, the less they'll spill out on other people, the less they'll suffer. That's your motivation here. The trick is to make it your motivation as continually as possible.

That requires a lot of mindfulness. This is why the Buddha said that universal goodwill is a kind of determination and a kind of mindfulness. Determination in the sense that you have to make up your mind that you're always going to act on goodwill. It doesn't come spontaneously. In some cases it may come naturally, but in other cases it doesn't. So you have to remember when you're dealing with people you like: goodwill. When you're dealing with people you don't like: goodwill. And then you want to go beyond just thinking thoughts of goodwill to acting and speaking in ways that genuinely embody goodwill.

This means you have to develop other qualities as well. We develop virtue to make sure that our goodwill doesn't get swayed by ideas that are short-sighted, saying, "Well, it would good for so-and-so if I lie to them a little bit and make them feel good." You have to realize that, in the long run, that's not going to be good for anyone at all. They're going to catch, at some point, the fact that you lied. And then your words are going to have less value for them. Of all the precepts, the Buddha gave the most importance to the one on not lying. He said that if you feel no shame in doing this, there's no evil you won't do. You

look at other people: If they lie easily and shamelessly, you know, “Oh, there’s no evil this person won’t do.” You know you can’t trust that person. So virtue has to go along with the goodwill to make it genuinely good, to make it skillful. We’re working not only on a good heart here. We’re trying to develop a skillful heart—a heart that not only wants good things to happen, but also goes about acting and speaking and thinking in ways that will make them happen.

And that requires endurance. You want to make sure that your goodwill is independent of conditions outside. That requires that you have an inner strength. Now, we sometimes depend on thoughts about other people’s goodness in order to encourage goodwill in ourselves, but it’s not only when other people are good—or we think that other people are basically good—that we should have goodwill for them. Remember that we want our protection to be all-around, which means that we have to want to act skillfully all-around, in all circumstances.

This means your goodwill has to be backed up by discernment. There are a lot of people who want to have Dhamma without kamma. And so they say, “We have goodwill for all beings because all beings have Buddha-nature or all beings are intrinsically good.” In a case like that, your goodwill is not really independent. When you run across people who are definitely evil in their intentions, what are you going to do then? Either you lie to yourself, thinking, “Well, they’re basically good” or you tell yourself, “Well, this person doesn’t deserve my goodwill.”

So you have to back up and remember the Buddha’s reasons for teaching goodwill. At all times we need to have good intentions to guarantee that our actions will be good. And if we really have goodwill, then we have to go beyond just being good in our intentions to being *skillful* in our intentions in all situations. So when we’re dealing with people we’re like, we have goodwill. When we’re dealing with people we don’t like, we have goodwill. And try to figure out the best way to express goodwill in any particular situation—and particularly the difficult ones. Because that’s where you need your protection the most.

So learn to look carefully at your intentions: Are they really good? Are they really skillful? You want to protect good intentions, skillful intentions, as the Buddha said, as a mother would protect her only child. Think of that image of the bandits sawing your limbs off with a two-handled saw. Even in a case like that, the Buddha said, you should have goodwill for the bandits and from them from all beings, so that your mind is not oppressed by the circumstances in the world around it that would seem to want to press it down, to confine it. This is one of the ways of freeing the mind from the limitations around us.

So make your goodwill immeasurable, with no limits at all. Then get down to the nitty-gritty of figuring out what is the most skillful way to act and to speak and to think with goodwill in any situation.

And be very careful to look at your motivation to make sure that it really is good. As Ajaan Chah said, when you look steadily at the mind, one of the first things you're going to see is its tendency to lie to itself. When the mind can lie to itself, then it can talk itself into doing all kinds of unskillful things. In the same way, as when we see other people lying shamelessly we have a sense that there's no evil they won't do, if the mind can lie to itself about its intentions, it may not intend evil, but it can easily do it.

So again, for your genuine protection, you want your goodwill to be genuine and you want to have the strength to carry it through. Endurance, equanimity when equanimity is needed, determination, truth: All of these perfections are needed to make sure that your goodwill is not just a floating idea, but that it actually informs everything you do and say and think. That way, your heart is not just a good heart, and you're not just a good-hearted person. You become a skillful-hearted person. That's when you're generally trustworthy. You can trust yourself, and other people can trust you, too. In a world of a lot of doubts and uncertainty, a trustworthy person is genuinely a treasure. So make yourself a treasure by being scrupulous in protecting your goodwill. And it'll protect you in return.