

The Sublime Attitudes

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The Buddha's teachings on skillful qualities of mind come in clusters: five this, seven that. Even the one quality that's always appropriate – mindfulness – is always taught in the context of clusters. To begin with, it's paired with alertness: Mindfulness means keeping something in mind, as when we keep reminding ourselves to stay with the breath as we meditate; alertness means noticing what's going on, being alert to what you do and to the results of what you're doing. For mindfulness to be effective in training the mind, it always has to be paired with alertness. And both of them have to play a role in larger clusters as well. They're part of the five strengths, the seven factors of Awakening, and the noble eightfold path.

The reason the Buddha teaches skillful qualities in clusters is because unskillful qualities come in clusters, too. The three roots of unskillfulness – greed, aversion, and delusion – can branch out into five hindrances, seven obsessions, ten fetters, 108 forms of craving. They grow exponentially. No one skillful quality can take them all on. Each skillful quality has to be strengthened by others to be effective, to play its part in the training of the whole mind. At the same time, each has to be balanced by others to make sure it doesn't go overboard and end up as a tool for the opposing forces. This is why the Buddha left teachings like the four bases of success, the seven factors for Awakening, and the four sublime attitudes: armies of skillful qualities to do battle with the armies of Mara.

When you see the various lists placed down – one, two, three, four, five, six, whatever – it gives the impression that you start with one skillful quality and then drop it to move on to the next. Actually the process is more a question of gathering all the qualities together, and then leaning in the direction of one or another as is appropriate so that the mind can maintain its balance. This is the principle that applies to the sublime attitudes: immeasurable goodwill, immeasurable compassion, immeasurable appreciation, and immeasurable equanimity.

We start out with goodwill not because it's the least advanced of the qualities but because it's the most essential, the most basic. On top of that you build the others: compassion, appreciation or sympathetic joy, and finally equanimity. A balanced mind is one that knows when to emphasize which of the four. It's not that you abandon number one to move to number two or number four; you're trying to keep all four of them on hand so that you can use whichever one is appropriate for the occasion.

Goodwill lies at the basis of everything. In fact you could say that it lies at the basis of the whole practice. If we didn't have goodwill for ourselves and the people around us, the four noble truths wouldn't make any sense as an important teaching. It's because we would like to see suffering end, not only for ourselves but for the people around us, that we want to follow the path to the end of suffering. We're concerned to find out what suffering is, how we can abandon its causes and help to realize its cessation.

So goodwill is where everything starts. Think about it: Why would you want anyone else to suffer? You might think about the evil or cruel things they've done in the past, but even then why would you want them to suffer? To learn a lesson? Well, they're going to learn their lesson because the principle of karma is going to take care of that – that's why the teaching on equanimity is there – so you don't have to go out and be God's vengeful sword to make sure that everyone gets their just punishments.

Your only job is to make sure there are no limits on your goodwill. When people have done horrible things, you don't have to like them; you don't have to condone their behavior. That's not what goodwill means. Goodwill means that you don't wish anyone harm. If they're doing horrible things, you have every right to stop them if you can – after all, in doing horrible things, they're creating bad karma, more suffering for themselves. Just make sure that you don't harm them in trying to stop them.

So try to make your goodwill limitless – or as the texts say, immeasurable. Take this as a challenge. When you spread thoughts of goodwill, test to see where the limits are. Don't just pretend that your goodwill is immeasurable. Everyone's goodwill starts out with limits. What are the limits of yours? After spreading goodwill to people you already feel it for – your friends, your family – start spreading it to people for whom you don't spontaneously feel it. Does your heart object when you try spreading goodwill to people you dislike? Stop and ask it: Why? What would you gain from seeing them suffer? Look at the little voice inside that resents their happiness. Is that a voice you want to identify with? Can you drop that attitude?

This is where the practice of developing goodwill really makes a difference in the mind: When it forces you to challenge any smallness or narrowness in your heart. If you think of goodwill as a billowing pink cloud of cotton candy covering the world in all directions, what you're really doing is covering up your actual attitudes, which is of no help at all in gaining insight into the mind. Goodwill is meant as a challenge, as a way of searching out and working through your small-hearted attitudes one by one so that you can examine them, uproot them, and really let them go. Only when you work through the particulars like this can goodwill become more and more limitless.

That's when your compassion can become limitless as well. If you feel goodwill for people, then when they're suffering the ill effects of their bad karma you can't help but have compassion for them. You want them not only to stop

experiencing whatever pain or suffering they're undergoing at the time, but also to stop doing whatever's going to cause them to continue to suffer. This is an important part of compassion. It's not simply a soft spot in your heart for people who are suffering. It also means also trying to find some way to help them to stop doing the things that are causing them to suffer to begin with.

When you can help them, you appreciate their happiness. You feel sympathy for the happiness they encounter. Even in cases where people are experiencing happiness that has nothing to do with you at all, you appreciate the fact that they're experiencing the results of their past good actions or present good actions. You don't resent their happiness. Even if you're in a contest and they come in first and you come in second and you felt that you really deserved to come in first, this is where you have to practice sympathetic joy. There's a larger framework for things than the one you're probably aware of.

Notice in all these cases that there comes a point where you have to leave things for what they are, cases where you want to help someone and you can't, or you would rather see yourself gain the happiness that somebody else has. This is where you have to develop equanimity.

Notice that the teaching on equanimity is a reflection on the principle of karma. Of the four chants we have for the sublime attitudes, it's the only one that's simply a statement of fact. The others say:

"May all beings be happy.

May they be free from stress and pain.

May they not be deprived of the good fortune they're experiencing."

The first three are wishes, attitudes, things you would like to see happen. "May... May... May...." The fourth one is simply a reflection on the way things are.

"All living beings are the owners of their actions, heir to their actions....Whatever they do, for good or for evil, to that will they fall heir."

This reflection actually turns up in lots of different contexts. In the five reflections, the reflection on karma is the one that gives hope. You realize that you're in charge of your actions. You're not simply a victim of fate or of the stars or of some other being acting through you. You're the one who's making the choices. That's what gives you hope.

But it's hope coupled with heedfulness. You've got the power to do good with your actions, but also the power to cause harm. The principle of karma is a double-edged sword. If you're not careful, you can use it to cut your own throat. This is why the Buddha recommends reflecting on the principle of karma as a way of inspiring heedfulness.

Taken a little further, the universality of the principle of karma is a reflection for developing equanimity both toward yourself and toward other people. In other words, you come across incidents in your life where you can't gain the

happiness you'd like. There's a karmic block there. So you learn to accept it with equanimity. That doesn't mean that you give up and become totally passive and indifferent. You look for the areas where your actions *can* make a difference. Don't waste your time and energy, butting your head against the wall in areas where you can't make any change. Focus on the areas where you can.

So equanimity is not hopelessness, it's not passive indifference. It's there to redirect your energies in the proper direction, to the areas where you can act for your own wellbeing and for the wellbeing of others.

The reflections on karma are also used as a basis for developing wisdom and insight. They form the background for all the teachings on discernment. The central insight of the Buddha's Awakening was that pain and pleasure come from your actions. There are actions that bring pain, actions that bring pleasure, actions that bring both, and then special actions, that put an end to action, an end to suffering, and bring total happiness. That's the essence of the Buddha's discernment. So it's an interesting combination: equanimity, hope, heedfulness, discernment. These things all go together. They hover around that same reflection:

"I am the owner of my actions. All beings are the owners of their actions."

In other words, all beings are responsible for what they do. Ajaan Suwat once gave a Dhamma talk on this reflection, focusing on the difference between the *anatta* teaching and this one statement. Form, feeling, perceptions, thought-constructs, consciousness: These are not self. But we are the owners of our actions. "Think about that," he said.

In other words, don't latch on to the results of your actions; latch on to the fact that you're making the decisions right now, all the time. Once a decision has been made, it's been put into a larger circle of cause and effect beyond your control; but you do have a chance to make a decision again the next moment, and the next moment, and then the next. Focus on that. Don't get caught up in the results of past actions. Focus on what you can do now to make the present actions skillful. That's the focus of the teaching, "We're the owners of our actions."

"We're the heir to our actions"

We're going to be receiving the results of these actions. So act in a way whose results you'd like to receive. Be concerned about that: That's what's meant by the Pali word, *ottappa*. It can be translated either as fear of the results of your actions or concern for the results of your actions. However you translate it, it means that you're not apathetic; you know that whatever you do is going to bear results.

Here again the quality of discernment comes in. There are lots of things we like to do that will give bad results and things we don't like to do that will give good results. The Buddha said the measure of whether we're a fool or a wise person lies in how we handle situations like that. In other words this is where the

quality of discernment really shows its worth. You can talk about discernment, you can describe the three characteristics, the five khandhas, the six sense-spheres, dependent co-arising, emptiness, all these wonderful concepts; you can talk about them, but if they can't help you make the right decision when you're faced with a hard decision, your discernment's useless. Useful discernment is the type that enables you to talk yourself out of doing things you would like to do but that you know would give bad results, or to talk yourself into doing things you don't like to do but would give good results. That's where discernment shows its stuff.

"We're born of our actions."

Our actions are the source of everything we experience. If you want experiences to be good, focus on the source. If you don't like the kind of experiences you're having, turn back and focus again on the source. It's constantly right here, right here in the present moment.

The Buddha's teachings on time are interesting in that even though they do talk about time, they don't talk about a beginning point in time. The beginning point for your experience is right here in the present moment. It all comes springing out of right here; so instead of trying trace things back to first causes someplace way back in the past, the Buddha has you look for first causes right here and right now. Dig down deep inside into the area of the mind where intention and attention and perception play against each other, for that's the point from which all things are born.

"We're related through our actions"

The connections we have in life with different people are created by our actions: things that we've done together *with* other people or *to* other people or *for* other people. These create the connections that we have with the people around us.

Interconnectedness is a very popular teaching in Buddhism, especially nowadays, but it's funny that people like to talk about interconnectedness without the teaching on karma. They turn to dependent co-arising as a model for interconnectedness, this web of connections where one factor can't exist without a whole lot of other factors, but they neglect to realize that dependent co-arising is a teaching on how ignorance is connected with suffering, how craving is connected with suffering. It's the kind of connectedness you want to cut, not the kind you want to celebrate.

Connectedness through karma can go either way – the connections can be good, or they can be bad. So you want to foster the good ones.

And again, where do you look? You look at what you're doing right here and right now. How are you behaving with other people? How are you treating them? These create the relationships you're going to be able to enjoy or you're going to be stuck with, now and on into the future. So choose your actions carefully.

"We have actions as our arbitrator."

Our actions decide our lives. In other words there's no judge up there someplace in the sky sitting on a big throne passing judgment on us. We're passing judgment on what kind of life we want to have by the way we act—which is both empowering and also a little scary. Think of how many times you've acted on unskillful motives. Think of the unskillful motives you still have lurking around in your mind that could form the basis for future unskillful actions. Think hard about that. It means there's work to be done—not just to escape unskillful actions but also to foster skillful ones.

This is where the hope comes in. Even though we may be suffering in our lives, there's a way out through our own actions. We don't have to sit around waiting for somebody else to come and save us. We're not victims of fate. We can make the choices, we can order our priorities so that we can reshape our lives in a positive direction through our thoughts, words, and deeds.

This is why we meditate, because meditation creates good qualities, skillful qualities in the mind: mindfulness, alertness, concentration, discernment, persistence, truthfulness, perseverance. As we work at these qualities, as we put them into action, they get strengthened and become more and more the wise arbitrators of our lives, pointing our lives in the direction we really want to go.

Then the final reflection builds on that:

"Whatever we do for good or for evil, to that will we fall heir."

This is a reminder to be heedful, that we really want to act on our good impulses, our skillful intentions. We want to develop the qualities in our minds that will foster these skillful intentions, because these are the things that really make a difference.

These teachings foster equanimity in reminding us to be equanimous toward our past actions, toward the results from past actions. Certain things we can't change because they've already been done. We can't turn back the clock.

But the teachings foster hope in that we can make a difference in what we're doing right here and right now. There's that opening for us to design our lives, to point them in a better direction.

In that balance among equanimity, heedfulness, and hope, learning how to make proper use of this principle of karma: That's where the discernment comes in.

The teachings on karma have gotten a bad rap, largely because they've been mangled, turned into a simplistic caricature: either fatalistic or tit for tat. But if you understand the complexity and also the purpose of the teaching, you begin to realize that it's not what we thought it was. It's not an excuse to justify the suffering that people are going through or for our being indifferent to that suffering. When you really understand the workings of karma, you see other people's suffering as an opportunity to help them. You don't know how much longer their karma for suffering is going to last. Wouldn't it be a good thing if

you could be the agent to help bring their suffering to an end? Put yourself in their place: Wouldn't you like to have somebody come and help? And someday you may actually be in their place too. After all, as the Buddha said, you've already been there before and if you don't get out of the cycle of rebirth, you'll probably be there again. Karma is not a teaching meant to make us feel superior to other people. You never know: Maybe the results of their past bad karma are simply coming faster than the results of your past bad karma, and you may someday be in a similar place to where they are – or even worse.

So you can't be complacent. And the teaching on karma is not designed to make you complacent. If anything, just the opposite: It's meant to make you uncomplacent. I once read someone saying that September 11th burst his complacent Buddhist bubble. Well, that's an oxymoron: "complacent Buddhist." The whole purpose in following the Dhamma is that it teaches you not to be complacent. As long as there's suffering in your heart, there's work to be done.

So, on the one hand, the principle of karma makes you heedful, reminding you that you've got work to do. But it also means that there's a way to work with suffering so that you can go beyond it: That's where the hope lies.

If you understand how to use the teaching on karma, you see how really useful it is, how relevant it is to the meditation we're doing right now. The prime factor you want to dig down and find in your meditation is just that: the karma, the factor of intention. Watch to see how it moves. See how you can make it more skillful. See how you can perfect that factor so that it takes you not only into more pleasant places in space and time, but also – when you get really skillful – outside of space and time, to the end of karma, to the point where there's no more work to be done.

That's one of the descriptions of an arahant: *katam karaniyam*, someone who's done the task, done what had to be done. The burden is laid down.

Understanding the principle of karma, and using it the right way, is what makes all that possible.