

Feeling & Intention

April 12, 2012

When the Buddha talks about goodwill, he uses two words to describe it. In one case, he talks about it as a type of right resolve. The word resolve here can also mean intention, a way of thinking that you set your mind on. In the second case, he talks about goodwill as a kind of mindfulness, something you determine to keep in mind.

In neither case is it a feeling. In other words, we're not asked necessarily to have feelings of warmth or love or even liking for other people. Goodwill is an intention we want to develop: that we're not going to do harm, and that we would like to see other people act in ways that are not harmful, either toward us, toward other people, or toward themselves. So it's perfectly normal that there are people out there that you don't like and yet you can still have intentions of goodwill for them. This is what the mindfulness is for: You keep in mind the principle that regardless of whether you like somebody or not, you will not act in ways that are harmful for them.

This is an important distinction, because many of us know that there are people out there we have grudges against, people we don't like, and we feel guilty because we don't like them. We feel somehow that we should feel love and warmth for them instead. One of the reasons for this misunderstanding is a mistranslation of the passage in the sutta we chanted just now that talks about caring for your sense of goodwill in the same way that a mother would care for her only child. Sometimes that's mistranslated as having a love for all beings in the same way that a mother would love her only child. But that's impossible. The love you have for your child is very different from the love you would have, say, for someone else in your family, and even more so for other people outside the family, or for people who've really wronged you, or people who've wronged those you love.

What the Buddha is actually saying here is that you want to look after your goodwill the same way that a mother would look after her only child. Meticulously. Thoroughly. Always keeping it in mind. Sacrificing your life for it, if it comes to that. You're trying to protect your intentions, because you know that your intentions are even more important than your physical survival. They shape your life now and can shape it far into the future. And as the Buddha often said, feelings are an unreliable guide to action. There are lots of things we like to do but either we don't know that they're going to give rise to harmful results, or else we know they're going to give rise to harmful results but we let our likes take over. Or there are things that we don't like to do, even though we know that they're going to give rise to good results. So you have to put the mind in a position where it's not going to let its likes or dislikes take charge.

A lot of that has to do with learning how to talk to yourself in the right way. And that's what right resolve is all about. The ability to talk to yourself skillfully can be strengthened by a different kind of feeling: not emotions, but feelings of pleasure. The mind doesn't operate totally on its understanding of things. Feelings of pleasure and pain do play a role in the way we act, the way we think. This is one of the reasons why we try to give rise to feelings of well-being within ourselves, through the breath, through the meditation: so that we can gain a sense of nourishment, a sense of inner contentment. That sense of inner contentment makes it a lot easier to look at things we have to look at but don't like to look at, or to do things we have to do that we ordinarily don't like to do, or to act in harmless and kind ways toward people we don't ordinarily like.

When the mind is feeling hungry, when it feels a lack of pleasure, it will look for pleasure anywhere. Sometimes it takes pleasure in getting revenge on others, or doing things that we know are really unskillful, or in pretending that those unskillful things are actually okay. The pleasure there is a pretty miserable pleasure.

It's like finding that you have a taste for rotten food. You're embarrassed about it, so you don't want anyone else seeing you eating it. You don't even want to admit to yourself that you like eating it. But then you go ahead and nibble on it in the dark. That's because

you don't have a greater sense of well-being inside, so you're really hungry for just about anything that you can think of.

This is one of the reasons why meditating on your breath—giving rise to a sense of fullness, rapture, pleasure—is a gift not only to yourself but also to other people, other beings. If you can create this sense of well-being inside, then even when you're dealing with someone you don't like, you don't feel the need or the hunger to get back at that person or to act on your feelings of dislike. You can see those feelings of dislike as something separate. They're part of the committee of the mind. But just because a committee has a few unskillful members doesn't mean that they have to take over. If you're nourishing the good members of the committee, the good members can get stronger and overrule the unskillful ones.

This comes under the Buddha's teachings on fabrication. There are three ways we fabricate our emotions, our intentions. One is through the way we breathe. And this is something we can have some control over. Try to breathe in a way that's comfortable. Breathe in a way that feels nourishing. Second, there's the way we talk to ourselves about things. For instance we try to keep in mind this mindfulness of goodwill, that we want to act on good intentions. We don't want to harm other beings. Even though there may be contrary desires in the mind that actually want to harm people, we can say No. We recognize those desires as something we don't want to identify with. And in talking to ourselves in the right way, we can give ourselves lots of good reasons for why acting on skillful intentions really is in our own best interest. It's a lot easier to convince yourself of that and to actually act on those understandings if you have that sense of well-being inside. This is why we start with the breath.

Third, there are perceptions and feelings. "Perception" here means the labels the mind uses, or the images it uses, when you're thinking about a particular issue. You can practice with this in your concentration. You learn how to perceive the breath, to picture it to yourself, in different ways. This is something that's very intimate. Just the way you picture the breathing to yourself can have a huge impact on how you actually feel the breath. And this will have an impact on the mind.

If you can put aside your image of the breath as just the air coming in and out of the lungs and think of it more as an energy that suffuses the body, then when the breath comes in, it doesn't have to fight against the sensations that are already there in the body. Think of it as energizing them, blending with them. That's a different perception. Hold that in mind and see what it does to the way you feel the breath and the sense of pleasure or well-being that arises.

When you practice with the breath, you're practicing with these different kinds of fabrication so you can gain a sense of confidence that you can change them if you want. You practice with good fabrications so that when unskillful fabrications come into the mind you realize that you don't have to take them as your real feelings or your real thoughts on the matter. You can see them as something that's been fabricated in reaction to other people's actions, your own feelings, the things you've done in the past. And if you see that they're unskillful, you're in a position to say, "Let's change it. Let's change the perception, change the way we breathe for the time being, so that we can feel less threatened by this situation." You can change the way you perceive it, change the way you think about it.

And you remember this mindfulness of goodwill: the principle that you don't want to harm yourself, you don't want to harm others. This is important. All too often we view our emotions as something real, as a message from deep inside that this is what we really believe or how we really feel about something. But when you understand that all emotions are fabricated, either through past actions or present actions, you have the freedom not to identify with them. You have the freedom to fabricate or to shape the present in a new way. That's a very useful freedom.

To get the most out of it, we use the Buddha's teachings on the noble eightfold path, particularly right resolve, as our guide. We resolve on goodwill, the principle that we don't want to harm anybody. Even though there are members of the committee that seem intent on harming others or in some sense harming ourselves, we want to strengthen the better

members of the committee so that they can win out, so that the choices we do make are skillful, and our original intention to be harmless gets actualized in our thoughts, words, and deeds.

We develop concentration in order to strengthen that resolve and to make it easier to maintain that mindfulness and have it be effective whenever the committee is running all over the place, pulling in different directions. You want to strengthen that mindfulness and that resolve so that they win out more and more consistently. When they finally take over the whole committee, there's no more internal strife.