

Goodwill as Restraint

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There's a passage where the Buddha talks about the development of goodwill— and by implication all the other sublime attitudes—as a form of restraint. We don't usually think about goodwill in those terms. We think of it more as an opening of the heart, letting all its natural goodness come pouring out. But then, of course, the Buddha never said anything about natural goodness. He said the mind is very changeable. It's capable of all kinds of things and it can change so quickly that even saying, "in the flash of an eye" is too slow.

So what are we restraining as we develop goodwill? Basically, if we have thoughts of ill-will in the mind, they're going to come out in our actions. And so, instead of just holding the ill-will as you try to prevent it from coming out in your actions, you try to nip it in the bud. You're sitting here and things come up in your mind about something that someone did, or someone else said, and it gets you really worked up. You need a way to restrain yourself. And that's what goodwill is for.

Similarly, the idea of wanting to do harm to somebody comes up. You need compassion—again, both for yourself and for the other person. Resentment comes up for somebody's good fortune. You feel they got something that you should have had, or you see that they've got some position that you don't think they deserve. Well, develop empathetic joy. If any aversion comes up for anybody, the Buddha says to develop equanimity.

They're all very interesting pairings: especially the equanimity for aversion. We're usually told that goodwill is the antidote for anger. But sometimes there are cases where someone has done something and it's really hard to feel goodwill for them. But at the very least you can say, "Okay, I'm just not going to get involved for the time being." And remember that everybody has their own karma.

But there's another kind of restraint as well. And that has to do with remembering that you've done wrong to somebody and you want to resolve not to do it again. This is where the Buddha again recommends developing all the brahmaviharas as a way of maintaining that vow you've made to restrain yourself from making that same mistake in the future.

When you've wronged somebody else, it's very easy to start thinking that you're a really bad person, and that gets you down. And then, to get out of that mood, you start telling yourself, "Well, maybe the other person deserved what I did." But you don't want to think in that way, either. You have to develop goodwill for both sides.

Goodwill for yourself means what? Thinking about what genuine happiness comes from and what you need to do in order to find it. And making the resolve that you really do want to find that happiness.

Goodwill for other people, of course, means that you don't want to harm them and you

don't want to get them to do harm, either. Of course, they'll have their own free will to make choices, but to whatever extent you can have an influence, you want to make that influence good.

And remember that the goodwill is there for *you*. Even though you're directing it to somebody else, it's for the sake of your own skillfulness. Because as you train the mind, there are going to be a lot of things you're going to have to give up: habits you've developed over the years—ways of thinking, way of speaking, ways of acting. You've got to exercise more restraint over them.

One of the reflections that the Buddha has the monks think of every day is, "Now that I've changed my status, I have to change my way of acting." You look around, you see how the other monks are behaving and you ask yourself, "Is that the way I behave? Do I still have some rough edges that I need to polish off, file down?"

And you learn to do this in a way where you don't feel like you have to hold yourself in and explode. You want to get to the root—i.e., your attitude, which is that you want true happiness, and true happiness makes a lot of demands. It's not that we just simply follow our own habitual nature and everything's going to be fine. There are a lot of areas where the practice requires that we *not* follow our habits, that we not follow our strong urges.

You can't think that the mind is naturally good and so therefore you can trust everything that comes out. The mind has all kinds of potentials inside. Just because something feels natural or normal doesn't mean that it's going to be good for you. It's just what you've been accustoming yourself to.

So whatever you have to give up, try to do it with an attitude of goodwill. Have some good humor about it as well. Learn to see the bad side of the habits you're having to abandon so you don't feel like you're giving up anything essential or anything that you think you really would like to hold onto.

After all, happiness is not an easy thing. There are very quick pleasures you can get and they're very easy, but they usually turn into something else—and pleasures that turn are like milk that turns. They don't turn into anything good. But genuine happiness is something else. It lasts. It doesn't turn. But it requires training.

After all, goodwill is a form of concentration, and that requires restraint. You don't let your mind wander off into other areas. If you do find some ill-will creeping in, or the desire to do harm, or to see somebody being harmed, or resentment or aversion, you've got to look into it for the purpose of training yourself out of it. You don't just spread thoughts of "May all beings be happy, happy, happy, happy!" That may work for a few minutes but it doesn't really get to the problem, which is that you're holding onto some sort of attitude which is related to wrong view.

And thinking that someone deserves to suffer is not a right view of any kind at all. The whole purpose of the teaching is that people are suffering but they don't have to suffer. In other

words, the Buddha's saying they don't deserve to suffer. Even though they've done bad in the past, that doesn't mean that they deserve to suffer. Even if you've done bad things in the past, you don't deserve to suffer. Everybody can change their ways.

This is one of the basic propositions that the Buddha worked on. If people couldn't change their ways, he said there would be no need to teach them, no reason to teach them. But people can. They can learn to be more skillful, drop unskillful things.

And so that's the attitude you should have toward everybody. If they're doing something really unskillful, make the wish, "May they learn how to stop that." And if you're in a position to have any influence over that person, try to use it skillfully. If not, you just pose that thought in the mind as a foundational attitude. Because the fact that the mind changes so easily means that you can't really trust it until you've reached at least the first level of awakening. It can always turn around very quickly.

So you've got to do whatever you can to make sure that you can really trust yourself. And one of the ways of doing that is by developing the restraint that comes with goodwill. You're not going to go into thoughts of ill will. Or if thoughts of ill will come up, you're going to deal with them, try to root them out—because if you let any ill will linger in your mind, it might come out in ways that you might not anticipate. It comes out in times of weakness, times when you're feeling threatened. It comes out in times of fear.

You've got to learn how to defend yourself from unskillful behavior that would come at any of those times, so that even when you're feeling weak and threatened and fearful, you hold onto the principle, "I want genuine happiness"—which may require some sacrifices.

And number one is that you have to sacrifice anything unskillful you might do to get out of a difficult situation. There are some difficult situations you have to learn how to accept because you can't think of any skillful way out. In cases like that, you have to put up with the difficulty. You need to honor the principle of skillfulness more than your dislike of difficulty. That's a form of restraint that's hard but it's really important.

One of the reasons the precepts are so simple is that when they're simple, they're easy to keep in mind. If they were very complex, your tendency to make excuses for yourself would slip into the folds of the complexity. You'd have to consult scholars at times when you don't have time to consult scholars—when danger is staring you in the face and you've got to make a decision right here, right now.

So you simply keep remembering, "I'm not going to do anything that's going to harm myself and I'm not going to do anything that harms others." And it's interesting: From the Buddha's point of view, harming yourself means engaging in things like killing, stealing, having illicit sex, breaking any of the precepts. Harming others is getting *them* to do those things. In other words, you treat people not simply as objects of your actions. They're agents, too. They have free will, too. So you don't want to influence their choices in a bad way because that's what's going to create suffering for them down the line.

All this is very basic, but it's good to remember the basics every now and then, because it's very easy to cover up the basics with lots of rhetoric. Fancy words can sound very high and very noble. They can justify war, justify stealing, justify illicit sex. The mind can create excuses for all kinds of behavior and make it sound very advanced and compassionate and very spiritual. But it's not.

Keep the basics in mind and try to keep your mind at a basic level. That way, it's hard to go wrong.

So we don't pretend that we're all innately good or that we're all One. Each of us has an element of free will that we have to respect. And each of us can do all kinds of things. In that possibility, you can see both danger and a potential, a potential for good. But to develop the potential for good, we have to keep the mind's potential to endanger itself in line.

So we develop goodwill as a type of restraint. It gets the mind thinking in the right terms: in terms of the causes and effects of happiness.

As for the case of resentment—in other words, the attitude that empathetic joy is supposed to overcome—developing empathetic joy teaches us there's nothing in the world worth resenting. We shouldn't see other people's good fortune as making anything less of us. We're not here to compete. We're here to work on our own unskillful habits and develop whatever skillful qualities we can. So resentment doesn't make any sense at all.

When you can think in those terms you can trust yourself a lot more.