

Goodwill & Kamma

April 1, 2012

As we meditate, we're engaging in good kamma. Of all the possible things we could be doing right now, we're choosing to develop good qualities in the mind, skillful qualities in the mind: mindfulness, alertness, ardency, concentration, discernment. The simple choice to do this is good kamma, and as you maintain the choice, maintain that intention, that's good kamma as well.

The Buddha talks about two kinds of good kamma. One is the kamma that leads to a good course through samsara—or, because samsara is not a place, it would be a more correct to say that it leads to good samsara-ing. The other kind of good kamma is the kamma that leads out, that leads to the end of kamma.

A lot of people don't like to think about kamma. It sounds too mechanistic, too deterministic—or that's the way it seems. A lot of that kind of thinking comes from the fact that many of us don't really understand what the Buddha taught about kamma. It's not that kamma is a machine that metes out just desserts, as if your goodness, or lack of goodness could be measured in precise terms. That's not the case.

Some of the images that the Buddha uses for kamma have nothing to do with mechanistic things at all. Kamma is like a stream of water with many currents. It's like a field with many seeds. You've got lots of actions in the past, some of which have already sprouted, some of which are about to sprout, some of which are sprouting right now. And a lot of that sprouting has to do with where you pay attention, where your interest is: That's what waters the seeds. This gives you an element of choice right now. The ways the seeds sprout also has to do with the quality of mind you're bringing to the present moment. The Buddha talks about having a narrow mind or having an expansive mind. If your mind is narrow, your goodwill is narrow, your compassion is narrow, your empathetic joy is narrow, your equanimity is narrow. Your ability to deal with pain and not be overcome by it, your ability to deal with pleasure and not be overcome by it: Those are narrow as well. And as a result, any little act of bad kamma from the past, when it yields its results, is going to seem huge.

It's like someone who has very little money and suddenly has a debt. If you can't pay the debt, you get thrown into prison. On the other hand, if your mind is expansive, if your goodwill is expansive and measureless, your compassion is measureless, your empathetic joy is measureless, or your equanimity is measureless; if you're able to face pain and pleasure and not be overcome by them, then your mind is expansive. It's like having a huge fund of money. If you had suddenly to pay that same debt, you'd be able to pay it with no problem, and have much left over, a whole lot left over. You'd hardly notice the debt payment at all.

So there's no question of a precise meting out of good and bad situations. It's a much more fluid process. And there's no sense of people "deserving" to suffer. There's a common view that each of us has a single karmic account, and what we see right now is the running balance. That's a very simplistic idea. It leads people to think that if you see somebody suffering now they must deserve to be suffering, so you leave them—which is hard-hearted, and certainly not what the Buddha taught. Each of us has lots of seeds, and when someone's suffering now, you don't know what other seeds they have in their field. And as for you, you don't know what other seeds you have in *your* field, either.

So the best thing to do is to develop compassion, for yourself and for the people around you. Take that word "deserve" and throw it away—unless you use it in the sense that everybody deserves compassion. Everybody deserves goodwill, empathetic joy. But again, it's not so much what they deserve, it's: What do you want to do with your life? How are you going to shape your experience? How do you want to shape the world around you? Give your goodwill as a gift, your compassion as a gift to others and to yourself. That's a good way of shaping things.

It's not the sort of gift where you expect something in return. I was reading about an Inuit hunter in Greenland. A European who was doing some walrus hunting on the coast of Greenland came back empty-handed. He had nothing to eat, nothing to take home. And this Inuit hunter happened to have had a very good hunt that day so he brought in hundreds of pounds of meat for the European. The European thanked him profusely, but the Inuit hunter said, "Don't thank me. I'm not doing this as a gift. This is something people just have to do for one another."

That's the attitude you should have for your goodwill. This is something you just have to do. This is part of being a human being: goodwill for yourself, goodwill for others. And try to make it as expansive as possible, as all-inclusive as you can. If you see people who are wealthy, enjoying power and all sorts of sensual pleasures, the Buddha said not to be jealous: You've been there before. If you see people who are suffering horrible diseases, poverty, discrimination of all kinds, don't look down on them: You've been there before.

What this means is that we should have compassion for one another, for our own good, as well as for their good. It's the kind of compassion that doesn't demand thanks. It's just the right thing to do.

This is one of the reasons why we begin each meditation session with thoughts of goodwill for ourselves and for all beings, to learn how to be comfortable with those thoughts, because those are the right thoughts for human beings to think.

And then we work on this business of learning how not to be overcome by pleasure, not to be overcome by pain. With the pain, this means learning how to deal with whatever pains come up in the body right now as you're sitting here. If there's pain in your back, pain in your hips, pain in your legs, how can you learn how not to focus on it? If you find that focusing on it

actually makes it worse, you've got to stay away from it for a while. If you find that focusing on it helps you understand the process of pain, then focus on it.

Take a proactive attitude toward the pain. Don't just sit there complaining about it. Try to develop a sense of well-being some place in the body, some place in the mind, so that you can use that as your standpoint. In the beginning, this may mean focusing on a different part of the body until you feel secure there. You're able to stay there and not get entangled in the pain. In other words, even though the pain seems to be calling your name—"Look, look, look here"—you learn to ignore it until you're ready to deal with it. Then you can turn around and probe in, to see: Where is the pain worst? You find that it keeps moving on you. It's like mercury. Try to pin it down with your finger, and the more you try to pin it down, the more it scoots away.

Of course, nowadays they don't let you play with mercury, but you can play with your pain. And if you can have the attitude of playing with it, that puts you on a higher level. You're exploring. You're trying to understand it. And as long as you don't think of yourself as being victimized by it, then you can learn about it—and learn *from* it—and the level of suffering goes way down. You're not overcome by the pain.

Similarly with pleasure. A little bit of pleasure comes up in the meditation and we tend to wallow in it and then we lose our focus. It's interesting that when the Buddha talks about how the steps of breath meditation develop feelings as a frame of reference, he classifies attention to in-and-out breaths as a kind of feeling. It's a strange statement, because usually we don't think of attention as a feeling. But he's pointing out two things. One is that every feeling we have has an intentional element, just like every sense of our form of our body contains an intentional element. Every perception, every fabrication, even plain old consciousness contains an intentional element. Something is fabricated out of a potential, coming from past kamma, and turns into an actuality. Just like the issue of past kamma in general: What you focus on is going to become the actual kammic result you experience.

And so it's the intention there that's important, the intention to pay attention to the breath continuously, that keeps that feeling going.

Two, the Buddha's also reminding you that you don't switch your attention away from the breath to focus in on the feeling. If you do, everything gets very blurred. Either you lose your concentration or you goes into what Ajaan Lee calls delusion concentration, where everything is pleasant but there's very little definition of any kind at all. And you come out wondering, "Well, where was I just now? Was I awake? Was I asleep?" You weren't asleep, but you're at a loss to say where you actually were.

The best thing to do when pleasure comes up is to not get distracted by it. You keep your attention with the breath. The pleasure will have its good effect on the body, if there's rapture that will have its good effect on the body, without your having to squeeze as much intensity out of the pleasure or rapture as possible.

In fact, the more you just let it happen, let it be, as you stay focused on the breath, the more it's going to be healing for the body and the mind.

So these are the ways in which you develop that enlarged mind, that expansive mind, that wealthy mind that's not appreciably diminished by any little debts that you may have from your past kamma. The question of deserving or not deserving the happiness gets thrown out the window. It's not a matter of deserving, it's a matter of skill. And you can develop the skill, if you want.

We often think of kamma as something very diametrically opposed to goodwill. How can people be happy if they've got bad kamma and deserve to suffer?—that's what we think, but that's not what the Buddha taught. The teachings on kamma and goodwill go together. You realize the difference between suffering and non-suffering is a matter, not of past kamma, but of present kamma: your skill in the present moment. The same principle applies to other people as well.

And as for the potentials coming from their past, you can't see them, but you can see your own. If you sense that something is potentially skillful, focus in on that. And try to develop it as much as you can. That way you're planting more good seeds.

You're the one who decides how much you have to suffer. So it only makes sense that you decide not to suffer. And the meditation is what makes that decision a reality.