

Goodwill in Action

December 1, 2014

When the Buddha talks about people who harm themselves or harm others, he says basically that the people who harm themselves are the ones who break the precepts. The people who harm others are the ones who get *them* to break precepts. It's interesting: in killing, stealing, we normally think that the harm goes to the other person, but the Buddha says, No, you're harming yourself.

He always thinks of people not so much as recipients of past karma but as active agents doing karma now in the present and on into the future. He gives everybody the dignity of having freedom of choice.

It's good to keep that principle in mind when you're spreading thoughts of goodwill. When you're spreading goodwill for yourself, it's basically a wish that you will act skillfully. When you're spreading goodwill to others, it's a wish that *they* will act skillfully.

Thinking in that way makes it a lot easier to develop goodwill. If you think of goodwill as lovingkindness and you're there like the mother protecting her only child, as some people believe that passage in the Karaniya Metta Sutta says, it becomes pretty oppressive—and very inflated. How are you going to go running around protecting everybody the way a mother would protect her child? It's hard enough to protect one child, much less all beings. But actually, the Buddha's saying in that passage that you've got to protect your *goodwill*, both for yourself and for others, as a mother would protect her child. That's something you can actually do.

As for protecting others, you can't really protect them from themselves. You can hope to be a good influence on them, but you have to remember that everybody has his or her own freedom of choice, which is why metta has to be balanced with upekkha, equanimity: realizing that you can have only so much influence on other people, but you want whatever the influence you have on others to be as beneficial as possible.

So we start by developing metta for ourselves. It's good to reflect on ways in which we're behaving unskillfully so that we can change them. If you really seriously want to be happy, do you want to continue acting the way you are? Or is there anything you want to change?

This means that metta is not an idle thought. It's a motivator, but also a reality check. Are your actions in line with the statement, "May I be happy"? What kind of thoughts do you indulge in? What kind of words do you indulge in? What kinds of actions do you indulge in that are actually going to prevent happiness? How about changing them?

This means that metta is not a thought of cotton-candy spread around the world. It's a

measuring stick: Are you really serious about happiness? If so, look at your actions, look at your words, look at your thoughts. What needs changing?

Now when you spread goodwill to others, you think about what other people are doing around you: To what extent could you actually have a good influence on them? Of course, the best way to be a good influence is to set a good example. But sometimes there are other ways that you can actually be of help.

This takes metta out of the realm of the airy-fairy and puts it in a very real and practical context. It's the motivation for the practice. It's reminding ourselves that there are ways in which our practice has an impact, not only on ourselves but also on other people. You want that impact to be good.

Think about the Buddha's teachings to Gotami, about how to test what's true Dhamma and what's not. That's a good way of checking if you really do have metta when you're influencing other people. One, are you unburdensome? Are you placing burdens on other people that you really don't have to? Two, are you modest? Are you trying to show off? Three, do you avoid unnecessary entanglements so people can have time and space to practice? Or are you trying to get involved as much as you can?

These are ways in which your practice can actually have a bad effect on others. And of course that means it's going to have a bad effect on you.

As for the more internal things, the test is: Do you give in to laziness or are you more active in putting more effort into the practice? Do you stop meditating in the evening as quickly as possible or do you try to push your limits a little bit further than normal?

Another test is: Are you content with what you've got?

This is a good time of year for practicing. Back in Thailand every year during my first three years as a monk, I would have to go back to Wat Asokaram around this time of year for the Dhamma exams, and it was my favorite time to be there. During the Rains retreat they'd have more than a hundred monks and more than two hundred nuns, many of them coming up for the evening sit, and it was pretty crowded. Then at the end of the Rains retreat, the temporary monks would disrobe, and many of the other monks would head off into the forest or other parts of the country. And in a sala that used to have well over a hundred fifty people, all of a sudden there were maybe twenty. And it was nice to have that extra space. So this is a time of year where we have that space here as well. There's a lot to be content about in terms of your surroundings.

The third internal test is: Are you holding on to anything that it would be better to let go? This refers to the principle of shedding as opposed to accumulating. Shedding here mainly applies first to shedding your pride about things that are not really related to the practice. And even if the pride is related to the practice, you want to make sure that it's not the kind of pride

where you're comparing yourself to other people. Just compare yourself with yourself: where you are now as opposed to where you used to be. So go ahead and have a bit of pride about the fact that you are getting better at the meditation. The Buddha doesn't criticize that kind of pride, but watch out for that pride when it grows teeth and starts biting other people.

The second kind of shedding is shedding old grudges, shedding all the baggage in your mind. If you really have goodwill for yourself, you can sort through your mind in the same way you'd sort through an old attic. Finding all this old stuff, part of you has nostalgic attachment and the other part of you realizes that you're cluttering up the place. If you suddenly had to move, you'd be a lot better off if you just let go, get rid of the stuff. Well, it's the same with your mind.

As the Buddha said, you have to realize you could go at any time. Ajaan Lee has a nice analogy. He says dying is like migrating to another country, and if you suddenly had to go, how much good baggage would you be able to take with you and how much clutter would you take that would weigh you down? If you find anything in the mind that's going to weigh you down, visualize it as piles of luggage under your arms, on your shoulders, on your head. Do you want to go that way or do you want to go light? So look into your mind. What can you let go of?

This is where forgiveness for yourself and for other people comes in as a good way of shedding. Think of that story of the prince who was able to overcome his desire for revenge. His parents had been executed, and he had the chance to kill the king who was responsible for their execution, and yet he chose not to. Compare your little grudges with his grudge, and how difficult it must have been for him to put that down. Well, he could do it. Take that as an example.

Then finally there are the teachings that have to do with the goal of the practice. To what extent are you still fettered by things, to what extent are you passionate about things that would lay you low, weigh you down? How can you analyze those things in order to get past them? How can you use your powers of concentration to pull the mind back from them?

As the Buddha said, the quality of tranquility is what can cut through passion: your ability to stay calm in the face of all kinds of things that used to provoke you. Can you develop that quality? That's a good way of showing goodwill for yourself. You keep yourself safe. Insight cuts through the ignorance that would make you go back to that passion. When that ignorance is gone, you're really safe.

When you can cut through passion and ignorance, then you can be a good example to others. If you have practice in figuring out how to do these things, then you can offer advice to others and give the greatest gift, which is the highest goodwill for others: in other words, the ability to offer very really relevant and useful advice for people who want to hear it. Even the Buddha, remember, taught only those who were fit to be tamed. A lot of people living at his

time weren't interested in his teachings at all. So in the same way, there will be some people who will be sensitive to your example, sensitive to your words, and there'll be a lot of people who won't. But you don't let the second group deter you.

You start out telling yourself that—at least inside yourself, in terms of the areas where you really are responsible, i.e., your own thoughts, words and deeds—you're going to practice this principle of goodwill. You're going to create the causes for happiness, not letting the causes of unhappiness have a hold on the mind. That's your primary focus.

Your ability to influence other people depends on a lot on other factors beyond your control. But there will be times when you can have a good influence, so let that thought keep you going. Make sure that your metta in terms of seeing yourself as an agent with free choice, and seeing other people as agents with free choice, is something that you can use for the betterment of everybody you can affect.