

Skillful Goodwill

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Why do we meditate? We meditate because we have goodwill for ourselves and goodwill for others. This is one of the reasons why we start the meditation with thoughts of goodwill, to remind us of our motivation.

Goodwill is a wish for happiness, true happiness: a happiness that doesn't change, a happiness that doesn't harm anybody. A happiness like that is hard to find in the world.

The Buddha said there are basically three ways of finding happiness that are harmless: generosity, virtue, and meditation. And even with all three of those, you have to be very careful. It is possible sometimes to be generous in a way that harms yourself or harms others. There are ways of observing the precepts that can be harmful if you're not careful. And there are ways of going off-track with the meditation, so you have to be *very* careful.

This is why simply goodwill on its own is not enough. It's the start but then you have to add heedfulness: a realization that our actions have results and they're not always the way we think they will be or the way we want them to be.

So we have to be very careful as we practice generosity, as we practice the precepts, as we meditate: to see what we're actually doing and the actual results that we're getting.

In this way, goodwill may be the start but it's not everything. You have to watch carefully: What do you think you're going to gain from your actions? What results do you think you'll gain? And then if you see that anything you anticipate is harmful, you don't do it.

While you're doing it, you check to make sure that you're not causing any unexpected or unanticipated harm. If you see that you are, then you just stop what you're doing, backtrack, try to figure out a better way of doing it.

Once you're done, you have to check the long-term results as well. Because sometimes your actions show results immediately and sometimes it takes a while for them to show.

It's in this way that we learn to overcome our delusion so that our goodwill becomes more than just goodwill. It becomes a skillful activity: not just a good intention but a skillful intention.

As we learn from our mistakes, we get more and more careful about how we do things. It's in this way that the meditation develops and our sense of what it means to be truly happy is going to develop as well, as we get more and more sensitive to

the little ways in which our actions can cause suffering that we otherwise tend to overlook.

Meditation is a good way of developing the power to see these things clearly because you've got the mind more and more still. You stay with the breath coming in; you stay with the breath going out. Try to adjust the breath so that it feels good all the way in, all the way out, so that the mind will be more and more likely to stay here.

When it's more still like this, there's a sense of peace and quiet that can detect subtle things more and more precisely. That's when you get more and more sensitive to what your actions really are causing, what results they're leading to. Then you can adjust them even further.

So we try to take our good intentions and turn them into skillful intentions through the way we practice generosity, virtue, and meditation. They require being very, very observant both of what you're doing and of the results.

So try to keep your attention focused here. This is another reason why we stay with the breath: The breath is our anchor in the present moment. When an intention comes up in the present moment, we're right here to catch it.

If we don't catch our intentions in time, then we have trouble searching back and figuring out, "Why do I do that?" But if you see it while it's happening, you're in a much better position to notice if it's unskillful and you can change.

So try to stay anchored with the breath even as you go through the day, not just while you're sitting here with the eyes closed—because the choices that you have to make during the day can come up at any time, not just while you're sitting here.

You want to be on top of things and turn your good intentions into skillful intentions each time you act.