

Goodwill All Around

November 2, 2006

Every evening before the meditation, we chant the four brahmaviharas. Actually just chant the words that are meant to be conducive to these sublime attitudes. And they are meant to remind you that it's good to actually cultivate these attitudes as part of your practice. They are the context for what we're doing, thoughts of goodwill. If the Buddha's teachings weren't based on a motive for goodwill, he wouldn't have focused on the issue of suffering, the issue of stress. He wouldn't have focused on the question of how to put an end to suffering and stress as the primary point of the Dharma. So we have to assume that that was the underlying motive, both for his teaching and for the practice of his teachings. That's what we are doing right now, we are looking for an end of suffering, trying to find a true happiness.

So cultivate that attitude. May I be happy. May I be truly happy, with the emphasis on the truly because that places some demands. Ordinary happiness, the pleasures that come from eating and sleeping and having fun aren't all that hard. There is no need to sit for a whole hour, and put up with the pains and other difficulties in meditation if all you want is a quick fix, if a quick fix is good enough. But it's not, because a happiness that turns into something else doesn't turn into happiness. It turns into regret, remorse, actual pain. So we want a happiness that's true, a happiness that lasts.

But think about it. You are not the only one who wants happiness. The people around you want happiness too. If your happiness were to depend on their misery, there's no way they would allow it to keep going. This is why oppressive people have to hire bodyguards, have to have special security forces to protect a very fragile oppressive happiness. And it can never last. So you want a happiness that doesn't take anything away from anyone else, doesn't cause anyone any suffering or harm. And that requires that you look inside. And to keep you looking inside, it's good to remind yourself that you do wish happiness for other beings, other people, because your happiness depends on at the very least you're not causing them any harm. And the world would be a much better place, a lot easier to find happiness, if everybody were looking for true happiness inside.

And so the Buddha advocates spreading thoughts of goodwill in all directions. As they say in the text, first direction, in other words, the east; the second, third, fourth: south, west, north; above and below and all around. Let your thoughts of goodwill go out in all directions, radiating. The image they give in the texts is of a hornblower, you blow the conch horn (there was a conch shell that they used as a horn). And the sound goes in all directions. It doesn't choose just the east or just the west, goes everywhere. In other words, your thoughts of goodwill should extend not just to your tribe or to your group, but to everybody regardless. Not only human beings, all kinds of beings. Beings you know about, beings you don't know about. Try to make your wish for happiness all-inclusive.

The Buddha recommends this as an attitude to develop as a context for the practice. Because one of the big problems we run across in our meditation is thoughts of greed, anger and delusion. And one way to overcome them, or at

least to keep them in check, is to remind yourself you've already wished happiness to these other beings. So why do you want to be greedy for their things? Why do you want to get angry at them? Why do you wish them ill? How can you let yourself be deluded as to what's going to be skillful and what's not if you really want to be happy? In other words, you've got to take the issue of happiness seriously. Most people, you'd think they would take happiness seriously, it's something everybody wants. But if you look at the way people go about trying to find happiness, they don't really think about it. They don't reflect on where true happiness would lie, how it could be brought about. They just go for the quick fix.

So thoughts of goodwill are meant to prevent you from going for that quick fix, remembering that your actions do have results and you want to make sure those results are not harmful. If you run across anyone who you have trouble thinking thoughts of goodwill for, ask yourself why? How would you benefit from their misery? How would there be any benefit from their misery at all? Why are you stingy with your thoughts of goodwill? In other words, the development of goodwill is not meant to be nonreflective, spreading thoughts of cotton candy out in all directions to smother your true feelings about people. They are meant to bring up the issue, is there anybody out there whom you don't feel goodwill for? And if so, why? Then you have to think about it, you have to reflect on it until you realize there's no reason that you would benefit in any way from their suffering.

So this provides the context. Then from goodwill there are the other three attitudes. Compassion, in other words, when you see someone suffering you wish them freedom from that suffering. When you see someone who is happy, you appreciate the fact that they are happy. You don't get resentful, you don't get jealous. Those are natural outgrowths of good will. And then there's equanimity. Because there are going to be cases where you wish for people's happiness, and they're not happy. You try to show compassion for them, and they can't gain freedom, they suffer. Other people who are happy, but then they use that happiness to abuse other people and there is nothing you can do about it. That's why you've got to develop equanimity. Without equanimity goodwill can be a cause for suffering in and of itself.

So that's when you have to reflect: all beings are the owners of their actions. Some people have karma that's going to force them to suffer for awhile, or at least have bad circumstances. The issue of how they respond to those bad circumstances, that's something they can do something about, perhaps in that way you can help them. In other words, our experience is not totally shaped by past actions, it's also shaped by our present intentions. This applies to other people, applies to you too. There are going to be times when you are in difficult circumstances and you've got to be careful about your intentions, how you respond to those difficulties. There are going to be times when you're in really good circumstances, and again you have to be careful. You can't let yourself be heedless. Other times people, when things are going well—they are wealthy and in a good mood—then they tend to get sloppy, complacent, and that's a cause for suffering right there.

So equanimity is there to remind you, there is this principle of karma that places limitations on what you can do for other people, what you can do for yourself. The purpose of that reflection is to remind you to focus on the things

where you can make a difference. Sometimes given the situation, all you can do is just work on how you're reacting to bad circumstances. This is why we have to train the mind. This is how the brahmaviharas lead us into the development of mindfulness and alertness.

There is a passage where they talk about how the brahmaviharas lead to awakening. It's the brahmaviharas imbued with the seven factors for awakening. And the first of those is mindfulness, the ability to keep something in mind. In this case keeping your basic attitudes, your basic attitude of goodwill in mind. And your knowledge of the principle of action, principle of intention—that you've got to be careful about what you will, what you do, what you say, what you think—got to keep that fact in mind. And then train the mind so it's more and more careful all the time, more mindful all the time. This is why we use the breath or use the word *buddho*, or 32 parts of the body, whatever object we find is easy to keep in mind as a way of getting the mind to settle down. Once the mind settles down, it can see things a lot more clearly. And that's how it can be more careful in what it chooses to do.

This is how the four brahmaviharas or the four sublime attitudes bring us right here. You've got work to do. You've got this mind that keeps churning out intentions, so we've got to be very careful about what those intentions are, which ones we choose to follow, which ones we choose to let go. We've got to keep that in mind. It requires mindfulness, requires alertness. We've got to work on these qualities, we've got to exercise them. This is why we are sitting here meditating. These are qualities that need strengthening, they need to be made more and more consistent, more lasting.

So as you work with the breath, try to be as quick as possible in noticing when the mind slips off the breath. As soon as you sense that it's slipping, then bring it right back. This is the work of the meditation. This is how mindfulness and alertness are exercised, and with exercise they get stronger just like the body. If you exercise it the right way, if you feed it the right way, you can keep the body in relatively good shape so that it can do what you want it to do. Same with the mind. You feed the mind with these thoughts of goodwill, thoughts of the sublime attitudes and you exercise its mindfulness and alertness. Try to develop its concentration in that way, to develop its discernment into what's going on in the mind: what you choose to do, what you choose not to do. And you gain insight also into this whole question of what does it mean to intend, what is an intention, what is this karma we are doing all the time?

Once you see that clearly, then you are in a much better position to act on that basic motivation for goodwill. You can get the mind to do what you want it to do, and it's strong enough to do what you want it to do. You've got that desire for true happiness. For true happiness you need a well trained mind, a mind that's not afraid to comprehend suffering, let go of its cause, develop the factors of the path, so it can realize the end of suffering. Otherwise even though we all desire happiness, we just keep creating more and more suffering, which is the big irony of life. But it's possible to train the mind. So keep at it. Keep remembering your intention, try to maintain that intention and try to develop the skills that are needed to keep acting on that intention. So you can test whether the Buddha is right: there is an end to suffering, and it can be attained through human effort.