

Metta

February 18, 2014

It's good to start and end our meditation with thoughts of goodwill.

At the start, as Ajaan Suwat once said, it's basically for us. We're trying to get the mind into concentration. Ill-will is one of the hindrances that keeps us out of concentration, so we want to do a little heading off at the pass. This is so that thoughts of ill-will don't come up in the course of the meditation, or if they do, we can remember the goodwill we've been spreading to ourselves and all beings. It helps put the mind in a good mood. We don't wish any ill on anybody.

As for whether people actually *will* be truly happy, that's going to depend on them. Thoughts of goodwill are not a prayer and they're not a magic spell. As the Buddha once said, if prayer worked, there wouldn't be any poor or ugly or short-lived people in the world.

And it's not that we're spreading goodwill to people because they deserve it or don't deserve it. The question of deserving doesn't enter into the issue at all. It's for our own sake, not only in terms of the concentration but also in terms of the practice of the precepts. We don't want to harm anyone, so we have to consciously develop thoughts of goodwill, even for people who have harmed those whom we love or who have helped people we don't like. We can't let our likes or dislikes determine our actions, because it's very easy for them to lead to a lot of unskillful actions.

This is one of the reasons why it's important to understand goodwill. *Metta* isn't love. As the Buddha pointed out, love—*pema* in Pali—tends to create divisions. If you love somebody and someone else does something nasty to them, it's very hard to love that person. Or if there's someone you've seen doing a lot of evil, and there are people helping that person, it's hard to love them. So love creates divisions, which we don't want. We want an attitude that whoever, regardless, wherever, regardless, when we're dealing with other people, dealing with ourselves, we want to have an attitude of goodwill: "May this person be happy. May we all be happy."

What kind of happiness are we talking about here? Any kind of happiness that comes from skillful actions. The attitude of goodwill is called *metta-cittena*. The word *citta* in *cittena* can mean either heart or mind—it actually means both. The Buddha's teachings don't make a clear division between your thoughts and your emotions. You're trying to develop both, which means you want your thoughts to be motivated by goodwill and you want your goodwill to have some

understanding. Part of that is realizing that other people are actually going to be happy depending on their actions. That means that you can wish goodwill for them, but that doesn't necessarily mean they're going to be happy as a result of your wishes. You want to be careful about your actions so that you don't actively cause suffering or harm to others.

This is why goodwill is coupled with those other brahmaviharas: compassion, empathetic joy, and equanimity.

Compassion is what goodwill feels on seeing people who are suffering, or who are doing actions that would cause suffering. Notice one of those phrases in the chant just now: "May no beings despise anybody. May no beings harm anybody." In other words, we don't want anybody to act in ways that will cause harm, harming others by their actions right now or on into the future. So it's not just, "May beings be happy" but also, "May they act on the causes of happiness and avoid the kinds of actions that would lead to harm."

Empathetic joy is what you feel when you see someone who is either happy already or who is doing things that will lead to happiness. You're glad for that person. The results may not be coming right away, but you know the results will come down the line.

Then there's equanimity, realizing that there are a lot of things you can't change. Happiness depends on present actions and past actions. Past actions you can't change. With present actions, you have some control over *your* present actions, but there are a lot of people out there whose actions you don't have any control over at all.

As Ajaan Suwat used to say, "Each of us has one person." We're responsible for *our* thoughts, *our* words, *our* deeds. We can have an impact on others, but we can't be responsible for them, for their actions. So we have to be very careful to keep watch over ours.

One of the problems with most people is that they neglect what they're doing, pay no attention to what they're doing, and pay a lot of attention to what other people are doing and want to straighten it out. But that doesn't work.

So these are some areas where you have to have some equanimity. That's what brings some wisdom into your goodwill. You're doing this for yourself, so that you can be a reliable person. Whether people deserve your goodwill or not is not the issue. You need your own goodwill both for your practice of the precepts and for your practice in meditation.

For the meditation to go well, you've got to get the mind to settle down. If you're thinking about how you might harm somebody, or you're living with the results of having harmed somebody, it's very difficult to get the mind to be still.

You start thinking about unskillful things you've done. There may be unskillful things where you meant well but you didn't know the full story. That doesn't leave a scar in the mind the same way as if you knew you were deliberately causing harm. That leaves a scar that lasts for a long time. So to avoid that kind of scar, you want to be able to develop goodwill in all areas.

When you realize that you have acted in an unskillful way, the best thing you can do for the world is to not to wallow in remorse but to notice that it was a mistake and resolve not to make that mistake again. Then spread thoughts of goodwill, both to encourage yourself to realize that you do have some good to you, and to protect you so that you'll be more likely to act skillfully on into the future.

We have to understand goodwill—our wish for happiness for ourselves and all others—within the context of karma. There are certain things we can do, certain things we can't. In the areas where you can make a difference, you want to make sure that the motivating factor is goodwill, a wish for happiness, particularly the kind of happiness that comes from doing the practice: being virtuous, being generous, meditating. That way, goodwill exercises control on your actions and through your actions has an impact on other people.

As for thoughts of goodwill at the end of the meditation, those are to remind yourself, one, that you're going to be leaving meditation now: You're going to be dealing with other people, so you want to make sure that goodwill is your motivating factor. And two, the fact that the mind has been concentrated, which gives more power to the goodwill, actually makes the goodwill more tangible. You've got a sense of well-being inside, and it's good to reflect: "I don't want to harm that sense of well-being." Any unskillful thoughts that come out of your mind are the primary things that will harm the sense of well-being that you've gained from the concentration, so don't ruin it.

When the mind is really concentrated, other people can pick up on the fact. You've probably noticed when you're in a group of people in a room and someone walks in and you can immediately pick up that this person means well to others or doesn't mean well to others. It colors the atmosphere all around. That's just one of the ways which you can see how an attitude of goodwill really does make a difference that other people can feel. In that way, it does help their happiness too.

Whether they're conscious of it or not, that's another matter. Whether they respond in kind or not doesn't matter at all. We've got to think about what we're producing as we go into the world, instead of what we're getting back from other people. If our goodness depends on their goodness, it's really shaky and unreliable.

Contemplate what it means for us to be happy, for other people to be happy, and what it means to wish for people to be happy. You realize you're wishing that

people would change their ways if they're being unskillful, that they'd understand the causes of true happiness and learn how to act on them.

That's something you can wish for anybody, regardless of how horrible or despicable their actions have been in the past. The world would be a better place if everyone could find a true happiness inside: through generosity, virtue, meditation. When you can think in this way, you realize that goodwill isn't something that requires you put on rose-colored glasses or send out pink clouds or cotton-candy of nice thoughts. It's extremely practical. It's essential. It's what allows you to live safely in the world.