

The Conditions for Goodwill

April 29, 2015

That chant on the world just now, if you look at it from one perspective, is pretty scary. The world has no one in charge. There's no protection. There's no shelter. We have nothing of our own. And we're slaves to craving. It's a pretty bleak picture. And it's meant to give rise to a sense of samvega.

Think about the way we normally live our lives and the expectations we have about the world and how they so often get disappointed. But you can look at them another way that's liberating. The world here isn't designed by anybody. We're not here trying to figure out who the designer was or what the purpose of his design was—or hers. As Ajaan Fuang would like to say, nobody hired us to be born or paid us to be born. We were born out of our own desire. And we can make of our lives what we want to.

The question is, are we going to use this freedom responsibly or not? I was reading a while back, someone saying, that as Kant had pointed out, with the Enlightenment came maturity. We're talking about the European Enlightenment here. And as this person interpreted it, it means that there's nobody up there to tell us what to do. There's nobody up there we have to please, so we just do what we want. That's irresponsible, because actions do have consequences, for us and for others. Just doing what we want can often cause a lot of harm.

We have to learn how to train our desires. If we're going to shape our lives in a way that really does give good results, we have to train the mind. We have to train it to be honorable, to recognize its responsibilities. And one of our first responsibilities in a world like this is that if we're going to look for any goodness, we have to look inside. It has to start with us. If we wait for other people to provide us with the love and care we want, or the truthfulness we want, there are many cases when we can wait until our dying days and it's not going to come.

Is there anything good going to happen with this system, which is very interconnected, but doesn't really serve any particular purpose except for the purpose of each individual? The problem is that each individual has lots of conflicting purposes and is pressing the levers, many times out of ignorance. This is why the world is the mess it is. But if you wait for everybody else, or just even a few other people to be good examples, you let pass by your own opportunities to do good.

So you've got to start right here with this breath, with this moment of awareness. What's the best thing you can do with it? What's the most honorable

thing you can do with it? The Buddha recommends looking for happiness with an attitude of universal goodwill. And universal goodwill is something that has to be developed. It's not innate to the mind, any more innate than hatred can be. Hatred can be very easy to feel. Anger can be very easy to feel. Greed, aversion, jealousy: All of these things are just as natural as the good side of the mind.

And the mind is something that can change very quickly. There are passages where the Buddha asks the monks, "Have you seen a moving picture show?" You look at the translation and you say, "This must be a mistranslation." But it turns out they actually had a show that they called moving pictures. They would set up a lamp near a big blank wall, and they'd have a material that was like cellophane. I think it was made out of gelatin. They'd paint pictures on it. They'd paint scenes. And then they'd have little shadow puppets running through the scenes. From the light of the lamp, it would get projected on the wall. And as the Buddha said, those moving picture shows can be very variegated—but that the human mind is a lot more variegated than that.

Or the animal kingdom. You think of all the different kinds of animals there are in the air, on the land, and in the sea. All those species of animals came from a particular desire. It was a mind of some sort that came up with the idea that this would be a good place to be born, this would be a good particular thing to be born as. And they'd go for it.

So our mind has lots of qualities, not just innate goodness. And it's very changeable. In fact, the Buddha, who was a master of the apt simile, couldn't even think of a simile for how quick the changes of the mind can be. So you've got to train this changeable mind, because if goodness is going to come out of it, it's got to be trained to be more consistent. That's what the mindfulness is all about: to keep in mind what you really want so that you don't forget.

And it requires determination. When the Buddha talks about goodwill, he says it's a form of mindfulness on which you should be determined—with mindfulness meaning something you keep in mind so you don't forget. And you've got to be determined. You've got to keep working at it. You've got to be wise in how you understand goodwill and how you apply it. And you've got to be truthful.

You've got to learn how to give up a lot of unskillful thoughts that might be very tempting. You've got to keep your mind at peace, realizing that even though you may wish for the well-being of all beings, there are a lot of beings who are not interested in being very skillful at all. And no matter how much you want their happiness, they're free to not go in that direction. All the qualities that go into determination, wisdom, truthfulness, relinquishment, and calm are conditions for developing goodwill. So even though goodwill is unlimited, it's not

unconditioned. It requires the proper conditions inside you in order to stay unlimited.

And, of course, it meets up with situations where there are people who are suffering and there's nothing you can do about it; or times when you're suffering and there seems to be nothing you can do about it. That's when you've got to develop equanimity.

So these are things you have to work on.

It helps when you're working on goodwill to have a sense of well-being inside already. Ajaan Lee's image is of a water tank. If there's no water in the tank, you can open up the faucet and nothing but air will come out. The air may be cool, but the coolness of air coming out is nothing compared with the coolness of the water that you want. You've got to have water in the tank so that when you turn on the faucet, you get the cool water that's really refreshing.

So we work with the breath and what the Buddha calls bodily fabrication. This is the energy that fabricates our sense of the body. Try to work with it in a way that feels refreshing so that you can have a basis for your goodwill.

And then learn how to think properly about goodwill. What does it mean? You're wishing that all beings create the causes for happiness. As one of the Buddha's phrases says, "May no being despise another or deceive another." In other words, you're not just wishing for people to sit around smiling. You're wishing for them to act in ways that really do lead to happiness.

So you direct your thoughts in that way. And then you evaluate: To what extent can you really feel these feelings, have this attitude toward all beings, toward anybody out there you have trouble spreading these thoughts to. If you're honest, you'll find that there are some people out there. Okay, how do you change your attitude so that it's possible to direct thoughts of goodwill to those people in all sincerity?

This goes back to your understanding of what goodwill is. You're wishing for happiness and you're wishing for that person to understand and work on the causes of true happiness. And as for any part of you that wants that person to suffer a little bit first, reflect on that—like those people we saw in the courtroom the other day who went all that way and spent all that time in the courtroom because they wanted to get vengeance. It was a sad sight.

This is why forgiveness is such a good gift to give. Even though you may not be able to have reconciliation with other people, at least you can learn how to forgive. Allow that person the possibility of changing his or her ways and finding happiness more quickly than you might have wished otherwise. When you can teach your mind how to think in these ways, it really helps.

So remember that goodwill does have its conditions. To make it unlimited, it has lots of conditions. They say that for Brahmas, it's very easy to feel unlimited goodwill. That's something they've worked on. When they were human beings, they had to work hard on this because it's very easy for us to be partial: goodwill for this group but not for that group. Or goodwill for this person under these conditions but not under those. Even for ourselves, there are times we have a hard time feeling goodwill for ourselves.

So it takes training. It takes determination. And you have to be mindful in the sense that you want to keep remembering this. We work with the breath to develop our mindfulness to stitch together our moments of attention so that things don't slip through the cracks. And as we work on the conditions, we get a goodwill that's more and more reliable.

It becomes totally reliable only with the noble attainments. That's when the mind has found a basis for happiness inside that really is unconditioned. It makes it a lot easier to have unconditional positive attitudes. Until then, it's something you've got to work at all the time. So learn how to give the mind the nourishment it needs with your concentration so it has the strength to keep working at this continually and doesn't run out.