

Refuge for All Beings

June 12, 2017

When the Buddha teaches the practice of universal goodwill or the brahmaviharas as a whole, he does it in two main contexts. One, contexts in which you've been wronged by other people; and two, contexts in which you have wronged other people. It's necessary in both.

In the first context, it's basically for your protection—not against their wrongdoing, but protection against any possible unskillful actions you might do in response. There's that image where he says that even if bandits pinned you down and started sawing off your limbs with a two-handed saw, you should still have goodwill for them. That's a pretty extreme example. And he means it to be extreme because most of us don't get hurt in those ways, but we get hurt in other ways, and we think that we're justified in snapping back, mistreating the other person. But the Buddha wants you to keep that extreme example in mind so that when people say things to you or do things to you that are not nice, you remember, "Well, at least they're not sawing off my limbs with a two-handed saw."

Then you ask yourself: What would be the skillful way to act around them? You may think that they don't deserve your goodwill, but what's goodwill for unless it is for everybody? The type of goodwill where you treat people nicely only because they treat you nicely is pretty common. You want something special—you have to be able to have goodwill always, for everyone. In other words, you wish for everyone's happiness. It doesn't mean, "May you be happy sawing off my limbs." It's more, "May you realize the causes of true happiness and act on them." That way, that person's happiness would be for the good not only of that person but also everybody else around. And that's a wish you can have without being hypocritical.

It may take some training, because part of the mind may say, "Well, let's see this person suffer a little bit first, and then we can wish for their happiness." But you have to think of the Buddha. He taught everybody. As we said in the chant just now: the Buddha, the Dhamma, and the Sangha are refuges for all beings.

There are no questions asked, like: What is your past? What have you done to the Buddha in the past? The Buddha had to teach people who had mistreated him in the past but he didn't hold it against them. He taught them how to put an end to suffering. They say in the commentaries that the Buddha even taught Mara, that he finally converted Mara, after all of Mara's many attempts to get in the Buddha's way.

So basically the Buddha is saying to have the kind of compassion he did. He taught an end to suffering—not only for people who deserved not to suffer but for everybody, whether you “deserve” your suffering or not. It wasn't a matter of deserving or not deserving; it was simply a matter of discernment—realizing that if you could find true happiness within, it would be for everybody's good. That was the kind of goodwill the Buddha had—goodwill for everyone. No matter who had wronged him in the past, he would still teach them.

The other time that he recommended goodwill was when you'd done harm to other people. The Buddha says you should resolve not to repeat that harm and then you spread goodwill to everybody. You spread goodwill to others to remind yourself—if you think of doing harm again—“Well, wait a minute. I'm supposed to have goodwill for this person. Is this action actually going to lead to their welfare? If it's not, why do it?” You want to have some consistency; you want to have some loyalty to your original intention.

And then have goodwill for yourself. If you get down on yourself for things you've done in the past that are not honorable, you can think about that only for so long, and then you start lashing back, saying, “Well, maybe it wasn't so bad after all.” Or if you start thinking of yourself as being a miserable person, and again, you can think that thought only for so long, and then you start lashing back. So have goodwill for yourself. Just as you would spread goodwill to all beings whether they deserve it or not, you should have goodwill for yourself whether you think you deserve it or not. In other words, understand the causes for your own true happiness and be able to act on them.

Some people have the feeling that they don't deserve to have goodwill for themselves. It's like when we're sitting here meditating. Sometimes you come across a feeling of well-being and part of the mind may say, “I don't deserve this.” You've got to argue with that. Here again, the question of deserving or not

deserving doesn't enter into this. It's the same sort of problem with survivors of mass suffering: The ones who come out sometimes feel that they owe it to the others who didn't survive to be miserable for the rest of their lives. They don't feel right about finding happiness.

But the Buddha is teaching happiness here as the wise thing to do. And it's not a question of justice, as to who deserves it or doesn't deserve it. In fact, as many people have noted, the concept of justice doesn't exist in Buddhism as a goal. Some people find that a severe lack. But if everyone were to be treated to their just desserts, no one would be able to find awakening. If you had to meet up with the consequences of all your actions in the past before you can gain awakening, awakening would never happen.

So instead of imposing ideas of justice on us or having us impose ideas of justice on one another, the Buddha has us think thoughts of goodwill for ourselves, and think of finding true happiness as a gift not only to ourselves but also to others. It's a wise thing to do. By lessening the cause of suffering for yourself, you'll be less likely to cause suffering for others. And also in terms of having done wrong to other people, the Buddha has you spread thoughts of goodwill as a way of lightening the karmic backlash. He says, if you have an unlimited mind, if you train yourself in virtue, train yourself in discernment, train yourself not to be overcome by pleasure or pain—which are issues of concentration and discernment—then when results come from past bad karma, they're going to be a lot less.

He gives the example of the lump of salt. If you put the lump of salt in a small glass of water, you can't drink the water because there's so little water there. But if you put into a large, clean river, you can drink the water from the river with no problem—it's not too salty. There's another image that rubs the wrong way: a poor person stealing a goat and a rich person stealing a goat. When a rich person steals a goat, he usually gets away with it—very little punishment. A poor person steals a goat and gets thrown into prison.

Here the wealth stands for the expansive mind. You can develop an expansive mind and you don't have to suffer the results of your past actions nearly as much as you would without that expansive mind. Of course, together with the expansive mind, there's the training in virtue and discernment, and learning how not to be

overcome by pleasure or by pain, which—as I said—is both a matter of concentration and discernment.

When you're sitting here, you learn how to deal with the pains in the body as you get the mind to settle down—working with the breath, working with your attitude, working with the places you focus so that you can live with pain and not suffer from it. That way, you're not overcome by pain. It's the same with pleasure—you can live with pleasure and not suffer from it—i.e., you don't get distracted by it. You're not overcome by pleasure.

That's one of the skills you have to develop as you concentrate the mind. A feeling of ease comes up and it's all too easy to leave the breath and wallow around in the pleasure for a while. The pleasure will stay for a bit, and then it'll turn into something else. Because the cause of the pleasure was that you had constant alertness to the breath. So you keep the cause going, and the pleasure—the result—will stay. When you learn to make that distinction, that's how you avoid getting waylaid by the pleasure and how you can master concentration.

As for pleasures and pains outside, there are going to be the pains of people's words. As the Buddha said, you have to realize that human speech has good and bad speech; well meaning, ill meaning; true, false. This is the normal way of human speech. When there's unpleasant speech out there, you don't take it into your heart. Just leave it there at your ears. As the Buddha says, tell yourself, "An unpleasant sound has made contact at the ear." And leave it there. Don't drag it into the mind and create lots of narrative around it.

This doesn't mean we ignore people who teach us valuable things or who criticize us. But we learn to take the criticism and see what in there is a good lesson, and the rest we can just leave. This is another way in which you teach yourself that you don't have to suffer from the things outside, and you don't even have to suffer from a lot of your own past karma, if you train the mind.

Think of Angulimala. He killed all those people. The Buddha taught him to gain awakening and he didn't have to suffer 999 deaths. We like that story because we think that there's hope for everybody. You can imagine, though, the people whose relatives had been killed: They were not happy at all. In fact, they actually threw things at Angulimala when he went out for alms. But as the Buddha told

Angulimala, it would have been a lot worse if he hadn't gained awakening. So even the teachings on karma are not there for total justice, in a tit-for-tat way.

The Buddha's teaching is that there is a way out from all our sufferings. Whether we deserve those sufferings or not, we can still find the way out. And he's happy to teach it to us regardless of what our past is. But he wants us to have the same attitude toward people who have wronged us. It's only fair. If you don't want people to impose their ideas of justice on you, you don't impose yours on them. You wish them goodwill. You try to treat them with generosity. You treat them in a virtuous way. In other words, you abstain from harming them. And you have goodwill, expressed the thought, "May this person understand the causes for true happiness and act of them." Because it is through that person's actions that that person is going to be happy or not.

It's the same case with you. It's through your own actions that you're going to find happiness, through your skill in dealing with things that come up. Past karma comes—we have all kinds of things in our past that will sprout at some point, and if you learn how to deal with them skillfully, you don't have to suffer. That's what we're learning as we meditate—the skills that can enable us to deal with painful sights, sounds, smells, tastes, tactile sensations, and ideas without suffering from them. That's the skill that the Buddha wanted to make available to all. And he's willing to be a refuge for all who decide that they want to take on his training. He himself never imposed it on anyone. Even the duties of the four noble truths are not duties he imposes. He simply says, "If you want to put an end to suffering, this is what you've got to do."

It's the same with generosity. A king once asked him where should a gift be given, and the Buddha said, "Wherever you feel inspired." After all, the Buddha was not our creator. He wasn't in a position where he could tell us what we have to do, aside from the monks who—once we become ordained—are committed to following the teachings, following the Vinaya. But otherwise, there's no imposition. But he spoke as an expert: If you want true happiness, this is what you've got to do. We follow the path voluntarily.

This is why when the Buddha was asked by a brahman, "Will the whole world gain awakening or a half or a third?" it was not a question he would answer.

Because he knew that everybody has the right to make a choice as to whether they'll follow the path or not.

As Ven. Ananda explained to the brahman later, it's as if there's a fortress with one gate and a wise gatekeeper. The gatekeeper goes around the fortress and he sees there's not a hole big enough for even a cat to slip through. So he returns to the gate. He doesn't know how many people are going to enter through the gate, but he does know that if any sizable animal is to enter the fortress, it'll have to come by the gate.

It's the same with the Buddha. He doesn't know whether the whole world or half the world or a third will reach awakening. But he does know that whoever is going to do it has to follow this path. And so he makes it available for everybody. And count yourself among part of that everybody. It's your choice. But the opportunity is there.