

In Accordance with the Dhamma

August 4, 2018

In our practice, we try to have goodwill for all beings, which means that we not only wish that they be happy, but also that they create the causes for true happiness. Otherwise, the happiness is not going to happen. You have to understand happiness in the context of karma. Our goodwill for all beings doesn't mean that they will all act in good ways or that they will all be happy. We're trying to make that our underlying intention as we deal with our own mind, as we deal with other people so that all our actions come from a skillful motivation.

An important part of this training is to realize that the opposite of goodwill should not be ill will. In other words, when people are not acting in ways that are conducive to happiness, we don't have ill will for them. The alternative should be equanimity, which doesn't mean indifference. It means learning to put certain things aside, learning to put your hopes and preferences aside, and to look at the situation: What can be done? What can't be done? What are your priorities?

When your priorities are clear, you realize that some things are more important than others. The things that are not important you have to put off to the side. This is actually the most effective way of getting things done. I was reading about a woman general in the Army whose policy every day was to rank the ten most important things that had to be done that day from one to ten, and then she'd cross out everything from three on down, to focus on the top two. That was how she got things done.

In this way, instead of letting your anger take over when you're not satisfied with the things that are happening, when people are not acting in ways that are wise and conducive to true happiness, you try to get your wisdom to take over, because when you look at the expressions for goodwill, compassion, empathetic joy, and equanimity, you notice that first three are wishes: May all beings be happy. May all those who are suffering be released from suffering. May those who are happy continue in their happiness. Also, may all those who are creating the causes for misery stop. May all those who are creating the causes for happiness continue. Those are the wishes expressed in those three attitudes.

But then equanimity comes in, and it's not a wish. It's a statement of fact. All beings are the owners of their actions, heir to their actions. And it's in seeing this statement of fact that you get the clear vision you need for discernment. So as Ajaan Fuang used to say, goodwill has to have equanimity or else it burns out. It becomes a cause for suffering.

So remember that equanimity is the alternative to goodwill. Not that it replaces it. It just puts things into perspective. It's where you back off and look at what really needs to be done, what has to be sacrificed for the sake of what other things. Because all too often we're presented with situations where there's a trade-off. There are some advantages and some disadvantages to different courses of action. You've got to decide, okay, what's really important? And you're not willing to sacrifice that for anything else.

We see this principle in the world outside. We see this principle in our own practice. We have lots of preferences, and the Buddha's not telling us to have no preferences at all. Just make sure that your preferences are informed by wisdom and a clear vision of which goals are really worthwhile and which goals are only secondary.

Now the highest goal, the Buddha said, is dispassion. It sounds a little bit unattractive. Dispassion sounds like you don't care or you're fed up with things, but the Thai ajaans talk about it as being more like sobering up, growing up. In other words, you've been confused about what's worthwhile and what's not, immature about what's worthwhile and what's not, and then you come to your senses. You see that all the stress that's weighing down the mind comes from your passion for fabrication. You're making all kinds of worlds out of your experiences, and in the course of that you're making yourself suffer. But a lot of those worlds are hard to give up.

The different hopes and ideals we have: Some of them are in line with the Dhamma and some of them are not. As the Buddha is saying, if you want a happiness that's truly harmless, you have to take the Dhamma and put it first. This is why he talks about practicing the Dhamma in accordance with the Dhamma—in other words, not shaping it to your preferences but shaping your preferences to the Dhamma, shaping yourself to the Dhamma. Because there's a lot in the Dhamma that goes against the grain. Things that may seem kind and compassionate and wise in the short term, when you take the long-term perspective, are not as kind or compassionate as you thought. And the part of the mind that's attached to them is something you have to learn how to let go.

You have to raise your sights as to what true well-being is and bring your oughts or your shoulds, your sense of what should be done, in line with the duties of the four noble truths, because as the Buddha said, this is the way to true happiness. This is the way to freedom. This is the way to stop oppressing the rest of the world. One of the reasons we have that reflection on the requisites so often is to realize that even if we live in the world with the kindest and best of intentions, we're still placing a weight on it through the fact that we need food, we

need clothing, we need shelter, we need medicine. This is placing a weight on people and beings we don't even know, which is why the kindest thing is to get out. Now, that means we'll have to leave the world in an imperfect state. There will be some loose ends that never get tied up, but that's better than staying on and, in the process of tying up loose ends, creating more loose ends in the process.

So we practice the Dhamma in accordance with the Dhamma, which classically means two things. One, as I said, is putting the Dhamma first, ahead of your preferences. And then two, bringing your preferences in line with the Dhamma, i.e., to prefer dispassion, wanting to learn how to get past all the processes by which you create suffering. You realize that no matter how much entertainment or satisfaction you get out of your mental constructs, you're better off getting out. It's wiser, more mature, more sober. You're no longer intoxicated with your ideas. You learn to see them in a matter-of-fact way, because after all the Buddha was very matter-of-fact in finding the Dhamma. It's not that he designed the Dhamma in line with his preferences. He himself had to conform himself to what he found.

It's interesting that in his account of his awakening or the quest for his awakening, he talks very little about what his preconceived notions were about what it was going to have to be, but he uncovered them as he went along the path. He began to realize, "Okay, this idea I have that things have to be this way, have to be that way: This is not working." So he had to let it go, find something else. He let that go, and found something else. He kept having to submit himself to the way things actually are: All beings are the owners of their actions. So he used that principle both in the karma of his path until he realized that ultimately he was going to have to get past karma entirely, because the goodness of karma can go only so far, except for one kind of karma: the karma of the noble eightfold path. That's the karma that gets you out, starting with right view going on through right concentration.

These are things he discovered. These are not the things that accorded with his preferences, but he realized that this is the way it's going to have to be. And in acting in accordance with them, he was rewarded with a happiness that was far beyond anything he imagined. And the amount of good he was able to do in the world as a result was far more than anything else any other human being has ever done.

So as you practice for dispassion, it doesn't mean that you become passive. It means you learn how to motivate yourself in a different way. Instead of motivating yourself through anger or the back and forth between love and hate or goodwill and ill will, you try that new alternative: goodwill versus equanimity.

You don't really abandon either. It's just you learn how to use them at the right time and the right place, and this puts you in a position where you can clearly see: What is the path of Dhamma in this situation? What guidance does the Dhamma give here? Because as the Buddha said, the whole purpose of any kind of teaching is that it gives you guidance on how you can figure out what should and shouldn't be done.

The Buddha submitted himself to the Dhamma, and that's how he got his sense of what should and shouldn't be done. He benefited, and he passes that on to us, so it's good that we don't change what he taught. This is one of the reasons why the forest tradition is so conservative in a lot of ways, because they've seen that what the Buddha taught was really well taught, as we chant every night: *Svakkhato bhagavata dhammo*, the Dhamma of the Blessed One is well taught. It doesn't need to be ornamented. It doesn't need to be spruced up. It doesn't need to be brought up to date. We need to be brought up to the Dhamma.

As we manage issues in our own mind, we learn how to do it with finesse and with skill, and as we manage issues in the world, we do it with a lot more clear-sighted vision of what works and what doesn't work, what has the best long-term results, what doesn't. We start by learning to have a good appreciation for that quality of equanimity as a place to stand back and look at things clearly, so that when the time comes to act, our motivation for action does come from wisdom rather than the back and forth of love and hate, goodwill and ill will. That's how we can live in the world without suffering from it—and also how we can live in the world without causing suffering, which may not be the goal of the practice, but it's one of the good side benefits.

The goal, of course, is the dispassion that allows you to get out of the world. And it's from that safe space out of the world, in the mind, that you can come back and look at the world and deal with the world in a way that's good for everyone.