

Goodwill Starts with Gratitude

October 10, 2018

When the Buddha taught breath meditation to his son Rahula, he started out with some preliminary meditations to get the mind in the right shape to be focusing on the breath. I've talked a lot in the past about the meditation on making your mind like earth so that you're not shaken by events coming up outside or coming up inside your mind.

But he taught other meditations as well that build on that. One of them is the brahmaviharas: spreading goodwill to all beings, compassion to all beings, empathetic joy to all beings, equanimity to all. That, too, should be based on the reflection of making your mind like earth. Because there are a lot of beings out there who've been unkind to you, unkind to people you love, unkind to people you're concerned about, but you have to have goodwill for them. Of course, a good way to build up to that is first by thinking of people who are easier to extend goodwill to. And it's often useful to combine the practice of goodwill with thoughts about gratitude.

When the Buddha talked about kamma, gratitude was one of the first topics he mentioned as being relevant to the fact of kamma. He said that there are people for whom we should be grateful because they had the choice to help us or *not* to help us, but they chose to help us. And so you want to feel some special goodwill for them, special appreciation for them. That makes it a lot easier to extend goodwill.

A couple of years back when I was in France, I was staying in a hotel. In the room there was a little booklet where the woman who owned the hotel told the history of the place. It was largely a history of her gratitude to her grandfather, her father, the staff of the hotel, and all the work they'd done to make it such a nice hotel. This was way out in the Ardeche, a very isolated area, but it was a very nice hotel.

As I was reading the booklet, I couldn't help thinking about another account of the history of a hotel I'd read here in America. It was in Utah, a combination restaurant and hotel, and there was a little booklet in the restaurant about the history of the place. It was all about how the owner and her husband had to fight off all kinds of difficulties while setting up the place there originally. Then the husband died, and the wife was alone and the banks were going to swoop in and take it away from her because they thought she was just a woman and they could do it very easily. But she showed them. The story was all about, "I did it myself."

Very American. Not an ounce of gratitude for anybody. And I couldn't help notice that the hotel in France, even though it was in a poor area, was a much nicer place than the hotel and restaurant in Utah. The food was good, and the staff was very accommodating, whereas the restaurant in Utah had only a few miserable choices, along with a notice that no substitutions would be allowed in their offerings. You wonder if it was connected to the issue of gratitude. People who feel gratitude for others tend to be kinder to others.

So add that to your practice of goodwill when you spread thoughts of goodwill to east, west, north, south, to people you like, people you don't like. Make a special category for the people you should feel grateful for. Just go down the list, think of all the people for whom you have a debt of gratitude: people who've helped you, who've had to go out of their way for you, people in your family, teachers, others who helped you along. They didn't have to do it, but they chose to help. You have to realize how much you owe to others, in the sense that you're able to speak a human language, live in a human world, use things that other people have provided.

You can think also about the Buddha and be grateful for all that time he spent establishing the Dhamma. After he gained awakening there were all kinds of things he could have done—he had no debts to anybody at that point—but he decided it would be good to spend the rest of his life setting out the religion so that it would last for a long time, for people not only right around him but also for people who would come in later generations in different countries, everywhere in the world.

In fact, there are times when you have a sense that the Buddha was more concerned about us than we are about ourselves. All too often, when we think about doing something, we don't really calculate the long-term consequences. We just go for what we like. And then we find ourselves creating suffering for ourselves. As he said, he saw the world on fire, people setting fire to everything they touched.

So there are lots of people we've never even met who were concerned for us, who left something behind for us. And we owe them a debt of gratitude too, even though we've never met them.

So spend some time thinking about all the people, all the beings who've helped you. Send them some special thoughts of goodwill wherever they are now. And goodwill, of course, includes compassion and empathetic joy. If they're suffering right now, you hope for them to become happy. If they're happy already, or they're creating causes for happiness, you rejoice with them. You're not resentful of their happiness.

And this serves two purposes: One, it reminds you that you are indebted to so many people. This is how we live as human beings, through our debts to others. As you think about this, it makes you more inclined to want to do something for other people, to pass on the goodness. So it's good for you.

In fact, you can use this as a good motivation for meditation. You're trying to find a happiness that doesn't have to take anything away from anyone else, doesn't harm anybody. We all want happiness, but if we take care in how we look for happiness, then it becomes something special. Otherwise it's just everybody grubbing around and trying to find pleasures, grabbing what they can get.

That was the Buddha's other vision *before* his awakening: seeing the world as a drying-up stream filled with fish who were fighting one another to get that last little bit of water, and they were all going to die. It was all pointless: a lot of pointless suffering. If we don't have a sense of gratitude, and we don't take care in how we go about finding happiness, we're like those fish. If we do take care, we become more human. So that's the first benefit.

The other benefit, of course, is that when you send thoughts of goodwill to others there are times when they can benefit immediately from that. This is something the forest ajaans talk a lot about: the currents of the mind. As you're sitting here meditating, you're actually broadcasting some good energy. The more stillness you have, the more concentration you have, the better the energy. And then you can dedicate it to others. Think of someone who may be suffering right now. In some cases, the people who are suffering now are especially sensitive, so it's good to send goodwill to them. It can have a calming effect on their minds.

Now, how much they'll actually benefit from your goodwill is something you can't control. It's as if you're a radio station sending out signals: You have no control over whose radio is on and whether they're tuned to your signal or not. But it is more likely that people who are suffering tend to be very sensitive, and as you can send a little extra oomph in their direction, it's all to the good.

So to give a little juice to your practice of the brahmaviharas, start with the people you feel grateful for: not just people you like, but people you know have done something really good for you, who went out of their way for you.

When I first went to see Ajaan Fuang, it was shortly after my mother had died. One of the first instructions he gave to me was, "When you meditate, spread thoughts of goodwill to your mother. Dedicate the merit to your mother."

So this is the fabric within which we practice: goodwill for everyone, along with a very strong sense of those for whom we have to be grateful, those who we've been dependent on. It's not that we're all One, but we are connected through our actions, so you want to make those connections good. And you can

choose to make them good, starting with thoughts of gratitude and goodwill, and then making your mind more and more solid inside, because that, too, is a gift to others. It's a way of thinking that allows the mind to put aside a lot of its issues with the world outside, its grievances with the world outside, and to create a softer landing here in the present moment as you settle down with the breath.