

A Heart Set on Goodwill

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The mind is very changeable. In fact, the Buddha said it's so quick to reverse itself that there's no adequate image to illustrate how quick and how reversible it is. You're heading in one direction and then suddenly you turn around and you're heading in the other direction. Now, if the mind is heading in a bad direction, that's a good thing. But if you've already got it in a good direction, you have to be very careful. This is one of the reasons why we develop mindfulness: to remember where we're going and the good qualities we're headed to, so that when the mind is tempted to reverse direction, you can turn it back ground.

We see this in so many areas of our lives. As you're meditating here, you're with the breath. Then all the sudden you're off someplace else. This is why the Buddha never mentioned anything about the mind's innate nature, aside from the fact that it knows. It's aware. Beyond that, it can be anything. It's capable of all kinds of things. He says to look at the animal kingdom, all the variety of animals out there. Every type of animal there is comes from an attitude, an intention. And the mind, he says, is even more variegated than the animal kingdom, including all the animals that have disappeared and potentially new species that could come into existence. They all come from the mind. But we're not just animals. We can also be capable of things that are higher than that. And one of the things we can do is lift the level of the mind.

This is why the Buddha recommends the practice of the brahmaviharas, starting with goodwill. Universal goodwill is not innate to the mind. Goodwill and ill will come very easily: goodwill for people who have been kind to you, people you like, and ill will for people you don't like. You can't say that one is more innate than the other. But if we want to lift the level of our minds, we have to watch out for ill will because it's going to get us into trouble. Goodwill for people you like, people who have been kind to you, ill will for people who have been nasty to you: That's not a very high level of attitude. Common animals have those attitudes. Brahma, however, the highest level of devas, are capable of having goodwill for everybody. And that's what you've got to try to develop.

So it's something that you determine, as the Buddha said. A determination is basically the effort to put some order into your desires, in this case that you're not going to let random desires for ill will get in the way of your progress. Universal goodwill is also a form of mindfulness. You have to keep it in mind, that regardless of what other people do you've got to have goodwill for them.

That means you've got to understand what goodwill means. It's a wish for happiness. And you've got to understand that wish for happiness in line with right view. One of the first lessons of right view is that if something has to be created, it's a kind of karma. So goodwill has to be a kind of karma. In other words, it's something

you have to intend. You have to fabricate a state of mind in order to maintain it. And the happiness you're wishing universally is also something that will have to come from karma.

So you're thinking about the fabrications of the mind as you're trying to create a sense of goodwill—how you're breathing, what you're saying to yourself, and the perceptions you hold in mind. If you allow yourself to have perceptions of feeling threatened by the people who are difficult to have goodwill for, it makes it even more difficult. This is why the Buddha recommends perceptions of your goodwill being like the earth—solid. Like the river Ganges—vast and cool. Like space also—even more vast. Just as nobody can write anything on space, nobody can scribble or scrawl things on your mind. So think of your goodwill as being that large and impervious.

And also think of your goodwill as being dear to you. That's another perception that the Buddha recommends. Just as a mother would sacrifice her life for her only child, you have to be willing to sacrifice your life for your goodwill. Realizing again the principle of karma—if you give into ill will, no matter why, even if people are killing you, you're going to get fixated on those people and then get reborn among them. But a life dedicated to getting revenge: Is that the kind of life you want? Say No. And let the whole thing go. And you're liberated that way.

Remember, the Buddha's image of a fire. The fire clings to the fuel and so it's trapped in the fuel. The fuel doesn't trap the fire. The wood doesn't care if it's burning or not. But for the fire to be maintained, it's got to hold on. And as it holds on, it's trapped. That's how they saw fire back in those days. The fire went out when it let go. And that's how it was freed. So for the sake of your own freedom, you've got to let go of any ill will based on the horrible things that people have done. You remind yourself that it's for your own true well-being that you're developing these thoughts. You want to be able to trust yourself so that you don't do or say or think unskillful things around people who are difficult. After all, you live in a world where almost everybody is difficult one way or another. If you were to wait for the world to be happy and peaceful, with everybody behaving nicely, and only *then* you would meditate, or *then* you would be able to get your mind to settle down, you would die first.

So you think these thoughts as ways of helping you to fabricate thoughts of goodwill. And what are the thoughts you think about the other people? Well, you remind yourself that they're going to be happy based on their actions. So you're extending thoughts of goodwill to them when you think, "May they act skillfully." Now, you look at some people and say, "There's no way this person is ever going to act skillfully." Well, you never know. It may take a long time. But maybe there is a potential in there. Maybe someday that person will see the error of his or her ways. That's what you're hoping for: a change of heart. You can ask yourself, how do changes of heart happen? If there's anything you can do to help the other person have a change of heart, you're happy to do it. If there's nothing you can do right away, this is where the Buddha recommends patience. Many of his discourses on goodwill

include images of patience, of endurance, waiting for the opening, waiting for the opportunity where maybe you can do something positive.

There was a case in the time of the Buddha of a young prince who wanted to be king. Devadatta was a monk who wanted to become Buddha, who asked the Buddha to retire so that he could take over the Sangha. The Buddha said some pretty sharp words about him: "I wouldn't hand the Sangha over to a lickspittle like this guy." Devadatta got the prince on his side and told him, "Okay, I'll kill the Buddha and you kill your father. That way you'll get to become king, and I'll get to become Buddha." When the prince tried to kill his father, the father found out why, and so he handed the kingdom over to him. But then the prince didn't trust him and he ended up putting his father to death.

So now he was a king who had conspired against the Buddha. Later, after Devadatta fell, the king was feeling ill at ease. So one night he goes to see the Buddha. The Buddha gives him a talk, one of the longest talks in the Canon. He goes into a lot of detail on the steps of the practice. And the king's only reaction is, "I regret killing my father." And so he makes a confession. The Buddha says, "This is the way for progress in the Vinaya of the noble ones: to recognize a wrongdoing as a wrongdoing and to make a resolve not to repeat it in the future." So the king leaves. The Buddha then tells the monks, "If the king hadn't killed his father, he would have become a stream-enterer listening to the talk." So here's somebody who's pretty hopeless. The fact that he killed his father means that he's going to go to hell. But the Buddha gives him a talk to inspire him to have a change of heart so that even after he comes out of hell he'll be headed in a better direction.

So there's nobody who's totally hopeless, simply that sometimes it's going to take a long, long time for your goodwill to show any benefits to the other person or to influence the other person. But meanwhile, the goodwill does have an immediate influence on you. For that reason, you've got to protect it. You have to be patient and enduring for that reason. Because the mind that slips into ill will can do a lot of harm to itself.

So remember, this is a determination, something you have to make up your mind you want to do. It's not going to come naturally. Once you've made up your mind to do that, treat it as a form of mindfulness. You've got to keep it in mind. May all beings understand the causes for true happiness and be willing and able to act on them: That's the attitude you want to maintain. One of the reasons we meditate is to strengthen our mindfulness so that once you've got the mind on the right course like this, it doesn't suddenly reverse itself. It sticks with it all the way through.