

Mending the Social Fabric

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I've been reading about past pandemics. They say if you've seen one pandemic, you've seen one pandemic—in other words, they're all very different—but one thing they do have in common is that they tend to rip the social fabric apart. Institutions and ways of living together tend to fall to pieces. And one of the worst signs of social breakdown is scape-goating. Some pandemics were blamed on outsiders; some were blamed on the doctors. Neither case was helpful. And especially now as we're living more in isolation with social distancing: A lot of what creates the social fabric is being worn thin.

So we have to think about the qualities that can help mend the social fabric. And as usual, the Buddha has a list. There are six elements in the list. The first three have to do with goodwill: physical acts of goodwill, verbal acts of goodwill, mental acts of goodwill. The Buddha could have simply said “acts of goodwill” and made those three categories into one, but I think he wanted to emphasize goodwill, goodwill, goodwill, in everything you do, not just ideas or chants or meditations. When you act with your body, you move your body, try to do it with goodwill, for yourself, for those around you. When you speak, don't open your mouth until you're sure you're speaking out of goodwill. When you think of others, think of them with goodwill. Think of yourself with goodwill.

Because without goodwill, society breaks down, even without pandemics. We can see this in the divisiveness that's been sown in our society for decades, where people have found it in their interest to keep people from talking to one another, to get people polarized. There are people who feel that the institutions of our society should be aimed only at making money. They pooh-pooh the idea that they should be also engaged in helping with human values. This tears the society apart because it lacks goodwill. It reduces everything to dog-eat-dog—a society where no human being can be happy to live.

Ideally, when you think about other people, think about how they feel. Think about what their true happiness would be. Think about what your own true happiness would be. And when you think in terms of true happiness, you begin to realize there doesn't have to be a conflict, because true happiness comes from within. True happiness isn't like material things, where the more you have, the less other people have. Actually, the more you can develop your inner resources for happiness, the more you'll have to offer for others.

So this is how we start with goodwill. We start with goodwill for ourselves, looking for true happiness inside, realizing that there will be frustrations, there will be disappointments outside, but those don't really matter. They come and

they go. As the Buddha said, when you see someone who is totally miserable—a leper on the side of the road, without enough food to eat, without enough shelter to protect from the elements—remind yourself: You’ve been there. You see people who are wealthy with way more than they need: You’ve been there, too. As Ajaan Fuang once said, when you think of some sensual pleasure that you’d really like, it’s a sign that you’ve had it before and now you miss it. Think about that for a bit and it’s enough to give rise to a sense of *samvega*. Because if you do get it, well, you’re going to lose it again, you’re going to miss it again, and you’ll try to find it again, and it just keeps going around and around and around.

True goodwill means that you look for happiness somewhere else, inside, in the qualities of the mind. So always keep in mind what it means to have goodwill, and then try to express it in your words, in your actions. Don’t let your emotions take over and don’t let the news get you discouraged. There are a lot of people suffering out there right now. We all have our own connections with people who are suffering, but the fact that we’re able to meditate means that we’ve got an opportunity to do something good. Spread thoughts of goodwill around. You create a good energy around yourself that way. And the world needs more good energy of this sort. It’s what helps to mend the social fabric.

After all, if human society were not based on goodwill, it wouldn’t be a very desirable society to live in. People tend to forget that when they have other things, lots of things, lots of toys to play with. But when a crisis strips things bare, it reminds us of what’s really valuable. What makes social life or shared life as human beings livable is the goodwill we have for one another. That’s why the Buddha emphasized goodwill, goodwill goodwill at the beginning of his list of the things that create a sense of amiability, friendship, of valuing one another.

The next quality is sharing what you’ve got. Whatever gains you have, share them with others. Again, we see a fair amount of hoarding going on. And that, too, helps rip the fabric of society apart. Someone asked me yesterday about the value of looking for things that would help build up resistance to the virus. As I told him, make sure that when you get some, get some for your neighbors as well. Because you never know when you’re going to have to depend on your neighbors.

So when something special comes your way, don’t take all of it for yourself. Make sure there’s enough for others. The Buddha instructed senior monks, when they were invited to a shared meal, that the seniors should always make sure that everybody, all the way down to the last, most junior monk, had enough. In line with seniority, it’s true that the more senior monks always get first dibs, but that doesn’t mean they should abuse that privilege. You have to

think about everybody else: Make sure everybody has a good share. That makes life a lot easier for everybody. Someday, when you're in need of help from other people, they'll be happy to give it. It's the hoarders who make things fall apart. So here again, sharing is a basic human value that makes human society livable, creates the human social fabric. Especially in days like this, with things that are pulling the social fabric apart, we have to mend it as much as we can. So share.

The next quality is having virtues that are in tune with one another. That doesn't mean that everybody keeps a low level of virtue and makes sure that everybody else comes down to a low common level of virtue. The Buddha talks about being in tune with the virtues that are pleasing to the noble ones. In the Buddha's terms, these are called virtues that are unspotted, untorn. In other words, all your precepts are whole. At the same time, you don't exalt yourself over the fact that your precepts are better than other people's. You follow the precepts because you know that it's good for you. And when everybody is on the same wavelength as to what kind of behavior is acceptable and what's not, then we can live together easily.

This can be extended to what's needed to be done to minimize the dangers of the disease.

But that then relates to the final quality, which is that we have right view in common. When your views are in common, then it's easy to speak, it's easy to understand one another. It's a happy place to be. And what does right view tell you? That your important issues are in the mind. Aging, illness, and death will come. Separation will come. We can put up walls to defend against these things, but then something's going to break them down. That doesn't mean we shouldn't put up the walls. In the Buddha's analogy, there are diseases that will go away regardless of whether you have medicine, there are those that will go away only if you get medicine, and then there are those that won't go away even if you do get medicine. You don't know which category you fall into, so you take the medicine.

In the same way, there are dangers we can protect against, along with dangers we don't know about. You protect against the ones you can foresee, and you don't get discouraged about the unknowable ones. At the same time, though, you realize that this is, at best, a holding action. So your real efforts have to be here in the mind. This is why, even in the midst of the pandemic, meditation is the most important thing you can do, because this is where your real treasures are. This is where your real refuge is, finding that spot in the mind where things outside don't matter. Otherwise, they eat away, eat away, eat away, eat away, even in your sleep. You have no chance to rest, no chance to pull yourself together. And you're going to wear out. Even if getting worn out doesn't lead to a disease on your part, it leads to unskillful behavior toward others.

So both for your own sake and for the sake of those around you, look after your mind. You've got the breath. There's a lot that can be done with the breath to soothe the body, to soothe the mind, to heal the body, heal the mind, strengthen the body, strengthen the mind. And when we all see eye-to-eye on this, then it's a good society to live in. It makes it easier to share, because we remember that physical survival is not the big issue. The big issue is the survival of your goodness. With that in mind, it's easier to share; it's easier to have goodwill for others; it's easier to have goodwill for yourself. This is why, of the various qualities, right view is the most important.

Notice that virtue and right view are listed in what the Buddha says are your most important possessions, the things that, if you lose them, are a really serious loss. Whereas if you lose wealth, lose your health, even if you lose your relatives, it's not nearly as serious. After all, health, wealth, relatives come back. In the large scheme of things, as long as you're in samsara, you're going to meet the people you love again. Wealth that's gone comes back again. Your health's that's gone can come back again. But when you lose your virtue and you lose your right views, it can sometimes be a very long and miserable time before you get them back. You've got them now. Protect them. These are also the qualities that the Buddha said are the foundations for mindfulness, and mindfulness, of course, is the foundation for concentration.

So in mending the social fabric, you're also weaving together the fabric of your own refuge, the foundation for your refuge, your own inner wealth, your inner strengths. And this is how looking after society, looking after those around you, protects you. Because the qualities that are good for society are really good for you as well. When you look at things in these ways, there's no conflict. And when there's no conflict, the mind can settle down in peace and gain nourishment and strength from that peace.

So remember, goodwill in your physical actions, goodwill in your verbal actions, goodwill in your mental actions, sharing with one another, having a high level of virtue in common, having right view in common: These are the things that are good for us inside, and they mend the social fabric outside to keep it whole.