

## *Faith in Goodness*

*September 18, 2020*

When we meditate, it's a meritorious activity, although we may not like the word "merit." Replace it with the word "goodness." We're doing something good. It comes from the goodness of the heart.

It's good because we're looking for happiness in a way that's harmless—harmless to ourselves and harmless to other people. One of the aspects of goodness is that it breaks down barriers between us and others. So as we practice, we're basically showing that we have some faith in goodness: that it's not for nothing, that it's actually something that really exists.

When the Buddha explained karma, the first things he pointed to were generosity and gratitude: basic, basic forms of goodness—the implication being that if you have faith in goodness, you should have faith in the principle that we do have choices, and that the choices will give results depending on the quality of the motivation behind the choice. When talking about having faith in the principle of karma, or conviction in the principle of karma, it sounds rather dry and theoretical. But if you think of it as faith in goodness, it gives you a better idea of how you should relate to it.

We have this power within us to do good and to act on motives that are selfless, not in the sense that we would harm ourselves, but we're willing to give and we find it ennobling. There are times when it may be difficult to give, but by overcoming the difficulty, we become stronger, and we have more respect for ourselves.

So when you engage in the meditation, it's meritorious. It's good. The Buddha focuses on the *brahmaviharas*, and particularly the *brahmavihara* of goodwill. But goodwill includes compassion and empathetic joy. You see people who are suffering, or who are creating the causes for suffering, and you don't just leave them and say, "Well, they deserve to suffer." You have compassion: *May they find some way of ending their suffering*. If there's anything that you can do to help, you're happy to help.

With empathetic joy, people are happy or creating the causes of happiness, and you're happy for them. You don't resent their happiness; you're not envious of it. After all, when you have goodwill for beings, when you want them to be happy, well, this is what happiness looks like. You want to be fair. You don't want to have your empathy depend on your likes or dislikes.

The same with the compassion: compassion for all those who are acting in miserable ways, all those who are doing miserable things, seeing that they're digging a hole for themselves, and feeling compassion for their desire for happiness.

What that this comes down to is goodness, realizing that *we* want happiness; *other beings* want happiness. Sometimes they can be very misguided and confused about how to find it, but

there's that spark that we all have in common, just as we have suffering in common. We can't feel other beings' suffering. Sometimes we can see the signs and we can empathize, but we have to assume that when they suffer, it hurts just as much as when we suffer.

When there's a part of your mind that feels pained by that realization, that's when you develop the heart, the good heart, that wants to develop goodness—in other words, finding happiness in a way that doesn't cause any pain to anybody, doesn't cause any harm. A happiness that erases boundaries and creates a connection.

Now, there are some people, of course, whose behavior is such that you may not want to be connected with them. But at least have sympathy: To whatever extent they're doing unskillful things, they're suffering. In some cases, the best course of action is to wish them well but to realize that you're going to have to go separate ways.

That's why the *brahmaviharas* include equanimity as well. You think of all the many, many lifetimes we've been through, and all the unresolved relationships we've had. It's very rare that a relationship comes to good closure. They start abruptly, then they end abruptly, and in the meantime there can be some very harmful, very painful things that happen and never get resolved. You have to accept the fact that that's the way it is in samsara; that's the way it is with this wandering on. When you read history, what you read is basically a lot of missed opportunities. And that's the way it is with a lot of relationships: missed opportunities. You have to accept the fact that that's the way things are, because there's work to be done.

The Buddha says when you're experiencing grief, you allow its expression to whatever extent you feel that you're accomplishing something by expressing your grief. But then there comes a point where you realize you have work you have to do. The work, of course, is straightening out your own mind, realizing that if you don't straighten it out, you're setting yourself up for a lot of many, many more lifetimes of just this same sort of thing. So express your grief to whatever extent you feel is useful, make merit for those who have passed away, and then remember that this is the way it's going to be: As long as you haven't pulled that arrow out of your own heart, you're going to be the victim of a lot more arrows.

The good thing is that as you develop more good qualities in the mind that are strengths, that provide the path away from all the sorrows that we usually experience, you find that you have more goodness to share. So you're willing to dedicate it to all those in the past who've wronged you, all those you've wronged. In that way, as you leave the world, you leave a lot of good behind. And that's something of which you can be proud. It's a genuine basis for self-esteem.