

Appreciating Goodness

October 18, 2020

Close your eyes and watch your breath. Spread thoughts of goodwill to yourself, thoughts of goodwill to all the beings around you, and then get back to the breath. Watch the breath coming in; watch the breath going out.

We do this because the mind needs to be trained. Try to find a breath that feels comfortable so that the mind will be happy to stay here, because you want to get the mind under your control. We live in a world with lots of dangers, and you don't want your own mind to be a danger to you. But if your mind is not under your control, what can you depend on? You can learn the best things, you can be told the best things, you can read the best things, you can remember them, but if the mind can't stay under your control, then a lot of that knowledge is going to be useless. So make up your mind you're going to stay right here.

There's a story in the Canon where King Pasenadi Kosala comes to see the Buddha in the middle of the day, and the Buddha asks the king, "What are you coming from, here in the middle of the day?" And the king, in a remarkable display of frankness, says "Well, just the typical things of someone who's obsessed with power."

And the Buddha says, "Suppose someone were to come from the east, saying that there's a huge mountain moving in from the east, crushing all living beings in its path. Another trustworthy person comes from the south and says there's another mountain coming in from the south, crushing all living beings in its path. Another mountain from the west, another mountain from the north—altogether four mountains are moving in from the four directions. With this horrible destruction of life, given that human life is so hard to come by, what would you do?"

And the king says, "What else could I do but right conduct, Dhamma conduct, meritorious deeds, skillful deeds?" In other words, the king sees that when life is going to be destroyed like this, you have to find something that gets past the destruction of life. And the goodness you do is what can take you past that kind of destruction.

Then the Buddha goes on to say, "Well, I tell you now, great king: Aging, illness, and death are moving in, crushing all living beings in their wake. What are you going to do?" The king gives the same response, "What else can I do but Dhamma conduct, right conduct, meritorious deeds, skillful deeds?"

We live in a world with lots of dangers. Our protection is our own actions, because our actions go beyond death. In other words, the results of the actions carry over into our next lifetime. As the Buddha said, when you've done good things—you've been generous, you've observed the precepts, you've been meditating—then those good deeds will be waiting for you, the happiness created by those good deeds will be waiting for you on the other side, just like

relatives happy to see a long lost relative come home. What he doesn't go on to say is that the bad things you've done will be waiting for you like enemies, ready to get back at you.

So, what are you going to do? We live in a world where there are dangers all around, and the proper response is heedfulness. As the Buddha said, all skillful actions come out of heedfulness. It's not the case that the mind is innately good or innately bad. The mind is innately almost anything, or it has the potential to be almost anything, and it can change very quickly, which is why it has to be trained.

So we come together on a day like this to do good deeds and skillful deeds. It's a sign that we're being heedful, that we're looking beyond the immediate pleasures we can gain from material gain, status, praise, sensual pleasures. We realize that there's got to be something better in life, because when aging, illness and death come in, a lot of that gain, status, pleasure, and praise will mean nothing. We want something that's meaningful, and among of the most meaningful things are the good qualities you've developed in the mind and the good actions you've left behind in this world.

After all, this world is not a place to stay. It's a place where we come through. The irony is that the things you try to hold on to as you come through the world—the things you gather up and clutch to your breast—are the things that are going to be torn from your grasp. Whereas the good things you leave behind will follow you.

Now, skillful deeds and meritorious deeds are different things. "Meritorious" is a word that we don't like in English. It sounds like Girl Scouts, Boy Scouts, merit badges. But the Buddha says to think about it in another way: It's the goodness you've done, and it's a type of happiness. He lists three types of goodness in particular—generosity, virtue, and the development of goodwill—because these are ways of finding happiness that don't cause any harm to anybody.

The Buddha never said that the search for happiness is a bad thing. He never said that you should try to deny your happiness for the sake of others. He said you should work for your own happiness in a way that actually increases the happiness of others, or at the very least doesn't harm them in any way. In that way, you're being responsible in your search for happiness. That builds a solid happiness right now and goes on into the future.

When you're generous, the Buddha recommends that you give anything you want to anybody you want. It's an exercise of your freedom of will. You realize that you're not a slave to your greed. You have something that you could use yourself, but you say, "No, I'd rather give it to somebody else." You begin to realize there are gradations of well-being, gradations of happiness in the world. There's the pleasure that comes from consuming something, but there's a greater pleasure that comes from giving something away, and you realize that that's a much more long-lasting happiness. And as I said, it's an exercise in freedom of will. You don't have to be a slave to your drives, a slave to your urges. When you see that something's going to give good results and you go ahead and do it, that's an exercise of you freedom.

As for virtue, that's when you learn how to say No to your unskillful tendencies. You realize there are some ways you could gain by, say, lying, or by stealing, taking something from somebody else. But then you realize that the gain you'd get is not really worth it, because you don't have any respect for yourself. Self-respect is something you can't buy, but you can gain it by learning how to say No to what you know are going to be harmful urges.

And then there's the development of universal goodwill. Goodwill is something we tend to feel for some people but not necessarily for everybody. But if you want to be able to trust yourself to treat people well, you've got to have goodwill for everybody, even for people who you think have done horrible things. After all, if they could change their ways, it'd be better for them and for the world around them. And that's what goodwill means: If you see that someone's behaving in an unskillful way, your hope is that they might see the error of their ways and be willing and able to act on the causes of true happiness, without your trying to settle any scores first. That would be for their own good, your own good, and for the good of the world. When you can develop goodwill like this as a universal attitude, then you can trust yourself more around other people, that you're not going to let slip things that are going to be harmful.

So these are meritorious deeds that will stand you in good stead.

Then there are skillful deeds. That's when you learn how to look out for the greed, aversion, and delusion in the mind, and learn how to say No to them. This training starts with being meritorious, but it goes on beyond that, it goes deeper into the meditation, as you learn to see ways in which the mind is causing itself unnecessary suffering, and you can root out those causes.

The mind becomes a lighter mind, more spacious mind, a mind you can trust a lot more. The scariest thing in life—even scarier than aging, illness, and death—is the realization you can't trust your own mind. You know something is good, you know something is right, and yet you can't do it. Or you know something is wrong but you can't help yourself from following that. That kind of mind can't be trusted. It's as if you have an enemy inside you.

So you want to learn how to root out these things, so that wherever you go, you're safe. You can depend on your own actions. That way, the dangers of the world outside become nothing, because you're not creating any danger from the inside.

So as we come together on a day like this, we're trying to develop goodness: We're observing the precepts, we're being generous, we've been meditating. It's a sign of heedfulness, a sign that we're taking our happiness seriously and we're being responsible about how we go about it. That way, when the mountains move in, we have something that the mountains can't crush. They can take our health away, they can take our life away, but they can't take our goodness away. Our goodness will stand us in good stead for a long time to come.

So we do good like this—meritorious deeds, skillful deeds—and we rejoice in one another's goodness. That's another aspect of a day like this. Sometimes you come and do

something good on your own, but it's even better when you see lots of people are doing it together. It gives you a sense of confidence in the human race, that there's still some goodness to us, and there's some goodness that we can pass on to the next generation.

So at times when you're feeling down about the human race, think back on days like this, when people are getting together to do something good, finding something that even mountains moving in from the four directions can't crush, and sharing it with one another. That's how the world becomes a better and better place to pass through, as we're on our way to something even better.