

Skilled in Aims

September 28, 2021

That chant just now is called the *Karaṇīya Mettā Sutta* because the first words are *karaṇīya*, “what should be done.” The whole phrase is, “what should be done by one skilled in aims.”

To be skilled in aims, you have to think about the long-term: What would be conducive to a true, long-term happiness? Much of the sutta is about goodwill. You live a life that doesn’t place a burden on other people, and your attitude toward all beings is: “May they be happy.”

You protect that attitude “as a mother would protect her only child.” Sometimes we hear it said that we should cherish everybody in the same way that a mother cherishes her child, but that’s impossible. There are people out there you like, people you don’t like. How are you going to cherish and protect them all? It is possible, as the Buddha said, to provide safety from your quarter by not breaking the precepts, but the important thing you want to protect is your attitude of goodwill, because goodwill, basically, is an aspect of right view.

There’s a passage where the Buddha says that anyone who has ill will has wrong view. So look into that. Mundane right view is basically about abandoning what’s unskillful, developing what’s skillful. And you do that why? Because you want to find true happiness. And what does true happiness involve? It involves not harming anybody. So there it is: Woven into basic right view is goodwill.

Then, of course, with the four noble truths, the fact that you’re trying to put an end to suffering shows that you have goodwill for yourself. The way you do it is through the noble eightfold path, and that involves right view, right resolve, all the way down through right concentration, including right speech and right action—again, virtue. You’re acting in harmless ways.

So you want to protect your right view—protect your goodwill—regardless, and this means making it independent of everything else, making it bigger than everything else. The image that the Buddha gives is of goodwill as large as the earth, goodwill as large and as cool as the River Ganges, goodwill as like space. Beings walk on the earth, they swim in the Ganges, and they go through space. They don’t encompass the space; the space encompasses them. The earth supports them. The water supports them. So think of your goodwill as being like that. Beings can come and go in your life, and they come and go within the framework of your goodwill.

But goodwill is a determination—you have to “be determined on this mindfulness,” as the Buddha said. It’s something you have to keep in mind. Otherwise you forget and go back to your attitude of having goodwill for people you like and not for people you don’t like. When you try to make it universal, it’s a Brahmā attitude, which is higher than a human attitude.

That means you’ve got to make your mind like a Brahmā mind. You do that through the concentration. You focus the mind on a pleasure that has nothing to do with sensuality. In fact, it’s when the mind gets past sensual thoughts, secluded from sensual thoughts and secluded from all types of unskillful dhammas—unskillful qualities from wrong view all the way up through wrong mindfulness—that you lift the level of your mind. You give it a good foundation inside—a sense of well-being inside—that doesn’t have to depend on any harm to anybody at all: a well-being totally generated by the mind that’s quiet.

We focus on the breath and, in working on the breath, we work on the mind. The intention to do this comes from within the mind. It’s not the case that the breath pulls at you and says, “Hey, hey, hey, pay attention to me!” It’s because we have right view, realizing that the mind needs to be provided with a sense of nourishment inside that doesn’t depend on things outside, that we look for it in the breath. Then we cultivate the breath. This all comes from within.

And that’s a good message. We live in this world where things go up and down, and there are times when you wonder why you would want to be in the human race at all, when you look at the behavior of people around you. But then you remind yourself: There have been good people in the past and they’ve shown us the path. They’ve shown us how we can raise the level of our minds, deepen the level of our minds, make them more solid, make them more encompassing—larger than the bad things that people do outside—and, that way, we have a foundation inside that we can depend on.

So we focus on the breath as a way of showing goodwill for ourselves, finding happiness in a way that doesn’t need to involve anyone else at all. Then, from that happiness inside—that well-being inside—then we’re much more likely to behave in ways that are skillful. It becomes easier to protect our goodwill “as a mother would protect her only child.”

Think of the example of the bandits trying to cut you up into pieces. The Buddha said that even in that case, you have to have goodwill, and the goodwill starts with them. There’s a long tradition that dates from the very last books of the Canon—they were added well after the Buddha passed away—that recommend that, when you’re developing goodwill, you start with yourself, and then you go to people who are easy, and then you go to people who are progressively harder. But

in the case of the bandits, the Buddha said, you have to start with them. After all, who knows how much longer you're going to last? They're cutting you up into little pieces. So your goodwill has to go straight to the bandits and then, from them, you spread it for everybody because, as you're dying, you don't want to be focused on ill will for anybody at all.

As you go through the Canon, you get impressed by how much emphasis the Buddha places on your attitude at that last moment of life. You can be living a good life and the results of your good kamma will show, but they might get cut off or interrupted for a while if there's a drop in your mind-state at the moment of death. And, conversely, you may have some bad kamma, but if you have a change of heart and the mind-state is lifted, you get at least a brief reprieve. And maybe in that reprieve you have the opportunity to develop the noble paths, the noble attainments, so that you can escape a lot of the kamma that you would have otherwise have to experience. At least it would be greatly weakened before you go.

So you want to make sure that your goodwill is quick. You're being sawed up; you don't want to think, "Well, may I be happy, may my parents be happy, may the people I love be happy, may my..." and then finally get to the bandits when who knows where you're going to be at that point. You have to start with the bandits and *then* go to all beings.

So practice your goodwill so that it's quick with regard to anybody—that it becomes the default mode—and this way you become skilled in aims, skilled in the goal. This is what should be done by someone who wants to be skilled in the goal.

Years back, I was sitting in on a class where this sutta was being explained. The teacher got to the first line, "This is what should be done...." Someone raised his hand—the teacher couldn't even finish the sentence—someone raised his hand and said, "Wait a minute, I thought there were no shoulds in Buddhism." The poor teacher was stymied. He spent the whole morning trying to explain. But it's pretty easy to explain: Of course, there are shoulds. The Buddha said his whole purpose as a responsible teacher was to give you a sense of what should and should not be done.

What Buddhism doesn't have is people giving commandments, forcing you to practice. We're here of our own free will because we've seen all the harm that can come when our actions aren't skillful and when we're not skilled in aims. We want to be skilled in aims, skilled in the goal, skilled in knowing what will lead to true happiness. And the way things are in the world is that, if you want true happiness, you've got to have goodwill. So you start with good intentions in this way and then you develop them.

It doesn't stop with simple good intentions. The Buddha teaches you to add heedfulness to your goodwill if you really want to be skilled in aims, realizing that your actions do make a difference, so you want to look carefully at what you do, and the real results of what you do.

You don't simply say, "I have good intentions, so it doesn't matter how things fall" as if your good intentions were all that was to be expected out of you. You're a human being. You have eyes. You should see the results of your actions. If you thought what you were doing was good but then it turns out the results weren't good, you should learn. Your willingness to learn is a sign that your goodwill is really genuine. You're not just going through the motions. You're not thinking nice sentiments and leaving them there; you want to carry through all the way.

So you're heedful of the little things, heedful of the harm that can be done by little things, and heedful of the good that can be done by good little things. That way, your goodwill becomes complete, and you really are skilled in aims, taking yourself to a place where you really want to go.