The Sublime Attitudes in Context

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We chant those phrases for the sublime attitudes of the Bhamaviharas every evening. And we do it with a purpose. They’re good things to think about before you meditate. They’re a good part of the meditation. Sometimes we forget that they’re meant to serve a higher purpose. These attitudes seem to be good things in and of themselves. But the Buddha always taught them in a context. And in the context, they’re means to a higher end. There’s a passage in the Canon where Sariputta goes to visit an old Brahmin who’s on his deathbed. And he reasons that these Brahmins regard going to gain union with Brahma as their goal. And so he teaches the Brahmin these four attitudes, not just in a simple form, but developing these attitudes towards all living beings. These are good things of all kinds, in all directions, without limit. And so the Brahmin does so, and he dies, and he becomes reborn as a Brahma. Sariputta goes back and sees the Buddha. The Buddha chastises him. He says, “You could have taken him further. You should have let him stop when there was more to do.” So these attitudes are good for certain things. But they only go so far. So it’s good to think about their context. Part of that context is that they’re often taught in the context of the teaching on karma. Because when you spread these attitudes or develop these attitudes, they’re meant to be developed with understanding. If you develop them without understanding, it’s like one of those fog machines or cloud machines they used to have on movie sets. A lot of dry ice, and you put fans behind it, and the fog comes out and obscures the set. These attitudes, if they’re developed without any understanding, do just that. They obscure the mind. The nice pink cloud of light of goodwill, compassion, empathetic joy, universal equanimity, gets spread out in all directions. It looks nice, it feels nice, but it can obscure a lot of things. When it’s just a cloud like that, then when the time comes actually to act on these attitudes, you often find them evaporating. You’ve got to realize that you need to develop these attitudes because you need them. Once sense their protection. They protect you against bad karma. In one of the contexts, the Buddha talks about people who sit and reflect on the teachings on karma and what’s skillful and unskillful. They realize they’ve done a lot of unskillful things in the course of their lives. So what are you going to do? If you get tied up in remorse, that just makes things worse. It saps away your strength. The best you can do is to resolve that you’re not going to repeat those mistakes. A good way to strengthen that resolve is to develop these attitudes. If you make a practice of reminding yourself that you always have to have goodwill for everybody you deal with, it makes it harder to treat them in cruel or harmful ways. This way you protect yourself from doing unskillful things. Your basic dealings with people should be based on goodwill. When you see that they’re suffering, you want to feel compassion for them. Again, you don’t want to pile on more suffering. When you see that they’re happy, you don’t want to be resentful or jealous, because that’s going to lead you to do unskillful things as well. When you see that there are situations that are beyond your control, you have to learn how to put them aside or let them go with equanimity. That way you don’t waste your strength on areas where you can’t make a difference, and you can focus your strength on areas where you can. Another principle of karma that’s useful to understand when you’re developing these attitudes is, particularly in the context of compassion and empathetic joy, when you see somebody who’s poor and miserable and suffering in all kinds of ways, you have to realize that what you see is not the sum total of their karmic account. In other words, this is no measure of the best they’ve been able to do in their lives, ever. We don’t go around with one single karmic account that has one balance. Each action is like a seed. You’ve got many seeds in your past. Other people have many seeds in their past as well. And just because the bad seeds are sprouting right now doesn’t mean that there aren’t any good seeds there. And conversely, the fact that good seeds are sprouting and bearing fruit right now doesn’t mean that there aren’t any bad seeds. So when you see somebody who’s in a position where they’re poorer than you or have a lot more difficulties than you do in life, remember, you could be there. You might have those seeds. They’re in your storehouse. And how would you want someone to behave toward you when those seeds began to sprout? What kind of help would you want from them? What kind of expressions of help would you want? Which ones would you find tedious and oppressive? Keep that in mind as you deal with these people. The same when you’re dealing with someone who’s had advantages that you don’t have now. The fact that they’re better off than you are or more successful than you are is not a reflection on you or your value as a person or their value as a person. Simply, those are the seeds that are sprouting right now. Maybe sometime down the line you’ll have good seeds that will sprout. Would you want the people around you to be jealous and resentful? What does that accomplish? In this way, these attitudes are not clouds. They actually sharpen your vision. They’re based on a very realistic look at what it is to be a human being, what it is to act, what attitudes you need in order to act in skillful ways. And if you’re really serious about developing them, you’ll find that they also help you bring up their opposites. This is also a useful practice. When you tell yourself you should have compassion for a certain person, but you don’t feel it or you feel very uncompassionate feelings about that person, you have to look into them. You can’t just slather them over with clouds of goodwill, and they won’t go away. You’ve got to probe and ask, “Why do I feel this way?” Why would you want this person to suffer? What do you really gain from that person suffering? What kind of actions are you going to do as a result of your lack of compassion? It’s the same with empathetic joy. Sometimes you tell yourself to be happy over so-and-so’s happiness, and you find a lot of resentment and jealousy resisting the idea. Probe into those. Find out what they’re all about. What misunderstandings they’re based on. This is an important part of the practice. You can’t pretend that these attitudes are not there, because they’ll just fester and grow. So you have to challenge them. You have to confront them. And to confront them successfully, you have to have a good understanding of this principle of karma, of why you need the positive attitudes and what understanding of the nature of action, the nature of happiness, and the nature of suffering that these attitudes are based on. When they’re based on understanding, they really do have an impact on your life. They’ll vanish and evaporate as soon as you’re leaving the meditation. If you’re mindful, you keep remembering that these are the attitudes that you need for the sake of your own happiness, as well as the sake of theirs, and that they require conscious cultivation. The Buddha never said that we’re basically good or that awareness is basically compassionate. The mind has potentials, but in and of itself, your awareness is neutral. It can know good things. It can know bad things. Compassion and good will have to be developed from an understanding, first realizing that if your happiness depends on other people’s misery, it’s not going to last. So you have to take their happiness into consideration. In that sense, it has to be cultivated. But at the other end of the spectrum, it’s a path. When you have fully developed these attitudes, the fact that they are constructed and fabricated is something you have to understand as well. Even equanimity, which is the most peaceful of them all, has its limitations. It’s something you do. It’s something fabricated. So it, in and of itself, can’t be your true nature. If you identify that as your true nature, or if you identify anything—all these good things, compassion, good will—that’s your true nature, then you’re stuck there. There’s no real release. You have to see that even these things are constructed. They’re based on intentions. You develop them for a certain purpose, but they have their limitations. That’s what the Buddha says. You have to see that even these things are constructed, and that way you go beyond them. Even good will is not self, i.e., it’s not you, it’s not yours. It’s something you use, but it’s not intrinsic. And right there lies your liberation. So it’s important that these attitudes be conjoined with wisdom and discernment and understanding. You have to use them when you need them and understand that you really do need them. It’s not just a nice gift to other people to make you feel good, but you really need them in order to keep yourself in line, to make sure that you’re not going to do things that you’re later going to regret. And you need them as a strong, motivating force in the practice. But there will come a point where you have to learn how to put them aside as well. As with everything else that you put aside in the path, it’s not that you lose them at that point. It’s just that you don’t identify yourself in their terms. It means you can pick them up and use them when you need them, and you can put them down when you don’t. In this way, you’re not limited even by the limitations of what they call immeasurable good will, compassion, empathetic joy, equanimity. You pick them up with discernment and you put them down with discernment. In that way, you’re holding no danger for the mind.

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