The Brahmaviharas & Karma

May 4, 2008

When you extend thoughts of goodwill, it’s often useful to put those thoughts into a verbal form. You could simply think of goodwill as a quality radiating from your heart, almost like a light that spreads out in all directions. That works too. But sometimes you want to express it in a thought so that you really understand what you are wishing for when you extend thoughts of goodwill. The phrases that we have at the end of the evening chant don’t come directly from the Buddha. They come from a part of the canon that was generally agreed to be later. When you search the canon to find how the Buddha expressed these thoughts, the primary one is in the Garaniya Meta Sutta. Spread thoughts of goodwill to all beings of all kinds, seen and unseen, long, tall, short, big, small. To all without exception. And then he adds something very interesting. “Let no one deceive another or despise anyone anywhere, or through anger or irritation wish for another to suffer.” In other words, when you’re spreading thoughts of goodwill, you’re not only wishing that other people be happy, but you’re also wishing that they avoid the causes of unhappiness. Avoid unskillful actions. This is an important point to remember, because our thoughts of goodwill have to be understood in the context of karma. When you spread thoughts of goodwill, you’re not simply saying, “May you be happy just as you are,” or “Continue acting the way you are and be happy.” You have to understand that when you’re spreading thoughts of goodwill, many times it’s a wish for people to change their behavior. Because if they’re acting in ways that are going to cause unhappiness, they’re certainly not going to be happy. So you focus on the causes as well as the results. That means when you’re actually trying to help people to be happy. Again, you have to focus on the causes. You have to look at their behavior. What are they doing that’s causing themselves to be unhappy? Then you try to figure out ways to induce them to change their behavior. This is why the Buddha said that the gift of dharma is the greatest gift of all. But you have to be selective in how you give that gift. There are a lot of people who don’t want to hear it from you. We live in a society that’s very impervious to lessons in skillfulness. People have their way of doing things, and we’ve got to stick with that way, and they don’t want to hear anything else. So sometimes you have to act in a more roundabout way. In other words, you have to embody happiness in your actions, in your attitude, in your demeanor. When people see that you’ve been practicing the dharma and you seem to be happier, then they’ll be interested. Then they’ll ask. In other words, you want to make sure that they’re receptive before you start teaching dharma or explaining the dharma. Jon, leave it to me. Everyone said that when you try to explain the dharma to people who aren’t interested, it’s idle chatter. It’s a form of wrong speech. So you have to be careful. You might actually turn them off more than you turn on their interest. This is why equanimity is part of the practice of the Brahma-viharas. The first three are wishes. May all beings be happy. May they not experience suffering. May they stay in their happiness if they are happy. Equanimity is simply a statement of fact. All beings are the heirs to their actions. You have to accept that fact, understand it, if the rest of the Brahma-vihara is going to work, both in the sense of understanding what it means to wish happiness for other people. And in the sense of trying to figure out how to induce them to act in ways that are going to lead to more happiness. You have to bring some head to this heart practice. In most of the Buddhist languages, the word for “mind” and “heart” are the same word. Or else they’re used interchangeably. In Pali, the word for “mind” and “heart” is citta, which means mind, but also we talk about metajittena, something done with a thought, with a mind or a heart of goodwill. So in Pali, when you train the heart, you train the mind. When you train the mind, you train the heart. The two have to go together. You simply sit there wishing, wishing, wishing for people to be happy, but you don’t understand what you’re wishing for. It doesn’t go very far. And it can lead to unskillful behavior on your own part. An understanding of karma also helps spreading thoughts of compassion and developing thoughts of empathetic joy. When you see that someone’s suffering, a misunderstanding of karma would say, “Well, they’re suffering. They deserve to suffer, so what can you do about it?” The Buddha never said that people deserve to suffer. It’s simply that one type of action tends to lead to a certain sort of suffering. Another type of action leads to a certain sort of happiness. There’s a tendency. It’s not ironclad. And the results of those particular actions, when they show up later on in time, are also affected by the state of mind of the person who’s receiving the results. As the Buddha said, if it’s a state of mind that you’re easily overcome by pain or easily overcome by pleasure, then if it was an unskillful action, the results are going to be really felt very strongly. Or if you have a very narrow, confining mind, a mind that hasn’t developed the Brahman Mahārāja, again, the pain is going to be felt very strongly. The analogy is a big hunk of salt. Take the hunk of salt and you throw it into a glass of water. You can’t drink the water because there’s so little water there. That’s the narrow mind. Take the same hunk of salt and throw it into a river. You can still drink the water in the river because there’s just so much water. That’s an expansive mind. That’s the mind that’s been trained not to be overcome by pain and pleasure. When you see somebody suffering, again, teaching them the Dhamma is a helpful way to help lessen the suffering. You have to watch out for the understanding that says, and you often hear it said, “You want to see someone’s past actions, you look at their present condition. You want to see their future condition, you look at their present actions.” That assumes that you have one single karma account, and what you see in the present moment is the running balance. But that’s not how it works. Each act of karma is a seed. You don’t have to think about how many acts of karma you’ve committed over how many lifetimes. Just think about it in the course of one day. How many choices do you make? Some of them are good, some of them are bad, some of them go back and forth. That’s just one day. You’ve been planting seeds all day long. You’ve been doing that for weeks, months, years. Lifetimes. Some of the seeds grow quickly, give their fruit, and then die. Others grow slowly, give their fruit, and then die. Some of them grow slowly, but then they keep on giving fruit for a long time. So you’ve got a whole field full of these things. What you see at any one moment is simply what’s bearing fruit right now. You don’t know how many good people have already borne fruit and disappeared, or how many have yet to bear fruit and disappear. This applies to you, it applies to everybody else. So when you see somebody suffering, you don’t see the sum total of all their past actions. You see a tiny part. So the idea of being compassionate to that person is not a futile thing. You just may be the right person to nurture a few good seeds in that person. You’re either helping to inspire them to produce a few good seeds right now or induce some past seeds to bear fruit. So when you see somebody suffering and you can help, go ahead and help. The mere fact that they’re suffering now doesn’t mean they have to deserve to keep on suffering in the future. The same principle applies to thoughts of empathetic joy. You see somebody who’s happy right now. You don’t know how much longer that happiness is going to last. When you spread thoughts of empathetic joy, you’re basically saying, “May they continue to produce the type of karma that’s going to keep them happy.” Or if they’re simply living off the fruits of past good actions, and they’re misbehaving right now, you don’t think in a vindictive way and hope for the lightning strike to come that’s going to wipe out the results of their past good actions, so they can get some of the bad karma that they seem so obviously to deserve. That doesn’t help anybody. What you’re wishing for is that people learn how to behave in skillful ways, whether they’re currently suffering or currently happy. So proper understanding of karma helps you understand that when you’re wishing thoughts of goodwill, you’re wishing for good behavior in the world—for yourself, for the people around you, regardless of whether you like or dislike them. Goodwill doesn’t mean you have to love somebody. This is why loving-kindness is not an especially good translation for metta. You simply have to wish that they be happy, that they act in ways that lead to happiness. And if you can’t influence them in that direction, that’s when you develop thoughts of equanimity for the purpose of focusing your efforts in areas where you can make a difference. So it’s important that we bring some head to this heart practice, bring some understanding to these feelings we’re trying to develop, because we regard them in this way. It’s a lot easier to maintain these feelings and help them to grow and become a permanent part of the way we treat the world. We realize there’s no need to wish ill on anybody. We certainly don’t benefit. And even if there are people we dislike, we wish that they would stop whatever unskillful behavior they’re engaged in. We’ll benefit. The world around them will benefit. This kind of wish is something you can hold on to at all times. Even when you dislike the other person. It’s because you understand what you’re doing. You understand happiness. You understand how happiness is brought about, so that when you’re wishing for happiness, it’ll all make sense. It’s not some vague, touchy-feely kind of thing. It’s a hard-headed look at the world, understanding how happiness comes about and what needs to be done. And when you can bring both your head and your heart to this, that’s a practice that can develop and keep on growing. you

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