Reliability

December 2, 2010

These four brahmaviharas—goodwill, compassion, empathetic joy, equanimity—are emotions that we should try to develop as much as we can. They’re actually more than emotions. There’s a virtuous aspect to them as well. If you really feel goodwill for others, you don’t want to harm them. The problem is, people like to feel these feelings because they feel good. They’re nice things to feel. And that’s not to be sneezed at. It’s one of the reasons why we have these reflections every evening before we meditate, to get the mind in the right mood. When you’re actively developing thoughts of goodwill, compassion, empathetic joy, equanimity, you feel better about yourself. That makes it easier for the mind to settle down. When you feel good about yourself, it’s easier to have the kind of self-esteem that’s needed to convince yourself that this is something you can do, that you actually can meditate, that you can get the mind in concentration. When you run against obstacles, you need that self-esteem in order to pick yourself up and keep on going. But it’s more than just feeling good. It’s learning to develop the motivations where you can trust yourself to do good. Because if you allow ill will to come into your mental equation, if you allow yourself to get worked up about things you don’t like, cold-hearted towards people suffering, jealous of their happiness, then you can’t trust yourself to do the right thing. Or say the right thing, or think the right thing. And those actions have influences that spread out, which is why thoughts of goodwill are good for you and good for others. You’re training yourself so you can trust yourself more. But simply having the attitude of being able to trust yourself is not enough. You have to find something more solid inside. If you have any other attachments, any other hungers inside, they’re going to come out and take over. So this is why we have to develop not only concentration but also insight to understand where the mind is feeding. And wherever the mind is feeding, of course, it’s going to be very possessive. It doesn’t want to have its food source taken away. This could be anything, material wealth, status, relationships, praise, wherever the mind takes its sustenance, especially if it’s on things outside or on the simple pleasures of the body, health of the body. On the one hand, it’s leaving itself exposed to outside dangers. On the other, if anything happens to that source of food, you’re going to fight back. It’s at times like that when your virtue suddenly goes by the board. This is why John Lee said that the Brahma-viharas are food for virtue. But it’s the concentration and the insight that makes virtue really solid. Sometimes we hear the triple training lined up. First there’s virtue, then there’s concentration, then there’s discernment. And then when you talk about the four noble dhammas, then you add release on at the end. But it’s not just a one-two-three-step kind of program. Your virtue helps your concentration and your discernment. Your concentration helps the virtue and the discernment. The more concentrated you are, the more you find that sense of ease and well-being inside. The easier it is to stick by the precepts that you’ve promised you’re going to maintain. The main cause for breaking the precepts is sensual desire. So to cut that off, you’ve got to find an alternative source of happiness. As the Buddha once said, no matter how much you may understand the drawbacks of sensual desire, if you don’t have an alternative source of pleasure, starting with the ease and rapture of the first jhana, you’re not going to be able to overcome your attachment to sensual passions. You’re going to keep on coming back, coming back as the mind. If it doesn’t have better food to eat, it’s going to go back and eat the same old stuff it’s been eating all along. So the concentration gives you an alternative sense of well-being, so you’re a lot less tempted to break the precepts. And then, of course, discernment helps to develop your concentration. And your virtue. You see things more clearly, where your true well-being lies. And you can see what’s coming and going in the mind, all these little desires, all these little voices in the mind. The more discerning you are, the more you’re able to see that you don’t have to identify yourself with any of the unskillful ones. You’re also more and more skilled at learning how to say no to anything that comes up that seems like you’d enjoy doing it, but you know that down the line it’s going to cause trouble. And you can stir yourself to do the things that may seem hard to do, but down the line are going to reward you with a long-term happiness. Discernment also helps with your concentration. You see more clearly exactly what’s going on in the mind. When the Buddha talks about five-factored noble concentration, he goes through the four jhanas, and then he adds his fifth factor, which is the ability to pull yourself up a little bit from any of the other jhanas. And notice what’s going on. The analogy he gives is of a person who’s sitting watching someone who’s lying down, or someone who’s standing watching someone who’s sitting. You’re backed up a little bit and above, and you can see everything that that person is doing. You can see what the mind is doing to stay with its object, to what extent it’s creating, even in that state of concentration, unnecessary stress. And it’s this ability to create a good, solid state of concentration and to use your discernment first to cut away any things that would keep you out of the concentration, and then to be able to step back from it a bit and to watch what still is lacking, what still is. So you can drop it. Not just drop the concentration, but drop any stressful elements in it. This is one of the main techniques for arriving at that fourth noble dharma, which is release. When the mind has gained release, that’s when it can really trust itself. You know you have something that nobody else can touch, nothing else can touch, not even time or space. You’ve reached a happiness that’s really secure. And that’s when your goodwill is complete. At that point, you don’t need anything from anybody. From that point on, whatever actions you have are purely a gift. But it is important that in order to bring the mind to that trustworthy state, you have to develop the quality of being trustworthy yourself. Buddha said that the primary prerequisite for a student he’d take on if he wanted someone who was truthful and observant. Because if you’re not truthful with others, not truthful with yourself, you can’t really develop the discernment you need in order to develop the path. There’ll be all these blind spots and these screens you put up inside the mind. So it’s important that we work on this virtue of truthfulness. Because everything else depends on it. I was reading one of the John Lee’s dharma talks where he was saying that of all the different perfections, truthfulness, or truth, is the foremost. Without it, none of the others can be developed. So you have to be reliable in order to find something that’s even more reliable. So always keep this quality in mind.

[https://www.dhammatalks.org/Archive/y2010/101202%20Reliability.mp3](https://www.dhammatalks.org/Archive/y2010/101202 Reliability.mp3)