Goodwill for the Whole Committee

September 30, 2011

Jon Fore once commented that all you really need to know or to trust in as you meditate is the principle of action, that you really do have choices. And when you act on the choices, it really does make a difference. You can choose to act in a skillful way or an unskillful way. If you act based on skillful intentions, the results are going to be good, tend in a good direction. If you act on unskillful intentions, they’re going to tend in a painful direction. And action here doesn’t mean just the actions of the body or your speech. All actions come out of the mind. That’s why we train the mind. The mind gets more and more sensitive to its own actions. What’s radical about all this is what counts as an action. There are lots of things that we think of as things or identities that the Buddha would prefer that we think of as actions, because they’re a lot more fruitful if you look at them as actions. Part of it is your sense of who you are. You make choices to identify with certain things, certain skills, certain activities. And as you’ve probably noticed, your choice of who to identify as is not always consistent. Sometimes you feel pulled in many directions. The Buddha gives the image of a series of animals all tied together by the leash. There’s an alligator that wants to go down into the river. There’s a monkey that wants to go up into the trees. There’s a jackal that wants to go into the cemetery. There’s a dog that wants to go into a village. And just so happens, whichever one happens to be strongest at any one time pulls all the other animals in its direction. That’s what we’ve got going on inside. So to get some peace, to be able to have a post that you tie them to. That’s why we meditate, to get the mind to settle down with the breath, to be here with the body and get your awareness immersed in the body. So it’s not always flowing out. And as for any voices that come up in the mind, remember, they’re activities. They’re not really people. You’ll notice certain personalities. They either help or hinder you with the meditation. You can identify some of them as people you’ve known, people you’ve grown up with, teachers, parents, friends, ideas you’ve picked up from media. They’re all in there. And note the other identities that you’ve taken on yourself, that you’ve cobbled together from other people’s examples, or things you had to think up on the spur of the moment when you were suffering. Because each of these identities is based around a desire. It’s based around a certain idea for happiness, a certain strategy for how you’re going to go about finding happiness. And it’s good to see them as that, as strategies, as actions. Because you can recognize them and you realize you don’t have to identify with them. But to break the identity with the unskillful ones, first you have to develop some skillful habits to replace them so you have a larger range of choices. This is why we listen to the Dhamma. This is why we read things that inspire us to believe in the principle of action, in the principle of skillful action, and give us some ideas of what skillful approaches might be. This is where it is useful to study, to read, to listen, to enlarge the range of your imagination and the range of your skills. But then the real skill comes in learning how to deal with these different members of the committee, or members of the crowd. Sometimes it’s not even organized enough to be a committee. And again, this is where you try to get the mind to settle down so you can see these voices without letting them sneak in and slip into you. So that when they say they’re bored, you believe you’re bored. When they’re frustrated, you believe you’re frustrated. Just notice, okay, there’s frustration there. It’s an action. There’s boredom there. It’s an action. And it’s a choice you can make. Do you want to identify with that? Or would you rather identify with a meditator here? Try to stick with a meditator. And then your parent voices will come in saying, “You’ve got to do this, you’ve got to do that,” some of which are helpful and some of which are not. So watch out for those too. But remember, each of these is a strategy. And at one point, some place, it must have worked at least to some extent. Otherwise it wouldn’t have hung on. So when you’re dealing with the voices that you really don’t like, this is where the principle of goodwill is useful. Like that chant we had just now. It’s a really interesting chant. It’s a chant spreading goodwill. Essentially to snakes. Those are the four great families of snakes that it starts out with. But then it goes on to all beings. All the creepy crawlies you can think of. This is a chant that the Buddha taught to the monks. There was a case of a monk out in the forest who’d been bitten by a snake and died. When the monks reported this to the Buddha, he said, “Well, that’s because that monk hadn’t suffused the four great families of snakes with goodwill. If he had, they wouldn’t have bitten him.” When you think about it, you realize that if you’re living in an area where there are snakes and you just hate them, you’re setting yourself up for all kinds of problems. But if you learn to sympathize with them, it’s easier to think, “Well, how does a snake think? What would threaten a snake? And how can I act in a way that doesn’t threaten the snakes?” Then you find it’s a lot easier to live with them. You can have goodwill for them, but notice at the very end, it’s, “May they all go away.” Goodwill doesn’t mean we have to sit around and be loving and chatting people up all the time or showing how much we care. Many times, goodwill is simply, “Okay, may you be well, but it’s very difficult for us to live together. Maybe it’s better for us to live apart. But may you be happy.” No real will is born. And when there’s no real will, it’s a lot easier to talk to people. Occasionally people would come to Ajahn Phu, and they were possessed by spirits. We would probably in the West say, “Bad case of schizophrenia.” And, as Ajahn Phu said, he never used any of the old traditional ways of exorcism. What he would do is spread goodwill to everybody that was in there. And the different parts of that person’s personality, some of which may have been spirits of somebody else, would actually start talking. He’d talk to them with goodwill, negotiate a peace so the spirit would leave the person alone. The same principle applies to all the different voices in your mind. Some of them are people that you’ve had lots of trouble with, but now they’re inside your head. What are you going to do? Spread them goodwill. In the same way that you spread goodwill to snakes, you don’t have to be afraid that by spreading goodwill they’re going to hang around. After all, each of them has a desire for happiness, and that’s the basis for being able to negotiate. So we all want happiness. It’s simply that some of us have some really wrong ideas about how it’s found, what it is, how it’s found. So you wish them well for the sake of their basic motivation, and then it’s a lot easier to unpack where the unskillful parts are and then to send them packing, let them go their own way. They don’t have to hang around. They don’t have to exert power over the mind. So to spread goodwill to some of these voices, some of which are really difficult, is one of the reasons why we work with the breath in a way that makes it comfortable. Because you’re coming from a place of well-being, it’s a lot easier to feel goodwill for the things that have been tormenting you. It’s a lot easier to see because they have their problems. Someplace in there, there was a desire for happiness, but it all got skewed and distorted. So you think about the basic desire for happiness. Communicate on that level. Then it’s a lot easier to let go of some of the unskillful voices without a lot of aversion. That way, you can make peace. So remember, all those identities in your head of who you are, what you have been, are actions, they’re choices, based on different skills you’ve had, different desires you’ve had, your idea of who’s going to benefit from your actions inside here and who in here has the power to bring those desires into being, the self as the consumer and the self as the producer of happiness. There are lots of them in there. And we meditate so that we can have a common ground where we can start looking at them. Recognizing them for what they are and then learning how to deal with them in a more effective way, so that all of our actions, thought, word, and deed actually do conduce to true happiness. Because that’s what this is all about. There are lots of ephemeral pleasures out there. We’ve all had them before. We know what they’re like. And there’s a lot of pain out there as well. What we’re looking for is how can we find happiness that’s really reliable, that’s really worth the effort we put into it. And that’s why the Buddha offered this as his teaching. You train the mind, he says. Look at everything as an action. There was a woman who came the other day and asked, “What do I see when I look at other people?” And the answer is, you see examples of actions, skillful and unskillful. You can ask yourself, “When you see somebody do something unskillful, is that something I do? Well, this is what it looks like.” Or if they do something noble and inspiring, you remind yourself, “Well, they’re human beings. I’m a human being. They can do it. Why can’t I?” Then learn to look at yourself in the same way as examples of actions. And begin sorting out which are the ones you want to encourage and which are the ones you want to let go. Just that simple principle right there covers a lot of the teaching and a lot of the practice. So get the mind, the mind, the mind. Let the mind settle down and look at things in this way. These are actions, intentions, and results. Then apply that principle as skillfully as you can.

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