Goodwill & Equanimity, Inside & Out

July 28, 2022

Every night we have to chant on goodwill, compassion, empathetic joy, and equanimity. It’s good to think of these qualities as a set. All too often people focus on one at the expense of the others. The goodwill or equanimity or compassion and empathetic joy are applications of goodwill. So it comes down to two. You have to think of them together, because equanimity without goodwill becomes indifference. You just don’t care about anybody. You start not caring about anything at all. Goodwill without equanimity causes you to suffer, because you look at the world, how many people are behaving. They’re behaving in ways that will actually lead to happiness. We want all beings to be happy, but they can’t simply be made happy by our wish. And it gets frustrating, because you know that the only way they’re going to be happy is if they behave in skillful ways. There seems to be a real race right now. How many skillful people do you see? Very little. The race is towards the unskillful side. How many people can say the most outrageous things? The most harmful things? Do the most harmful things? I was reading that the magnetic field of the earth is behaving in very strange ways. Maybe it’s stirring up people’s consciousness. Who knows? But you look at the world and it’s pretty discouraging. And if you don’t have any equanimity, you’re going to suffer. But it begins with yourself. Have some goodwill for yourself and some equanimity. Here again, if it’s just equanimity, you’ll see things arising and passing away and nothing much happens. As the Buddha said, if you practice with only equanimity, nothing goes anywhere. You compare it to a goldsmith. A goldsmith actually has three duties. One is to put the gold into the fire, get it heated up so it melts. But then you take it out to blow off the impurities. And then you take it and look at it to see what still needs to be done. Putting it into the fire is effort. Blowing on it is getting the mind into concentration. And equanimity is watching. As the Buddha said, if a goldsmith simply watches the gold, nothing happens. He can’t make it into anything. So in this case, the concentration and the effort are actually an expression of goodwill for yourself. Think about that. Sometimes we think about the effort that goes into meditation as a harsh taskmaster. But it’s how you show goodwill. Because after all, we all want happiness. Happiness, though, has to come from happiness. And your mind is sending up bad causes in terms of unskillful thoughts. Where are you going to get the happiness? If you really have goodwill for yourself, you put in the effort. If unskillful thoughts or mental states haven’t yet arisen, you do what you can to prevent them. If they have arisen, you try to abandon them. As for skillful states, if they’re not there yet, you try to give rise to them. Once they’re there, you try to develop them. That’s showing goodwill for yourself. Of course, right effort connects to right mindfulness. And the right mindfulness leads you into right concentration. So it’s all an expression of goodwill. You really want your true happiness. And you’re looking at the causes. If your true happiness depends on everybody else being happy out there, it’s not going to happen. If you’re going to wait for somebody else to make you happy, it happens sometimes. But it’s not nearly as deep as the happiness that you can create for yourself. As for the equanimity, that’s simply there to watch what’s going on. But you don’t simply watch. You watch with the purpose of figuring out what needs to be done, what doesn’t need to be done. It’s in this way that these brahmavaharas, when they’re applied to you in the meditation right now, work together. Then when you have practice in learning how to balance these things inside, then you can extend them out. Because goodwill is not like dedicating merit. When you’re dedicating merit, you’re dedicating, you’re done. You’ve made the merit, and it’s up to other beings to express admiration, express their appreciation or approval. But once you’ve made the dedication, you’re done. With goodwill, though, you have to ask yourself, “What can I do that would actually contribute to this person’s happiness?” It’s not the case that you will be willing to do anything at all that will make the person happy. You have to think about what’s a skillful thing to do to make this person happy in terms of long-term welfare, long-term benefit. That requires a lot of thought, but it’s useful. All too often, there’s that idea that if you’re expressing love and kindness to others, you’re nice to them, you do whatever they want, you please them. But sometimes the things that would please them are not for their own good. And if they’re going to cause you harm, you have to draw the line. Ideally, if you can get people to behave in skillful ways, that’s for their long-term benefit and long-term welfare. As I’ve said, one way to benefit other people is to get them to observe the precepts or get them to see that whatever passion, aversion, or delusion they have in their minds is something to be abandoned. Then you’re happy to help in whatever way leads in that direction. That’s a genuine expression of goodwill. But when you see that it can’t happen, that’s when you bring in the equanimity. Because we can have goodwill for everybody and it can be limitless. It’s as if you have a printing press and you’re free to print as much money as you want. The Buddha does talk about goodwill as a form of wealth, but he talks about all the brahmavaharas as a form of wealth. So the question comes down to when you’re actually acting in the right way. When you want to be generous, when you want to be helpful to other people, you have limitations on your energy. There may be no limitations on your goodwill, but your energy does have its limits. That’s when you have to figure out where is the best place to apply that energy. Then you have to have equanimity about everything else. So when you’re practicing on your own, it is an expression of all the brahmavaharas when you do it right. When you’re dealing with other people, it’s an expression of the brahmavaharas. That’s when the practice becomes seamless. And when you’re practicing on your own, remind yourself it’s not just for you. Remember that image of the acrobats that the Buddha gives. One acrobat standing on the shoulders of the other acrobat. And the one below says, “Okay, you look out after me and I’ll look out after you. That way we’ll come down safely.” They’re standing on the end of a bamboo pole. And the one on top says, “No, that’s not going to work. I have to look after myself. You look after yourself. That way we protect each other.” As the Buddha said, in that case, the one standing on top is right. By training your mind, by keeping it in the principles of right mindfulness, you are providing protection to others because you’re keeping your mind in safe bounds. You’re keeping your balance. When you do that, it’s a lot easier for other people to maintain their balance. At the same time, as you deal with other people, it should be good for you. It should be good for you, too. At the very least, you develop in your kindness, you develop your goodwill, you develop your endurance and equanimity. Because after all, dealing with other people is not always easy. But as your endurance grows, that’s your strength. So try to practice in such a way that it is good for you and good for the people around you. It really is a genuine expression of all the brahmaviharas, because when they’re balanced and put together in the right way, it’s a kind of goodness that spreads all around.

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