

## *The Need for Goodwill*

*February 24, 2022*

Every evening, we have the chant on the brahmaviharas: “May all living beings be happy. May they be freed from their suffering. May they not be deprived of the good fortune they have attained.” All of those are wishes, aspirations. Then there’s the fourth: “All beings are the owners of their actions, heir to their actions. Whatever they do, for good or evil, to that will they fall heir.” That’s a statement of fact.

You can see how far apart our aspirations are from facts: You look at the world, and it seems to be full of lots of ill will—people acting on very unskillful intentions, with very unskillful motives. The hope that they would all be happy, or that they would actually understand the causes for true happiness and be able to act on them, seems pretty far away.

Because that’s what goodwill means, not, “May you be happy whatever you’re doing—killing, stealing, having illicit sex, lying to people.” We’re not wishing that people will find happiness in those ways. You look at the Buddha’s different ways of expressing goodwill, and they come down to, “May all beings have goodwill for one another. May they not despise anyone, may they not, through anger or irritation, wish for anyone to suffer.”

Now, it may seem very unlikely that the whole world will ever be that way, but we have to make that *our* personal aspiration as a way of informing our actions, the direction *we* want to act in. We see that we really do want to be happy. This is the Buddha’s basic assumption about all beings.

Once I was asked, “The Buddha seems to assume that we’re all basically good. Then why do we behave the way we do?” I replied, “Wait a minute. The Buddha doesn’t assume that we’re basically good. The mind is basically changeable. It’s capable of all kinds of things, but we do all want to be happy. It’s just that we have some very confused notions of how that can be brought about.”

We have to realize that if our happiness depends on anyone else’s suffering it’s not going to last. And particularly if it depends on other people doing unskillful things for our sake, that doubles the bad consequences, because we’re not only harming ourselves, but we’re also harming them in getting them to break the precepts and to behave in unskillful ways.

So, it’s for our own protection: “May all beings be happy. May all beings have goodwill.” You take that as your motivation for acting. It’s your motivation for being generous, for observing the precepts, and for meditating.

In our own case, we meditate so that we can develop the skills inside that allow us to find happiness *here*, simply by the way we breathe, by the way we understand the breath, hold the breath in mind. We also do this as an example to others because the good examples of human behavior are what give us heart as we live in the human world. It's in this way our meditation is a gift to other people.

I remember when I first went to Thailand: The first morning I looked down from my hotel room, and there was a monk going for alms. It really struck me, more than I had expected. I had seen documentaries of monks going for alms in Asian countries, but seeing it in real life, that there really was somebody doing this, I found inspiring.

I was inspired by what that monk represented: that there's another way of living that doesn't have to be based on just making a living, competing with one another, in line with that vision that the Buddha had of the fish competing with one another in the drying-up stream—and they were all going to die in the end anyhow. The monk represented something else: a way of living, a way of looking for happiness that didn't have to take anything away from anyone at all.

He was living totally off of other people's gifts. That's how we live here. We manage to live off of other people's gifts, and we find that it's plenty.

Sometimes we get what we want, sometimes we don't get what we want, but we make the best of what we get. We realize that what we need for the purpose of the practice—in terms of food, clothing, shelter, medicine—is pretty basic. This is one of the reasons why we try to get away from the media of the world, because their basic message is, "You don't have enough, you don't have enough. You always need more, need more, need more."

So we get here and we just sit down with our breath, and when you get a sense of having a sense of well-being being with the breath, then you begin to look at the other things that you still do for your pleasure, and you begin to sort out what you really need and what you don't. It's a very useful practice.

The more frugal we can be, the more we can be an inspiring example to other people so that maybe they might want to try the practice too—looking for happiness *inside*.

Otherwise, all the world shows is people fighting one another, and getting one another to fight, and seeing it's to their advantage to create conflict. It's pretty discouraging. If that were all there was to the human realm, it wouldn't be a good place to live.

But we can make it a good place to live by our choices, by the way we look for happiness in a harmless way. So, think of the meditation not only as a gift to

yourself, as an expression of your goodwill for yourself, but also as an expression of goodwill for others.

In times when you get lazy, one way of overcoming laziness is to remind yourself, “I’m not doing this just for myself. There are other people who will benefit too from the fact that I’m doing this.”

I would often have that thought in Thailand after I became a monk and I was going out for alms. There were days when some very poor people would put food in my bowl. I’d come back to the monastery and I’d remind myself, “Okay, today you were the beneficiary of a poor person’s generosity. That’s something really special, so you want to honor that. Practice extra hard so it will be for that person’s long term welfare and happiness.”

They say that the arahants in the Theravada tradition are selfish, but one of your motivations for becoming fully awakened is that those who have given you gifts along the way will benefit greatly from that fact. So you’re doing this not just for you, but also for them, and that thought can inspire you to better and better practice. Because it is all too easy, when the practice gets difficult, to say, “Well, maybe as far as I’ve gone is far enough.”

You want to inspire yourself in various ways, to remind yourself: As long as you haven’t really seen the deathless yet, you’re not yet safe. Your happiness is still precarious. It’s only when you realize that there is a deathless element in the mind—the Buddha was right, it’s found in this way: That’s when you can breathe easy.

And again, you’re not the only one who benefits then. So, we practice as an expression of goodwill, goodwill all around, because the world really needs it. We really need our goodwill; the world needs our goodwill. So give it the best you’ve got.