

Love is Conditional, Goodwill Is Not

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One time Rahula asked his father, the Buddha, to teach him breath meditation. But before teaching him the steps of breath meditation, the Buddha taught Rahula some other meditations as well. One of them was to make his mind like earth, or in the Pali phrase, “in tune with” earth. In other words, you want to make your mind as solid and non-reactive as earth is. Now, this doesn’t mean that you’re going to just sit there like a lump of dirt and do nothing. When you look at the steps of breath meditation, there are a lot of things you’re going to do: You try and develop a sense of ease with the breath, a sense of rapture with the breath, to breathe in and out aware of the whole body, breathe in and out calming the mind.

There are lots of things you’re going to be doing. But to do them well, you have to make your mind non-reactive so that you can see clearly what you’re doing, what the results are, and when you’re getting good results. When you’re not getting good results, you want to be not upset. You want to keep trying. Have the attitude, “Well, if I can’t do it this way, I’m going to do it that way. And if I can’t do it that way, I’ll do it another way,” and just not give up.

Another meditation the Buddha taught to Rahula before teaching him breath meditation, though, was the brahmaviharas: thoughts of unlimited goodwill, unlimited compassion, unlimited empathetic joy, and unlimited equanimity. You want to make these attitudes without measure. In other words, you’re not going to be measuring out your goodwill, saying “I’m going to give this much to that person, but a little bit less to this other person, and hardly anything to somebody else over there.” You want it to be unlimited for everybody.

Compassion is basically what goodwill feels when it sees other beings suffering. You’d like to see that suffering end: again, regardless of whether you like the person or not. If you see someone who is enjoying good fortune or is doing things that would lead to good fortune, you want to be happy for them. That’s empathetic joy. Again, that’s the attitude of goodwill, unlimited goodwill, toward people who are happy.

Equanimity is your reality check, realizing that not everybody’s going to be happy and you can’t make your happiness depend on everybody else’s being happy. There are a lot of things in life you have to accept. But one of the things you also accept is the fact that there are things you *can* change. That’s what goodwill is for. If there’s anything you can do to help other beings be happy, you’re happy to do it.

And notice: The Buddha's not teaching love here. Love and goodwill are two different things. Love—*pema* in Pali—tends to be partial and conditional. As the Buddha said, there are times when love can give rise to more love. In other words, there's somebody you love and then somebody else does something nice to that person. Well, you're going to love that person too. But there are also times when there's somebody you love and other people mistreat that person. You're going to hate those other people. Or there's somebody you hate and if somebody does nice things to somebody you hate, you're going to hate that person. And if there's somebody you hate and somebody else does something really nasty to that person, then you're going to love the other person. In other words, love is quite arbitrary and very partial and very conditional. And even with the people you love, the conditions go up and down.

Then there comes a time when the person you love dies. And the idea of meeting up with that person again all of a sudden becomes something you're afraid of, perhaps because of complex emotions when you were together. But even the fact that if you loved one another really strongly, now that the other person is dead and if you were to meet up with that person's spirit or a vision of that person, it would be scary. That would be a condition in which you would not want that other person around. So love is not all that dependable. It depends very strongly on conditions.

However, goodwill is an attitude that you can have for everybody everywhere and it doesn't have to depend on conditions. But we have to train ourselves to make it unconditional. It doesn't come naturally. Goodwill comes naturally, but ill will also comes naturally. To make goodwill universal, unlimited, immeasurable: That, the Buddha said, requires determination. You have to make up your mind you're going to have that attitude and you develop it consciously in spite of what you may feel about other people, other beings. When you can make it unlimited like this, the Buddha said, it's your protection. Psychologically, it protects you because you realize that if you do meet up with someone you dislike and they do something nasty, there's nothing inside you that says, "Well, this is what I deserve." You don't submit to unskillful behavior on their part. You still have goodwill. In that way, you're protecting yourself from yourself, from your partiality.

You'll notice this as you meditate. Sometimes you'll have a vision or just a thought of somebody. And there may be a long history with that person. It might be somebody you know or somebody you don't recognize, but there's a sense of your have something involved with that person. You want to have your immediate reaction to be goodwill, regardless. That protects you from doing

unskillful things. It also untangles you from those histories that could stretch out and fill up the entire meditation. So with anybody who comes into your meditation—you see this person, see that person—you simply think, “Goodwill, goodwill, goodwill. May you be happy; may you be happy.” And then, “May we go our separate ways.”

Remember one of those phrases for goodwill, “May all beings look after themselves with ease.” That doesn’t mean we’re going to have to be there for them. We’re hoping that they’re going to be there for themselves. Sometimes there’s a realization that the best thing for both parties is to go your separate ways. There was a chant that the Buddha has the monks repeat when they’re out in the forest and surrounded by dangerous animals and dangerous beings of different kinds. The chant starts out with goodwill for everybody: goodwill for beings with no feet, goodwill for beings with two feet, four feet, many feet. And you try to make that attitude unlimited.

Once the attitude is unlimited, then it’s larger than all the beings there are, because there’s only a limited number of beings and they have limited powers. But you want to take your goodwill and make it unlimited, make it larger. That’s your protection.

Then, at the very end, the chant says, “May the beings depart—with goodwill—but may they go away,” because, after all, as you’re meditating, you have work to do. We’re here in the present moment not because it’s a wonderful present moment, but because there are duties we have to follow if we want to put an end to suffering. And we don’t want to let ourselves get distracted by stories of this person and that.

We have to work directly on our minds. Now, that may require that we sort through lots of different things as we settle down and until we can simply be with our awareness in the present moment as it’s with the breath coming in and going out. And these other meditations are helpful in the sorting out.

You want to remind yourself that no matter what comes up, you’re not going to let yourself get shaken. And as to whatever narratives you have regarding this person or that, you’re not going to let them get in the way, because the best narrative-dissolver is thoughts of goodwill, followed by thoughts of equanimity.

That chant we have, “All beings are the owners of their actions, heir to actions,” is not meant to be indifference. But it does point you to something, which is that the extent to which we have involvement with other people, it comes down to what karma are we taking out of that involvement? Because every relationship has to end. What karma do you have as a result of the relationship? That’s the question. And it’s an impersonal question.

We tend to think that so much of our happiness depends on being with this person or that, and having this situation and that situation with that person. And it gets very personal. It also gets very entangling. It gets you entangled in partiality, entangled in conditions. But here we're trying to release ourselves from conditions. And so it's good to have unlimited goodwill and equanimity as a solvent. But it does require determination. It requires mindfulness. It's a form of mindfulness, as the Buddha said. You have to keep it in mind. But you want to learn how to make it second nature, particularly as you meditate.

Whoever you see in your meditation, whatever you sense in the meditation, just "Goodwill, goodwill." And then you can get back to work, because there *is* work to be done: getting sensitive to the breath, the way the breath energies feel in the different parts of the body, and then learning how to adjust them. As we go through life without having thought about breath energies, we've been adjusting them in our own peculiar, subconscious ways, sometimes with some skill, sometimes not, not really knowing what we were doing.

Sometimes we push energies too hard. We clamp down on them. And as a result, they get disturbed in the body. When the body is disturbed, then the mind is disturbed. And when the mind is disturbed, then the breath gets disturbed. It's a vicious cycle. Now we're trying to cut that cycle. But it means that we'll have to notice what kind of habitual patterns we already have: where they're useful, where they're not, why they need to be adjusted so that we get more and more sensitive to how we're fashioning the present moment, and how we can do it in a skillful way—in other words, in a way that gives rise to a sense of well-being, a sense of ease that doesn't harm anybody. You want to learn how to appreciate that.

The Buddha talks about how when you see that there are skillful and unskillful qualities in the mind, and you work on developing the skillful ones, it gives rise to a sense of rapture. The Pali word *pīti* can also mean a sense of fullness, a sense of refreshment. You might wonder what can give rise to that. Well, one, it's learning how to appreciate that when the mind has skillful qualities it really does feel good. You want to learn how to appreciate that. All too often, we take a more mechanical attitude toward working with the breath: We try the long breath, short breath, without appreciating that the different kinds of breathing can do different good things for the body and good things for the mind. It's simply a matter of learning, "Well, what is this particular breath good for and what does the body need right now in terms of breath energy?" and learning how to fit the need with what you're doing. Then learn how to appreciate it when they fit.

As the Buddha said, once the mind begins to settle down, you allow yourself to indulge in the sense of ease that comes from being still. You have to be careful

here, because if you get too indulgent with the pleasure and forget the breath, then you're going to get into what Ajaan Lee calls delusion concentration. You want to appreciate the pleasure and stay with the breath at the same time. This sense of appreciation will then allow you to develop your skill even further. Otherwise, you can sit there breathing, breathing, breathing and not have any sense that one kind of breathing is better than another. There's no sense of enjoying the breath. It becomes more and more of a chore. And that's not very encouraging.

You want to learn how to encourage yourself by appreciating. It's like learning a language. When the native speakers are encouraging, it's a lot easier to learn the language. When they're not encouraging, you end up not wanting to try. Well, it's the same with the mind and the breath as you're meditating. Encourage yourself to enjoy the breathing and you'll find that it's easier and easier to stay with.

So this is the kind of work we do. It's not just a matter of brute force. It's learning how to understand our mind, learning how to bring it down to the present moment with a sense of well-being. But it's the kind of work that involves all of your attention, which is why the Buddha taught Rahula those different meditations—so that when something comes up that disturbs you, you have a way of dealing with it and then can get right back to the matter at hand.

When the breath meditation starts getting dry, or you're having trouble sticking with it, think about those different meditations that the Buddha taught to Rahula. Remind yourself again that these skills also are part of doing breath meditation. And they're also skills that you want to carry into your life. For instance, the sense of having a mind that's like earth: That's useful not only when you're sitting here with your eyes closed. It's useful all the time. Having a sense of unconditional goodwill: That's protection all the time. Learning how to have unlimited equanimity is protection all the time.

So as you meditate, try to make sure that you have a full range of skills, so that the central skill, which is breath meditation, can show its full benefits.