

The Sublime Attitudes in Context

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We chant those phrases of the sublime attitudes, the brahmaviharas, every evening, and we do it with a purpose. They're good things to think about before you meditate, and they're a good part of the meditation. Sometimes we forget that they're meant to serve a higher purpose. These attitudes seem to be good things in and of themselves, but the Buddha was taught them in a context. And in the context, they're means to a higher end.

There's a passage in the Canon where Ven. Sariputta goes to visit an old brahman who's on his deathbed. He reasons that these brahmins regard gaining union with brahma as their goal, so he teaches the brahman these four attitudes, not just in a simple form, but developing these attitudes toward all living beings of all kinds, in all directions without limit. The brahman follows the instructions, and when he dies, he's reborn as a Brahma. When Sariputta goes back and sees the Buddha, the Buddha chastises him, saying, "You could have taken him further. You just let him stop when there's more to do."

So these attitudes are good for certain things, but they only go so far.

Which means that it's good to think about their context. Part of that context is they're often taught in the context of the teaching on karma. When you develop these attitudes, they're meant to be developed with understanding. If you develop them without understanding, it's like one of the fog machines or cloud machines they used to have on movie sets: You'd pile up lots of dry ice and put fans behind it. A fog would come out and obscure the set. These attitudes, if they're developed without understanding, do just that. They obscure the mind. The nice pink cloud of universal goodwill, compassion, empathetic joy, and equanimity gets spread out in all directions, looks nice, feels nice, but it can hide a lot of things, like contrary attitudes that you don't want to express to yourself. When the brahmaviharas are just a cloud like that, then when the time comes to actually act on these attitudes, you often find them evaporating.

You've got to realize that you develop these attitudes because you need them. For one thing, they're there as protection. They protect you against creating bad karma. In one of the contexts, the Buddha talks about people who sit and reflect on teachings on karma, and what's skillful and unskillful, and they realize that they've done a lot of unskillful things in the course of their lives. So what are you going to do? If you get tied up in remorse, that just makes things worse. It saps your strength. The best you can do is to resolve not to repeat those mistakes. And

a good way to strengthen that resolve is to develop these attitudes. If you make a practice of reminding yourself that you always have to have goodwill for everyone you deal with, it makes it harder to treat them in cruel or harmful ways. In this way, you protect yourself from doing unskillful things.

So your basic dealings with people should be based on goodwill. When you see that they're suffering, you want to feel compassion for them. Again you don't want to pile on more suffering. When you see that they're happy, you don't want to be resentful or jealous, because that can lead you to do unskillful things as well. And when you see that situations are beyond your control, you have to learn how to put them aside, let them go with equanimity. That way you don't waste your strength on areas where you can't make a difference, and you can focus your strength on areas where you can.

Another principle that's useful to understand when you're developing these attitudes is that, particularly in the context of compassion and empathetic joy, when you see somebody who's poor and miserable and suffering in different ways, you have to realize that what you see is not the sum total of that person's karmic account. In other words, this is no measure of the best they've ever been able to do in their lives. We don't go around with a single karma account with one running balance. Each action is like a seed. You've got many seeds in your past; other people have many seeds in their past as well. Just because the bad seeds are sprouting right now doesn't mean that there aren't any good seeds there, and conversely, the fact that good seeds are sprouting and bearing fruit right now doesn't mean that there aren't any bad seeds.

So when you see somebody who's poorer than you or has a lot more difficulties than you do in life, remember you could be there, too. You might have those seeds in your storehouse. And how would you want someone to behave toward you when those seeds begin to sprout? What kind of help would you want from them? What kind of expressions of help would you want? Which ones would you find tedious and oppressive? Keep that in mind as you deal with these people.

The same when you're dealing with someone who has advantages you don't have right now: The fact that they're better off than you are or more successful than you are right now is not a reflection on you or your value as a person or their value as a person, simply that those are the seeds sprouting right now. Maybe sometime down the line, you'll have good seeds that will sprout. Would you want the people around you to be jealous or resentful? What would that accomplish?

When you can think in these ways, these attitudes are not clouds. They actually sharpen your vision. They're based on a very realistic look at what it is to

be a human being, what it is to act, what attitudes you need to develop in order to act in skillful ways.

If you're really serious about developing them, you'll find that they also bring up their opposites. This is also a useful practice. When you tell yourself you should have compassion for a certain person, but you don't feel it, or you harbor very uncompassionate feelings about that person, you have to look at those feelings. You can't just slather over them with clouds of goodwill, because they won't go away. You've got to probe and ask: Why would you want this person to suffer? What would you really gain from that person's suffering? What kind of actions would you do as a result of your lack of compassion?

The same with empathetic joy: Sometimes you tell yourself to be happy over so-and-so's happiness, but you find a lot of resentment and jealousy resisting the idea. Probe into those attitudes, find what they're all about, what misunderstandings they're based on.

This is an important part of the practice. You can't pretend that these attitudes are not there, because they'll just fester and grow. You have to challenge them. You have to confront them, and to confront them successfully, you have a good understanding of this principle of karma, of why you need the positive attitudes, and what understanding of the nature of action, the nature of happiness, the nature of suffering, these attitudes are based on. When they're based on understanding, they really do have an impact on your life. They won't vanish and evaporate as soon as you're leaving the meditation. If you're mindful, you keep remembering that these are the attitudes you need for the sake of your own happiness as well as theirs.

And they require conscious cultivation. The Buddha never said that we're basically good or that awareness is basically compassionate. The mind has potentials, but in and of itself your awareness is neutral. It can know good things. It can know bad things. Compassion and goodwill have to be developed from an understanding, first, realizing that if your happiness depends on other people's misery, it's not going to last. So you have to take their happiness into consideration. And that sense has to be cultivated.

But at the other end of the path, when you've fully developed these attitudes, the fact that they are constructed and fabricated is something you have to understand as well. Even equanimity, which is the most peaceful of them all, has its limitations. It's something you do. It's something fabricated. So in and of itself, it can't be your true nature. If you identify that as your true nature, or if you identify with anything, all these good things—compassion, goodwill—as your true nature, then you're stuck there. There's no real release. You have to see that

even these things are constructed. They're based on intentions. You develop them for a certain purpose, but they have their limitations.

There's a sutta where the Buddha says that you have to see even these things as constructed. That way, you go beyond them. Even goodwill is not-self, i.e., it's not you; it's not yours. It's something you use, but it's not intrinsic. Right there lies your liberation.

So it's important that these attitudes be conjoined with wisdom, discernment, understanding, so that you use them when you need them—and then understand that you really *do* need them. They're not just a nice gift to other people to make you feel good. You really need them to keep yourself in line, to make sure you're not going to do things you're later going to regret. And you need them as a strong motivating force in the practice.

But there will come a point where you have to learn how to put them aside as well. As with everything else that you put aside in the path, it's not that you lose them at that point, it's just that you don't identify yourself in their terms. You can pick them up and use them when you need them, and you can put them down when you don't. In this way, you're not limited even by the limitations of what they call immeasurable goodwill, compassion, empathetic joy, and equanimity, because you pick them up with discernment and you put it down with discernment. In that way, they hold no danger for the mind.