

Empathetic Joy Is Ennobling

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Goodwill is a wish for happiness. When you're getting started with goodwill practice, it's good to start by providing some happiness for yourself.

This is one of the reasons why Ajaan Lee recommends working with the breath to gain a sense of well-being, and then you can dedicate that well-being to others. You're happy to share. He says it's like having a water tank. If there's no water in the tank, you open up the faucet and nothing but air comes out. The air may be cooling but it's not nearly as cooling as if there were water coming out.

So it's good to have some happiness inside, some well-being inside. That's the water of your mind. Learn how to relate to the breath in a way that allows a sense of well-being to grow. Don't squeeze it, don't push it. Just give it space to develop and to grow on its own. When you can tap into that and spread goodwill to others, that'll be the water that comes out of the faucet.

But you have to remember that goodwill is supposed to be universal if you're doing it right. Which means you have to develop thoughts of goodwill at times when you're not feeling happy, too. If the breath is uncomfortable, the body's uncomfortable, that's no time to have ill will or thoughts of being put upon.

Think of the Buddha's image of the person being sawn into pieces by a group of bandits. He said that if, when you were having your limbs sawn off by these bandits that pinned you down, you felt ill will for them, you would not be following his teachings. Even for them, especially for them, you have to have goodwill. Because if you die, you don't want to have your mind fixated on them or on getting revenge. So you start by spreading goodwill to them and then you spread thoughts of goodwill to the whole universe.

Which means that you have to learn how to generate goodwill even when you're not feeling especially happy, when there's no great pleasure inside. This means you have to reason with yourself. Ask yourself, what do you get out of ill will? And there will be a part of the mind that likes to feed on ill will, likes to feed on anger, likes to get worked up, resentful. But you have to ask yourself: What kind of food is that? What kind of nourishment is that for the mind? It's like food that tastes good but is going to be bad for your intestines. So you have to realize that it's for your own good that you think thoughts of goodwill.

This is also why the Buddha includes in the brahmaviharas not only goodwill but also compassion and empathetic joy.

Compassion is for when you see someone else suffering and you want to see that suffering end. You're not going to take advantage of their weakness, you're not going to add to their suffering. You may actually be in a position of power above them, but you're not going to abuse your power.

And as for empathetic joy, of the brahmaviharas it's the one that gets glossed over the most. But it's actually a really noble application of goodwill. In other words, you see people who are happy, who have wealth, who have good fortune that you don't have at the moment, and you make up your mind you're not going to be jealous, you're not going to be resentful, you're not going to be envious. "May they continue in their good fortune; may they continue in their happiness." In other words, at that point you're not thinking about "me, me, me, me, me." You're putting your immediate desire for that kind of happiness off to the side.

Here it's useful to remember, as the Buddha said, that when you see someone else who's very wealthy, has lots of power, lots of beauty, lots of popularity, remind yourself you've been there, too, in this long, long time of wandering-on. It's the same as when he says you see somebody who's really, really poor, a leper by the side of the road: You've been there as well. When you think of that, it helps make sure that your compassion isn't tinged with a sense of superiority, that you're not looking down on the other person. You may not be able to remember these past occurrences, good or bad, but just think of the general principle: You've experienced all kinds of happiness, and it's gone. If it had been really good, it would have stayed with you. So there's no reason to be resentful, no reason to be envious.

And if you want to have a thought of "me" in there, just remind yourself that to wish other people happiness that you don't have is a noble thing. It shows a real generosity of character, a generosity of heart. You're developing a perfection. Otherwise, you're going to allow people to have happiness only up to your level at best. What kind of attitude is that? Very narrow. And if you're envious of people who are happy, that means when the time comes for you to be happy, have good fortune, there are going to be people envious of you. Do you want that? No.

So broaden your mind. Make sure in your practice of goodwill that you include space for empathetic joy. That way, the practice becomes ennobling. And in ennobling you, it makes your mind much broader and in a better position to settle down and say, "Each of us has our own happiness. There's no reason to be jealous, no reason to be envious. But I've got my work to do." The potentials for happiness are here inside. Just make sure you give yourself the time and the space to develop the skills that make the most of them.