Seeing Our Goodness

Winnie Nazarko · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Three-Month Retreat (IMS 2012) · 57:49

Good evening to you all.

This is Thanksgiving evening, and the topic of the talk tonight is recognizing the good, recognizing the wholesome states which arise in the mind.

If you remember a while back, we talked about the four great endeavors. The first two of them have to do with unwholesome states: keeping unwholesome states from arising and abandoning them if they do arise. But the third and fourth of the great endeavors have to do with working in the field of wholesome states—supporting their arising, and maintaining and increasing them when they are present.

This is a very interesting area of practice, because for a number of reasons we seem to have a very hard time recognizing these and giving them equal valence or equal import in our practice. We very often seem to just skip over them, to not recognize them, to not acknowledge them, in some ways to not even value them. We seem to orient towards the hindrances, towards noticing what's problematic in the mind stream.

I always like to start by defining terms. To define the wholesome states, we would say that they are states that have their roots in non-greed, non-hatred, and non-delusion—which is another way of saying generosity or renunciation, loving-kindness, and wisdom. These states are considered to be wholesome because they are for our benefit and well-being and for the benefit and well-being of others in this relative realm. But they're also significant because they lead us in the direction of liberation, of ultimate release of the mind. So they have not only relative and practical benefit, but they're a sign, a pointing to, a trail of beauty if you wish, towards the ultimate freedom, which is the pointing of the whole Buddhist teachings.

So let's give some examples of what these are.

Mindfulness, of course, is one of them. Mindfulness always arises in conjunction with wholesome states, all wholesome states. So in order for these others to be wholesome, you should understand that it's assumed mindfulness is their companion, is part of the experience.

In addition to mindfulness, there are the states that are practiced in doing the Brahma Viharas: metta, which is friendliness; karuna, compassion; mudita, empathetic joy; and upekkha, equanimity. These are also wholesome states.

Dana, or generosity, is another. The state of generosity could be the doing of a generous deed, but it could also be a thought of generosity, or the state of mind that regards things in a generous way.

Gratitude is a wholesome state. Wise attention is a wholesome state.

The seven factors of enlightenment, which we haven't talked about so much in these talks, are also very much a part of this. The seven factors of enlightenment include mindfulness—it's kind of the kickoff—and then investigation, energy, rapture, calm, concentration, and equanimity. You may be noticing at this point in the list there's a certain kind of repetition going on. Some of these are turning up in more than one of these lists.

Insight into the three characteristics is a state of wisdom and is a wholesome state.

The four bases of power: the aspiration for liberation, virya which is a kind of courageous effort, clear mind, and investigation.

The five spiritual faculties, also known as the five spiritual powers when they've ripened and strengthened: faith, energy, mindfulness, concentration, wisdom.

The paramis are the perfections of mind: generosity; morality, better known as sila; renunciation; wisdom; effort; truthfulness—a very interesting one. You could say in a way this whole practice is a practice of the truth, the truth of what is directly known. Then resolve; loving-kindness, metta again; patience; equanimity again.

The five controlling faculties: faith, energy, mindfulness, concentration, wisdom.

Two that Pascal talked about the other night: moral restraint due to self-respect—"I'm not going to do that because I don't want to be that way"—and moral restraint due to respect for others—"I'm not going to do that because that's not right to do to someone."

So that's a list of them, and you get a sense of what the range is. They can come up in a number of different combinations. You can have a number of these states arising as mental factors at the same time, giving the experience a different flavor.

For instance, you could have an experience of generosity arise in the mind along with the experience of metta being present, a feeling of care and concern, and then accompanying that, the impulse to do something, to give something, to offer something. Or you could have the experience of resolve and truthfulness be present while sila, the impulse towards right speech, is there, giving you the power to say the truth, to stand in an upright place of integrity and say what must be said.

So many beautiful combinations are possible with these unique mandalas. But we don't see them so often. I want to focus a good part of the talk on that fact—that we don't see them, or we discount them.

These states are easily overlooked, and the question is why. One reason is that they're often quite familiar to us because we have many of these states every day. Their relative prevalence may actually cause them to become somewhat invisible to us.

There is so much everyday goodness that we take for granted in others and also in ourselves.

I was driving through one of the small towns around here this week. As I drove down the road, there was a sign—handmade, hand-painted, colorful, looking like it was made on a piece of poster board or foam core. It was mounted on a telephone pole, and it caught my eye. As I drove back by, I noticed it said something like, "Thanks to all the people who helped our son."

I had a few seconds of puzzlement. Right out on the side of the road—it didn't seem apropos of anything. And then I realized I was driving by the gates of a cemetery. Suddenly I had an intuition about why that sign might be there. Someone's son had passed away. There was a funeral. People who were part of their friendship system, part of the community that supported them, had been part of that funeral. And the family put that sign there so it would be seen when people came for the burial.

Everyday kindness. People don't even think about it—of course you would extend yourself to a family you knew facing that kind of situation. It's no big deal. We usually don't experience these states as problematic either, and we tend to be oriented toward problems. This is another reason for their relatively low profile. They're not necessarily dramatic or riveting—not the way, for instance, a good hindrance storm is. There is nothing like the arising of all the *kilesas* simultaneously in a strong and prolonged manner to catch the attention of the mind. Those are vivid. Sometimes these wholesome states aren't so vivid.

And sometimes the mind has to be at a certain level of subtlety to even recognize them, at least in part because often these states are primarily mental. They might not have the vivid expression in the body that a good old state of rage might have, or a strong bout with craving where you can hardly keep yourself on the cushion for the thought of what you'd like to do as soon as the sitting is over.

Another reason we often overlook these states is that we may recognize on some level that we do have these experiences, but we hold a kind of "yes, but" attitude toward them. We might not want to be inflated—egoically inflated—by the experience of these states, or to be seen as bragging. Very often we're aware of our imperfections, and we approach our mindstream in a very binary way. If it's not ninety percent pure, it doesn't count. The good things don't count. The wholesome states don't really count because other things arise too as part of our knowing. So we wouldn't want to be tooting our horn, as the idiom goes in American culture. We do a lot of it, but theoretically you're not supposed to.

There's also some suggestion that there might be a biological basis underpinning this relatively low profile for the wholesome states. If we're going to ask the question—is there a biological basis toward the arising of unwholesome states and toward noticing unwholesome states rather than wholesome ones—we would have to say, probably.

There's a researcher named Rick Hanson who wrote a very interesting book called *Buddha's Brain*. He also does some Buddhist teaching on the West Coast. What he has to say about the nature of the brain and how it often functions is very much on point here.

He writes: "Imagine our mammalian ancestors dodging dinosaurs in a worldwide Jurassic Park seventy million years ago, constantly looking over their shoulders, alert to the slightest crackle of brush, ready to freeze or bolt or attack depending on the situation. The quick and the dead. If they failed to duck a stick which looked a little bit like a predator, they'd probably be killed. The ones that lived to pass on their genes paid a lot of attention to negative experiences."

So he's talking about our progenitors. This is our ancestral tree—the nervous ones.

He continues: "Your brain has a built-in negativity bias that primes you for avoidance. This makes you suffer in a variety of ways. For starters, it generates an unpleasant background of anxiety, which for some people can be quite intense. Anxiety also makes it harder to bring attention inward for self-awareness or contemplative practice, since the brain keeps scanning to make sure there's no problem. The negativity bias fosters or intensifies other unpleasant emotions such as anger, sorrow, depression, guilt, and shame. It highlights past losses and failures. It downplays present abilities and exaggerates future obstacles. Consequently, the mind continually tends to render unfair verdicts about a person's character, conduct, and possibilities."

So there's a reason that suffering catches our attention. There seems to be something inborn, given our biological setup and the heritage we have as mammals of the surviving, quick, and nervous tribe. That's part of it.

But I think there's a whole other dimension to this, which is the role of social conditioning in forming self-view—in forming it in a way that's negative.

The majority culture has a very big role in shaping how we view ourselves and how we judge ourselves. I realize not everyone here is from a Western culture, but Western culture is the one I know best, so I'll speak about that, particularly as it manifests in the United States. I think it could fairly be described as hyper-competitive and hyper-individualistic, with the self being seen as a closed system—a standalone, isolated being set off against and graded against all others.

We've said earlier that fixed self-view, in the Buddhist understanding, is problematic. All fixed self-view has within it delusion, but some self-views are more deluded than others. The description I just gave of how Western culture shapes the mind is an example of a particular kind of distortion that is very problematic.

If you consider our egoic identity, it's really a construct of conditioned views and beliefs which we draw from the larger culture. We also draw it from our individual families and from life experiences, but to speak for a moment about the larger culture: if we looked at what it emphasizes in values and markets, it would be something like power, youth, attractiveness, wealth, success, popularity, and fulfillment in sense pleasures. Our self-identity, our egoic view, is assembled growing up in the matrix of this particular value system. And if you don't believe me, when you leave, turn on television for a while, or go online and see

what the dangling shiny carrots are that are being used to sell things.

If the egoic self-identity is formed within this matrix, it tends to adopt these beliefs and preferences very often in a way that is unseen, unconscious. We're constantly being fed this—often in the community, often by the media, in school, in many different kinds of environments.

There's a new field now called neuromarketing. Has anyone heard of this? Different versions of sales pitches are presented to test subjects, and their brain activity and physical responses are examined so that the people researching these products can determine which approach really rings that chime and makes you feel that you have to have it, or you have to do it, or you have to be it. This is a very interesting infiltration into our formerly private and somewhat secluded minds.

We all have many ideas, feelings, thoughts, wishes, hopes, expectations, aspirations, longings, aversions, repulsions, comparisons, standards—conscious and unconscious—that are deeply conditioned. If we can see them as they are, without adding identification and a narrative around them, that narrative having a great big "I" in the middle, it's not really a problem. But very often we don't see them and we don't recognize their source. We just feel the discontent with how we are, without understanding that it's a conditioned response.

When we don't see these things, don't understand them to be conditioned and to be coming, at least in their initial genesis, from sources outside of ourselves, we're very easily taken in. These things become the measuring stick by which we determine whether or not we're okay, whether we deserve love, respect, and compassion. And really, who can ever measure up to what's being sold as necessary?

It was very revelatory when it became more public knowledge that pictures of models used in magazines and online are all altered—digitally changed to improve upon the appearance of individuals who probably already represent the zenith of the cultural ideal of physical beauty. Even that isn't good enough. They have to be fixed up, further improved upon. And yet these are the standards against which we tend to make decisions about whether or not we're okay. That's just a blatant example.

These conditioned views can really make us prone to see our real or imagined deficiencies rather than our goodness and good qualities. If you consider what I said I thought the cultural values were, you might notice there was nothing in what I listed that had anything to do with wholesome qualities of mind at all. It's not even on the measuring stick, is it? What did I say? Power, youth, attractiveness, wealth, success, popularity, happiness, and satisfaction found in and limited to sense pleasures. That's a long way from the Brahma Viharas, isn't it?

So it's no wonder we don't see the wholesome qualities. The mind is not turned toward looking there.

One of the names of a younger Western sangha—and I think there might be some people from this sangha here—is Against the Stream. Dharma practice is, in a number of senses, against the stream.

So then the question becomes: how do you practice with wholesome states? Let's say we see that trying to conform to these cultural norms is nuts and has no lasting value, only a lot of suffering. We see that's not the way. As Saint Matthew would say, do not store up your treasures here on earth, but seek what is lasting. If we were going to cultivate unarisen wholesome states, how could we do it?

What would we do? Brahma-Vihara practice. This is a very powerful method. One fruit of the Brahma-Vihara practice is a foundational, reliable loyalty and goodwill towards the self and towards other beings—an instinctual, reflexive, reliable loyalty to the self and to others. That would be a very important baseline to have in relationship to any kind of self-view. If there's a basic, stable respect and care for the self, kindness is available in practice periods of difficulty and in life experiences of difficulty. There's a kind of reliability to the mind, a kind of sense that the mind on a very deep level is an ally and an asset, and won't turn on you when it gets tough. And it does get very tough in the course of a life from time to time.

So let's talk about something that is related to this Brahma-Vihara practice, as well as insight practice—but the Brahma-Vihara practice in particular—which has to do with the ripening of the three Buddhist personality types. There's been some mention of this in the talks, a little bit here and there. You didn't have a full-blown talk on this, did you? On the Buddhist personality types? I know that I've talked about this in interviews with a number of people, but I'll put this out for general consideration because it's useful. It helps to objectify our understanding of what particular kind of condition, what pattern of suffering we have. It's not that it's who we are—it's what our mind tends to do, what our mind tends to notice, and how our mind tends to react to vedanā in particular.

All three of the unwholesome roots of suffering—greed, aversion, and delusion—are present in us until the mind is fully liberated. There's some expression of this, there's some experience of this, and there's some identification with this. We all have all three—greed, aversion, and delusion—but we do tend to specialize. There tends to be one which is dominant. And some of the people I've worked with who have known about this from previous teachings or experience, when we've talked about it, I'll say, "Do you know which of the Buddhist personality types you are?" "Oh, yeah, totally greed. Greed all the way." "Yeah, I'm aversive. I'm really aversive." "I'm not sure. I thought I might be, but then I thought, no... but how many of them are there again? Maybe deluded. I might be deluded."

But to go through them in sequence and to talk about how they can be transformed, let's start with a basic description. We'll begin with the greed or lobha types. The conditioning for these beings, where this is the dominant conditioning—and this is not like your fixed or essential nature or anything, this is conditioning—they tend to crave what's pleasant. They orient towards what they believe will provide gratification and satisfaction, and they try to get it and keep it. They're always looking for more or better, nicer. This is the suffering of thirsting, or taṇhā—that craving, that burning to get. When it's burning, it becomes clear that this is a state of suffering. At lower levels of experiencing greed or craving, it's not necessarily that clear to the mind that there's suffering going on, especially if the mind still thinks it might

get it. The fantasy is alive and very interesting.

The second type is the aversive type, which tends to notice what's unpleasant and/or threatening. This is the dosa type. The conditioned response here is to keep an eye out for what's wrong with what they're experiencing, and then they try to flee it or attack it. There's the aversive type that wants to run away, and then there's the aversive type that wants to do something about it. This is the suffering of not wanting something, not wanting things, bracing against what's happening.

Then the deluded types, moha, don't necessarily notice either pleasant or unpleasant unless it's strong, nor do they notice neutral. There was a talk on delusion one of the Saturdays, wasn't there? Which pretty much spells it out—given by, interestingly enough, quite a brilliant being.

So it makes clear that this has nothing to do with intelligence. Often deluded types are lost, unsure what's going on. And if they do know what the immediate experience is, they don't know what to make of it. This is the suffering of delusion.

As I said, we all have all three of these tendencies. It's just that one of them tends to be in the foreground.

So that's the bad news. But the good news is that each of these types, with bhavana—with mental development and the spiritual growth and insight that comes with it—manifests certain gifts. Spiritual practice is a bit like applying compost to a rose plant. It causes the rose part to grow, but not the thorns. The thorny part tends to wither, and then some of the strengths within the type start to manifest. The tendencies of mind are still there, but they're repurposed, if you want to put it that way, in an interesting way.

The being that has a tendency toward greed develops in the direction of generosity and loving-kindness. Why would that be? Because this mind is already oriented toward seeing what's of value, what's beautiful. When the mind isn't sticky any longer, when the craving aspect of this tendency is ameliorated, it becomes prone to share what it appreciates, taking happiness in the pleasantness of sharing with others and seeing their goodness. So it ripens in the direction of metta.

The aversive mind ripens in the direction of wisdom. Why? Because it tends to see what could be changed to improve the functioning of things, how things could work together or might work together. It tends to see causation. When the mind isn't reactively running away or striking out, it's clear and able to identify skillful action.

The deluded mind develops in the direction of equanimity. Why? Because it's not reactive to either pleasant or unpleasant. It's not driven toward or away from things by vedana. When it becomes clear, it's able to see pleasant, unpleasant, and neutral without bias or preference—just things, just the way they are, with balance, which is a definition of equanimity.

This kind of ripening of the hidden potentials of the mind is an indicator of spiritual growth. It's the

product of spiritual practice.

So that's all about the brahmaviharas and their role in cultivating and supporting the development of these wholesome states of mind.

Another thing that can be done to bring these states forward and develop them is to reflect on our wholesome qualities and actions. I consider this kind of like pump priming. When you're trying to get water out of a pump, sometimes you have to work the handle for a while before anything comes out of the nozzle.

Reflection on wholesome qualities and deeds—this is really hard, very often, for people to do. When I ask people to tell me what their wholesome qualities are, they frequently can't come up with anything. You're here on a silent meditation retreat for three months or six weeks, and you can't squeak something out? Maybe there might be something related to goodness present for somebody who would come to do something like this for three months or six weeks—maybe just one or two little things?

Goodness can often be a shadow side for us. This is very interesting. Often we think that our shadow side has to do with deep secrets of bad things we're keeping down and suppressing because they're too threatening. But there's this whole other kind of not seeing, not recognizing, that has to do with what's wholesome and good.

This is actually a commonly given practice in some traditional settings. I remember Joseph telling a story about how he was practicing in Asia, I think with Sayadaw U Pandita. At one point Sayadaw said to him, "You should go and reflect on your sila." His first reaction was, "My sila? I need to reflect on my sila?" And then he realized what was really being said: reflect on your upstanding moral nature. Sayadaw didn't say "and you have one"—he took it for granted.

It's very interesting how that falls on the ear, isn't it? "Go to your room and think about what you did."

The Buddha says, "Whatever one frequently thinks upon and ponders upon, that will be the inclination of the mind." It's very useful to become aware of our wholesome experiences, states, qualities, and deeds for this reason—because it increases them. When wholesome qualities become conscious, they increase, they're supported, they're strengthened.

Another practice is gratitude practice.

Annie gave a beautiful reflection on gratitude this morning, and this is another practice that's very skillful. The Buddha says that gratitude is the primary sign of a person of integrity—an interesting statement. A person of integrity, meaning someone who is truthful and is able to recognize and acknowledge what has been given, what has been received from others.

Gratitude practice is skillful because it turns the mind towards an awareness of what is already present and available that is good and useful. The mind becomes able to identify some gifts, some riches that are

present, some assets that are there, even if there are problems. This helps to move the mind out of that feeling of scarcity and recognize that there is grace here, and there is beauty. Generosity towards self and towards others becomes possible because the heart and mind are no longer compressed by a feeling of lack.

If you wanted to do one practice as a daily practice to take home, gratitude practice—keeping a gratitude journal—can be quite transformative. It orients the mind towards noticing, recognizing, and acknowledging what there is to be grateful for.

Other practices related to developing and cultivating wholesome states of mind include maintaining sila, the basic practice of the ethical trainings. There's the practice of dana, the practice of generosity, of giving, of offering. There's the practice of the paramis, the perfections of mind. And in all of this, of course, mindfulness has this most amazing ecological effect, because the presence of mindfulness has the effect of weakening unwholesome states while supporting the arising, strengthening the occurrence, and increasing the frequency of wholesome ones. That's one of the reasons mindfulness is spoken of as a safeguard, a great protector of mind.

So the last of the great endeavors: maintaining wholesome states already arisen. How can you do that? You can incline the mind towards noting the presence of wholesome states. You could do it within this context, for instance, by taking a sitting—or a number of sittings, or a day, or a week—and basically inclining the mind at the beginning of the sitting to notice and to note the presence of wholesome states. Just in the way you could start a sitting by saying, "I'm going to note the arising or the passing away of phenomena," or "I'm going to notice the presence of not-self"—in that same way you can take a resolve or incline the mind to notice the presence of wholesome states.

Another thing you can do is to reflect on these states as beneficial and significant. Their arising is a good thing, a very wholesome thing, even when there aren't fireworks present. When we cultivate what's in our interest, we enter into a kind of virtuous spiral where the seeds are being planted for these kinds of states to arise more and more frequently, more of them, in stronger and stronger forms. If we recognize them, name them, note them, mindfulness will increase their occurrence.

You can notice their vedana, which is often pleasant, sometimes neutral. We can allow whatever sensations are there to be present and to be known. These sensations that accompany wholesome states are often pleasant, if subtle. A wholesome pleasant is nothing to run away from. You can even invite them to remain. It only becomes unskillful if you're grasping and clinging and clawing, trying to get them to stay. They, of course, are impermanent like anything else you can experience, and at a certain point that state will dissolve. But if mindfulness is present, it could very well be followed by another wholesome state. And the more mindfulness is present, the more likely that is going to be the case.

In thinking of the practice horizon long-term, it's important to know that over time the mix of mind states we experience changes. There are more and more wholesome states and fewer unwholesome ones. The

wholesome states last longer and are deeper. The unwholesome ones move through more quickly. And that's the way the practice develops and works with the existing ecology of the mind.

So just to close tonight with a little bedtime story for you—or nearly bedtime story. This is by Ajahn Brahm:

"After we purchased the land for our monastery in 1983, we were broke. We were in debt. There were no buildings on the land, not even a shed. Those first few weeks we slept not on beds but on old doors we'd bought cheaply from the salvage yard. We raised them on bricks at each corner to lift them off the ground. There were no mattresses, of course—we were forest monks. The abbot had the best door, the flat one. My door was ribbed with a sizable hole in the center where the doorknob would have been. I joked that now I wouldn't need to get out of bed to go to the toilet. The cold truth was, however, that the wind would come up through that hole."

I didn't sleep much those nights.

We were poor monks who needed buildings. We couldn't afford to employ a builder—the materials were expensive enough. So I had to learn how to build: how to prepare foundations, lay concrete and bricks, erect the roof, put in the plumbing, the whole lot. I'd been a theoretical physicist and high school teacher in lay life, not used to working with my hands.

After a few years, I became quite skilled at building, even calling my crew the BBC—the Buddhist Building Company. But when I started, it was very difficult. It may look easy to lay a brick: a dollop of mortar underneath, a little tap here, a little tap there. But when I began laying bricks, I'd tap one corner down to make it level and the other corner would go up. So I'd tap that corner down and the brick would move out of line. After I'd nudge it back into line, the first corner would be too high again. You try it.

Being a monk, I had patience and as much time as I needed. I made sure every single brick was perfect, no matter how long it took. Eventually, I completed my first brick wall and stood back to admire it. It was only then that I noticed—oh no—I'd missed two bricks. All the other bricks were nicely in line, but these two were inclined at an angle. They looked terrible. They spoiled the whole wall. They ruined it.

By then the cement mortar was too hard for the bricks to be taken out. So I asked the abbot if I could knock the wall down and start over again—I did have time on my hands. Or even better, perhaps blow it up. I'd made a mess of it and I was very embarrassed. The abbot said no, the wall had to stay.

When I showed our first visitors around our fledgling monastery, I always tried to avoid taking them past my brick wall. I hated anyone seeing it. Then one day, some three or four months after I'd finished it, I was walking with a visitor and he saw the wall.

"That's a nice wall," he casually remarked.

"Sir," I replied in surprise, "have you left your glasses in your car? Are you visually impaired? Can't you

see those two bad bricks which spoil the whole wall?"

What he said next changed my whole view of that wall, of myself, and of many other aspects of life. He said, "Yes, I can see those two bad bricks. But I can see the nine hundred and ninety-eight good bricks as well."

I was stunned. For the first time in over three months, I could see the other bricks in that wall apart from the two mistakes. Above, below, to the left and to the right of the bad bricks were good bricks—perfect bricks. Moreover, the perfect bricks were many, many more than the two bad bricks. Before, my eyes would focus exclusively on my two mistakes. I was blind to everything else. That was why I couldn't bear looking at that wall, or having others see it, and it was why I wanted to destroy it.

Now I could see that the good bricks far outnumbered the flawed ones. The wall didn't look so bad after all. It was, as the visitor had said, a nice brick wall. It's still there now, twenty years later, but I've forgotten exactly where those bad bricks are. I literally cannot see those mistakes anymore.

How many of us become depressed, or even contemplate suicide, because all we can see in ourselves are two bad bricks? In truth, there are many, many more good bricks—perfect bricks—above, below, to the left and to the right of the faults. But at times we just can't see them. Instead, every time we look, our eyes focus exclusively on the mistakes. The mistakes are all we see, they're all we think there are, and so we want to destroy them. And sometimes, sadly, we do destroy a very nice wall.

We've all got our two bad bricks. But the perfect bricks in each one of us are much, much more than the mistakes. Once we see this, things aren't so bad.

So my wish for you all is that you become conscious of the many aspects and experiences of goodness that arise within you, and which are part of you—and that you not be deceived by the voice of Māra.

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