

# Hatred (3 of 5) Practicing with Ill Will

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## SUMMARY KEYWORDS

*dosa*, hostility, attitude, *mettā*, goodwill, meditation, body, emotions, tension, messenger

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The topic this week is *dosa*. I've been translating it as "hatred" or "hostility." It's also translated as "ill will," which has the benefit of feeling like it can include a wider range – including even things that are very mild. These things can feel as though there's a little bit of ill will in them, which you might not identify as being hatred or hostility.

It might be as simple as someone crowding you in a supermarket line. Maybe, instead of standing six feet away, they're standing four feet away. It's far enough that you don't feel like you can say something, but you really don't like it. You feel a little ill will for that person. Is it necessary to have this ill will? It's not hatred. It's not hostility. But it is an unkind attitude.

Today, the topic is how to practice with ill will, which is a big topic. I first want to approach ill will from kind of a wide perspective, and then move in closer to discuss mindfulness practice with it. One thing you can do to get a wider perspective on ill will – if you want to practice with it, get a handle on it, become wise about it, and even become free from it (even if it remains, finding a kind of freedom around it so you're not caught in its grip) – is to reflect on it for a while. Think about it. Contemplate it. Talk to friends about it. See if you can begin understanding what your relationship to it is. What attitude do you have toward ill will?

If you have ill will toward ill will, do you tend to justify it and hold onto it? Do you tend to feel shame because you have it? Do you tend to ignore it, deny it, and push it away? All those are common enough attitudes people can have toward ill will, and there are lots of others. But what is the relationship you have? What's the attitude? What are your beliefs about ill will? Do you believe that ill will is always wrong? Do you believe that, for you, it's always justified? That's a tricky one because, in some ways, maybe ill will is justified given how difficult your experiences are and what people are doing.

Maybe it's easy to justify, but that's not really the most strategic way of living your life in the face of challenges. Maybe there are better ways. Look at your attitude – your relationship – to ill will, and then consider also, if

you act on it, what happens? What are the consequences of that? Are the consequences in the world really beneficial or not? Sometimes expressing strong ill will to someone can be strategic in the moment for getting what you want. But maybe it doesn't really set up healthy or useful long-term conditions. What are the dangers associated with ill will? What's it like for you when you walk around with ill will? What are the things that come with it?

In order to live a reflective, contemplative life – to question ill will and consider it – it's often helpful to do so with a wise friend. Sometimes engage your friend and say: "I'd like to explore ill will and my relationship to it. Would you be willing to just be with me as I explore it, maybe asking me questions and helping out?" The benefit of this kind of reflection is that when you sit down to meditate, you're wiser about ill will. You can recognize some of the attitudes that come up, some of the common strategies and beliefs you have in relationship to ill will, all of which interfere with the ability to really be present for it.

Another thing that can be helpful – even before meditating, or during meditation – is to have some familiarity with *mettā*, some familiarity with the emotions of kindness, compassion, and care that can live inside us. Consider – and this can be reflective also, maybe as a conversation with friends – what is the relationship

between goodwill and ill will? Are there appropriate ways to bring goodwill to ill will, have goodwill meet ill will, or have it touch ill will?

I use the words “meet” and “touch” carefully because they’re different from fixing and getting rid of ill will. I have had ill will and tried to use my practice to blast it out of existence. I’ve had ill will toward my ill will. But we can touch ill will. We can begin to explore this world of ours in relationship to goodwill. What is goodwill, and where does that live in our lives?

This is a reflective life, a contemplative life that lets things deepen and fill out for us. When we come to meditate, for example, goodwill is there in the background as a foundation, as a support for mindfulness practice itself. Mindfulness practice, whether it’s on the cushion in meditation or in regular life, entails, in a sense, stopping and looking. If we have ill will, we want to stop and take a good look. Stopping means that we don’t just barrel ahead busy in our lives but, if the situation allows, maybe even pause and really reckon, “Oh, this is what’s happening now.”

Sometimes there can be kind of a general, simple understanding that ill will is there. Some people might be content, “Well, that *kind of* is mindfulness.” But it’s not really stopping, pausing, and really taking an honest

good look, seeing: “This is what’s happening. There is ill will here.”

Having stopped to take a real look at ill will, you then take the time to familiarize yourself with it. Be in the present moment with the experience, which is what the seeing is. And begin seeing it more fully with eyes that, maybe, have a little goodwill, or eyes that are not carrying all of our attitudes about it that make it so complicated. Stop and look at ill will with eyes that are simple, present, and without hostility, condoning, justifying, feeling shame, or being critical about it. Look at it just for itself, for what it is.

There’s a rightness – an appropriateness – in really stopping and taking a look at the experience of ill will, in and of itself, as if it has permission to be there. But because you’ve stopped, there’s no danger that you’re going to act on it in harmful ways. You’re just going to look at it and really get to know it.

One of the ways in which meditation works best is to feel it in your body. How is ill will experienced? Where’s the center of it? Where is it expressed most in the body? Where’s the tension? Where’s the heat? Where’s the pressure? Where is the place that wants to do something and act? Feel it in the body. One of the advantages of really feeling it in the body is that the body is not a story.

One of the things that fuels ill will is the story-making mind: “She said. He said. They said.” Instead of continuing with the stories and conversations, we drop in and let the body be the place where we feel what’s actually happening. Something very significant about feeling ill will in the body is that the body has the ability to process difficult emotions. That’s processing in a very different way than through the cognitive mind, the mind that thinks about, analyzes, and imagines things.

The body has tremendous healing power. Dropping down and feeling the body is part of the healing potential we have. One way that healing happens is through feeling the tension in our body. Just as soon as we feel the tensions, those tensions can begin to melt away. That changes our whole relationship to ill will, because some of the fuel – the power – that ill will has comes from the tension we hold in our body, our mind, and our heart.

It might also be useful to notice what other emotions come along with ill will. There might be underlying emotions. Ill will might be a symptom of deeper emotions. There might be fear. There might be hurt. Deep inside, there might also be a sense of conceit, a sense of self that we’re contracted around. Sometimes dropping in and beginning to carefully feel those underlying attitudes, feelings, emotions, contractions,

and sense of self is much more useful than just paying attention to the ill will.

I find it very helpful sometimes to think of ill will as a messenger. Don't kill the messenger. What's the message? What's going on more deeply? Then feel and be mindful of that. It's not an analysis, but it's feeling our way into what's deeper, what's really going on here.

Sometimes with ill will, there can be mindfulness of the stories we tell and the beliefs we have. The fascinating thing there is to see them just as thoughts, to be able to be quiet – still – enough, to have stopped enough, just to observe a belief or thought come up without believing it, picking it up, or being involved. It is almost like stepping back. It is as if you could watch a thought bubble rise above the head of a friend or a stranger. You're a little bit detached, a little bit removed. You're not entangled in it.

Sometimes we step back and watch the thoughts, the story-making mind, which can sometimes be so important for perpetuating ill will. Then, always find some way to relax. Find the places where there's tension and, if it's easy enough, relax it and settle. Practice with it. Be present for it. Be mindful of it.

All along, if you have an interest in and place value upon goodwill, practice with ill will with an attitude of

goodwill. You're doing this, even though it's difficult, for your own welfare and happiness – for long-term happiness. It might be difficult in the moment, but with more familiarity, wisdom, and a greater capacity to be mindful and present with ill will, that will slowly begin to build, creating, more and more, a wise way of living with it. Until, one day, you'll discover that ill will has less and less of a hold on you, less and less power over you. It might still arise, but instead of being alarmed by it or going along with it, you'll say: "Oh. There's my old friend, ill will. It's okay. You can just stay there. We're not going to get involved with that. Later, we'll practice with you. We'll sit down."

So, in these few minutes, that is what I have to say about practicing with ill will. It's well worthwhile. I think it's part of a responsible life to really learn the art – the ability – to be mindful of ill will so that it doesn't get the upper hand, and so we don't cause harm in the world.

For this next day, one of the things you might think of doing in order to practice with ill will – even in the slightest way – is to see in what way ill will contracts you into yourself so that a sense of self or conceit is highlighted. To what degree does ill will create an unhealthy separation from other people? Both directions are possible – seeing the difficulty in yourself created by having ill will, and seeing the difficulty it creates socially. You might see how that operates. Thank you very much.



