

# Unsentimental Goodwill

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Years back, when I was a lay person in Thailand, I was visiting a family in Central Thailand, and they took me to a monastery where there was an old monk who made protective talismans, little clay birds that were called protecting birds. You'd get one and you'd put it up under the eaves or someplace else high up in the house to protect everybody in the house, to keep the house peaceful. The monk was very old and quite sick, but he sat up to receive us and was very kindly. As we left, I happened to notice scrawled in chalk on one of the walls, in English, the words: "Don't love." I was very surprised.

The first reason for my surprise, I guess, was because I came from a country where love was considered to be the highest religious emotion. The second reason was because I'd heard so much about the Buddha's teachings on loving kindness. But as I got to know his teachings better, I realized that the word metta is not loving-kindness. It's goodwill. The word for love, pema, is something else again.

The Buddha didn't have much positive to say about pema, or love. There was a time when a group of Brahmans who had suddenly gotten faith in the Buddha came early one morning, getting ready to prepare food for the Buddha and the monks as they came out for their alms round. The Brahmans were making a huge racket, and the Buddha asked the monk, Nagita, who was attending him at the time, "Nagita, what's making all that racket out there like a bunch of fish mongers?" And Nagita said, "Oh those are Brahmans who have new faith in the Buddha." And the Buddha said, "I want nothing to do with them."

I've forgotten Nagita's precise words, but he said something to the effect of, "Please be kind. Their faith is new."

And the Buddha said again, "I want nothing to do with them." He added, "What do you get out of food? You get excrement. What do you get out of love? The mind gets altered and you suffer pain, sorrow, grief, and despair."

There's another passage where the Buddha talked about how closely intertwined love and hate are. If you love someone, then you're also going to love the people who are good to that person, regardless of whether they're good people or not. Or if they're bad to the person you love, you're going to hate them regardless of whether they're right or not. If people are good to someone you hate, you're going to hate them. And if they're bad to someone you hate, you're going to love them, regardless of whether they're right or wrong. So your love is an unreliable guide to how you should skillfully judge people or relate to people.

So when the Buddha's talking about universal metta, he's not talking about universal love. He's talking about universal goodwill, a universal desire for happiness, but he never promotes the idea that everybody's good and therefore we should love them.

There are actually some passages where the Buddha talks about goodwill as protection, both from yourself and from others. In other words, if you realize you've been behaving in an unskillful way, you want to develop goodwill for yourself and for other beings so that you can strengthen your determination not to repeat that unskillful behavior.

This is because you realize that your motivation influences your actions, and so you've really got to work on your motivations. Whether it comes easily or not, you want to remind yourself that you don't want to harm anybody—partly because of the simple principle of kamma, that if you harm others, they're going to harm you.

Or as the Buddha pointed out in that story about King Pasenadi and his Queen Mallika: You will never find anyone in the world whom you love more than yourself. But you have to reflect also that everybody else has that same fierce love for themselves, too. So you should never harm them.

He doesn't say why he draws this connection, but you can think of at least two reasons. One is that if you love yourself that intently, it's not fair to harm others who love themselves intently. Why should your self-love be important and theirs unimportant? And

second, it's not wise. If your happiness depends on their suffering, they're not going to stand for it. They'll do what they can to bring it to an end.

So it's not because people are lovable that you spread thoughts of goodwill to them. You spread goodwill because you need protection.

And you want to be able to draw on that attitude of goodwill with regard to anybody, at anytime. The Buddha talks about the case where bandits have pinned you down and are savagely sawing off your limbs with a two-handed saw. He says, "Start with thoughts of goodwill for the bandits. And then from the bandits, spread that goodwill out to everybody else in the whole cosmos." Now, of course, at that moment, the people in the world who are going to be hardest to feel goodwill for are the bandits. But they're the ones you have to start with. So you've got to prepare yourself.

It's easiest to start with someone you find it easy to feel goodwill for, someone for whom you can in all honesty say, "May this person be happy." In some cases that person may be yourself. In other cases, it may be somebody else. You may at first have some trouble wishing for your own happiness, so find somebody for whom you do find it easy to think, "May he or she be happy."

The phrases you use don't have to be elaborate. And you don't just repeat the phrase mindlessly. Just pose that idea in the mind until you agree with it.

Then start spreading that same thought to another person and then another, and include yourself in there at some point. If you have trouble feeling goodwill for yourself, ask yourself why. You might respond, "Well, I'm not a good person," or whatever, but that doesn't matter. It's not because people are good that you spread goodwill to them. It's because you don't want to harm them. And this desire should apply to yourself as well.

From there you keep spreading that thought of goodwill out, out, out, spreading it out, until you've got a sense of at least a certain group of people for whom you feel goodwill. Then ask yourself, "Is there anybody out there that you really do have trouble feeling goodwill for?" And some faces will probably pop into your mind. Then ask yourself, "What would you gain from this person's suffering?" And part of you may say, "Well, they deserve to suffer." The Buddha never says anything about people deserving to suffer or not deserving to suffer. He simply speaks in terms of actions that lead to suffering and actions that lead to happiness. Everybody's mix of actions is very complex. And just because someone has done something negative doesn't mean that they really have to suffer. After all, the Buddha's teachings are all about putting an end to all suffering, "deserved" or not.

Take that image of the lump of salt in the river. If you've done unskillful things in the past but you've developed an unlimited attitude of goodwill, that unlimited attitude will mitigate the impact of your past bad actions. This applies to other people as well: If they can develop an attitude of universal goodwill and try to change their ways, wouldn't that be a much better thing for the world than to see them punished, to see them squirm one way or another? After all, when people are punished in that way, they often don't learn the lesson and instead actually get more hardened and entrenched in their own sense of their rightness, and of the unfairness of the punishment.

So the world would be a much better place if everyone could develop an attitude of goodwill. And that's part of what we wish for: Not only do we want them to be happy, but we also want them to understand the causes of true happiness and to act on them. We want them to develop universal goodwill, too. That's something you can genuinely wish for anyone.

So it's for protection that we try to develop this attitude: protection for ourselves, protection for the people around us, protection for the world as a whole. You don't have to think about whether beings are lovable or not lovable. It's just that when you think about all the suffering there is in the world, you should say, "Isn't there already enough? Do you have to wish more suffering on yourself, or more suffering on other people? Wouldn't it be better if we could all learn how to be skillful?"

This, of course, doesn't mean that everybody will be skillful or that everybody will find true happiness. It also doesn't mean that you don't protect yourself from other people's

unskillfulness. All too often we confuse the idea of metta with a kind of Pollyanna-ish attitude toward life that everybody deep down inside is a good person and if we would only allow them to show their goodness, they would be very happy to show that goodness. Well, that's not always the case. There are a lot of people who, when you're good to them, will see that as a sign of weakness. So you have to protect yourself. But the trick is learning how to protect yourself in a way that's not harming anyone.

The breath is helpful here when you've developed a sense of your own energy field being filled with good breath energy. That makes it harder for people's unskillful energy to invade your field. The image the Buddha gives is of a solid wooden door and someone throwing a ball of string at it. The ball just bounces right off, because of the solidity of the door. You want to make your sense of comfortable full breath that solid—as opposed to the times when your body is not immersed with mindfulness and your mindfulness isn't immersed in the body. When that's the case, the Buddha compares your mind to a lump of clay. If someone throws a stone into it, the stone is going to make big dent in the clay, because the clay is so soft and weak.

Try to develop an attitude of healthy breath filling the body and a healthy attitude filling your mind. That's your strength. That's your protection. As for whether other people are going to be good or not, you can't let your goodwill depend on that.

So you want to take an unsentimental attitude towards goodwill. And that actually makes the goodwill a lot easier to maintain. If you go around trying to love everybody and then you run into somebody who's just really evil and really cruel, then you're likely to pull back into your shell. What you want instead is an ability to go through the world with your goodwill as your protection, with your breath as your protection—knowing that you're going to need protection, but that these things provide you with a protection you can trust.

There are a lot of people out there you can't trust. That was a lesson that really struck me when I first met Ajaan Fuang. One of his favorite statements was, "If you trust the path and you trust people, you're going to end up sorry for it." He explained this as follows: Suppose you've followed a path many, many times and you come to feel, "Oh, I don't have to carry my flashlight tonight. I know this path is safe." Well, that might be the night a snake is on the path.

And the same with people. People may have been good to you, but it's not the case that they always will be. The human mind is very changeable, and they could change without notice. You can't rely on their goodness as your nourishment. You've got to learn how to take as your nourishment whatever goodness you can give rise to in yourself.

This is where goodwill is very important. If, when you're not wishing any harm on anybody, harm does come to you, you're not going to feel guilty or that somehow it was a punishment for your unskillful attitude. You can just chalk it up to past kamma and leave it at that. It's a much cleaner and more bearable way of thinking.

Of course, in the beginning it's easier when you can find goodness in other people. That's something you want to look for, but you're not pretending that they don't have their unskillful side. The Buddha said that it's like a monk who goes out looking for rags to make a robe. He finds some rags that are partly clean and partly dirty, so he tears off the dirty part and takes just the clean part. This means that you don't pretend that the whole cloth is clean. If you realize that this part is dirty, you know it's unusable. But you can still tear off and take the part that is usable. This way you learn to take what nourishment you can find from other people in terms of their goodness. But at the same time, you need to learn how to create your own source of nourishment inside. This is one of the reasons why goodwill practice should not end with just, "May I be happy, may I be happy," as you sometimes hear.

How are you going to feel good about yourself unless you also feel goodwill for others? If you look at your own mind and see that it's narrow and selfish, it's hard to gain nourishment from that kind of mind. But if you see that you do have goodwill for others, that there are others whom you wish well, others that you want to help: Seeing that quality in yourself gives you a lot of encouragement, that whatever other faults you may have, at least you've learned how to develop some goodwill.

The more limitless you can make that, the more nourishing it's going to be. And the more protection it's going to give to you.