

Metta Math

January 12, 2022

Every evening before we meditate, we have a chant on the sublime attitudes: universal goodwill, compassion, empathetic joy, and equanimity. Because we do it every day, it's all too easy for us to simply mouth the words without really thinking about what we're saying, even though it's translated in English. So it's good to stop and think: One, why do we have the chant? And two, are we getting the most out of it?

The chant is there to remind us of our motivation. We're looking for happiness. Not only that, we're looking for happiness in a way that doesn't harm anybody, which means that we have to think about the happiness of others. So primarily, we're doing it for ourselves, because if we can have ill will for anybody, that means we're probably going to behave in an unskillful way toward that person. And that becomes our karma. It's a drain on our resources.

The Buddha talks about goodwill and the other sublime attitudes as being the practitioner's wealth. And it's an interesting kind of wealth. It's not the kind where you have to go out and do something to get it from somebody else. It's something you can produce from within. It's as if you had your own printing press and you could print as much money as you wanted. And the more you print, the wealthier you are.

So why is our account so small? Why do we not see goodwill as wealth? There's a strong tendency to keep score. "Someone else said this to me. Someone else said that to me"—things you don't like. That's keeping garbage. It's like those pack rats that pick up whatever and stash it away, stash it away. They treat it like wealth, but it's not wealth at all. It's just garbage. And why clutter up your mind with garbage? You can produce abundant goodwill, abundant genuine wealth.

Think of all the images the Buddha has for the wealth of goodwill. The whole Earth: You want your goodwill to be like the whole Earth. Someone comes along and wants to make the Earth be without earth. They dig here and they spit there and they urinate here, thinking, "Be without earth, be without earth." But the Earth is so much bigger. You have look at other people's misbehavior as like that pitiful little man trying to make the Earth be without earth. You want your goodwill to be that much larger, that much more abundant.

Make your goodwill like the River Ganges. Someone could come with a torch and try to burn the river away, but would never succeed. The water just puts out the flame. Goodwill can be like space. People can try to draw pictures on space,

but there's nothing there for the pictures to hang on to. You want your attitude to be that: something that nobody can draw pictures on. No matter what they do, you don't keep it in mind, and in particular, you don't keep tally as to who owes what to you.

So make your goodwill large. You can be as wealthy as you want. The Buddha talks about how if it rained gold coins, we wouldn't have enough for our sensual desires. But with goodwill we can create huge amounts of a different kind of wealth, and it can always be more than enough. Make that your attitude: If people misbehave toward you, you want to overwhelm them with goodwill. After all, just look at this world: People are so poor in goodwill. With the least little bit of disagreement, people draw lines and they get all upset. For what? We keep battling, battling, battling, then we die. We have nothing to show for it.

But goodwill raises the level of the mind. It's not innate. You have goodwill for some people. The human attitude is that you have goodwill for some but not for everybody. But with the sublime attitudes, the brahmaviharas, you're trying to raise the level of your mind to a Brahma level. It's the Brahmas who have goodwill for everyone with extra left over. If you can learn how to think in those terms, you become a Brahma inside.

So ask yourself: What's keeping you from generating as much wealth as you want? What attitudes are getting in the way? And remind yourself: It is heedful of you to be generous with your goodwill. As the Buddha said, all skillful qualities start with heedfulness, are rooted in heedfulness, and goodwill is one of those qualities.

Sometimes we're told that we need only get in touch with our innately goodwill nature and allow it to bloom. But you look at little kids behaving, and it's not as if somebody told them that they had to be partial in their goodwill. When you first try teaching goodwill to children, there are some who will say, "No, I can't do that. How can I have goodwill for that person? That person did this or that mean thing." You have to remind them, "Okay, the goodwill is not so much for them. It's for you."

Which means that universal goodwill is an attitude that has to be cultivated. It has to be developed. You have to think your way to goodwill.

They talk about a *citta* of goodwill: *mettācittena*. The word *citta* means both "heart" and "mind." The main emphasis in goodwill, of course, is with the heart, but it requires some of your head as well. When you think of somebody for whom you have trouble generating goodwill, try to ask yourself: Why are you so stingy in your goodwill? What's the obstacle?

Because what does goodwill mean? It means, “May that person be happy.” How is the person going to be happy? Through his or her actions. So basically you’re wishing, “If this person is behaving in an unskillful way, may he or she see the error of his or her ways and be willing to change, willing to become more skillful.” That’s an attitude you can have for everybody. Then you can ask yourself: Is there anything I can do to help that person be more skillful? Rather than tallying up all the bad things that person did in the past, you’re looking at him or her as a person with potential, the potential to change. So, make it your challenge. Is there anything you can do to help that person become more skillful—to *want* to become more skillful?

You probably know the folktale of the Sun and the Wind. They got into a discussion one day, and then into an argument: Who was stronger? Who had more power? The Wind said, “I know. See that man down there on Earth, walking down that road with a blanket around him? I can blow that blanket away. You can’t do that.” So the Wind blew and blew and blew, and of course the man just clutched the blanket tighter and tighter and tighter. The Wind couldn’t blow it away. Then the Sun said, “Okay, let me try.” The Sun just beamed. The man took the blanket off of his own accord—the lesson, of course, being that if you try to force your ideas of what’s right and wrong on other people, they’re just going to hold even more tightly to what they’ve been doing all along. But if you figure out some way to make them *want* to change, then they’ll be happy to do it.

So goodwill requires more than just an attitude of the heart. It requires some thinking. This is why the Buddha gives those images—the Earth, the River Ganges, space—and talks about goodwill as wealth. Once you generate it, then you try to protect it, as with all wealth, because there will be people who misbehave, and you can’t let that erode your goodwill away. Think of the example of the mother protecting her child. The poem says, “Just as a mother would protect her child, her only child, so you should try to protect your goodwill.” Sometimes that passage is mistranslated as, “You should cherish all beings as a mother would cherish her child.” But the word “cherish” doesn’t appear in the poem at all. The word is “protect.” And it’s not that you’re protecting beings; you’re protecting goodwill, so that no matter what happens, even if you have to die, you’re not going to give up your goodwill.

The Buddha gives a related image in the simile of the bandits who are trying to cut you up into pieces with a two-handled saw. He says that if you let any ill will arise in your mind toward those bandits, you’re not following the Dhamma; you’re not following his teachings. You have to have goodwill for them even as you’re dying, because after all, if you die with ill will, you’re going to die with a

vengeful attitude, wanting to get back at those people. That's going to pull you down. Again, it's a case where your lack of goodwill is bad for you.

So it's not a question of other people deserving or not deserving your goodwill. We talk about "deserving" when we have limited resources and are trying to parcel them out: "This person deserves that much. That person deserves this much." But here, your goodwill is supposed to be unlimited. You give unlimited goodwill, infinite goodwill, and then you give more infinite goodwill. It's like one of those weird math problems where there are levels of infinity. You can give infinite goodwill, then you can give more infinite goodwill the next day, and more infinite goodwill the next. There doesn't have to be any limit. When you have that much, you don't have to worry about who deserves and who doesn't deserve. You just give it to everybody all around.

So learn how to be generous with your goodwill. The more generous you are, the more you get, the more you have. Don't approach goodwill with a shopkeeper's mind, who has to tally things up and do the math for fear of running out of money. You should be engaging in the math of infinities. You don't need to keep tally of that. Just keep producing. And as the Buddha said, when you give abundantly, you're going to receive abundantly as well. You may not receive goodwill from other beings, but there's an inner sense of well-being that you create within your own mind, and you want that to be abundant.

And it's something you can do. If there's anything in the mind that resists the idea, you've got to question it, grill it. Don't let it have any force, because it's just going to make you poor. You have to ask yourself: Why do you choose to be poor when you can be wealthy?

So keep that image in mind: Goodwill is your wealth. As I said, it's like having your own money press where you can print as much money as you like. And the value doesn't get reduced when there's more of it. So the math of goodwill is not like the math of poverty. It's the math of infinite wealth.