

Goodwill for Bad People

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Our practice is founded on goodwill: a wish for happiness: our own happiness, the happiness of others.

We're looking for a happiness that doesn't harm anyone—a point we always have to keep in mind because most pleasures of the world cause somebody some harm. The person who gets intoxicated with consuming the pleasures gets harmed. And then there are the other people who have to give up something for whatever the pleasure is that you're seeking, because it oppresses them or takes advantage of them. There's a lot of that going on in the world.

One of the reasons we want to look for a harmless happiness is because we realize that if our happiness causes other people to suffer, they're going to do what they can to stop it. It's not going to last; it's not going to be reliable. So it's in our own interest to develop thoughts of goodwill, to keep remembering that we have to be very responsible about how we look for happiness if we want it to last.

There's a sutta where the Buddha's talking to someone about the attitudes you should have toward mistakes you made in the past, times when you actually harmed people. He says you resolve not to repeat that mistake and then you develop thoughts of limitless, immeasurable goodwill so as you get your intentions straight.

It's not just a sentimental thought, "Oh, may people be happy." You realize that your motivation every time you act has to depend on goodwill—and it has to be a goodwill that doesn't make exceptions. Otherwise, you can't trust your intentions.

So when we spread thoughts of goodwill, it's not just for others. It's for ourselves, so that we can learn how to trust ourselves, to be more scrupulous in how we find happiness.

That's an important thought to keep in mind because there are times when you spread thoughts of goodwill and it's really difficult, either because of negative feelings you have toward yourself, or you look at the people around you and see that the human race is not a pretty sight. You see thievery going on. You see ingratitude, cruelty, thoughtlessness. It's everywhere.

After a while you may begin to think that these people don't deserve your goodwill at all. But that's not the point. *You* need the goodwill. And you need to be able to make it limitless.

As the Buddha said, when your goodwill is limitless then you have a share in limitless safety. If you resolve not to harm anyone, you're not going to steal from anyone, you're not going to kill anyone, not have illicit sex with anyone, not lie to anyone, not take intoxicants under any situations. It's when your precepts become limitless that you have a share in that limitless safety.

And for the precepts to be limitless, your goodwill has to be limitless as well. You can't

reserve your goodwill only for people you like or people you feel deserve your goodwill. It has to go to everybody.

That doesn't mean that we pretend not to see other people's negative traits. After all, you have to be heedful as well when you're dealing with other people.

But there are times when you have to focus on their good traits just as one way of reminding yourself that there is something there that it's possible to feel goodwill for. But that's a crutch.

Ultimately you want to understand goodwill to the point where you don't have to think about other people's good habits or good traits for you to feel goodwill for them.

After all, there's compassion. As the Buddha said, when you see people who have no good habits at all—the things they say, the things they do, the things they think are all corrupt—the attitude you should develop toward those people is the same as when you're going across the desert and you see somebody lying on the roadside, sick, without any help.

At the very least, you would want somebody to come and find that person and help them, even if you can't do it yourself. That's the attitude you should have.

Because when you're wishing for other people's happiness, one, you want it to be true happiness. And two, you realize that happiness, especially true happiness, has to come from understanding. People, to be happy, have to understand the causes of true happiness and be able to act on those causes.

You're not saying, "Well, may this person who's killing and stealing, etc., be happy killing and stealing." You're saying to yourself, "May they see the light, realize that the killing and stealing doesn't lead to happiness so they can stop those things."

So when you find it difficult to spread thoughts of goodwill to other people or try to make thoughts limitless, you really have to stop and work on your understanding of goodwill. Otherwise it becomes make-believe. You sit there sending out pink rays in all directions, but it doesn't really mean that much. When the meditation is over, you go back to your old prejudices or your old likes and dislikes. And you find yourself really wishing that someone else would suffer. That doesn't accomplish the purpose of goodwill.

The purpose of goodwill is to establish a principle in the mind. The Buddha calls it a determination: that you're going to have goodwill regardless.

And it's important to think about it in those terms. This is a determination that you're going to act on goodwill regardless of how the other person is acting or speaking or thinking. You're going to keep in the back of your mind the thought, "I want that person to understand the causes for true happiness." That then becomes a part of your intention as you deal with that person.

Goodwill is part of the other brahmaviharas, too. It's expressed in compassion: When you encounter someone who's suffering, you feel compassion. When you encounter someone who's already happy, you feel empathetic joy. You don't allow yourself to resent their happiness

or their good fortune.

And then there are the people who, regardless of how much you wish for them to be happy, are just determined not to understand, not to look for true happiness. That's where you have to exercise equanimity.

The equanimity there helps save your goodwill from turning into burnout or disappointment or cynicism. You realize that, for the time being, that person just doesn't want to get the message. Some people you can't speak to about anything that has to do with true happiness because they simply won't listen. That's where you exercise equanimity.

We live in a world where there are a lot of people you can't help. Even the Buddha couldn't save all living beings. This idea of a bodhisattva who aspires to save all living beings is totally unrealistic. There are a lot of people out there who are just determined to stay here in this wandering-around for the foreseeable future.

When you see they're beyond your help, you have to exercise equanimity. But that doesn't mean you don't have goodwill for them. The goodwill is there. It's just you want to make sure that it's realistic.

Simply wishing people to be happy is not going to make them happy. The world is not entirely plastic. So there are times when goodwill is hard. That doesn't mean you should give up. It means you should try to understand goodwill, understand the principle of karma, understand why we're extending thoughts of goodwill.

A woman who was going through a divorce came here once. It was difficult for her: Her husband had been cheating on her, and of course she was obsessed. I told her, "You've still got to spread thoughts of goodwill in their direction." She complained, though, "Doesn't that give them power, doesn't that give them an energy that they don't need, that's going to make me more oppressed?" I said, "No. You're giving yourself power when you spread goodwill to them. You're putting yourself above the situation."

When you spread thoughts of goodwill it's for protection. On the one hand, the texts talk about spreading thoughts of goodwill to actually protect yourself from outside dangers. But goodwill also protects yourself from yourself: your own unskillful actions, the things you're likely to say and do or think when all you can think about is how horrible that person is and how much they deserve to suffer.

Remember that the Buddha never talked about people "deserving" to suffer. Actions lead to consequences, that's it. But the actual suffering, the suffering that weighs down the mind, is something that comes from present karma. You've seen people in bad situations and they're not suffering. You've seen other people in good situations and they're suffering horribly.

So simply because people have a lot of really bad karma in the past doesn't mean that they have to suffer. If they can gain an understanding and develop the mind that, as the Buddha said, is limitless, then the past bad karma is like a lump of salt thrown into a huge river of clean, clear water. Even though there's a lump of salt in the river, the salt dissolves and the water is so fresh

and there's so much of it that you can still drink it.

So it is possible for other people not to suffer from past karma, and it's possible for us, too. That's another reason why we develop thoughts of goodwill: If our mind stays narrow, then we're going to suffer. If there are limitations on our goodwill, we're going to suffer.

So it's not a question of who deserves or who doesn't deserve your goodwill. Remind yourself: *You* need your goodwill. And you benefit from making it limitless.

So as we spread thoughts of goodwill, remember that this is not make-believe. We're trying to adjust our intentions. It's a determination: that regardless of how other people behave, we're going to keep our focus on a happiness that's harmless.

That's the foundation of our practice. Otherwise we'll never get free.