

## *Spread Goodness Around*

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There's a Pali word *puñña*, which doesn't get much good press in the West. Largely because it's translated as "merit," which sounds like merit badges or brownie points. When people hear about it, it sounds like a very materialistic attitude toward training the mind, gathering up as many points as you can.

Maybe we should translate it in another way: In one book I translated it as "inner quality" or "inner worth." You can also translate it simply as "goodness." Which unfortunately is a word that also doesn't get used much anymore.

A while back, I went onto Amazon and I typed in different words like "honesty" and "truth" and "goodness," just to see what came up. "Truth" was the worst: all the books purporting to tell us the truth about diseases and politicians, all of which seemed had very little to do with the truth. "Goodness" led to recipe books: how to make good cakes and other baked goods.

But stop and think about it: You'd like to have a life in which there is goodness, in which you can give of your goodness. That's what *puñña* is all about: creating goodness in the world through developing your own inner goodness.

Traditionally there are three main types: generosity, virtue, and meditation. So right now as we're meditating, we're making *puñña* or doing *puñña*. As the Buddha said, don't be afraid of acts of *puñña*. They're another word for happiness.

That's what it's all about: finding happiness in a way where you're not taking anything away from anyone else. In fact, you're actually finding happiness through giving. This is the kind of happiness that creates a sense of unity in the world. The happiness that comes from *having* things requires that you have something but somebody else doesn't have it. And that creates divisions. But in the case of generosity, virtue, meditation, there are no divisions, no boundaries. The happiness spreads around; the goodness spreads around.

Take generosity for example. Usually it's a matter of giving material things, but it also covers generosity of other kinds as well. You give of your knowledge, you give of your time, you give of your energy, you give your forgiveness: These are all good things to give and they don't need to cost any money.

And the nice thing about generosity is that it's totally free. In other words, the Buddha doesn't place any constraints on it. He said if you try to prevent someone from giving to someone else, you're creating obstacles for all three parties: the giver, the receiver, and yourself.

So when King Pasenadi asked him, “Where should a gift be given?” he replied, “Give where you feel inspired, or you feel it would be well-used.” Then the king went on to ask him, “When a gift is given, where does it give great fruit?” And the Buddha said, “That’s another question entirely. You want to give to people who are free of greed, aversion, and delusion, or working on getting rid of their greed, aversion, and delusion.”

In addition, you give in a way that you’re not harming anyone. In other words, you don’t steal something to give. You don’t give gifts to people who are actually going to be harmed by using them, and you don’t harm yourself in the process. But where you want to give, who you want to give to, what you want to give: That’s a matter of free choice.

And that’s an important point: The Buddha never pressured anybody to give. When he talked on the topic of generosity, it was *after* people had given something, to make them rejoice in the fact that they’d done something good. But he was trying to make the point that we do have freedom of choice, and it’s that freedom to give that feels really good. The times when you give because you *have* to give don’t feel nearly as good as the times when, simply out of the goodness of your heart, you want to give. You realize you have something that someone else could use well, and you’re happy to give it to them.

This relates to his teachings on karma, that we do have freedom of choice in the present moment. The people who said that there was no worth in giving said, “Well, if everybody’s predetermined to do whatever they’re going to do, then those who give and those who don’t give: it’s simply a matter of the stars or the creator of the world or past actions forcing them to do that. So there’s no virtue in giving.” But the Buddha’s saying, “No, there is virtue in giving because you’re free to choose.”

He’s also saying that the people you give to have worth. It’s not that there’s nothing there or that the people get wiped out at death. They don’t. They move on to wherever their cravings take them. And so when you help somebody, you give something to someone who’s going to be lasting for a long time.

Giving is also a good topic for contemplation. As the Buddha said, when your practice is getting discouraging, stop and reflect on your generosity, on the fact that it proves that you at least have *some* goodness to you. But if you try to think about the times when you were generous when you didn’t have to be, and you can’t think of any, well go out and be generous. Make the news in the world that you want to meditate on.

You find that it’s uplifting. It really does feel good and it really is, as the Buddha said, an act of happiness to do these things. You don’t have to wait till your next lifetime: Right as you do it, it feels good.

The same with virtue. On the one hand, virtue means abstaining from harm, not doing things that are beneath your principles. But it also has a

positive side. When the Buddha advises you not to kill, he also recommends that you be gentle and protective of other beings. The same with the precept against stealing: You also protect other people's belongings as best you can. The precept against illicit sex: You respect people's rights, you don't let your lust overcome the bounds of propriety. The precept against lying: You try to be a person who tells the truth, you try to promote friendships, you try to promote goodness in other people as well. So there's a positive side to virtue too.

And again, it doesn't cost you any money. Now, you may find that you're put at a disadvantage sometimes when you can't lie. But the things you get through lying are not really worth anything, because you've traded your virtue for what? Things that are just going to slip through your fingers. But the fact that you lost your virtue: That's not going to slip through your fingers anytime soon. That's going to stay with you.

Your virtue, too, is a good topic to reflect on. When the meditation gets dull or dry, at the very least you're not harming anyone. As when you're sitting right here right now: You're not harming anybody at all. There's goodness to that.

And finally with the meditation: In the list of the topics of *puñña*, inner quality or inner worth, the usual meditation topic is meditation on goodwill. When the Buddha talks about this, he gives a few images. He says it's like a person blowing a conch horn that can be heard in all directions. You want your goodwill to spread out to everyone in all directions, all at once. He says at one point, "Even if bandits are sawing you apart, cutting off your limbs with a two-handed saw, you should still have goodwill for them, starting with them and then spreading it to the entire world."

And he recommends a few goodwill phrases, like the ones we chanted just now, "May all beings be happy, free from oppression, free from trouble. May they look after themselves with ease." That last phrase is to remind you that beings are really happy when they can look after themselves with ease. You're not saying you're promising to be there for them. You want them to be there for themselves. But all of this is to remind you, when you're dealing with difficult people, that you don't want ill will to get in the way. That's so you can trust yourself.

And other people do benefit from your goodwill. Not only the good things you do and say, but also good things you think. Some people really are sensitive to when a meditator has spread goodwill in their direction.

A woman who was one of Ajaan Fuang's students was once going through a rough time, so one evening, as I was meditating, I spread some goodwill in her direction. A few days later she came to the monastery. "The other night, did you spread goodwill to me?" she asked, and then she added, "I felt it." So some people do feel these things.

It's good practice, as you're spreading goodwill, to think of all the beings in the universe and to think of the ones for whom you might feel resentment or the ones whom you might look down on. Then remind yourself of the Buddha's teachings on rebirth: We've been to all of these places before. As he said, if you see someone who's really wealthy, enjoying all kinds of pleasures: You've been there before. You see someone who's really poor and diseased: You've been there before. In fact whatever type of person you can think of: You've been there before.

This is one of the sad things about Western Buddhism: They've thrown away this really useful teaching on rebirth. It's really great for empathy, it's great for seeing through differences. It means that nobody in the world is a stranger, in the sense that the suffering that they're going through is not strange: You've been there. You've had that suffering too.

They say that after the Buddha's awakening, he surveyed the world with the eye of a Buddha, and he saw that all beings were on fire with the fires of passion, aversion, and delusion. That insight grew out of his second knowledge on the night of his awakening: seeing how all beings were reborn in line with their karma, and how long it had been going on. Even though, after his awakening, he was now free from all that, he didn't look down on the beings who weren't free. Instead, he felt compassion, for he had been there, too. It was a combination of those two visions that propelled him to teach.

So when you think about these things, it helps you do good for other beings—with a sense, as I said, that nobody's a stranger. Regardless of race, gender, economic status: We've all been through this together, and we're all suffering together. So do you want to keep on creating more suffering?

Think of that other vision the Buddha had before he got on the path to Awakening. The world was just a little stream drying up and it was filled with fish competing with one another for that last little gulp of water. For what? You get the gulp of water, you still die. The water goes, but the karma you've created in fighting all the other fish: That sticks with you. So why add to the suffering?

So it's for these reasons that we develop goodwill. Even working on breath meditation is a form of goodwill for yourself, as you look after the energies in your body. You begin to realize that you've been placing a lot of burdens on your mind, unnecessary burdens, by allowing these energies to get all out of whack. But if you work on them and gain a sense of being balanced here in the concentration, a lot of the burdens in the mind get lifted. And then you have more time for other people.

So the meditation is a gift to yourself and to others. And when you want to dedicate the merit of your meditation, you've got something good to dedicate. As to whether they'll receive the merit or not, that depends on their ability to

know and to appreciate it. The Pali word is *anumodana*, which basically means appreciation, seeing that what you did was a good thing. That then becomes a meritorious act on their part. In other words, they appreciate goodness. And the more we can develop an appreciation of goodness in the world, the better off we'll be.

So as you're meditating, it's one good way of developing inner worth, which then becomes a happiness that spreads around. It's the best way to look for happiness. All three ways of developing inner worth are forms of happiness forms of goodness, without blame.

Years back I was going to be giving a Dhamma talk on Buddhist ideas on the pursuit of happiness. The afternoon before I gave the talk, I happened to visit one of my old college professors, whose field was Christian ethics. He asked me what the talk that night was going to be about. And knowing the type of person he was, he wanted it quick and direct, so I said it was basically about how Buddhism teaches that the search for true happiness needn't be hedonistic. And he said, "I wish I could hear that talk."

But this is what it's all about: This search for inner goodness is the wise way, the heedful way, to search for happiness. Because it's not just for you. It's a happiness that spreads around.