

Goodwill

September 23, 2007

An attitude of goodwill provides the basis for our practice. If we didn't have goodwill for ourselves, didn't have goodwill for other people, why would we practice? We're looking for a happiness that doesn't disappoint. Goodwill is essentially a wish for that kind of happiness. We look for a happiness that causes no harm to others. So our goodwill extends not only to ourselves but also to the people around us. In fact, when you think about the true happiness that comes from the practice, our true happiness conflicts in no way with anyone else's true happiness at all.

This is why it's possible to have goodwill for all beings. Ordinary happiness—the happiness of the body eating, sleeping, getting the things it wants—involves conflict because there are only so many resources in the world, and the fact that we need to eat and have clothing, shelter, and medicine means we're a burden on the rest of the world. So that kind of happiness inevitably brings conflict, which is why the desire for release from all this is not a selfish thing.

Now, we can't release other people. The reason we're tied up in this world of wandering on is because of our own lack of skillfulness. The same holds true for others: They're tied up by their lack of skillfulness, too. We can learn to be skillful but we can't make other people skillful. You can teach them how, but it's up to them to want to do it, and it's up to them to put in the necessary effort.

So our first order of business in being kind to others and showing true goodwill is to develop our own skillfulness, because one way of encouraging other people to become skillful is to have ourselves as an example. When people see that we're happier than we were before, they'll be interested: "How did you do this? What kind of food are you eating? What kind of exercise are you doing?" You can respond, "It's not exercise, it's not so much the food, it's training the mind." Some people will say, "Oh," and that'll be the end of the matter. But other people will say, "Oh, tell me about it."

So this practice we're doing is not a selfish thing. And the Buddha ultimately saw no clear dividing line between working for your own happiness, your own true happiness, and working for the true happiness of others—as in that famous sutta on the acrobats, where the acrobat tells his assistant, "You get up on my shoulders, and I'll get up on a bamboo pole. Then you look out after me, and I'll look out after you, and that way, we'll come down safely." His assistant says, "No, that's not going to work. I have to look out after myself, you have to look out after

yourself. In other words, I have to maintain my balance, you have to maintain your balance, and that way we help each other come down safely from the pole.”

As the Buddha commented, in that particular exchange, the assistant was the one who was right. But then he goes on to say that when you help yourself, you help others; when you help others, you help yourself. Now, there are limits to how much you can help others. You can create a good environment for other people, but whether they're going to suffer in that environment or not is really up to them. But you do what you can, realizing that there are limitations.

My teacher had a student who had visions of the spirits of dead people. She didn't like it because it freaked her out, running into spirits in strange places: under stairways, behind trees, all kinds of weird places. But Ajaan Fuang told her, “The fact that you see them means that you have some sort of connection with them and maybe you can help them. So go ahead, spread the merit of your meditation to them.” In some cases, as soon as she spread the merit of her meditation, they seemed to be happy. They rejoiced the merit and were able to escape from that particular state of being. Other spirits couldn't or wouldn't.

Then she got upset when they wouldn't. She told this to Ajaan Fuang, and he said, “Your duty is simply to do your best, but whether they can accept your help or not, that's a matter of their own actions, their own karma. But you keep spreading thoughts of goodwill and dedicating your merit, because you never know beforehand who's going to be able to benefit and who's not.”

There's a passage in the Canon where the Buddha says that sick people come in three types: those who will recover whether they get medicine or not, those who will recover only if they get medicine, and then those who won't recover even if they do get medicine. He says that even though there are these three kinds of sick people, the doctor has to go on the assumption that every person he's treating is of the second kind. In other words, you give them the medicine, because you can't know beforehand which type of ill person you're dealing with.

It's the same way when you're spreading thoughts of goodwill to other people. You don't know whether they're going to be able to benefit or how much they're going to be able to benefit, but you assume that they will. After all, it doesn't cost you anything to spread thoughts of goodwill. There may be a little bit of disturbance as you move your mind out of whatever state of concentration it's in, just enough to think thoughts of goodwill. But who knows, maybe the person will benefit a lot.

In the process of doing this, you're developing the right attitude that keeps the practice alive, keeps you on the path. There's another passage where the Buddha says that when you realize you've acted in unskillful ways in the past, the proper

attitude to have toward your past bad actions is to realize first that remorse doesn't help. No matter how much you regret the past action, that doesn't go back and erase the action. And you don't get Brownie points by feeling very guilty right now. In fact, that saps your strength, makes it harder to do skillful things in the future. What you do is that you recognize it was a mistake and you resolve not to repeat that mistake. Then, in order to strengthen that resolve, he has you develop thoughts of goodwill, unlimited goodwill.

The goodwill here keeps showing you the path, strengthens you on the path. It keeps reminding you that we're not only here just for our own true happiness but also for the true happiness of other people. In Theravada, we don't talk about it that much, but it's there all the time. The fact that it's there is much more important than any mere talk would be. You go to a place like Thailand, and people are happy to put food in the bowls of monks who are meditators. When you're receiving food every day from people like this, it's hard not to feel gratitude, feel goodwill. You realize that the practice here is a group effort and that your meditation is not just your own private affair. It's dependent on the generosity, the goodwill of other people. You look around the monastery here, everything here is a gift, or the result of a gift.

So as we practice here, we're doing it not just for ourselves, we're also doing it for everyone who has provided the place where we live, the food that we eat, everything that makes it possible for us to practice. So always try to keep this attitude of goodwill in mind. Ajaan Mun, they say, would spread thoughts of goodwill three times a day—first thing when he woke up in the morning, in the middle of the day when he woke up from his daily nap, and then at night before he went to bed—to provide the context for the rest of the practice.

So try to keep this context in mind. Thoughts of goodwill are part of right resolve. They're part of the path: *abyapada-sankappo*—abandoning thoughts of ill will, being resolved to avoid ill will, and to develop goodwill in its place. So it's not something peripheral. It's an essential part of the path. And as I said earlier, the path isn't just a path just for your own happiness, for your own benefit. It benefits everyone around you. So try to keep these attitudes in mind.