

## *Goodwill as a Strength*

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There's a nice passage in Ajaan Lee's autobiography where he describes a tudong that he was on with group of monks and laypeople. They were setting up their tents in the forest on the edge of the ocean, and all of a sudden a huge cloud of mosquitoes was coming in off the ocean. So Ajaan Lee told everybody to put up their tents, sit, and meditate, while he was going to fight off the mosquitoes with goodwill. And he said, "No holds barred."

It's not the usual image that you think of when you think about goodwill. The popular idea of goodwill, metta, tends to be something softer, but here Ajaan Lee was talking about it as a strength, a fighting strength. And it's important that we keep that in mind.

We live in troubled times, with a lot of injustice going on around us, a lot of danger, a lot of really misguided people. And we have to remember that in our dealings with those people, no matter how bad they get, we have to maintain our goodwill. And that's our strength. Because, after all, we're here not to win out over people. When you win out over people, what happens? Everybody dies eventually. And you're left with the karma of what you did in order to win out.

So you have to make sure that if you are in conflict with people, you have to do it with goodwill. That way, you can guarantee that your actions will be skillful. Now, you can't guarantee that you'll always get the results that you want. In that particular case, Ajaan Lee was able to fight off the mosquitoes, but there are other times when he couldn't.

I knew a monk who knew Ajaan Lee when Ajaan Lee was teaching at Wat Asokaram. This monk was a young monk at the time. As he was sitting meditating with the group one night, he was bothered with all the mosquitoes flying around. He decided to open his eyes and check and see: With Ajaan Lee, working with his breath energy, breath coming in and out of all the pores, maybe that was keeping the mosquitoes away. But no, Ajaan Lee was covered with mosquitoes, too.

So there are times when no matter how much goodwill you have for others, you can't win out over them. But at least you've guaranteed that in your own actions you're not doing anything unskillful. That's the legacy you leave to yourself, and the legacy you leave to the world. There are people who've fought for justice in the past but they've done it in very unskillful ways. And the legacy they leave behind is the example of their violence or their lack of skill.

There's a concern sometimes that you can't get people to behave in just ways.

But even the Buddha himself couldn't get people to do that, aside from being a good example and extolling the virtues of being kind and generous. That's the example he left behind, and it's an example that's lasted now for two thousand five hundred years. You think about all the other people who've had their ideas of justice, of how our society should be. And most times we don't remember them at all, whether they won or they lost. And what they've left, of course, is the legacy of their karma.

So remember, as the Buddha said, "It's better to win out over yourself than it is to win out over a thousand other people." And your main possession consists of your actions. And what's going to keep them going well in bad circumstances? Strong goodwill. Here in America we'd say, "industrial strength" goodwill, that no matter how bad someone else is going to be, you've got to have goodwill for them. Because your main concern is how skillfully you're going to behave toward that other person. And it may happen that they pick up on the fact that you do really mean well for them. You see that they're simply misguided.

As the Buddha said, when someone is doing something unskillful, you have to have compassion for them. If there are no redeeming characteristics in the other person at all, you have to have even *more* compassion, because they're just digging themselves deeper and deeper into a hole. And as for the damage they can do to you and people you love or the people you care for, the Buddha said that kind of damage is much less a concern than damage to your virtue and damage to your right views. Nobody can damage those except you yourself,

So goodwill protects both of your virtue and your right views, remembering that we're here for a happiness that harms no one. This doesn't mean that it's going to be a happiness that everybody's going to praise or like. There are times when your practicing and saying the right thing may hurt somebody else's feelings, but that doesn't necessarily mean that you're harming them.

There was a book I was reading recently where the author was saying, "Well, even the Buddha spoke in harmful ways." But what the author meant by that was that the Buddha would sometimes hurt people's feelings by challenging them on their wrong views or saying things they didn't like. Well, that's not harm. There are times when saying something harsh, something strong, something unwelcome, is an expression of goodwill. Goodwill's not just tenderness or gentleness.

The example the Buddha gives is of a child who's gotten something sharp into its mouth. You have to pull the object out, even if it means drawing a little blood from the mouth. Much better than letting the child swallow the object and have it tear up its insides.

This doesn't mean that we're weak, and metta doesn't necessarily mean

lovingkindness or tenderness. There are times when you have to be sharp with people as an expression of goodwill. But if they can sense that it's coming from your goodwill, then you're fine.

There are times when pleasing words are actually *not* skillful, where gentleness is not skillful. You may not know the story by Flannery O'Connor, "A Good Man is Hard to Find." This crazy guy has kidnapped a bunch of people and is holding them for ransom. He sits there and he's talking—and he's had a miserable life—and this one old woman who listens to him and starts developing tender, motherly feelings for him, realizing what a damaged childhood he'd had. And so at one point she reaches out to him, and he immediately shoots her dead, saying that you can't trust anybody. So there are times when tenderness may not be the best expression of your goodwill.

But remember that goodwill is the desire not to harm anybody. If you can get other people to act in skillful ways, so much the better. But if you can't, you have to guarantee that your own skillful actions aren't going to be affected by other people's crazy, strange, bad behavior. After all, *your* actions are yours. No one else can give you bad karma. You're the only one who can give yourself bad karma. And you do that through a lack of goodwill, a lack of discernment.

So goodwill's something you have to keep in mind all the time. And as for the battles you fight in the world, choose them well. Choose your battles well. But always fight using goodwill. Remember that it is a strength.