

Goodwill as Right View

July 7, 2019

In the standard descriptions of the path, the Buddha defines goodwill as a type of right resolve, ill will as a type of wrong resolve. But there's an interesting passage where the Buddha says that ill will is also a form of wrong view, the implication being that goodwill is a form of right view. The view underlying ill will, of course, is that you would gain something by seeing somebody else suffering. Right view is that you gain something by wishing everybody to be happy.

We live in this world where it's really difficult to know what to do sometimes. We deal with individuals and, as Ajaan Fuang used to say, it's not like each individual is one person. You're dealing with five aggregates, and when you have another person, it's like five more, although it's more like multiplying than adding. It feels like you've got twenty five aggregates when there are just two people. Then it goes up from there.

We'd like good rules of thumb that would apply in all cases to give us some idea of what to do. There are not that many. We have to use our own discernment. But it's an important insight to realize that discernment has to be based on goodwill. That *is* a rule of thumb. When you're dealing with yourself—say, when you're meditating—you want to meditate with goodwill. This doesn't mean being kind to yourself by giving yourself ice cream all the time. But it does mean that when you're critical with yourself, it's for the purpose of improvement, not for the purpose of discouragement.

When you're practicing goodwill for others, again, it doesn't mean you always say the nice, gentle thing that they want to hear. It means you always want to have that person's best interests in mind, even if it means saying things the other person doesn't want to hear. After all, most people don't like hearing the truth, and if you gave free rein to their likes and dislikes, the truth wouldn't have a chance. So think about what goodwill really means, and make it a regular practice that, as you leave meditation, you think thoughts of goodwill for everybody.

Ajaan Suwat used to say that when you think thoughts of goodwill for everybody at the beginning of a meditation session, it's basically for you, to clear away the difficult issues of the day. No matter what other people have said to you, no matter what they've done, you spread goodwill to them, you spread goodwill to yourself. You remind yourself that that's why you're here: for the purpose of genuine happiness. That gets the mind in the right frame to sit down and meditate and not get entangled with a lot of the loose ends from the events of the day.

Then when you come out of meditation, devote some time to goodwill again, this time for the sake of others. Your mind has greater strength when you're coming out of concentration, and whatever you can think of that would be good for other people, you wish it for them.

And some people can actually pick it up. I've known of a couple cases where people asked me, "Were you spreading thoughts of goodwill in my direction last night?" And it turned out that I was. This is a universal thing with meditators: that your goodwill is stronger as you come out. But it's not only for the purpose of the others that you carry this out, it's for your own well-being as well that you carry this attitude of attitude into the world from your meditation. Mindfulness of goodwill is to remind you that you don't want to do anything to harm other beings. For one thing, you won't have that karma. And two, if things in the relationship go poorly, you won't have the self-recrimination that comes from realizing that you actually wished the person ill at some point. It's a lot easier when relationships end that they end with goodwill. And, of course, goodwill is what keeps the relationships going as long as they can.

Remember what goodwill means: You wish that everybody would understand the causes for their true happiness and be willing and able to act on them. That applies to you; it applies to other beings. I knew a woman one time who was having some difficulties with her landlord. She told me she was trying to spread thoughts of goodwill in his direction, imagining him with a really nice house, a swimming pool, lots of cars. I said, "Wait a minute, stop, stop, stop. That's not what happiness is all about. You wish that that person would act in a skillful way, and you try to think, if you need to get involved with that person, what would be the skillful thing to do and say so that that person would also think about being skillful?"

Sometimes that's a tall order, and a little bit too much of a stretch. That's where you need to have equanimity. This is why the brahmaviharas all go together. But you do want to maintain your goodwill in all situations. As the Buddha said, you want to protect your goodwill as a mother would protect her only child. Sometimes that image is misinterpreted as meaning that you should love everybody the same way a mother would love her only child, but that's impossible. The Buddha never asked for impossibilities, never placed impossible goals on people. But your goodwill *is* something you can protect the same way a mother would protect her only child with her life.

There are times when you have to be willing to put up with some losses as you maintain your goodwill. The image the Buddha gives is a group of bandits pinning you down and they're sawing off your limbs with two-handled saws. They've overpowered you; there's nothing you can do. He said, even in a case like that you have to have goodwill for them. Now, the purpose of that image

was to remind people that the things we usually get upset about are much less violent and detrimental than having our limbs sawed off, so this is a case where the Buddha is establishing a very high standard. But it is possible. When people say harsh things, when people do violence to you, you've still got to have goodwill for them. That's your protection.

This is a theme that you hear over and over again in Thailand—you don't hear it quite so much here in the West—that you really do protect yourself through your goodwill. On the one hand, you protect your state of mind. On the other, there is a power to goodwill. When people come at you with bad intentions, sometimes they pick up the power of your goodwill and that changes their intentions. There are lots of stories of this in the Thai tradition, lots of stories in the Canon.

Devadatta had sent some men to kill the Buddha. One person was sent to kill the Buddha, and then after he left, two people were sent to wait for him in hiding and to kill him; then four people were sent to kill the two people, and so on up to sixteen, to erase the evidence. The first person comes in and as he approaches the Buddha, he's overwhelmed by the Buddha's goodwill. The Buddha gives him a little talk—actually gets him to stream-entry—and then says, “Now, don't go by the way that you were told to go, go another way.” And the two men, curious as to why didn't the first man come, come in, see the Buddha. The Buddha spreads goodwill to them and teaches them. That way, he saves the lives of all these people.

So think of goodwill as a power. Sometimes we think of metta as kind of weak and namby-pamby. It's not. It's a power. This is the power that the Buddha depended on in order to gain awakening, to teach his teachings. After all, the four noble truths: What are they but an expression of goodwill? Taking everybody's suffering as the big issue and showing how we can all put an end to our suffering: Goodwill is what the Buddha depended on to teach, to go out of his way to establish the Dhamma and Vinaya. Ordinarily, a teaching Buddha has only one duty, which is to teach his contemporaries how to gain awakening. And then there's the optional duty of establishing a Dhamma and Vinaya that'll last a long time, for future generations. It takes a lot more effort. But his goodwill for us was what gave him the strength to establish the Dhamma and Vinaya that we can benefit from up till now. So think of goodwill as a power that can do great things.

It's also a kind of discernment. It's a form of wisdom. After all, it's right view and right resolve together: your view that you would benefit if everybody could be happy, and your resolve to act on that view. So when you're in difficult situations where you're not quite sure what to do, at least hold onto your goodwill. Sometimes it helps the situation come out fine. But even if the situation doesn't come out fine, at least you come out fine. You come out fine

because you have no self-recriminations. There were no areas where you can criticize yourself.

This doesn't mean you get entangled with other people. I know some people who don't want to practice goodwill because they're afraid of entanglements. But think of that story of Ajaan Fuang with the snake in his room. His goodwill for the snake was basically, "May you go someplace else where you can live in happiness and peace." And the basic wish of goodwill is that other beings would learn how to be skillful. This is basically wishing that they would become independent: May they look after themselves with ease. Or the passage where the Buddha has monks spread goodwill to snakes: not so the snakes will come around and hug the monks, but so that the snakes will go away and leave the monks alone, but with goodwill, realizing that we all have to go our separate ways at some point, so may we go wishing everybody well. And if we happen to meet up again, we've got a good past with each other. Having that good past with one another helps us start up again on a good footing.

So universal goodwill is good all around. It's a categorical teaching, one that's applicable everywhere. So when you're facing difficult decisions, remember goodwill will help carry you through. It may not be able to solve the problem, but at least it gives you a good foundation for a good solution. And as with all foundations, you don't want to leave it. Sometimes we think that a particular teaching is elementary and that we're beyond it, but, no. When a teaching is elementary, it basically means you've got to keep it right there as your foundation. Then everything else you build on top of it in the practice will be solid and secure.