

Goodwill for Free

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I read a story one time of a Tibetan view of hell. In a particular scene, a group of hell beings are pulling a huge heavy cart and are being whipped by the hell guardians. At the same time, they're struggling with one another: fighting, cursing. They're miserable and they're making everybody else around them miserable as well. Suddenly, one of the hell beings stumbles and falls. The hell guardian descends on him and starts whipping him even more ferociously. The hell being right next to him sees this and suddenly realizes that this isn't right, so he tries to stop the hell guardian from beating the other hell-being. And at that moment, he's freed from hell.

The story goes on that he becomes a Bodhisatta and eventually becomes our Buddha. Whether this really happened or not, I don't know. But it does illustrate some interesting points, one of which is that our sense of goodwill for others, our sense of compassion for others, does come from a sense of right and wrong. The second being saw the one next to him stumbling and falling and being whipped for falling and it didn't seem right. When it didn't seem right, that's when he felt compassion.

It's in situations like that where our compassion really goes out to others: when they're being wrongly harmed. And it's easy to see in some obvious cases. But it's good to remember that goodwill does come from a sense of right and wrong. It's not a non-dual teaching. Compassion is not a non-dual teaching. It comes from the recognition that there are right ways and wrong ways of behaving, kind ways and unkind ways. So it's important to keep that distinction in mind.

Secondly, the second being didn't have to help the first being. After all, the first being had been biting and cursing him all along. But there was that moment when this second being noticed him and recognized: This being is suffering a lot and I don't have to keep contributing to his further suffering. Goodwill in this case is a free gift. He didn't owe goodwill, didn't owe compassion to the first being, but he gave it.

This is something we should keep in mind as well.

It's possible to go through life and think of all the wrongs that other people have done us. You look around you, it seems like everyone's in a contest to beat everybody else to see who can be nastier, who can do the most harm. From their point of view, people who show goodwill are simply losing on that contest. But who wants to be a winner in a contest over who can do the most harm? We all know where that leads: It leads down.

So you don't hold your goodwill only for people who deserve it. In fact, you don't think about people deserving your goodwill. You give it as a gift and in that way you free yourself. The more free the gift, the more free you become.

So think of goodwill as a way of getting yourself out of that nasty back and forth that human life tends to be.

We talk about how it protects you from doing unskillful things, but simply the act of having goodwill expands the mind. Remember, it's called a brahmavihara: Vihara means "dwelling place." When you can develop this attitude, your mind is dwelling in a more spacious place. Brahmas live in extremely spacious places with no outside limitations. Their dwelling is an immeasurable dwelling. As long as there are restrictions on your goodwill, limitations on your goodwill, there will be restrictions and limitations in the sense of space within your mind.

The mind in which you're tallying up the score of who wronged you, or who's going to do you wrong in the future, is a very narrow mind. It lives in a very narrow place, a very impoverished place. Whereas goodwill, as the Buddha said, is a monk's wealth—and "monk" here applies to everybody who practices. Your inner wealth can create an immeasurable dwelling for yourself.

It's one of the three dwellings that the Buddha recommends: There's the divine dwelling of the mind in concentration, which is very spacious; there's the immeasurable dwelling, which includes all the brahmaviharas; and finally, of course, there's the noble dwelling of the noble attainments. That's even more unlimited. The brahmaviharas are still in space and time. They still depend on fabrication. Goodwill is something you have to fabricate, especially if it's going to be universal. Beyond that, though, developing goodwill is one of the bases for developing discernment. It leads to a type of concentration that is conducive to discernment if you apply it in that direction. From there it liberates you to the noble dwellings.

So keep these points in mind. Goodwill does depend on a sense of right and wrong. Even though it's immeasurable, there's a certain dualism. Goodwill is better than ill-will; acts of kindness are better than acts of harshness and harmfulness.

Secondly, acts of goodwill and kindness are a gift a free gift. Remember that bumper sticker they used to have about random acts of kindness and senseless beauty? You're basically nice to strangers, which is not being senseless. It's senseless only if you think that what makes sense in the world is doing whatever you can to get ahead, being recognized for whatever favors you do to other people so that you can take advantage of them. But from the point of view of the way to genuine happiness, the free gift of kindness, the free gift of goodwill makes a lot of sense in that it's free.

By giving this free gift, you become free, and the freedom is immediate in the sense of spaciousness that appears in the mind. It lasts for a long time, but it does have to be maintained. You learn how to feed your goodwill by reflecting on the state of the mind that you've developed and then comparing that with the state of mind in fear, in competition. You realize you've got something much, much better.

So as we live in this world where it seems like everyone is running a race to the bottom and the competition is over who can do the most harm, we can free ourselves though from that competition and, in doing so, it's a gift to other people and a gift to ourselves.

Where does it come from? It comes from your desire for happiness inside. It comes from being responsible for your happiness. This underlies the point that freedom and responsibility go together. When you think of that hell being, it was when the hell being took responsibility to help the other hell being: That's what set him free.