

Goodwill for Safety

April 30, 2021

The Buddha never talks about goodwill as a natural quality of the heart. He describes it as a determination: something you set your heart and your mind on. And remember that the Pali term *citta*, which we translate usually as mind, can also mean heart. The Buddha never made a clear distinction between the two: Your feelings have their reasons, and your reasons are accompanied by feelings.

Goodwill has to be based on *heedfulness*: the realization that if you have ill will for anybody, you're going to do unskillful things, so you have to talk yourself into goodwill. After all, it doesn't come naturally all the time. And don't think that just talking to yourself is not going to have an effect on your feelings. The kind of conversation that goes on in the mind has a huge effect on feelings, which is why we repeat the brahmaviharas every day, twice a day as a group—to get those thoughts embedded in your mind.

And it's why we don't just chant them in Pali, we also put them in English. As an exercise, if your native language is not English, translate them into your own language and chant them to yourself every day, so that the basic idea gets imprinted on your mind.

Now, don't expect that there won't be some resistance—you're actually trying to dig up the resistance. A part of the mind will argue: "How about so-and-so, how about so-and-so? How about people like this, people like that?" You have to think your way into why you might have goodwill for so-and-so and people like that.

It may seem dry and artificial, but you're learning new habits. And just because something is habitual already doesn't mean that it's natural—you had to *learn* that habit at some point. So now you're going to unlearn it and learn good new habits in its place.

Keep reminding yourself that if there are any exceptions to your goodwill, you're leaving yourself exposed and unprotected. They talk about goodwill as protection. Think about that story of Ajaan Lee with the elephant: It wasn't a sentimental rosy-pink kind of goodwill that he was spreading to the elephant that day. The elephant was threatening, and so Ajaan Lee had to have lots of strong goodwill. And the strength starts out by being able to say that yourself: "May this being—may this person, may this deva, may this hell-being, may this whatever—be happy." Always go with that as your basic motivation.

I saw a couple times when Ajaan Fuang was called on to deal with spirits that had inhabited people. As he said, he never tried to drive them out. He started out with goodwill, and in some cases the spirit would leave; in other cases it would stay, but it would stay on better terms. Because wise goodwill is based on the realization that we have to live in this world together with all kinds of people, all kinds of beings. There are some that are threatening, there are some that are hard to like, but you can't let yourself have ill will for them. So you have to talk to yourself, because if anything is natural, fear is. Fear can cause you to want somebody to go away, want them to disappear, want them to just not be in this world.

That state of mind that wants total security by wiping out threatening things actually ends up causing a lot more trouble than it resolves. We have to realize: We have to live in the world with all kinds of people, all kinds of beings, and we have to protect ourselves first—with our goodwill. So, think your way to goodwill. If you find yourself reacting to somebody in a negative way, just stop and remind yourself: You don't have to *like* the person or *like* the being, but you have to think about that person or that being's well-being—so that your actions are skillful.

If you repeat this theme to yourself often enough, and dig up all the resistance, you find that it does come more and more easily. It becomes more and more of a habit. That way, you can live with people who are threatening and not end up doing something unskillful to protect yourself. You can provide yourself with *skillful* protection.

There was a woman who came to see Ajaan Fuang one time, and I'd known her for years. She'd hang around Wat Asokaram, and she'd visited Ajaan Fuang a couple of times. She was a very difficult person to live with. If we were to give her a Western diagnosis, we'd diagnose her with Tourette's syndrome—she'd just start yelling at people for no reason at all.

She came to see Ajaan Fuang one day. She brought him a glass of sugar cane juice, he took a sip, and then he gave the rest of the glass to her and told her to drink it. She did, and all of a sudden the symptoms came on. Ajaan Fuang, as he told me later, just spread lots of goodwill to whatever was in her and said, "Why are you doing this to this woman?" The voice speaking through the woman explained that this woman had done some pretty nasty things to it in a previous lifetime, now it wanted to get back at her. It made it impossible for her to live with anybody. Ajaan Fuang said, "If you do this, you know, next time around she's going to do the same thing to you. Do you want that?" After a pause, the spirit said, "No." "How about letting her have a normal life, making merit and dedicating the merit to you, so that you benefit, too. Would you like that?" "Yes." And that was

the end of the problem. So, the woman still lived with the spirit, but on different terms.

This is the kind of goodwill we need to have. There are a lot of really difficult people, really difficult beings in the world, and we can't make our goodness depend on someone else's being good to us. That would mean that our most valuable possession, our goodness, is dependent on somebody else—which would not be a good position to be in at all.

So you protect your goodness by protecting your goodwill. Remember the Buddha's analogy of the mother looking after her only child: "Just as a mother would protect her only child with her life," in the same way, you protect your goodwill with your life—it's that important.

So, whether you *feel* it spontaneously or not, you have to get more and more habitual in *thinking* it, so that that inner voice can remind you when your impulse is to do something unskillful: "This is not going to help you, and it's not going to help anybody else." Over time, that attitude becomes more and more normal, more and more habitual, so that it *seems* natural—because you realize it's the safest way to live.