

Goodwill as a Guardian

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The Buddha teaches three governing principles, three ways of thinking to keep yourself on the path, and two of them have to do with goodwill, or *metta*. The first one involves your goodwill for yourself. You remind yourself that you entered on this path because you wanted to put an end to the suffering. Basically, you loved yourself. But now what? If you're planning to leave the path, does it mean you no longer want to put an end to the suffering? What happened to your goodwill for yourself?

That's one way of thinking that involves goodwill. The other way has to do with other people's goodwill for you. The Buddha calls it: "taking the world as a governing principle." You remind yourself that there are beings in the world who can read your mind. Suppose the Buddha were reading your mind, and he saw that you were planning to give up on the path. What would he think? He'd be concerned. If you're thinking this way, you should feel embarrassed, because here's someone else who has goodwill for you, who wants to see you put an end to suffering—and you're going to let someone else have more goodwill for you than you have for yourself?

Thinking in these ways shows how goodwill is one of the guardian meditations. It's one of the ways of keeping yourself on the path. You start out: "May I be happy, may I be free from stress and pain." Well, where are you going to find happiness? It's not going to come floating by. It's going to come because you've done something that's conducive to happiness. Think about the Buddha's ways of expressing what it means to extend goodwill to yourself and goodwill to others. It's not simply: "May you be happy, happy, happy." He also includes thoughts along the lines of: "May you not behave in an unskillful way." In one of the suttas where the Buddha expresses that, he says, "May no one despise anyone, or wish ill to anyone anywhere." In other words, not only may these people be happy, but may they also not engage in unskillful behavior, which would then lead to results of unskillful behavior: pain and suffering.

Which means when you think of a goodwill for yourself, it should include not only, “May I be happy,” but also, “May I understand the causes for happiness and may I act on them.” Then you spread the same thought to others, hoping that they will behave in a skillful way, too. You place no limits on your goodwill.

Now, you might ask yourself: Is there anybody out there for whom it’s hard to feel goodwill of this sort? Some people will probably come to mind. But, then you have to ask yourself: “What do I gain from their suffering? What would the world gain from their suffering?” You might say, “Well, maybe they’ll come to their senses.” But a lot of people, when they suffer, don’t come to their senses at all. They just get more and more entrenched in their old ways. The world would be a much better place if people could *understand* how to find genuine happiness and then act on their understanding. If there’s any way you can help them toward that understanding, you’ll be happy to help.

Thinking these ways protects you in lots of ways, guards you in lots of ways, in that it helps to keep you on the path. After all, remind yourself: If you really want to be happy, this is what you’ve got to do. Goodwill is a universal good human quality, but it becomes specifically Buddhist when you start thinking about what the Buddha had to say about what leads to happiness. You think about his goodwill in teaching us to begin with. He taught what? How to put an end to suffering. That was motivated by goodwill. It’s the best way to find happiness.

The Buddha’s greatest gift would be, when people come to see him, that he would start teaching them. He’d start with a graduated discourse, talking about the virtues of giving, the virtues of observing the precepts, the sensual rewards of giving, the sensual rewards of the precepts, but then the drawback of sensuality. In other words, the rewards would be either happiness in the human realm or in the higher realms. But even those realms have their drawbacks, because the kind of pleasure that comes in this way is not going to last forever. If you get used to having nothing but good things happening to you as a result of your past good karma, it begins to spoil you. Then you get complacent and you start misbehaving, you fall again, and then you have to start all over again.

When the Buddha saw that people could acknowledge these drawbacks, then he would teach them the four noble truths. Those truths are counterintuitive in a lot of ways. But once he had prepared you to accept these truths, you’d be inclined

to follow the duties with regard to them. Many times, as he would teach people these truths, they would have their first experience of awakening, called gaining the Dhamma eye. That was his gift to them. There were even people who went to see the Buddha to argue with him—there were even cases where people were sent to *kill* him—and yet this is how he responded. He talked to them in a way that made them open their eyes and gain awakening.

A sign of the great compassion and the great goodwill that he had for all beings.

So as I said earlier, think about the goodwill the Buddha had for you. What goodwill do you have for yourself? If you content yourself with anything less than awakening, you can't really say that you have goodwill—at least not in the Buddha's eyes, not in the framework provided by the Dhamma. So goodwill is a guardian in that it keeps you motivated to practice.

Now, there are other passages in the Canon that talk about how goodwill also protects you from the bad influences of past bad actions. If your goodwill is large and expensive, it lessens the impact of past bad actions. There's even a passage where he says that someone who is extending thoughts of goodwill is not going to die from fire or weapons. But the real protection is that genuine goodwill keeps you motivated to keep on practicing because it forces you to think about what happiness is. It's pleasant enough to think, "May all beings be happy, happy, happy," But then you should start thinking more about, well, what would real happiness be?

I knew of a woman one time who was having difficulties with her landlord and she told me that she was trying to have goodwill for him. She was imagining him with a nice house, a swimming pool, lots of girlfriends, fancy cars. I said: "Wait a minute, no. You can have those things and still be miserable. Real goodwill has to do with 'May you be deeply happy at heart.'" That kind of happiness has to come from developing skillful qualities in mind.

Real happiness, of course, comes from seeing that what the Buddha taught is true: There is a deathless element; there is a dimension where the mind doesn't have to suffer from aging, illness, and death. When that becomes your standard for happiness, then goodwill really does protect you and guard you, because you won't be willing to settle for anything less. You develop the qualities that the

Buddha said were key to his awakening: the persistence and the unwillingness to settle for second best.

So thoughts of goodwill protect you not only from ill will, but also from laziness and complacency—if you think those thoughts in the right way. This is where a generic good human quality becomes heightened as it's practiced in the context of the Dhamma. It's good for you to think of it in that context, too—and act on it as well. That's when goodwill really does become a guardian meditation.