Goodwill

September 23, 2007

An attitude of goodwill provides the basis for our practice. If we didn’t have goodwill for ourselves, didn’t have goodwill for other people, why would we practice? We’re looking for a happiness that doesn’t disappoint. Goodwill is essentially a wish for happiness. We look for happiness that causes no harm to others. So our goodwill extends not only to ourselves but to the people around us. In fact, when you think about the true happiness that comes from the practice, our true happiness conflicts in no way with anyone else’s true happiness. This is why it’s possible to have goodwill for all beings. Ordinary happiness—the happiness of the body, eating, sleeping, getting the things at once—involves conflict, because there are only so many resources in the world. The fact that we need to eat, have clothing, shelter, medicine, means that we’re a burden on the rest of the world. So that kind of happiness inevitably brings conflict, which is why the desire for release from all this is not a selfish thing. We can’t release other people. The reason we’re tied up in this world of wandering on is because of our own lack of skillfulness. We can learn to be skillful, but you can’t make other people skillful. You can teach them how, but it’s up to them to want to do it, and it’s up to them to put in the effort that’s necessary. So our first order of business is to develop our own skillfulness, because one way of encouraging other people to become skillful is to have ourselves as an example. If people see that we’re happier than we were before, they’ll be interested. “How did you do this? What kind of food are you eating? What kind of exercise are you doing?” You say, “Well, it’s not exercise. It’s not so much the food. It’s training the mind.” And some people will say, “Oh,” and that’s the end of the matter. Other people will say, “Oh, tell me about it.” So this practice we’re doing is not a selfish thing. The Buddha ultimately saw no clear dividing line between working for your own true happiness and working for the true happiness of others. There’s that famous sutta on the acrobats, where the acrobat tells his assistant, “Okay, you get up on my shoulders, and we’ll get up on the bamboo pole, and you look out after me, and I’ll look out after you, and we’ll come down safely.” And his assistant says, “No, that’s not going to do. I have to look out after myself; you have to look out after yourself.” In other words, I have to maintain my balance; you have to maintain your balance. That way, we help each other come down safely from the pole. As the Buddha commented, in that particular exchange, the student was the one who was right. The assistant was the one who was right. But then he goes on to say that when you help yourself, you help others; when you help others, you help yourself. There are limits to how much you can help others. You can create a good environment. But whether they’re going to suffer in that environment or not, that’s really up to them. But you do what you can, realizing that there are limitations. My teacher had a student who had visions of spirits of dead people. She didn’t like it, because it freaked her out, running into spirits in strange places, under stairways. She saw spirits behind trees, in all kinds of weird places. But Ajahn Fung told her, “Go ahead and spread the merit of your meditation to them. The fact that you see them means that you have some sort of connection with them, and maybe you can help.” So in some cases, as soon as she spread the merit of her meditation, they seemed happy, they rejoiced in her merit, and then they were able to escape from that particular state of being. Other spirits couldn’t, or wouldn’t. Then she got upset when they wouldn’t. So she told this to Ajahn Fung, and he said, “Look, your duty is simply to do your best.” Now, whether they accept your help or can accept your help, that’s a matter of their own actions, their own karma. But you keep spreading thoughts of merit, thoughts of goodwill, because you never know beforehand who’s going to be able to benefit and who’s not. There’s a passage in the Canon where the Buddha says that sick people are of three types. Those who will recover whether they get medicine or not, those who will recover only if they get medicine, and then those who won’t recover even if they do get medicine. He says that even though there are these three kinds of sick people, you have to go on the assumption, or the doctor has to go on the assumption, that every person he’s treating is of the second kind. In other words, you give them the medicine. Because you can’t know beforehand which type of ill person you’re dealing with. It’s the same when you’re spreading thoughts of goodwill to other people. You don’t know if they’re going to be able to benefit or how much they’re going to be able to benefit. But you assume that they will. After all, it doesn’t cost you anything to spread thoughts of goodwill. It may be a little bit of disturbance. You move your mind out of whatever state of concentration it’s in and just enough to think thoughts of goodwill. But who knows? Maybe the person will benefit. In the process of doing this, you’re developing the right attitude. That keeps the practice alive. It keeps you on the path. There’s another passage where the Buddha talks about when you realize that you’ve acted in unskillful ways in the past. He talks about the proper attitude to have toward your past bad actions. He says you realize that remorse doesn’t help. No matter how much you regret the past action, that doesn’t go back. You erase that action, and you don’t get brownie points by feeling very guilty. In fact, that saps your strength. It makes it harder to do skillful things in the future. What you do is you recognize that it was a mistake, and you resolve not to repeat that mistake. Then, in order to strengthen that resolve, you develop thoughts of goodwill, unlimited goodwill. So the goodwill here keeps you on the path, strengthens you on the path. It keeps reminding you that we’re here not only for our own true happiness, but also for the true happiness of other people. In Dharavada, we don’t talk about it that much. But it’s there all the time. The fact that it’s there is much more important than the talk. You go to a place like Thailand. People are happy to put food in the bowls of monks who are meditators. And if you’re receiving food every day from people like this, it’s hard not to feel gratitude, feel goodwill. You realize that the practice here is a group effort. And that your meditation is not just your own private affair. It’s dependent on the generosity and the goodwill of other people. You look around the monastery here, and everything here is a gift, or the result of a gift. So as we practice here, we’re doing it not just for the benefit of others. We’re doing it for ourselves. We’re doing it for everyone who has supported the place where we live, the food that we eat—everything that makes it possible for us to do this. So always try to keep this attitude of goodwill in mind. In Jhan Mon, they say, we’d spread thoughts of goodwill three times a day. First thing when you woke up in the morning. Then in the middle of the day when you woke up from your daily nap. And then at night, before you went to bed, to provide the context for the rest of the practice. So try to keep this context in mind. Thoughts of goodwill are part of right resolve. They’re part of the path. Abhiyābhata-saṅgapa, abandoning thoughts of ill-will, being resolved to avoid ill-will, i.e., developing goodwill in its place. So it’s not something peripheral. It’s an essential part of the path. As I said earlier, the path isn’t just a path for your own happiness. It’s not for your own benefit. It benefits everyone around you. So try to keep these attitudes in mind.

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