Samaratrophia

December 30, 2007

We’re told that Ajaan Mun developed thoughts of goodwill every day. He would spread thoughts of goodwill to all beings in all directions, three times a day, right after he woke up in the morning, right after waking up from his midday nap, and the last thing at night before going to sleep. This was the context for the rest of his practice. We have to make it the context for ours, too, because we are practicing for our true happiness. That’s what the Buddhist path is all about. You wish for your own happiness, you wish for the happiness of everybody else. Because you want a happiness that causes no harm, harm to anyone else. This is part of our basic motivation in the path. Look at the factor of right resolve. To be resolved on non-ill will is one of the sub-factors. It may sound strange. It sounds kind of negative. But what it does, the way it’s phrased that way, acts as a reminder. The Buddha could have said being resolved on goodwill, but goodwill is only one of the four Brahma-viharas, and it needs to be balanced out by equanimity. Because goodwill without equanimity can be a cause for suffering. Anyone who’s followed any of the caring professions knows how easy it is to get burned out. You work hard trying to help people, and either they don’t seem to want to benefit from your help, or they want to take advantage of your help, and it’s very easy to get cynical. Kurt Vonnegut’s term for this was Samaritophia. Your good Samaritan instincts begin to atrophy. So it’s important that your goodwill be tempered by understanding. The first thing you’ve got to understand is that people are not all good by nature. Sometimes people go into the caring professions hoping that they’ll be able to right all the wrongs and correct all the injustices, and all these people who are very good by nature somehow are suffering, and that you want to help them because they’re good. That can’t be your reason for helping people, because that one burns out really quickly. You want to help people because there is the opportunity that in some cases you may be of help, but you can’t expect that it’s going to happen in all cases, or that you’re going to like the people you’re trying to help. The Buddha in his teaching compared himself to a doctor, and he said there are three kinds of patients in the world. There are the patients who will get well regardless of whether they get medicine. There are the patients who will not get well no matter what, whether they get medicine or not. And then there are the ones who will get well if they get the medicine and will not get well if they don’t. Only one out of three are the ones where you really can make a difference. But you never know when you meet with a patient which category they fall into. So you give medicine to everybody. Because it’s good to be a doctor, it’s good to be helping. It develops all kinds of good qualities within you. And that has to be your basic motivation. You’re developing the perfections inside. Because if you measure your success totally by how much difference you make in the world out there, the world is a harsh place. And so much of it lies beyond your control. After all, the people you are helping, they have their own karma, and you can’t control whether their karma is going to be such that they’re going to benefit from what you do or not. What you have to assume is that everybody wants happiness, but there are a lot of people with a lot of misunderstandings about how happiness can be found. And in some cases, you can help their understanding. In some cases, they just refuse to listen. No matter how much they’re suffering, they think they’re doing the right thing to find happiness. And they simply won’t listen. You’ve got to accept that fact. This is where equanimity comes in. So you do look at results in the sense of trying to see where sometimes your actions may be harmful or where they could be more effective. But again, you do that for the purpose of being. You do that for the purpose of being skillful for the qualities that develop in your own mind. In other words, you have to bring an understanding of karma into your goodwill. This is one of those cases where the head and the heart have to be communicating. The head is what reminds the heart. People are not necessarily good by nature. Their nature is essentially neutral, if you were to even speak of a nature. People live by their actions, and as you can imagine, everybody has all kinds of actions. In some cases, there are some bad actions that people have done, and they’re going to have long consequences. Now, this doesn’t mean that the people don’t deserve help, but it does mean sometimes that they can’t benefit from it. But again, you can’t know. You can’t look into people’s karma account or karma field to see what’s there. What you are concerned with is planting good crops in your own karma field. That should be your motivation. Goodwill is a good karma crop. Equanimity is a good karma crop as well. Look at the Buddha. He was the greatest teacher for human beings and devas. And still, there are a lot of people he couldn’t teach. There are a lot of people he couldn’t train. So he focused on the ones that he could, and he would give the dharma to everybody. But again, as you realize, there are some patients who, even if they get good medicine, are not going to recover. Where the analogy fails, of course, is that when you give the dharma to everybody, you can see that they may not benefit right now, but maybe someday in the far distant future, that little seed of what you’ve given will sprout. You can never know. So your motivation should be to act on whatever skillful motives you can find within yourself so that they develop. If you don’t develop them, they begin to atrophy. And that’s a danger in your own life. So as long as you’re not approaching this with the sentimental idea that everybody is really basically good at heart, your realization that there are some people out there who are suffering, and they’re pretty nasty sometimes, is not going to cause you suddenly to become cynical and disillusioned. You want to go into it with clear eyes. This means that your heart and your head have to respect each other. The heart has to respect the principle of causality. Your head has to respect the heart’s need to be kind. The heart’s need to act in a way that’s totally harmless. Because, after all, if you want true happiness, your happiness can’t depend on the suffering of other people. If it does, they’re going to try to destroy it. So we know instinctively that helping other people is good. But that instinct has to be trained so that it doesn’t cause us suffering, and so that its misunderstandings don’t cause it to die out. When your kindness is based on understanding, then that kindness is going to last. So when you find that you can’t help someone, take heart from that. But realize that there are also going to be some dry stretches where the people you help abuse your help, ignore your help, or for some reason don’t benefit from it. That’s where you develop equanimity, realizing that all beings are the owners of their actions. So that person may want to own some unskillful actions, but you don’t want to be infected by that attitude. You want to keep on doing what’s skillful. Sometimes what’s skillful is learning how to be equanimous. Learning how not to get worked up over the areas where you can’t be of help, because otherwise it’ll sap your strength. And then the areas where you could have been of help get ignored. So try to bring some wisdom to your kindness. Because that’s what will enable it to last.

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