High Level Goodwill

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The monk who introduced me to Ajaan Fueng years back commented that Ajaan Fueng’s metta, his goodwill, was high. In other words, he functioned on a high level, which meant not simply that he was kind. But he was also demanding of his students so that they would learn how to be self-reliant. That was probably one of his greatest gifts. To show you how you could take care of your own happiness, he says, “May all living beings look after themselves with ease.” He would teach you how to look after yourself with ease. That meant being strict in quite a lot of ways. Because for most of us, we like to get by with the least amount of energy that we can put into something. As in the criticism you sometimes hear leveled at pragmatism. One person’s pragmatism is another person’s laziness. In other words, you say, “Well, this is good enough for me. That must be good enough for me. How good is good enough for you?” If your teacher really has your happiness at heart, the teacher will want to have you raise your standards for what’s good enough, and at the same time show you how you can meet those standards. It’s not the sort of teacher who would set impossibly high standards and then just punish you for not making them. As in the old, traditional phrase, he would instruct and urge and rouse and encourage you. In other words, he’d show you how it should be done, urge you to do it, rouse you from your laziness, and then encourage you, give you the confidence that it was something you could do. So it’s important to think about happiness in general. This is one of the reasons why the Buddha has us spread thoughts of happiness, thoughts of goodwill. “May all beings be happy.” What does it mean to be happy? How does happiness come about? Just spreading that thought, that in and of itself, can help make you happy. A mind that’s not in conflict with other beings. That is happy to see them happy. That’s a good mind state to have, a good mind state to develop, just in and of itself. And then you act on it, either in ways where you can help the other people, or in simply taking that as your motivation in all your actions. You want to make sure that your actions, your words, your thoughts, don’t conflict with anyone else’s true happiness. In doing that, you’re creating good karma for yourself and you’re helping other beings. The best way to help, of course, is to teach that of the person to be independent. That’s the old phrase about a good mother, someone who gives a nest but also gives wings to her children. If you’re in a position to help others develop their own wings, good. And at the very least, you want to wish that they would develop wings. Because happiness isn’t something that just comes floating by. You can have all kinds of good circumstances around you. You can be wealthy, powerful, have beauty and popularity, and still be totally miserable. Because your mind state in the present is what’s all-important in how you deal with what comes your way. If you’re skillful, you can handle anything like a skillful cook and walk into a kitchen and make good food out of whatever is there. Even food that’s almost rotten. Tenking, a student of mine, told the story when he was a cook one time in the British Club in Singapore. They had a special dinner one night, and one of the items on the fixed dinner was cream of asparagus soup. It turned out that more people showed up than they’d anticipated. They were running out of the soup. So he cleared everybody out of the kitchen. He said, “Okay, I’ll make cream of asparagus soup, but I don’t want you to see how I’m doing it.” So when everybody left, he went into the garbage can, got all the asparagus shavings, and chopped them up really fine in a blender and made a really good cream of asparagus soup. That’s where real happiness comes from, the ability to take whatever comes your way and learn how to deal with it skillfully. John Lee’s image is very similar there. The ability to grind everything up into a fine powder, no matter what comes your way. So you can’t eat it all, bones, fins. Say you’ve got a fish, you eat the bones and the fins and everything, but you can grind them up into a powder to the point where they’re edible. In other words, you learn how to analyze them, understand them, deal with them in a way that doesn’t cause you any suffering, doesn’t cause anyone else any suffering. So this is where the true potential for happiness is. Happiness lies in your skillfulness each moment that you deal with anything. So when you’re wishing that other people be happy, basically you’re saying, “May you be skillful. May all living beings be skillful.” You might want to try that in your metta chant. “May all beings be skillful. May they look after themselves skillfully.” Then you think about your own thoughts, words, and deeds. In what way can you help other people be skillful? In what way can you instruct, urge, encourage, and arouse them? You find that there are a lot of people in the world who will not respond to your instructions or encouragement or urging or arousing. And that’s where you have to develop equanimity. Right now may not be the right time, may not be the right place, but in cases where you can be of help in this way, this is where compassion and sympathetic joy come in. If you see someone as being really unskillful, creating a lot of unnecessary suffering for themselves and for others, you’re trying to help them see how to be more skillful. You look for that opportunity. And sometimes that means you have to be very patient, because the opportunity to instruct other people is usually a very small window. But you want to have that in the back of your mind. When you have the chance, you want to make a comment or two that will help them deal more skillfully with whatever comes up. So in this way you may sometimes find people who are in really good conditions, but you see that they’re being unskillful, you’ve got to have compassion for them. The same with sympathetic joy. Or empathetic joy. Some people may be in miserable situations, but they’re dealing with them very well. In a case like that, you want to encourage them so that they continue to be skillful. This is why the Buddha taught the practice of anamodana. These are primarily for the chance that monks give after a meal. But that’s not the only way in which you can show anamodana for someone else. You see that if they’re doing something skillful, you encourage them, you give them your congratulations. So compassion is not just for people who are in bad situations, and empathetic joy is not just for people who are in good situations. The situation is only secondary. It’s the skillfulness of how you shape the raw materials of your situation. That’s what determines when compassion is appropriate, when empathetic joy is appropriate. That’s for equanimity. In that chat we had just now, all living beings are the owners of their actions. You realize that you cannot make the choices for other people. If they’re your children and they’re very small, you can help direct them. But as they get older, you find that they become more and more out of your control. Then you look at the whole rest of humanity. They’re out of your control, too. You can have some influence in some places. But you have to develop equanimity in the areas where you really can’t have any influence, and people’s actions are just going to go their own way. So we develop these thoughts, these ideas. They are sublime abidings. One, because they’re a good place for the mind to stay. And two, because they remind us of how to direct our motivation. I think, “May all living beings be happy.” Well, the question is, is there ever going to come a point when all living beings are going to be happy? It’s pretty doubtful. But you want to keep that as your motivation for all your actions. You want to keep reminding yourself, “This is why.” “This is why I’m acting.” “This is why I’m engaging with other people with the wish that they be happy, with the wish that they understand the causes for happiness and act on them.” So when you see someone doing something unskillful, you’ve got to have compassion for them. When you see people handling their situations in a skillful way, you want to develop empathetic joy. And, of course, there’s the fact that as you send this energy out, it really is good for the world in a sort of subterranean way. So it’s a combination of the heart quality of goodwill, wishing for happiness, and the head quality, the understanding of how does happiness come about, and why is it good to wish for the happiness of others and for yourself? Why is it good to have compassion, and when are these things appropriate? These are things that are good to reflect on, because it helps tie the practice of the sublime abidings into the deeper practice of training the mind, as you gain more and more understanding about action and its implications. I’ve heard people say, “Well, what’s the connection between the four noble truths, which focus so much on suffering, and the sublime abidings, which are focused more on happiness?” But the connection goes deep if you understand that they both grow out of the Buddhist teachings on skillful action. The whole reason he taught the four noble truths was because he wanted beings to understand how to become truly happy. You don’t understand happiness until you’re really willing to look at suffering and comprehend it. This is why the teachings on the sublime abidings permeate everything, and you want them to permeate your day. You say that Ajahn Mun would spend time every morning, right after awakening, developing the sublime abidings. Every afternoon, after waking from his afternoon nap, he’d develop them again. And every evening before going to bed, he’d develop them a third time. And that’s just providing the emotional framework and the reminding framework. This is why we’re practicing the four noble truths. This is why we’re engaging with other beings. This should inform our engagement and should inform our practice, the way of a sincere wish for happiness, for true happiness. And we really want to act on that. And we want to keep our standards high. That’s why we emphasize the true. Because goodwill is not just a warm feeling. It’s the motivation that should urge and rouse and encourage you to find the truest happiness you can find. And in doing so, you benefit yourself and you benefit others in the best possible way, with the highest form of metta.

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