Protecting Goodwill

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With goodwill for the entire cosmos. It’s an attitude we try to develop. It’s part of right resolve on the path, and it forms the framework of the entire practice. Think about the Buddha after he gained awakening. He could have taught anything at all, but he decided to teach a way that puts an end to suffering. He himself had pursued that way, out of goodwill for himself, and with the idea that when he had found it, he could teach others as well. This attitude of goodwill underlies the whole practice. It gives a direction to the path that we’re following here. Because once you understand the cause of suffering and how to put an end to suffering, then goodwill is what motivates you to practice. So it’s important to try to develop this attitude every day. They say that Ajahn Mun, every morning when he woke up, would spend some time spreading goodwill to all beings. When he woke up from his afternoon nap, he would spread goodwill to all beings. Before he went to bed at night, he would spread goodwill to all beings. He had a student. His wife had gone off with another man. So what did Ajahn Mun teach him? He taught him a very long chant. It takes a good half hour or so to go through all the levels of being, all the types of beings, from whom you can spread thoughts of goodwill. And Ajahn Lee’s divine mantra talks about the rewards of goodwill. Spreading goodwill to yourself through all the elements of the body and from that out to everybody. Because goodwill does have to come from a sense of well-being. Here’s images of a tank for water. If there’s no water in the tank, then no matter how far you open up the faucet, nothing’s going to come out, just air. But if the tank is full of water, you open up the faucet and water comes out. So working with the breath is a way of showing goodwill for yourself and developing an attitude inside that allows you to feel genuine goodwill for others when you’re feeling unoppressed through your own lack of skill. In other words, you develop the skill that takes some of the burdens off your own mind. You’re more likely to want to bring thoughts of goodwill for others. So working with the breath, as we do, is one way of showing goodwill for yourself and making it easier to feel goodwill for others. Ajahn Surwat would often recommend developing thoughts of goodwill before each meditation session and then after each one. When you do it at the beginning, it’s basically for yourself to clear out old issues in the mind. Whatever issues you have with people that you may have picked up in the course of the day or the past week or month or whatever. Then, regardless of what people have done, you spread thoughts of goodwill. You’re not going to hold any grudges. And as you settle down to meditate, you want to keep that in mind. So if the image of any person comes in the course of your meditation, your first reaction should be goodwill for that person, whether it’s someone who’s wronged you or someone whom you’ve wronged. Or just a thought passing through the mind. Make goodwill your first response. Then, at the end of the meditation, spread thoughts of goodwill again. This time, though, it’s for others. As with Ajahn Lee’s principle, when you have a sense of well-being from keeping the mind concentrated, it really gives more force to your wishes for goodwill. So when you think thoughts of goodwill for specific people or for all beings, you’re getting an actual energy that goes out and gets transmitted. What’s the quality of that energy? There’s that passage we chanted just now. Just as a mother would protect her child, you want to protect your goodwill. Notice, sometimes you hear it said that just as a mother would cherish her child, you should cherish all beings. That’s impossible. You can’t go around cherishing everybody. Goodwill is an attitude you have. One of the ways of expressing it is, “May all beings look after themselves with ease.” That’s not a mother’s attitude for her child. Hopefully, eventually she will train the child so the child can look after itself with ease. When the child is still small, she’s got to spend all her time protecting it. What the Buddha’s talking about here is actually protecting your goodwill in spite of whatever people may be doing. That requires mindfulness and requires alertness, qualities that are helpful in getting the mind to settle down. As he says in that passage, you want to maintain this mindfulness at all times, i.e., keeping in mind the fact that you’re going to treat everybody with goodwill. One effective way of preparing yourself for dealing with all the difficult people in the world is once you’ve established yourself in a sense of well-being as you meditate, you start spreading thoughts of goodwill to others. Ask yourself, “Is there anybody out there that she really can’t sincerely wish goodwill for?” There may be people you know personally or people you’ve read about in the news. Ask yourself, “What would you gain from that person’s goodwill?” What would the world gain from not allowing that person to see the error of his or her ways and really work for true happiness? Because that’s what goodwill is. It’s not that you’re touching people with a magic wand, saying, “May you be happy however you are.” One of the passages in the Sutta Vipassana just now, “May no one despise anyone, may no one mistreat anyone, may no one abuse anyone anywhere.” You’re hoping that people will stop acting in ways that are harmful. Instead, they’ll act in ways that are conducive to good, solid states of happiness. So you’re not asking for anything magical. Although, looking at the way some people are behaving, it would be, I guess, magical to expect that people have been writing the world would suddenly have goodwill for everybody and an understanding of what true happiness would be. By the very least, you’re not asking for anything that goes against the principles of karma. Is there anybody out there that you can’t wish that for? You want to ask yourself that question until you’re sure that, okay, even when you have dealings with that person or if you ever happen to meet that person, you would be able to treat that person with goodwill. Why do you do this? It’s for your own protection, so you don’t start doing unskillful things. You want to protect your goodwill, as in “protect your child,” in other words, all the time. That’s what the Buddha’s asking you to protect. This requires not only mindfulness, but also alertness. I found an interesting passage in the Canada Day where the Buddha’s talking about alertness, not just being aware of what’s going on, but making a resolve that you’re not going to do anything unskillful in a particular situation. You’re alert, so that you don’t do anything unskillful. You’re alert to your resolve and you’re alert to your actions. Both of these ways—mindfulness and alertness—blend with right effort. The effort to maintain right resolve, to develop right resolve, to bring it to, as the Buddha says, its culmination, to the point where your goodwill is solid and you can depend on it. This way you give safety to yourself, you give safety to others. This is an attitude we should work out at all times. The Buddha never said that we have a natural tendency toward goodwill. He said it’s our heedfulness that makes our goodwill reliable. If you try to depend on your innate nature to develop the goodwill when you need it, a lot of times it’s just not there. And this doesn’t mean there’s anything wrong with you. It’s simply that this is something that has to be developed. This is when you have to bring out your heedfulness to remind yourself that if you can’t develop goodwill for everybody, you’re endangering not only the world, but also yourself. So remember, this is a form of protection. This is a way of giving safety. This is a way of learning how to make your own resolves more reliable. Because if you can’t depend on your own resolves, you’re really exposed to all kinds of problems. So protect this resolve. Be alert. Be mindful. Protect it as you would if you could. You’re only child.

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