A Heart Bigger than the World

August 30, 2013

Start with thoughts of goodwill, wishing for your own happiness, your own true happiness, and the true happiness of everyone around you. Life is a lot easier when we can maintain that wish. Even though we know not everybody’s going to be happy. Why is that? Because not everybody acts on the causes of true happiness. You can’t make anybody act that way. And so your goodwill has to be backed up by equanimity. We say, “May all beings be happy, but can all beings be happy?” They can. It’s a possibility. Will they? We don’t know. But we can maintain that wish. Because when you act on that, you don’t have the scars of looking back on bad motivations. You can live with yourself, and your actions are much more likely to be skillful. But this doesn’t mean that people aren’t going to be difficult. Often the people who are most difficult in our lives are the ones who are closest to us. And goodwill is not a Pollyanna kind of wish, thinking that everybody’s going to be good, therefore I’ll be good to them. It’s because people are not going to be good many times that you’ve got to be good to them, good in a discerning way, thinking about what would be in their best interest, the best interest of their true well-being. And taking that as your guide. So spend some time with the thought of goodwill. All too often we think that we know all about goodwill. Why? Because we say, “May all beings be happy,” and there you are. But it’s good to stop and think about it. When you have that wish, what are the implications? It means you have to look at your thoughts, your words, and your deeds to make sure, at the very least, that they’re a good example. It also means you have to make your mind bigger than the events of the world. This is one of the reasons why we practice concentration. Because if the mind is small, it gets overwhelmed. And all you can start thinking about is what this person did, what that person did, and how you’re squeezed by their actions. If you put yourself in the world, the world is going to squeeze you. But if you make your heart bigger than the world, the world is there. And it can squeeze, but it can’t find the boundaries of your heart. So there’s nothing for it to squeeze on. So when the Buddha recommends goodwill, it’s not because he thinks that everybody’s going to be good. One of the examples he gives is of bandits who’ve grabbed hold of you, they’ve pinned you down, and they’re going to cut off your arms and legs with saws. He says even in that case, you have to spread goodwill. That doesn’t mean that by spreading goodwill the bandits will stop. They’ll probably go ahead and continue. But what’s important is you maintain your state of mind. Because if you’re going to be losing your limbs, you’re quickly going to be losing your body. And what do you have left? Just your mind. The qualities you’ve developed in the mind. So you don’t want your good qualities to be sawed off along with your arms and legs. The Buddha saw the world as it really is. There’s a very schizoid way that we in the West tend to look at Buddhism. On the one hand, the Buddha is very negative, saying that everything was suffering. And on the other hand, there’s the Buddha with that blissful smile, the Buddha of sweetness and light, that we see portrayed sometimes. So which is it? The Buddha saw that the world has its good and its bad sides. He doesn’t pretend that everybody is good by their innate nature. He never talks about that. When you hear talk about Buddha nature, you have to remember that the person who is most qualified to talk about Buddha nature, the Buddha himself, never mentioned the topic. He didn’t look at the world through rose-colored glasses. But he did see that the mind can be trained so that it doesn’t have to be affected by the difficulties in the world, the cruelties in the world. That’s why we’re here—to train the mind so that it’s larger than the world. To train your heart so that it’s larger than the world, both when you’re on the receiving end of things and when you’re on the active side, as you’re planning your actions with regard to the world. Remember that everyone wants happiness, and a lot of people are very ignorant about how happiness can be found. That’s something you’ve got to live with, and there are a lot of people who will not give up that ignorance. But you want to overcome your ignorance. So you want to let the events of the world have an impact on the mind. And so you make sure that when you’re having an impact on the world, it’s a good impact, coming from good motivation. That way, you can look at the world and realize that there are people out there who are good in some ways and not so good in other ways. And when you want to nourish your mind so that it’s easier to develop thoughts of goodwill, you focus on the good side. That doesn’t mean that you pretend that the bad side is not there. It’s just that that’s not where you go for your nourishment. Because the mind sometimes will nourish itself on other people’s bad qualities. If you enjoy feeding on the idea that you’re a victim or that you’ve been mistreated, there is a kind of food there. And there are a lot of people who like to nourish themselves with that food. It’s not very nourishing. So the Buddhas remind you that when you’re looking for food in the world, look at people’s goodness, the goodness of their actions, the goodness of their words. Someplace in each person there is some goodness. You want to keep that in mind. Now, letting people treat you like a doorman is not showing them goodwill. But again, when you can make your mind larger than the world, there’s nothing for the people to step on. So try to develop this limitless quality, this immeasurable quality—goodwill without conditions, goodwill without bargaining. In other words, the idea that “I’ll be good to the world if the world is good to me.” There’s nothing special about that attitude at all. Limitless goodwill is something special. As the Buddha said, it’s a Brahma-vihara. This is how the Brahmas lived. This is how they became Brahmins to begin with. It’s because they developed these qualities and these attitudes. All four of them—goodwill, compassion, and empathetic joy—are all aspects of metta, or goodwill. In other words, compassion is what you feel when goodwill sees that people are suffering or creating the causes for suffering. Empathetic joy is what goodwill feels when it sees people happy already, and acting on the causes of happiness. But these all have to be backed up by equanimity, remembering that there’s a lot in people’s actions that you cannot change when they’re being unskillful. Or, if you’re currently beating up with the results of your own past unskillful actions, you have to treat that with equanimity too. And also realizing that when you’re dealing with people, you can’t let down your guard. Some people think that, “If I have enough goodwill, everything will be okay and people will pick up on the good vibes and then they’ll respond.” Equanimity is there to remind you that’s not always the case. You can sit there beaming goodwill and a lot of people will resist it. But that doesn’t mean you should stop beaming—simply that you have to be heedful in your actions. We used to get snakes in the kitchen, and for some reason it always fell to me to be the person to get them out. I learned one of the first lessons is to have goodwill for the snake. That way you can get your mind into the snake’s mind and figure out, “Okay, what does the snake want? And where can we put our wants together?” That way you can catch the snake. You have to be very careful. After all, it is a cobra. Catch the snake. Take it outside and give it its freedom—all the time with goodwill, but all the time with heedfulness. When you can balance these two qualities, then you can live in the world.

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