Spreading Goodwill

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For the most part, we spread thoughts of goodwill as a framework for the practice, to remind ourselves of our motivation, why we’re here to meditate. It’s because we want a happiness that doesn’t harm anyone, but at the same time helps to clear out a lot of the issues of the day. People who disturbed you, people who got you upset in the course of the day, you don’t want to carry that attitude into your breath meditation. So you think thoughts of goodwill, spread the thoughts of goodwill around to kind of clear the decks. And Chan Mun, they said, would spread thoughts of goodwill three times a day, in the morning when he woke up, in the afternoon when he woke up from his nap, and in the evening before going to sleep. This is good not only for your meditation, but also for your sleep. Spread thoughts of goodwill before drifting off. Your mind is in a much better state than if you’ve been thinking about lust or anger, greed, or whatever. You tend to wake up in a much better state. And the sleep tends to be better as well. That’s goodwill as a framework. You can also use it, though, as a topic for concentration. Make that your object. It’s especially good for times when you have trouble staying with the breath, have trouble focusing on the body. Spread thoughts of goodwill. You don’t have to articulate things too much. Those phrases we have in the standard chant of the four, the phrases for goodwill, compassion, empathetic joy, and equanimity, only the phrases for goodwill are found in the suttas. The other ones are added on later. And as you articulate that, you get the proper feeling tone, the proper attitude, and then you just hold on to the attitude. And think of it going out in all directions. It’s good to think things through first. In other words, you can ask yourself, “What does it mean to have goodwill for yourself and for others while you wish for happiness?” Happiness can be any kind of well-being. It’s not just going around with a big smile on your face, but it’s a sense of deep inner peace that can count as happiness. It can be pleasure, well-being, even bliss. Where do these things come from? They come from actions. So when you’re wishing thoughts of goodwill, you’re wishing that everybody would understand the causes for true happiness, true well-being, and would be able to act on them so they actually get results. You’re not just saying, “Well, may you be happy in whatever way you are.” Because in some cases people would have to change the way they are, change the way they act, in order to find a happiness that really lasts. Then you can ask yourself, “Is there anyone out there that you can’t feel these feelings for?” Most of us can come up with a list. People we don’t like, people we’d like to see suffer a little bit before they gain happiness, so we can balance out and make things fair in the world. But most people, when they suffer, it’s not something they take as a lesson. They get more and more aggravated. You remember the Buddha’s teachings on teaching people to put an end to suffering. He never asked them, “Is your suffering deserved or not?” It’s more a question of, “Do you want to keep on suffering? Here’s a way out, regardless of whether someone else might say the sufferings were deserved.” That’s the kind of attitude we want to have, whether we think people deserve to find the way to true happiness or not. We put that aside and just wish them that they will find that way and gain the results. And you want to work through any attitudes that would get in the way of your being able to wish this sincerely for everybody. In some cases, that takes a fair amount of work. But if you can work through those attitudes, you find that you can trust yourself more. There’s a passage where the Buddha talks about goodwill as a form of restraint. In other words, you hold a restraint over your likes and dislikes, your attitudes of who deserves to be happy and who doesn’t deserve to be happy. You hold those in check. Think of the fact that everybody wants well-being in one form or another, however they conceive it. You want everybody to conceive an accurate and true and effective way of finding happiness and have the strength to follow through. The world would be a much better place that way. Whether all beings will be happy, that’s another matter. But you want to straighten out your motivation. This is something you want to determine. That’s another term the Buddha uses for goodwill. It’s a determination. You set your mind on this and work at it to whatever extent is needed. A lot of us like to think that the natural state of the mind is one of goodwill. But as the Buddha said, that’s a Brahma attitude. It’s not necessarily a universal human attitude. For most of us, we have our loves and our hates, our likes and our dislikes. And those go together. In other words, as the Buddha points out, love can produce hate. If there’s somebody you love and someone else treats that person horribly, it’s very easy to hate that other person. Or if there’s somebody that you hate and someone else treats them nicely, you’re going to hate that person, that person who treats the person you hate nicely as well. And there are also the cases where somebody you hate and somebody else is really nasty to them, you’re going to love that person. This is what love and hate do. They feed off of each other in this way. Metta is something different. You put a restraining order on your likes and dislikes, your sense of what’s fair, who deserves to suffer and who doesn’t. You tell yourself, “Okay, I want to act in the world in such a way that would be in line with everybody’s finding true happiness.” Because this is not meant to be just some idle thinking. It’s actually meant to be put into practice. As the Buddha said, this is what enables societies to stay together. If you have acts of goodwill, if you speak words of goodwill, if you think thoughts of goodwill for the other members of your community, that helps tie the community together. So you’re not just here thinking words of goodwill. You’re trying to develop a genuine attitude. And then sit with that attitude. If you’re going to make this an object of concentration, you want to stay with that attitude and think of it spreading out in all directions. It’s that quality of all directions that’s important. The breath can help here, because you want this to be anchored here in the present moment and not just drift off into one direction. So you’re right here in the middle. You’re here with your breath. You’re trying to breathe in a way that’s comfortable, because after all, you’re one of those people you want to have goodwill for, too. And why breathe in a way that’s causing suffering? So to whatever extent you can breathe comfortably, do that. And centered here, think of the goodwill going out in front of you, behind you, to the left and the right, up and down. In the Buddhism, it’s just like someone who plays a conch horn. They would take conch shells and blow them as horns back in those days. And, of course, the sound from the conch doesn’t go to just one person or in one direction. It goes in all directions. You want to think of your goodwill spreading out in all directions in just that way. As an object of concentration, just keep that in mind. You’re centered here, but your awareness, an awareness imbued with thoughts of goodwill, goes off in all directions. See to what extent you can maintain that. This gives rise to a very spacious sense. The body does tend to disappear, or in other terms, the outline of the body tends to disappear in this practice. There’s a sense of you are here, but the boundary between you and the world outside gets very porous. You can do the same with the other brahmaviharas, compassion, empathetic joy, and equanimity. Compassion is basically what goodwill feels when you see that someone is suffering, or is creating the causes for suffering. After all, if someone’s creating the causes for suffering, it’s going to be very easy for them to suffer down the line. So you don’t want to wait until they’re actually suffering. You want to have compassion for them. If there’s anything you can do to help them see the error of their ways, then you’ll be happy to do it. Similarly, with empathetic joy, it’s what goodwill feels when it sees somebody happy or creating the causes for happiness. In that second case, again, you see the happiness coming down the line, and you want to encourage that person even more. The passage is in the kettle. It indicates that the concentration for compassion is more refined than the concentration for goodwill. And the concentration for empathetic joy is more refined than the concentration for compassion. The most refined of the four, of course, is equanimity. And this is something you need to back up the other three. There are a lot of cases where you would like to see beings be happy or create the causes for happiness. But we’re not going to do it. We see it all over the world. There’s someone suffering. You’d like to see them get beyond their suffering. But for some reason you can’t help them, and they can’t seem to get past it. There are people who are happy, but their happiness ends. That particular pleasure, that particular sense of well-being, ends. And if you can’t develop equanimity, your mind is going to go up and down with these things. You have to realize, ultimately, that your wishes, even though they’re good wishes, can’t straighten out the whole world. And you have to make your peace with that fact. At the same time, you realize that if you’re trying to help someone who just can’t seem to benefit from the help, you’re wasting time and energy that you’re putting in so that you could be devoting to cases where you actually can be of help, either to yourself or other people. Because even though your goodwill may be unlimited, your ability to help other people does have its limits. And so equanimity is basically a recognition of your limits and trying to do your best within those limits, even though your attitudes may be unlimited. It’s only when they’re unlimited that the restraint can be trusted. Otherwise you see cases where people are doing horrible things, and it’s very easy to very quickly develop hatred, ill will, for that person. That means you can’t trust yourself. You can’t trust your goodwill. So you’ve got to really work on this. Equanimity is there to help give you a reality check and to exercise restraint over these other forms of restraint, in other words, keep them in line. Now, as the Buddha said, this is not a complete practice. He talks about previous lifetimes when he spent years developing goodwill on the other brahmaviharas. He said that would lead to the Brahma world, but it doesn’t lead to dispassion, it doesn’t lead to cessation, it doesn’t lead to total unbinding. You need to develop discernment beyond that. The discernment may be, in one case, learning how to overcome sensual desire. That’s where you pull in other meditation topics, like contemplation of the body or contemplation of the drawbacks of lust and anger. Or you can contemplate the state of concentration that’s here with the goodwill and see that it, too, is something fabricated. Again, we like to think that goodwill is our true nature, but it’s something that actively has to be developed as a determination. As you work at it, it gets more and more second nature. But it is still something fabricated, and you want to be able to see that. The way you breathe when you’re developing goodwill, the way you talk to yourself when you’re developing thoughts of goodwill, the perceptions you hold in mind, the feelings that come up, all these things are fabrication. There’s an intentional element in them that you have to keep producing, working, working, working at it. The work is subtle, the effort is subtle, but it’s still there. It’s still not the ultimate. So once you’ve worked on developing this concentration, you have to look at it in such a way that it gives rise to dispassion, the realization that there’s got to be something better than this. And the mind will often resist. After all, you put so much work into developing this as your theme. And it’s very easy to see this oneness. There’s something innate in the mind. Why would you want to change that? But it’s still a mind with objects. It’s still a mind with intentions. It’s still a mind that keeps fabricating this process, which means that it’s still not totally dependable. And when you can see that, when the mind is ready for that insight, then that’s when it’s willing to go beyond. In the meantime, we can practice this as a framework, as one of the alternatives for breath meditation. Or if you find that this is the topic that allows the mind to settle down really solidly, you can take this as your topic. But again, try to keep it centered right here. Don’t go flying off to the edge of the universe. Because it’s right here that you’re going to be able to see this as a process. And it’s in seeing it as a process that you can work your way beyond it. So imbue your breath with goodwill and imbue your goodwill with breath as a way of keeping this expansive mind state grounded. And imbue your goodwill with some understanding of what happiness is and how it’s found. Because that, too, will keep you in touch with the fact that these are processes. And it’s through seeing things as processes, and the extent to which there is an intentional element in the processes, based on choices, but also the extent to which all processes are very fragile. That’s how discernment can arise, a discernment that’s even more reliable than the goodwill. And, of course, that, too, will make you a more reliable person. [BLANK\_AUDIO]

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