Give Goodwill a Grounding

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An attitude of goodwill underlies all practice. Think about the Buddha’s main teaching, the Four Noble Truths. Why did he focus on teaching that? Because he had goodwill for all the people he taught. He saw that they were suffering, and particularly they were suffering because of things their minds were doing. So he wanted to show them the way that they could solve the problem within their own minds. It’s not that he was just trying to reduce the suffering in the world in general. In other words, he didn’t go out and try to rule the world or straighten it out or try to figure out some way that we can force people to live in a world where there’s not so much suffering causing much suffering to one another. There was no forcing there. It was just pure goodwill, together with wisdom, seeing that the suffering that really weighs down the mind is the suffering that we impose on ourselves by our craving. As a passage, we chant again and again, “We’re a slave to craving.” We live in a world where it’s swept away, everything that’s swept away. Nothing endures. There’s no shelter. There’s no one in charge. We have to leave everything behind as we pass on. And yet we still keep coming back, trying to look for happiness in things that really don’t offer happiness. They offer a little bit of pleasure here and there, but nothing really lasting, nothing really for sure. In the Buddha’s own quest, he was looking for an end to that problem, looking for true happiness, wishing true happiness for himself. And then when he found it, he wished that other people could take that teaching and apply it within their own minds. As he said, as a teacher he had to have some equanimity, because there were times when people would listen and not practice, or not even listen. But again, he wouldn’t force anything on them. He’d focus on the areas or the people that he could teach and be willing to put it into practice. As for the others, he said he treated them like fields. The field with the best soil were the ones who would listen intently and were intent on practicing. That’s where he put his first seed, the seed of his teachings. And then there were those who were listening, but maybe sometime later they would put it into practice, so he put some seed there. And then for the others, who didn’t like that it was going to be a long time before they would actually practice, he gave them some seed too. But he tried to emphasize those who were most earnest in the practice, because his time was limited. And it’s the same with us. Our time is limited. Now that we have the teachings, we can take the seeds of his teachings and we can plant them inside ourselves and nurture them and help them grow. And it starts with that attitude of goodwill for ourselves and for others. There are sometimes voices in the mind that say, “You don’t deserve to be truly happy that you’ve done this or that horrible thing.” But the Buddha never said his teachings were only for people who deserve to be happy. Everybody in the world has a mixture of good and bad karma. If you’re a human being, that’s what you’re coming into life with. So the question isn’t how much good or bad karma you’ve got in the past. It’s what you can do with your karma right now, the opportunity you have to make a choice right now. And so goodwill should inform that choice. You want to be happy, and despite what the other voices in your mind may be saying, you want to stick with that desire, honor that desire. And it’s good to have the voice of goodwill as one of the major voices. On its own, it’s not going to be able to do all the work, but it gives the impetus to the others. As I said, it underlies the Four Noble Truths. That’s Right View. Based on Right View, if you have goodwill for yourself, you’ll want to put it into practice. It leads to right resolve. All the other right factors of the path grow out of goodwill for yourself, and you can motivate yourself also. You can motivate yourself by having goodwill for others, realizing that the happiness you’re looking for here is not imposing any burdens, not causing any harm to anybody else. This is one of the reasons why we have that chant for goodwill several times a day, and why we’re encouraged to make goodwill the framework for the day as well. When you wake up in the morning, spend some time just spreading thoughts of goodwill around. See if there’s anybody that you have trouble feeling goodwill for, reminding yourself that what you’re hoping for is that person will understand the causes to happiness and be able to act on them. That’s something you can wish for anybody. And when you’re able to wish that for anybody, you also can learn how to wish it for yourself and make the wish more sincere. If you’re having trouble having goodwill for others, you’re going to have trouble having goodwill for yourself. The two go together. If there are people you’d like to see suffer a little bit first before they find true happiness, ask yourself what real benefit you would get from that. What attitudes in your own mind is that attitude feeding? Not the ones you want to encourage. So try to work through any knots that would get in the way of your goodwill. When you can do this with a few people, then it gets easier and easier as you go through other people that you notice that you’re irritated with, upset with, or have trouble getting along with. Remind yourself that you’re wishing them goodwill, again, not because they deserve it, but because your own skillfulness of your own actions requires that you have goodwill for all. And learn how to trust yourself, especially around difficult people. Then you want to give that goodwill a grounding. That’s one of the phrases they use, “Give it a vehicle, a means of transport, give it a grounding.” The means of transport means basically your ability to send it out to everybody. The grounding is the way you deal with your own issues, the problems, the concerns, the body and the mind right here. If you have goodwill for yourself, a good way of showing it to yourself is learning how to breathe comfortably. Why impose unnecessary stress on the body and the mind by letting yourself breathe in a way that’s not comfortable? There’s medicine for the mind, medicine for the body, that’s free. All you have to do is pay attention, be observant, experiment, and see what really feels good right now. And see what the body needs. We’re going to have that sense of basic well-being inside. It helps you in many ways. It gives you a place where you can step out of your thoughts, because if you see your thoughts are heading off in the wrong direction, you can stay here with the sensation of the breathing. Because no matter what the thoughts are in your mind, they don’t destroy the sensation of breathing. It’s simply a matter of where you’re going to pay your attention, what you’re going to take as your grounding. If the thoughts are unskillful, don’t take those as your grounding. Be grounded right here, right here with the breath. At the same time, when you find a sense of well-being welling up inside, then it’s a lot easier to have goodwill for others. You’ve got something to share. In John Lee’s analogy, there’s a difference between turning on a person a faucet and having nothing but air come out, and turning on the faucet and having water come out. The air that comes out is just simply random thoughts of goodwill, but without a sense of well-being inside, of your own. Whereas the water, when you have a sense of well-being inside, you want to share. As he says, air coming out of the faucet is cool, but it’s not as cooling and refreshing as water. So show some goodwill for yourself right now. Work with the breath. Try to stay with the way of breathing. It feels really good, regardless of what other voices may be coming up in the mind. This is something that’s available to you, the possibility of having a sense of well-being right here. This will strengthen the voices of goodwill for yourself and for others. And when goodwill is grounded like this, it has a lot more power.

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