Goodwill without Exception

July 21, 2017

There’s a passage in the Canon where the Buddha’s been wounded by a stone sliver in his foot. So he’s resting during the day. And Mara comes up to him and starts taunting him. “Are you moping? Are you miserable?” The Buddha says, “No. I have goodwill for all.” It’s an interesting statement for several reasons. One, of course, is that he has goodwill for the person who threw the boulder down the hill that created the stone sliver. So he’s not seeking revenge. He’s not moping about why this could happen to him. And secondly, it’s the Buddha’s way of saying, “This is what you do when you’re ill. Spread thoughts of goodwill.” Instead of focusing on the pain that you’re going through—and this is going to be illness of any kind, misery of any kind—instead of focusing on your own personal pain or the pain of people you love, which only aggravates the problem, develop thoughts of goodwill for everybody. Make your goodwill without limit, without end, without exceptions. This is not an easy thing to do. It’s not the natural state of the mind to have goodwill for everybody. The natural state of the mind is to be partial, to have goodwill for some and not goodwill for others. You have to remind yourself of why it’s a good thing to have goodwill. This relates also to what the Buddha was doing as he was ill. He said in another place that if you can develop an unlimited state of mind, then if you have any bad karma coming in from the past, your unlimited state of mind will turn it into almost nothing. The analogy he gives is of a large crystal of salt. If you put in a tiny cup of water, you won’t be able to drink the water because the water would be too salty. But if you threw it into a large, clean river, you could still drink the water in the river because the water was so much more. In the same way, the results of past actions, when they come into a narrow mind that’s partial, that has trouble having goodwill for everybody, are going to aggravate the pain. But if you have a more developed mind, unlimited in its goodwill, unlimited in its equanimity, then the results of past actions will hardly be felt. Goodwill and equanimity are two different things, but they go together. Goodwill is a wish for happiness. Equanimity is an acceptance of things that cannot be changed. And they need each other. Because if you have goodwill for everybody, look around. Is everybody happy? No. Is everybody acting on the causes? No. Can you make everybody happy? No. If you can’t have some equanimity, your goodwill is going to make you miserable. If you have equanimity without goodwill, then you don’t care about anybody, which is also wrong. There’s an interesting passage where the Buddha says that to have ill will for someone is to have wrong view. We know that ill will is wrong resolve, but here he’s also saying it’s wrong view. You don’t understand what is in your own best interest. You don’t understand that having ill will is going to make you act in ways that are going to be unskillful, and then you’re going to have to reap those results. So goodwill is good both when you’re dealing with results of past karma and when you’re planning your present karma that’s going to carry on into the future. So it’s good to be able to make the goodwill unlimited, because then you can make that the basis of virtue that is unlimited. When your virtue is unlimited, then the Buddha says, then you have safety. You’re giving safety to everybody else, and you’re going to have a part in that safety, that universal safety. So sometimes it’s a good exercise to sit down, develop thoughts of goodwill. First, for people, it’s easy to feel goodwill for. And then for people it’s more and more difficult to ask yourself, “Is there anybody out there that you would like to see suffer and cast around? It might be somebody you read about in the media, somebody you’ve encountered in your own personal life.” You say, “What would I gain? My desire to have that person suffer is wrong view, it’s wrong resolve, it’s pulling me off the path. Can I see clear to having goodwill for that person?” Again, the teaching on karma comes into help. Because when you have goodwill for someone, you’re basically wishing that they will create the causes for happiness. In other words, you’re wishing that they behaved in a skillful way. And you should be able to think that for anybody. So then maybe some people you think, “Well, I’d be happy to see them be skillful but I’d like to see them suffer a little bit first.” But that doesn’t help anything at all. A lot of people, when they’re suffering, end up doing things that are even worse. They start thrashing around and do more and more damage. So it’s a good exercise. Goodwill for everybody. No exceptions at all. And so in that way you can make your own mind unlimited. In the terminology of the canon, immeasurable. There’s really no measure to how large your goodwill can be. An immeasurable mind is a much nicer mind to be in. If your mind is narrow, you can think about other things that make you suffer and squeeze you in. And you’re just piling more and more suffering on yourself. And when you do that, then you become the kind of person who wants to lash out at other people. So as a regular exercise, try to develop thoughts of goodwill for everybody. And keep checking to make sure that there’s nobody out there that you would feel ill-willed for. We’re not sending out just some vague cloud-like energy. We want to be specific. The person in front of you, the person you are dealing with, regardless of how difficult that person may be, you want to have goodwill for that person. Make it specific. There’s a passage in the canon where, instead of the practice of starting with people who are easy and then going to people who are harder, the Buddha actually has you start with somebody’s heart. Suppose there were bandits who pinned you down and they were trying to saw off your limbs with a two-handled saw. The Buddha says, “Start with them, have goodwill for them, and then spread it out for the rest of the world.” Goodwill is meant to be specific. It’s universal, but it means everybody. The person right in front of you, the person who’s affecting you, the person who’s behind you, whatever. People right around you that you’re immediately dealing with. You’ve got to have goodwill for them. Wish that they would understand the causes of happiness and be able to act on them. And if there’s any way that you can help, you’re happy to do it. If you can’t help, that’s when you develop equanimity. You want to be able to hold onto this thought as you get ill, as you get old. Even as you’re dying, you want to have goodwill for everybody. And preparing goodwill for yourself in the sense that you want happiness that doesn’t harm anybody. That becomes your motivation. You want to dig deeper into the practice. Because goodwill does have its limitations in the sense that it, on its own, can’t take you all the way to awakening. The Buddha talks about remembering a previous lifetime when he had been a king and then abandoned his kingdom and gone off to practice. He developed the Brahma-viharas—unlimited goodwill, compassion, empathetic joy, unlimited equanimity. He said that created a lot of good karma for him, but it didn’t lead to dispassion. It puts the mind in a good place, but it doesn’t take it all the way to awakening. So use this as part of your motivation. You want happiness that doesn’t harm anybody. And ideally, you’d like to have a happiness that means you don’t have to come back to feed. Because people keep coming back, keep having to feed again and again, physically, emotionally, and mentally. The only truly blameless happiness is the happiness of nirvana, which is outside of space and time entirely. So you use goodwill as your motivation in your dealings with other people, and then you turn around and use it as your motivation as your practice. We hear practicing meditation because we want a happiness that’s totally blameless, a happiness without limitations. It’s only through developing our concentration and our discernment together with our virtue that we can find that happiness. So it’s in your best interest to make that your focal point. Make that your motivation. And a lot of good things in the path will follow from that.

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