Goodwill Basics

November 13, 2021

When you’re doing formal meditation, Ajahn Suwat recommends that you do a practice of spreading goodwill twice. First at the beginning, and it’s mainly for you. Spread goodwill to yourself. You remind yourself this is why you’re here practicing. You want happiness that lasts, a happiness that’s not going to turn on you, a happiness that doesn’t harm anyone. Then you spread goodwill to others as a way of cleaning the deck. Any leftover feelings of ill will or irritation from dealing with people in the course of the day, just put them aside. Remind yourself that you want a happiness that doesn’t harm anybody, and that if you harm anybody else, that’s going to come back and harm you. No matter how well justified you may feel your ill will may be—in fact, it’s very rare that we think of ourselves as having ill will—we just think that this person deserves to suffer a little bit. This person needs to be reprimanded, needs to know how much they’ve harmed other people. A lot of that can count as ill will. So to get the mind ready to settle down and not have a lot of bumps in its path, you spread goodwill to everybody. And if anything comes up in the course of the meditation where you’re feeling irritated, or a memory of something comes up where either you’ve done something wrong in the past or someone else has done something wrong in the past, you spread goodwill again. You remind yourself, “I’ve already spread goodwill to that person. There’s no need to bring up some irritation.” And then you can settle down and practice. In the forest tradition, we don’t take the practice of goodwill as a core practice. It’s more of a framework, reminding ourselves of our motivation. But the actual core at work is going to be with other topics, like the breath or the parts of the body. Or the simple word bhutto, boat with the in-breath, tow with the out. Whatever works to get the mind to settle down. Whatever theme you need in order to help gain some understanding into the mind. Then, at the end of the session, you spread goodwill once more. And this is for other people, because hopefully by the end of the session your powers of concentration are stronger. In Thay they talk about the current, gassaz, the word they use, the current that comes out of the mind. And the current of a concentrated mind can go far, and it can have a good influence. So use that current. Spread goodwill once more, because you want the world to be a better place. You want people to understand the causes for true happiness and be willing and able to act on them. That’s what goodwill means. But the power of the concentrated mind can give a little more oomph to the practice, oomph to the goodwill. And I’ve known cases where people can actually tell if someone has been spreading goodwill in their direction. So these currents are real. They’re not a figment of the imagination, but they are a product of the mind. We have to remember that as we practice, as we’re sitting here meditating. It’s not just for us. It can also be helpful to others, partly simply through the influence of the calm mind. And also the example that we’re setting, showing that it is possible to find happiness without having to harm anybody at all. This principle of harmlessness is very important. When the Buddha talks about the beginning of discernment, “But when I do, it will lead to my long-term welfare and happiness,” there are other questions that go along with that. What is skillful? What is unskillful? What is blameworthy? What is blameless, blameworthy in the sense of causing harm? So a wise person is looking for happiness that is long-term, skillful, and blameless. Which is why, even though we’re not focusing on goodwill as our main meditation topic, it’s always there in the background—the motivation for why we’re doing this. There’s a passage where the Buddha talks about having yourself as your governing principle. What it means is that there are times when you’re thinking of giving up on the practice and you couldn’t ask yourself, “I came to this practice because I wanted to put an end to suffering. Do I no longer want to put an end to suffering?” The implication there being that you came to the practice because of goodwill for yourself. And if you give up on the practice, it’s not showing goodwill anymore. Goodwill is so important that the Buddha said you should try to maintain your goodwill, even sacrificing your life. That image in the Dhamma-Nyameta Sutra is of the mother who cares for her only child. Back in those days, if you had one child, you would have to be very careful because her future life, her future in this lifetime, would depend on the survival of that child. So she would be very careful. She would defend it with her life. The Buddha said in the same way, you’d try to protect your goodwill as she would protect her child. An image she gives elsewhere is of bandits. They’ve seized you, they’ve pinned you down, and now they’re going to saw you into little pieces with a two-handled saw. The Buddha said even in that case, you should have goodwill for the bandits. At that point, protecting your goodwill is more important than protecting your life. Because if you don’t protect your goodwill, you die with ill will. And that doesn’t lead to a good lifetime. You want to maintain your goodwill at all times. The Buddha teaches the ways of dealing with the hindrances, especially the ways of dealing with hindrances as they come up at death. With three of the five, goodwill is part of the cure. The obvious one, of course, is that it’s a cure for ill will, but it’s also a cure for restlessness and anxiety. If you think about the harm you’ve done in the past and you can get pretty anxious about it, the Buddha says in a case like that, resolve not to repeat the mistake. And then spread thoughts of goodwill to yourself, to others, to the others, of course, so that you remind yourself you don’t want to harm them in that way again. And for yourself, realizing that if you get down on yourself too much, it’s going to be hard to muster the strength in order to stick with your resolve not to repeat that mistake. Then there’s the case of doubt and uncertainty. When the Buddha’s talking with the galamas, he first tells them to look at a teaching and judge it by what it leads you to do. If it leads you to do anything unskillful, stay away from that teaching. If it leads you to do something skillful that gives good results and leads to your true will for unhappiness, stick with that teaching. And then, as an example of the teaching that would lead to true happiness, he gives the Brahma Paharas, starting with goodwill, as a practice that shows its results very quickly. If you have goodwill for others, you find that your actions change. You’re more careful about what you do. You have to learn a lot of patience and endurance so that when someone mistreats you, you don’t respond with mistreatment. Again, maintain your goodwill in all cases. Protect your goodwill. And as you see the results of that, it helps you overcome your doubt. So goodwill is a good practice to have in the background. It’s a good practice to do every day. Because as death approaches, it’s one of the things you’ll be able to rely on. If you’ve practiced it, if you’ve developed it, it helps you through a lot of harm and difficulties. Remember the Buddha when he was wounded by that sliver of rock when Devadatta hurled the rock down the mountain? The rock crashed against another rock and split into splinters, slivers. Some of the slivers pierced the Buddha’s foot. The doctor had to remove it, and the Buddha lay down. Mara came to see the Buddha and taunted him. “You sleepyhead, why are you lying down?” The Buddha said, “I’m lying down with sympathy for all beings.” That’s a way of taking your mind off of the pain, taking your mind off of the “Why did so-and-so do that to me?” You lift the level of your mind. After all, these are Brahma Viharas. They’re not Manusa Viharas. Those normal human beings have goodwill for some people and some beings but not for others. They’re partial. It’s the Brahmas who are able to rise above all that and have goodwill for everybody. So as you spread thoughts of goodwill around, remember you’re lifting your mind. This is part of the Buddha’s instructions. Heightened mind, devotion to the heightened mind. It’s one of the Buddha’s teachings, one of all the Buddha’s. And the first way in which you heighten your mind is through thoughts of goodwill, developing a quality inside that’s immeasurable. And when you hold that quality in mind, you can think of the currents coming out of your mind and realize that you’re spreading a good influence far and wide.

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