Tough Goodwill

July 20, 2022

It’s easy to dislike the Buddhist teachings on goodwill for several reasons. One is that it seems weak and simpering. May everybody be happy, even though we know very well that not everybody’s going to be happy. There’s also the question of whether other people deserve our goodwill. It may be based on having to have goodwill for people who’ve harmed you. We’ve got a lot of the wrong associations with goodwill now. Think of Ajaan Lee when he was young and in the forest. An elephant rut had come into the forest, and the householders nearby had warned him, “Don’t stay in the forest. This elephant is crazy wild.” He wanted to prove that he was strong enough to deal with a situation like that, so he stayed. One day, sure enough, the elephant came into the clearing where he was sitting. One look at the elephant, and before he knew it, he had one hand on a tree and one foot on the tree ready to climb. Something inside him said, “If you’re afraid to die, you’re going to die many times.” So he sat down and got back into his meditation posture. He faced the elephant and spread lots of goodwill. The elephant stared at him for a while, and then he could see that it wasn’t going to attack him. It walked away. So in that case, goodwill is Ajaan Lee’s protection. It’s good to think of it that way. There was a large group of laypeople on a tudung right next to the sea. They were staying in a forest right next to the ocean. They were meditating, and they could see this huge cloud of mosquitoes coming in off the ocean. So they said, “Okay, everybody, put up your umbrella tents. Don’t stay in the tents. We’re going to fight off this cloud of mosquitoes with goodwill and no-holds-barred.” So the cloud of mosquitoes dispersed, and no one was bitten. So when you think of goodwill in those terms, it changes the equation. It’s not weak and simpering. It’s a strength, and it’s your protection. And you’re giving it to beings not because they deserve it, but because it is your protection, not only from the immediate things they might do to you, but over the long term. It protects you from doing the kinds of things that would lead to your own harm. There’s also that story of the woman who was trying to converse with some nasty spirits one time. There was a woman who had come to the monastery, and the chief cook in the kitchen had told us that the woman was a friend of hers. The woman had this problem that every time she tried to sit down to meditate, she would shake uncontrollably. And sure enough, she was sitting there with us, and she started shaking. And John Fung had a student, Ben C., who was quite psychic. He said, “Check her out. See what’s going on.” And she looked, and she saw these two horrible-looking creatures behind the woman, shaking her. And so in her meditation, she confronted them. She said, “Why are you doing this to this woman?” And Ben C. scared her so much that she ran out and threw up. She came back and told John Fung what she had seen. He said, “You fool, you didn’t protect yourself.” She would have a light in her meditation, so he said, “Fill your body with light, but it also works to fill your body with breath energy. Fill your body with your awareness and then spread lots of goodwill. Again, that’s your protection.” And then she talked to the spirits. She found out that this woman in a previous lifetime had been their child and had killed them. They were afraid that if she meditated, she’d get away unpunished. She probably had already gone through pretty bad enough punishment, but it hadn’t satisfied them. So she asked them, “What could she do that would satisfy you?” They said, “Build a Buddha image.” Well, we were in the process of building a Buddha image at the monastery. So Ben C. went and told this to John Fung. He said, “You can’t say that to her. It’ll sound like we’re using our psychic powers to gain money. So we just have to let her be. But in an interesting lesson, goodwill is protection.” And John Fung himself said that when he was dealing with people who had spirit possessions, that’s how he dealt with it. Just lots and lots of goodwill. I think I’ve told you the story of the woman with the Tourette syndrome. She came one time to see John Fung. She brought a glass of sugarcane juice. He took a sip and then returned the glass to her and told her to finish it off. She did, and immediately the symptoms came on. He started talking, not to her, but to the spirit that he saw that was inhabiting her. He said, “Why are you ruining her life like this? She can’t live with anybody with these crazy outbursts.” But as she told me later, before he’d said that to the spirit, he sped lots of goodwill. And the spirit said, “Well, she did this to me. She did that to me. She did that to me in a previous lifetime.” And John Fung said, “Well, if you harass her life this time around, then she’s going to harass yours the next time around. Do you want that?” “No.” “How about letting her live a normal life, make merit, and dedicate the merit to you? Would that satisfy you?” “Yes.” And from that point on, the woman didn’t have any of those symptoms. It’s burning goodwill. You’re creating a good atmosphere. And don’t think of it as you’re submitting to the other person’s power, that they may be mistreating you and you’re not mistreating them back. That’s no way to end anything. If someone throws something nasty and foul at you, you dodge it. You don’t pick it up and throw it back. And don’t feel that you’re giving in to them. Ending a bad story, a bad back and forth, with wisdom. There’s that passage in the Canon where Vipacchitti, the asura, is in debate with Sakka, the king of the devas. And Vipacchitti is saying, “My belief is that if someone is mistreating you, you’ve got to mistreat them back to make sure they don’t do it again.” And Sakka says, “No, you have to have forbearance. You can’t let their karma become your karma.” Vipacchitti says, “But then they’ll think you’re weak.” And Sakka says, “Well, let them think what they want to think. I know I’m practicing the Dhamma. I can’t let what other people’s opinion might be about who’s winning the back and forth. Because as long as it’s back and forth, it’s just simply not worth winning.” So think of goodwill as a strength. And it’s something that toughens your mind, toughens you against your defilements. The defilements say, “Well, I want to win out this one time. I don’t want to submit to that other person.” You’re not submitting. You’re lifting yourself up. When your thoughts head in the direction of thoughts of goodwill, think of it as a form of directed thought and evaluation. The Thais have a nice way of describing directed thought. They say you lift your mind to the meditation object. Here you’re lifting your mind above the back and forth. I had a student one time who was in the process of a divorce, and it was a nasty divorce. And so I recommended that she have thoughts of goodwill for her husband. And she said, “Well, isn’t that going to give him energy? Isn’t that going to give him strength?” And he said, “No, it’s lifting you above the situation.” So think of goodwill as tough. Think of it as something that you need. You’re not doing it because the other person deserves it. The question of deserving and not deserving doesn’t come up. If you had goodwill only for good people, only for people who were pure, who had no bad marks in their karmic record, where would you find people to have goodwill for? Everybody born in the human realm has a mixed bag. So remember, goodwill is for your protection. There are plenty of stories in the canon and in the stories of the Vajrans of goodwill actually giving immediate protection, but it also gives long-term protection against yourself, your ability to do unskillful, thoughtless things. You have to remind yourself that any kind of happiness that comes from harming others is not going to last, and it’s going to turn on you. Do you want a happiness that lasts? Do you want a happiness that’s not going to deceive you, not going to leave you high and dry? In which case, you have to have goodwill all around.

<https://www.dhammatalks.org/Archive/y2022/220720_Tough_Goodwill.mp3>