Goodwill for the Real World

July 3, 2024

Years ago, after the 9/11 attacks, there was a Buddhist teacher who said that the attacks had burst his complacent Buddhist bubble. Now that’s a contradiction in terms - complacent Buddhist. After all, the Buddha said that all skillful qualities come from heedfulness and heedfulness is having a very strong sense of danger. There are dangers in the world, there are dangers in your own mind. And the reason we try to develop skillful qualities in the mind is because we see that we have to prepare for the dangerous. Though it is true that some of the Buddhist teachings sound like they’re not designed for the real world, like goodwill for all beings. A lot of beings are really misbehaving. So it seems difficult or impossible to have goodwill for everybody. But actually goodwill is for our own survival, the survival of our goodness. Because if you act on ill-will towards other people, you’re going to be creating a bad state of mind for yourself and bad conditions in the world through your karma. And so the first thought is that you’re doing this for yourself. So you can protect yourself from your greed, your aversion, your delusion, especially from your ill-will. And the Buddha admits that there are a lot of people that it’s difficult to have goodwill for. That second chant we had just now comes from a story about a monk who was sitting out in the forest meditating and a snake fell out of a tree on top of him, bit him and he died. So the monk’s men reported this to the Buddha. He said it’s obvious that the monk had not spread goodwill to the four families of snakes. And then he proceeded to teach the monks that particular chant for spreading goodwill for beings who have no feet, beings who have two feet, beings who have four, beings who have many feet. He goes through the list of all the creepy crawly things that there are out in the forest. And that’s just a little bit of the places where he talks about having goodwill for little beings, big beings. And some of the big beings in the forest of course are pretty scary too. Elephants, bears, rhinoceros. So the Buddha lived in a dangerous world. And one of the things you notice about that chant, goodwill for snakes and creepy and crawly things. He said I have goodwill for you all but may you all depart. Because goodwill doesn’t mean that you’re going to be there for them. Or you’re going to be loving to them. There are lots of cases where goodwill basically means you’re looking for happiness in your way, I’m looking for happiness in my way. As long as I can maintain a world where I’m behaving in a skillful way. May we go our separate ways. The snake will be happier to be away from you than you’ll be happy to be away from the snake. Goodwill doesn’t mean love. I read a while back someone saying that even the word loving kindness is too weak. The Buddha wouldn’t want to have you have love for everybody because of course everybody loves love. But the Buddha didn’t teach just because someone liked to hear something. The attitude is goodwill. May that person be happy. You stop to think about it. What does it mean for a person to be happy or an animal to be happy? They have to behave skillfully. Especially for people. So your wish basically is that may all beings behave skillfully. That’s a wish you can have for anybody without hypocrisy. People who have been really misbehaving, people you really intensely dislike. If you’re mature your attitude should be may this person see the error of his or her ways and be willing to make a change. And if there’s some way that you can help them make that change you’re happy to help. But you realize also that a lot of people are not willing to change. So you’re not going to do anything to harm them. But at the same time you have to develop an attitude of equanimity. So it’s not cold-heartedness. It’s just realizing that there are some people who you cannot influence. No matter how intense your goodwill. There are stories in the Canon of the Buddha extending intense goodwill towards individuals, changing their behavior. But that’s largely to do with the power of his mind and also that person’s good karma. The power of your goodwill may not be that strong, but at the very least it protects you. So today you’re not acting on ill-will. It makes it a lot easier for the mind to settle down in the evening. You feel better about yourself. So even though you may be angry at people for one reason or another, you don’t let it spill over into ill-will. And you’re careful not to let the anger influence your thoughts, your words, your deeds. And so you protect your goodwill because it is your protection. There’s that famous line in the Heta Sutta, again one of the ones we chanted just now, that just as a mother would protect her only child with her life, you should protect your goodwill. Some people read that passage as saying that we should love everybody in the same way that a mother loves her only child. But that would be impossible. And again it gets into the world of unreality. It’s changing goodwill for the real world. And there are cases where people are really going to misbehave, and it’s going to be a real challenge for you to have goodwill for them. But you have to protect your goodwill, because as I said, it’s your protection. So that’s what the verse is saying. Just as she would protect her child with her life, you protect your goodwill with your life. The example the Buddha gives is that of the thieves that have pinned you down. They’ve overpowered you, and they have a two-handled saw. I’ve always liked that detail. It means at least two of the thieves are cutting you up in little pieces. And the Buddha said in a case like that, you still have to have goodwill for them. In fact, you have goodwill for them, and it’s starting with them for the whole universe. So you’re not focused on them. You realize that the most important thing you have in life, your most important wealth, is the state of your mind. And that you protect, even if it means you’ll be faced with death. You protect that, because that’s more important than your body. There are stories from the forest tradition. A monk who was sitting in his hut one night, and an elephant comes and crashes through the wall right in front of him. You’re there, face to face. The monk realized his only protection was goodwill for the elephant. So he spread goodwill, and he spoke to the elephant in kind terms. Elephants, it turns out, are very sensitive to what you say to them, and the tone of voice. And the elephant withdrew. Last year I was staying at a monastery in Thailand, and an elephant came and started crashing through the monastery wall. And someone happened to be nearby. He spoke to the elephant in very kind terms. He said, “Big brother, big brother, don’t do that. It’s bad karma.” And the elephant stopped, and walked away. There’s a story of a Chan Lee on the forest. The villagers had warned him there was an elephant in rut, who was going around stabbing people with his tusks, and told him he’d be wise to get out of the forest. He wanted to test his determination not to be afraid of that kind of thing. And sure enough, one afternoon, he was sitting in meditation under a tree, and the elephant came into a clearing right in front of him. And his first thought was, “If he comes at me, I’d be dead.” So he reaches up, he’s going to climb up the tree, and something inside him says, “If you’re afraid of death, you’re going to keep on dying.” So he sat back down, faced the elephant, said meditation, spread goodwill to the elephant, and the elephant stopped, and shook his ears up and down a bit, and then walked away. So for the Forest of Johns, metta, or goodwill, is not a soft, tender, weak emotion. It’s strong. It’s a protection. It protects. It protects your genuine valuables. So when they talk about having goodwill for all beings, it’s not an airy, fairy world that they’re imagining, or a complacent Buddhist bubble. You need real goodwill for the real world, because the dangers of the world are real. And this is one of your ways of protecting yourself. So when you think about it in those terms, it’s a lot easier to spread thoughts of goodwill. And if it’s not there, you work on it. We’re sometimes told that goodwill is part of the innate nature of the mind. And it is possible to have thoughts of goodwill. Remember, human goodwill is very different from a Brahma goodwill. And we’re trying to develop a Brahma goodwill. Human goodwill is partial. You have goodwill for the people who are good to you, and not for the people who are not. But that’s no protection at all. It’s like building a fence around the front of your house, but leaving the back of the house open. Human goodwill is all around. So you think about it. Who is there for whom you feel ill will? The people who are easy to feel goodwill for, and then go to those who are harder and harder. You get to the ones where you find it really hard. You ask yourself, what would you gain by seeing that person suffer? You think it through, and you realize that nothing would be gained. So what are you doing? You’re engaging in directed thought and evaluation. That’s verbal fabrication. And you hold in mind those images, the images of the bandits sawing you in pieces, the mother protecting her child. Those are mental fabrications. So working on goodwill, you begin to get more sensitive to how the mind has to create these things, and how it can create these things, by learning to think in new ways, learning to hold different perceptions in mind. So basically what it comes down to is understanding goodwill in the light of karma. On the one hand, there’s the karma of generating goodwill itself. Then there’s the karma that you’re thinking about as you think the thoughts of goodwill. What does it mean in the light of karma to wish people to be happy? Means you wish that they would create good karma, that they would be skillful. As the verse said just now, “May beings not despise one another.” Or wish ill on one another. There’s goodwill in the light of karma, which makes it an extension of right view. As the Buddha said, if you have ill will for anyone, that’s part of a wrong view. Not just a wrong attitude, it’s wrong view. So when you understand goodwill, you realize that it’s goodwill for the real world, and it deals in realities as you’re trying to make goodwill universal. It’s not just magical thinking. It’s a genuine power in the world.

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