When Goodwill Doesn’t Come Easily

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The Buddha calls goodwill a form of mindfulness and determination. In other words, it’s something you have to keep in mind, and you have to make up your mind that you’re going to pursue and develop that quality. This is very different from what we often hear, that the Buddha says we’re naturally good and that goodwill is the natural state of the mind. Just look at the natural state of the mind. It can feel goodwill just as easily as it can feel illwill, based on where your desires are and who’s getting in the way of your desires and who’s helping your desires. You have to remember that desire is the root of all things that we experience. So they’re going to get in the way of goodwill sometimes and foster goodwill other times. Which means that if we want to have goodwill for everyone, we’ve got to look at our desires, tame them, train them. So that we see that goodwill is in our interest in all situations. A part of the training, as the Buddha says in the Karnanayameta Sutta, you start out by looking at your behavior. You want to make sure that the things you do are not harmful to others. And he also recommends that you have what he calls peaceful faculties. In other words, your eyes are not out looking for new things, new pleasures, all the time. Your ears are not looking for new pleasures all the time. You have to learn that you have to live in such a way that you’re not creating a lot of unnecessary conflict. Because when you create unnecessary conflict, you’re going to create unnecessary illwill. You want to look for happiness inside. This is one of the reasons why we meditate, to have a sense of well-being that doesn’t depend on things outside. And this is why meditation, when it’s done well, getting the mind to settle down with a sense of well-being right here with the body in the present moment, is a form of goodwill for yourself and for other people, other beings. The less sense of well-being you have inside, the more you’re going to look for well-being outside. And that’s usually going to end up involving taking things, getting into conflict. Think of that image the Buddha had when he was young and before he’d gone out in search for the deathless. He saw the whole world as being like a small stream filled with fish fighting for the little bit of water that was there in the stream. And everywhere he looked, he said, everything was laid claim to. There’s no way that you can find happiness outside where you wouldn’t have to push somebody else out of the way. So one of the first steps in having goodwill is learning how to live in such a way where you do a minimum of pushing. And you take on the idea or the goal that the best form of happiness would be one where you don’t have to push anybody out of the way at all. Then you ask yourself, “How do you get to that goal?” And part of it is learning how not to harm anybody. We have goodwill in all circumstances, and this is why goodwill is basically for our own purposes, for our own well-being. Universal goodwill is in our best interest. Because if you have ill will for somebody, it’s going to be really hard to act in a skillful way around that person. No matter how much you try to get that person to change, they’re going to sense that the desire for change comes from ill will and they’re going to resist. So even in cases where you realize somebody’s behavior is wrong, the best way to change that behavior is to have goodwill for that person. Remember, it’s in that person’s own ultimate best interest not to mistreat others. So you keep that in mind, that you’re doing this for this person’s well-being. That’ll change your tactics. That’ll change the way you approach the situation. As the Buddha said, you follow the precepts and get very sensitive to ways in which your behavior can harm yourself and harm others. The precepts are a good way of measuring that, because they set up specific “yes” and “no,” “right” and “wrong” situations. The part of the mind that says, “Well, this might be an exception. Or that might be an exception.” The fact that you’ve taken in the precepts forces you to question that attitude. You say, “Well, why do you think this is an exception? Why do you think that it’s okay in this case to kill, or okay to steal, or to lie?” That’s a big one where people tend to justify things very easily. You say, “Well, if I tell a little white lie, it doesn’t matter. I’ve got some information I don’t want to divulge. They might misuse it.” There are other ways of not divulging the information besides lying. If you have that barrier there, it forces you to be more discerning. At the same time, you’re showing goodwill for yourself. You’re looking at your speech as something valuable. You don’t want to compromise the value of your speech just for this or that, but maybe a very minor advantage. The principles of your speech are much more important. So learn how to develop the discernment that goes with the precepts. Then you find that it’s an expression of goodwill for yourself and others. You get more sensitive to what exactly is meant by harm. Harm for yourself would be breaking the precepts. Harm for others would be getting them to break the precepts. This fine-tunes your goodwill. They have a concept in Thailand that they call “high goodwill.” Once you do something for someone else, they may not like it, but it is for their best interest. Sometimes this is used to describe the way the Ajahns yell at their students, or are very strict with them. In other words, goodwill is not always sweet and gentle. You see, if somebody’s doing something really wrong that’s going to harm them down the line, you want to stop them. The image the Buddha gives us of a child who’s got a sharp object in his mouth. You have to get the object out, even if it means drawing a little blood. Because otherwise, if the child swallows the object, it’s going to be even worse. So as he said, in his case, there were times when he would say things that were unpleasing but it was with goodwill. So keep that in mind. Another way of developing goodwill is to remember that image of the fish in the water, the things that we struggle over in the world, the things that our desires are aimed at, or are going to slip through our fingers at some point. Struggle for the water, regardless of which fish gets to live in the water and which fish gets pushed out. They’re all going to die at some point. And the things that they squabbled over are going to seem really minor. That attitude is called sanghvega, when you see all the trouble that we go through, all the conflicts we have. It’s just pointless suffering. That attitude toward a lot of the conflicts you have with other people makes it a lot easier to feel goodwill for them. It puts you in a higher plane. It gives you a larger view. So there are cases where goodwill comes easily, and there are cases when it doesn’t. And when it doesn’t, it’s good to think of it. Not as your natural state of the mind. As far as the Buddha was concerned, what was natural about the mind was how quickly it could change. He never says it’s innately good or innately bad. In fact, the thoughts that he says are “I’m an innately good person” or “I’m an innately bad person,” that kind of chatter goes out of the mind when it’s awakened. He calls those kinds of thoughts as a kind of suffering. Instead, just look at the fact that your mind is really changeable. And so when it changes in a wrong direction, when you start feeling ill will and wanting to see somebody suffer, there are techniques for getting it back. Now, part of it, of course, has to do with how you live in general. But there are ways of thinking. Sometimes you look for the person’s good qualities in spite of what they’ve done. Sometimes when you realize that somebody has no good qualities at all, it’s like seeing a person on the desert, far away from any help, who’s fallen sick and is just lying at the side of the road. Regardless of who that person is, whether you know that person or not, you’re going to have to have compassion for them. In the same way, you have to have that attitude towards all the people in the world who have very, very, very few good points to them. Even in their case, you have to have goodwill. So remember, there are ways of thinking that can get you around to that. That’s for your own best interest and for the best interest of everybody else.

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