Wise Goodwill

June 2, 2022

Years back, I happened to witness a faith healer in Brazil. Hundreds of people came to see him. Long lines of people. It was just an ordinary day. You think of how many people had come to see him over the many years, with all kinds of illnesses. And even though it required a lot of compassion to treat all those people, still, the question was, was he treating them at the right spot, at the right point in the process? From the perspective of the Buddha, the illnesses came from the karma. And as long as people are committing unskillful karma, it’s going to be illness. It’s like coming into your house and seeing that there’s water coming from a broken pipe, and getting a bucket and just bailing out the water without looking for the pipe. The best thing, of course, is to find where the broken pipe is and fix the broken pipe. Then there’ll be no more problem with water. You’ll have to clean up the mess that was already there, but then there’ll be no more water coming out. That was the Buddha’s approach. He taught people, “This is skillful, this is unskillful,” and gave them reasons for wanting to do what was skillful. And this is where his compassion was really not only hugely extensive, but also very wise. You attack the problem at the cause. You don’t attack it at the result. Another time when I was in Thailand, I read about a group of very wealthy and powerful wives of wealthy and powerful men in Bangkok going out to a little tiny village off in the countryside, visiting the school there. The little kids lined up in front of the school, and their shirts were dirty and their trousers were dirty. The little girls had skirts that were dirty. So the visitors from Bangkok arranged to have good school uniforms sent to the kids so they wouldn’t be embarrassed in front of the prisoners. But again, that’s solving the problem at the result, not at the cause. Why is everything so dirty and poor? Because parents didn’t have enough money. So I didn’t have enough money. I was cut off from all kinds of opportunities to gain education. So in order to solve a problem, if you really are compassionate for the world, you solve it at the beginning. You have to solve it at people’s views. The Buddha’s approach was the kindest you can think of. He showed the most goodwill for all beings. As you saw, people were constantly going through the process of death and rebirth, death and rebirth, based on their actions, which were basically coming from their intentions. And their intentions were informed by their views. Those with the wrong view were going to be doing unskillful things. Those with the right view would be doing skillful things. Right not only in the sense of being correct as to your understanding of what’s going on, but right in knowing how to encourage yourself to do what’s skillful and to discourage yourself from doing what is unskillful. The Buddha made this a measure of wisdom. The things that you like to do but will give bad results, you know how to talk yourself into not doing them. The things that you don’t like to do but will give good results, you know how to talk yourself into doing them. That’s the best application of your wisdom. So it’s in this way that wisdom, compassion, and goodwill go together. As you follow the Buddha’s teachings on what’s skillful to avoid what’s not skillful, you’re showing goodwill for yourself and you’re showing goodwill for the people around you. Because we are very easily influenced by one another. If you can be a good example to others, that makes them want to reassess what they’re doing that’s unskillful. And again, you think of the Buddha. He didn’t simply teach people to have a right view. He acted on right view himself. He set the example. He set the example in how he acted, how he spoke, how he thought. Some people would say there was a reality that lay behind the words. After all, after his awakening, he could have just kept to himself. There’s that passage where he thinks about the possibility of teaching and gets discouraged, realizing how difficult it was going to be. You read what he had to go through as he set forth the Vinaya, as he set forth the Dhamma. People attack him. Here he is trying to teach them how to not suffer, and they attack him. He’s trying to set up a community where people can live together and practice the Dhamma. There are people who are trying to keep finding new ways of breaking the rules or getting around the rules. So there was that period when he was inclined not to teach. And he could have not taught. After all, after his awakening, he didn’t owe anything to anybody. And then when Sampadipa, the Brahma, saw this, he was upset. So he went down and invited the Buddha to teach. It seemed there would be those with a little dust in their eyes who would benefit. And the Buddha reflected on that and said, “Yes, there would be people who would benefit from his teaching.” So he went out into the world, taught both with his words and with his actions. It was that combination of words and actions that gave force to the Dhamma. So when we think about the fact that here we are, born in the human realm, what’s the kindest thing we can do? Where do we show the most compassion, both for ourselves and for others? It’s first straightening out the mess in our own minds, because that’s where the big problem is. That’s where it starts for each of us. We start out by spreading the Dhamma in ourselves, taking care of the stock of how we act, how we speak, how we think. This is where that principle that Ajahn Mun held to comes in, practicing the Dhamma in accordance with the Dhamma, seeing where we are in line with the Dhamma and where we’re not. Instead of trying to change the Dhamma to fit with our likes and dislikes, we try to change ourselves to fit in line with the Dhamma. So the Dhamma becomes a reality. The Dhamma is not just the words in the books. It’s a quality of the heart, a quality of the human being. We have skillful Dhammas and unskillful Dhammas within us. We develop the skillful ones. Then we can taste the reality of what the Buddha was talking about. That’s when we know what the Dhamma means. They use the word attha in Pali, which means meaning and purpose, goal, benefit. The cluster of meanings basically points to the fact that you don’t really understand the Dhamma until you practice it to the point where you see something of the goal. It’s always for this that we do that. When the reality of the Dhamma appears within you, the attha appears within you, when you know what it really means, then you might think about teaching others. In the meantime, you teach through your example. Do your best to teach through a good example. After all, when you have goodwill for the world, what are you wishing for? May all beings understand the causes for true happiness and be willing and able to act on them. You’re not saying, “May all beings be happy just doing what they are already doing.” Because you look at the way people are acting. All kinds of horrible things happen in the world. You don’t want people to be happy doing their horrible things. A drug counselor from Vancouver one time came to one of my retreats. He was talking about how he’d opened up a little storefront with government funding to help give psychological counseling to the druggies. He found that they would come in for counseling only if he was encouraging them to learn to teach them how to have high self-esteem. But they ended up having high self-esteem and continuing with their drug habit, which wasn’t really helping. So the best way to help other beings is to see what you can do on your own, to be a good example for other people, to make them want to do what is skillful. When you act, it’s obvious that you’re acting with happiness, with a sense of well-being. That’s when you can have a good influence on the world. Otherwise, we just sit here thinking thoughts of goodwill, goodwill, goodwill. And it’s good for us. And there’s a certain amount of good energy that comes out of that. But the real goodwill for others is when you’re really careful in what you do and say and think, thinking about the fact that you might be influencing somebody, you might be an example for somebody. So you want that example to be good so they can take it to heart and start acting in ways on their own that will lead to true happiness. So we keep coming back to the cause, the right view. The right view comes from being with good people. Being with good people, however, often depends on having at least some right view so you recognize who’s good, who’s worth staying with, who’s worth emulating. And then use both of those principles. Memorable friendship, appropriate attention, to inform your actions. And that’s how you have goodwill for the entire world.

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