Determined Goodwill

June 14, 2022

Every night before we meditate, we recite the chant on goodwill—goodwill for ourselves, goodwill for all beings. It’s good to reflect on that. I read someplace that Ajahn Mun would spread thoughts of goodwill every day, three times a day. In the morning when he first woke up, in the afternoon when he woke up from his afternoon nap, and in the evening before he went to bed, it provided the framework for his practice. Goodwill is an attitude we have. As human beings, it tends to be partial. In other words, there are some people for whom we have goodwill and a lot of other people for whom we don’t. It’s especially difficult to have goodwill for people who’ve either harmed us or have harmed people we love. But in this practice, the Buddha says, you want to make your goodwill universal, unlimited, measureless. That’s when it becomes a brahma-vihara or an attitude of a brahma. The brahmas are the highest levels of devas. They live in a world of very refined pleasure or equanimity. And they do that because they’ve developed these attitudes. Goodwill for all, compassion for all, empathetic joy for all, equanimity for all, when it’s necessary. But because our goodwill is partial, we have to work to make it universal. That’s why the Buddha said it’s a form of mindfulness that you have to be determined on. In other words, you have to keep it in mind all the time. It’s not going to be there to tap in wherever you want it. You have to keep reminding yourself that you have to generate thoughts of goodwill. And the determination is necessary because there are a lot of difficulties. We live in a world where a lot of people seem to be behaving in such a way that they want to repel your goodwill or deny your goodwill. But you have to be determined that you’re going to have goodwill even for them. As with any determination, the Buddha said there are four steps. The first is to develop discernment. The discernment has to do with why you’re going to develop goodwill for all. It’s because your actions are going to shape your life. And if your actions are based on ill will for anybody, they’re going to be unskillful. And then you’re going to have to live with the results of those unskillful actions. For the sake of your own happiness, you have to have goodwill for everybody. So it’s not the case that we have goodwill for everybody because they deserve it or because we’re all one, which you sometimes hear. It’s because we live dependent on our actions and we want to do everything we can to make sure that we don’t act in ways that are unskillful. That changes the equation. It means you never think about other people deserving your goodwill or not deserving your goodwill. You might want to ask yourself, “Do you deserve goodwill? Do you deserve to be giving it?” And you say, “Of course. There’s no question about that.” Then you have to be true to that. That’s the second step in any determination. You have to look at the way you live your life. Are you living your life in a way that is conducive to the happiness of others and your own happiness? In the Garden of Niyameta Sutta, the Buddha talks about living lightly on the world. This is one of the reasons why we have the reflection on the requisites. Because as soon as we’re born, we’re placing a burden on the world. It starts out with burdening our parents. Then, as we grow older, the burden spreads out. We’ve got this burden on the world. It’s a digestive system that has no limits to how much you can take in. Whatever goes in comes out. Whatever goes in comes out. You have to keep stuffing something into it all day long. So the Buddha basically says, “Stop and think about what you’re putting in your mouth and why, so you can gain some control over that. That way you lighten your burden on the world around you.” It’s the same with the other requisites. Not only food, but also clothing, shelter, medicine. You want to live in a way that’s not a burden on others. The Buddha also says that if you have goodwill, you don’t have a lot of projects where you have to get people to do this for you, get people to do that for you. Otherwise, when people come to see you, that’s all you think about is, “What might this person do for my project?” So instead, you try to maintain the attitude that when people come, if there’s anything you can do to help them, you’re happy to help. That’s how you’re true to your goodwill. Goodwill here differs from dedicating merit on just this point. When you dedicate merit to others, it’s up to them to express their appreciation for it. That becomes their merit then. But whether they express appreciation or not, that’s their duty. It’s not yours. So when you dedicate merit, you’re done with it. But when you spread goodwill, you have to carry out, carry through with it. So you look at your thoughts, your words, and deeds. Do they really express goodwill? And then you give it as a gift. That’s the third aspect of a good determination, that you’re willing to relinquish things. The term there is jaga, which can mean relinquishment. It can also mean generosity. In this case, you give your goodwill to everybody, no matter what their behavior. You try to protect your goodwill. The image the Buddha gives is of a mother who has an only child. Back in those days in India, a mother’s guarantee of her future lay in her children. If she had one child, she would protect that child with her life. Sometimes that passage is translated as saying, “You should cherish all beings the same way that a mother would cherish her only child.” But that’s impossible. It turns it into a flowery sentiment that doesn’t have much reality. But what the Buddha is actually saying is, “You protect your goodwill the same way that a mother would protect her only child.” So no matter what anybody else does, you’re happy to give goodwill to them. The Buddha gives an extreme case. He says, “Suppose bandits have pinned you down and they’ve got a two-handled saw, and they’re cutting you into little pieces. Even then, you should have goodwill for them.” You start with goodwill for them and then for the rest of the cosmos. In other words, you give your goodwill freely. Again, it’s for your own protection. If someone were actually cutting you up into little pieces and you died, you died with a mind of ill will, seeking revenge. That would lead you to a pretty miserable rebirth. So for the sake of your own happiness, again, you give your goodwill freely. Finally, there’s calm. In any good determination, if it’s a really worthwhile thing that you’re determined on, something that really is worth achieving, it should bring the mind to calm. And if you don’t succeed, it should bring your mind to calm as well. So in this case, the Buddha says that you should back up your goodwill with equanimity. You may have noticed that for those passages that we chant, the chant for goodwill is “May all beings be happy.” The chant for compassion, which is basically goodwill extended to people who are suffering, is “May they be freed from their stress and pain.” The chant for empathetic joy, which is goodwill extended to people who are happy, is “May they not be deprived of their happiness and their good fortune.” When you get that equanimity, though, it’s “All beings are the owners of their actions.” It’s a statement of fact. As you stop and think about it, how are beings going to be happy? This gets back to using your discernment. They’re not going to be happy simply because you wish them well. As the Buddha said, if wishes were enough to make people happy, who in the world would be miserable? When you’re wishing for other beings to be happy, you’re basically wishing that they will create the causes for happiness. In other words, that they will be skillful in their actions. In fact, one of the expressions of goodwill that the Buddha teaches is, “May they have no ill will for anybody anywhere.” In other words, may they have goodwill for one another so that they can act in skillful ways. This is a wish you can have for anybody without hypocrisy. But whether they were actually willing to act in skillful ways, that’s up to them. It’s beyond your control. Equanimity there is to remind you that you may have goodwill for all beings, but it’s not necessarily the case that they won’t be happy. So you look at the cases where people’s actions are getting in the way of their happiness. Then there’s nothing you can do about it. You’ve just got to accept that, so that you can focus your attention and your efforts and your energy on areas where you can make a difference through your goodwill. So the equanimity is there, not as a blanket indifference, but as your backup so that goodwill doesn’t make you miserable. And John Fong once made the comment, “If you don’t have the equanimity of strong concentration, even a skillful mind-state like goodwill can cause suffering.” But if you do have equanimity as your backup, then you don’t have to suffer. So these are some of the ways in which you get determined on goodwill. You take that initial impulse, “May all beings be happy,” and you can carry it through. In a way that’s consistent. In other words, you reflect on the fact that your true happiness doesn’t have to conflict with anyone else’s true happiness. So there’s no conflict there. True happiness comes from within. And as I said, your wish for others is that they will act in skillful ways. So there’s no hypocrisy if there’s someone who has been behaving in unskillful ways. You’re not saying, “Well, may you continue acting in unskillful ways and be happy at the same time.” That’s not what you’re saying. You’re saying, “May you see the error of your ways and change willingly.” Now, there may be some people you’d like to see suffer a little bit first, but you have to ask yourself why. What would be accomplished by that? Even if you feel that justice wouldn’t be served by their suffering, that counts as ill will. Think of the case of Angulimala. Justice wasn’t served according to the law. He’d killed all those people. Then he had a major change of heart on meeting the Buddha and ended up becoming an arahant. The only result of the karma he had from killing all those people was that people who were cradled with him would throw things at him when he was on his alms round. But that was much less than the karma would have been if he had not gained awakening. That’s the case where justice wasn’t served. And look at the people who threw things at him. That became their karma. So if you see yourself having any thoughts at all that someone should suffer, no matter what, remind yourself that’s an expression of ill will. It’s a wrong resolve. It takes you off the path. So for the sake of your true happiness and for the sake of everyone else’s, you want to develop goodwill for all. And whatever effort is required as you determine on this, to keep this in mind at all times, it’s all effort well spent. Because the world needs goodwill. It’s always needed goodwill. But this seems to be a particular time where people have gotten frazzled from the pandemic, the wars, all the difficulties that have come. And one of the first things you notice is beginning to wear away is people’s powers of endurance. But goodwill actually strengthens your endurance. There’s a sutra where the Buddha is talking about how important it is to be able to endure harsh words. And in all the examples he gives, he says you try to make your goodwill large so that the harsh words and other things that other people might do to you seem very small. Think of your goodwill as large as the earth. And as solid as the earth. As broad and cool as the river Ganges. And as being like space. So people can try to write things in space, but there’s no place for the words to stick. I want your goodwill to be that, that spacious, that large. So strengthen your powers of endurance. When we endure things, we find life gets a lot easier. If you simply react, the reaction sets off chain reactions. And who knows where they’ll end? So if you learn how to endure things, don’t see that as a weakness. See it as a strength. Other people can misbehave, but you’re not going to misbehave in response. And as the Buddha said, when you do that, you’re actually showing goodwill for yourself and for the other person. So think of goodwill and endurance as going together. And the energy you send out into the world through your thoughts and your words and deeds will be an energy that contributes to peace and well-being for you and for everybody around.

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