Goodness & Goodwill

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There’s the Pali term bhunya, the ties of taking it over and shortening it to bhun. In English we translate it generally as “merit,” which has some unfortunate connotations. It sounds like brownie points. I think a better translation would be “goodness.” When you’re generous, when you observe the precepts, when you develop thoughts of goodwill, you’re developing goodness. And that’s something that should have a universal appeal. There’s a section in Bangkok that used to be a section where the Western traders lived. When they built the city of Bangkok, they tried to model it on Ayutthaya, which was the old capital. The old capital had a section for Westerners, a section for Arabs and Persians. A section for the Chinese. So in Bangkok they had similar sections. This section for Westerners had a Catholic church. Somehow, over the years, the Catholic cemetery fell into disuse and was finally torn up, and a condominium was built there. Then the people in the condominium started seeing spirits hanging around in their apartments. John Fung had a student who had a condominium there. One night he was meditating and he saw the spirit of a Catholic. He saw a Catholic nun hovering in his room. So he dedicated the merit of his meditation to her. She said, “I don’t want any of your Buddhist merit,” and she disappeared. That’s someone who doesn’t appreciate goodness crossing across different religious boundaries. When you think about it, goodness is something that should be universal, should be accepted by all. And when you dedicate it to someone, it’s not that you just give them a gift or take your merit and put it in their hands. They have to appreciate the goodness you’ve done. And it’s a natural thing that when you appreciate someone else’s goodness, that’s an act of goodness on your part. That’s how merit gets shared. So tonight, let’s develop some goodness. Think of all the relatives we have who’ve passed away. Dedicate some goodness to them. Develop thoughts of goodwill. The word metta, goodwill, is expressed by the Buddha as a form of restraint, which is an interesting idea because it’s also an unlimited attitude. So what’s the restraint on something unlimited? Well, the unlimited part is that you have goodwill for all beings. The limitation of the restraint is on your actions. In other words, simply thinking thoughts of goodwill is not enough. You have to have physical actions and verbal actions that express goodwill. So in other words, you don’t want to harm anybody. And you want to encourage others to create the causes for happiness. As the Buddha said, it’s one thing to create those causes in yourself. It’s even better if you can persuade others to create them as well. Of course, you have to look at the right time and the right place. There are a lot of people who don’t want to be persuaded into generosity or virtue or thoughts of goodwill. So you have to learn how to be sensitive to the situation. Think of thoughts of goodwill going out in all directions, and a good way to test that is to think of anyone for whom it’s hard to have thoughts of goodwill. And some people may appear. It might be a political figure or someone else in your own personal life. Ask yourself, “What do you gain from having ill will for that person?” We don’t usually like to think of ourselves as having ill will for anybody. But if we think about someone doing something bad and hoping that they’ll get punished for it, well, that’s ill will. You’re looking for someone suffering. You think, “Well, it would be useful suffering, helpful suffering. Maybe teach them a lesson.” But there are a lot of people out there who suffer for their unskillful actions. They don’t see the connection between their unskillful actions and the suffering. They think the suffering is wrongly imposed. So they never learn anything. So what you’re hoping is that they actually will learn. And they don’t have to suffer punishment. Sometimes it might be good if they could learn before the punishment. Think of the case of Angulimala. He killed all those people. And yet, before the punishment for having killed those people came to him, the Buddha encountered him and got him to lay down his weapons to meditate and actually become an arahant. So the king forgave him and decided not to punish him. There are a lot of people out there who are not happy. It may have been their relatives who were killed. Sometimes he’d go on his alms round and people would throw things at him. He came back one time with his head bloody, his bow broken, his rope torn. The Buddha said, “Bear up, Brahman. It could have been a lot worse.” So the fact of his attainment had weakened the karmic consequences. That’s a case of real goodwill for somebody who thinks, “Well, maybe he deserves to suffer.” But no, they don’t have to. You think about the Buddha’s wisdom as being better than justice in that case. So try to have a wise attitude. You don’t necessarily have to go for justice. Go for wisdom. It would be good if people would voluntarily see the connection between their unskillful actions and the way they suffer and learn how to stop those unskillful things. The world would be a much better place. That’s the verse in the Dhammapada that says that someone who has seen the error of his or her ways, who used to be heedless but now has become heedful, brightens the world, like the moon at night when it’s released from a cloud. So have that attitude towards people who you find difficult to have goodwill for. Another test for your goodwill is when you see somebody’s happy and you think they don’t deserve it. You have to ask yourself, “Here you are wishing for people to be happy, and yet when they’re happy you don’t like it. What’s going on here?” If you really do want people to be happy, you’re happy for them regardless of whether you think they deserve that happiness or not. Now, it may be the case that they’re doing something unskillful, in which case you have to have compassion for that. Realize that they may be abusing their good fortune. So the proper attitude there is compassion. They’re causing themselves harm and they don’t realize it. And here again, you should think about, “Is there any way that you can help them?” And if you can help them, we’ll have equanimity for that. But be very careful in your actions—and this is where the restraint comes in—that you’re not going to cause any suffering to others intentionally. You’re not going to cause any harm. Now, there may be people who are not pleased by your practice, but that’s not causing harm. Or there may be people whom you have to tell that they’re doing something wrong. They may not like that. Again, saying things that people find displeasing is not causing harm. There’s a huge amount of misunderstanding about this point. A lot of people say things that people don’t like are harming them, but I’ve never seen the Buddha say that. After all, the Buddha said a lot of things that were displeasing. As he said, there are times when people are doing harmful things and you’ve got to get them to stop. The analogy he gave was of a child who had taken a shred of pottery or a sharp stone into his mouth. And you have to get the stone or thing out, even if it means drawing blood. Because otherwise, if the child swallows it, it’s going to be even worse. So there were times the Buddha said when he had to say things that were displeasing. That’s not harmful. That’s actually a form of compassion. So the difference between spreading thoughts of goodwill and dedicating merit is that when you dedicate merit or dedicate the goodness that you’ve done, then you’re done with it. Whether the people or the person to whom you’re dedicating that goodness appreciates it or not, that’s that person’s business. But you have no further responsibilities in that area unless you just simply want to keep on dedicating goodness. But with goodwill, you’re committed. If you really have goodwill for others, you want to act, speak, and think in ways that are harmless all around. So as you develop goodness, it’s a good thing to think in these terms. Years back I did a search on Amazon for books about goodness, and most of them had to do with good cookies, good cakes, good pies. That’s what goodness is. That’s what goodness has become in our society. But think about the goodness of the heart, the goodness of the actions. It’s an attitude or a concept that is hardly even talked about. We want to revive that. When people live together, they want to live together doing goodness for one another, doing goodness for themselves. And when other people see that, they can appreciate it. And you’re happy to share that goodness with them. There’s an image. It’s not in the Canon, but it’s a useful image to keep in mind. It’s like having a lit candle. You see other people whose candles are not lit, and you offer to light their candles, and they’re happy to light the candles. And the flame of your candle is not diminished, and the whole world gets brighter. So do goodness and dedicate it to others. Specifically, when you do the dedication, it’s for people who have passed away. That’s for goodwill. That’s for everybody, living or dead. I was talking the other day to someone who was working on opening up breath channels in the body, and he was concerned that once you start opening up the breath channels, if there’s any negative energy outside, it might start coming in. And there are cases like that, but they come in cases where you’re not fully inhabiting the body. You fully inhabit the body with your awareness. You fully inhabit the body with good breath. Radiate good energy, and that becomes your protection. When good energy is going out through your energy channels, bad energy can’t come in. So there are lots of reasons why it’s a good thing to develop goodness. And then radiate it out. Make it a gift. As John Lee says, “You’re doing goodness, but you’re laying claim to it.” When you get past that, you do goodness, and it’s a gift to the world. You do good, and you let it go. That way you can travel lightly. If you do good and hold on to it, it’s like plowing a field. In his days, they used water buffaloes to plow fields. So you tie a bag to the water buffalo’s leg, and you stick the dirt that comes off the plow into the bag. And of course, it’s going to get weighed down. Another image he says is, “You do good, you do goodness in the world.” And if you hold on to it, it’s like leaving a magnet in the world. You’re going to get pulled back to that. So instead, think of the Buddha’s image. You do good, and you don’t have to hold on to it. It’ll follow you like a shadow. The shadow doesn’t weigh anything, doesn’t cause you any trouble. So you learn how to let go of behavior that’s unskillful and do things that are skillful. And then you do things that are skillful, and you let them go. You leave them as a gift to the world. And that way you can travel lightly.

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