

The Demands of Goodwill

July 31, 2014

Last year I was teaching a course on goodwill, and one of the issues that came up was a teaching you sometimes hear: that the practice of goodwill is a complete practice that will take you all the way to awakening. I pointed out that that was not the case. The practice of goodwill has to be based on developing a lot of qualities: being virtuous, being harmless, being easy to support; not having lots of projects that are going to involve seeing other people as means to finishing your projects; being easy to teach. Then you practice goodwill. Now, you don't have to wait until everything is perfect, but you have to practice goodwill in the context of a life that's in concordance with goodwill.

Then, as I pointed out, you can bring the mind to fairly deep states of concentration with the practice of goodwill, even deeper states with equanimity—and then you have to analyze them.

One, use the power of your concentration to look at your fascination with sensual pleasures. See why it is that you go for those things. See what the allure is, see what the drawbacks are, and then see that there's an escape. Seeing the escape and taking the escape: That's the duty of wisdom or discernment.

So goodwill can play a large role in the practice, but it's not everything.

One of the people in the course commented, "Well, I guess you could say that goodwill is a complete practice but it needs some other things as well." Everybody in the room laughed. It's like saying that rice is a complete dinner as long as you add other things to it. Goodwill is not the whole practice, but it *is* an important part of the practice and it's very central.

There was a book years back, a survey of early Buddhist teachings, that organized everything under the four noble truths and then, at the very end, tacked on the brahmaviharas—as if they were somehow not integral to the practice. The author said they formed the social dimension of Buddhism, whereas everything else was totally devoted to the training of your mind—as if you could separate the two. One of the reasons we practice is that we look at our lives, we look at our desire for happiness; but then we also turn around and look at how much harm our desire for happiness can cause both for ourselves and for other people, if we're not careful, if we're not skillful.

And so one of our underlying motivations for practice, one of the reasons we're here, is because we're looking for a happiness that's harmless. A happiness that will be reliable. And the happiness of nirvana is something really special in

that way. The path itself is relatively harmless, but nirvana is totally harmless. It doesn't need to feed on anything at all. When you're on the path, you have to feed physically and you have to feed your mind and to take lots of care. So there is some extent to which you're a burden on other people, and on yourself, but you try to be as unburdensome as possible. This is one of the ways in which you show goodwill.

And there are other teachings that are related as well. There's that set of teaching that Ajaan Suwat liked to comment on again and again, which was the traditions of the noble ones, or the customs of the noble ones. They're four altogether, and the first three have to do with contentment: being content with whatever food you get, whatever clothing you get, whatever shelter you get. Learning how to use these things for their proper purpose. Learning how, interestingly enough, not to be proud of the fact that you're content with little. In other words, you realize that even in contentment, there's a potential for pride, that you have to watch out for.

And then you train yourself to get to the point where you don't need food, clothing, and shelter for your happiness. That's what the fourth tradition is: which is delighting in developing, delighting in abandoning. In other words, you take delight in developing skillful qualities, and you take delight in abandoning unskillful ones. This is how you make progress along the path. When things are difficult, you figure out some way of making them lighter: encouraging yourself to be up for whatever the difficulties may be.

Ajaan Maha Boowa often talks about having a fighting spirit in the practice. Ajaan Mun's comment is that the soldier in the practice is the determination never to come back and be the laughingstock of the defilements ever again. Ajaan Lee talks about being a warrior so skilled that you can actually convert the enemy to your side. So there's some battling that has to be done, and there also has to be a willingness on your part to create the spirit of a warrior. Again, this is all for the purpose of goodwill. We're not just saying, okay, may you forever be well, and think that somehow that statement is magically going to make everything all right. We keep reminding ourselves of these principles because we want them to underlie all our actions.

And so metta has its difficult side as well, because it requires you to be very scrupulous, very thoughtful in how you deal with yourself and with other people. It's often thought of as a nice "feel good" kind of practice—and it does create that energy of feeling good about yourself: that you don't have any evil intentions toward anyone. You're not out there trying to get revenge. You're not trying to straighten everybody else out. If there's anything you can do to help other people

straighten themselves out, so much the better. But if there's nothing you can do, then that's when you practice equanimity.

Recently, I heard a senior monk make some very snide remarks about goodwill practices. He said, "You think this is going to make a real difference when there's war and there are evil people out there?" We have to accept the fact that there are some cases where we can't make a difference. But, as for people who are facing difficult circumstances, our wish for them is, "May they act in skillful ways, even in spite of the difficulties"—because in the long run, it's going to be for their well-being. Even if it requires sacrifices.

There was an interesting and very inspiring story recently in the *Guardian* about a couple in Iran whose son had been killed. The murderer had been found and brought to trial and found guilty. And according to Islamic law, apparently, the parents of the boy had the right to decide whether to forgive him or not. If they wanted revenge, the execution would go ahead; if not, then it would stop. The murderer would be set free. And both parents were set on seeing the execution through. But then, a few days before the actual execution, the mother had a dream that the son came to her, pleading with her, "Don't go for revenge. Please forgive the guy." She woke up and she wished she hadn't had that dream. It bothered her. She couldn't face the idea of forgiveness. The dream happened a second time. And so finally on the day of the execution, she went up, slapped the murderer, and then removed the noose from his head. So he was set free. And afterwards, she was interviewed and she said that she now felt a huge sense of peace that had overcome her, as a result of that decision.

That's the kind of thing that we wish for: that people will act skillfully. And if there's anything we can do to help, we're happy to do it. Of course, one of the best ways we can help other people to act skillfully is by acting skillfully ourselves. This means being very scrupulous in our behavior: not only in our interactions with other people, but also in the interactions in our mind.

So what kind of tendencies are you developing as you're sitting here with your eyes closed, or as you're off just being by yourself, not doing formal meditation? Where does your mind go then? What kind of ruts are you creating in the mind? They may seem harmless at first, but over time they get deeper and deeper, and they actually will start influencing your behavior. So being very scrupulous with yourself—in your thoughts, words and deeds—is a real expression of goodwill.

And remember, goodwill is not just a soft, pink cloud kind of feeling. It's a very demanding wish. A very demanding attitude. This is why it's called a "Brahma" attitude. It's not your normal, human attitude. Our goodwill usually is partial.

There are certain people we feel goodwill for and others we don't feel any goodwill for at all. And we often feel justified in our choice.

But the Buddha's asking us to do something radical: goodwill for everybody, regardless. And it's our protection. It protects us from our own potential for doing unskillful things in the future. Remember the image of the lump of salt in the river of water: If you can make your mind expansive now, then whatever past bad karma you have from the past, your development of goodwill will reduce the impact it could have in creating pain.

So goodwill is your protection in all directions, including the direction of the past and the direction of the future. It's your protection right now. And we're not speaking just in metaphorical terms. It really does protect you, as long as you're serious and careful and thoughtful, scrupulous in carrying it through.