

Goodwill & Gratitude

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Goodwill and gratitude are the framework for the practice. Look at the four noble truths, which Ven. Sariputta said contain all the other teachings. But what contains the four noble truths? The fact that someone on awakening would focus on the problem of suffering, teaching other people how they could stop suffering. Where does that come from if not from goodwill? The fact that someone would go around northern India for 45 years, teachings these truths to people—everyone who was willing to listen and able to practice—was motivated by goodwill and its companions: compassion and empathetic joy.

So it's good to think of that as we practice. We should make goodwill the framework for *our* practice as well. We're looking for a happiness that's true: That's goodwill for ourselves. But the fact that we're looking for true happiness also spills out into goodwill for other people. People who find true happiness find it a lot easier to think about the well-being of others. People who are looking only for false happiness tend to be very irritable. They want happiness but they're not getting the real thing, so they often take it out on other people.

So looking for your own true happiness is not a selfish thing. And it doesn't involve selfish activities. After all, generosity, virtue, meditation: These things are all beneficial for others in addition to being primarily beneficial for ourselves.

So we're looking for a happiness that doesn't create boundaries. This is why the Buddha said we should develop goodwill in all directions: goodwill without limit, compassion without limit, empathetic joy without limit—along with equanimity without limit to balance out our wish for happiness in cases where it simply is not going to happen right yet.

Then you realize there's no hypocrisy in these attitudes. If you're looking for true happiness you have to look inside, so it's not going to involve taking anything away from anyone else. So there's an ease with which you can go from thoughts of your true happiness to the true happiness of others.

Then it's good to make goodwill the framework of your practice every day.

I've mentioned many times Ajaan Mun's practice. As soon as he got up in the morning: goodwill for everyone. After he woke up from his afternoon nap: goodwill for everyone. Before going to sleep at night: goodwill for everyone. Ajaan Suwat would recommend making goodwill the framework for each meditation session, especially when you're doing a formal session like this. You start with goodwill in the beginning, which is primarily for you: Even though you're

extending goodwill for everyone, those thoughts of goodwill help to clear the mind and prepare it for the meditation.

The Buddha taught this to his son. Before you focus on the breath, try goodwill for everyone. That helps to clear up any issues you may have had from the day. And it's good to stop and think: What does it mean to have goodwill? It means that you wish that other people will create the causes for happiness for themselves, and you're happy to see them do it. If there's anything you can do to help, you're happy to help. That's a thought you can have for anyone, even people who've been unkind, cruel, thoughtless, the people who've done or are doing a lot of damage in the world. You can have this thought for them without any conflict. You would like to see them stop their bad ways. And then you can settle into the present moment a lot more easily if you can hold this thought for everyone.

Then, after the end of the meditation, Ajaan Suwat would recommend thoughts of goodwill for everyone again. This time, though, it's more for them. Because when you're coming out of concentration, your mind is stronger and the force of those thoughts of goodwill will be stronger as well. You're coming from a place of well-being, and there are people out there who are very sensitive to the fact that someone is wishing them goodwill. So you do this for them.

You also make this the attitude that you're going to carry into the world: goodwill for everyone you meet. Even during the meditation, it's good to make that your attitude from the very beginning. Sometimes you'll be sitting and meditating, and thoughts of someone else will come up, either simply as a thought or as a vision, and before the thought goes away, think thoughts of goodwill to that person. May that person look after him- or herself with ease. This helps the vision go away easily. The thoughts will go away with fewer hooks, let's put it that way.

So it's good to develop a practice of goodwill all around. It's nourished also by thoughts of gratitude. Now gratitude isn't something you have for everybody. It's specifically for people who have gone out of their way to help you. It starts, of course, with your parents. Without them, you wouldn't even be here. Extend gratitude to your teachers, friends who've helped, even strangers who have helped you. You can think of the Buddha and all the noble disciples who've passed on the teaching—and all the regular people who've passed on the teaching, too. If it weren't for them, we wouldn't know anything of the Dhamma. As the Buddha said, without him as an admirable friend we'd have no idea that there would be a way out of suffering.

Sometimes when you think about it, it seems that the Buddha was more concerned about us than we're concerned about ourselves. He was concerned

about our true well-being, and yet when we look at our own actions and our own thoughts about what we want to do, true well-being doesn't often come that often into the calculation. We have other ideas of well-being, other ideas of happiness.

So think about it: The Buddha was more compassionate for us than we are to ourselves. This means that the fact that you're here training your mind depends on a lot of people.

These thoughts of gratitude are helpful in two ways. First, it does make it easier to start your goodwill with the people you're grateful to. You recognize the fact that it was through their actions, and many times through their sacrifices, that you've benefitted. It's a sign that you appreciate goodness. Second, it also gives you a sense of your own worth: There are people who've sacrificed for you, they saw that you were worth helping, and you're part of this long continuum of people helping one another, going out of their way for one another. When you have a sense of that, then it's a lot more likely that you'll want to pass on the goodness. You appreciate the hard decisions people had to make to help you, and that makes it easier for you to make some of those hard decisions to help others yourself.

If all you can think about is, "I got where I am just because of me, without anybody else's help," on the one hand it's just wrong, and two, it creates a very narrow mind, a mind that's not likely to go out of its way for others—and a mind that's not very likely to create any good kamma. Certainly not the mind that's going to help you find an end to suffering. As the Buddha said, if you don't have a generous mind, if you're stingy, there's no way you're going to be able to attain jhana, much less gain any of the noble attainments.

So these attitudes of goodwill and gratitude are good to develop, good to cultivate, because they enrich your practice. There can be times when the practice gets dry, when you don't seem to be making any headway at all, but at the very least you can develop goodwill. It's an attitude available to everybody.

Then you see, in the Buddha's case, what goodwill did. It got him on the path to awakening. Of course, it was assisted by other qualities, but it started with that wish: "Is there a happiness that's true? Is there happiness that doesn't harm anybody?" He said that his search for awakening was a search for what is skillful. And that's what skillful means: something that's conducive to true happiness for yourself and for other people, other beings, as well.

So goodwill, when it's cultivated, can do a lot of good things. And it spreads its goodness around in all directions.