

Dedicating Goodness, Spreading Goodwill

January 20, 2019

Shortly before I left Thailand to come back to live in the States, I participated in a commemoration of Ajaan Lee's passing away. And every year when they did the commemoration, they'd invite a senior monk, either a one from Bangkok or an ajaan from the forest tradition, to give the final Dhamma talk that closed the ceremonies.

And that year it was going to be a senior monk from Bangkok. The time came for the talk and he wasn't there. A phone call came, saying that he was stuck in traffic, and to go ahead and have someone else give the talk. So they got one of the forest ajaans to give the talk. He gave a talk on suffering, saying that this is what the Buddha's teachings are all about: suffering. Then shortly after he finished, the monk from Bangkok arrived. So they asked him to get up and give another talk. And the theme of his talk was the Buddha's teachings are all about happiness.

And they were both right. The purpose of the Buddha's teachings is happiness: a happiness that's true, a happiness that's blameless. The happiness itself doesn't harm you, and the things you do to gain it don't harm you or anybody else. But for the happiness to be true, you have to look squarely at suffering, to see what the mind is doing. Because both happiness and suffering, in the Buddha's analysis, are things that you *do*.

Usually when we're suffering we think that we're on the receiving end of something bad. That may be the case. There are a lot of bad things out there in the world that have an impact on us. But in the Buddha's analysis, those aren't the things that make us suffer. We suffer from our own lack of skill in how we relate to the good and bad things of the world.

In the same way, if you want to be happy you have to bring some skill to how you relate to the things in the world. And the good message of the Buddha's teachings is that true happiness is possible, something you *can do*. You can develop the skills.

A while back I was reading a book that offered an image of the Buddhist analysis of happiness and suffering: We're on the edge of a beach, waves are coming in, and we simply have to accept the fact that good waves come and go, and bad waves come and go. If you can learn how to accept that fact, then you're okay—as if that's what the teachings were all about. That's only a very *beginning* stage, accepting the fact the world has good and bad things, but the Buddha would say turn around and look at what you're *doing* with those good and bad

things. It's not just a matter of accepting. Happiness is something that you actively pursue. And there is a happiness that's long-term, that's worth the effort that goes into pursuing it.

You can see this in the question that the Buddha says lies at the beginning of wisdom and discernment: "What, when I do it, will lead to my long-term welfare and happiness? What's skillful? What's blameless?" The wisdom there lies in seeing, one, that long-term happiness is possible, and two, that long-term is better than short-term, and three, that it's going to depend on your actions.

And the very beginning answer to that question, "What leads to long-term welfare and happiness?" are three activities that the Buddha identifies as *puñña*. This word is often translated as "merit," but that has unfortunate connotations in English. It sounds like Brownie points, merit badges. I think a better translation would be "goodness." You *do* goodness in the Buddha's analysis.

Now, goodness is one of those words that's not talked about much in our culture. It's a shame. A while back I went onto Amazon and I typed "goodness" into the search box just to see what would come out. And it was mainly books on baked goods: pies, cakes, cookies. That's goodness in our culture, but that's not the kind of goodness the Buddha was talking about. He was talking about the goodness of the heart, the goodness of your actions, the goodness in the way you relate to yourself and the way you relate to other people. Even though a large part of the practice is meditation, it's not just you alone with your eyes closed. To get good results when you're sitting here with your eyes closed depends on the way you live your life with your eyes open.

As the Buddha said, there are two other activities that lead to a happiness that doesn't harm anyone. One is generosity and the other is virtue. Generosity, of course, means giving. And as the Buddha said, you give where you feel inspired. But if you want your giving to be skillful, you want to be careful about your motivation for giving, the actual items you give, and the people you give to. You can turn generosity into a skill.

Your motivation may start with the idea that you're going to be getting this back. Now, that's an okay motivation but it's not the highest. Other possible motivations go up many levels: when you feel simply that "giving is good," or you feel that it's not right when you have something, enough to share, and other people are poor and they don't have it so you feel compelled to give. And then finally the motivation gets to the level where it's simply a natural expression of the mind, the mind doesn't grab onto things. You see that this item would be good in the hands of that person and you're happy to give.

In terms of the items, you want to make sure you haven't stolen anything to give, and you're not harming yourself, in other words, you're not depleting yourself too much. And you want to give an item that's actually useful for the person: at the right time, the right place.

And as for the people you choose to give to, the Buddha says the most skillful recipients to look for are people who are free of greed, aversion, and delusion, or people who are practicing trying to get rid of greed, aversion, and delusion, because they'll probably make the best use of the gift. And as for the recipients, the Buddha said that their responsibility to the donor is to do their best to look after the gift, to make sure that it gets well-used.

Virtue, too, is a skill. You want to behave in such a way that you don't engage in killing any living beings, you don't steal, you don't have illicit sex, you don't tell lies, you don't take intoxicants. In this way, you avoid the harm that would come from those activities. And as the Buddha said, you want to make that universal, in other words, no killing *ever*, no stealing *ever*. This means even when the situation in the society gets really difficult, you maintain your honor. In that way, he says, you give universal safety to all beings. That doesn't mean, of course, that you're protecting them from other all people's misbehavior, but it means that at least from your quarter there's no danger. This, too, is a gift.

As for meditation, when the Buddha's talking about meditation as a form of *puñña*, or goodness, he's talking primarily about the meditation of developing goodwill for all beings. They have chants for this, but it's not so much a matter of the chant. It's the actual wish in your mind, that you're looking for a happiness that's not going to harm anyone, so you have to take *their* happiness into consideration, "May all beings be happy, may they find true happiness." When you think about the word *true* there, it means, "May everybody look for happiness inside." Happiness that comes from outside comes and goes, but the happiness that comes from within can be really solid, and it doesn't require taking anything away from anyone at all—which means that your true happiness doesn't conflict with anyone else's.

So those are the three main ways of making merit, making goodness. And the Buddha says you can dedicate that goodness to others. There are certain levels of being that actually feed off the goodness that has been dedicated to them. We're here in the United States, so think about how little dedication of merit there's been here. There are probably a lot of these hungry beings hovering around waiting for some merit to be dedicated their way. So it's good to dedicate the merit of what you've done. That increases the goodness. Think of the image of

holding a lit candle: You can light other people's candles, and your candle is not depleted by sharing the flame with others. Everybody gets brighter.

However, the dedication of merit and spreading thoughts of goodwill are two different things. Once you've dedicated the merit, that's the end of that particular gift of merit. In other words, you don't have to think about it beyond that, aside from appreciating the fact that you've actually done something good.

In some quarters of our society there's an embarrassment: You don't want to think of yourself being proud of doing something good. But that's not the Buddha's attitude. He says that when you see that you've done something well, you should take joy in that fact. When you dedicate merit to others, you realize that you've got something good to share. And it's good to underline that, to remind yourself that this is what makes human beings human. We have the goodness of generosity, we have the goodness of virtue, the goodness of goodwill for one another. The more we can *do* happiness in this way—it's good to think of happiness as something you *do*—the better our lives are, and the better the lives of the people around us.

So when you've done something good, dedicate it to others as a way of underlining the goodness, telling yourself, "I've got something so good here; I'd like to share it." But that's the end of your responsibility, whether the recipients accept the dedication of merit is up to them.

Ajaan Fuang had a student who was able to see hungry ghosts. These are the beings that are able to feed off the merit dedicated to them. At first, she didn't like this. She'd find them at unexpected places—under stairways, in doorways—looking pretty miserable. And she asked Ajaan Fuang, "How can I turn this off?" He said, "Look, you're in a position where you can actually help these beings, and you can learn something about karma in the meantime. When you meet them, ask them, 'What did you do to get reborn this way?', and then dedicate the merit of your practice to them." In some cases, she said it was as if they changed their clothes and moved on. Others, though, were not able to accept it yet. So she went and complained to Ajaan Fuang about that. He said, "That's not your responsibility. Your responsibility is to give. Whether they can take it or not, that's up to them." That giving attitude is what you really want to focus on.

So with the dedication of merit, once you've done it you're no longer responsible, you don't have to follow up. However, when you spread goodwill, you're actually taking on a responsibility. You're not just sitting here thinking nice thoughts about other beings. Once you've set that intention in mind, you want to find a happiness that doesn't harm anybody. Then you have to look at how you live. Is your way of life really in line with that intention?

That chant we had just now, the Karaniya Metta Sutta: Go back and look at the first several passages. It doesn't start out immediately with just saying goodwill for everybody. It talks about how you live: You want to be someone who takes criticism easily, someone who's not so busy with projects that you start thinking of other people just as means to your ends. You want to live a life that's light on the world. And in that context, you develop goodwill.

Then, based on this concentration coming from goodwill, there's more work to be done inside. Turn around and look at your mind. See especially where your mind is trapped by thoughts of sensuality, in other words, your fascination with thinking about different sensual pleasures. You realize how much that wastes your energy—energy that could be put to a much better purpose—and how much it keeps you tied down.

So that's the basic structure of that passage. It starts out with the type of life you live, then thoughts of goodwill, and then further meditations based on goodwill. So there's kind of a commitment that goes with goodwill.

You want this to be the attitude you bring out of the meditation as you deal with the people immediately around you. We spread thoughts of goodwill to all beings. The beings you don't know are the ones who are easy to feel goodwill for. It's the beings that are right next to you sometimes: Those the ones that are hard. As they say in Thai, the tongue is close to the teeth and so it gets bit often. In the same way, we get bit by the people who are near us and we probably bite them, too. You can ask yourself, "Okay, in what ways can I develop more goodwill for the people immediately around me? What would that mean?"

It doesn't mean you're going to go around and do everything for them. Remember one of the phrases in the goodwill passages is, "May beings not despise anyone or mistreat one another." In other words, you're hoping that they will actually create the causes for happiness. Because again, in the Buddha's analysis, your happiness is something you do; their happiness is something *they* do. You just don't want to get in the way of their doing true happiness. And if there's any way you can help them in that direction, you're happy.

Which means that goodwill is something you can wish for anybody, no matter what they've been like in the past. If you find that there are people that you actually have ill will for, or you find it difficult to think positive thoughts of goodwill for them, stop and remind yourself that you're actually hoping that they'll understand the causes for true happiness and be willing and able to act on them. And you want to get your mind in a position where you can think that for everybody.

If you harbor a few thoughts of some people where you say, “Well, I’d like to see them suffer first,” remind yourself that when people suffer it’s not necessarily that they’ll then see the error of their ways and then make themselves better. Sometimes they take their suffering out on others—in fact, all too often that’s what happens. So there’s nothing positive accomplished by wishing for others to suffer. What’s positive is your thought, “May they understand where they’ve been wrong. May they be happy to change their ways.” Or, “May they desire to change their ways.” Those are thoughts can make universal, without any conflict, without any hypocrisy.

So you look at your life: To what extent can you help others in that direction? That’s a positive gift to the world.

And then there’s activity of doing happiness or making happiness. You notice how much of it comes down to giving—material things, your knowledge, your time, your forgiveness—realizing that you actually have more than enough to share and you’re happy to give it.

That relates directly to the Buddha’s analysis of suffering. Suffering is clinging, holding on. So you have the option: Do you want to do suffering or do you want to do happiness? Because these are things that you can do, and you really have the choice. If your happiness had to depend on the world being a certain way outside, or if you were suffering from the way the world is outside, that would mean you’d have to change the world in order to be happy, and very few of us are in a position where we can do that. But the Buddha’s saying that the sources of happiness and suffering come from within. They’re activities that you do and you can change your activities, you have the choice. That’s a choice that everyone can make.

And when you make the right choice, you’re not the only one who benefits. The less greed, aversion, and delusion you have in your mind, the less you inflict them on other people. The truer the happiness you find inside, the more you’ll be willing to share happiness with others. If your happiness is unreliable, it’s very easy to take out your sense of frustration on others. So you want a happiness that’s not going to disappoint. That’s what the Buddha says you can find through your actions, with a sense that you’re not the only one who’s going to benefit. With this kind of happiness, the benefits spread around.