

Determined Goodwill

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The Buddha speaks of goodwill as a form of mindfulness—something you have to keep in mind—which means that it's not an innate quality of the mind. If it were innate, you wouldn't have to be mindful. It would just be there, constantly expressing itself. But the fact is that the mind has both goodwill and ill will. We have to keep in mind that we want to hold by goodwill all the time. Even when we go through all the brahmaviharas and get to equanimity, the reason we use equanimity is for the sake of mature goodwill, realizing that there are areas where we would like to see people do what's skillful and to experience the results of skillful actions, but for one reason or another, it's not going to happen. So if you have genuine goodwill for yourself and for the people that you could be helping otherwise, you have to treat certain things with equanimity.

So goodwill is always there as something to keep in mind. The Buddha also speaks of it as a determination. You have to make up your mind you're going to stick with it.

Here it's good to reflect on his teaching about determination. What's involved in a good determination? First there's discernment. You have to think about what goodwill means. In a cosmos where pleasure and pain are shaped by action, it means: "May all people and all beings act on skillful intentions. May they not harm one another. May they understand the causes for true happiness and be willing and able to act on them." In other words, you think of other beings not simply as the recipients of your goodwill. They're also agents. And the fact that you're spreading thoughts of goodwill doesn't mean that you have a magic power to make them happy. You have to reflect on how the principles of karma work, which means you have to focus on the causes.

At the same time, you have to reflect on how to maintain a good state of goodwill in the mind.

This is where you have to think about the different kinds of fabrication. When you find yourself overwhelmed with thoughts of ill will, you have to stop and ask yourself: "How am I breathing? How am I talking to myself about the issue? What's wrong with what I am saying? How can I change what I'm saying to myself?" And finally, "How can I change my perception of the situation? The feelings that I'm focusing on?" In other words, you gain discernment into how to fabricate a state of goodwill not only when it's easy but also, and especially, when it's hard. You realize—and this is another aspect of discernment—that your motivation for developing goodwill is not based on the idea that we're all one. Also, there's no question of who deserves or doesn't deserve goodwill. It's just that if you harbor ill will for anybody, you're going to do unskillful things. So for your own protection, you have to think thoughts of goodwill in all situations.

So that's the first aspect of a good determination: having discernment about your motivation, about your means, and about the goal you're aiming at. You want to learn to find a happiness that's totally harmless. You keep reminding yourself that this is a good goal to keep in mind.

The second aspect of determination is truth. You really stick with it. This is where goodwill differs from dedicating merit. With dedicating merit, you're not responsible after the act of dedication. In other words, you do something good and you say, "May all being who want to rejoice in the merit I have made. I'm happy to give it to them." It's in their rejoicing, their approval of what you've done that they gain merit. But that's totally up to them. You don't have any responsibilities after your original dedication.

Ajaan Fuang had a student who could see hungry ghosts. It unnerved her the first time it happened because they tended to hide out in unexpected places—under stairways, in doorways. She asked Ajaan Fuang how she could turn off her visions of them. He said, "Here you're in a position where you can actually help them. Most people can't see them, and when you can't see them, there's no way you can engage with them at all. But here you can see them and help them."

So he told her that next time she met with a hungry ghost, one, ask the hungry ghost what it had done to get in that situation. And then two, she should dedicate the merit of her practice to it. And so she did. She found that one by one by one, she was able to get them out of the situation of being a hungry ghost.

But then there were some cases where it didn't work. They just stayed right there. She got upset about that. So she went and reported that to Ajaan Fuang. He told her, "Look, your duty goes only as far as dedicating your merit. Whether they have the merit to appreciate or rejoice in it is their business."

That's the dedication of merit. When it's done, it's done. But the spreading of thoughts of goodwill carries further responsibilities. If you have goodwill for other people, you should act on it. That's where the quality of truth comes in. You really follow through. So when you wish for someone to understand the causes for true happiness and be willing and able to act on them, what can you do in that direction? What can you do to help influence that person to act in ways that are skillful? Very rarely do we think about that. We think, "Well, maybe I'll do a favor for so-and-so and be nice to them." But goodwill is not just niceness. Goodwill goes into thinking about: How is this person going to fare? How is this person going to be truly happy?

Of course, one way of influencing people to pick up skillful activities is to be skillful yourself. In fact, that's probably the best way. You don't go around preaching to people, but if they can see that you're a good example and they think about what it means to be a human being—here's a human being who's kind, generous, virtuous—it might inspire them to act that way as well. So your truthfulness is what takes the thought of goodwill and helps to carry it out in your thoughts, words, and deeds.

Then there's relinquishment. Here it's a matter of thinking about situations where there's someone you think deserves to suffer. They've acted in unskillful ways, and it seems wrong that they're not meeting up with some sort of misfortune. It seems that justice has not been done. You have to relinquish that kind of thinking. The ideal way for people who have been misbehaving to change their ways is to have them have a change of heart. Now, it may happen that they will meet up with bad karma, but ideally they would be in a position where they had developed thoughts of goodwill themselves, learned to be virtuous, learned to be discerning. They would have developed their minds to the point where they're neither overcome by pleasure nor overcome by pain.

That would be the ideal situation—as in the case of Angulimala. The Buddha didn't say to Angulimala, "Okay, come back after you've reaped the rewards of having killed so many people, then we'll talk." He saw that Angulimala had the potential, so he taught him and got results. There were a lot of people who were upset by the fact that Angulimala became a monk and was not going to be punished for those murders. They would throw things at him when he was out for alms.

When we hear the story, we usually identify with Angulimala, but often in our daily life, we're actually playing the role of the people who throw things: the ones who would like to see so-and-so get his just desserts, and then get some satisfaction out of that. That's something you've got to relinquish if you're going to have goodwill all around. Otherwise, how are you going to help that person?

So relinquishment is the third quality of a good determination.

The fourth is calm. Goodwill is often a calming thought but in cases where you have to give up your ideas of wanting to see justice done, you have to calm your mind down. This is where all the factors of a skillful determination come in. You have to use your discernment to remind yourself that if karma plays out, you don't have to be an agent. You don't have to be the avenging angel, because avenging angels easily turn into avenging demons. If it so happens that that person does change his or her ways, then you have to be happy for them. So you have to calm the mind down. Think in a much larger perspective, that it's good for the world that people change their ways without necessarily having to suffer.

So when you think of goodwill as something you have to be mindful of and that mindfulness is something that you have to be determined to stick with, it changes the relationship to developing goodwill. It's not a matter of digging down and looking for your innately good nature. As the Buddha said, goodwill is also a form of restraint. You can have lots of impulses that go against goodwill, and you can have lots of good reasons, you think, for having ill will for a person. In fact, you can dress it up so that it's not ill will in your eyes. It's your idea of justice.

So there's a lot in the mind that has to be fought and requires a lot of determination if you want to develop universal goodwill. But it's good in the long term. You think about those

people who threw things at Angulimala: That became pretty heavy karma on their part. Their desire for justice was going to backfire on them. You don't want to be in that position. You want to get out of this whole back-and-forth entirely. You can think of goodwill as an escape in that way. It helps you get out of the back-and-forth. That thought makes it easier to stick with it.

So bring some discernment to your practice of goodwill, some truth, some relinquishment, some calm. You'll find that these qualities change your relationship to your whole idea of what's a good way to live in the world. And you develop an attitude that's a lot more mature.