

Tough Goodwill for a Tough World

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Sometimes when you hear people talking about goodwill, it's as if they're living in a different world, especially when they're talking about goodwill for all: They say that we're all one; we appreciate our oneness; goodwill comes easily, naturally.

But although our lives may be interconnected, it's hard to say that we're one, or that the interconnectedness is necessarily a good thing. When people are interconnected when they're having war with one another, when they're scrambling over limited resources, when they're arguing about how the world should go: There's an interconnection there, but it's not a good one.

Think about the fact that you're living in a world where you would like to have everyone act in a skillful way so that they could all be happy, but people are very determined to act in unskillful ways. And their lack of skill affects not only them, but also a lot of people around them, including us.

As long as our happiness is dependent on food, clothing, shelter, and medicine from the world, based on relative peace in the world, we're always in a precarious position. There are a lot of people out there who would be all too happy just to destroy the world. And some people have the capability to do that. So it's a rough world for developing thoughts of goodwill for all.

This may be one of the reasons why the Buddha doesn't call the immeasurable sublime attitudes *manussa-viharas*, human attitudes. They're more-than-human attitudes, all the *brahmavihāras*. They're the attitudes of *brahmās* who live in relative security. They're not involved in the rough and tumble of the world. They're not affected by human beings' actions.

So it's a lot easier for them to have unlimited goodwill, unlimited compassion, unlimited empathetic joy, and unlimited equanimity. But it's not the case that they got there by living in easy worlds. They had to develop their goodwill, compassion, empathetic joy, and equanimity here in the human world. So everybody who develops these attitudes has to go through a lot of difficulties first, such as learning

to think about how you might have goodwill for beings who would be all too happy to see you die.

Of course, the first thing you have to think about is: Who are you extending the goodwill for? You're extending them *to* other people, but it's *for* your own good. You realize that if you allow yourself to have ill will for anybody, you're going to do some very unskillful things around those people. And then that's going to become your karma. So it's primarily as a protection for you.

This is a theme you see throughout the Canon—that goodwill protects you from your own actions. At the same time, the fact that you're not doing anything unskillful means that the bad actions of other people are less likely to reach you.

Which is why that sutta we chant every now and then, the *Karaṇīya Mettā Sutta*, talks about how to live in a way that's actually in harmony with universal goodwill. You're easy to instruct. You don't have lots of activities going around that involve taking advantage of other people. Your senses are under control. There's a whole list at the very beginning of the sutta about the different qualities that are in line with attitudes of goodwill.

So you have to start out by looking at your own behavior: To what extent does your own behavior express goodwill for others? In what ways could it express more goodwill?

Which is why I say that when you're dedicating merit and when you're extending thoughts of goodwill, the responsibilities are very different. When you dedicate merit, it's really up to the other beings to learn about the fact that you're doing that, and then to express their appreciation. That then becomes their merit. You have no responsibility for them after you think thoughts of dedicating merit. It's up to them whether they appreciate what you're doing or not.

With goodwill, though—along with compassion, empathetic joy, and equanimity—you have to carry through in your actions. There's more responsibility there. And you have to remember that it's going to require that you be strong. I don't know how many people have complained to me, saying, "If I have goodwill for everybody, they're just going to step all over me."

That's not what goodwill means. The Buddha's not teaching you to be a Buddhist doormat. Goodwill means that you wish beings would behave in skillful

ways *for their own good*. You hope that they can do it voluntarily, and you'd be happy to assist them in any way in that direction.

Letting them step all over you is not going to induce them to voluntarily learn how to be skillful. You have to know when to say No. It's totally possible to have boundaries within limitless goodwill, because the help you give to others is a form of generosity. Goodwill may be limitless, but your generosity has its limits in terms of your strength, in terms of your position in life. And it's good that you see the difference between the two. When people are taking advantage of you, you can say to yourself, "Look, that's beyond the realm of what the Buddha said in terms of generosity, where you don't harm others, and you don't harm yourself in the way you're being generous."

And you can forgive others. In fact, it's a good thing to forgive others, but that doesn't mean you condone their behavior, or allow them to continue stepping all over you.

This is where the teachings of the forest ajaans are helpful. When they talk about goodwill, they always talk about it as a strength. It's the kind of goodwill that lives in this real world where other beings are really difficult.

Think of the story of Ajaan Lee with the elephant in rut. He could have been killed. Instead, he sat there and, as he said, he fought the elephant off with goodwill. Think about that: radiating thoughts of goodwill to fight off other beings that could harm you. Or that time when he was with a large group of monks and lay-people on a tudong. They were down by the ocean, and they all had their umbrella tents. They saw a huge cloud of mosquitos coming in off the ocean. So Ajaan Lee ordered everybody to put up their tents—in other words, tie-up their mosquito-nets, sit outside the mosquito-nets—and he was going to fight off the mosquitos, as he said, "With no holds barred." I'm sure he appreciated the humor of that statement—that you're fighting with goodwill—but it is possible.

You just think of the ajaans going through the forest, and their protection was what? That mosquito-netting for their mosquito-netting tents was very, very thin. And even when they were in huts, the walls of their huts were thin. There's that story about Ajaan Khao living in a hut, and this elephant comes crashing through the wall on one side of the hut facing him. His only defense was goodwill.

But in all cases: In the case of the mosquitos, they just disappeared; in the case of the elephant, it backed away very slowly.

So you can imagine how the ajaans felt about goodwill, that it was not just a nice, sweet attitude toward others, being nice to others. It was a strong mental state. You can think of it as tough goodwill, tough compassion, tough empathetic joy, tough equanimity. That's the kind of attitude that allows you to think thoughts of goodwill for everybody, but at the same time realizing that you have your boundaries.

After all, having goodwill for others doesn't mean you're weak in the face of whatever they want to do. You want to be determined that you're not going to let them do anything unskillful. Of course, you have to do that in skillful ways yourself, which is where goodwill involves a fair amount of discernment. But think of goodwill as a strength, and it is a protection.

When the Buddha talks about the rewards of goodwill, he talks about the protection that it gives, among other things. And this theme is carried out in the teachings of the ajaans.

So when you start out thinking thoughts of goodwill, first think goodwill for those for whom it's easy to think those thoughts, and then go to those for whom it's harder and harder. And then think it through: what it means to have goodwill in light of karma, and what it means to have goodwill as a means of protecting yourself. After you've thought through some of the really difficult people, then the next time you do it, it's going to be easier. The next time after that, it'll be easier still.

Once you've adjusted your views, goodwill becomes very easy. Of course, the other part of all this is that you have to have a source of happiness inside that's not going to be touched by anyone else's behavior. You can construct states of concentration, you can construct attitudes of goodwill, and they do provide you with an independent source of happiness inside.

Think about the monks and nuns in Tibet who were tortured by the Chinese and were able to survive because they maintained their goodwill. The fact that they were able to maintain it was a source of happiness for them.

If you think about being in a prison where you're being tortured, there are not many sources of happiness being made available. In fact, when the torturers come and try to act nice to you, they're actually trying to get information out of you, so that they can make their tortures more devious.

So you have to really be on your guard in terms of your outside environment, which means you have to have a source of happiness inside. The happiness of concentration, the happiness of goodwill: These are fabricated things, but you can make them strong. This is how brahmās become brahmās. They started out as human beings and learned how to make their goodwill strong, so that they were able to feed off of that goodwill. That then got them to the brahmā realms.

Ideally, though, you want to find something better still, something that's not fabricated. In other words, you work on the path to awakening, and when you reach the stages of awakening, then you've got something really secure inside—which makes goodwill a lot easier, because you know that the happiness that comes from the noble attainments cannot be touched by anything anybody does. You're in a much more secure position where it's easier to have thoughts of goodwill.

So it gets easier as you go along if you do it right. Think about goodwill in the right way. Think about your sources of happiness, and develop the ones that really are more and more secure, until you get to that point where the Buddha says it's *The Secure*. That's one of his epithets for *nibbāna*.

So goodwill requires not only that you have an attitude of goodwill, but also that you live your life in such a way that it gets easier and easier to maintain that attitude, and to express that attitude in whatever you do.