

The Gift of Goodwill

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When we spread thoughts of goodwill to all beings, what kinds of thoughts are we spreading? We're not wishing that everybody runs around with a big grin on their faces. We're wishing that people find well-being. One of the Buddha's phrases is, "May all beings look after themselves with ease." Another is, "May no beings despise anyone or mistreat anyone." In other words, we're hoping that people will understand the causes for true happiness—generosity, virtue, meditation—and act on them. Now, that may bear very little resemblance to the world as we see it, but we do this first for our own sake and then for the sake of other beings. For our own sake, wishing goodwill for all beings gets us out of our own stories. There's so much suffering in the world that comes simply from the way people talk to themselves. "So-and-so did this to me, did that to me, I did that, and then they did that in return." When we look at the mistreatment around us, we can get obsessed with that.

So one of the reasons we spread these thoughts is to get ourselves out of those narratives and to get us out of ourselves a bit. Think about the Buddha on the night of his awakening. First he was thinking about his own past lives, back many, many eons. And he realized that simply looking at his own narratives, there was a lot that he didn't understand. Sometimes good actions seemed to lead to bad results, sometimes bad actions led to good results. Sometimes there'd be simply no immediate result. This was because the perspective was too narrow. It was in the second knowledge of his awakening that he saw the larger picture thinking of all beings. That's when the pattern became clear.

When you act on skillful intentions with right view, the results are going to be good. The results may come slowly, but they're going to come. If you act on unskillful intentions and wrong view, believing that your actions don't matter, then the results are going to be bad. It was seeing that larger pattern that the Buddha was able to come into the present moment and watch the views and intentions in his mind.

So in a similar way, we spread thoughts of goodwill to see the larger picture. And then from that larger picture we look at ourselves. Are we living in such a way that would be conducive to the true happiness of other beings? If not, what can we change?

The purpose of this is, on the one hand, to give you a sense of well-being, that you have that generosity of spirit that's not concerned only for your own welfare. You're also concerned for the welfare of others. But it's also to remind you that happiness comes from actions. Well-being comes from actions. And

however we may define happiness, we want to make sure that our quest for happiness doesn't cause any harm to anybody else. That's when we're being responsible. In the Buddha's teaching on goodwill, he starts out by saying you should live a life where you're not oppressing others, live a life where you're easy to talk to. In other words, when people see that you've done something wrong, you take criticism well. You try not to be a burden on others.

In other words, you take that larger picture and then look at yourself in that framework. See where you're causing unnecessary suffering and unnecessary harm to yourself and to other beings. That's really good for getting outside of your narratives. Because the narratives can wear you down. After all, what is the narrative of life? When the Buddha remembered his previous lifetimes, it was of his being born, with this name, this appearance, this experience of pleasure, this experience of pain, this kind of food, then he died. That's pretty much it: birth, eating, pleasure, pain, death. When you read biographies, that's where they all end. But the principle of action doesn't end with death, it goes on. And so when you identify with that larger principle, that you want to act on skillful intentions all the time, that can give you a sense of mission and purpose.

Then you ask yourself, how can you do that? Where are you going to look for happiness in a way that doesn't harm anybody? It's got to be inside, by the way you train your mind. Because so much of our experience is shaped by the mind. The input that comes in from the senses is just raw material. It's like the food in our garden. Sometimes it's good, sometimes it's bad, but the way we fix the food is going to make all the difference in the world as to whether it's actually good to eat or not. A really good cook can take something that's even a little bit old and rotten and turn it into good food. An inept cook can take really good ingredients and turn them into garbage. So the way your mind approaches things is going to make all the difference. And that's what we can train.

If you can find happiness in changing the mind's habits, you're finding happiness in a way that's harmless. You're also setting a good example for others. Then, as you face aging, illness, and death, you've got the tools you need to not suffer. And when you're not suffering from those things, you're placing less and less of a burden on others. Otherwise, people will see you suffering and, as things get worse, they'll see that there's nothing much they can do.

When I was in Thailand, I would sometimes read the books they hand out at funerals. It's a custom they have there: When someone passes away, they print a book in honor of that person. Sometimes it's a Dhamma book; sometimes it's a book on something else. And they'll usually have a little biography at the front, and the biographies always end the same way. So-and-so started out having little symptoms of an illness here and there. At first the

doctors were able to take care of the illness, they did their best, but then they finally reached the point where they couldn't help at all and they threw up their hands. The family was there: No matter what, there was nothing they could do to reach in and take the pain of that person and make it less. And when you see the person suffering a lot, it really tears at your heart.

So, taking care of your mind is a gift not only to yourself but also to the people around you. They talk of the famous ajaans dying extremely peacefully, not burdening anyone else with their suffering because they've learned how not to suffer from whatever can happen to the body, whatever happens to the mind.

So as you train the mind, it's a very high-level expression of goodwill for all beings. Because the common pattern of the world is people suffer and then they let their suffering spill out all over the place. But if we can take care of business inside, then there's no need for suffering to spill anywhere.

So, thoughts of goodwill are not simply nice pink clouds that we send out. They're not wishful thinking. We're not expecting that all beings will be happy. The Buddha was once asked: Was the whole world going to gain awakening? Or only half the world? Or a third of the world? And he didn't answer because he knew it was up to individual people to follow the path. Ven. Ananda was standing by and was afraid that the person who asked the question would get upset because the Buddha wasn't answering. So he pulled the person aside and told him that it's like a wise gatekeeper looking after a fortress. He walks around the fortress and doesn't see a hole big enough for even a cat to slip through anywhere except for the gate. And he comes to the conclusion that he doesn't know how many people are going to come in and out of the fortress, but he does not know if they're going to enter the fortress on foot they have to go through the gate. In the same way, the Buddha didn't know how many people would gain awakening, but he did know that all those who would gain awakening would have to do it by training their minds in the establishings of mindfulness and the factors of awakening.

So that's our wish, that people will train their minds, find a sense of well-being that causes no harm to anybody. This is happiness and goodness at the same time. It's not simply lack of harm. Part of the path depends on generosity. As the Buddha said, nobody gets into nibbana if they're stingy.

So we're working on happiness that goes together with goodness. And a happiness that doesn't conflict with anyone else's true happiness. When you can think that thought, it's a happy thought. But you don't stop with the happy thought, you act on it. That way the goodness spreads around. Instead of spilling out a lot of suffering in the world, we spill out our goodness. That's our gift to everybody, including ourselves.