

Metta & Merit

May 30, 2020

Sabbe satta sada hontu, avera sukhajivino: We chant that toward the end of every chant in the evening, in the morning. That's spreading goodwill.

Katam puñña-phalam mayham sabbe bhagi bhavantu te: That's dedicating merit.

Both of these sentiments come basically from the goodness of the heart that wants to share its goodness. But they go about it in different ways.

When you spread thoughts of goodwill, it's totally up to you: You can spread goodwill to as many people as you want. You can spread goodwill to all beings everywhere, or you can focus it on particular people you know are suffering or are going through a difficult period. They don't have to know, and you do it both for them and for you.

There are stories in the Canon of the Buddha spreading goodwill to people and its changing them. There was a Mallan named Roja who one day went to the monastery. Ven. Ananda was surprised to see him there because he knew that Roja had a lot of pride. So he asked him, "What are you doing here?" And Roja replied, "Well, I'm not here because I want to be here. There was an agreement down in the city that if anyone didn't come to the monastery, they'd be fined."

Ananda thought that that was pretty disgraceful. So he asked the Buddha, "Could you spread some goodwill to this guy?" So the Buddha did. The next day, Roja came to the monastery and kept asking the monks, "Where is the Buddha? Where is the Buddha?" The texts said he was like a calf looking for its mother.

Another case was when the Buddha spread goodwill to the people who'd been sent by Devadatta to kill him. As soon as they saw him, there was no question in their minds: They were not going to kill him at all.

So there are times when goodwill can have an effect without the other person really knowing where it came from or why.

There's a story they tell in Thailand of Ajaan Funn. One night he learned that there had been a seizure of the Israeli embassy in Bangkok by some terrorists. And this was right at the time there was going to be a large, very important ceremony in the palace, and it was going to mar the ceremony to have this hostage crisis going on. So he spent the whole night sitting up meditating, spreading thoughts of goodwill. The next morning, he told one of his attendant monks at six a.m., "Okay, the crisis is over." And then a few hours later the word came by the radio that the terrorists had been willing to leave the embassy peacefully.

So there are stories like this. You may say, "Well, my concentration is not that strong," but still it's good to spread thoughts of goodwill when you can. The world has so much ill will. The mental atmosphere, the emotional atmosphere of the world is very negative right now. So it's

good to spread some thoughts of goodwill to make it a little bit more positive, or as much more positive as you can manage.

The thing about spreading thoughts of goodwill is that when you spread those thoughts, it doesn't stop there. There's a responsibility that goes with them, which is to carry through. And although you may be spreading goodwill to beings far away, you start carrying through with people who are right close to you. Goodwill, the desire to see everyone truly happy, is an intention that you should follow through with. In other words, it places a certain responsibility on you.

All too often you hear stories about people on meditation retreats spreading thoughts of goodwill for weeks, "May all beings be happy, may all beings be happy." They get into a car to leave and somebody cuts in front of them, "Well, may *this* being go to hell!" Which shows that the goodwill didn't take. For it to take, you have to think: What are the situations where you have ill will for people? And think it through: why it's not a wise response or a useful response, why it's counterproductive.

As the Buddha said, if you have ill will for anybody, it's a sign you have wrong view. It's interesting—we think of ill will as part of wrong resolve, but it's also wrong view, that somehow you would benefit from seeing other people suffer. So go through the cases where you have ill will for people, and try to reason with yourself, so that when you meet up with these people you find it easier to have the right attitude, so that you're not going to say or do or think anything that's going to be harmful.

So basically the dynamic is that you're the only one who has to know that you're spreading thoughts of goodwill. Some people may pick it up: I know of cases where I've spread thoughts of goodwill to people and they ask the next day, "Did you spread thoughts of goodwill to me last night?" There *are* cases where people pick it up, but whether they know or not is purely an individual affair. It's not necessary. And as I said, you bear a responsibility that goes with it afterwards to carry through on those good intentions.

Those are the two areas where spreading thoughts of goodwill and dedicating merit are different. Because with dedicating merit, the person to whom you're dedicating it has to know. This is one of the reasons why the Buddha talked about dedicating merit only with regard to people who have passed away, because there are beings on certain levels who *can* pick it up. The primary ones are hungry ghosts. This is their food, the merit dedicated to them. But for them to be able to partake of that food, they have to approve of it. It's not always the case that they would know, or even if they did know, it's not always the case that they would approve.

I knew a man in Bangkok who lived in a condominium built over an area where there used to be a Catholic church and a Catholic cemetery. The church had been abandoned and so the church had been destroyed. The cemetery, all the bones and everything, had been dug up and moved away, and they built the condominium over it. So, the people in the condominium were having visions and dreams of old Catholics coming to harass them.

One day he was meditating in his apartment and he saw a Catholic nun standing in the apartment. So he thought, “Okay, I dedicate the merit of my meditation to you.” And she said, “I don’t want your Buddhist merit!” Which means, of course, that she’s still going to hang around. She won’t get any further than that.

So the recipient has to know and approve, because that’s how the merit gets transferred. You can’t just give somebody merit. They have to see what you’ve done as a good thing.

The other difference is that once you’ve dedicated the merit, there’s no further responsibility on your part. You get more merit because you wanted to dedicate it, but whether the other person actually receives it, that’s the other person’s responsibility.

Ajaan Fuang had a student who had a tendency to see hungry ghosts in different places. At first she didn’t like it. It was like having a TV that she wanted to turn off. He told her, “Look, you’re in a position where you can help these people.” He added, “If you encounter one, dedicate the merit of your meditation. But before you do that, ask them, ‘What did they do to get born on that level?’ And then dedicate your merit.”

She told me she’d ask the question, and she learned all kinds of things about karma. And I think it was a good lesson for her, because before she’d become a meditator, she liked to dabble in what you would call white magic. The thing about people who dabble in magic is that they don’t really believe in karma. They think they can get around karma with their spells. And seeing the results of karma was a good lesson for her.

At any rate, she’d then dedicate merit to the hungry ghosts. Sometimes it was as if they changed their clothes and they moved off, but there were a couple of cases where they didn’t get any improvement at all. So now she went to Ajaan Fuang and complained about that. He told her, “Look, you’ve done your duty. Whether they can receive it or not, it’s up to their karma. You don’t have to tabulate the results of your merit.”

So both practices—dedicating merit and spreading thoughts of goodwill—are signs of the goodness of the heart. You’ve got something good and you want to share. But the way in which you share is going to be different. What’s especially important to remember is that thoughts of goodwill are not meant to stop simply with the thoughts. You want to be able to act on them as best you can. Because, as the Buddha said, this is one of the causes for harmony in a group: physical actions of goodwill, verbal actions of goodwill, mental actions of goodwill. He had a list of six qualities altogether, and those are the first three. He could have simply said “actions of goodwill” to reduce the list to four, but I think he wanted to emphasize that half of having the group get along is the goodwill, goodwill, goodwill that you bring to it. The other three qualities are being generous with any special gains you get, having virtue on the level of the noble ones in common, having right view in common. These are the things that give rise to harmony in the group. But as I said, half of harmony is goodwill.

So take some time to generate thoughts of goodwill. We read the news, and there are a lot of things happening in the world that we can’t have an effect on, at least in an ordinary way. But

we *can* spread thoughts of goodwill to people who are suffering or people who are in conflict. Then maybe, just maybe, adding some good energy to the mental atmosphere of the world might be able to help. At the very least, it makes *you* a better person, a person with a more expansive mind, able to sympathize with all kinds of people, and willing to keep their true happiness in mind.