

Paramis (9 of 10) Goodwill (*Mettā*)

August 13, 2020

SUMMARY KEYWORDS compassion, goodwill, benefit, welfare, well-wishing, *Treatise on the Paramis*, Bhikkhu Bodhi, determination, unshakeable, suffering, affliction, resolve, wisdom, truth, renunciation, peace, liberation, worldly, effort, companions, *Dhamma*, success, merit, field, roots, foundation

Gil Fronsdal

Today we come to the ninth of the ten *paramis*. They are ten jewels that live inside of us. Sometimes they are jewels in the rough, but with practice, the roughness fades away and they can shine for us.

The ninth *parami* is *mettā*. As I said before, *mettā* is usually translated into English as loving-kindness. Sometimes translating it as “loving” puts the bar of what it's supposed to be pretty high. Perhaps a word like “goodwill” or “well-wishing” is a lower bar – easier and

more accessible. The word loving-kindness implies there is supposed to be love for everyone. Perhaps that expectation is a bit too high.

There can be tremendous goodwill. We can wish people well generously and honestly. But for some people, it might be hard to feel love because of the way they've been treated by others. Sometimes it's just difficult. I don't want to justify not having love, but it's just a fact that it's often very hard. If there is an expectation that there has to be love always, then we might not connect to something that's a little bit easier.

It's possible to have goodwill even for people we feel uncomfortable with or people we don't like. Rather than feeling ashamed that maybe we feel uncomfortable being with some people or it's challenging for us, we can still tap into our goodwill and well-wishing.

Sometimes it is easier from a distance. When we are in the presence of someone who is challenging for us, maybe we have to protect ourselves and take care of ourselves, or it is just too complicated to always have goodwill. Maybe someday you can have loving-kindness present even in very difficult situations. Our capacity for loving-kindness can build over time.

But setting the expectation that you're supposed to do it right away can be very discouraging.

We can have goodwill for our enemies, and goodwill for the people who are angry at us. We don't have to love them, we don't have to invite them for tea, but we can step back and say, "I sure wish it goes better for this person. I sure hope this person can have a better life and happier life. I think some of the ways they're behaving represent the fact that they're unhappy." I want them to be happy, but that doesn't mean that I have to ooze with love. The idea is to have goodwill for others.

There is an ancient *Theravada* Buddhist text about the *paramis*. It's called *The Treatise on the Paramis*. You can find it on a wonderful website called "Access to Insight." It's a website with all kinds of *Theravada* Buddhist texts, including translations of the *suttas*. Bhikkhu Bodhi has translated this treatise on the *paramis*. Bhikkhu Bodhi translates *mettā* as loving-kindness." I'm going to keep it that way, even though it's not necessarily the only choice that works for people. I'm very fond of the sections that talk about loving-kindness or *mettā*. I want to read some of these

passages to you because they really speak to me and inspire me. I think they can probably talk about loving-kindness (*mettā*) or goodwill in a much richer way than I can.

So here are some quotations from this ancient commentary, maybe from the sixth or seventh century. It says: “Loving-kindness is mentioned immediately after determination because loving-kindness perfects the determination to undertake activity for the welfare of others.”

That speaks to me so much. Coming out of the practice I've done, living for the welfare of others has seemed like the most natural thing. Doing this has great meaning for me personally. I can't imagine living a life based on anything else. I made a choice almost 40 years ago, when I became ordained as a Zen priest, that I was going to live a life dedicated to alleviating suffering in the world.

The text says:

“Loving-kindness is mentioned immediately after determination because A, loving-kindness perfects the determination to undertake activity for the

welfare of others; B, in order to list the work of actually providing for the welfare of others right after stating the determination to do so, for one determined upon the requisites of enlightenment abides in loving-kindness; and C, because the undertaking of the activity for the welfare of others proceeds imperturbably only when determination is unshakable.”

The determination to practice and the determination to be resolved on wisdom, truth, renunciation, and peace helps the mind become imperturbable, still, steady, and unshakable. Then loving-kindness can be unshakable too.

“Loving-kindness has the characteristic of promoting the welfare of living beings.” So this is where the goodwill is. It's promoting others' welfare, even the people who are enemies. We want them to be better.

“Loving-kindness has the characteristic of promoting the welfare of living beings. Its function is to provide for their welfare. Its function is to remove resentment. Its manifestation is kindness. Seeing the agreeable side of beings is its proximate cause.

Seeing the agreeable side of beings is its proximate cause.”

Even with people we have trouble with and are challenged by or whom we don't like, there is a practice of looking for what is enjoyable, pleasant, or agreeable about them. Don't harp on the challenges only. It's too easy to have a partial view of people. When we're really challenged by someone, sometimes it's useful to expand our view to see what is good about this person. Is there anything at all?

“The noble qualities of loving kindness should be reflected upon as follows. One resolved upon one's own welfare cannot achieve success in this world or a happy rebirth in the life to come without some concern for the welfare of others.”

I don't think often about rebirth. But this part is a powerful idea: “One resolved upon one's own welfare cannot achieve success in this world without some concern for the welfare of others.” We can't benefit ourselves without being concerned in some way about what benefits others, and wanting to take care of others.

“If you wish to ultimately lead all beings to *nibbana*, you should begin by wishing for their mundane success here and now.” So if you want people to attain spiritual liberation, you should also wish them well in the worldly way – that they are healthy, taken care of, safe, have food, and live a healthy life.

I like this quote: “One reflects, I cannot provide for the welfare and happiness of others merely by wishing it. Let me put forth effort to accomplish it.” That's quite something. And: “Now I support them by promoting their welfare and happiness. Afterwards, they will be my companions in sharing the *Dhamma*.” So when we support and help other people out, in one way or another they become our companions. If *Dhamma* just means goodness or truth, we're supporting people so that they can come and share with us their goodness or their truth.

These are all ways of developing loving-kindness. Another quote is:

“Without these beings, I could not acquire the requisites of enlightenment. Since they are the cause for the manifestation and perfecting of all the Buddha qualities, these beings are for me a

supreme field of merit, the incomparable basis for planting wholesome roots, the ultimate object of reverence."

I interpret this to mean we need all the beings, especially the ones who are challenging for us, so we can develop our own practice, and develop the Buddha qualities. All these beings that we live with, all around us, are the supreme field of merit. They are the people to support and help to grow. In a sense, they are the fuel for developing ourselves.

I think for some meditators, there is often an idea that meditation alone is going to do all that we need to develop in Buddhism. But we need people too. We need to be involved with and in contact with other people, to be concerned with their welfare, bump up against them, be polished by them, get smoothed out by them, and be reflected in them. Our social world is such an important part of Buddhist practice that without it we might not develop as fully as we need to in order to attain full awakening.

"Thus, one should arouse an especially strong inclination toward promoting the welfare of all

beings. And why should loving-kindness be developed towards all beings? Because it is the foundation for compassion. For when one delights in providing for the welfare and happiness of other beings with an unbounded heart, the desire to remove their affliction and suffering becomes powerful and firmly rooted. And compassion is the first of all qualities issuing from Buddhahood, their footing, foundation, root, head, and chief.”

So if you have basic goodwill, kindness, and concern for the welfare of others, then you'll also develop compassion. Compassion is one of the powerful motivating forces for engaging in Buddhist practice. We practice to make ourselves someone who benefits and helps other people. With the ninth *parami*, there's a powerful call for the practice to be for the welfare and benefit of others. It is important to remember that this is the ninth *parami*.

I have a lot of respect for this slow, steady practice. We practice with what we have, what our needs are, and what our situations are. But it's good to know that sooner or later, as we practice something will shift in our hearts and we'll understand that our practice can only

keep developing and growing in the world of people around us. It will only develop in a field of caring for others, having goodwill for them, and benefiting the world around us, not just living for ourselves.

After the first eight *paramis*, with the ninth one, we're coming to what's born and germinates inside – the powerful forces of loving kindness and compassion. May it be for all of us that, as we keep practicing, the sprouts of loving-kindness and compassion keep growing, so we can live for the welfare of the world. Thank you very, very much.