

Metta Means Goodwill

March 9, 2011

Every morning, every night here at the monastery, we repeat a metta chant, expressing goodwill, limitless goodwill, for ourselves and all other beings. And there's a reason why we do it so often. It's part of the motivation for why we practice. We want to find true happiness. We want to make sure that we act on the intention not to harm anyone in the course of finding that happiness. There are two reasons for wanting to keep this intention—a desire for harmless happiness—uppermost in our minds. The first is that if our happiness depends on somebody else's suffering, it's not going to last. They'll do what they can to destroy it. The second reason is the plain quality of sympathy: If you see someone suffering, it's painful. It's hard to feel happy when you know that that happiness is causing suffering for others.

But developing goodwill for everybody doesn't come naturally. It takes work because there are a lot of people out there who are doing hurtful, despicable things. It's hard to feel friendly toward them. So we have to sit down and think about why we might want to have goodwill for them.

First, we gave to understand the quality of goodwill itself. There are three places in the Canon where the Buddha recommends what you might call metta phrases—phrases for directing thoughts of goodwill. These are a good guide for gaining a clear idea of what metta means. One is that set we chant every day: “May all living beings be happy, free from stress and pain, free from animosity, free from oppression, free from trouble. May they look after themselves with ease.”

Notice that last statement: “May they look after themselves with ease.” We're not saying that we're going to be there for them all the time. And most beings would be happier knowing that they could depend on themselves rather than having to depend on others. I once heard a Dharma teacher say that he wouldn't want to live in a world where there was no suffering because then he wouldn't be able to express his compassion—which you think about it, is an extremely selfish wish. You need other people to suffer so you can feel good about expressing your compassion. The best attitude to have is, may all beings be happy. May they be able to look after themselves with ease. That way they can have the happiness of independence and self-reliance.

Another set of metta phrases is in the *Karaniya Metta Sutta*. They start out by saying, “May all beings be happy at heart, whether they are long or short, big or little, strong or weak,” but then they go on to say, “May no one harm anyone else or despise anyone else or wish them harm.” In saying these phrases, you not only wish for beings to be happy, but you also wish that they avoid the actions that would lead to bad karma, to their own unhappiness. You honor the principle that happiness has to depend on action: For people to find true happiness, they have to understand the causes for happiness and act on them. So again, you're not saying that you're going to be there for them all the time. You're hoping that people will wise up and be there for themselves.

The *Karaniya Metta Sutta* goes on to say, when you're practicing this, you

want to protect this attitude in the same way that a mother would protect her only child. Some people who misread that, thinking that they're supposed to cherish all living beings the same way a mother would cherish her only child. But that's not what the Buddha is saying. He's saying that you try to protect your goodwill as a mother would protect her only child, looking after it all the time, making sure that it doesn't waver. Because again, you don't want to harm anybody. It's usually during those waverings that the harm happens, so you do everything you can to protect this attitude. So, as the Buddha says toward the end of the sutta, you should stay determined to practice this form of mindfulness: the mindfulness of keeping in mind your wish that all beings be happy, to make sure that it always informs the motivation for everything you do.

Finally there's another passage where the Buddha taught the monks a chant for spreading goodwill to all snakes and other creeping things. The story goes that a monk meditating in a forest was bitten by a snake and died. The monks reported this to the Buddha and he replied that if that monk had spread goodwill to all four great families of snakes, the snake wouldn't have bitten him. Then the Buddha he teaches the monks the chant for expressing metta for all snakes—and not only for snakes, but also for all footless beings, two footed beings, four-footed beings, many footed beings. May all beings—whether they have no feet or two feet, or four feet or many feet—meet with happiness, may they be free from suffering. Then he goes through a list of all kinds of creeping things: rats, snakes, scorpions, lizards. May they all be happy. May they meet with good fortune. And may they go away. In other words, this expression of metta takes into consideration the truth that living together is often difficult, especially for beings of different species that can harm one another, and the happiest thing for both sides may often be to live apart.

Ajaan Fuang, my teacher, once discovered that a snake had moved into his room. So for three days they lived together. He was very careful not to startle the snake or make it feel threatened by his presence. But finally on the third day, as he was sitting in meditation, he addressed the snake quietly in his mind. He said, "Look, it's not that I don't like you. I don't have any bad feelings for you. But our minds work in different ways. It'd be very easy for there to be a misunderstanding between us. There are lots of places out in the woods where you can live without the uneasiness of living with me." So he sat there, spreading goodwill to the snake, and the snake left.

These different ways of expressing goodwill show that goodwill is not necessarily the quality of lovingkindness. You're not there to cherish these beings or to look after them. You wish them well, sometimes realizing that the best thing for everybody would be to live separately, with each of us understanding the causes for happiness and each being able to look after him or herself with ease. This is an attitude you can extend to everybody, regardless of how much you like or dislike them, or of how good or bad their current behavior. If we were told to love everybody and to want to be kind to everybody, to look after them, there are a lot of people out there that are pretty unlovable. The Buddha is not asking you to love them, just to wish them well: May they be happy. May they understand the causes for happiness. May they avoid the kind of behavior that causes suffering. May they look after themselves with ease. That way the whole world could be at peace.

Although these are good attitudes to develop at all times, the Buddha recommends two situations where they're especially important to develop. One is when you're being harmed by other people, or feeling threatened with harm. You try to develop an attitude of goodwill for those people and then, starting with them, you spread that attitude out to encompass the entire universe of beings. Try, the Buddha says, to make your mind as large as the River Ganges, or as large as the earth—in other words, larger than the harm they're doing or threatening to do to you. May they be happy. May they stop causing suffering. May they stop suffering themselves. You're taught to think in this way so that you don't react in unskillful ways to their unskillful behavior.

Another time the Buddha recommends developing an attitude of infinite goodwill is when you realize that you've harmed others. You realize, he says, that getting tied up in remorse is not going to undo the harm. So remorse is no help. If you tie yourself up in remorse, it's very easy for you to weaken yourself and as a result, end up doing harm to others again. So you simply note the fact that what you did was a mistake and then you wish that person well. Then you wish all beings well, as a way of helping to guarantee that you would never again intentionally try to cause harm. And then you have to act on that determination. You can't just stop with that wish and then pretend that you've taken care of everything. You've got to look at the situations in which you live. You have to keep your thoughts of goodwill in mind. Where do you tend to cause harm? Is it through your words? Is it through your actions? How can you act in different ways? How can you speak in different ways?

In other words, try to be a fair judge of your actions. If you see that your instinctive way of reacting to the situation is unskillful, sit down and ask yourself: What would be a more skillful way of handling the situation the next time it comes? This fits in with the Buddha's teachings on preventing unskillful states from arising. These are times when you really do have to think about the past and think about the future, i.e. where you've made a mistake in the past and what you can do in the future not to repeat it.

The same principle applies to observing the precepts. Once you know that you're not going to kill anything, you have to sit down and look at your house. How can you arrange things in your house so that you're not attracting ants, cockroaches, or whatever. Don't treat these pests as a surprise when they come. They are things you can anticipate. So it's a useful exercise to sit down and look at your life to figure out in what ways can you be less harmful. If situation X were to arise, how can you prepare yourself ahead of time so that you don't respond in your old unskillful ways?

This teaches you to be meticulous, scrupulous in following your wish for all beings to find happiness, true happiness. In other words, your goodwill, to be most effective both inside and out, can't be just a floating sort of general idea. You have to apply it to the nitty-gritty of all your interactions with others. This way your goodwill becomes honest. And it actually does have an impact, which is why we develop this attitude to begin with: to make sure that it actually does animate our thoughts, our words, and our deeds.

As the Buddha said, the development of goodwill is one of causes for true happiness, a happiness that's good for everybody. And that kind of happiness is really special. All too often, the pleasures of the world require that if somebody's

gaining, other people have to lose. But with this cause for happiness, everybody gains.

So develop it as much as you can.