

Metta

June 1, 2019

Metta means goodwill.

When I was in France, someone asked me, “This Metta Monastery you have, do you specialize in metta meditation?” I said “No, we actually specialize in breath meditation, but goodwill meditation is part of the framework, part of the background for the practice.”

We’re practicing because we want a happiness that’s harmless—that doesn’t harm ourselves, doesn’t harm anyone else—and that motivation right there is an expression of goodwill.

After all, so many pleasures in the world, so many forms of happiness in the world, do harm. Sometimes they harm the person who’s trying to enjoy the pleasure, but often they harm other people, other beings. And to continue enjoying those pleasures, you have to be pretty blind: either denying that you’re causing any harm, or saying that it doesn’t matter or you don’t care.

We come to the practice because we *do* care. We realize that a happiness that harms others is not going to last, it can’t be true happiness. Now, the Buddha’s solution to this dilemma is not that we shouldn’t search for happiness. It’s simply to be more skillful in how we look for happiness. So, as we practice for the sake of true happiness, we try to make sure that our actions do cause no harm. And that’s why metta is a theme of meditation: We’re trying to develop this attitude in the heart and mind. It’s not the case that goodwill for all beings is innate in us. It’s very easy for us to feel goodwill for some beings and easy to feel ill will for others. To make goodwill something that we hold for *all* beings is more than human. The Buddha called it a Brahma-dwelling. It’s not a human being dwelling, it’s a Brahma-dwelling. You’re raising the level of your mind up above the ordinary human level.

And it’s for your own protection: If you let yourself have ill will for certain beings, it’s very easy to mistreat them, and then that becomes your karma, and your happiness gets spoiled. So it’s primarily for *you* that you should be developing goodwill as a protection for yourself. The Buddha also said it’s a resolve, a part of right resolve. It’s also a determination. You have to make up your mind this is something you really want to do. Once you’ve made up that determination, then you maintain it as a form of mindfulness, something you want to keep in mind.

The Buddha doesn’t say much about how to do it. He does say you should protect your goodwill as a mother would protect her only child. An instance he

gives is of bandits pinning you down—they've overwhelmed you, they've outnumbered you, they're going to saw off your limbs with a saw—and the Buddha said that if we have ill will for any of them, then we're not really following his teaching. His teaching is *that* demanding, and our goodwill requires that much protection.

Because in the Buddha's phrase, "As a mother would protect her only child with her life," there are times when you have to say, "Okay, for the sake of my goodwill, I'm willing to sacrifice my life." Whatever advantage you could get from acting on ill will would be nothing compared to the bad karma that would result and the suffering that would result for you and for others. So as a way of protecting yourself from suffering, you have to develop goodwill, even in extreme circumstances.

The Buddha does give a few examples of how to express goodwill. One of them is the one we chanted just now, "May these beings be happy, free from animosity, free from oppression, free from trouble. May they look after themselves with ease." In other words, you're not promising that you'll be there to make them happy. But you do what you can to help them look after their own happiness in a way that's harmless as well.

Of course, simply thinking thoughts of goodwill is not going to uproot ill will. To uproot something like that you have to look at it when it arises, when it passes away; what its allure is, in other words, why you like it; and what its drawbacks are. That's when you can gain escape from it.

But in the meantime it's important to discover what its antithesis is. In other words, what is goodwill? It's not love. There's another word in Pali for love, which is *pema*, and the Buddha says that love is undependable. It can turn to hate very easily and can be very arbitrary. If you love somebody, and someone else treats that person well, then you're going to love that second person. Or if that person mistreats someone you love, you're going to hate that person. Or if there's someone you hate, and someone else treats that person well, you're going to hate that person. If they treat that person poorly, you're going to love them—which is a very arbitrary and undependable way of dealing with human beings.

We have goodwill in hopes that other beings will find true happiness, too. And you realize that that's going to depend on *their actions*. Now, there are things we can do to give pleasure to other beings, but for them to be truly happy is going to depend on them.

And it's good to think about this in terms of two extremes: One extreme is the people we love a lot. When you have a very strong attachment to somebody, you have to step back a bit and say, "Well, what would be really for that person's

good?” Remembering that, as human beings, we live together for a while and then our ways part. Then we get back together again, and then our ways part again, and then sometimes we *don't* come back together again for reasons of karma. So you want to ask yourself, what would be the best thing to leave with that person, that that person could take with him or her to look after him or herself with ease? In other words, what skills would they need?

If you're dealing with your children, how can you teach those skills to them? A lot of times this means doing things they don't like, imposing rules on them that they don't like. But they'll be happier in the long run, so you've got to think about the long run if you really want to have goodwill for the people you love. And think about them as agents: How do they act? How can they learn how to act in skillful ways? And what can you do to help them in that direction? That's the best gift you can give them.

As for the other extreme, people you really dislike, people you think are doing horrible things: Again, you have to remind yourself that your goodwill is basically, “May that person look after him or herself with ease,” which means, “May that person act skillfully.” So you're not pretending that you say, “Well, may this person be happy just as he or she is right now, doing things that are unskillful.” You're basically hoping that they'll change their ways. And what could you do to induce them to *want* to change their ways?

This means that goodwill is not a matter of just simply accepting people as they are. It's realizing that they're agents, and as agents they're changing, and you look for the possibility of their changing for the better.

Of course, when you have goodwill for yourself, that should be the same thing: What could *you* do to change for the better? That's how the Buddha gained awakening. He didn't just stay there in the palace and accept the fact, “Well, I've got this nice palace and I might as well learn how to enjoy it, even though I know it's going to pass away.” He realized, “I want something better than this.” And he realized it was going to have to depend on his actions.

This is why an important part of the path is not just letting go but also developing. In fact, the word for meditation in Pali, *bhavana*, means to develop. We're developing good qualities like mindfulness, alertness, concentration, discernment, as an expression of goodwill for ourselves, hoping that *we* will be able to look after ourselves with ease.

So metta surrounds the practice, gives us our motivation. And it also gives us our protection. That's another way in which it surrounds the practice. When you feel tempted by ill will to do something that's going to be unskillful, you remind yourself, “I can't do this.” The fact that you've been developing thoughts of metta

and then trying to keep them in mind should alert you, okay, you're about to do something that's not going to be on the path, that's going against your original resolve and determination. You can step back.

And this gives you more inducement to want to understand, "What is this ill will? Where does it come from?" And you can see that it comes from people doing things you don't like, things you think that are bad, harmful. And they really may be bad and harmful—good and bad are not necessarily arbitrary concepts. But even then you've got to keep in mind that this, too, is a human being with potential for change. Now, the potential may be pretty small, and the prospect of change may be very, very unlikely, but at least you try to keep your mind open.

But you have to notice ill will not only when it comes but also when it goes. And then notice when it comes again. This is when you begin to realize, okay, this is not just a minor thing here. There's something deeper in the mind that actually likes the ill will. This is when you start looking for its allure: What do you get out of saying that this person deserves to suffer? The state of mind that wants to see somebody suffer: What is it feeding on? And you begin to realize it feeds on a lot of things inside yourself that you really can't admire. And you think of the drawbacks again, that if you have ill will for other beings, it's going to be very easy to create a lot of bad karma for yourself. When you see the drawbacks are not worth it, okay, that's when you can let it go.

So we're not just trying to browbeat the mind into having metta by repeating phrases over and over again. We have to think about it and what it means. In terms of the image of the committee of the mind, there are lots of committee members who have their ideas about what's good about ill will, and you've got to learn how to reason with them so that you can get the whole committee onboard with the practice of universal goodwill. Only then can really trust yourself as you go through life, that you're not going to do things simply out of spite, or to get back at other people and then justify it by saying, "Well, they deserve it." Remember that the question of deserving or not deserving doesn't come up in the Buddha's teachings very much. It's more a question of what can you do that's skillful and how can you keep yourself motivated to think in those terms. That's why you've got to have goodwill, as you might say, on tap, ready whenever you need it.

So we practice it and we practice thinking about it and thinking about its implications. In that way, it becomes our dwelling. We raise the level of our mind from the human level up to the level of Brahma. And we provide the right context inside our own mind to continue in the practice.