

## *Metta through Samvega*

*September 29, 2017*

There's a passage where the Buddha tells of an image that appeared to him before he left home to go out into the wilderness. He said he saw the whole world as a bunch of fish in a small dwindling puddle, fighting one another over that last gulp of water before they were all going to die. Everywhere he looked, he saw nothing that wasn't already laid claim to. Everywhere he looked, there was nothing but competition. He wanted to get out.

That image describes the feeling called *samvega*, a sense of dismay—or even terror—over the way life is lived, and an urgency to want to get out of that way. But it's also a useful image to hold in mind when you're thinking of spreading thoughts of goodwill. Goodwill is one of the guardian meditations, in the sense that it guards you from your own defilements. But it's also nourishment. And the image is useful, both to warn you about how to guard yourself and also how to gain nourishment from goodwill.

On the guardian side, it helps you look at the things that might give rise to ill will for other people. And usually, they all comes down to the sense of competition. Those other people are getting in the way. They're doing something either to you or to people you love, and there's the sense that you're being violated by their actions. But when you look at the world as basically fish struggling to get that last gulp of water, you begin to realize the things over which you would compete with other people are not really worth ill will. This isn't to say that, as we normally live in the world, we don't try to make things better than they are. But there are so many things that you realize you can't change—particularly, while you're sitting here right now.

It's very easy, when the mind is quiet and you're off by yourself, to start thinking about old wrongs: people who've harmed you; the injustices you've been subjected to. That's when it's good to hold the image of the fish in mind: The things you're competing for, the things you're upset about, are just that last gulp of water, and then everybody's going to die. So why get tied up in ill will? You're harming yourself if you do. So that's the guardian side.

As for the nourishing side of goodwill: You realize that the happiness you're looking for now as you meditate is not in competition with anybody at all. Nobody's struggling to get to see your breath. You're not fighting with anyone else as you're trying to get the mind to settle down. It's all internal. You're not harming anyone and you can take joy in that fact. This is one of the reasons why, when the Buddha talks about practicing goodwill, he says it has to be based on a life of virtue and a life where you keep your senses under control—or, as he says, you keep your senses calm.

In other words, you're not constantly looking for the newest flashy object or trying to listen to the latest tunes that are attractive. You realize that your true happiness comes from within. You don't have to keep searching outside, because the more you're searching outside,

the more you're going to get into conflict with other people. But if you're looking for a happiness in a way that's in line with the precepts—you're not harming anybody and you're not greedy for things—then it's a happiness that's pure. You can take joy in that fact. Your goodwill can be a goodwill that's sincere. It's not hypocritical.

If you're harming people, but then you say, "I have goodwill for everybody," your actions and your words aren't in line with each other. But if you're holding to the precepts and finding your happiness in ways that are in line with the precepts, you can take joy in the fact that you're not betraying your professions of goodwill. No one's competing with you for your happiness. And this gives energy to your practice.

You can settle down and show some goodwill for yourself now by working with the breath, finding a way of breathing that feels good for the body right now. That's goodwill for yourself. And if you can find this sense of well being inside, you're going to be less hungry for things outside. So you're increasing your ability to find happiness in a way that doesn't get into any conflict, that doesn't require laying any claim. You don't have to push anybody out of the way, or away from something they've already laid claim to.

So it's good, when you're spreading goodwill, that you try to develop a sense of samvega to go along with it. That makes it a lot easier to step back from the things that you would normally want to fight over. You can say, "Nope, I don't need to fight over that. I don't have to have ill will for the people who are trying to take that— because I don't need that. I've got something better inside." There's a whole range of potentials inside, that once they're developed, can provide you with a happiness much better than anything you could find outside.

So you're developing both samvega and the quality called pasada, or confidence, that this is a good path. And as you look at your actions and realize that they don't get into conflict with anybody, your confidence in the path becomes more than just confidence. It becomes something you really know.

So on days when you find yourself tied up in thoughts of ill will, think about that image of the fish, realizing that you don't want to be one of those fish. There must be something better. If you're tied up in thoughts of ill will, you're like a fish upset at another fish for taking that gulp of water. But then, they're all going to die. If you can let go of your ill will out of a sense of samvega, and have goodwill instead, you get yourself out of the puddle of water.

Goodwill doesn't mean that you have to like people. And you're not thinking of goodwill as a magic cloud that's going to spread out and make everybody happy. You simply want people to find true happiness, to understand the way to find true happiness, and to actually have the willingness and strength to do that. In one of the phrases where the Buddha describes goodwill, he says, "May these beings look after themselves with ease." You're not necessarily saying you're going to be there for them. You're hoping that they'll be there for themselves, in line with the principle that happiness comes from each person's actions.

This way, you can step back from trying to get that last gulp of water. You realize that goodwill is something very easy to develop, even for people who've taken all the water you might have wanted, because you know you've got something better, or at least the prospect of something better. And that thought will make the mind more inclined to want to settle down and be at ease with the breath and actually find that "something better" within.