

A Friend to the World

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The Pali word *metta* is related to the word *mitta*, which means friend. Metta is the quality of a good friend, which is what you're trying to develop as you develop thoughts of goodwill. Now, there are all kinds of friends. There are true friends and false friends. There's skillful friendship and unskillful friendship. And it's obvious, of course, that the Buddha wants us to develop the qualities of true and skillful friends. So it's good to stop and think about what that means. If you're going to be a friend to the world, you want to be a good friend.

The Buddha recognized two types of worthwhile friends. The first is the loyal friend, as in that chant we keep repeating: the one who is helpful, one who shares in your sorrows and joys, the one who points you to worthwhile things, the one who's sympathetic.

The Buddha explains these terms. The helpful one is one who, when you're heedless, he protects you. When you're being heedless, he or she will protect your belongings. When you meet with misfortune, this friend doesn't abandon you. And when you need a loan for business, your friend will give you twice what you ask for. That's a nice little detail.

One who shares in your sorrows and joys is basically someone who sticks with you. When things go up and things go down, the friend is still there.

The one who points you to worthwhile things is one who tries to keep you from doing unskillful things, and get you established in doing skillful things—shares whatever knowledge he or she has, particularly knowledge of the Dhamma, and points the way to heaven.

In other words, your loyal friend is not just a yes-man or a yes-woman. If you're doing something wrong, a good loyal friend will point it out, will encourage you to do something right.

The one who's sympathetic is one who, when you meet with misfortune, your friend doesn't delight in that. When you meet with good fortune, the friend does delight. When other people are criticizing you, the true friend will try to stop them. And when other people are praising you, your friend will rejoice along with them. That's a quality of a loyal friend.

But their being loyal, as I said, is not just a matter of going along with whatever you want to do. A loyal friend is someone who has your true best interest at heart and is willing to make sacrifices. The friend who shares in your sorrows and joys, as the Buddha said, would be even willing to give his or her life for your sake, but at the same time knows when you're doing something wrong and is willing to tell

you. That, he says, is the kind of friend you want to cherish.

The other kind of friend the Buddha recognizes as worthwhile is what he calls the “admirable friend,” the *kalyanamitta*. This, essentially, is somebody who’s got good qualities and encourages you to develop those good qualities as well.

They list four. The first is conviction, which means conviction in the Buddha’s awakening—that he really was awakened, and he did it through his own efforts. And he knew what he was talking about: that not only he but anyone who develops the same qualities can develop awakening, too.

The admirable friend is virtuous—holds by the five precepts—and is generous, is willing to share material things, knowledge, help, advice, forgiveness.

And this friend is discerning. Here we’re talking about someone who’s more than just an ordinary, everyday good person but someone who can really see into the causes of suffering and their end.

Now, the ideal way to have friendship with this sort of person is to engage this person in discussion about these qualities, and to try to emulate them.

So basically when you’re spreading thoughts of goodwill, hoping for all beings to be happy, you realize that this is not a prayer. It’s a resolution on your part. It’s a type of right resolve, that you want to act in a way that’s harmful to no one and actually helpful when possible. But it’s not just a matter of being nice. To be a true friend, you have to be a virtuous person. You have to be generous.

That means there’s no room for, say, compassion that breaks the precepts. That was a principle that crept into Buddhism long after the Buddha passed away, the idea that somehow the needs of compassion might require that you break a precept. The Buddha never recognized that as a legitimate argument, because it’s always very short-sighted. When you break a precept, it sets a bad example. You can dress up compassion in any way you want to make it seem worthwhile, but that becomes an easy excuse for breaking the precepts and unskillful behavior.

This is why in the Karaniya Metta Sutta the Buddha talks about being virtuous as a prerequisite for developing goodwill, so that your goodwill isn’t hypocritical, and so you have a good idea what it means. If you want to be a friend to the world, you need to have principles. You’re not uncritical. In fact, there are times when your friend is doing something wrong and you’ve got to be able to tell your friend that that’s the case. You have to know how to do it: find the right time and right place.

As the Buddha noted, there’s a right time to say pleasant things and a wrong time to say pleasant things, just as there’s a right time to say unpleasant things and a wrong time to say unpleasant things.

This keeps coming back to the principle of karma. When we’re wishing that

beings be happy, we're wishing that they develop the causes for happiness. How are you going to help? One is to develop the causes of happiness within yourself—true happiness of course, happiness that harms no one, so that you can be a good example. If you try to tell other people to act it in a skillful way but *you're* not acting in a skillful way, it has no power.

This is why the practice of goodwill goes along with virtue, goes along with all the rest of the practice.

So when we chant these chants in the evening and in the morning, let them go beyond being just chants. Make them genuine resolves on your part, and express them as a true friend to the world in your thoughts, in your words, in your deeds.

This is how we get along in the world and do more than just “get along.” This is how we make our resolves something of genuine benefit. We get along and we all get better. That's what it means to be a true friend.