

A Friend to the World, A Friend to Yourself

November 14, 2020

Metta, the word for goodwill, comes from *mitta*, which means friend. When you spread thoughts of goodwill, you're spreading friendly thoughts. You're trying to be a friend to yourself, a friend to the world. And it's good to think about what that means—because it's not just a quality of the thoughts. As the Buddha said, there are ways of expressing goodwill or friendliness in your physical actions, in your verbal actions, as well as in your thoughts.

The sutta we chanted just now talked about the various ways that you conduct your life that are in line with spreading thoughts of goodwill. One of them is that you're easy to support. You try to take as little from the world as possible, and give as much back as you can. One of the best ways of giving back is to practice the Dhamma. You're setting a good example and you try to encourage others as well. In some cases, you can actually talk to them about practicing the Dhamma, and in others it doesn't seem quite appropriate, but you can still be a good example.

The Buddha talks about observing the five precepts and following what we call the ten guidelines. In other words, no killing, no stealing, no illicit sex: That's physical action. Then there's verbal action: no lying, no divisive speech, no harsh speech, no idle chatter. And then there's mental action: no inappropriate greed, no ill-will, and you try to keep your views straight—in other words, in line with right view.

Here again, you set a good example, and you encourage others as best you can. But of course, encouragement is easiest when you're setting that good example.

This is where your well-being and the well-being of others come together. You're trying to find happiness in a way that takes as little from the world as possible. So where are you going to get your happiness if you're not taking much from the world? You have to create it from within. It's not the case that we're innately good. The mind is innately all kinds of things. So you want to find out where its good potentials are and you want to strengthen them, so that you can be good in all directions.

To be a good friend to the world, you have to be a really good friend to yourself. That means not selling yourself short. It's all too easy to say, "I'm going to be good in this area but then I'm going to be lax in those areas, and my goodness in the other area will cover the areas where I'm lax." If you know that something is not good, why engage in it?

You want your goodness to be all-around, or as Ajaan Mun would say, you want your goodness to be in the shape of a circle. Think of a fence around your house to keep thieves and wild animals out. You need a fence that's in good shape all-around. If the fence is good only in front of the house but not behind the house, it doesn't serve much purpose.

So you start by being a good friend to yourself in every area where you can think of: What's the good thing to do here? What's the right thing to do here? You try to do that. If another part of the mind says, "I can't put up with goodness all the time, I need to have some time to relax," this is what meditation is for. In fact, all the forms of strength that the Buddha talks about are there for giving your goodness the power it needs so that you don't have to be taking goodness from the world and you can keep creating it. No matter what the world does, you want to make sure that your goodness stays in good shape.

Think of the Buddha's image of the mother caring for her only child, especially back in those days where a woman's hopes for the future depended entirely on her children. If anything happened to her husband, she was going to have to depend on the children, so she had to take good care of them. That means looking after them all the time. If you've ever been around a baby, you realize you have to be there *all* the time, because the baby can do all kinds of things, get itself in all kinds of trouble very easily, and you have to be there ready for whatever the trouble's going to be.

So you need sources of strength from within to maintain this kind of vigilance. This is where the different kinds of fabrication come in. The most obvious one, of course, is getting the mind into concentration: directing your thoughts to the breath, working with the breath, evaluating the breath in a way that makes it really good, something you *really* like to breathe. It feels good; it feels nourishing. There you've got bodily fabrication and verbal fabrication. As you hold images of the breath in mind that help the comfort of the breath to spread around through the body, that's mental fabrication.

See this really as a source of strength. Think of that image of the frontier fortress where you have mindfulness as the gatekeeper and right effort as the soldiers. The gatekeeper and the soldiers need food, which is what the concentration is for. The various levels of concentration in that image start with very basic foods and then go up to the really good stuff: honey and butter.

But concentration is not your only strength. The Buddha says that inner strength depends on conviction. This is largely a matter of verbal fabrication and mental fabrication. You talk to yourself in ways that remind yourself, "Yes, I really do want to do what's good. I don't want to give in to *any* thoughts that will spoil

my goodness.” So especially with the thought that says, “Well, I’ll be okay in this area, I’ll behave myself in this area, and be a little bit lax in these other areas”: You’ve got to remind yourself that everything you do is a kind of karma and it’s going to have consequences. And saying that “Okay, I’ll be good in some areas and relax in other areas,” is saying, “Well, I’ll fix food for myself in some areas and I’ll fix poison in other areas and mix the two together.” If you ate that way, you’d get sick. No matter how good the good food was, the poison would spoil things.

So look at all your actions, in all the areas of your life, and see them as having consequences. You don’t know what kind of bad karma you may have in the past, so you’ve got to create as much good karma as you can right now. Here’s your chance to do something good for yourself and for the world around you.

So you develop the kind of conviction that, yes, your actions do matter. That’s what conviction comes down to: Technically it’s conviction in the Buddha’s awakening, but what’s the message of the Buddha’s awakening? He gained awakening through his own efforts, and one of the things he learned in the course of his awakening was seeing all the beings of the world dying and being reborn in line with their actions. Those with mixed records of actions went to mixed places; those with really good records went to really good places. So the lesson of action was both the *how* and the *what* of the awakening: how the Buddha attained awakening and what he saw in the knowledges leading to awakening.

Even the final knowledge that took him beyond action was an activity. You develop insight through your perceptions, through your feelings, through the way you talk to yourself again: verbal fabrication and mental fabrication. The discernment is what cuts through your defilements. That, too, is a strength.

In between, you’ve got persistence and mindfulness. Persistence is based on your conviction. It’s always a matter of seeing whatever’s going to be skillful and trying to give rise to it if it’s not there. Once it’s there, you try to maintain it. Anything unskillful, you don’t say, “Well, I’ll think of this as a bank account. I’ll put a lot of good money in the bank account and then draw some out.” You want to just keep on putting good money in there.

And you always keep that in mind. That’s mindfulness. The more consistently mindful you are, the stronger your concentration. The more nourishment you get, the more strength you get from the concentration. That’s what enables you to develop your good potentials as much as you can.

So we have within us the ability to create as much goodness as possible, goodness enough eventually to gain awakening if we’re consistent. Our problem, though, as Ajaan Lee points out, is that our path is sometimes the right path and sometimes the wrong path. We don’t stay consistently on the right path—and

then we're not satisfied with the results. Well, of course you're not going to be satisfied with the results. You go on the right path for a while and then you turn around and wander off a bit and then you go back and wander off again. The Buddha's image is of taking a cart down a road and then suddenly deciding you're going to go off on a little side road that's not really safe, and you end up with a broken axle, a broken wheel. If you stay on the path, the cart will be in good shape all the way down to the end.

This is how you're really a friend to yourself—not by saying, “Well, I'll give myself a little time off.” You've got to be on top of yourself all the time. If it seems strict and tense, this is what the concentration is for: to relax that tension, so that you can stay strict but not tense.

Then the energy of the path begins to develop momentum. You find that your goodness does get more and more consistent, and you are creating a better example for the world. When you speak about the path, you can speak with more authority.

So instead of thinking how much goodness you miss getting from the world—you didn't get these good possessions, you didn't get those good relationships—you can tell yourself, “It doesn't matter. I've got the resources within me that I can develop.” And you don't have to think about whether the world deserves your goodness or not. The more goodness you give to the world, the more you gain.

That's when being a friend to the world means that you're a true friend to yourself. And in being a friend to yourself, you're a friend to the world. When you can think in this way, it resolves a lot of conflict. You're finding your happiness in a responsible way.

You can think about all the people out there who are looking for their happiness in really irresponsible ways, but you have to decide that that's their business. They're endowed with the freedom of choice, but you're also endowed with freedom of choice. Whether or not they make the best use of their freedom, you don't want that to be the deciding factor in your own—unless you take the Buddha as your example, and all the noble disciples. They show you: This is what human beings can do. They can develop their goodness to a really high degree. With the goodness, there's happiness, the happiness of blamelessness, the happiness of finding something really solid inside—a real sense of peace. And because it's blameless, it's really, really satisfying all around.