Metta Metacognition

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You want to start the day every day with thoughts of goodwill, wishing for happiness, your happiness and the happiness of everyone else. We do that as a way of clearing our minds before we meditate. But metta in and of itself is something good to contemplate. An important part of the meditation is the practice of alertness, watching what you’re doing, and watching the results that you’re getting from what you’re doing, so you can learn. Psychologists call this metta cognition, M-E-T-T-A, cognition, the ability to watch your mind in action. Step back a little bit so you’re not entirely in your emotions. You can contemplate a little bit more. About what you’re doing, where it’s skillful, where it’s not skillful, where you’re getting good results, where you’re not getting good results. And you’re going to apply the same principle to the practice of metta itself. You might call this metta, M-E-T-T-A, metta cognition, M-E-T-A, cognition. Thinking about what it means to think thoughts of goodwill. What does it mean to be happy? What does it mean for you to be happy, for other people to be happy? And how can you do that in a way that’s not going to be in conflict? One of the first things you realize is that you’re going to be happy through your actions. Happiness sometimes seems to just come floating your way without you having done anything. When you think about that, that’s the result of past actions. How about your present actions? Are you creating happiness or not? That’s the beginning of wisdom. And the question is, when you’re putting forth an effort to be happy, what kind of efforts are worth it? Which ones are not? You want a happiness that lasts. Otherwise you can put a lot of effort in, get a brief taste of happiness, and then it turns to something else. So what kind of happiness lasts? You want to observe that. Ideally you want something that’s happy in the doing, and happy in the long-term results. Psychologists have studied children, and they’ve noticed that we’re talking about babies. They’ve studied babies. They’ve noticed the thing that makes babies happiest is when they do something, and they get a result, and they do it again, they get the same result. This is why they make noises all the time, repeated, repeated, repeated. It can drive you crazy, but for them it’s pleasurable, because they realize they’ve figured out something about cause and effect. You get into the world, cause and effect you discover is a lot more complex than just making noises. But there’s a happiness in figuring out cause and effect, so you can use it to your advantage. That’s part of what you learn from the practice of meditation. You start thinking about happiness seriously. We all want to be happy, and you think that we would plan for it seriously, not in the sense of being grim, but in being systematic, organized. And yet so many people just blunder their way through life, going for what looks happy on the outside, and turns into something else on the inside. That’s one of the lessons you learn. You have to look more deeply. You have to look long-term. The Buddha gives some examples of activities that are happy in the doing and also happy in the long-term results. When you’re generous, when you freely give something to someone else, it feels good to do it, especially if it was a totally voluntary gift. You could have taken what you had and used it yourself, but you decided no, give it to someone else, make them happy. You develop a feeling of wealth. Same with virtue. There are times when you’re going to have to make a sacrifice in order to hold to the precepts, but you find that you do that with a sense of honor, that you’re not going to just let money govern your life. You’ve got something of higher value, and that higher value is in you. That creates a sense of honor. And in thoughts of goodwill themselves, they manage to lift you above the ordinary back-and-forth give-and-take of human life. You decide that you want to lift your level of your mind to that of a Brahma, which is a high level of Deva, which isn’t concerned about who did what. You realize that goodwill is a form of generosity as well. You do it not because people deserve it, but because it feels good to do it, and you’re going to benefit in the long term. Because if you have ill-will for anybody, you’re going to find it easy to do things that are unskillful, and that’s going to come back and get you. But if you manage to have goodwill for all, and this doesn’t mean you have to like them, just wish that they would understand the principle that happiness comes from their actions, and they’ll have to act skillfully, and you’d be happy to help them in that regard. And when you have that attitude, it lifts your mind. This is something you’ve learned. There are a lot of things that are happy in the doing, and of course, happy in the long-term results. This means you have to find a happiness that’s harmless. There’s a story in the canon, King vicinity. There was a follower of the Buddha who was in his upper apartments with his queen, Mallika, or one of his queens. In a tender moment, he turns to her and says, “Is there anyone you love more than yourself?” Now, she’s no fool. He doesn’t say, “Yes, your majesty, I love you more than I love myself.” She’s truthful. So she says, “No, there’s nobody I love more than myself. And how about you? Anybody you love more than yourself?” And the king has to admit, “No.” That’s the end of that scene. So the king goes down from the palace, goes to see the Buddha, and tells him about the conversation. The Buddha says, “You know, Queen Mallika was right. You could go the whole world over and not find anyone that you love more than yourself, but you have to remember at the same time that everybody else loves themselves just as fiercely.” So the conclusion he draws from that is that you should never harm anyone or get anyone to do any harm. If you harm them, of course, they’re going to immediately dislike you. If your happiness depends on harming them, they’re not going to want to see your happiness last. They’re not going to want to destroy it. At the same time, if you get them to do something that’s harmful, and they reap the bad results of that, then they’re going to resent you as well. We see lots of cases of this in history. Kings telling their soldiers to shoot at the populace. The soldiers are saying, “Wait a minute. These are human beings. How can I shoot human beings?” And then they turn on the king. So you don’t want to harm anybody. You don’t want to get them to do harm. Which means that if you’re really wise in your search for happiness, you want to have goodwill for others. Take their happiness into account. Which means that your happiness has to be harmless. Again, you go back to generosity, virtue, meditation. These are things that harm no one. In fact, the more you try to find happiness here, the more happiness you give to others. When you’re generous, of course, they receive the gifts. They’re happy. And you develop that quality of a spacious heart, a rich heart. When you observe the precepts, cases where you could have the power to harm somebody else, but you choose not to, they’re going to appreciate that. At the same time, you have that sense of honor. And when you meditate, you’re reducing the number of times you give into greed, aversion, and delusion. You benefit, the people around you benefit as well. And you benefit not only now, but also in the long term. Getting you to think in the long term. That’s another important part of spreading thoughts of goodwill. As the Buddha said, this is the question that lies at the beginning of discernment or wisdom. What, when I do it, will lead to my long-term harm and suffering? What, when I do it, will lead to my long-term welfare and happiness? Thinking about the long term is what makes you wise. We hear so much about how the Buddha taught to pay attention to the present moment. But it’s always in the context of realizing that we don’t have much time left. Death could come at any time. And are you ready to go? You realize you’ve got some qualities in the mind that make it difficult to go. Then that’s what you’ve got to work on right now. So that’s when the Buddha has you focus on the present moment. But you’re focusing on the present moment because the present moment, what you do in the present moment, has long-term consequences. So it’s not just the present moment for its own sake. It’s the present moment as it leads into the future. And so you realize you’ve got to learn the skills that when there’s something you’d like to do but you know is going to give long-term harm, then you learn how to talk yourself out of doing it. You basically get yourself so you don’t want to do it. This means thinking about that harm, taking it seriously. Not just giving in to your desire to do what you feel like doing right now. Same with things that you don’t like to do right now but you know are going to give long-term good consequences. You learn to talk yourself into wanting to do them. Not just grudgingly but learning how to want to do them. That’s a sign of real wisdom. We hear so much about Buddhist wisdom that it sounds paradoxical. Emptiness, not self. But the Buddha says actually wisdom is pragmatic. If you know your likes are going to get in the way of your long-term happiness, you have to learn how to get past your likes. So these are some of the things you learn when you think thoughts of goodwill and reflect on what you’re doing. Practicing metacognition. The same principle applies throughout all the meditation. When you focus on the breath, you want to be alert to what you’re doing, alert to the results. And you learn about your mind. All the many minds that you have. This is one thing you learn. It’s not mentioned in the Canon, but you realize you have many, many opinions in there. Each of them identifies itself as you. “I think this. No, I think this. No, I feel this. I feel that.” And you have to learn how to realize the way you deal with these different voices is going to be really important. Because basically they’re the voices of past karma. Ideas you’ve had in the past. Ways you’ve sought for happiness in the past. Which work to some extent. At least enough to satisfy you at the time. May not have been satisfactory in the long term, but it may be at least a quick fix. And you have to realize, “I can’t identify with every voice in my mind.” So learn how to see them as something separate. This, the Buddha said also, is an aspect of wisdom. Seeing the events in the mind as separate. There’s a thought going through. Don’t tell yourself it’s your thought. It’s just a thought. And then the question is, “Is it a good thought to go with?” If it’s not, you can say, “I don’t want it. I don’t have to go there.” A part of the mind may want to go. You’re going to have to learn how to dig that out. And that part of the mind may have seized your breath to put some pressure on the issue. You’ve got to take the breath back. You consciously decide how you’re going to breathe. Make it as comfortable and easeful, soothing, refreshing as possible. And you find that the desire to follow through, say a bout of anger, a bout of lust, gets weakened a great deal. So we’re here to learn about the mind and the heart. This is another important lesson you learn from metacognition. We’re not training only the mind to be smart and intelligent. We’re training the heart to be intelligent as well. In other words, to will things in a way that really is for your true happiness. If it’s just the mind, it’s pretty weak. But if you’ve got the mind working together with the heart, and you’ve got the breath on your side, then you begin to realize you can go far. This is the lesson of all this practice of alertness, is that training the mind is necessary for true happiness. Training the heart and mind together is necessary for true happiness. So make sure that goodwill is a part of your practice, and you reflect on it as you do it. Think on what it means to wish for happiness. Think what it means to be happy in a way that’s satisfying and is worth of all the effort that has to go into being happy. Take the issue of true happiness seriously, and you’ll find that you can learn a lot that’s conducive to happiness that really is genuine.

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