Metta Isn’t Love

February 18, 2025

I read a Dhamma talk one time, where the person said that metta shouldn’t be translated as loving-kindness, because loving-kindness is too weak. It should be translated as love. And part of the reason he said was that nobody writes songs about loving-kindness, but everybody writes songs about love. I didn’t know that we were in the business of writing songs. And we have to realize that love and metta are two very different things. To begin with, they’re different words in Pali. Metta basically means goodwill, wishing for happiness. Love, pema. And as the Buddha said, it has its restrictions. To begin with, it’s very possessive. You’re going to blame someone, and it goes to people you like. And if someone mistreats the person you love, you’re going to hate that person. If someone is nice to a person you love, you’re going to love that person. Which can be pretty arbitrary. And it’s very partial. Similarly, if there’s somebody you hate, if someone is good to the person you hate, you’re going to hate that person. Which is not fair at all. If someone is bad to someone you hate, you’re going to love that person. Which is not fair either. You can end up having, as they say, strange bedfellows. So that love builds partiality. And it gets in the way of metta, especially when trying to develop metta as a universal attitude. Because you realize that happiness comes from where? It comes from your actions. So people are going to be happy because of their actions, if their actions are skillful. That means that there doesn’t have to be only X amount of happiness in the world that you portion out to some people and not to others. Everyone has the capability of acting skillfully. And it is possible to wish that all beings behave skillfully. There’s no conflict, there’s no hypocrisy in that attitude. And you’re basically renouncing your claims on those people. You realize it’s going to be up to them. It’s going to be up to you to develop skillful attitudes in your own mind. You want to make sure that your mind is not partial. Because then you’re going to be good to the people you like and not good to the people you don’t like. That’s going to create karma. So you develop goodwill as an attitude, metta as an attitude. You have to realize that we’re abandoning possessiveness. That’s an important aspect of dealing with other people. One, we’re not possessive of our ideas and what we want out of them. We want them to be happy. But understanding karma, which is part of developing metta in a correct way. You also realize that it’s going to be beyond your power. To make other people truly happy, you can have an influence. You can do what you can to help them understand what would be good karma. And do your best to arouse and encourage and urge them to be skillful in their actions. It’s going to be up to them to decide to do that or not. Look at the Buddha himself. He was talking to a group of people who were very wound up in the politics. One of the people was saying, “You can’t just let evil survive in the world.” Well, evil has been surviving for a long time in the world. Even the Buddha left the world. There was evil in the world then. There’s been evil all along. The problem is if you try to wipe evil out of the world, you become pretty evil yourself. You have to realize that there’s a lot in the world that’s beyond our power. In this way, metta can live with equanimity. Love cannot. It’s hard to be equanimous about people you love, especially when they’re being mistreated by others, or when they simply age, grow ill, and die. Which is sure to happen to all of us. So metta is the attitude that allows you to live in the world in a mature way, in a wise way, if you see it as goodwill. You develop your goodwill in line with an understanding of karma. That way your goodwill doesn’t have to create suffering. Because if we don’t have equanimity to back up our goodwill, we’re going to suffer. We want beings to be happy, and look what they do. All kinds of things are the opposite of the causes for happiness. There are a lot of people out there over whom you have no power. But if you realize that’s the way of the world, we’re here to do our best within the world, develop our perfections in an imperfect world. It means we have to develop the proper attitude toward every person. Everybody. People are acting skillfully, people are acting unskillfully. We have to have goodwill for them all. This is why the Buddha said so many things about how we suffer if we hold to anyone dear. In other words, if we love them. There’s that story in the Canon where a man has lost his son. He goes to the cemetery every day and cries out, “Where have you gone, my only son? Where have you gone, my only son?” One day on the way back from the cemetery, he stops off and sees the Buddha. And the Buddha says, “Where have you come from? You look like someone out of your mind.” And the man tells what has happened. And the Buddha says, “Yes, so much suffering comes from those we love.” And the man gets offended. He says, “No, happiness comes from those we love.” Here he’s been suffering every day since the loss of his son. So he is out of his mind. So he leaves the Buddha. He happens to run across a group of gamblers and tells them what the Buddha said. And they say, “Oh no, happiness comes from those we love.” The guy decides that he agrees with the gamblers. Of course that is symbolic. Love is a gamble. The King was saying that he at that time was not yet a follower of the Buddha. So he calls in his queen, Mallika. He knows she’s a follower of the Buddha. And he says, “This Buddha of yours, listen to what he said now.” And Mallika says, “Well, if he says it, it must be true.” Then he says, “Get out of here. You’re not thinking for yourself at all.” So she sends a man to see the Buddha. He says, “What did you mean when you said that?” And the Buddha tells stories of people going crazy over when their loved one has died. So crazy that in one case, there’s one man who’s afraid that his wife is going to be taken away from him by her relatives and given to somebody else. So he kills her and kills himself with the idea that they’ll both be together after death. The only thing that can get you to do that is obviously not a skillful attitude. So the man goes back to tell the queen. And the queen goes to see the King. And instead of quoting the Buddha’s words, she comes up with her own lesson. She says, “Do you love your other queens?” “Yes.” “Do you love your son?” “Yes.” “Do you love me?” “Yes.” “If anything happened to us, what would that do to you?” He said, “My very life depends on you. It would have a huge impact on me.” She said, “That’s what the Buddha meant. Because love is sending yourself up for a fall. Goodwill, however, can survive death. It can deal with death. It can deal with separation. All the facts of life. When someone is born, you can have goodwill for them. When they die, you can still have goodwill for them. So that’s the attitude you want to develop. Goodwill. When I first came back to the States, I gave my first interviews for a group that I was teaching in Orange County. And the very first one, there was a woman who came in, and her very first question was,”This practice is all about love, right?” I said, “No, it’s all about freedom.” She seemed shocked. I was pretty shocked too. But it comes down to that. The Buddha is teaching us to be free. So we’re going to avoid doing the things that would tie us down. And love is one of them. Of course, there are going to be people that you’re close to, but your attitude has to be one of goodwill. Your time together is short. So you want to do what you can to help that other person find happiness within. But it can’t be happiness that depends on you, because you’re going to have to leave that person. Whatever you can do to help others develop strength inside, that helps you end a relationship when it inevitably ends, without any regret. So it’s important that we realize that we’re not here to write songs, or to appeal to people’s emotions. Or to appeal to our own emotions. We’re here to learn some maturity. Goodwill is something you can have for everybody. And it’s something, as I said, that can withstand the facts of aging, illness, and death. Because you’re not laying claim. You’re looking for your own freedom, and you’re allowing other people to be free as well.

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