

Metta Means Goodwill

Ajaan Fuang, my teacher, once discovered that a snake had moved into his room. Every time he entered the room, he saw it slip into a narrow space behind a storage cabinet. And even though he tried leaving the door to the room open during the daytime, the snake wasn't willing to leave. So for three days they lived together. He was very careful not to startle the snake or make it feel threatened by his presence. But finally on the evening of the third day, as he was sitting in meditation, he addressed the snake quietly in his mind. He said, "Look, it's not that I don't like you. I don't have any bad feelings for you. But our minds work in different ways. It'd be very easy for there to be a misunderstanding between us. Now, there are lots of places out in the woods where you can live without the uneasiness of living with me." And as he sat there spreading thoughts of *metta* to the snake, the snake left.

When Ajaan Fuang first told me this story, it made me stop and reconsider my understanding of what *metta* is. *Metta* is a wish for happiness—true happiness—and the Buddha says to develop this wish for ourselves and everyone else: "*With metta for the entire cosmos, cultivate a limitless heart.*" (Sn 1:8) But what's the emotional quality that goes along with that wish? Many people define it as "lovingkindness," implying a desire to be there for other people: to cherish them, to provide them with intimacy, nurture, and protection. The idea of feeling love for everyone sounds very noble and emotionally satisfying. But when you really stop to think about all the beings in the cosmos, there are a lot of them who—like the snake—would react to your lovingkindness with suspicion and fear. Rather than wanting your love, they would rather be left alone. Others might try to take unfair advantage of your lovingkindness, reading it as a sign either of your weakness or of your endorsement of whatever they want to do. In none of these cases would your lovingkindness lead to anyone's true happiness. You're left to wonder if the Buddha's instructions on universal *metta* are really realistic or wise.

But as I learned from Ajaan Fuang's encounter with the snake, *metta* is not necessarily an attitude of lovingkindness. It's more an attitude of goodwill—wishing the other person well, but realizing that true happiness is something that each of us ultimately will have to find for him or herself, and sometimes most easily when we go our separate ways.

This understanding of *metta* is borne out in the Pali Canon, first of all in the word itself. The Pali language has another word for love—*pema*—whereas *metta*

is related to the word *mitta*, or friend. Universal metta is friendliness for all. The fact that this friendliness equates with goodwill is shown in the four passages in the Canon where the Buddha recommends phrases to hold in mind when developing thoughts of metta. These phrases provide his clearest guide not only to the emotional quality that underlies metta, but also to the understanding of happiness that explains why it's wise and realistic to develop metta for all.

The first set of phrases comes in a passage where the Buddha recommends thoughts to counter ill will. These phrases are chanted daily in Theravada communities the world over: "*May these beings—free from animosity, free from oppression, and free from trouble—look after themselves with ease.*" — AN 10:176

Notice that last statement: "*May they look after themselves with ease.*" You're not saying that you're going to be there for all beings all the time. And most beings would be happier knowing that they could depend on themselves rather than having to depend on you. I once heard a Dharma teacher say that he wouldn't want to live in a world where there was no suffering because then he wouldn't be able to express his compassion—which when you think about it, is an extremely selfish wish. He needs other people to suffer so he can feel good about expressing his compassion? A better attitude would be, "*May all beings be happy. May they be able to look after themselves with ease.*" That way they can have the happiness of independence and self-reliance.

Another set of metta phrases is in the *Karaniya Metta Sutta*. They start out with a simple wish for happiness:

*Happy, at rest,
may all beings be happy at heart.
Whatever beings there may be,
 weak or strong, without exception,
 long, large,
 middling, short,
 subtle, blatant,
 seen & unseen,
 near & far,
 born & seeking birth:
May all beings be happy at heart.*

But then they continue with a wish that all beings avoid the causes that would lead them to unhappiness:

*Let no one deceive another
or despise anyone anywhere,
or through anger or resistance*

wish for another to suffer. — Sn 1:8

In repeating these phrases, you wish not only that beings be happy, but also that they avoid the actions that would lead to bad karma, to their own unhappiness. You realize that happiness has to depend on action: For people to find true happiness, they have to understand the causes for happiness and act on them. They also have to understand that true happiness is harmless. If it depends on something that harms others, it's not going to last. Those who are harmed are sure to do what they can to destroy that happiness. And then there's the plain quality of sympathy: If you see someone suffering, it's painful. If you have any sensitivity at all, it's hard to feel happy when you know that your happiness is causing suffering for others.

So again, when you express goodwill, you're not saying that you're going to be there for them all the time. You're hoping that all beings will wise up about how to find happiness and be there for themselves.

The *Karaniya Metta Sutta* goes on to say that when you're developing this attitude, you want to protect it in the same way that a mother would protect her only child.

*As a mother would risk her life
to protect her child, her only child,
even so should one cultivate a limitless heart
with regard to all beings.*

Some people misread this passage—in fact, many translators have mistranslated it—thinking that the Buddha is telling us to cherish all living beings the same way a mother would cherish her only child. But that's not what he's actually saying. To begin with, he doesn't mention the word "cherish" at all. And instead of drawing a parallel between protecting your only child and protecting other beings, he draws the parallel between protecting the child and protecting your goodwill. This fits in with his other teachings in the Canon. Nowhere does he tell people to throw down their lives to prevent every cruelty and injustice in the world, but he does praise his followers for being willing to throw down their lives for their precepts: "*Just as the ocean is stable and does not overstep its tideline, in the same way my disciples do not—even for the sake of their lives—overstep the training rules I have formulated for them.*" — Ud 5:5

The verses here carry a similar sentiment: You should be devoted to cultivating and protecting your goodwill to make sure that your virtuous intentions don't waver. This is because you don't want to harm anyone. Harm can happen most easily when there's a lapse in your goodwill, so you do whatever you can to protect this attitude at all times. This is why, as the Buddha says toward the end of the sutta, you should stay determined to practice this

form of mindfulness: the mindfulness of keeping in mind your wish that all beings be happy, to make sure that it always informs the motivation for everything you do.

This is why the Buddha explicitly recommends developing thoughts of metta in two situations where it's especially important—and especially difficult—to maintain skillful motivation: when others are hurting you, and when you realize that you've hurt others.

If others are harming you with their words or actions—“*even if bandits were to carve you up savagely, limb by limb, with a two-handled saw*”—the Buddha recommends training your mind in this way:

Our minds will be unaffected and we will say no evil words. We will remain sympathetic, with a mind of goodwill, and with no inner hate. We will keep pervading these people with an awareness imbued with goodwill and, beginning with them, we will keep pervading the all-encompassing world with an awareness imbued with goodwill—abundant, expansive, immeasurable, free from hostility, free from ill will. — MN 21

In doing this, the Buddha says, you make your mind as expansive as the River Ganges or as large as the earth—in other words, larger than the harm those people are doing or threatening to do to you. He himself embodied this teaching after Devadatta's attempt on his life. As he told Mara—who had come to taunt him while he was resting from a painful injury—“*I lie down with sympathy for all beings.*” (SN 4:13) When you can maintain this enlarged state of mind in the face of pain, the harm that others can do to you doesn't seem so overwhelming, and you're less likely to respond in unskillful ways. You provide protection—both for yourself and for others—against any unskillful things you otherwise might be tempted to do.

As for the times when you realize that you've harmed others, the Buddha recommends that you understand that remorse is not going to undo the harm, so if an apology is appropriate, you apologize. In any case, you resolve not to repeat the harmful action again. Then you spread thoughts of goodwill in all directions.

This accomplishes several things. It reminds you of your own goodness, so that you don't—in defense of your self-image—revert to the sort of denial that refuses to admit that any harm was done. It strengthens your determination to stick with your resolve not to do harm. And it forces you to examine your actions to see their actual effect: If any other of your habits are harmful, you want to abandon them before they cause further harm. In other words, you don't want your goodwill to be just an ungrounded, floating idea. You want to apply it scrupulously to the nitty-gritty of all your interactions with others. That way your goodwill becomes honest. And it actually does have an impact, which is

why we develop this attitude to begin with: to make sure that it actually does animate our thoughts, words, and deeds in a way that leads to a happiness harmless for all.

Finally, there's a passage where the Buddha taught the monks a chant for spreading goodwill to all snakes and other creeping things. The story goes that a monk meditating in a forest was bitten by a snake and died. The monks reported this to the Buddha and he replied that if that monk had spread goodwill to all four great families of snakes, the snake wouldn't have bitten him. Then the Buddha taught the monks a protective chant for expressing metta not only for snakes, but also for all beings.

*I have goodwill for footless beings,
goodwill for two-footed beings,
goodwill for four-footed beings,
goodwill for many-footed beings.*

*May footless beings do me no harm.
May two-footed beings do me no harm.
May four-footed beings do me no harm.
May many-footed beings do me no harm.*

*May all creatures,
all breathing things,
all beings
—each & every one—
meet with good fortune.*

May none of them come to any evil.

*Limitless is the Buddha,
limitless the Dhamma,
limitless the Sangha.*

*There is a limit to creeping things:
snakes, scorpions, centipedes,
spiders, lizards, & rats.*

*I have made this safeguard,
I have made this protection.*

May the beings depart. — AN 4:67

The last statement in this expression of metta takes into consideration the truth that living together is often difficult—especially for beings of different species that can harm one another—and the happiest policy for all concerned is often to live harmlessly apart.

These different ways of expressing metta show that metta is not necessarily

the quality of lovingkindness. Metta is better thought of as goodwill, and for two reasons. The first is that goodwill is an attitude you can express for everyone without fear of being hypocritical or unrealistic. It recognizes that people will become truly happy not as a result of your caring for them but as a result of their own skillful actions, and that the happiness of self-reliance is greater than any happiness that comes from dependency.

The second reason is that goodwill is a more skillful feeling to have toward those who would be suspicious of your lovingkindness or try to take advantage of it. There are probably people you've harmed in the past who would rather not have anything to do with you ever again, so the intimacy of lovingkindness would actually be a source of pain for them, rather than joy. There are also people who, when they see that you want to express lovingkindness, would be quick to take advantage of it. And there are plenty of animals out there who would feel threatened by any overt expressions of love from a human being. In these cases, a more distant sense of goodwill—that you promise yourself never to harm those people or those beings—would be better for everyone involved.

This doesn't mean that lovingkindness is never an appropriate expression of goodwill. You simply have to know when it's appropriate and when it's not. If you truly feel metta for yourself and others, you can't let your desire for warm feelings of love and intimacy render you insensitive to what would actually be the most skillful way to promote true happiness for all.

—*Thanissaro Bhikkhu*