

Mettā Sutta (2 of 5) Intentions of Goodwill

June 8, 2021

SUMMARY KEYWORDS

loving-kindness, peace, renunciation, non-ill will, non-cruelty, desire, heart, love, happy, universal, all-encompassing, seed, phrases

Gil Fronsdal

Today we continue with the topic of the “*Mettā Sutta*,” the discourse on loving-kindness. The tradition attributes the “*Mettā Sutta*” to the Buddha, but we do not really know if he wrote it. The sutta is a beautiful series of verses. As I said yesterday, it is considered the foundational text for loving-kindness practice.

The fundamental purpose of the “*Mettā Sutta*” is to reach a state of peace, liberation, freedom. To do so, it is important to develop certain qualities. A lot of these qualities can be seen as expressions of the second factor of the Eightfold Path – right intention, right resolve. This is said to be renunciation, non-ill will, and non-cruelty, non-violence. The negative prefixes in the text – *not* ill will, *not* cruelty – are understood in the Pali

tradition to encompass the opposite. It is not just the absence of the quality, but rather it involves the presence of the quality's opposite.

You might ask, “Why don’t you say the opposite?” The reason is that the opposite of ill will could be a range of different attitudes, not just one. When we let go of ill will, we are then available for whatever attitude in the range is appropriate at that time. Sometimes it might be loving-kindness, compassion, or generosity. Other times, it might be patience, equanimity, or something else. We are not limited to just one attitude.

In the opening section of the “*Mettā Sutta*,” these qualities can be seen as expressions of renunciation, non-ill will, and non-cruelty – especially the first two:

*Gentle and not proud,
Contented, easily supported,
Living lightly and with few duties, – These are about
renunciation, a healthy letting go.
Wise with senses calmed,
Not arrogant and without greed for supporters,
And should not do the least thing that the wise
would criticize.*

The next section describes the intention, motivation, and aspiration of loving-kindness. It is the heart’s wish that others be happy. Here it is put in the context of reaching the state of peace. In the context of becoming

liberated, we develop and cultivate care and goodwill for others. If the path of liberation is only about me, myself, and mine, there is no liberation. To close down and hold ourselves in check – gripped by a sense of self when we focus only on our practice and welfare – actually limits the movement towards freedom.

This section of the sutta includes care for others in the world. There is a relaxing of the barriers – relaxing the strong sense of separation, otherness, me-ness, me against you, and “It’s all about what’s good for me.” Now goodwill can go out in a relaxed, open way and include the welfare of others as well.

The sutta goes on to say one should consider:

*May all be happy and secure;
May all beings be happy at heart.
All living beings, whether weak or strong,
Tall, large, medium or short,
Tiny or big,
Seen or unseen,
Near or distant,
Born or to be born,
May they all be happy.*

This goodwill is not simply for the people we love. Here it is universal goodwill: “May all beings be happy.” Universal goodwill is not easy to have. But we begin with love for those we care about, those for whom it is

easy. The practice of loving-kindness is to begin expanding that. How can we relax, be open, and be inclusive with our goodwill – so that we can genuinely have goodwill for the whole world?

The advantage and benefit of this in meditation practice is that it frees up the restrictions on the heart when we keep our love bound or held in check. There is something about opening up all the windows of the heart completely so that the heart can radiate in all directions, not limited by anything – an unlimited heart.

This, of course, is a very large ideal. But it is very useful to consider that we are talking about intention. An intention does not necessarily mean that we feel loving. It just means that we have an intention to do so. We have a desire to be loving, to have goodwill. If the requirement is to have an emotional feeling of love, that could limit and hinder us from actually practicing it or feeling that we are doing the practice well.

It is enough to have the intention – that is where it begins. The intention is like a seed. We plant a seed so that something can begin to grow. Over time, something important will grow within us. What that will be for any individual, I don't want to say. For some, it might be emotional. Or it might have more of a cognitive quality – with understanding and ideas that are all-encompassing. But it does involve a releasing of

clinging and self-preoccupation. And it begins with just an intention.

To simply have the desire for goodwill is valuable. If you do not have any goodwill, you might consider whether having goodwill is a good idea. “Yes, I would like to have it.” “I would like to have it someday.” “I wish I could do it.” But do not berate yourself if you cannot have goodwill. Or do not diminish the value of the desire for goodwill because it is only a desire. Instead, celebrate and appreciate that the desire itself is quite phenomenal. Desires and intentions are an important part of human life. It is good to appreciate wholesome desires when we have them, especially if the alternative is unwholesome desires.

The desire to have goodwill is enough in itself – that is a beginning. Appreciate the desire and maybe give that desire a voice. One way to practice loving-kindness is in your own mind – quietly saying words to express it. Voicing goodwill is good for the heart. When you are alone, you might try speaking goodwill out loud – maybe very personal expressions of goodwill that you have for others or all beings.

You can also express goodwill with classic *mettā* phrases or these phrases from the “*Mettā Sutta*”:

*May all be happy and secure,
May all beings be happy at heart.*

Here the emphasis is on the word “all.” Your goodwill is all-encompassing and goes out in all directions. There are no limitations on your goodwill.

The sutta continues:

*All living beings, whether weak or strong,
Tall, large, medium or short,
Tiny or big,
Seen or unseen,
Near or distant,
Born or to be born,
May they all be happy.*

This includes not just human beings. “Tiny and big” can mean the smallest creatures to the largest. “Seen and unseen” does not only mean people you do not see but also bacteria and insects so small they are unseen.

What does it take to have all-encompassing goodwill? It takes intentionality and some desire. We have to appreciate that desire plays an important role in our lives. Learn how to be wise with desire. Desires are wholesome and beneficial. We do not succumb to the limitations of expectation and demand, success and failure. We do not hijack desire with clinging, craving, and grasping. We can have an open, free, generous heart where we wish well for people. We wish for their welfare.

Some people are afraid to have goodwill or the intention because others might take advantage of it. Or they feel embarrassed or awkward. But this goodwill that you are cultivating does not have to be publicly known. It can be your secret. You can silently wish for the welfare of people who are angry or annoyed with you. You can wish that they be happy. It can be wholesome enough to wish for their welfare and happiness – because if they are happy, then they probably will not be mean to you.

These are beautiful words: “May all be happy and secure. May all beings be happy at heart.” How can these words be intentions, desires, or aspirations that live in you with integrity – that flow out of you, and are valuable for you? There are many ways to answer this question. One way that comes out of meditation is to have a non-claustrophobic mind – to have a mind not busy with thoughts, desires, ill will, annoyances, and fantasies. In a busy mind, there can be no room for the quieter emotions of goodwill, love, and kindness. But in a calm mind and life, there can be room for you to frequently connect to the intention for goodwill.

May you explore this topic today, maybe by repeating *mettā* phrases to yourself and seeing what that brings up in your heart, mind, and body. Repeat these phrases to yourself: “May all be happy and secure. May all beings be happy at heart.” You do not even have to feel any goodwill saying them. What happens if you make

those phrases your mantra for the day? Keep coming back to them and living with them. What do you learn about yourself and your heart?

My translation of the “*Mettā Sutta*” is on the IMC website at: <https://www.insightmeditationcenter.org/metta-sutta/>. Thank you, and I look forward to continuing tomorrow.