

## Metta & Karuna (Right Intention, Part II)

Let's briefly recap what we've covered this semester in our sequence of discussions on the Noble Eightfold Path. You'll recall that the Path is divided into three sections: wisdom, morality, and concentration. Right View is the first element of the wisdom section. It encompasses the concepts that we must understand in order for the rest of the Path to make sense. To reduce it to the most basic formulation: 1) our actions have consequences, and 2) our suffering is caused by craving.

The week before last, we began our discussion of the second element of the Path: Right Intention. Where Right View consists of things that we should know or understand, Right Intention comprises those mental states that we should actively cultivate. These are three: renunciation, good will, and harmlessness. We can think of Right Intention as forming a bridge between the interior qualities of Right View and the external behaviors described in the morality section of the Path.

We've discussed renunciation, so tonight I'd like to talk about the remaining factors of Right Intention, which brings us to the end of the wisdom section of the Path.

"Good will" implies the cultivation of *metta*, a Pali word usually translated as "loving kindness." It is related to the word *mitra*, meaning "friend," so Bhante Gunaratana prefers "loving friendliness." *Metta* is a feeling of unbounded love for all beings everywhere. The Buddha compares this feeling to the love that a mother feels for her only child: "As a mother would risk her own life to protect her only child, even so one should cultivate a boundless heart" (Snp. 1.8).

This idea of boundlessness is central to the practice of *metta*. By its nature, *metta* applies to all beings, without any distinction. It's not something that you feel a whole lot of for your significant other, and a bit less of for your cousin who's always flooding your inbox with those huge e-mails full of cute animal pictures. In the process of cultivating *metta*, we may specify different groups of people, but the ultimate goal is an attitude that makes no such distinctions. Ideally, this attitude should extend far beyond the meditation cushion and should become an instinctive response to situations that we encounter in everyday life. The Buddha specifically mentions that this is a mental state that should pervade our entire waking life: "Whether standing, walking, or sitting, lying down, or whenever awake, one should develop this mindfulness" (ibid.).

The antithesis of *metta* is anger or hatred. In many Buddhist writings, especially in the Mahayana tradition, the development of good will is addressed primarily in terms of overcoming anger. One example is the sixth chapter of *The Guide to the Bodhisattva's Way of Life*, by the 8th century Indian poet and scholar Shantideva. He

lists a number of clever ways to overcome anger, even if someone has hurt you in a very direct way.

He argues, for instance, that it makes no more sense to be angry at a person who hits you with a stick than to be angry at the stick:

*If I become angry with the one who impels [the stick], then it is better if I hate hatred, because the person is impelled by hatred. ... Both his weapon and my body are causes of suffering. He has obtained a weapon, and I have obtained a body. With what should I be angry? (Bodhicaryavatara 6.41-43)*

He further argues that those who harm us will suffer the negative results of their actions, whereas we can benefit by patiently enduring their attacks. So, paradoxically, our adversary becomes our benefactor, since he gives us the opportunity to practice patience.

*Those who hurt me are impelled by my actions, as a result of which they go to the infernal realms. Surely, it is I alone who has ruined them. On account of them, many vices of mine diminish through forbearance. On account of me, they enter the infernal realms with long-lasting agonies. It is I alone who harm them, and they are my benefactors. Wicked mind, why do you misconstrue this and become angry? (Ibid. 6.47-49).*

The complement to *metta* is *karuna*, or compassion. Compassion is a feeling of identification with the suffering of others, and a desire that all beings be free from suffering. It involves the recognition that there is very little difference between us. All of us desire to be free from suffering, yet we're not. We're all in the same predicament. Many of our negative feelings toward others are brought about by an illogical emphasis on differences: She's Christian; I'm Buddhist. He's straight; I'm gay. He's a Wall Street billionaire; I'm a poor student. By focusing on our common suffering, we can remove these boundaries from our minds.

At the risk of taking us too far afield from the Noble Eightfold Path, I'd like to mention that besides their role as components of Right Intention, *metta* and *karuna* are the first two elements in another Buddhist list: the *Brahmaviharas* or "divine abidings." The third item of this list is *mudita*, or "sympathetic joy," which is the obverse of *karuna*. *Karuna* denotes our sharing in the suffering of our fellow beings, while *mudita* dictates that we also share in their happiness, without any feelings of jealousy or envy. The fourth element is *upekka*, equanimity.

That fourth element may strike us as a little out of place. *Metta*, *karuna*, and *mudita* all sort of fall into the "warm fuzzy" zone. Equanimity has a comparatively chilly tone. Equanimity is useful in that it counteracts the danger of the other three brahmaviharas degenerating into mere sentimentality. It helps us to remember that the brahmaviharas are states that we cultivate within our minds. We should not be attached to outcomes.

A good example of how equanimity can help in the development of metta comes from a passage in the Bhavana Society chant book:

*May I be free from hatred. May I be free from affliction. May I be free from worry. May I live happily. As I am, so also may my teachers, spiritual guides, parents, and friendly, indifferent, and hostile beings be free from hatred. May they be free from affliction. May they be free from worry. May they live happily. May they be released from suffering. May they not be deprived of their fortune, justly acquired. **All have kamma as their own.***

I'd like to close with a point that Bhante Gunaratana often makes about *metta* meditation. It is not a sideline to the "regular" practices of concentration and mindfulness. It is a vital component of our practice. Some of you will remember last semester when we talked about the Five Hindrances to meditation. Number one was anger. An angry, hateful mind is simply not capable of concentration, so the cultivation of *metta* will improve our concentration and our meditative practice in general.