

The Way of Metta: Vision of a Peaceful World

Delivered on Vesak Day, June 11, 2023

My thanks to Master Jiru and others at Mid-America Buddhist Association for hosting this event. My thanks to Kungshih and other Buddhist Council members who invited me to speak today. We are celebrating Vesak Day, the Buddha's birth, his life, his awakening and his teaching. We opened the ceremony with Venerable Jue Huang and Reverend Daigaku's spirited recitation of the Heart Sutra, an expression of complete freedom, awakening, bodhi svaha, free at last. Now I would like to share some reflections on one of the Buddha's most beautiful lessons, the Karaniya Metta Sutta. Karaniya – duty or obligation. Metta – friendliness – which is also about freedom, freedom from enmity, freedom from affliction, freedom from the cycle of suffering.

The sutta is taken from the Samyutta Nikaya and written in verse form, 10 stanzas of 4 lines each. It is a frequent part of Theravadan liturgy. It is also part of the liturgy here at MABA, which may be the first place I heard it. In the Soto Zen tradition, at least in America, it is not a usual part of the liturgy. I would like to start by reading the text of the sutta as translated here at MABA.

This is what should be done
 By one who is skilled in goodness,
 And who knows the path of peace:
 Let them be able and upright,
 Straightforward and gentle in speech.
 Humble and not conceited,
 Contented and easily satisfied,
 Unburdened with duties and frugal in their ways.
 Peaceful and calm, and wise and skillful,
 Not proud and demanding in nature.
 Let them not do the slightest thing
 That the wise would later reprove

Wishing: In gladness and in safety,
 May all beings be at ease.

Whatever living beings there may be;
 Whether they are weak or strong, omitting none,
 The great or the mighty, medium, short or small,
 The seen and the unseen,
 Those living near and far away,
 Those born and to-be-born –
 May all beings be at ease.
 Let none deceive another,
 Or despise any being in any state.
 Let none through anger or ill-will
 Wish harm upon another.

Even as a mother protects with her life
 Her child, her only child,
 So with a boundless heart
 Should one cherish all living beings;
 Radiating kindness over the entire world:
 Spreading upwards to the skies,
 And downwards to the depths;
 Outwards and unbounded,
 Freed from hatred and ill-will.
 Whether standing or walking, seated or lying down
 Freed from drowsiness,
 One should sustain this recollection.
 This is said to be the sublime abiding.

By not holding to fixed views,
 The pure-hearted one, having clarity of vision,
 Being freed from all sense-desires,
 Is not born again into this world.

There is a traditional back-story to this sutta reportedly passed down through generations and recorded by Buddhaghosa in the 5th century CE. Whether you believe the story literally is beside the point. A story may have truth value, whether factual or not. As time for the Rains retreat approached the Buddha

instructed his 500 monks to go to a particular forest to meditate for the duration of the rainy season. The forest seemed like a perfect location in the foothills of the Himalayan mountains with a freshwater stream and a village nearby where the lay people were welcoming and willingly would offer alms to the monks. The first couple nights in the forest were just fine and the monks settled into deep meditation practice. Then on the third or fourth night they started seeing frightening visions of demons and monsters and hearing loud shrieks. As it turned out the forest was occupied by tree spirits living in the forest canopy. They didn't mind the monks being there for a short while, but after a few nights wanted their privacy back. Exercising their magical powers, they were trying to scare the monks away.

The monks, trained in concentration, were trying their best to contain their fear and ignore the visions and sounds. Then the tree spirits got the idea of releasing unpleasant odors into the forest to repel the monks. There was overwhelming stench and the monks agreed they would have to leave and let the Buddha assign them a different location. When they reached the Buddha, he instead taught this sutta in verse form so it could be easily memorized. He instructed them to memorize it and recite it aloud frequently when they returned to the forest. Reluctantly they went back and did as instructed. Much to their relief and amazement, upon hearing the words of the verse the tree spirits were pleased and pacified. They quietly allowed the monks to stay in the forest until the end of the Rains Retreat. By the end of the retreat all 500 monks were fully awakened.

So, the advice contained in this sutta was the Buddha's prescription for managing fear and aversion and was also a path to awakening. And it was not confined to the problem of angry tree spirits. It is also applicable to other sources of fear and aversion, even those we confront today: concern about the environment, wars, those expressing bigoted or racist views, those who practice or threaten violence, those who disagree with you or threaten to harm you.

In this teaching the Buddha presents friendliness as an attitude that can be systematically cultivated, and not just a feeling that arises from time to time due to conditions. The Metta Sutta is an expansion of an earlier teaching in the Dhammapada:

In this world

Hate has never dispelled hate.
 Only non-hatred (love) dispels hate.
 This is the law,
 Ancient and inexhaustible.

The Metta Sutta provides instruction as to how to implement non-hatred or metta, loving-kindness or simply kindness, universal love, or friendliness. The sutta begins with the word *karaniya*, which implies duty or obligation. This is what should be done. Then the Buddha defines his audience. This is what should be done by those with skill and good intentions who have knowledge of the path of peace, who have at least a glimpse of perfect peace. I think that is us. We wouldn't be here if we didn't have good intentions and likely everyone here has had at least a glimpse of perfect peace – either during meditation or during a walk in the woods or when offering or receiving an act of kindness, at least a glimpse.

So, the Buddha is talking to us and then goes on to recommend 15 virtues. Just reading through a list of virtues may not have much effect, but the Buddha recommended memorizing them or, at least, keeping them in mind, revisiting them so that as you go through the world, encountering others, playing your part, making decisions, they come to mind. I'm not going to discuss all 15 but will highlight a few of them.

The Buddha encourages his followers to be upright – honest, trustworthy, the kind of person you can count on. He recommended being *suvaco*, which can be translated as gentle in speech, but can also be translated easy to instruct, exercising kind speech but also being a good listener – being willing to accept good advice and not automatically become defensive and willful. Another virtue: humility, not being proud or arrogant based on one's social status, or race, or education, or skill, or wealth, or, for that matter, virtue.

Being content. In our materialistic, consumer culture we are pummeled with the seeds of discontent. If only we had this device, or could take this trip, or receive this service we would be happy. Being content with what you have is almost un-American. The economy is fueled by demand for more and better things. It is also fueled by coal, oil, and natural gas. The Buddha is advising us to at least think twice before ordering the next shiny new thing. Again, from the Dhammapada:

Health is the greatest of gifts,
Contentment the greatest of riches;
Trust is the finest of relationships
And nirvana the highest bliss.

Closely related to contentment is frugality or living simply with few things to protect and maintain, and unburdened by duties, not overly busy, recognizing that many of the tasks we take on are elective and fed by a desire for more. And finally, I'll mention the virtue of being not demanding, being low maintenance to the extent possible, which does not preclude asking for help when needed.

After listing these virtues, the Buddha advises his followers to express the aspiration that in gladness and in safety, may all beings be at ease. May they be happy. All beings -- literally, all breathing beings, regardless of size or status, regardless of location and whether present or future. An unbounded aspiration for all living beings to be happy.

I'm going to bring another voice into this discussion from a surprising source. Ratnaguna in his book *Great Faith Great Wisdom* quotes the English poet, Percy Bysshe Shelley:

The great secret of morals is love; or a going out of our nature, and an identification of ourselves with the beautiful which exists in thought, action or person, not our own. A [person], to be greatly good, must imagine intensely and comprehensively; putting himself in the place of another and of many others; the pains and pleasure of his species must become his own. The great instrument of moral good is the imagination.

The author then continues,

We've seen that, according to Buddhism, unethical actions lead to suffering. Shelley tells us something about this: that much of our suffering comes about because our desires lack imagination. We desire pleasure when we could desire happiness, we desire worldly happiness when we could desire the happiness of Awakening, we desire the love of another person when we could

desire to love everyone and everything that lives, we desire our small happiness when we could desire the highest happiness for all beings.

I think it is safe to say that it will never be the case that all beings are happy and at ease. There will always be those suffering sorrow, lamentation, pain, distress, or despair. And inevitably, as surely as I remain alive, I will contribute to someone's unhappiness through either ignorance, lack of skill, or deluded thinking. But that is not the point. Keeping the Buddha in mind. Keeping in mind the aspiration that all beings be at ease is an antidote for the greed, anger, and topsy-turvy thinking that arise. This aspiration provides us with a North Star, a direction. We can never arrive at the pure land if we have no idea where it is or vision of what it's like.

The Buddha continues by mentioning a couple things to avoid. Let none deceive another or despise anyone. Let none through anger or ill-will wish harm upon another. It's a natural impulse, to wish that someone who has harmed you gets their comeuppance – to even have fantasies about how they might fail in their efforts or suffer some loss. We are advised not to nurture such thoughts, to recognize them as unwholesome and let them go.

Then there is the analogy of showing the same love toward all beings that a mother shows toward her only child. Clearly not all mothers are the same, but here we are invited to picture a mother who would sacrifice her own life for the welfare of her child, not out of a sense of heroism or self-aggrandizement, but out of a heartfelt response. With this same intensity should we radiate kindness, friendliness, love, freed from hatred and ill-will, in all directions and to all beings. Keeping all of this in mind, the Buddha says, is a sublime abiding, a brahma vihara, a divine abode. This is nirvana.

And then not holding to fixed views, or false views, or, perhaps, not clinging tightly to any views at all. And being freed from greed for sense-pleasures. One is not reborn again into this world, or, more literally, does not return to another womb, which is to say, enters nirvana, perfect peace. Sensitive to the fact that there are differing opinions in the contemporary Buddhist community about the notion of rebirth, Thich Nhat Hanh translates the final phrase as, "Those who practice boundless love will certainly transcend birth and death."

So, the trajectory of this teaching is from having a glimpse of perfect peace to a life of perfect peace. The instructions involve how we carry ourselves in the world and how to relate to others, relating to all beings with an attitude of friendliness – of love, even those we disagree with or those who have harmed us.

This does not mean we have to make everyone our buddies. Those who have demonstrated themselves to be a physical or emotional threat may be best avoided, at least for a time, but the Buddha challenges us to not accompany this avoidance with ill-will. That if someone has harmed us out of ignorance, lack of skill, or even malice to wish that they be freed their affliction and be at ease, recognizing that we all are subject to causes and conditions. There is a quote, reportedly from the Buddha, that I find useful. If anyone knows the source, please let me know. It goes, “Do not despise those who have yet to learn.”

So, if we’re not memorizing this sutta and reciting it several times a day while sitting in a forest for four months, how do we practice with this, how do we follow the way of metta? Buddhaghosa in the Vissudamagga offers detailed instruction, perhaps too detailed for most lay people. But he emphasizes the importance of quelling resentment as a first step and gives numerous suggestions. Among them is a simple recognition of the harm that resentment causes, not to your adversary but to yourself. Like picking up a hot coal to throw at him and burning your hand, crippling yourself. I suspect all of us have witnessed, either in ourselves or in others, the misery that results from bearing a grudge, harboring ill-will, desiring vengeance and this misery can last for years or even a lifetime.

Short of reciting the entire sutta, we can recite a short form, “May all beings be free of enmity, free of affliction. May they be at ease.” This phrase can be an object of meditation or can just be brought to mind periodically during the day. Buddhaghosa suggests starting with yourself (“May I be free of enmity, free of affliction. May I be at ease.”) and explains why. It is not to foster self-centeredness but to use yourself as an example. He cites a verse by the Buddha:

I have visited all quarters with mind
 And found no one who loves another more than him or herself.
 In the same way, others, too, love themselves,
 Therefore, one who loves himself should not harm another. (Udana 5.1)

Perhaps if a person is very self-critical it might be easier to just jump to the universal and aspire that all beings be free of enmity and afflictions and be at ease, not starting with yourself.

Metta practice can also be used when situations arise. A personal example. I frequently ride my bike on a 4-lane road with relatively little traffic, passing through a residential neighborhood with a speed limit of 35 mph. Since there are two southbound lanes it is easy for cars to move to the left lane to give me plenty of clearance. Most drivers do this. Every now and then though a car or truck will stay in the right lane and pass right by my handlebar. Often these are the same drivers who exceed the speed limit by at least 10 mph. When this happens fear arise and an emotion that is on the anger spectrum, not rage, but more than mild irritation, perhaps moderate irritation.

Now I know it's possible that the driver has just been shot in the abdomen and is trying to get to the Emergency Room before he passes out from blood loss. More likely though the driver is habitually impatient and just drives this way with disregard for the safety of others. So, it's pretty irritating. What can you do?

May I be freed from enmity and affliction. May I be at ease.

May the driver be freed from enmity and affliction. May he be at ease.

May all beings be freed from enmity and affliction. May they be at ease.

Impatience and heedlessness to the welfare of others are afflictions. May we all be freed from them.

The way of metta doesn't require passively accepting everything that comes along. While doing a little background for this talk, I looked up the Missouri statute regarding passing bicycles and ended up being a supporting member of the Missouri Bicycle and Pedestrian Federation, a group advocating for measures to improve the safety of pedestrians and cyclists. If you have been following local news recently you know it's getting increasingly hazardous to walk the streets of St. Louis. The rate of pedestrian fatalities and injuries is increasing despite a declining population. The way of metta may lead to action and not simply restraint. But it does call on us to try and resolve issues in a friendly, civil, and respectful manner, recognizing that we all deal with blind spots in perception. We all have limited knowledge and skill. We are all human.

The way of metta is not just about interpersonal relationships. As written, it extends to all living beings, literally all breathing beings. That includes animal life both big and small. Regard for animals inevitably leads to regard for the environment we share. Regard for the environment affects everything. Everything we do or purchase or dispose of. It affects what we advocate for and who we vote for. A few years back my first teacher Rosan Yoshida at the Missouri Zen Center changed the wording of our Dedication of Merit. Instead of “May this merit be extended to all and may we together with all sentient beings realize the awakened way,” it was changed to “May this merit be extended to all and may we together with all beings realize the awakened way.” He didn’t want to confine the dedication to sentient beings, but to expand it to all beings, including grasses, trees, stones, mountains, rivers, and oceans, upon which we all depend.

In that spirit we can extend an attitude of friendliness to everything around us, treating objects with care -- practicing resourcefulness and non-harming as much as we can.

The Buddha, during his many years of teaching, offered numerous methods of practice leading to awakening. In this way he could accommodate the varying needs, conditions, and temperament of his listeners. The way of metta is one such avenue in which the Buddha invites us to abandon ill-will, adopt an attitude of universal friendliness, and imagine a peaceful world. For some, it may be their primary practice. It can carry the weight.

Thank you for listening.

May all beings be safe.

May all beings be at peace.

May all beings be liberated.

Will Holcomb
Heartland Zen