

The Skill of Goodness

by

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The Metta Sutra, Buddha's words on loving-kindness starts with the words:

*This is what should be done
by those who are skilled in goodness.¹*

Is goodness a skill? We don't usually think of goodness as something we can study, practise and get skilled at. The Christian tradition has instilled in us the belief that goodness is the absence of sin. That is, if only we could expel all that is bad in us, we would arrive at pure goodness.

In Buddhist terms, goodness is not so much a state as a path. As you walk this path your heart opens more and more and you come forth naturally with kindness, compassion and decency. On one hand there is the plodding work of walking the path, step by step and breath by breath, and, on the other hand, there is the sudden grace of kindness and compassion. The work of practice prepares you for grace.

Walking the path is like tilling the soil and planting seeds. Each time you sit in meditation you are tilling the soil and each time you turn towards your intention of love and goodness, you are sowing a seed. Seeds germinate underground and suddenly shoot forth when they are ready. This is like the sudden grace of kindness and compassion coming forth. You cannot force the sprout to grow, you cannot dig, grab the sprout and drag it into the light so that it may grow faster. Likewise goodness needs to emerge of its own accord and cannot be forced or contrived. Even though some people try and stick a perpetual simper to their face, this cannot compare with the smile that arises naturally as you tell someone that you appreciate them. To walk the path of goodness you need to become real, to become fully human and drop the protection of pretence and deception - like dropping your clothes, garment by garment, till you are bare and naked.

In the Metta Sutra, the Buddha describes the path of goodness as the path of love and kindness. It is the path of transformation through love. Even the little, everyday moments of kindness have transformational power. Just imagine that you are standing in line at the supermarket check-out and an older woman in front of you, flustered, drops her purse, bags and bundles and you help to pick them up. A smile passes between you. And in that fleeting moment your heart expands to include her. For a moment you let go of your restricted sense of self. The smile of the person we meet with love and kindness warms our heart and lights the way. The poet Thomas McGrath writes of this:²

How could I have come so far?
(And always on such dark trails!)
I must have travelled by the light
Shining from the faces of all those I have loved.

The work of transformation happens on your meditation cushion. There, instead of trying to get rid of that which causes yourself and others anguish - your anger, your fear or pain - you can allow it to transmute into goodness. This process of transmutation happens when you begin to embrace your passions, when you allow your storms of anger, jealousy or fear to flare up and die down - all the while meeting yourself with tenderness and compassion.

What holds us back from the transformation of love is fear. The English psychoanalyst John McMurray spoke of people being either 'fear-determined' or 'love-determined':

There are two...emotional attitudes through which human life can be radically determined. They are love and fear...The [fear-determined] have no sun in themselves and go about putting out the sun in other people...Whereas the love-determined have life in them, abundant life...They are the people who are really alive, of whom it can be said that they possess eternal life as a well within them perpetually springing.³

Many years ago I was sitting on a boulder overlooking a mountain lake and beside me was a German woman who, like myself, had just emerged from a Zen retreat. She told me about her life and it seemed like a series of endless catastrophes, one after another, with her worst fears always coming true. At the time I met her, she had a broken leg in a plaster cast. She had lain for two days by the side of a tramping trail, injured and helpless, before someone found her and alerted rescue services. You can imagine that she was a very lonely, anxious and unhappy person. Now, after her first retreat, she looked at me and said, "I don't know what all these Buddhist words mean. All I know is that I have discovered within me a spring of fresh water welling forth." She had had a glimpse of who she was in the depth and with that glimpse could start the work of transforming fear into love, moving from being a victim to leading a life of ease and joy.

When your life is determined by fear, you continually extinguish your own light: "No use trying!", "I'm hopeless at that!", "I'll never learn!", "This is too difficult!" Each time you play these negative tapes, you extinguish your light, you negate your potential. And when you look at others and their perceived talent and success, you may feel envy which is really a wish to extinguish their light also.

To be skilled in goodness is to become determined by love. How can we move from fear towards love? The key to such transformation is intimacy. We move from fear towards love when we start connecting with ourselves and others.

A wonderful way of practising intimacy is metta meditation. Metta, or loving-kindness meditation was taught by the Buddha specifically as an antidote to fear.⁴ Metta is the practice of cherishing the goodness in us and others. Thich Nhat Hanh translates the word metta as "the intention and capacity to offer joy and happiness."⁵ There are many different ways to practise metta and it is helpful to engage with a teacher to develop and deepen this practice.

Apart from engaging in metta on your meditation mat, there are simple ways of turning your intention towards loving-kindness. Try this, for example: When you get out of bed in the mornings immediately bow and dedicate yourself to the wellbeing of all, saying, "May I and all beings be at ease." In this way you dedicate your day as an offering. At first sight to wish for ease may seem a lowly thing, but really, to be at ease is the life of the enlightened being. Listen to the birdsong, look at a flower, stroke a cat - aren't they all at ease? And what about you? Are you at ease? To be at ease means resting in the moment without leaning forward into the future or backward into the past. To be at ease means being who you are without a thought of how you should be or how others perceive you. To be at ease means to be unselfconscious and natural. When we are at ease we are content. A while ago I was sitting beside the bed of a young woman who was dying of cancer. She was in great pain. Suddenly she looked up at me and said, "You know, I'm at ease with dying!"

You learn to be at ease through sitting on your meditation cushion. Whatever practice you are following, whether it is working with the breath or a koan or metta - the heart of practice is to come alive in the present moment. When you are in the moment - just as it is - you are practising being at ease. To be at ease in the moment means to be the bare person, unadorned - without pretences, without dreams, without stories. When we come forth as the bare person, stripped of everything, we embody our essential nature, the vast empty void that comes forth as you and I, stars, waves crashing on the beach, valleys cloaked in clouds, dewy grasses nodding by the wayside.

Being at ease leads to happiness and contentment. The great Buddhist philosopher Nagarjuna who lived in the second century CE, wrote in the Mahaprajnaparamita Shastra⁶:

When we want beings in all directions to be happy, there arises in us an intention to love. This desire to love enters our feelings, perceptions, mental formations, and consciousness; and it becomes manifested in all our actions, speech and other mental activities.

This is like setting the autopilot on a plane. You may veer off course, but the autopilot will point you back in the right direction. The intention to love allows you to return to your practice, allowing you to open to forgiveness when the tide of anger turns or gather courage as fear begins to fade. Your modest intention to love is a light of goodness that blesses you and all beings.

You may notice that it is easier to cherish others than to cherish yourself. However, if you do not have love and kindness for yourself, you do not develop love and kindness for others. And you end up with a travesty of love that masks deep unhappiness. As Sharon Salzberg points out: ⁷

Generosity coming from self-hatred becomes martyrdom. Morality born of self-hatred becomes rigid repression. Love for others without the foundation of love for ourselves becomes a loss of boundaries, co-dependancy and a painful and fruitless search for intimacy.

To cherish the seed of goodness in ourselves and others is the heart of metta. When you reflect on a moment of your own kindness, you can touch a core of goodness within that cannot be sullied no matter what you have experienced. And when you enter deeper into that goodness, you will experience that it is vast, reaching far beyond the stars and that it includes even the smallest grain of sand, even the finest blade of grass - nothing left out at all! This vast light lights our way through the darkness of suffering.

This is "...the formless field of benefaction" that the Verse of the Kesa speaks of. The Metta Sutra says:

So, with a boundless heart
should one cherish all living beings
radiating kindness over the entire world.

When you see clearly into that boundless heart, when you touch the ground of being, you are liberated from your sense of inadequacy, your preoccupations, your feelings of loss, emptiness and despair. Where there was despair, joy and tenderness will emerge - where there was preoccupation, a focus on what needs to be done, moment by moment, will grow. This transformation from fear to love comes about step by step as you continue to practise. Sometimes you will be angry, sometimes you will be hurt or lonely and will extinguish your light. But through the practice of metta you can find your way out of the darkness into the light again and can walk on to fulfil your destiny. For each one of us is a sun, born to warm and illuminate all beings.

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¹ Metta Sutra in: Sharon Salzberg, *Loving-Kindness* (Boston: Shambhala, 1997), introduction.

² Thomas McGrath, *Collected Poems 1938 - 1988* (Copper Canyon 1988).

³ John McMurray, *Freedom in the Modern World* (London: Faber & Faber 1932) p58.

⁴ Sharon Salzberg, *Loving-Kindness* (Boston: Shambhala, 1997) p20.

⁵ Thich Nhat Hanh, *Teachings on Love* (Berkeley: Parallax Press, 1997) p4.

⁶ Thich Nhat Hanh, *Teachings on Love* (Berkeley: Parallax Press, 1997) p14.

⁷ Sharon Salzberg, *Loving-Kindness* (Boston: Shambhala, 1997) p26.

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