

Skillful Action

(from *The Skill of Living*)

Discernment is seeing what we have to do to fulfill our wish to be happy.

Lovingkindness is doing it.

As dharma students developing lovingkindness, we strive to take action, physical, verbal, mental, that's motivated by the heart, by love, good will, compassion. We strive to act straight from the heart.

In this book we've learned that as we develop qualities such as generosity, ethical conduct, renunciation, in order to be skillful our actions must be driven by love, compassion. Now we're broadening the range of our actions to include all of our actions. As we cultivate lovingkindness, we make an effort whenever we take action to act skillfully, heartfully, with love, good will, compassion. We make an effort, whenever we act, to establish skillful intention.

Lovingkindness is a translation of the Pali word "metta." It doesn't, however, quite capture the essence of metta. Metta encompasses many qualities, including lovingkindness, love, kindness, friendliness, good will. It includes a range of heartfelt attitudes. It's often useful to think of metta as an attitude of good will. In cultivating metta, the dharma student seeks to relate wholeheartedly to all beings, including himself. It's not possible, realistic, or appropriate to expect that we'll be able to take loving action toward all beings, but we can learn to extend our good will to them. In doing so, we're not implying that we're going to spend time with them or

take care of them, but rather that we wish them well. As Thanissaro Bhikkhu says, an attitude of good will is often more skillful for us than an attitude of lovingkindness.

Metta is the baseline quality of the heart. When the heart is open, it shines with metta. Metta is boundless, limitless. It shines everywhere. It doesn't have preferences, doesn't pick favorites, doesn't decide to shine in one place but not another.

In cultivating metta, we seek to extend good will to all beings. As the Buddha says:

With good will for the entire cosmos,
cultivate a limitless heart:
Above, below, & all around,
unobstructed, without enmity or hate.
Whether standing, walking,
sitting, or lying down,
as long as one is alert,
one should be resolved on this mindfulness.
This is called a sublime abiding
here & now.

(Sn 1.8)

In our culture when we talk about love we're referring for the most part to romantic love. This romantic love, glorified in movies, popular songs and novels, is the product of desire, the often intense desire to engage with the other, to experience connection, to experience sense pleasure: the pleasure that comes when we're in the throes of relationship, the pleasure that

derives from physical contact, sex. This romantic love is not boundless. It doesn't transcend preferences. Just the opposite. It's driven by our preferences. In pursuing romantic love, we purposefully limit our focus: we seek just one person, a single recipient of our love. We may even speak about finding "the one."

Romantic love is motivated by desire, clinging. It's a volatile emotion. It's impermanent. As we all know, it doesn't last. In fact, it usually dissipates rather quickly. Needless to say, romantic love isn't what the Buddha is talking about when he talks about love. Love, according to the Buddha, occurs in the place where there's release from desire, letting go of clinging.

When we take action informed by lovingkindness for ourselves we act in support of the wish that we have to be happy. We seek to fulfill our wish to be happy. When we take action informed by lovingkindness for others, we act in support of the wish they have for true happiness.

Lovingkindness and the other heart qualities (compassion, joy, equanimity) are sometimes known as "sublime attitudes." It's a good way to think about these qualities. They're attitudes. Skillful attitudes. Most of us probably haven't gone through life with a very skillful attitude. Speaking for myself, for a good part of my life I went about my business with a fairly suspect attitude, a rather cynical, negative attitude. In developing lovingkindness, we relinquish our former attitudes, our old ways of going about things; we relate to ourselves and others with an attitude of lovingkindness, good will. We act with this sublime attitude.

It's all about action. As you follow the path, your heart will open, you'll feel lovingkindness. As dharma practitioners, however, we don't simply feel lovingkindness. We don't simply immerse ourselves in the warmth of lovingkindness. We don't luxuriate in this pleasant feeling, like somebody taking a warm bubble bath. We take action.

We have to act.

The fact is, when the heart is open we don't have any choice but to act. The Buddha knew this. In the days following his awakening, his heart was wide open, effusing love, compassion. He realized, accordingly, that he had to express his love. He realized that he had to engage in a full encounter with the world. He decided, therefore, to teach the dharma. And he spent the next 45 years doing that, acting in a completely loving, compassionate manner.

Sometimes new students worry that practicing the dharma will result in a sort of passivity. They hear about cultivating qualities like generosity, ethical conduct, renunciation, lovingkindness, equanimity, and they worry that if they follow the Buddha's path they'll turn into soft, mushy, motivationless people. They're afraid they won't accomplish anything. This is a grave misconception. We have only to look at the example the Buddha set to see that it isn't true. The Buddha, acting strictly out of love and compassion, accomplished a lot. He accomplished a hell of a lot. If anybody's life is a demonstration of accomplishment, it's the Buddha's. The fact is, when we act from a place of lovingkindness, we put ourselves in a much better position to accomplish something in our lives.

When you act from the heart, you act from a place of strength. Lovingkindness is your greatest strength. If you think about anything of great significance that's been accomplished by human beings, it's been done by people who've been propelled by love, compassion. The Buddha. Ghandi. Martin Luther King, Jr. They're people we're still talking about, years after they lived, because their actions were motivated by the heart. The idea may not align with the belief structures of many people in today's world, but the fact remains: the heart is by far the source of your greatest strength.

In previous chapters we've talked about paying attention to the "blatant and subtle." The principle applies here. Cultivating lovingkindness, we consider the big stuff and the small stuff. All of our actions are important. They're more important, undoubtedly, than we think.

In developing lovingkindness, we take heartfelt action with regard to the most significant aspects of our lives, our work, our relationships with our partner, children, parents, friends. We also cultivate lovingkindness when taking subtle actions. We bring heartfulness to the so-called small moments: getting out of bed in the morning, buying a quart of milk in the corner grocery, checking email, walking across the parking lot. I find walking a good activity in which to cultivate lovingkindness. As I'm walking along the street, I'll ask myself: How am I walking? Am I walking with lovingkindness? Walking along the concrete sidewalk, I'll cultivate skillful intention, the intention to walk with an attitude of lovingkindness. As St. Francis of Assisi said: "It is no use walking anywhere to preach unless our walking is our preaching."

All your actions ask for your attention, your care, your lovingkindness. Every action you take represents an opportunity to develop your heart, to meet the world and yourself with lovingkindness and good will.

When you take action imbued with lovingkindness, you condition lovingkindness. Lovingkindness is conditioned action by action, intention by intention. Each heartfelt action that you take, even the smallest action, contributes to the opening of the heart, the inclination to act heartfully going forward. The capacity to act with lovingkindness grows drop by drop. Each action is like a drop in a bucket; gradually the bucket fills up. Gradually you develop the habit of taking action, physical, verbal, mental, that's motivated by lovingkindness and good will.

Every time you take skillful action, you bend your mind in the right direction.

Cultivating lovingkindness, of course, is a skill. We develop the skill when we follow the five-step process for developing skillful intention/action.

Before acting, you see what your mind is like. If there's unskillful intention in the mind, you abandon it.

Perhaps you're about to talk to your fourteen-year-old son. You check your mind. You notice some aversion. You really don't feel like talking to him. Observing the aversion, refraining from feeding on it, you leave it to the side.

You set a skillful intention: the intention to act, to speak with your son, with lovingkindness.

You assert directed thought. You tell yourself: I'm going to speak with kindness. Or something along those lines (it's important to find your own way of verbalizing intention).

You connect to your heart, to a felt sense of your heart. You feel lovingkindness for your son.

Now, you speak with him.

While you're interacting with your son, you pay attention. You're heedful. If you begin to feel the aversion you'd experienced before, you notice it, put it to the side. You re-assert your skillful intention. You re-connect to your heart.

(If you realize, while you're in the midst of an action, that you've neglected to set an intention, you can set a skillful intention right then, right there, wherever you are. You can bring in the intention to act with lovingkindness. You can connect to a felt sense of your heart. You can change your course at any point. You're not condemned to unskillful action.)

After speaking with your kid, you acknowledge that you've acted skillfully. You recognize the benefits of taking heartfelt action. You pause for a moment. You reflect. You get a felt sense of the truth: the truth of the benefits in acting with lovingkindness.

There are extraordinary benefits in taking action driven by lovingkindness. It's important to recognize the benefits. It's important to recognize the power of lovingkindness. The Buddha said that the tiniest bit of lovingkindness has a powerful effect. You have to see that.

Lastly, there's step five: you take joy. Acknowledging the blessing of your skillful qualities, your lovingkindness, you take joy. You connect to the feeling of joy that arises in the heart when you act skillfully.

Most of us aren't in the habit of meeting the experiences of our lives with lovingkindness and compassion. It's not the way we've gone about things. For most of our lives we've acted from a place of desire and aversion and delusion. But the Buddha's teachings, the step-by-step instructions for developing skillful intention/action, provide a means for changing our habitual way of doing things.

You may believe on some level that you can't change. But it isn't true. You can. You can develop new habits. You can learn the necessary skills.

You can learn to meet life with an attitude of lovingkindness. You can learn to relate to yourself, to others, with lovingkindness. You can learn to adopt the sublime attitude of lovingkindness.

Even as you're reading this, you can cultivate lovingkindness. You can assert your intention to read these words with an attitude of lovingkindness, recognizing that you're taking care of yourself, that you're doing something that's going to help you in your efforts to find true happiness.

Try it.

Feel your breath.

Bring your attention in to your heart center.

Assert directed thought.

“I’m going to read with lovingkindness.”

Connect to a felt sense of the heart, your wish to be happy, the quality of lovingkindness.

Read this sentence with an attitude of lovingkindness, connected to your wish to be happy.

And this sentence.

And the next sentence.

As you continue forward, in reading, in doing whatever you’re going to do after reading this part of the book, cultivate a sublime attitude, an attitude of lovingkindness.

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