

Dharmette: Origins of the Metta Sutta

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There's a story—I call it a legend—in the somewhat later Buddhist texts about the occasion that the Buddha taught his monastics the *Mettā Sutta*, the *Discourse on Loving-Kindness*.

And the occasion was that the monastics every year have to go off for about three months. They call it the rains retreat because in India they did it during the rainy season, and they would stay in one place and practice and live in community. And so, when it got to be the rains retreat, getting close to that time, monks would gather together, and they'd go find a place to be living together for a time.

So there were some monastics who did that, and they went traveling a little bit in the countryside. They found what seemed like a pretty ideal grove of trees that was near running water and was kind of quiet and good for meditation. It was close enough to the local villages so they could go for their alms rounds every day. They don't have their own food every day; they have to go out and receive food from people who want to offer it to them.

So they found this beautiful place. They set themselves up there to be under the trees, to sleep and live and practice and meditate under these beautiful trees that were there. And they thought they'd found the perfect place.

Well, it turned out that there were *yakṣas*. The *yakṣas* are kind of like tree spirits that lived in those trees. And at first, the tree spirits were fine with the Buddhist monastics coming, and they're here to meditate. So they moved out, you know, out of their trees. So the monastics would be there for one night or two nights, and they said, "Wait a minute, they're staying. These are our homes. We can't just go wandering around. This is our home. We can't leave."

So they decided they would try to scare the monastics away, because how else would you do that, I guess? And so, at night they would create all kinds of hair-raising howls and screams

and growls. And all the monks, monastics, were all kind of sitting stoically with it and meditating through the night. But their hair was standing on end—if they had hair, because they have shaved heads.

But then, as the days went along, these monastics were getting paler and paler, more and more withdrawn, more and more kind of hollowed out a little bit by not sleeping and the fear they felt. But they didn't want to say anything to anyone because, you know, you know. I don't know exactly why, but they wanted to keep it to themselves. Maybe they felt like this was something I had to practice with privately. Or maybe it was embarrassing to be so afraid if you're a monastic, or maybe they didn't want to disturb everyone else.

But whatever the reason was, at some point it became clear that they were all shriveling, not sleeping and being so scared at night. So they got together and talked about it. And so someone said, “Oh, we should go to the Buddha and ask permission to find a different place because this place doesn't work.”

And so they go find the Buddha. And they go traveling to where the Buddha is and explain what's going on. And he says, “No, that's the—I looked. I looked. My mind's eye. I look around the whole universe. That grove of trees is the perfect place for you. You have to go back.” So I imagine they gulped, and he doesn't understand what we're up against.

But he said, “But memorize this,” and he taught them the *Mettā Sutta*.

This is what should be done by one who is skilled in goodness and knows the way to peace. May they be upright and straightforward. Capable, upright, and easy to speak to. And may they think: may all beings be happy, whether seen or unseen, small or large or medium, to be born and not to be born. May all creatures be safe. May they be peaceful. May they be happy. And may we treat every being as a mother would protect her only child. So in the same way, may our hearts be boundlessly filled with love. Living in love, sending out love in all directions—above, sideways, backwards, downwards—in all directions, may all beings be happy.

And he goes through all these ethical things, how they're supposed to be. So that's my paraphrase of it. And so they kind of gulped and, you know, memorized the text, and then they went back.

And sure enough, the tree spirits started when they saw the monastics come back. They were a little bit, you know, alarmed again. “This is our homes.” And so then they started their howling. And the monks started reciting the *Mettā Sutta*.

And when the tree spirits heard this text, they relaxed. They softened. They felt, “This is nourishing. This is nurturing for us. This is good. This is medicine. This is quite special to hear this.” And they relaxed and figured out a way that they could coexist with the monastics, and they lived happily ever after.

And so, something like that. The whole thing is paraphrased. But one of the things I think is relevant for all of us is that there is, for all of us, we have an unseen world, and that unseen world sometimes needs something from us.

And at the end of the recent retreat, I talked—I mentioned that we have the parts of who we are that are conscious, that we know about. And most of us relate to our conscious thoughts, conscious feelings, conscious memories and experiences, what we can identify and see. Much bigger than that, a bigger part of who we are, is what's subconscious.

Luckily, we don't have to be conscious of it all, because we would never be able to do anything if we knew all the—had to track everything that's going on and keep everything, you know. So there's a whole level of things which we do on habit, or subconsciously we do, but we could be conscious if we want to focus on it.

And then there's even a bigger domain of our inner life which is unconscious. But we don't neurologically, physiologically, hormonally—things that we don't track, we don't see, we don't understand what's going on. And maybe we'll never have consciousness of it. There's some people who think there's ways to access that, or somehow interpret it or understand it, but, you know, that's just interpretations. We don't know.

But there's something there that is unconscious, and the whole of who we are includes all of those. And *Dhamma* practice that we do is supposed to touch all of it. And a lot of the way that works is you don't have to understand everything. But you have to provide the supportive conditions. You have to provide the context that touches all the different places within us that need to be met and grow and develop and heal and be nourished and provided with safety.

And so we create the context, and that's one of the big important parts about Buddhism. It is not about cause and effect exactly. It's not like you have to figure out the cause and be the engineer to put in the effect that's going to make everything good here. But rather, our responsibility is not to be the agent of change, but that we're the caretakers of change. We put the conditions in place, like a gardener, so something can grow and develop and shift and change.

And so, living an ethical life is huge in Buddhism. It's kind of like the foundation of it all. It's

very hard to live an ethical life if you're trying to harm people intentionally, or even kind of unintentionally but willingly, unknowingly. You want to avoid causing harm, and that does something to us, the subconscious and the unconscious parts of ourselves, because it seems that the subconscious and unconscious parts are very affected by how we live our lives, the choices we make.

So you want to make wise choices, and then to do meditation practices or inner practices. That creates a lot of well-being, cultivates well-being, cultivates integrity, cultivates unification. So we're not divided from ourselves. And the practices of *samādhi*, which are unification processes, are activities where all of who we are gets pulled together in some way.

The conscious, subconscious, and unconscious all come under the domain of a coordinated, cooperative system. They work together. We don't have to know what's going on deep down, but we can put the conditions in place for that unification, that gathering together, where it all begins to kind of come into some kind of harmony. A harmony that sometimes in Buddhist musical is said to be beautiful. It's kind of an inner beauty.

And one of these forms of inner practices is things like loving-kindness and compassion and appreciative joy and equanimity. Love. And this makes a huge difference for what we can see sometimes, but even what we don't see, what we don't know about.

So that's true for ourselves as individuals. It's also true, maybe, for the whole world, at least the human world, that, you know, there's the conscious, the subconscious, and the unconscious that we all share. And we all live together in one large family of human beings. And so all of us share what we don't know about each other. We all share this unconscious, this subconscious.

We all share that even the life systems of this planet—we know more and more of how it works, but we don't. Do we really know all of it? Do we bring everything into consciousness? Do we all know how these processes work? Maybe, maybe all of this—it's all working together in one big system.

And so, how we live—are we living ethically? Are we living with integrity, meaning unified and whole, or are we living divided? Are we living unethically? And the ancient legends of Buddhism are that the whole world is very dependent on how ethically human beings live.

That will have literally, back then in the ancient world, environmental and social decay and destruction when humans start being unethical. And we have the restoration of the world and restoration of society when human beings start being ethical and start meditating. That's the kind of ancient stories.

And so why I want to emphasize this is that it's not a small thing, this practice we do. This practice that we do, we don't know all the areas of our personal life, our family life, our social life, our world life, that we're touching when we're trying to come together into this deep feeling of integrity that this practice is about. I believe it has tremendous benefit for ourselves and for others.

So, maybe you'll memorize the *Mettā Sutta*, and maybe something from inside of you will rise up and howl and scream, and you'll know what to do. You'll chant the *Mettā Sutta* or something else like that. May this practice be healing for this whole world that needs so much healing. Thank you.