

# Overcoming Ill Will

How to change the way we interact with  
those who anger us

By Bhante Henepola Gunaratana



Courtesy Bhavana Society

As a practice that trains the mind to become gentle and considerate, *metta* is a powerful method to dissolve our habits of thinking about, speaking to, and treating others with ill will.

In the *Discourse on Repression of Ill Will (Aghata Vinaya Sutta)*, Sariputta, one of the Buddha's leading disciples, offers five practices for overcoming ill will and practicing loving-friendliness. These examples show us simple ways to think about complex, difficult situations. When we are with others, as our metta is sprouting in our hearts, we may face situations that challenge us. We know that we need to overcome whatever ill will remains in our minds toward others, but we are tempted to fall into old patterns of judging and distancing ourselves from them. These practices offer a different way of interacting with people who anger us.

## The Dirty Rag

We may come across people whose words are kind, but whose bodily behaviour is not. They make promises they can't keep and act evasively, or say nice things to us but act poorly. We can consider behaving toward them like the monk who, while walking down the road, comes across a dirty rag. The rag is so filthy he can't even pick it up with his hands, so he holds it with one foot while he kicks it with the other foot to clean it off. Then he picks it up with two fingers, shakes it off, brings it home, and washes it. He sees that this once-dirty rag is in fact completely functional and he sews it onto his patchwork robes!

When we encounter people whose deeds are not good but whose words are pleasant, we can search for ways to arouse loving-friendliness within ourselves. We can certainly find one reason or another to do so—we can grasp onto their kind words in the same way the monk saw the value of the cloth obscured by dirt. We admire

and respect these people for their words and arouse our own loving-friendliness to share with them. If we are able to associate with them and show them loving-friendliness, it might encourage them to change their way of acting. But we do not pay attention to their actions. Focusing on and encouraging others' positive words gives their kindness room to blossom naturally.

Additionally, when we learn to practice compassion and equanimity toward people in this way, our own thoughts of ill will toward them are subdued.

Keep in mind that the layers of conditioning on a person have made them difficult to handle, just like the layers of dirt on the cloth. Perhaps they have faced hardship unknown to us—such as losing a friend or family member, home, or job. Maybe they were mistreated or abused as a child and this contributed to their thinking that rough behaviour is a normal part of life. What matters for us is that we see that someone is suffering. We can offer them our loving-friendliness.

## The Algae-Covered Pond

Next, consider how you become angry with a person whose speech is unkind but whose actions are respectful. For example, someone disparages you for doing a task incorrectly but then does the task for you so that you can learn from them. Sariputta compares this type of person to a pond covered with algae. Say that there is a pond nearby on a hot day when you are very thirsty. You are sweaty and feeling exhausted, and a cool dip would feel so refreshing. But the pond is covered with algae, so how do you dive in? First you must clear the algae away with both hands.

Similarly, you can overlook this person's challenges and recognise that their heart opens to compassion and loving-friendliness from time to time. On this basis, you develop loving-friendliness toward that person. The ill will you may have felt toward them diminishes on its own.

## The Hoof print Puddle

The third type of person speaks both unwholesome words and does unwholesome deeds, but from time to time their heart opens to noble, friendly, and compassionate things. Sariputta suggests that such a person can be compared to a puddle on the road.

Suppose you are walking along a road and there is no water or well. You are thirsty and tired, desperately looking for water. Almost dehydrated, you find a little rainwater that has collected in the hoof print of a cow in the middle of the road. There's very little water, and if you try to scoop it up by hand, you'll make it muddy. What to do? You kneel down and slowly bring your mouth to that bit of water and sip it without disturbing the mud, thus quenching your thirst.

From time to time, even with their bad words and deeds, you'll find that this person's heart opens to loving-friendliness, compassion, appreciative joy, and equanimity. When you recognise a moment when their heart is open, take advantage of it—enter quickly. Say some loving words to keep their heart open. Speak kindly, showing metta in your tone and words. This is a wonderful opportunity to share with someone the benefit of metta. By patiently practicing loving-friendliness toward this person, despite all their weaknesses, you can produce a miracle. Others might give up and over time

get tired and burn out. They might blame metta, saying it doesn't work; while it is a normal reaction to blame something that doesn't work, look closely. If you do something haphazardly and fail, don't blame the system. Find out what could be done differently and make the necessary adjustments.

Similarly, you can find a way even with this kind of person to cultivate loving-friendliness. Use whatever possible opening you can get to overcome your feelings of ill will, just as you would sip the water in the cow's hoof print.

## The Sick Traveler

The fourth type of person you may feel ill will toward has no visible redeeming qualities: their words are negative, their behaviour is bad, and their heart does not open at all for anything noble.

Coming across such a person is like finding a patient, a sick man, walking alone on a road where there is no hospital, no village, and no other humans around. There is no water, no house to rest in, not a single tree to provide him shelter. This person is afflicted and suffering from severe sickness. He needs immediate medical attention—otherwise he will die. You see him and feel very sorry for him. Your heart melts. You think, “How can I help this man? He needs water, medicine, food, and clothes. He needs somebody to help him.” When your heart responds with empathy, you find a way to help this person. Listen to that voice that wants to help him, and let that spark of kindness grow. Then you will volunteer to help that person in spite of any difficulty.

Similarly, when people are completely negative in thought, word, and deed, we can practice metta. Although we might normally react to them with anger, still we need to find a reason to develop thoughts of loving-friendliness and compassion toward them. Then we become like the sick person's medicine. One who practices metta should think about how this person's unwholesome behaviour creates so much suffering for himself, both now and in the future. If this man gives up his bad behaviour and cultivates wholesome bodily and verbal behaviour, he could find peace and happiness in this life. He could enjoy things available to him without grumbling. He could have many friends and live a happy and healthy life. So instead, think: "I should help him to get rid of his hatred; if I do, I will be glad for the rest of my life thinking that I have done something wonderful." Rather than being angry with such a person, let your heart open to him to see how much he suffers by acting in such a harmful way.

## The Clear Lake

The fifth person's words and behavior are sweet, and their heart is open for noble practices. This person can be likened to a clear, calm lake. The water is sweet and cool, and the pool is surrounded by soft grass and shade trees. If someone comes along tired and overheated, taking a dip in this lake is most refreshing. In a similar way, this person's thoughts are sweet and wonderful, and their words are beautiful and friendly. Their deeds are friendly, beautiful, and pure. Everything is ideal. It is easy for us to cultivate loving-friendliness toward that person. If you are unable to calm

the anger you may feel toward such a person, reflect on their good qualities without harboring any jealousy. Know that it is possible for you as well to become like a clear lake in your thoughts, words, and deeds.

Consider the ways in which you can try to cultivate loving-friendliness equally toward all these five types of people without discrimination. Of course, you may find that it is not very easy—that there are times when you want to give in to ill will. Stretching our capacity for loving-friendliness sometimes requires that we make a great sacrifice—but what we sacrifice are our comfort, thoughts, feelings, and attitudes. In other words, we sacrifice our old way of relating to the world. Remember that the purpose of developing metta for these people is to make *yourself* calm and peaceful. To make others comfortable, first make *yourself* comfortable with them. It is not very easy, but in time we may see it as worthwhile—even natural!

## Patience, Mindfulness, and Metta Go Together

Another traditional story about Sariputta from the *Dhammapada* shows how metta helps us overcome ill will. One day when Venerable Sariputta was on his alms round, a brahmin and a few of the brahmin's friends saw him in the distance. They discussed how noble and patient Sariputta was. This brahmin said that he wanted to test Sariputta's patience, so he slowly went behind him and gave a very serious blow to Sariputta's back. Venerable Sariputta continued his alms round without even turning back to see who had struck him.



The brahmin felt so guilty that he rushed in front of Sariputta and apologized. When Sariputta asked him why he was apologizing, the brahmin said that he had given him a strong blow. Sariputta forgave him and continued his alms round. Then feeling even more guilty, the brahmin said, “Sir, if you really forgive me, I would like you to come to my house and have your meal there.” Accepting his invitation, Sariputta went to his house and after the meal gave him a dharma talk.

Meanwhile the news spread around that a brahmin had struck Venerable Sariputta. Many people in the neighborhood gathered with clubs, sticks, and rocks to attack the brahmin. As soon as Sariputta finished his talk, he saw the people armed with all these weapons.

Realizing what would happen to the brahmin, Sariputta used his mindfulness and compassion to help him. He gave his alms bowl to the brahmin and asked him to follow him. The angry people asked Sariputta to take his alms bowl back, yet he retorted, “Why?”

“Because we want to beat him up.”

“Why?”

“Because he attacked you.”

“I have forgiven him. You have not been attacked. So you all go home. This brahmin is a good man now.”

After this episode the monks assembled in the discussion hall and started talking about the incident. Then the Buddha asked them what the topic of their discussion was. When they reported the incident, the Buddha said:

One should not strike a brahmin

And a brahmin should not set anger loose.



Shame on the one who hits a brahmin  
And greater shame on the one who sets anger loose.  
For the brahmin, nothing is better  
Than restraining the mind  
From what it cherishes.  
Whenever one turns away from the intent to harm,  
Suffering is allayed.

We can learn from Sariputta's example and from the Buddha's teaching. Though it may be tempting to set anger loose, we may find that patience and loving-friendliness are essential for overcoming such emotions. If you find your patience tested, think of a person with only one eye—how his or her compassionate friends and relatives would do whatever they could to protect the one eye. Similarly, imagine there is a person who has great faith in practicing mindfulness but is always forgetful. Rather than getting angry, as a person practicing metta protect this person's faith, just as a compassionate person does everything possible to protect the sight of the one-eyed friend.

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Bhante Henepola Gunaratana is a Buddhist monk from Sri Lanka and the author of *Mindfulness in Plain English*. He is president of the Bhavana Society in High View, West Virginia, an organization that promotes meditation and monastic life.

