

Lovingkindness



Lovingkindness adapted from *Lovingkindness*, by Sharon Salzberg, © 1995. Reproduced by arrangement with Shambhala Publications, Inc., www.shambhala.com

Metta, which can be translated from Pali as “love” or “lovingkindness,” is the first of the brahma-viharas, the “heavenly abodes.” The others—compassion, sympathetic joy, and equanimity—grow out of metta, which supports and extends these states.

In our culture, when we talk about love, we usually mean either passion or sentimentality. It is crucial to distinguish metta from both of these states. Passion is enmeshed with feelings of desire, of wanting or of owning and possessing. Passion gets entangled with needing things to be a certain way, with having our expectations met. The expectation of exchange that underlies most passion is both conditional and ultimately defeating: “I will love you as long as you behave in the following fifteen ways, or as long as you love me in return at least as much as I love you.” It is not a coincidence that the word *passion* derives from the Latin word for “suffering.” Wanting and expectation inevitably entail suffering.

By contrast, the spirit of metta is unconditional: open and unobstructed. Like water poured from one vessel to another, metta flows freely, taking the shape of each situation without changing its essence. A friend may disappoint us; she may not meet our expectations, but we do not stop being a friend to her. We may in fact disappoint ourselves, may not meet our own expectations, but we do not cease to be a friend to ourselves.

Sentimentality, the other mental state that masquerades as love, is really an ally of delusion. It is a facsimile of caring that limits itself only to experiences of pleasure. Like looking through the lens of a camera that has been smeared with a little Vaseline, sentimentality puts things into what is called “soft focus.” We cannot see the rough edges, the trouble spots, or the defects. Everything appears just too nice. Sentimentality finds pain unbearable and so rejects it.

Our vision becomes very narrow when we need things to be a certain way and cannot accept things the way they actually are. Denial functions almost as a kind of narcotic, so that vital parts of our lives end up missing.

When we practice metta, we open continuously to the truth of our actual experience, changing our relationship to life. Metta—the sense of love that is not bound to desire, that does not have to pretend that things are other than the way they are—overcomes the illusion of separateness, of not being part of a whole. Thereby metta overcomes all of the states that accompany this fundamental error of separateness—fear, alienation,

loneliness, and despair—all of the feelings of fragmentation. In place of these, the genuine realization of connectedness brings unification, confidence, and safety.

In Buddhism there is one word for mind and heart: *chitta*. Chitta refers not just to thoughts and emotions in the narrow sense of arising from the brain, but also to the whole range of consciousness, vast and unimpeded. As we open to the experience of chitta, we come to an understanding of who we are, with an ability to care for ourselves. Through the force of love, the presumed boundaries between ourselves and others crumble into ash as we touch them.

What unites us all as human beings is an urge for happiness, which at heart is a yearning for union, for overcoming our feelings of separateness. We want to feel our identity with something larger than our small selves. We long to be one with our own lives and with each other.

If we look at the root of even the most terrible addictions, even the most appalling violence in this world, somewhere we will find this urge to unite, to be happy. In some form it is there, even in the most distorted and odious disguises. We can touch that. We can draw near and open up. We can connect, to the difficult forces within ourselves, and to the different experiences in our lives. We can break through the concepts that keep us apart. This is the true nature of love and the source of healing for ourselves and our world. This is the ground of freedom.

Metta is the ability to embrace all parts of ourselves, as well as all parts of the world. Practicing metta illuminates our inner integrity because it relieves us of the need to deny different aspects of ourselves. We can open to everything with the healing force of love. When we feel love, our mind is expansive and open enough to include the entirety of life in full awareness, both its pleasures and its pains. We feel neither betrayed by pain nor overcome by it, and thus we can contact that which is undamaged within us regardless of the situation. Metta sees truly that our integrity is inviolate, no matter what our life situation may be. We do not need to fear anything. We are whole: our deepest happiness is intrinsic to the nature of our minds, and it is not damaged through uncertainty and change.

In cultivating love, we remember one of the most powerful truths the Buddha taught—that the mind is naturally radiant and pure. It is because of visiting defilements that we suffer.

The word *defilement* is a common translation of the Pali word *kilesa*, which more literally translated means “torment of the mind.” We know directly from our own experience that when certain states arise strongly within us, they have a tormenting quality—states like anger, fear, guilt, and greed. When they knock at the door and we invite them in, we lose touch with the fundamentally pure nature of our mind, and then we suffer.

By not identifying with these forces, we learn that these defilements or torments are only visitors. These forces are adventitious, not inherent. They do not reflect who we really are. The defilements or the kilesas inevitably arise because of how we have been conditioned. But this is no reason to judge ourselves harshly. Our challenge is to see them for what they are and to remember our true nature.

We can understand the inherent radiance and purity of our minds by understanding metta. Like the mind, metta is not distorted by what it encounters. Anger generated within ourselves or within others can be met with love; the love is not ruined by the anger. Metta is its own support, and thus it is free of inherently unstable conditions. The loving mind can observe joy and peace in one moment, and then grief in the next moment, and it will not be shattered by the change. A mind filled with love can be likened to the sky with a variety of clouds moving through it—some light and fluffy, others ominous and threatening. No matter what the situation, the sky is not affected by the clouds. It is free.

The Buddha taught that the forces in the mind that bring suffering are able to temporarily hold down the positive forces such as love or wisdom, but they can never destroy them. The negative forces can never uproot the positive, whereas the positive forces can actually uproot the negative forces. Love can uproot fear or anger or guilt, because it is a greater power.

Exercise: *Phrases of Lovingkindness*

In doing metta practice, we gently repeat phrases that are meaningful in terms of what we wish, first for ourselves and then for others. We begin by befriending ourselves. The aspirations we articulate should be deeply felt and somewhat enduring (not something like “May I find a good show on television tonight”). Classically there are four phrases used:

“May I be free from danger.”
“May I have mental happiness.”
“May I have physical happiness.”
“May I have ease of well-being.”

I will describe these phrases here in detail, and you can experiment with them, alter them, or simply choose an alternative set of three or four phrases. Discover personally in your own heartfelt investigation what is truly significant for you.

“May I be free from danger.” We begin to extend care and lovingkindness toward ourselves with the wish that we may find freedom from danger, that we may know safety. We ultimately wish that all beings as well as ourselves have a sense of refuge, have a safe haven, have freedom from internal torment and external violence.

There is a nightmarish quality to life without safety. When we live repeatedly lost in conditioned states such as anger and greed, continually being hurt and hurting others—there is no peace or safety. When we are awakened at night by anxiety, guilt, and agitation—there is no peace or safety. When we live in a world of overt violence, which rests on the disempowerment of people and the loneliness of unspoken and silenced abuse—there is no peace or safety. This deep aspiration is the traditional beginning. “May I be free from danger.” Other possible phrases are “May I have safety” and “May I be free from fear.”

“May I have mental happiness.” If we were in touch with our own loveliness, if we felt less fearful of others, if we trusted our ability to love, we would have mental happiness. In the same vein, if we could relate skillfully to the torments of the mind that arise, and not nourish or cultivate them, we would have mental happiness. Even in very positive or

fortunate circumstances, without mental happiness, we are miserable. Sometimes people use the phrase “May I be happy” or “May I be peaceful” or “May I be liberated.”

“May I have physical happiness.” With this phrase we wish ourselves the enjoyment of health, freedom from physical pain, and harmony with our bodies. If freedom from pain is not a realistic possibility, we aspire to receive the pain with friendliness and patience, thereby not transforming physical pain into mental torment. You might also use a phrase such as “May I be healthy,” “May I be healed,” “May I make a friend of my body,” or “May I embody my love and understanding.”

“May I have ease of well-being.” This phrase points to the exigencies of everyday life—concerns such as relationships, family issues, and livelihood. With the expression of this phrase we wish that these elements of our day-to-day lives be free from struggle, that they be accomplished gracefully, and easily. Alternative phrases could be “May I live with ease” or “May lovingkindness manifest throughout my life” or “May I dwell in peace.”

Sit comfortably. You can begin with five minutes of reflection on the good within you or your wish to be happy. Then choose three or four phrases that express what you most deeply wish for yourself, and repeat them over and over again. You can coordinate the phrases with the breath, if you wish, or simply have your mind rest in the phrases without a physical anchor. Feel free to experiment, and be creative. Without trying to force or demand a loving feeling, see if there are circumstances you can imagine yourself in where you can more readily experience friendship with yourself. Is it seeing yourself as a young child? One friend imagined himself sitting surrounded by all the most loving people he had ever heard of in the world, receiving their kindness and good wishes. For the first time, love for himself seemed to enter his heart.

Develop a gentle pacing with the phrases; there is no need to rush through them or say them harshly. You are offering yourself a gift with each phrase. If your attention wanders, or if difficult feelings or memories arise, try to let go of them in the spirit of kindness, and begin again repeating the metta phrases:

“May I be free from danger.”

“May I have mental happiness.”

“May I have physical happiness.”

“May I have ease of well-being.”

There are times when feelings of unworthiness come up strongly, and you clearly see the conditions that limit your love for yourself. Breathe gently, accept that these feelings have arisen, remember the beauty of your wish to be happy, and return to the metta phrases.

Order Toll Free 1.800.794.9862, 9 AM — 5 PM, EST . FAX 978.722.6601 .

www.dharmacrafts.com

Contact Customer_Service@dharmacrafts.com

© 2006 DharmaCrafts, Inc.