

The Metta Sutta: Buddhist teachings on Love
Transcription of a talk by Subhana Barzaghi

The Buddha's words on Loving-kindness

*This is what should be done,
by those who are skilled in goodness,
and who know the path to peace:
let them be able and upright,
straightforward and gentle in speech.
Humble and not conceited,
contented and easily satisfied,
unburdened with duties and frugal in their ways.
Peaceful and calm, wise, and skillful,
not proud and demanding in nature.
Let them not do the slightest thing
that the wise would later reprove.
Wishing: in gladness and in safety,
May all beings be at ease.
Whatever living beings there may be;
whether they are weak or strong, omitting none,
the great or the mighty, medium, short, or small,
the seen and the unseen,
those living near and far away,
those born and to-be born –
May all beings be at ease!
Let none deceive another,
or despise any being in any state.
Let none through anger or ill-will,
wish harm upon another.
Even as a mother protects with her life,
her child, her only child,
so with a boundless heart
should one cherish all living being.
Radiating kindness over the entire world:
spreading upward to the skies,
and downward to the depths;
outward and unbounded,
freed from hatred and ill-will.
Whether standing or walking, seated or lying down,
free from drowsiness,
one should sustain this recollection.
This is said to be the sublime abiding.
by not holding to fixed views,
the pure-hearted one, having clarity of vision,
being freed from all sense desires,
is not born again in this world.*

The word *metta* is an ancient Pali word for loving-kindness. Metta is grouped under the teachings on the four Brahma Viharas, also known as the four immeasurables. The four immeasurables are: *Metta* – love; *Karuna* – compassion; *Mudita* – joy; and *Upekkakha* – equanimity. The Buddhist path of loving-kindness can help us discover the radiant and joyful heart within each of us. These qualities of heart and mind are called immeasurable because there is no end to cultivating them. These four states of consciousness are said to be the most beautiful, powerful, and sublime states of consciousness we can experience. With consistent dedicated practice they can become our natural abiding place our true home. These qualities are also expressions of an awakened heart/mind, a heart that is as wide as the world.

If we examine the structure of the Metta Sutta, the first section of the Sutta lays out the conditions that give rise to metta, the second section informs us how and who should we direct loving-kindness to and the last part of the Sutta discusses the highest ideal of metta which is combined with wisdom.

*This is what should be done,
by those who are skilled in goodness,
and who know the path to peace:
Let them be able and upright,
straightforward and gentle in speech.*

Holding ourselves in an upright manner is an ability to walk with integrity and awareness through the trials and tribulations of our daily life. One of the conditions that give rise to loving-kindness and cultivating the loving heart, is *shila*, which is having an ethical foundation that embraces are conduct, speech and behaviour. The traditional five precepts are to take up the way of reframing from killing, stealing, lying, sexual misconduct and intoxicants. The path to peace relates to the classic three tier structure in training the heart-mind. One's ethical conduct, speech, and behaviour (*shila*), influence the capacity to develop and train the mind (*samadhi*) which gives rise to *prajna*, the cultivation of wisdom. Those skilled in goodness, establish this ethical container for their lives and live by the light of the precepts. Gentle and compassionate speech is an expression of the open loving heart.

*Humble and not conceited,
Contented and easily satisfied.
Unburdened with duties and frugal in their ways.*

The Buddha lived a renunciate lifestyle, which was unburdened with duties and frugal in his ways, a life of voluntary simplicity. While many of us are not living a renunciate lifestyle, we can have a taste of this experience by attending a retreat. Participants step out of their busy lives and temporarily let go of their family obligations and work commitments and live in a simplified manner. We enter a retreat with just a humble bag of clothes or camping equipment, we leave behind many of our creature comforts, cars, computers, household things and live a life of voluntary simplicity. Unburdened with duties, facilitates the feelings of contentment and we discover and touch deep states of mind; appreciation of beauty, joy and love that naturally arises out of the ground of our being. Unburdening ourselves in fact gives us greater access to the capacity of love. We do start to fall in love with everything, from the tiniest flower to the Great Ocean and golden moon rising over the sandstone cliffs.

*Peaceful and calm, wise, and skillful,
not proud and demanding in nature.
Let them not do the slightest thing
that the wise would later reprove.*

“Peaceful and calm, wise and skillful”, this line suggests that the basis of loving-kindness emerges out of the practice of calming the body and mind. The practice of cultivating metta is intimately tied to developing concentration; it is an aspect of focused attention.

Metta is not a love that is proud and demanding in nature. Sometimes due to a wounding in one's childhood due to the lack of loving attunement from one's family, one can develop an anxious neediness for love that is never quite satisfied. If you bring that needy hunger into relationship, if you bring your empty bucket expecting the other person to meet all your love needs, then it is bound to create problems. Many of us have experienced the pain of that, either being on the receiving end of a partner who is so needy or being the one who never feels satisfied. This pattern and dynamic often does not work, and the other person is repelled or overwhelmed by that neediness. The healing remedy for this condition is to learn to love and appreciate oneself. Metta practice starts with directing loving-kindness towards to this body, heart, and mind.

*Wishing: in gladness and in safety,
May all beings be at ease.*

I love this line, ‘May all beings be at ease’. The word ease has a deep sense of safety, peace, freedom from pain. I also enjoy the fact that not once in the Metta Sutta does it actually mention the word love. It is unfortunate that it is so difficult in our culture to talk about love. Love has become so commercialised, romanticised, erotised. It has been blurred with desire and appetite. We say, I love strawberries and ice cream, I love my house, car, country, without some discernment about the quality of love. The Buddha spoke of the near enemy to *metta*, or we could say its shadow, as something that masquerades as love, feels similar but isn’t true love. Sensual desire is the near enemy to loving-kindness and can so easily be enmeshed with erotic and passionate energy. We can think we are feeling love for someone when we are really feeling attachment and desire. Metta is a love that is free from sensual desire, it is a love and veneration for all of life that knows no bounds, it is an unconditional love. The first task in breaking open the loving heart is to bring clarity to the whole process and experience of love and differentiate love *metta* from sensual desire.

The second part of the Sutta informs us who we should direct metta towards.

*Whatever living beings there may be;
Whether they are weak or strong, omitting none,
The great or the mighty, medium, short, or small,
The seen and the unseen,
Those living near and far away,
Those born and to-be born –
May all beings be at ease!*

It is easy to love those dear and near to us, this is a preferential type of love, and there is nothing wrong with that, but the true art of *metta* is to be able to generate a loving-kindness to all beings, which means to cross the divide of one’s preferences, to cultivate a loving heart to others whether you like them or not. It is an ultraistic, unconditional love, a loving-kindness that does not discriminate, that omits no one. This inclusive spirit is dramatically evoked in a poem called, ‘Kindness’ by Naomi Shihab Nye.

“Before you learn the tender gravity of kindness
You must travel where the Indian in a white poncho
lies dead by the side of the road.
You must see how this could be you,
how he too was someone who journeyed through the night with plans
and the simple breath that kept him alive”.

Naomi’s juxtaposition of the words, ‘the tender gravity of kindness’, holds lightly so much depth and gravitas. Our spiritual journey does take us to regions where we begin to see how each person, the bus conductor, the old woman, the innocence of youth, the dead Indian, the soldier in Iraq, the poor illiterate children in Bihar India, could be you, if you were simple born in a different time and place. How every human being journeys with the simple breath of life. If we look deeper still, we can see how each and every person is in fact your original face a manifestation of your big heart-mind. This insight and deep connection with another naturally evokes kindness that has no degrees of division or separation.

*Let none deceive another,
Or despise any beings in any state.
Let none through anger or ill-will,
wish harm upon another.*

In the teachings on love, the Buddha referred to the near and far enemy to love. The far enemy is the opposite of love, which is anger and ill-will. There is a beautiful reminder

in (Chapter 1 verse 5) in the Dharmapada, that anger and hatred only beget more hatred and consequentially creates greater divisions in the community.

Hatred never ceases by hatred
But by love alone is healed,
This is an ancient and eternal law.

The Buddha's constant advice to his followers was not to retaliate but to practice patience at all times, in all places even when under provocation.

*Even as a mother protects with her life,
her child, her only child,
So with a boundless heart,
should one cherish all living beings.*

'Even as a mother protects with her life, her child, her only child', is for some a challenging metaphor for unconditional love. Some people haven't had the blessings of a loving wonderful, protective, supportive mother, so rather than generate love, it can easily trigger painful memories. However my own experience was to the contrary. After giving birth to my children, I remember just holding this tender, vulnerable, pink little being and looking into their eyes, and falling totally in love with them. That love evoked the protective tigress within me, a fierce determination that I would do anything for my child. At the time of birth, a potent dose of Oxytocin, the affiliative love hormone is released, which is probably nature's insurance and survival mechanism which ensures that a parent will protect and nurture their infant. And it is probably just as well that there is some powerful mechanism to sustain our parental love over the years, given the long and tumultuous phase of adolescence which lies ahead. So in the same spirit as a mother who loves her child, we hold the intention to cherish all living beings.

The last part of the Sutta, informs us how we should sustain this recollection, and how it is linked to the practice of insight, and the awakened heart-mind.

*Radiating kindness over the entire world:
Spreading upward to the skies,
And downward to the depths;
Outward and unbounded,
Freed from hatred and ill-will.
Whether standing or walking, seated or lying down,
Free from drowsiness,
One should sustain this recollection.*

The sublime abiding is poetically expressed by Naomi Shihab Nye, in her poem 'Kindness'.

Then it is only kindness that makes sense anymore,
Only kindness that ties your shoes
And sends you out into the day to mail letters and purchase bread,
Only kindness that raises its head from
The crowd of the world to say
It is I you have been looking for,
And then goes with you everywhere
Like a shadow or a friend.

So let loving-kindness walk you to the meditation hall, sit you down. Let kindness be the meal you serve up for yourself and your life. Let it flow though-out the day, let it be your daily bread. It is the power of loving-kindness that can save not only this one sitting here but is the necessary medicine and nourishment that this sorrowful world needs right now. It has the power to transform your life, if you let it.

*This is said to be the sublime abiding.
By not holding to fixed views,
The pure-hearted one, having clarity of vision,
Being freed from all sense desires,
Is not born again in this world.*

In the last section of the Sutta, loving-kindness is tied to the ideal of a Bodhisattva, an enlightened being, free from holding fixed views. When you cling to views, ideas and perceptions about yourself and others, you build up whole stories and projections about the other person. This is like pouring colored dye into a glass of water and seeing the other person through a filter which is distorted. When we hold to fixed views about ourselves or the world, we mistakenly believe them to be true, real, and correct, when they are just views. We can see how much suffering there is in the world that is caused by holding fast to our opinions, views, judgments, and ideologies as being the one true way. We have gone to war over religious and political beliefs and fixed views about one another. When you let go and can see your views and beliefs are just like clouds floating through the empty sky, nothing substantial there at all, then you can see the nature of self and other with clarity of mind and rest in the sublime abiding of the pure heart song.

I came across a simple yet delightful poem by a man named Josh, who is a Vipassana student in New Zealand, which expresses a heart that is as wide as the world.

The World inside my heart

I'm walking around
with the whole world
in my heart.

Please don't
ask how it happened.
I don't know.

The world hasn't shrunk, and
my heart hasn't grown.

I'm walking around
with the whole world
in my heart.

Please don't
ask me how it fits.
I don't know.

My heart just
opened out, somehow,
and when I looked inside,
I found,
the whole world is living there
all the time.

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