

Metta Week 1: Introduction

This week we take up the parami of *metta*, often expressed in English as goodwill, kindness, benevolence, friendliness, love, loving-kindness. “Kindness is immediately and obviously a big part of what spirituality, and true humanity, is all about.”—Ajahn Sucitto.

This is an ideal shared by all spiritual paths. Some quotes from David:

Tolstoy says that “The sole meaning of life is to love humanity.”

The Dalai Lama says that his religion is kindness. “...love, kindness and affection are the source of happiness...our basic human nature is good, is positive, so that can give us a basis for courage and self confidence.”

Bishop Desmond Tutu says, “You see, in order to become a happy person, we need to live more from the compassionate part of our nature...”

It is a quality that is an inherent aspect of so many of the Buddhist teachings. It both enables and finds expression in true mindfulness, generosity, ethical speech and action, non-clinging, freedom from greed, hatred and self-centered delusion. It is there in any moment of simply allowing our experience to be received just as it is, and it can develop into the heart/mind that is “abundant exalted, without boundaries, free from hatred and ill-will”.

There are many different ways to cultivate this Parami, and there are many different ways of understanding and experiencing it. Many aspects of suffering involve blocking our access to this basic attitude of kindness or goodwill. There can be misunderstandings about what this quality is. Many people find it especially hard to be kind to themselves. Most of us have some difficult relationships and we may confuse condoning harmful behavior with true *metta*. *Metta* is not the emotional mixture of approval, liking, wanting, and attachment our culture tends to associate with ‘love’. In the sense of goodwill, it can be as simple as not adding our own ill-will to an already difficult situation, or simply wishing someone greater inner peace and wisdom, which might eventually lead to more ‘lovable’ behavior. When is intentional unkindness and ill-will ever more helpful than a more even-minded attitude?

Sylvia Boorstein writes:

“If I make blessing my habit, if I meet each moment with equal benevolence, my mind relaxes and all of my rehearsed reasons for resenting are redeemed by goodness. The relief of not using the categories of affection – ‘Most-favorite’, ‘Semi-favorite’, ‘So-so’, ‘Not really’ and ‘Not at all’ – as criteria for kindness invites my mind, for its own sake, to forgive. Being on good terms with all of my life allows me to feel safe and convinces me that Lovingkindness must be the universal antidote to suffering, that it must be what everyone wants most.”

Take a moment to recall witnessing some simple act of kindness. Just in seeing someone hold a door for another, we see a spark of recognition of fellow-beingness, a pause in the headlong pursuit of self-advantage, a moment of consideration for another's existence. In the moment of sitting down and taking a few easeful breaths, we are kindly allowing the whole bundle of stresses and anxieties we carry to simply be as they are for a moment, not further tightened by aversion and struggle. Touching into fellow-feeling in relation to others and meeting our own human imperfections with a benevolent awareness—these are mutually supportive.

From Ajahn Sucitto's chapter called "Holistic Kindness" (as usual, the whole chapter is highly recommended):

Mettā is non-aversion, but it's also non-fascination and non-projection. It releases others from being the objects of our projections, lust and idealism. It allows others to not be the way I want them to be for me. True love for another means that you don't appropriate someone or project your unfulfilled wishes or needs onto them. Instead, *mettā* means recognizing otherness, and feeling that it's OK. We don't have to make people the same as ourselves or judge ourselves, based on what we think about other people. We don't have to feel we have to win them over, or feel that they should satisfy our emotional hunger. And when *mettā* is fully developed it can allow us to be with the irritating and the unfair and the messy, so that such perceptions no longer even take hold.

It's the same for ourselves: when we hold ourselves with the mind of goodwill, we don't have to feel intimidated and compelled to prove ourselves. We have all been small, weak and stupid. We have all been totally irresponsible infants, awkward adolescents, made a mess of things, lied, cheated and maybe even killed. Yet we changed. These were all visitors and forces that occupied the mind. Now there's no denying the responsibility for allowing one's mind to be so occupied, but our current responsibility is one of cultivating virtue, discernment and kindness, not of obsessing and sustaining the burden of guilt and denial. And one of the major healing tools for this process is *mettā*. With this we take on *samsāra* with non-aversion and non-projection. We can accept the presence of the petty-mindedness, the guilt and anxiety as visitors conditioned into the mind, and work with them. Then there is nothing to hide from or dread anymore. This is a more useful approach than going through another round of anguish, self-hatred and defensiveness. By stilling these reactions, *mettā* enables us to penetrate to, and remove, the root cause of ill-will — often towards ourselves — underneath the complexes.

The suttas offer many teachings on cultivating intentions of non-harming and generosity. If it's possible for you to tune in to the felt-sense of kindness or goodwill, or simply the recognition of the intention not to cause harm, this is a beautiful state of heart/mind to dwell in, to soak in. Allow it to deeply touch you and further open your heart. The explicit teachings on *metta* in the texts often speak of "radiating *metta*" in all directions.

Our tradition has also developed a gradual training in *metta* that is based on recognizing our own deep wish to be safe, well and happy. It can begin a deep transformation to turn the attention away from all our attempts to force behavior and ward off remembered or imagined threats, and simply feel and deeply acknowledge the wholesomeness of the wishes themselves. It can turn the mind in this direction to simply repeat these wishes as simple phrases, meaning them as sincerely as you can, or just letting them resonate as you say them, see what they bring forth. Phrases such as:

May I be safe from harm.

May I be healthy.

May I be happy.

May I live with ease.

This practice is based on the analogy of a mountain waterfall that fills a pond at one level and then spills over to fill the next level: as we are able to fully allow these good wishes for ourselves, it's easier to see that other beings have these same wishes and to acknowledge them without jealousy or resentment. Just as I wish myself to be safe from harm, may you be safe from harm. Some people find it hard to start with themselves and much easier to start with a child or a pet or wild animal. The traditional practice moves in this waterfall fashion from oneself (or whatever is easy), to a benefactor (someone who has helped you, a teacher or relative), a friend, a neutral person (someone you encounter but don't know), and then to a difficult person. We each need to find what phrases, what order and pace works for us. Remember the waterfall model: start with something easy and dwell there as long you wish, until you feel you have some goodwill to extend to whatever might be a little more of stretch for you.

Reflections: Recall some memories of acts of kindness and goodwill you have witnessed. Recall acts of kindness and moments of goodwill offered to you from others. Recall acts of kindness or goodwill you have offered. Apart from specific actions, what might it feel like to meet everyone and every circumstance coming from an attitude of benevolence? Have you met someone who seems to live that way? Notice what shifts in you as you reflect on these experiences.

Try some of the formal practice of Metta. See what phrases work for you and where it's easiest for you to begin. For more guidance, Nikki and Diana from IMC offer a weekly "Happy Hour" dedicated to this practice. Recent sessions are now available on YouTube.

More talk recommendations and notes from David, ending with a link to the well-loved poem *Kindness* by Naomi Shihab Nye:

Here is a talk by Ajahn Sumedho, Ajahn Sucitto's venerable teacher, about welcoming everything in yourself, especially what you don't like. I always love to hear this wise kind old man, an easy relaxed grandmother. And funny! He has a wonderful unique slant on practice and on Metta, so helpful to relieve our self judgements. His fundamental practice is Awareness, accessing the one who knows, which he calls the unconditioned seeing the conditioned, albeit seeing with warmth, acceptance, and welcome. This is his abiding. Boundless metta based in the still point of awareness. His approach to metta is to just know, with unconditional acceptance, openness and allowing. For him Metta is not the traditional generation of a mind state, but in letting go of aversion to any mind state, including aversion to aversion. Everything belongs here simply because it is here, in this moment. "I said the wrong thing," is included. "I said a great thing," is included. No aversion, no judgement, no annihilation of "nonspiritual" thoughts. What a relief. I can relax and trust. Even when we are harmed or humiliated, we have space for this, for what we are most afraid of and dread. Enjoy this profound teaching:

<https://buddhismnow.com/2013/07/18/metta-by-ajahn-sumedho/>

Here is more kind wisdom from Ajahn Sumedho about metta for ourselves:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iy6Ncj8AIJ4>

Here are some notes: Personality is ephemeral, not solid. We have so many different experiences of our personality in different situations--wishy washy, weak, arrogant, lustful, insecure, afraid, anxious, jealous, bad moods. Metta welcomes, allows, embraces them all. Not to be gotten rid of, to conquer. If we prefer one over the other, not metta---though we can have metta, patient acceptance, for this too, this preferring, and wanting to get rid of. A surrendering, relaxing, trusting, refuge of knowing embraces all that appears. Not critical. (There is a lot of silence in this talk. Please relax into that and enjoy it.) We don't need to purify, prove ourselves, solve problems, getting something good / getting rid of bad thoughts, selfishness. We intimidate ourselves, and never get what we want. We can be such a disappointment to ourselves, and get depressed. We can know and welcome our desires, not attack and demolish them. We are attracted to what is sensually attractive, repulsed by what is sensually repulsive. These are natural mental conditions. No liberation in inner tyrant ranting about how bad we are. There is no such thing as a pure person, though trusting awareness is pure and is not personal, not me or mine, not an attainment---just a conscious relaxed state of being. All conditions come and go---we don't have to get rid of, and can't hold onto. Trust in the path of awareness. Knowing feelings of not good enough or better than, is developing the path of non suffering. Acknowledge and accept what you are in this moment.

Here is a guided metta meditation by Ajahn Passano:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mPwONnD_gG8

Here is a nice talk by Gil about the transformative effects of meeting our suffering with kindness. https://audiodharma.org/talks/audio_player/10158.html

(This the poem to which he referred: <https://poets.org/poem/kindness>)