

Coming Home to the Heart: Metta

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The Best Home

The words *Brahma Vihara* are from the Pali language; the English equivalent would be the *Heavenly Abodes* or the *Divine Abidings*. Vihara means home or dwelling or abode in Pali, and Brahma means the highest, the truest, or the best. The Brahma Viharas can simply be called the True Home or Best Home. These qualities of loving-kindness, compassion, sympathetic joy, and equanimity are the truest and best home in which we can dwell.

What is it like to be truly at home? To be in a place where you can be relaxed and restful? To be free to hang out in comfortable clothes, put your feet up, let go of your public persona, and just be yourself—to be your truest and best self? As Sharon Salzberg wrote in *Lovingkindness: The Revolutionary Art of Happiness*,

We can travel a long way and do many different things, but our deepest happiness is not born from accumulating new experiences. It is born from letting go of what is unnecessary and knowing ourselves to be always at home. True happiness may not be far away, but it requires a radical change of view as to where to find it.

Our Spiritual Birthright

Tonight we will start with the first of the Brahma Viharas—loving-kindness, or in the Pali language, *metta*. The Buddha taught over and over and again, repeatedly throughout his discourses, that loving-kindness is a naturally occurring quality of mind and heart, and that with a spacious mind it arises naturally within us. The Dalai Lama calls this our “spiritual birthright.” Loving-kindness is part of our very essence as humans. It is part of us and not foreign.

This quality or state of loving-kindness is not unique to Buddhism. It is taught in Christianity, Sufism, Judaism, and other religions and philosophies. But what Buddhism

has to offer, what is unique to the Buddha's teachings, is a formal method to cultivate and practice these qualities.

What is Metta?

Metta is the ability to hold all beings in a loving regard. When we practice metta, we don't stop seeing the unwholesome qualities in ourselves and in others. But with metta we don't dwell on them. Metta is that sense of good will towards ourselves and toward all beings that arises in all of us from time to time. It is the generosity of the heart that wishes happiness to all beings.

Metta and Romantic Love

We all want love. We are told that love makes the world go round. In our lives we often experience love as an arrangement we make with another human being—I'll do this for you if you do that for me. These arrangements are often unconscious and unspoken, and they are subject to conditions. When one or the other doesn't live up to their half of the bargain—love goes away. Is there a difference between falling in love and living love in a way that does not give only by way of a bargain?

Metta can begin to mature this quality of love. Metta is the foundation for a deep sense of unconditional love. I'm sure that we have all experienced this maturing of love in long-term relationships with family, partners, and friends. When you begin to see past the bargaining aspect of your relationships, you are beginning to know metta.

The Mature Emotions

We may think of the Brahma Viharas—these beautiful qualities of our minds—as the mature emotions. We all come to adulthood and are for the most part socialized to behave well toward others—or mostly socialized. But often there is a dissonance going on inside. We may have all kinds of feelings that are not very mature. The practice of metta and the other Brahma Viharas helps us to cultivate emotions that are truly mature, that are beyond just acting nice or being polite. They allow us to act from our deepest, heartfelt intention to be kind.

Loving-Kindness is Not a Feeling

In *The Art of Loving*, which was first published in the 1960s, Eric Fromm said, "Love is not a feeling." Metta is not a feeling. *The feeling component of love is not love itself.* Metta

allows us to practice love even if we don't feel it. Sometimes there is a strong feeling but often there isn't. To practice metta is to hold the intention to act kindly.

Metta is Impartial

Metta is impersonal and impartial. It is not just for those we like or those who amuse or flatter us. It is not about favoring one over the other. It is not interested in fixing, comparing, or judging.

Metta is the sense of love that is not bound to desire. It overcomes ill will. Metta overcomes all of the states that accompany this fundamental error of separation that we carry—fear, alienation, loneliness, and despair. Even in our closest relationships, we often feel isolated and lonely.

Moving Out of Ill Will

Metta can move us from ill will to a more wholesome state. As I said earlier, metta is not just a warm feeling, although when we experience metta, warm feeling may be present. More often than not, when we shine a light on something we may see feelings and emotions other than metta lurking in the shadows. We may feel that we are not doing the practice right. But this is an opportunity to bring the light of metta to these shadowy places. For this reason, all of the Brahma Vihara practices are called *purification practices*.

The Buddhist teachings emphasize the importance of gradually dissolving ill will in our lives. *Gradually* is the important word here. What would it be like to gradually release our hearts and minds from all the constricted states we experience. All of the pain and tension around fear and ill will—to feel that deep sense of relief and release.

We All Share an Impulse Toward Happiness

With metta we begin to understand that all beings—whether we know them or not, whether we like them or not, whether we feel anything at all for them or not—have the same impulse toward happiness that we do, even if it seems misguided. So metta brings a sense of connection to the human condition, for the plight of all beings.

In her poem, "Kindness," Naomi Shihab Nye writes,

Before you know what kindness really is
you must lose things,
feel the future dissolve in a moment
like salt in a weakened broth.
What you held in your hand,
what you counted and carefully saved,
all this must go so you know
how desolate the landscape can be
between the regions of kindness.
How you ride and ride
thinking the bus will never stop,
the passengers eating maize and chicken
will stare out the window forever.

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.

Before you know kindness as the deepest thing inside,
you must know sorrow as the other deepest thing.
You must wake up with sorrow.
You must speak to it till your voice
catches the thread of all sorrows
and you see the size of the cloth.
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.

The Gentle Rain

Sometimes the image of a gentle rain is used as a metaphor for metta. When things are dry they cannot adhere. The moisture of a gentle rain allows that which is apart to join together. We talk about metta as becoming aware of nonseparation. We begin to see the connection between all beings. Love is not dry—it is moist and creates connection. We begin to be more aware that all beings have the same longing to be happy that we do. Like the Indian in the poem “Kindness,” who “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.”

Metta is for All

The loving care of metta does not make distinctions among beings. It loves all with the same openness and friendliness. We often see this in people who have developed deep metta in their lives, like the Dalai Lama. Being in love is specific to one person, but metta is open to any and everyone.

Cultivation and Developing Habits

As the Buddha urged his students, “In this way we must train ourselves by the liberation of the self through love. We will develop love. We will practice it. We will make it both a way and a basis. We will take our stand upon it, store it up, and thoroughly get it going.”

Metta and all the Brahma Viharas are cultivations. The word for meditation in Pali is *bhavana*, which means *to cultivate*. Here we are practicing metta bhavana. What does it mean to cultivate something?

In the formal practice we are repeating phrases over and over. It may feel rote, but cultivation is more than just empty repetition. It is caring for and nurturing something. When we put a new plant in the ground, we don’t just leave it there or only throw some water on it every now and then. We make sure that it has the right soil, enough sunlight, the right amount of water. We care for it. And that is how we practice metta, with deep care for ourselves and others, creating a space of ease and gentleness.

Henry David Thoreau had this to say about practice and the mind:

As a single footstep will not make a path on the earth, so a single thought will not make a pathway in the mind. To make a deep physical path, we walk again and again. To make a deep mental path, we must think over and over the kind of thoughts we wish to dominate our lives.

Retraining the Brain

When we practice metta bhavana, we are retraining the brain and developing new habits that can bring us deeper connection and happiness. Today we read and hear so much about the neuroplasticity of the brain. With this practice we are retraining our heart and minds. We are learning to find our way home.

Patience

All we have to do is look around us and we notice that nature embodies the quality of patience. The earth takes just as much time as needs to renew itself. Ten minutes or ten million years. So we can take refuge in the earth and its power to heal our hearts and minds. It does not happen on our schedule; we cannot force it. We need to be patient and gentle with ourselves.

Contemplation of the Benefits

The Buddha often asked his students to contemplate the advantages of wholesome actions and the disadvantages of unwholesome actions. The first time I heard this, I thought, "Well that's so simplistic. It sure is a no brainer." Like most of practice, it is easy to understand but perhaps difficult to actually do in life.

So what are the advantages of good will? Let's just contemplate this for a minute or two.

And what are the disadvantages of ill-will and anger? What are the advantages of friendliness and patience?

This is much more than just a mental exercise. It takes a great deal of mindfulness to begin to know what we are truly experiencing, without all the stories and

rationalizations. Can we actually feel this in our bodies? How does ill will feel? How does friendliness and gentleness feel?

We begin to see that what we habitually do and think does make a difference. A big difference—it creates who we are.

Metta as a Vast Open Space

In this practice there is no reason for self-judgment. We are not doing this practicing to get rid of our ill will, our anger, or our fear. Metta helps us develop a sense of spaciousness that can hold anything.

For example, if you took a teaspoon of salt and put it in a glass of water, the water would taste salty. But if you took a teaspoon of salt and threw it into a lake, it would not even be noticed because the lake is so vast compared to a small glass of water. When the mind is spacious, negativity is dissolved in spaciousness, just like the salt in the lake.

Gentleness Does Not Mean Weakness

Metta is not about being bland or weak. We can be firm and still be full of metta. How can you hold loving-kindness while keeping boundaries or having a difficult conversation with someone? That takes a lot of strength, and at the same time, to do it at all well requires deep care and gentleness toward yourself and the other person.

There may be people in our lives who we disagree with or people who are harmful, who we decide to put out of our lives. Metta is also about learning to be realistic about life's situations and still, at the same time, not wishing harm to others. I often reflect on this quote by Neem Karoli Baba: "You can throw someone out of your yard but never throw them out of your heart."

Can we learn to do this? Can we learn to be angry with someone without throwing them out of our hearts?

Kindness to Ourselves

This is not something that is learned overnight. It is not a quick fix. It takes a lot of practice. Often it takes years of practice. For some, learning to be kind to ourselves is the

most difficult practice. We often judge ourselves more harshly than any one else. But we need to remember that the harsh thoughts and judgments about ourselves are no different than thoughts and judgments about others.

Thoughts are not facts; they are just thoughts. They are mental habits that we have developed over time. They are not the truth. Perhaps we have internalized judgments from our families or from our society. If we believe we are unworthy, we only have to ask wise people close to us for a more objective view. There truly is no one more deserving as an object of loving-kindness than ourselves. This is not self indulgence, it is the deepest kindness.

The Eternal Law

The Buddha said: "Hatred can never cease by hatred. Hatred can only cease by love, and love alone. This is the eternal law."

We may not be able to dispel all the hatred and ill will in our hearts right away—or even in our entire lives—but we can begin to understand this eternal law. This is very profound. "Hatred can never cease by hatred." We may not be able to bring love and metta to every situation in our lives, but we can understand that hatred and ill will, when it is fed, will never cease by itself.

All we have to do to see this is to look at the world. There are cultures and religions caught in hundreds of years of hatred. We see it being played out daily. Sometimes it takes just one person or group of people to say, "Look this is not working, it can never work this way."

I think of the mothers who helped bring an end to violent conflict in Northern Ireland. They saw what it was doing to their children. There may be people in our lives or in the world, people who cause harm in the world, who we are not ready to love, but can we turn away from hatred and ill will? And can we hold the possibility of turning to good will in the future? It is helpful to reflect on the wisdom that ill will and hatred can only be ended by love, not by more ill will. Hatred and ill will, will only cease with love.