

Kind and Happy
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Humans are a species which evolved to survive through cooperation. We need to be part of groups, and those groups need its members to get along. So our biochemistry rewards us for feeling kind, and especially for *doing* kind acts.

We have not, however, evolved beyond a powerful impulse to serve our own, individual interests. These two sides of our nature are the angel and the devil on our shoulders. We determine how happy our lives will be by which one we cultivate – kindness or self-interest.

That's what the Buddha realized and taught his students: what makes us unhappy is greed, hatred and delusion – in other words, clinging to our cravings and aversions. Acting out of our attachments, we often make others unhappy, too.

Most people today believe happiness depends on getting what we want, which means getting something we don't have *now*. It takes a willingness to see things differently and some introspection, like meditation, to realize that the key to real happiness lies within us, in the present moment.

Happiness is best served by letting go of attachment to material things which comes from a sense of ourselves as separate, individual beings. This image of ourselves leads to frustration and conflict. But when we recognize how inter-connected we are to others, then kindness flows naturally, and with it, an inner sense of well-being and joy.

Because of our genetic inclinations, even the most self-absorbed people will be kind on occasion, and feel a happy connection with other beings, however briefly. But if we'd rather not leave our happiness to chance, we can cultivate that sense of connection by practicing lovingkindness.

When I first encountered this English translation of the Pali word "metta," it struck me as awkward and ungainly. That was almost thirty years ago. Now it works for me in so many ways. These two aspects of metta – love, and kindness – come together to mean a *lot*.

I've often talked about how metta is the guiding principle for how to live the dharma. It is the foundation of the Eightfold Path. When we have a Wise Understanding of how self-centered clinging makes us unhappy, we will form the Wise Intention to avoid causing dukkha. This principle of *caring for the happiness of all beings (including ourselves)* is acted out through the rest of the Eightfold Path, in our daily conduct and in our practice.

Metta is both of the things expressed by the word “lovingkindness.” There’s a mental and an active aspect to it. The mental or emotional side of it is cultivated... well, mentally, through repetition of phrases to incline the mind and heart to love all beings.

We can also practice being loving by intentionally focusing on good things about strangers, of any species. One trick I do when I’m upset with someone whom I can’t immediately forgive, is to think about someone else whom I do love. That changes my mental gears to a loving state of mind, so that it’s easier to consider how to deal with the person who upset me. This switch can take a little time, but it’s better than just letting our thoughts linger and linger on resentment, with the emotional discomfort it causes.

The active aspect of loving kindness is... to *act* kind. When we Understand that suffering is caused by our own self-centered clinging, and form the Intention to do what we can to make others happy, that *intention* to help others brings us a *joy* that’s qualitatively different from worldly pleasures.

We get a taste of it even if our kind action doesn’t have the outcome we try for. It’s important to remember this because a lot can happen between our kind intention and the effect our action has in the world.

Even if we can’t execute our act of kindness, or we botch it, or something happens to change the outcome of what we do, we get to keep the joy of our intention. And that joy pays dividends, because it incentivizes us to be kind more often, increasing the joy in our lives. Unlike sensual pleasure, this joy depends only on our practice.

So whenever you act out of a concern for another being’s welfare and feel the joy of it, *treasure* that. If an act of kindness goes awry, let it be. Let go of any attachment to the outcome. Just act on a wise intention and harvest the happiness that comes with that. If you act on a kind, unselfish intention, you’ll know you have done your best.

I learned how kindness makes us happy by volunteering in a hospice ward one day a week for over three years. That experience in Zen Hospice Project is one of the greatest gifts I’ve received in my life. When I entered the ward I paused and formed the intention that for the five hours I was there, everything I did would be simply to serve others. I would not cling to any of my own preferences. That made my time there wonderfully free from dukkha.

It felt so magnificent to see the patients happy. That was sympathetic joy. And it felt even more wonderful to spend that time acting on the intention of lovingkindness. It wasn’t guaranteed, however, that my actions would directly cause the patients to be happy. There

were so many other things affecting them. I could give someone a perfect neck rub and they'd still be miserable. Or I could hand someone a cup of tea which another volunteer had made and then asked me to deliver, and the patient would smile blissfully *at me*. We volunteers talked together every week and understood we all worked as a team, seldom really as individuals. I noticed over time that it was definitely not helpful to cling to being the cause of another's joy.

Why is it so important to strip craving from kindness? Well, that's the dharma. It's not about being a wonderful altruist who does things for others even when it's contrary to our own interest. Wanting to be a wonderful person is self-interest, and it diminishes the joy of kindness. This is because that clinging pulls us away from *seeing our connection to all beings*.

That's where the power of kindness lies. It does what evolution intended for us, turning people into cooperative groups and not just individuals.

Aside from what science has learned about lowered cortisol and elevated oxytocin, the Buddha knew millennia ago that kindness reveals our inter-connection with all beings as a direct, visceral experience of anatta. Kindness gives us a glimpse of what Thich Nhat Hahn calls "interbeing," the teaching of dependent co-arising. All that currently exists (including you) depends on everything else that has been and is now.

We simply are not and cannot be separate or alone. It's a delusion to believe we are, and that delusion is the root cause of dukkha. It's irrelevant that the vast majority of humans live in this delusion. The truth is that we depend on all other beings, and what we do has an impact on all other beings. It's like a great web connecting us all. We are all one.

There's an epiphany often called Satori in which the mind opens directly to the reality of this. The experience can be visual, emotional, or some mix of perceptions. It can happen when you have just stopped doing things, and fully inhabit that moment. It is extremely powerful and joyous. I first experienced this in graduate school, when I'd studied about Buddhist teachings but long before I began this practice. I had no clue what the experience was, except that it was wonderful.

It isn't Nirvana – that's the end of a process of uprooting attachments. I've heard Satori compared to a view from the mountaintop. It's very helpful in seeing where you've come from and where you're going. And it's joyful. A spark of this happens whenever we act on lovingkindness – becoming in that moment free from attachments, with the intention just to make other beings happy, however briefly.

Being kind to *ourselves* also has an element of this, even though the motives may be mixed. The kindest thing you can do for yourself and others is to nurture your own kindness. It's pulled me out of many emotional slumps.

Also, we can practice with the way others are kind, whether it's toward ourselves or other beings. Let yourself be moved by it, and savor that. It can bring tears to my eyes when I see kindness among others. It happens among animals, too, even between members of different species. That's one reason I love documentaries about animal behavior. Beasts are not all savage.

Please know the practice of kindness is not another Thing you have to take on, to fit into your already bulging list of practices. It's just a part of your day. Opportunities for kindness abound.

When I tear up after reading about a family or a cause that needs support, that's love. When the love, in turn, prompts me to action, that's kindness. That love softens and opens my heart and then kindness can pour out. That's true rather literally. I actually feel a soothing warmth in my chest, and sensations of expansion and widening around the heart. I could leave it at that, enjoy how happy those feelings of love made me for those several moments. But the kindness which love triggers makes me want to reach out.

It doesn't matter whether you call this motivation metta or compassion. The Brahmaviharas are four aspects of the same experience, really, the felt sense of caring about and being connected with other beings. When we feel that desire to help, *this* is the *moment* where we get to practice kindness. We can act in that moment, or not. So the practice is simply *choosing to act*, as often as we possibly can. I have found it's best to act right away before that willingness fades.

When I do make a phone call or a donation, something more tangible happens than just those moments of happiness. As the intention to help comes into my mind, my body feels stronger and energized. As I physically move to get the phone or my check book, or take more direct action, the connection I felt with those people or that cause becomes a concrete interaction which will be part of how my mind works in the future.

All this is present in simply *doing* something to help. It's not so much anymore about what they need and what I have, but how we are in this together at that moment. There's a bond there, however tenuous. Like the strands of webs that turn a field at dawn into a brilliant jewel, a connection has been made. Those strands may be tiny thin, but they are strong, and they hold on.

Now my days of marches or sit downs or committees or giving speeches or going door to door or driving voters to the polls are over. I just can't physically do that anymore. But I do what I can when I see an opportunity to help individuals or the planet as a whole, not because I feel I ought to, but because it feels so good to give those bits of myself to "all-of-us-together."

Generosity is part of this kindness I'm talking about. Dana is something I practice with constantly. It takes presence to receive what others have given so freely, to pay each donation the same attention with which it was given, and to savor the feeling of gratitude with which I receive it. Sometimes, once I have taken your dana into my possession, it's groceries. I haven't done the accounting, but I think most of the time it becomes my dana to someone else. So the cycle of joy and grace continues.

We are all endowed with this impulse to be kind. The more we savor this motivation, and act on it mindfully, the more often it will come, and with it, bring us greater understanding and joy.

So please, be kind and happy. Thank you.