

Metta and Personality

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Alameda Sangha, May 17, 2020

Metta, or lovingkindness, is an open hearted concern for all beings. It is a blissful state. It does not cling, and therefore there is no dukkha, no suffering in it. The experience of metta is peaceful and joyous. So are its other aspects, or Brahmaviharas. When metta encounters suffering it responds with compassion, which holds no suffering because of this element of selfless non-clinging. Compassion comes to our hearts along with the joy of *loving* the beings who suffer.

When metta encounters joy in other beings it responds with sympathetic joy, but it doesn't go into a frenzy of rapture because, without clinging, there is peace. And that peace supports equanimity, enabling the mind/heart to hold the truth *of all that is* with even-handed metta. Metta and its three sibling Brahmaviharas are accessible to us all. This is a basic part of our life experience.

On an Absolute level, there is no ongoing, separate self. This is the basic Buddhist teaching of anatta, that we aren't fixed things, but ongoing processes. On this level, free of clinging to self, our nature is that of a Buddha, kind and loving to all beings without exception. But we usually live on the Relative level in which "we" occupy a space on this planet and in human society. Here we have an influence on, and are influenced by, everything around us.

We function in this world on both an Absolute and a Relative level. We are ever-changing processes, including the processes that make up the bodies that others identify as "us." For convenience, or through inattention, we all develop mental habits. Some of these habits, or mindstates, help us function in this world; others torment us. Together these habits function as what is called our "personalities."

We call some aspects of our personalities "good," and others, "bad." We also identify other beings' mental habits as "good" or "bad." So while on an Absolute level we do love and care about all beings, on a Relative level, where we function in this world, we love a few, hate a few and are indifferent to most. Or we love *almost* everything about them.

This leads to the conundrum of life on the Relative level. All this good and bad hardens into desire and aversion. Those feelings cause clinging and thus suffering for us, and through our resulting behavior, suffering for others.

When we can remember that we also function on the Absolute level, it gets easier to let go and reduce this suffering. Having a practice helps us remember this. Sometimes just knowing

that we *can* end suffering is enough to let us re-direct our thinking and emotions. We can practice in a way which strengthens mental habits that support peace and happiness for all beings – including ourselves.

One of the habits we most want to strengthen is metta, in its many forms. We do have this capacity for universal love. In Relative terms you might think of this as our Buddha Nature, but in Absolute terms, it is the heart/mind's ability to love without clinging. This capacity can often be seen during crises. It can come out in the most unlikely people.

Early in the movie Crash, a racist cop tormented an interracial couple, just for the malicious fun of it. Later, when the crash happened, that cop risked his life to get the woman he'd abused out of the burning car. His mind/heart reached beyond his mental habit of bigotry, and recognized her as a sentient being in dire need. His capacity for lovingkindness then moved him to do whatever he could to help, putting himself in extreme danger to do it.

In general, on the Relative level, we know life would be better if we developed our capacity to regard all beings with metta. We get frustrated that we don't just *have it*. But metta is not a *thing* that we store up. It may help to remember that your disliking some people doesn't make you a bad Buddhist or unable to achieve liberation. You know you've been liberated from various things, habits you don't do anymore, so you're free from the dukkha that those habits caused.

Similarly, by increments you may not see, you can develop the *capacity* you have for metta. Even the frustration or shame you feel when you recognize that you do hate some part of someone's personality shows the strength of your ability to love absolutely. You build it, like a muscle, each time you steer your mind and heart toward it.

You do have the potential to act like the Buddha and care about all beings without exception. The Buddha compared this kind of love to what a mother feels for her child, her only child. This capacity would move you to throw all you had into helping someone survive, no matter their politics, religion, socio economic status or whatever usually makes you dislike people.

And you have a personality. So do the people around you, those you like or dislike. So do most animals. We're all like molecules with these different qualities that connect with or repel the qualities of other molecules. It's no surprise that we have vedana built into us – this automatic response of desire or aversion to everything we encounter.

We have so many traits, which gives us so many ways of connecting and interacting with others. Sometimes those connections are wholesome and loving. At other times, not so

much. Still there's this underlying potential for good will toward every being – friend and stranger alike.

How can we tune in more often to this Absolute metta? Well, we can practice. The traditional practice is to repeat phrases of good will – to develop metta as a mental habit. There are various sets of traditional phrases and a lot of practitioners end up with their own sets that change with their circumstances.

My metta phrases went from “may you be happy,” to “may you feel peaceful,” because there's so much confusion about the nature of true happiness. Most people today think it depends on external things and events. I wanted to focus on the state of mind that comes from being free from dukkha. And I wanted to avoid any magical thinking, like my metta practice would somehow make others happy without their knowing about it.

In life there are times when the heart naturally does open and fill with metta, compassion, sympathetic joy or equanimity. We are practicing metta when we hold the intention to recognize it whenever it arises, and let the mind/heart/body be filled with the joy and beauty of it. Often we treat these moments like a breeze carrying the scent of jasmine, lovely but fleeting, and then forget it. In daily life practice we learn to stop and breathe it in, intentionally savoring the experience of lovingkindness like something delicious.

Matreceta, a poet born in India around the first century A.D., wrote in praise of the Buddha:

You were kind without being asked,
 you were loving without reason,
 you were a friend to the stranger
 and a kinsman to those without kin.

When we consider how the Buddha gave up his status, wealth, family and devoted his life to help and love all beings without exception, we are inspired to try to live our lives as instruments of peace.

Even though generosity has come easily to me, probably because I've never been very attached to material things, some behaviors of others annoy or anger me. That pulls me back into the notion that “I” need to defend my “self,” usually by avoiding that person or animal.

But I can hardly walk away from all people and live off the land. There's barely enough wilderness left for wild animals. As Pema Chodron says, we have to start where we are, and that's here, as embodied awareness. We have these personalities that push and pull inside us, and push and pull with all the beings around us.

The fact that you do dislike people doesn't make you a bad Buddhist or unable to achieve liberation. You've been liberated often from little things, habits you don't do anymore, so you're free from the dukkha that those habits caused. Just like the rest of us, you have a personality. So do the people you like or dislike.

We have so many traits, and that gives us so many ways of connecting or conflicting with others. And still there's this underlying potential for unguarded good will toward every being – friend and stranger alike.

This universal good will becomes apparent during crises, and there's often a bit of nostalgia for it when the crisis is over. I'm enjoying the friendliness that's so common during this Covid-19 social distancing. For years, Carla and I have taken a walk every day, a route with hills that keeps our hearts and joints in shape.

We're known around the neighborhood as "the walkers." Now that I'm hobbling out again after being confined for eight weeks with a broken ankle, I'm being greeted by people whose names I don't know, telling me they're so glad to see me because they were worried I'd succumbed to the killer virus.

Receiving this kind of good will is very supportive. It's felt healing to me, physically and mentally. I love our house and our back yard garden, but I've missed this sense of community. Maybe people are friendly to us *because* we're friendly to them, but it's still a wonderful form of metta. It's reassuring to see lovingkindness operating on both the Relative and Absolute levels.

It's common to worry about whether we "have enough" metta. In my teens, long before I encountered the concept of metta, I noted in my journal that I found it so much easier to love all humanity than to love people. Now that I've studied our species from as many angles as I could find, I'm keenly aware that collectively we have as many flaws as we do individually. This *is* what we are.

It is our challenge to resist giving up on developing metta just because we get grumpy or aversive toward others. We still have this capacity for universal love. We just need to develop it whenever we can. In meditation we can say phrases that make it more and more of a mental habit. In daily life we can practice it whenever it arises spontaneously, celebrating it joyfully. As we go about our day we can practice finding lovable things about others. And there are many more ways to encourage this beautiful state of being.