

Metta Sutta—Sutta Nipata I.8

This is what's done by one skilled in what's good,
Who reaches toward that most peaceful state:
One would be capable, and straight—quite straight;
Well-spoken, gentle, without too much pride.

Content with little, easily maintained,
Not doing too much and lightly engaged;
Thoughtful, with a peaceful demeanor, and
Modest, without greed among worldly things.

One would not do even the slightest thing
That others who are wise would speak against.
May they be secure and profoundly well;
—May all beings be happy in themselves.

Whatsoever living beings exist,
Without exception, whether weak or strong,
Whether tall and large, middle-sized, or short,
Whether very subtle or very gross,

Whether visible or invisible,
Dwelling far away or not far away,
Whether born already or not yet born
—May all beings be happy in themselves.

Let no one work to undo another.
Let no one think badly of anyone.
Either with anger or with violent thoughts,
One would not wish suffering on others,

Just as a mother would watch over her
Son—her one and only son—with her life,
In just the same way develop a mind
Unbounded toward all living creatures.

Develop a mind of loving kindness
Unbounded toward the entire world:
Above and below and all the way 'round,
With no holding back, no loathing, no foe.

Standing, walking, sitting or lying down,
As long as one is devoid of torpor,
One would resolve upon this mindfulness
—This is known as sublime abiding here.

Without falling into mistaken views,
Endowed with insight and integrity,
Guiding away greed for sensual things,
One would not be born again in a womb.

Translation by Andy Olendzki

Being metta

Dharma talk, September 22, 2018
Rhonda Karlton Rosen

An angry person is a prey to anger, and ruled by anger.

It is a very painful way to live.

And as we know from our years on the playground, when we hurl unkind words, we hear the retort: "I am rubber, you are glue, your words bounce off me, and stick to you."

It is thoroughly unpleasant to be tossed around by our emotional response to circumstance, to be led around by our habitual reactions.

In this dharma talk, I want to speak about the cultivation of loving kindness, so we have an alternative to the whims of moods and happenstance.

This takes some resolve and discipline, for anger is seductive. Its poisoned root comes with a honeyed tip.

The Path of Purification, a 5th century tome spelling out the Buddhist path, states that in order to work with our natural reactivity, we must first understand that there are disadvantages to hating, and advantages to patience. This is an intellectual decision.

Only then can we create an intention for the cultivation of loving-kindness. It grows out of our yearning for a peaceful state.

We learn to trust, over time that this is a skill we can develop. We can decide to value good will, kind-heartedness, and basic openness. We learn to live in a space of patience and constancy.

In all forms of aversion, the heart contracts. We become imprisoned by our mind's reaction and subsequent sense of self and separation. The heart goes into hiding.

We need to practice holding our sense of isolation, loneliness, and anger with love and compassion.

That is why we sit here hour after hour.

Training our minds to be wakeful and gentle.

To cultivate kindness, we must start with our self.

Starting with our self is imperative. We learn to accept our imperfections.

And then we learn to "Love your crooked neighbor with all your crooked heart"
WH Auden, "As I Walked Out One Evening"

From the Path of Purification:

If we are to become a compassionate presence, we need to become a living example of kindness with ourselves, compassion with ourselves, joyful with ourselves, all rooted in equanimity. These are the four divine abidings, limitless in their possibilities. Every drop of experience, every mind moment with the experience of these qualities changes us.

We are instructed to develop loving-kindness in this way:

"I am happy. Just as I want to be happy and dread pain, as I want to live and not to die, so do other beings, too', making ~~himself~~ [myself] the example, then desire for other beings' welfare and happiness arises in ~~him~~ [me]. And this method is indicated by the Blessed One's saying:

'I visited all quarters with my mind
Nor found I any dearer than myself;
Self is likewise to every other dear;
Who loves himself will never harm another."

Path of Purification, IX, 10, p. 290

We start with ourselves, then we bring to mind the benefactor, the stranger, and the hostile, breaking down the barriers between them—we all want the same thing.

This is a practice.

This is how it begins:

--Out of the four divine abidings: loving-kindness, compassion, sympathetic joy, and equanimity, we need to start with loving-kindness.

--First we need to do the work of eating a meal so we are not dizzy with hunger. We need to receive kindness and generosity, and take in nourishment. This predicates everything else.

--Then we need to seat our self comfortably on a well-prepared seat in a private space.

--We need to review the danger of hate and the advantage of patience.

There is danger in hate, because we can become obsessed by hate and do things that cause lasting damage. This is not compatible with the peace that we seek. Patience is an antidote to hate.

Path of Purification, IX.1, p. 288

The practice of loving-kindness, or the metta practice, places its origin story in the time of the Buddha. A group of monks went to a forest dwelling for the three months of rainy season practice. At first, the forest deities who lived in that forest welcomed them, but when they figured out that these monks were there for an extended duration, occupying the trees, which were foundation of their celestial mansions, the deities decided to frighten the monks away. They materialized terrifying conditions. Soon the monks grew pale and could no longer concentrate. The deities continued to harass them, and they lost their basic mindfulness, and their brains seemed to become smothered by the oppressing visions, noise, and stench.

The monks broke the Buddha's retreat rules, and headed back to find the Buddha. The Buddha could find no other place to send them on retreat, and sent them back to the same forest. He gave them the teaching of the metta sutta, telling them: "Monks, go back to the same spot. It is only by striving there that you will affect the destruction of inner taints. Fear not! If you want to be free from the harassment caused the deities, learn this sutta. It will be a theme for meditation as well as a formula for protection."

The story goes, that as the monks neared the forest dwelling, meditating on the meaning of the sutta, the hearts of the deities became so charged with warm feelings of goodwill that they became caretakers of this group of monks, who all obtained the pinnacle of spiritual perfection.

So, what is this powerful sutta? I think we may need to know, to learn to live with all our internal and external deities.

It begins this way:

"This is what's done by one skilled in what's good,
Who reaches toward that most peaceful state:
One would be capable, and straight—quite straight;
Well-spoken, gentle, without too much pride."

What all does this first stanza offer us?

It tells us that this is a cultivated skill.

That we are capable of attainment, and it is increasingly subtle.

It speaks to the faith that this is possible.

It asks us to be upright, rousing energy, and action with the integrity of knowing cause and effect.
Our words and attitude, our emotional intention, and level of pride matter.

And it says "without too much pride." It does not say "no pride."

This is a call for basic honesty and simplicity, and not perfection.

The next stanza instructs us:

"Content with little, easily maintained,
Not doing too much and lightly engaged;
Thoughtful, with a peaceful demeanor, and
Modest, without greed among worldly things."

It asks us to cultivate contentment. There is an assumption contentment is a learned skill. We work toward equilibrium between what we want and what is happening. Contentment eventually requires no modifiers. Contentment, with practice, becomes independent of circumstance and effect, and becomes simply a way of being in the world.

And we are asked to become modest. There is no need to raise the banner of the self as we go forth.

And the sutta goes on;

"One would not do even the slightest thing
That others who are wise would speak against.
May they be secure and profoundly well;
--May all beings be happy in themselves."

We are called to practice kindness. It addresses the quality of our consciousness rather than the utilitarian effect our attitude has upon those we meet. In order to be secure and profoundly well, we need to keep track of our jealousies, enviousness, resentment and spite. And we practice looking for their antidote.

When we struggle with kind regard, we can remember that everyone wants the same thing as us, to be happy and to live well. And if this is too hard, we remember that this other person can possibly have some good traits. If that doesn't work, you can reflect on the power of kamma, that they will be the cause of their own effect, and you don't have to supply the effect for them. And if you are still irritated, you can recite:

"Since states last but a moment's time
Those aggregates, by which was done
The odious act, have ceased, so now
What is it you are angry with?"

Path of Purification, IX.22, p. 293

And if that does not work, we can recite:

"When a fool hates a man that has no hate,
Is purified and free from every blemish,
Such evil he will find comes back on him,
As does fine dust thrown up against the wind"

Ibid, 24, p. 294

Like we have recited many times on the playground:

"I am rubber, you are glue, your words bounce off me, and sticks to you."

The advice for breaking down anger and resentment in this 5th century document continues for pages and pages.

Obviously, this is a universal and timeless issue, requiring patience with our selves, and our limitations, and our struggle to break down the barriers of aversion. This path calls for patience, constancy, and compassion. We get glimpses, which then opens up new possibilities.

We can cultivate the ability to bring kindness into all aspects of our life and to the people we encounter—while we are alone, while we speak with others, when we are in conflict, and even with the folks with whom we live. While this can be daunting, it begins with having the intention to become kind. Appreciating each drop of love we encounter supports it. Even practicing kindness for the time it takes to snap the fingers is beneficial. Each drop of practice is significant, and as the Buddha is quoted as saying, "with dripping drops of water, the water jug is filled."

Gil Fronsdal, *The Buddha's Teachings on Love*

We continue reading the metta sutta:

The next three stanzas let us know there are no limits to this call to contentment, peacefulness, and modesty.

"Whatsoever living being exists,
Without exception, whether weak or strong,
Whether tall and large, middle-sized, or short,
Whether very subtle or very gross.

Whether visible or invisible,
Dwelling faraway or not far away,
Whether born already or not yet born
--May all being be happy in themselves.

Let no one work to unto another,
Let no one think badly of anyone.
Either with anger or with violent thoughts,
One would not wish suffering on others."

It is this next stanza that may bring us back to ourselves in a way that calls upon the other three immeasurables, those characteristics which work together to bring us to peace. Along with the loving-kindness we cultivate, we must hold in mind the need for compassion, sympathetic joy, and equanimity.

The stanza goes:

"Just as a mother would watch over her
Son—her one and only son—with her life,
In just the same way develop a mind
Unbounded toward all living creatures."

For those with limited experience of mother-love, for those whose lives are dominated by the need to hide their hearts away to protect them from betrayal, this is the work we do among our own forest deities who plague us. We have all been betrayed to some degree. It is inevitable. With betrayal of innocence, our hearts contract. There is a sense of self in separation, in isolation. We hide and protect our hearts in our loneliness. We all lose our basic mindfulness, and our brains do seem to become smothered by oppressive visions, noise, and stench and fear as we seek our open heart, or retrieve our capacity for loving trust. It is like seeking a treasure behind a locked door. We patiently wait for the key to become apparent, and we hope we will learn to practice using it, like we learn to strengthen a weak muscle. We patiently wait, cultivating compassion for our own circumstance. It turns out, that is the key. We anchor ourselves in equanimity, over time, learning that patience and kindness and compassion can hold the real distress of any betrayal, and our hearts learn to open, our hearts come out of hiding.

Sometimes as we start this practice of loving-kindness, it seems as if aversion has multiplied, that we are getting increasingly irritable. But if we can stay gently awake to that irritability, we can learn to trust that there is a powerful purifying process going on. "It's as if cool drops of water are falling on a piece of red-hot metal. As each drop hits the metal there is the sound of steam rising. Over and over again, the cool water hits the hot metal... 'whoosh.' But gradually the sound of steam rising from the drops diminishes until there is no reaction at all. The metal has cooled off. Our minds work in a similar way. We all carry a vast storehouse of impressions, old reactions, judgments, and hurts. As they begin to lose heat, we find ourselves living with greater ease and happiness and joy."

One Dharma, Joseph Goldstein, p. 114

As we learn to open and come close to the suffering in our own lives, we find we have a greater strength and courage and insight to be with the suffering of others.

Ibid, p 124

The depth of our pain becomes the depth of our capacity for compassion, joy, and equanimity for ourselves, and all beings. It becomes wisdom.

Our love can become easy, like water rushing over stone. Love nourishes spiritual freedom and is kept flowing by it. Freedom is our guide. Love that involves clinging, lust, confusion, neediness, fear, or grasping to a sense of self, are all limitations to freedom. We need to discover how and when we get trapped into the pettiness of mind, when the flow gets stuck in the eddies, and filled with debris. Our kind and compassionate awareness, helps to restore the flow. It clears the debris left over from the pain we have carried with us, consciously and unconsciously.

According to the Path of Purification, we are given guides to recognizing when our hearts are seizing up. It can be a guide to let us know when we are creating more suffering for our selves and others.

The Path delineates our near and far enemies of each of the divine abidings. Near enemies are the characteristics that masquerade as kindness, compassion, joy and equanimity. Far enemies are the opposite of what we have come to value.

Loving-kindness removes annoyance, and sees the lovable in all beings. Ill-will subsides. The root of love for our selves, and others is true friendship. We must learn to befriend ourselves before even thinking of loving other people. If we are constantly at war with our self, how can we live peacefully with another? Loving-kindness is like a loving mother with her only child. Its near enemy is greed, or selfish affection. When we feel greedy and selfish affection, we know we are missing the mark. The far enemy is anger. This is so much easier to notice. *When there is completion, the full flowering of loving kindness shines with beauty.*

Compassion allays suffering, and sees the helplessness in those overwhelmed by suffering. We can only know compassion for other's suffering when we have compassion for our own. When compassion falls short, there is grief and sorrow, rather than having its roots in equanimity. Its far enemy, its opposite, is cruelty. When compassion is realized, it is like the love of a mother for an invalid child. *In its highest form, it is boundless space.*

Gladness or joy is un-envious. There is the elimination of aversion. We make room for delight. This image of mother is the one who takes joy in the child who is in the flush of her youth. It's near enemy is when joy becomes attached to worldly things. The far enemy is the aversion inherent in boredom. *In its fruition, it is boundless consciousness.*

Equanimity promotes neutrality toward all beings, and resentment and disapproval subside. There can be calm in the face of complete uncertainty. This image of the loving mother is one whose child is busy in her own affairs. The near enemy is ignorance, the pseudo-equanimity of inattention. *Its fruition is complete absorption into the whole.* This is the view from the mountaintop, the self-less perspective. There are no barriers. The lines between the self and the benefactors and the neutral ones and the hostile ones are erased. When we come to this understanding, we are then instructed to include the consciousness of the earth element, grounding ourselves in this world. We can think of this as the stones over which the waters of love and freedom flow.

(Path of Purification IX.43)

The four immeasurables are without limitation.

We make our way in this practice, drip by sizzling drip, moment by moment. Cultivating steadfastness and patience, valuing kindness, beginning with our self.

The metta sutta continues:

“Develop a mind of loving kindness
Unbounded toward the entire world:
Above and below and all the way ‘round,
With no holding back, no loathing, no foe.

Standing, walking, sitting or lying down,
As long as one is devoid of torpor,
One would resolve upon this mindfulness
--This is known as sublime abiding here.

Without falling into mistaken views,
Endowed with insight and integrity,
Guiding away greed for sensual things,
One would not be born again in a womb.
Translation by Andy Olendzki

“As we learn to open and come close to the suffering in our own lives, we find we have greater strength and courage and insight to be the suffering of others.”
One Dharma, J. Goldstein, p. 124

“Love and compassion grow when we see there are no viable alternatives.”
Ibid., p. 126

Mindfulness involves a benevolent attitude toward the object of experience. Mindfulness and loving kindness arise together, each rounding out and supporting each other.

So about those hostile deities who inhabit our forest where we to go meditate-- we are not going to charm them, run them out of the woods, or defeat or defy them. We are going to just sit here, being metta, loving-kindness, friendly, and they will calm down and become our assistants. All those deities, internal and external.

We don't have to be perfect, but just not have “too much pride”.
We can learn to love our crooked neighbor with our crooked heart.
That is embodying metta enough to enlist the assistance of the community of living beings, internal and external.
The imperfect is held with loving-kindness.

Reference materials:
The Metta Sutta, translated by Andy Olendzki
Path of Purification, translated from the Pali by Bhikkhu Nanamoli
One Dharma, Joseph Goldstein
The Buddha's Teachings on Love, Gil Fronsdal, insightmeditationcenter.org
WH Auden, “As I Walked Out One Evening”

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