

Metta

Gil Fronsdal

2001-09-06

Keywords:

mettā, brahmavihāra, loving-kindness, compassion, sympathetic joy, equanimity, Theravāda, intention, mindfulness, boundless states

So the practice of loving kindness is called in Pāli, which is the ancient Buddhist language, *mettā*. And *mettā* is cognate with the word for friend, which is *mitta*. The idea of *mettā* is a kind of friendly attitude towards ourselves or towards other people. It is very strongly associated with Buddhism, especially the Buddhism that we now belong to, the Theravāda tradition of Southeast Asia, where loving kindness is considered to be a foundational positive virtue that Buddhists in Thailand, Burma, and Sri Lanka will be developing. The mindfulness practice is the practice of seeing clearly what is actually here, learning how to be present for things as they are, without reacting against them or pushing away or holding on—just being present in a simple, direct way for how things are. Loving kindness is different than that, because it is actually generating a sense of good will, or using good will as the reference for how our interpersonal relationships should be in relationship to ourselves.

Often when we go about our life, we have to make decisions about how to act and what to do. Mindfulness helps us to see very clearly what the situation is, what our reactions, our feelings, our thoughts, our values are that go into it. Loving kindness is one of the things that Buddhists use to help guide them—what to see, what the decision should be. Is it a kind thing that I'm going to do? Are you doing something kind or is it something which is unkind at this moment? Wouldn't you rather be doing something that's kind?

Buddhists try to cultivate the sense of *mettā*, friendliness or kindness, not artificially, not as a cover or the suppression of other feelings we might have. There is always the recognition that we might not feel kind towards people or towards ourselves, and it is not supposed to be pushing or repressing those feelings, but rather recognizing the unkindness that might be there—the anger or the hostility or the sadness or whatever it might be. And even with that

there, seeing if we can find in some core corner or some core essence of who we are that it would be nice to wish well for this person. You want this person's well-being. You want your own well-being.

In Theravāda Buddhism, *mettā* is the foundational virtue, and on the cultivation of love and kindness, the other four primary virtues of the tradition follow. So the other primary virtues are compassion, sympathetic joy, and equanimity. Compassion is the wish that someone not suffer. Sympathetic joy is sharing empathetically in the happiness someone else is experiencing. Both of them have to do with sympathy. Compassion is sympathizing with the suffering of someone, and sympathetic joy is sympathizing with their happiness. Those are qualities that arise out of loving kindness. If you can feel kindly towards people, then you are likely to feel these other emotions.

The four *brahmavihāras*—they're called the four: loving kindness, sympathetic joy, compassion, and equanimity—are called *brahmavihāras*. *Brahmā* is the great god of the Indian pantheon of gods. He is called the ruler god in ancient India. They believed, like the ancient Greeks, there were many gods, and then there was Zeus in the Greek pantheon. In ancient India, *Brahmā* was the equivalent of Zeus, and a *vihāra* means a dwelling place. So these four virtues are called the four *brahmavihāras*.

Some people will translate into English as the four divine abodes, *Brahmā* being the highest god, the highest divinity. The four divine abodes—when we are at our best, when the best qualities within us come to the foreground—then it's kind of a divine quality that comes through love, kindness, compassion. And *vihāra* means it's a place to dwell. It's a place to hang out. It's a place where we can operate from when we go about our life.

The four *brahmavihāras* are also called the four immeasurables, or the four infinite qualities, the four boundless states, in that they're not supposed to have any boundaries to them when they're really fully developed. Now, initially you might first have some kindness or love towards yourself and then towards other people, but as meditators develop this quality—Buddhists in spiritual life—they develop it so that these qualities of loving kindness and compassion become boundless or immeasurable, where they don't even have to be directed to any particular person. They are just boundless states of the heart, which is completely open and boundless. It has no limit to what the heart will include within it in a loving, kind, friendly way.

It's really remarkable to go to, for example, Southeast Asia, and to meet some of them, especially the monks and nuns who have spent maybe thirty, forty, fifty years every day practicing

loving kindness meditation. Maybe not only meditation, but also in daily life, they keep the loving kindness practice going as they go through their life. For some people, it is the primary spiritual practice they've engaged in for all these years. These people just are beaming—if you get into their field, it's like you're in this field of loving kindness. It is a remarkable thing to feel.

When I was first introduced to loving kindness practice, this practice, I mistrusted it. I thought it was a kind of artificial thing. How could someone do a practice that generates or makes happen feelings or attitudes of kindness or love or friendliness? Those things kind of happen spontaneously. You don't want to manufacture them or call them forth because it is kind of artificial. So in my own early training, when the teacher would guide us in loving kindness meditation, I would always tune the teacher out. I would not like to do that part, but I can't do that. I just continued with my mindfulness practice.

Then the remarkable thing happened: mindfulness itself, as it develops and matures, softens, tenderizes the heart, so that the natural goodness, the natural friendliness, kindness of the heart begin shining on its own. Then when the teachers led the loving kindness meditation, I was right there with them, because all this kindness was bubbling up through my own heart. The old crusts of fear and stuff had dissolved, and then I got really into it. It was really great. Some people will take to loving kindness practice right away, and some people will be like me, say, "No way! This is dumb," and I don't know how it was for you to do it. But both attitudes are allowed. It's fine to have both ways.

I'm very fond of the fact that scholars of Buddhism who study ancient, early Buddhism and study these four practices of the *brahmavihāras* point out that these were originally not Buddhist practices. Though in the modern world it is often associated with Buddhism, they seem to have been spiritual practices that were just part of the spiritual scene of ancient India. As were many, some of the teachings of the Buddha were not unique to the Buddha. He just adopted things that made sense to him from the spiritual traditions around him, and those traditions have long since died away. So people associate these things with the Buddha and Buddhism because that's where they've survived. The *brahmavihāras* are like that. They were part of the general Indian spiritual milieu of the time of the Buddha.

I like this a lot, because what it means is that they don't belong to a particular religion. It's not just a Buddhist religious thing—you don't have to be a Buddhist to do it or something. I like to think of it as just universal qualities that we all have. We all have the capacity for kindness, for love. We all have the capacity for compassion, sympathy. It's important to develop that

capacity we have. We don't have to leave it to chance that these things will just arise by accident.

You know, we can kind of pray at night, "Please, tomorrow, may I have some compassion or some kindness or something," but we can actually do something to cultivate that and develop it. One of the principles of Buddhist spirituality is that our intentions are like seeds, and if you act or express any kind of intention, that seed will flower, will develop, will grow into a wonderful plant. If your intentions are mostly intentions of ill will, of aggression, of self-loathing, then what you actually do is water that seed of self-loathing and aggression, whatever it is, and it becomes more like a habit that we're more likely to do more in the future. If we cultivate and water the seeds of kindness, of love, then you are more likely to have those develop and mature in your life.

If you leave it to accident, then you know how to do it. Now, all the oddities of daily life—maybe you feel loving one day or maybe not—you don't know, but you can actually intentionally or consciously choose to work on this intention. You can't make yourself feel loving, but you can water the seeds of the desire to be kind, desire of good will. What's remarkable is that a person who might do this in their own meditation practice every day—maybe ten minutes each day in their meditation practice—some people will make it the primary meditation practice. As this habit becomes more part of yourself, a regular part, and more close at hand, more accessible, more something you're familiar with, it pops up at unusual times.

You find yourself in a situation where normally you would be really angry at that person. But because you have made a regular practice of practicing kindness in your meditation, the attitude of looking at this person kindly or wanting to is right there close at hand, and you find yourself remarkably looking at this person in a new way. Rather than looking at the person through the colored glasses of aggression or anger or hurt, you look at the person through the colored glasses of wanting that person's well-being or seeing that person's capacity for happiness. One of the images or analogies for loving kindness practice is the kind of care or tenderness or caregiving or love that a parent has for their child. The traditional way of saying it is the way the mother feels for her only child. So it's a kind of parental feeling, but it's not meant only for your children. It's meant for yourself and for all other beings.

When I do loving kindness practice for other people, sometimes I like to imagine, even if it's someone I don't like, or someone I am troubled with or have tension with, I think about them, and I think, "How were they seen by their mother when they were one year old or a baby? How did their mother treat them? When they were one week old, how did the mother see

them and hold them? What kind of wishes did that mother have for that person? What did the mother see in that child?” Sometimes, for me at least, that kind of changes the filter by which I look at a person—from the hurt or the anger or the fear that I might have—and I see that person has a capacity for happiness, for joy, for tenderness. That sometimes will transform my relationship to that person.

Sometimes I see that person, and if that person was operating from their core tenderness within them, I don’t think that person would be doing what they’re doing right now. Seeing that that person has a capacity for that kind of tenderness, I don’t ignore or deny or condone what they’ve done if they’ve hurt me or something, but I am more likely to come back to them in a kinder way in my dealings with that person, rather than coming back automatically and aggressively or something like that. So the regular practice of loving kindness predisposes us to begin looking at the world through the eyes of kindness. Kindness is something our world sorely needs.

What a lot of Buddhist teachers have pointed out, who have come to America—both Asian teachers and also American teachers—is that, as a generalization, Americans need a lot more kindness, especially towards themselves, than Asian practitioners. There seems to be a level of self-loathing, low self-esteem, self-deprecation, self-doubt in our culture that has reached epidemic levels, and so much so that I wonder if it isn’t contagious. Sometimes Asian teachers coming to America are just blown away by what they find out here. The practice of loving kindness sometimes is really the best practice for someone to start with when they do Buddhist practice. For some people, the practice of mindfulness can actually make people worse.

Oddly enough, a person who is very self-conscious, and all they tend to look at in themselves are their faults and their problems, and, you know, they don’t even have to have a fault to fundamentally believe they’re at fault, like original sin, right? Original fault. So if you have that kind of tendency, the practice of mindfulness, which brings on a kind of self-introspection, will sometimes, oddly enough, fuel the tendency to be self-conscious, self-deprecating, self-loathing, self-whatever—it’s like it gives you more material, more proof how bad you are. Someone once said, “Self-knowledge is seldom good.” For some people, mindfulness practice is not the best place to start.

Rather, the best place to start is with loving kindness practice and to every day make half an hour or so every day in your morning meditation—just do loving kindness. Initially, maybe do it just for yourself, just yourself, for a whole half hour, for weeks on end, because some

people are already so hard on themselves. Sometimes it doesn't work very well to do it to yourself. The Buddha took it for granted that it was easy for everyone to start for themselves. He wasn't teaching in America. Some people will then not start with themselves, but will start with other people—some caregiver, someone who has cared about you. Sometimes it's a lot easier to have intentions of good will towards someone who's been kind towards you, and then after that you switch, and then maybe it's easier to do towards yourself.

So the traditional way is to start with yourself. It's not meant to be egotistical. It's meant to be actually very healthy. It's very healthy to develop a sense of good will towards yourself. Some people will say you cannot have real love for other people unless there is some kind of love towards yourself. So if you really want to be of service to others, you need to start towards yourself, and then you expand the practice out to include those people who are your benefactors, people who care about you. Then you expand the practice out by bringing to mind those people who are neutral in your life—you don't have any particular feeling for or against, like or not like.

Now, sometimes some people find it's very hard to think of such a person, because as soon as you think of someone, you immediately have a like or dislike. But it's meant to be like the mail carrier or someone you hardly know at all. It's not a charged thing. Someone more or less neutral. After you've done that, and stabilized yourself on those three categories of people—self, benefactor, and neutral person—then the challenge becomes to expand a sense of good will to include people who, the traditional word is “enemy.” In the West we don't like to use the word “enemy,” so we use “the difficult person.” But the Buddhist word is “the enemy,” and that just throws people for a loop, right? “You know, my enemy, the person who's caused me the most harm—I'm supposed to have kindness towards them and goodwill to them?”

It seems impossible, you know. Why should I? And that person doesn't deserve it, that jerk. Everyone deserves the intention of kindness, of wanting their well-being. So it becomes a little stretch then. Sometimes you have to do some reflection and work on that, and understand what it means to have kindness towards someone, and maybe develop some wisdom around it. It doesn't mean you condone what they've done. It doesn't mean you become foolish around them or lower your defences—maybe if they're still tending to harm you—but it means at least you don't lock them out of your heart.

Then the practice becomes more expansive. Then you're supposed to what's called “break down the barriers.” This means that once you've done those four categories, then you want to imagine all four people standing in front of you, and you want to direct the same level of good

will to all four, so there's no barrier. It isn't like you're more loving towards a benefactor, and you've done pretty well with the enemy, but it's kind of a few notches below the benefactor. You want to lower the barriers so it's equal to everyone.

Then your meditation teacher will go and test you—and I probably shouldn't tell you the test and the answer. But the test is, if you find yourself with yourself, a benefactor, a neutral person, and an enemy, and some horrible bandit comes along and tells you, "OK, you've got to choose one of those four people, and I'm going to kill them, which one would you choose?" So which are you going to choose? Choose your enemy, the neutral person, your benefactor, or yourself? The answer, which I shouldn't tell you, is you're not supposed to—you're not supposed to have any criteria by which to decide who should go first. Then, when the barriers are lowered entirely, you would just throw up your hands: "I can't decide, sir." It is not a very satisfying test. It just happens to be one that's used.

So after that, as that's very—it gets a very involved meditation, and now people usually do it. When it gets this involved, people will do it on retreats where people are meditating all day long. For me, sometimes days and weeks on end, just developing this loving kindness. So I need to vary a little bit to make it interesting tonight. After those four people together, then begin doing different categories of beings. You think of all women, "May they be happy." All men, "May they be happy." All children, all animals. You kind of cover all these categories of beings.

Then you think of all beings in the west, and all beings in the east, and up and down in all directions. You kind of expand the heart or the mind, and make it much more spacious. You become more boundless. You become more inclusive, and the sense of inclusivity goes way beyond you. It's almost like you become much bigger than you are. Your consciousness becomes so expansive it includes everything around you. Some people will expand to include first the people in the room we're sitting in: "May all these people we're sitting in this room—may they be happy." May all the beings in Poland be happy. May everyone in California be happy. The United States, and the world, and the idea—if you're doing this well, and you're concentrated and very stable, the mind becomes very expansive, almost as if you're holding everything within the mind.

The mind is infinitely large, and can handle and hold everything within it until finally it becomes boundless, and there's no directions, no boundary, no limit to the love. Infinite love, infinite kindness, kind of a huge bubble that encompasses the whole universe. Now, it's a lovely state to be sitting in. For most of us, we don't take the meditation that far, but even to

practice a little bit is very significant, to practice it in different circumstances in our lives.

I love doing it at the airports. Maybe it's not quite the right word, because it's not always pleasant to do in airports. But I like doing it in airports, and what I do is sit and watch the people walking by. You don't get a very high percentage of smilers in an airport; you get a lot of people kind of grumpy or serious. I imagine them. I can look at the person walking by, and I imagine them—this thing I told you earlier, like what they were like as a child, with their mother or their father, in the best of all family circumstances. Or I look at their face, and imagine what that face would look like if it was really happy.

So you use a little imagination, and then when I can catch that little kind of imaginary face of happiness, then I can, without them knowing, of course, “May you be happy. May you be well.” It's a much better way of spending my time at the airport than looking at that television screen up there on the ceiling, or pacing, or being impatient, or whatever else might go on. Loving kindness practice is often offered as an antidote to anger.

It's not meant to eradicate the anger, or to deny the anger, or avoid it, but it's meant—it can be a tender anger. So when anger arises, the anger doesn't have the upper hand. You're not being led around by the nose of the anger. The anger can be there, but you bring loving kindness to yourself as a way of balancing it, so you can maybe begin seeing the situation through the eyes of kindness more, or just so the anger is not in charge, especially when the anger is really overwhelming and obviously in charge. Practicing loving kindness for a while is a way of cooling out.

Sometimes you do loving kindness directly to the anger. Again, not as an aggressive act towards the anger to get rid of it, but just hold the anger in a friendly way: “May this anger be safe. May it be happy. May it be well.” Whatever works for you. Often anger is really an expression of fear. If that's the case, fear often just wants to be reassured and wants to receive some kindness. You can do it for yourself.

Suppose it's like for some of you to do that half an hour of loving kindness practice. Any reaction to it is allowable. Yes, and almost a scary experience—scary, because as I started feeling my heart, I have no loving kindness suggestion that you're going through it. I felt something hard. It smells dark. Yes, I said this is one of the functions of loving kindness practice—to reveal that. In Buddhism, it's said it's much better to know that that's there than to go around with a heart that's closed and dark and hard, and not know that it's there.

It's an improvement to know it's there even though it's unpleasant. Then you can either con-

tinue doing loving kindness practice, even sometimes just direct it directly to that hardness—not all of you, just that part of you—or just do loving kindness. Just the way we talked about earlier, and that might help just tenderizing. It might just be there. It might be the very thing that hardness wants, that never felt any love or kindness or tenderness towards it—just having it wash in yourself in kindness, and let it be. Or you might just switch to mindfulness practice, and bring mindfulness to bear on that hardness, and just look at it very honestly, and just feel it, and be present for it, study your reactions in relationship to it. But I would recommend that. It's very significant that a part of you, and it's well worth practicing with it, please.

Sometimes I would, if I am reciting the words in my mind, I have a very strong sense of well-meaning myself or a doctor. At other times, I get wise words, and it didn't seem to have the feeling of, "Well, come and go, come, come." The feelings are not as important as what you're doing is watering those seeds of intention. Many of us focus on how we're feeling as being really what's important. "I've got the feeling." No, great. The feeling is really secondary. So you can let go of any concern about "Am I feeling nice or not?" Just keep matter-of-factly watering the seeds of that intention.

If the feeling of kindness does arise, there's an art to not holding on to it, but letting it nudge you, encourage you, or keep you on track. So not to ignore the feeling, but you can appreciate it. An appreciation of it helps keep you on track with the phrases and with the intention. That makes sense. You admitted you were like, "Oh, I see. I see." So you have some old habit there, then it can take a long time to develop a wholesome relationship to oneself, to have a feeling of kindness or well-being towards oneself.

It's really well worth the endeavor, the effort to find that. But it requires a lot of patience. So if your benefactor worked best for you, do benefactors a lot and then gingerly include yourself, realizing it may be hard and painful or awkward or confusing. Just keep doing it anyway, very gently and slowly. You'll find your way to a more wholesome relationship to yourself. "Oh, that's great. Yes, you can imagine yourself. You can imagine yourself sitting next to your benefactor or any other person, and then do it for both of you maybe or so." All kinds of creative loving kindness practice—you're allowed to be very creative. You can use your imagination. You can make up your own phrases. There's no right way of doing it.

There's a traditional, classic way of doing it. If you do it on a long meditation retreat, it may be valuable there to follow the classic formulas and ways. But if you're doing it as part of daily life, if you can feel playful, even, and creative, it might be a lot easier to come to a wholesome

relationship to yourself. Yes, imagine yourself sitting next to your benefactor, one benefactor on each side. If some of you spoke, and some of you nothing happened at all, please—I've never heard of people doing that, but as I said, you can be creative, and certainly you're welcome to try.

If you might imagine yourself in a picture, imagine what your benefactor sees in you. When the benefactor looks at you, what image does a benefactor have of you? Because someone in the world has a good image of yourself. So it's possible to have it. If you put yourself in their shoes, in a sense, it might be easier. It doesn't have to be an image. Also, it can be a feeling tone of feeling towards oneself. Yes, please try. The wish, the sense of good will, the idea, the motivation—"Oh, it's a really good idea if I was happy, or that person was happy." It's kind of an attitude, kind of like the theistic attitude of, "May that person be happy, God willing." It's like you're not making it happen. You're not demanding it happen. Just God willing, kind of thinking.

So this feeling doesn't have to be there. Just this kind of wish. It's certainly no demand or expectation that it's supposed to happen—like God willing, you know, kind of way of doing it. And a lot of Buddhists will do this. I do loving kindness meditation for people who are in distress. Like someone who's going for surgery, or someone in great life crisis, or whatever it might be, and they want to do something to help, but it's not actually possible to be present physically or whatever. Or even if you are present physically, like coming at someone's deathbed, they're dying—a wonderful practice to do is this loving kindness practice, to wish this person well and do the practice.

Now, through some channels which may not be so obvious, it seems to have a big effect on the people around us. We can speculate what those channels are, but—well, what if no one has more to say? What I like to do then is to do another aspect of loving kindness meditation as a closing meditation. But if you'd like to stand first a few moments and stretch.