

## Loving Kindness (3 of 4)

**Gil Fronsdal**

**April 21, 2008**

**Keywords:** mettā, loving kindness, nibbāna, liberation, Buddhaghosa, sutta, benefactor, goodwill, self-criticism, sublime abiding

---

Good evening, and I'd like to continue today the series I'm doing Mondays in April, which is on the topic of *mettā*, loving kindness. As an introduction to today's part of this talk, I want to say that Buddhism puts a tremendous emphasis on attitude and cultivating an appropriate or helpful attitude for our lives. That also relates to how we practise meditation, practice the Buddhist spiritual life. Attitude is very important. There's a wide variety of helpful attitudes for different situations. One attitude I was thinking about regarding *mettā* today is the attitude of adventure.

So much of my own involvement with Buddhist practice over these decades feels like a grand adventure. I never could have imagined the discoveries, the errors I've had to face and deal with and open up to. It's just been a kind of wonderful adventure. At times, the attitude is one of playfulness. I think being playful a little bit is very helpful, can be helpful in practice. Other times, playfulness has not been the attitude, but rather one of a much more sense of seriousness or depth of meaning, that this is really important.

It's important for myself. It's important for the world around us. That's the kind of attitude that has supported me as I went into this. In relationship to loving kindness practice, loving kindness itself is an attitude, which is considered one of the primary Buddhist virtues. Cultivating loving kindness, expressing loving kindness, and making decisions based on loving kindness are considered to be very important in the Buddhist spiritual life. So the attitude is important.

But then the other side of it is that the very cultivation of that attitude, the exploration of loving kindness, is itself both an adventure and hopefully at times a playful phenomenon. It's kind of fun to do it, and a delight to be involved in this, and hopefully in being an adventure. It's also a time and place where we get challenged. I don't know if you think of love as something that challenges you, but it also challenges us in many ways. Loving kindness, for those

of you who haven't been here, is a disposition and attitude of wishing the welfare on others or anyone, yourself as well, so wishing them well. Sometimes it's translated as goodwill, basic goodwill towards people.

It's likened to two kinds of goodwill. It's likened to the goodwill of a mother who wants welfare, wants the best for her children. The other is likened to the kind of welfare or good wishes that a really good friend would have for you. Maybe one of them is more meaningful for different situations, or meaningful for you. Those are the two kinds of reference points for this sense of goodwill: wanting the best, and wanting the best for someone as a mother, a parent, or a good friend. One of the simplest ways of stating this is wishing for people's well-being, being concerned with people's well-being, and wishing for that.

The cultivation of that wish, that attitude, this disposition of wishing welfare, has an effect on the person who is doing the wishing. It is not just for the sake of the other person that we cultivate loving kindness. It's for our own sake as well. As we cultivate this disposition, this attitude of loving kindness, it changes our own heart. It opens us up. It softens us.

It creates a warmth. It creates a friendly disposition. It does a variety of beneficial things for us as well. When it's cultivated in meditation, it's a significant place to cultivate great stability, a great concentration with the mind. The heart gets very stable, very open, very radiant. Rather than having the mind besieged by all its thoughts, preoccupations, distractions, worries, fears, anxieties, all these different things, the mind is an interesting thing.

I think how we experience the mind is very much influenced by what goes on in the mind. It's almost as if certain activities of the mind are like coverings of the mind, a cloud over the mind that darkens the natural luminosity of the mind. One of the things that does a darkening is a preoccupation with thinking. Even more so, if the thoughts we're preoccupied with are egotistical thoughts, caught up in their own self-centered kind of way. It doesn't seem like it's darkening to many people, if you haven't meditated perhaps, because the mind doesn't have any color. We just kind of, I do not know how to describe it exactly, but maybe this is a terrible example, but I guess you have like videos—watching a video, and before you put the video in, the screen is beautiful blue.

Then you put the video in, and then you have all the drama. Nothing seems wrong, seems great. The drama seems great. We're excited. We're into it, seems wonderful. Then, after the video is over, you realize, oh, there's this beautiful blue there.

Maybe that's not a good example. But it's kind of like that with the mind, that when we're preoccupied with drama, with the thoughts and all that, we don't realize that it kind of ob-

scures the natural luminosity, natural radiance, clarity, openness, a translucent quality that the mind is. The mind and the heart are considered almost the same in Buddhism. So, same thing with the heart. The heart gets covered over. As we open up, as we settle down, get concentrated, and stop being preoccupied with all the things that preoccupy us, there's a natural kind of warmth that exists in the heart.

That natural warmth then can take various expressions. One expression is the wish for this goodwill, wanting welfare for people, wanting the best for people, being concerned with their well-being. Perhaps a reference point for this is whatever sense of very deep well-being that you've had yourself. Perhaps there's some reference point in the course of your life where you really felt a tremendous sense of well-being. Maybe that's a guiding light for you in your life. Oh, that's possible—to have that sense of well-being, and so to have that as a reference point in oneself gives you a sense of what's possible for other people as well.

Then, oh, that would be great if that person had it. That would be really nice. That very wish of wanting people to have this well-being is hopefully something that makes you feel good, brings well-being to you. I've certainly been in situations where my care, my love, my kindness for others, my compassion for others flowed purely enough, cleanly enough, that there was a sense of happiness or joy or delight that I felt in the very presence of those feelings I had for someone else. In the beginning, I was very surprised by this when I paid attention to it, because I remember a feeling when I was caring for someone who was struggling a little bit in their life and needed a lot of help—physical help getting over steps and stuff, to lift a person up and help a person out. I was so surprised how good I started feeling.

I said, you notice, it's not about me. Why should I be feeling so good? I'm just helping this person. I was concerned about the person. But I felt very good. Many years later, I found out one theory for why we feel good, and that is the theory of oxytocin, that there is a chemical, *dharmma*, I guess, that's released when there are very clean expressions of compassion or care for other people.

That chemical, the body produces a sense of well-being in people. Apparently, it's one of the reasons why mothers are happy to nurse, because nursing releases a lot of oxytocin. Isn't it nice? So that's a reductionistic explanation for all this. But I find it kind of odd that we have well-being in ourselves in taking care of someone else. If the caretaking is clean, it's not clean, you won't feel it so much.

In the classic description of practising loving kindness, the meditation of loving kindness, the instruction is to start with oneself. The classic instruction to start with yourself then has a little footnote that says, you might ask, if this is a basic system like this, is this really okay to do

this? Because the Buddha never gave people, and there's no record of the Buddha ever giving instructions that you should do loving kindness for yourself. This was written fifteen hundred years after the Buddha, not a thousand years after the Buddha, so this very famous Buddhist teacher says, you know, I'm teaching you to start with yourself. But you might wonder about this, since the Buddha never said this. Some people do ask that question: is it egotistical to start with yourself, to focus on yourself that way?

I thought Buddhism must be about freeing yourself from your egotism, and here I'm told to begin by offering kindness, goodwill towards myself. I think it's a good question, because sometimes it can be. It's a little bit tricky, maybe even dangerous, to focus on oneself even in mindfulness, because sometimes narcissism, self-preoccupation, egotism can be entangled with a very kind of inward practice that we do in meditation, and sometimes it can actually reinforce an unhealthy sense of self-identity, self-concept, in a variety of ways. But when meditation is done well, it's positioned to be helping to free us from egotism, from self-centeredness that causes a lot of suffering. The same thing can happen with loving kindness practice. Loving kindness practice towards oneself can reinforce a variety of unhealthy attitudes towards oneself.

For example, some people are really caught—the operating word here is caught—in a victim mentality or some variation of that: poor me, life has been hard on me, terrible things have happened to me. When we are caught in that attitude of being a victim, and then we do loving kindness to nourish myself, to cherish myself, you know, I deserve loving kindness, I should be happy, sometimes it can actually reinforce the very sense of impoverishment. Poor little me, poor me, needs to be taken care of. Make sense, I'm saying? So I must be careful with this. There's a tremendous love and warmth that can be directed towards oneself, but I have to be careful that it isn't entangled with unhealthy attitudes.

So what does Buddhaghosa, this ancient teacher, say? He said, yes, the Buddha didn't teach loving kindness for oneself, and in fact, the upper limits, upper reaches of how far you can go with the practice—loving kindness cannot be reached by doing loving kindness to yourself. Is that interesting? The practice itself, to the full development of it, cannot be reached when you focus it on yourself. However, by developing loving kindness on yourself first, that increases your capacity for empathy for others. If you can feel good about yourself, feel love for yourself, then you're more likely to feel that sense of a desire for other people's welfare.

You understand in kind, it's easier to put yourself in their shoes: oh, they have that capacity too. For example, the greatest sense of well-being that I've had in my life has been in the context of meditation practice, and I've had lots of all kinds of varieties of feeling good as well-

being. But really, meditation practice has given me the greatest, and some of the feelings of loving kindness and love that come through meditation practice have been some of the nicest feelings of well-being, happiness that I've had. As I've experienced that, then I've been able to see it in other people, and appreciate other people. I've also been able to appreciate that other people have that capacity too. Before I felt it for myself, I didn't know that people could have that capacity.

I saw some people were really happy. That's nice for them, but I didn't quite understand. As I understood it for myself, then I could have a greater kind of wish, aspiration, or connection to that possibility for other people. Make sense? As we do it towards ourselves, some people have to deal with a lot of the challenges for that, and that's part of the adventure of it all—the challenge. Some people have a lot of self-criticism.

Some people have a lot of difficulty around themselves. Some people are very wounded. All kinds of things people feel, and so to be able to cultivate goodwill towards oneself, a person has to work through all these kinds of issues, all these feelings, all these emotional issues, what's going on. It's very helpful to do that, to explore that, and to be up against that, rubbing up against ourselves that way. Then, with time, hopefully, something relaxes, something softens, and so the hardness that comes from self-criticism dissolves, and we're left with a warmth in our own heart. Such a nice adventure.

It's a very helpful, healing thing. There are a lot of times when our meditation teachers will instruct people to do loving kindness when there's so much fear or so much anxiety or so much self-criticism that it is not productive to do mindfulness practice. Some people do mindfulness practice, and because they're so self-conscious to begin with, so self-critical to begin with, the mindfulness practice just gives them more information to be critical of. Consideration of, you know, it makes them more sudden. Don't do mindfulness. Don't pay so much careful attention to what's going on in your mind.

Just cultivate this warmth, this loving kindness. Let that soften and heal something that needs to be healed. With time, the direction that loving kindness is going towards, ultimately, is not towards love or kindness for its own sake, but is going towards liberation, to freedom. That becomes the reference point a little bit for how the practice and attitude, the inner life, is developing as we do the practice of loving kindness. Is there a greater sense of freedom, in particular freedom from neurotic self-preoccupation, clinging, from self-centeredness? Is there any tight holding that I might have there?

Is there a softening of this sense of self in a healthy way, a dissolving of the hardness? If there is, then great. If there isn't, then that needs to be looked at. As the softening happens, as the

opening happens, then the instruction is to turn the mindfulness from oneself, much more the love and kindness from oneself, towards others. Again, the idea appears that once you've done it for yourself, you have a stronger basis from which to offer some genuine kindness or love towards others. So it begins with the benefactor, someone who has had kind expressions of kindness or compassion towards yourself, and for whom it's a clean, easy relationship for you to wish well for them.

Often a benefactor is considered that kind of person. Then from there it begins going from the benefactor to a good friend, to a medium friend, to a mild friend, to a minor friend, with the idea being that you're going from what's easiest. Once you have it established where it's easy, then you begin exploring: how can I do it where it's not? It's easy, but not quite as easy as a benefactor. You might have a really good friend: oh, it's easy to feel loving kindness for them, you do things for them, you help them out, you want them to be happy. But you realize that every once in a while, there's a little feeling of jealousy, or a little feeling of resentment, or you have this leftover hurt that's normally not there, but once fifteen years ago, they said something, and it still kind of hurts or irritates.

As we do the loving kindness practice to a friend, the idea is you are not to ignore the difficulties of the relationship you have, but to work with it and see if something, in a healthy way, can be dissolved, forgiven, worked through so that the kindness, the love becomes unlimited or unfiltered or uninhibited, so it becomes complete and a beautiful process. Then you do it with your good friend, you have this tiny little thing about, and then you have your medium friend. You know, you're good friends, you get along, you could do wonderful things together, but you know there are a couple of things you know you don't. So you get to explore what that's about, and work with that, and find out what that's about. This doesn't mean you are denying that people have their foibles. We're not ignoring it.

Rather, even if someone does unskillful things or even hurt you, sometimes we're not ignoring that, papering it over and saying, well, that doesn't matter, sugaring it over. It's hopefully clearly seeing the shortcomings other people have, and in spite of it, not ignoring it, not being foolish about it, but in spite of it, can we open our hearts completely to that person? So there's a kind of very pure feeling of kindness and love to that person. What does it take to do that? One advantage we have about this when we do it in meditation is the other person doesn't have to know. For some people, that makes it a lot easier because it's private.

As we do this work, I hope you get a sense that you are actually liberating yourself from the ways that you've been clinging or stuck or held, so that the openness, the radiance of the heart is not limited or stopped. It's a liberating process to do this. That is really the whole

point of this loving kindness practice: to move towards liberation. It doesn't have to be the point, but that's the ultimate point. I want to read to you this evening a sutta, a discourse of the Buddha, that is called the Discourse on Loving Kindness. This is taken to be the central reference point for loving kindness and its practice.

I think it's quite beautiful. I hope my reading of it and translation of it makes it beautiful enough. Most people focus on the middle part of the text, and they don't really notice the opening and the end. The opening makes it very clear that the loving kindness practice is not being offered here for the purpose of developing loving kindness practice. It's offered as a path to liberation, to freedom, to *nibbāna*. Isn't that great?

Some people think that, oh, you know, do this loving kindness practice for a while, and then I'll get to real Buddhism, you know, the liberation, the *nibbāna* stuff, the mindfulness stuff, and then I'll really get to the real work. In fact, that attitude exists in Buddhism. I've heard of, I know of Asian teachers who relate to *mettā*, loving kindness practice, as kind of like kids' practice, a children's practice, as in like kindergarten. Buddha: you know, you should really get on to the real stuff. But according to the Buddha, the loving kindness practice is also meant to be a practice that leads to liberation. Here the state of liberation in this text is called the state of peace.

So it opens this way: to reach the state of peace—there it is. Can there be a doubt about it? Here it says, and however, in order to highlight this, I reversed in translating it the first and second sentence. So if you read every other translation, this part about the peace is a second sentence, and often it's not so clear to the translator what they actually mean, they can lose it. By the second sentence you are already jumping ahead. So I put it front and center to make it clear that's what the text says.

To reach the state of peace, one skilled in the good should be capable and upright, straightforward and easy to speak to, gentle and not proud, contented and easily supported, living lightly and with few duties, wise and with senses calmed, not arrogant, and without greed for supporters, and should not do the least thing that the wise would criticize. One should reflect: May all be happy and secure. May all beings be happy at heart. All living beings, whether weak or strong, tall, large, medium, or short, tiny or big, seen or unseen, near or distant, born or to be born. May they all be happy. Let no one deceive another or despise anyone anywhere. Let no one through anger or aversion wish for others to suffer. As a mother would risk her own life to protect her child, her only child, so toward all beings should one cultivate a boundless heart with

loving kindness for the whole world. Should one cultivate a boundless heart, above, below, and all around, without obstruction, without hate, and without ill will. Standing or walking, sitting or lying down, whenever one is awake, may one stay with this recollection. This is called a sublime abiding here and now, who is virtuous, endowed with vision, not taken by views, and having overcome all grief, all greed for sensual pleasure will not be reborn again, for not being reborn again is another synonym for this peace. Or this *nibbāna* is liberation to reach a state of peace.

So it begins by talking about these beautiful qualities. I don't know how it was for you to listen to those, but I am inspired every time I see these qualities, and I wonder, do I have those in myself? Then there's a practice of loving kindness, which here is done by reflecting, may all beings be happy, no matter who, what kind of beings they are. May they be happy. May they have well-being, deep, sublime abiding, well-being. The attitude that counts is related to that of a mother.

Like that, one should cultivate a boundless heart—a nice expression, a boundless heart, and so on. Moving towards liberation, in that kind of context, maybe it gives a certain, a different kind of meaning, and maybe even value of seriousness, to this practice of loving kindness. It's not meant to be a kind of light practice. It's really meant to be a kind of move—it's possible to move to the very heart of what Buddhism is about. The adventure of engaging in loving kindness as practice is not just a practice of feeling love, feeling kindness, feeling goodwill, but to actually work with that which keeps us bound or held or constricted or attached. So we work then through these people.

We work through, you know, our benefactor, and then on and on down to what's increasingly difficult, until we come to a category of people that, in this tradition, is called the neutral person. Some people complain, well, no one is really neutral now, I judge people right away, no matter who they are. But the neutral person is basically someone whom you don't really know so well, and you haven't had a chance to develop any real impression of them. There's no one you don't really have any amount of animosity towards, but you don't really have any particular goodwill to them either. You haven't had the time or the chance really to do it. They're kind of more or less a neutral person.

I know some people will choose a mail carrier you've never talked to. You've seen the person come to your house for many months or years, but you never talk to the person, and you don't really have any, you know, maybe more or less kindly disposed, but you know there is more or less a neutral person, or a clerk in a store, or a neighbor who's a block away, or someone you see on the bus. If you go to work on the bus and you see someone regularly but you



don't talk, you know, someone—they sit in the back, you in the front, but you recognize and share the bus with them. Then you begin exploring: what does it take for you to cultivate loving kindness to that person, to have goodwill towards that person? Some people who do this find this is a really fascinating area of loving kindness, because what does it mean to have love or kindness or goodwill to someone who is not close to you, not a friend to you, someone for whom there is not such an extending kindness or friendship for you?

This is a kind of moving loving kindness to a place where there is no exchange involved. If you are getting anything back, the person doesn't know you. What does it take to feel kindness to such a person? What are the barriers to doing that? Some people don't want to open up to someone who is a neutral, kind of more or less a stranger, because if you open your heart to that person, well, then maybe you have to invite them home. Maybe then you say, it's better to be closed, do not pay attention, and know what the implications are if you open the heart to someone, a stranger, and what's going on there.

Hopefully it is a rich area of exploration, with the idea that if you explore it and work through those issues, not only can you feel kindness and love towards strangers, but more importantly, you've liberated the heart. You've freed something up. Part of the premise, I believe, is that a natural heart, a heart which is resting naturally on itself, without any limitations, any clinging, any attachments, any barriers or whatever, will naturally feel kindness and goodwill towards all people. As we liberate, as the process of liberation frees up that kind of attitude, this makes me think of how it goes to meditation, that there can be this process. One of the supports for this, and one of the ways that makes all this really real, not kind of idealistic, is to begin expressing it in practice too, not just keep it to yourself. In fact, there have been not just a few Buddhist meditators who have cultivated boundless love for all beings in meditation, only to get up out of meditation and say, "You disturbed my meditation. How could you?" and get angry at someone.

Or, you know, you're realizing what's not, and you know, "Oh, I'm so good. I must be the next, you know, Saint Redwood City." Then you get in your car. So actually, one of the very important areas to explore love and kindness and explore yourself in the process, and learn to free yourself, is to explore what does it take and how to express kindness, goodwill for others in life itself. How is it like to shop at the supermarket and then have goodwill for the clerk? Not just, "Oh yes, I care, yeah, I wish them well," but really take in the person there and stop, and somehow have an exchange which feels genuine but also the person feels a bit better, feels nice.

Someone cares about me. That's nice. Someone expressed some goodwill. Someone rec-

ognized, saw me as a person. Just to see someone as a person. Sometimes I haven't given money to homeless people, but sometimes I stop and smile and talk to them, and every once in a while—it hasn't happened that often—I get the impression that that was more meaningful for them than the money. Isn't that nice? Just take the time. How we are is very important.

There's, I think, a nice teaching from the Buddha. In ancient India, there were, still in India to some degree, a big degree, there are castes, different castes. People's worth and status in society has a lot to do with the caste they're in, and you're born into a caste. The Buddha was somewhat critical of this kind of caste system. In particular, he was critical of a way in which people's status, or maybe status, but their worth, their value as a kind of person, or their worthiness, came from how they were born. He would ask someone this question: What do you think? Are only the Brahmin priests—the Brahmin priests being the highest caste—are only Brahmin priests capable of a mind of loving kindness towards a certain direction, radiating it outwards without hostility and ill will, and not members of the noble, merchant, or worker caste?

The person says, no, people of all four castes are capable of cultivating a mind of loving kindness. Then the Buddha said, then on the strength of what argument and with the support of what authority do the Brahmins in this case say, "Brahmins are the highest caste. Those of other castes are inferior. Brahmins are the heirs of Brahmā," and so on. Here the Buddha went on to say that a person's worthiness and status, even if you may, doesn't come from how you are born, doesn't come from hostility, but comes from your attitude, how you are, which you have some choice about. If you have an attitude of loving kindness that is pure and beautiful, that is what makes a person a Brahmin. That is what makes a person worthy or of high status, if you allow that—how you are.

So not who you are, but how you are. I think for some people here in America it's a bit of a challenging teaching. Some people prefer to feel that their value comes from who they are. Maybe that can also be the case sometimes in a certain kind of way. But for the Buddha at least, the challenge here is that what's important is not who you are, but how you are. Buddhism has a lot to do with taking responsibility for how we are, for attitude.

This whole thing about loving kindness has to do with taking responsibility. There's a whole encouragement to explore this area, explore the territory of goodwill, of kindness, friendliness, friendship. What can you do to stretch that, to open it, to develop it, to heighten it, to make it something that becomes your disposition, that's ready at hand in all kinds of situations, as opposed to being preoccupied, caught up, afraid, anxious, or whatever, and so

closed down, so the radiance of the mind is kind of obscured, and so there's no chance for that to come out. That's the exciting thing that I think is really fun, to engage in that process. I certainly see in myself that sometimes it's not easy. When it's not easy, it's not easy, and when it's not easy, in some ways it's the most productive time.

I've found, you know, I've spent time sometimes exploring, "Well, I feel I can feel good about those people, feel warmth towards those people, but not to that person. OK, Gil, what's going on? Oh, I don't have to deal with that, you know. I don't like to see that person again. That person's, you know, a jerk. Why should I waste my time? I could be sitting and meditating peacefully. I have important things to do. Isn't it important to stop treating someone like a jerk, have that attitude even if they deserve it?" So what does it take? What does it take to make it real, so it's sincere? What does it take? What is to be explored?

Those are my thoughts for today. I would encourage you, if you're interested in this exploration, this adventure for the next week, to not only stretch yourself with your kindness, your friendliness in meditation or in your own heart, but stretch yourself a little bit in action in life with people. Look for some opportunities to offer some simple friendliness, goodwill, kindness, beyond the confines, beyond the limits where you usually take it, and then bring it in. See what happens, and see what happens to the relationship. See what happens to the person you offer it to. But see what happens to you, and see what you can learn about yourself.

If you find yourself incapable to move beautifully into some area or to stretch into some new area, say to yourself, "Great, I've found a limitation. I'm so happy. Finally, it is good, because that's where the path is found. That's where Buddhism is found, when you encounter your limitations. Great. Now let's practice with that as opposed to, 'Oh no, not again. One more limitation.' You know, it's an adventure to play it, to come into it. It's a really worthwhile thing. Now you're all capable of rising to the challenge. So thank you very much."