

Mettā Sutta (1 of 5) Foundations for Goodwill

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SUMMARY KEYWORDS

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This week I would like to focus on *mettā* (loving-kindness) in a particular way. I heard my friend Paul Haller give a wonderful talk in which he divided up the discourse on loving-kindness into four parts. I was inspired by his talk. I thought I would look at the foundational teachings attributed to the Buddha on loving-kindness.

Loving-kindness is emphasized a lot in the ancient teachings of the Buddha. Of the four *brahmavihāras* – the four kinds of love championed in the ancient world – loving-kindness gets the most attention. Loving-kindness encompasses quite a bit. Loving-kindness includes being kind, friendly, and all the good qualities that flow out of friendliness. It also includes helping and caring for people in trouble and supporting them when things are going well. *Mettā* is seen fundamentally as our goodwill and what flows out of it. “Goodwill” is a nice translation for *mettā* because the opposite of loving-kindness is seen sometimes as ill will – a hostility towards others.

There is a poem in the “*Mettā Sutta*,” the discourse on loving-kindness. If you want to read my translation, it is on the IMC website at <https://www.insightmeditationcenter.org/metta-sutta/>. I have divided the poem into four parts, and the first part reads as follows:

*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 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.*

This first section of the poem is not about loving-kindness itself. It is about the support for loving-kindness. It is a way of being in the world and with ourselves that makes room for our goodwill to grow and develop.

Some people refer to this section as an ethical teaching. However, it is not about the ethics of how we relate to other people. This section is about how we are ourselves. “Integrity” and “ethics” are sometimes considered near synonyms of each other, so perhaps this section involves qualities of integrity. I think they are things that make room for qualities of the heart to come.

If we want to have more *mettā* – kindness, friendliness – in our lives, it is not just a matter of drumming it up or evoking it automatically. Instead, we create the conditions whereby *mettā* is more likely to flow out of us or be here for us. We prepare the ground for loving-kindness. This is an indirect way of cultivating loving-kindness. Many important things that we do in life we prepare for. We adjust ourselves accordingly so that we are ready for the situation.

To reach the state of peace

The first section of the poem is not explicitly about loving-kindness – it is about reaching the state of peace. With a closer reading of the “*Mettā Sutta*,” we can understand it as utilizing loving-kindness on the path to liberation and freedom. Instead of loving-kindness being adjunct or different from the path of liberation, loving-kindness is very much on the path. Cultivation of this form of love supports the movement towards liberation.

One skilled in the good

There are a lot of words in the suttas related to “good.” My favorite is *kalyāṇa* (beautiful) – so one skilled in what is beautiful, beneficial, and wholesome. “Skill” is related to the word *kusala* (wholesome).

What follows “one skilled in the good” are skills we can develop and work towards. I like to think of them as skills so that we do not think we have to be that way automatically. These are valuable states that should not be overlooked. Cultivating them is phenomenally supportive if we want to live a purposeful life,

Should be

Capable and upright,

I think the word “capable” means able to apply oneself. Not that we are capable of doing a lot of different things. Rather, we are capable of engaging in the practice of cultivating skills – cultivating ourselves. “Upright,” in the ancient world and sometimes in English, means having a certain kind of integrity. This integrity allows us to stand upright without feeling diminished, belittled, or less than because of who we are. It allows us, in a simple way, to hold ourselves up straight and with confidence.

Straightforward and easy to speak to,

“Straightforward” means to be direct in how we speak – to speak in a simple, not roundabout way. “Easy to speak to” means that if someone needs to give us difficult feedback, we receive it easily. We listen without automatically defending ourselves or going into attack mode. We also do not agree automatically or allow ourselves to be pushed around by people. People can easily come to us and say, “By the way, I want to talk to you about something difficult for me.”

Gentle and not proud,

In modern English, the word “pride” has very positive connotations. But here, “proud” means to be puffed up, to have a certain kind of conceit. “Gentle” – there are certain kinds of gentleness. My reference point for understanding this is to appreciate the opposite of gentle. Not being gentle usually makes the heart and mind crowded. Being harsh or rough with people is an engagement that does not make room for freedom, love, and kindness – the cultivation of the heart that the path of freedom involves.

Contented and easily supported,

“Contented” and “easily supported” are values focused more on Buddhist monastics, but they can be for anyone. Monastics were supposed to be very content with having just enough to be comfortable. Through the eyes of the modern world, monastic life can seem ascetic. But, in the time of the Buddha, it was not ascetic. Other people were much more seriously ascetic than Buddhist monastics. Buddhist monastics had just enough to be comfortable – just enough clothes, housing, food, and medicine. They did not have more than what was needed. They were content with what kept the basics comfortable. This is a fascinating reference point – being content with just enough to keep us healthily alive.

“Easily supported” for a monastic was not wanting a lot from other people. Not try to acquire more and more from the donors who supported them.

Living lightly and with few duties,

This refers to not being so busy. Having many responsibilities does not make space and time that these heart qualities need to flower.

Wise and with senses calmed,

Our eyes are calm, not darting about looking. We calmly see the world. Our ears are calm. Our taste buds are calm – we do not want more and more food.

Not arrogant and without greed for supporters,

And should not do the least thing that the wise would criticize.

This mostly means do not be unethical. Do not be mean or have ill will. Do not do something that wise people in your life would criticize. Use wise people as a reference point for how to care for and relate to yourself. Do not do the least thing that the wise would say, “That’s not quite right.”

So this section of the sutta is a tall order. It is also a call to be careful with how you are in the privacy of your own life. Your life is transparent and harmonious whether you are alone or not. Are you living in a way that those you respect would not criticize?

To bring all these qualities to your private life and public life with others in the world. That you will 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 not do the least thing that the wise would criticize.

This sets the stage for an attitude of kindness, friendliness, goodwill, or *mettā* towards others. That will be the topic of the next section of the “*Mettā Sutta*” tomorrow.

If you are inclined, you might want to memorize this section of the sutta today. Some people benefit tremendously from memorizing the “*Mettā Sutta*.” This version is not the one we usually use at IMC. We use the monastic version from the monastery Abhayagiri or Amaravati in England because of its nice chanting quality. Memorize either one. Thank you.