

# Brahmavihāras: Loving-Kindness (2 of 5)

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## SUMMARY KEYWORDS

*mettā, mitta*, friend, friendliness, love, goodwill, kindness, beneficial, sticky affection, aspiration

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This is the second talk on this week's theme of loving-kindness as one of the divine abodes, the immeasurables. The Pali word for loving-kindness is *mettā*. *Mettā* is a cognate to the Pali word *mitta*, which means friend. Part of the connotation of *mettā* is friendliness. Friendliness is a basic attitude of respecting, being kind to, and appreciating people. It is being open to a friendly, kind exchange with people. It's possible to be friendly with challenging people or people you do not like.

The word "loving-kindness," which I think is a beautiful concept and word, might not represent *mettā* as fully as other English translations. For some people, the idea of love is a very high bar. It can be hard to have *loving-kindness* – kindness filled with love – for people who are challenging for us. Maybe there are people whom we find difficult to love. I don't have to explain why, but we encounter challenging people. And to love them might be unreasonable. To hold ourselves to some standard that we are supposed to love everyone might not be realistic.

But it is possible to have goodwill for everyone – to be friendly with everyone. We can be friendly toward strangers. We can have a sense of hospitality for anybody we encounter. So perhaps, an English word that translates *mettā* more appropriately might be "goodwill." There is an aspiration, an intention, a willingness to extend our goodness to others so that they feel safe and happy with us. They feel that we have their best interests in mind. We are here to support their welfare – not their ill-being. We are not here to undermine them, be critical of them, or diminish them.

In addition to "goodwill," I like the word "kindness" as a translation of *mettā* because kindness implies more than just a feeling or attitude. Kindness has connotations of an extension toward other people. It is an expression. We can have kind words, a kind gaze, a kind action. Goodwill can be that you radiate a sense of well-wishing for someone, but kindness implies action. So I like "kindness" as a translation for *mettā*.

In the ancient Buddhist texts, *mettā* is described this way:

*The primary characteristic of mettā is to promote the welfare of all beings. To promote beneficial conditions for others.*

There is the idea of wanting to benefit – of wanting things to be beneficial. The text says "beneficial conditions," which doesn't necessarily mean you have to provide these conditions. But there is a genuine wish:

*May the conditions of their life be such that they have happiness and well-being. May they experience welfare.*

While there is a big difference between simply wishing and doing something about it, we should not underestimate the tremendous value of having goodwill for others. When I have been the recipient of people's simple goodwill, I know it makes a difference. Something inside me opens up, is buoyed, or is inspired by knowing people are thinking well of me.

This description of *mettā* says that the core of loving-kindness is to focus on what is beneficial. This requires some sense of what is beneficial. Simply wishing for someone to win the lottery and become amazingly wealthy – is that really for their benefit? Studies show that people who win a lot of money in a lottery are less happy a year later.

We can wish what is genuinely beneficial and supportive for people. It might not be wealth. It might not be status or material goods. Sometimes it can be simple. Some of the simplest things are the most fulfilling and bring happiness. I think that learning how to breathe with an easeful breath is phenomenal wealth.

The Buddha said that wealth for a monastic (who is not supposed to acquire or have money) is *mettā*, loving-kindness, goodwill. Having goodwill for others is wealth for oneself – this is a wonderful juxtaposition. There is so much goodness in that aspiration. The goodness of the aspiration benefits, feeds, or nourishes something in us.

We are focusing on what is beneficial, both for others and ourselves. It is mutual. I love the English word “aspiration.” As I’ve said earlier, aspiration is a beneficial desire that Buddhism champions. Aspiration is a good thing. It is a desire that is opening, freeing, and helps us feel more connected. It contains within it beneficial seeds, beneficial goodness. When we breathe with aspiration – inspiration – we get filled with something good. It nourishes something in us. By having an aspiration for others’ welfare, we are benefiting ourselves as we are benefiting others.

The description goes on and says that the manifestation of *mettā* is the removal of malice, the removal of ill will. We know that loving-kindness is present in a stable, strong way when there is absolutely no ill will. There is only goodwill.

The proximate cause of *mettā* is “the loveliness of beings.” What a great expression! The proximate cause – the condition – that brings about *mettā* is seeing the loveliness in beings.

How do we see the beauty in other people? I think that one of the things this requires is slowing down – taking the time to pay attention. Our minds go fast – they pay attention to all kinds of things. We have a lot of desires, preoccupations, concerns, and fears. When we encounter someone, all these different things are sometimes swirling around, making the mind go fast or get caught up in things.

Stop and take time. It does not have to be that anybody notices you are pausing long. Learn to appreciate the loveliness – the beauty – of other people. Everyone has loveliness. Everyone has it. Begin to tune into that.

In meditation practice, we discover our loveliness. Sitting, we start opening up to our beauty within – our capacity for integrity and wholeness, our lack of conflict, ill will, hostility, and greed. We discover this beautiful place inside where a whole other way of being lives within us. As we recognize the beauty in ourselves, it is easier to see it in other people. It is there.

If you do not see beauty in other people, one thing you might want to consider – as a principle, not as truth – is that you may not see it in others because you haven’t seen it in yourself. And if you see beauty in yourself, you will see it even in people who are quite difficult. You will see a seed, which may be hidden even from them. But it is a seed, and it has potential. It’s something lovely to appreciate in others.

The last part of this description says that *mettā* fails when it leads to – the translation here is – “a sticky affection.” A sticky affection is an affection for others that is needy, wanting, or grasping. That is not *mettā*. *Mettā* is open-handed. With *mettā*, the hands do not grasp or hold on to anything. Things are offered freely: “Here. You can have it. You can have my goodwill. It’s offered freely, and I’m not going to hold on and demand anything in return.”

*Mettā* is an aspiration. For all the emphasis in mindfulness about being in the present moment, that is not the full story of a liberated life. There is also a place for having a sense of potential and possibility for others and wishing that for them. We certainly wish that they could have it now. But there is a sense of the possibility – the aspiration – that they can grow into it: “May it be so. May it be. This is what I would like: my heartfelt wish – my wholehearted wish – is that other people feel well and happy.”

You do not have to tell people that you have this wish for them. You do not even tell people that you have goodwill for them. Some relationships are such that it is too complicated to tell them because they are people with sticky affection, are even mean sometimes, or have difficult ways of being. So the wonderful art of *mettā* is knowing when to do it privately.

Just have goodwill for others. I have had goodwill. I have heard stories of people saying they have a very difficult person in their lives, and they decided to have goodwill for them privately. Sometimes they hold them in loving-kindness when they are not together. And when they are together, they are just reflecting on their wishing well for that person. Nothing special is said or done that expresses their goodwill. But that attitude seems to change the circumstances, and the person seems to become kinder, less threatening, or less difficult to be with.

Finally, the practice of loving-kindness is an expression that can be in the present moment – to express, to live with loving-kindness, goodness, and wishing well-being or friendliness to others. But also, it is an aspiration. An aspiration is a choice. It is possible to marshal together a choice, a decision, a wish. “Yes, I want to be kind here.

I want to be friendly. I want to wish this person well. I see what is beneficial. I see their loveliness.” Live a life in which we choose to have that aspiration – to be part of what rises out of us and opens us.

This means that you do not have to feel loving-kindness. You do not have to feel friendly. Those feelings may follow in the wake of the aspiration, but the wish is something deeper than the feeling. We have some choice over that, so do not wait for the feeling to have the wish. If the wish is an aspiration, it will carry goodness and welfare with it. You will benefit from having that wish if it is sincere.

May all of us have the sincere wish to benefit ourselves and others. May we be carried, expanded, and come to fullness in our kindness and goodwill.

For the next twenty-four hours, why don't you do some experiments and take some risks? See if you can make *mettā* – loving-kindness, goodwill – a theme you carry with you throughout the day. Reflect on it; think about it; extend it to others. See what you learn about loving-kindness that you do not know right now.

Thank you very much. I look forward to our time tomorrow.