

Brahmavihāras: Loving-Kindness (3 of 5)

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SUMMARY KEYWORDS

mettā, goodwill, kindness, friendliness, mutuality, self-care, devas, milk, water, harmonious

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We will continue the talks on loving-kindness, *mettā*, goodwill. I delight in saying those words. I think they are wonderful qualities. It touches something precious and valuable inside to evoke the qualities of *mettā*, kindness, friendliness, and goodwill.

That was not always the case for me. When I was first introduced to the teachings of *mettā* or loving-kindness, I understood them as being artificial. The teachings artificially created feelings of goodwill or kindness. These qualities felt kind of sticky, excessively sweet, or maybe sentimental. I was much more practical and pragmatic. I wanted a spirituality that was just about waking up and being present in a direct, unmediated way. And this loving-kindness was getting in the way.

When my early Theravadan teachers did guided loving-kindness meditation, I tuned them out and continued doing my basic mindfulness practice. Later, through mindfulness itself, something settled and relaxed. It was like mindfulness was a tenderizing force.

A way that I had been holding myself closed began to open. At some point, I started having a very nice feeling inside that was new to me. There was a pleasant, easeful, warm feeling of goodwill. It was very different from compassion, which I had already tapped into through practice.

I thought: "Maybe this is what these teachers are talking about. Yes, it is. This is what they mean by goodwill and *mettā*." Rather than being something I had to construct or make happen, it was welling up inside. By recognizing it, the practice of *mettā* – loving-kindness – became quite valuable for me. It has been a very valuable part of my life and *a life*. Saying these words – *mettā*, goodwill, kindness – touches something in my heart. It has a feeling of singing. My heart sings a little bit to those concepts and ideas.

One of the things I want to say is that in emphasizing goodwill and loving-kindness in this tradition – the Theravadan tradition – one also does it for oneself. It is easy to criticize meditation practice – closing your eyes and focusing on your inner experience – as being self-centered.

In fact, in my early years of meditating – I haven't heard this for many years now – people would complain that doing forty minutes of meditation each day was selfish. Someone religious should be doing things in the world, sacrificing themselves. The people who complained about the selfish meditators meditating for forty or forty-five minutes (or however long it was) were probably spending two or three hours a day watching television. But watching television belonged to a different domain of life than religious life, and religious life should really be about being altruistic. They viewed a religious life that was inward as being selfish.

I don't think it is that way at all. And it certainly wasn't for the Buddha. It is not a self-centered path because self-centeredness – being preoccupied with oneself – is actually a way of harming oneself. If you really care about yourself and see yourself as important, you would not be selfish because of the harm it does to you.

There is also the idea of mutuality in this world of ours. The more we care for, love, and free ourselves, the more we benefit others. If we benefit others without harming ourselves, we are also benefiting ourselves.

In the practice of loving-kindness, you can see this. As we offer our care to others – *mettā* care, the way of kindness, and friendliness – we benefit also. If these feelings are genuine – not artificial, forced, or obligated, but arise from a wonderful place inside – they vibrate, flow, and open up as we express and live them. Warmth happens here, which is nourishing for the person who has kindness.

Compassion is also meant to nourish the one who is compassionate. If we are not somehow nourished or there is not some satisfying feeling in having loving-kindness, it probably isn't quite loving-kindness, or it is loving-kindness mixed up with other things.

So, in loving others, the loving person benefits. In the teachings of Buddhism, the loving person is allowed to benefit from the love. It is not selfish. It is just a byproduct. It's not selfish because developing and growing oneself is a way to become a person who is beneficial to others. We are more able to meet others, to really see other people, and offer our presence as if that person is important – maybe the most important person at that moment.

If we diminish ourselves and feel that we are less than others or unimportant – if we demean or criticize ourselves, or if we don't care for and value ourselves – we actually have less to offer others. Then, when we meet someone, we are not meeting them fully. They do not feel the full goodness of who we are. If we are trying to be nice, they feel a kind of goodness, but it is not really full.

Sometimes we might be trying too hard. We can relax deeply and be at ease with and at home in ourselves. We can feel completely deserving regardless of our foibles and shortcomings. It is appropriate for us to love and care for this being – the being here for ourselves.

It isn't as if everyone deserves love and care except for one person – ourselves. It does not work that way. The practice of mindfulness and loving-kindness is a practice that includes caring for oneself – for everyone! Mindfulness is a self-care process.

The idea is to care for and love ourselves, to see ourselves as important. We can learn how to soften and relax how we suffer, close down, and diminish ourselves, so we have more to give others. You cannot teach a foreign language unless you learn the language first yourself. You cannot learn or teach a path of freedom unless you have been on that path yourself.

And you cannot know and offer love unless you really know it here for yourself. So it is okay to benefit from the practice of love and kindness.

This love for ourselves is not selfish. One of the great delights of spiritual life – and I've heard people of other religions say this outside of Buddhism – is that it is possible to have lots of love, warmth, kindness, friendship, and goodwill for others and not need to have it come back. Our well-being does not have to be dependent on being loved by others.

As adults, we have a bigger need to love than we do to be loved. And if we have a strong need to be loved, chances are that need benefits most from or is resolved if we are the ones who love ourselves. We benefit if we can learn to offer care, kindness, and goodwill to this person here.

If we practice loving-kindness or more goodwill in our life, learn to explore and appreciate it when it's there, and expand and enhance it whenever we can, the Buddhist tradition lists eleven benefits. This ancient description specifies developing loving-kindness to a high degree, but I think we get some of the benefits even if we start doing it in small ways.

It is a delightful list. I want to read the list of the eleven benefits of loving-kindness:

One sleeps happily.

One wakes happily.

One has no bad dreams.

One is loved by others.

One doesn't need to be loved by others, but one is loved by others. That's kind of a nice balance.

One is loved by non-humans.

This may mean animals or, perhaps, the devas. Buddhism believes in all these devas who are floating around.

One is guarded by the devas.

I think that when one practices kindness, friendliness, and goodwill, there are unseen ways in which the people around us treat us differently. There is a kind of protection that comes with it.

A fire, poison or sword won't touch one.

I don't know about that. But if it is true – that one is protected from fire, poison, and weapons – it is quite a wonderful benefit.

The next one is good for meditators:

One's mind becomes concentrated quickly.

One's mind becomes concentrated quickly because you have less to be agitated or upset about if there's more love. It's easier to get settled.

Number nine is:

One's complexion becomes clear.

That's nice. It's a lot cheaper than other ways of getting a clear complexion.

One dies with a mind free from confusion.

Now, this is a real benefit. I think about how we die. As I see it, to die well, at ease, at peace, and with an open heart without confusion is one of the greatest potentials or possibilities. Mindfulness is said to support that but so does goodwill – *mettā*.

And the eleventh one is:

If there is no higher attainment reached, one is reborn in the Brahma realms.

While some of these benefits speak to us in modern times and some do not, I delight in this grand list of wonderful benefits.

I will read you one more benefit. It says that the Buddha once asked a group of three monks:

Are you living together on friendly and harmonious terms as milk and water mixed together? Do you regard each other with affection?

The monk said they were. The Buddha said:

Well, how do you do this?

And one of them answered:

Since it has occurred to me that I am fortunate to be living with others in the holy life, the practice life, I have loving-kindness towards them. In speech, conduct, and thought, I openly and privately extend my loving-kindness.

To live together like milk and water, harmoniously mixing with others, is one of the benefits of loving-kindness.

Thank you.