

FACETS OF METTA

by
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A pearl goes up for auction
No one has enough,
so the pearl buys itself

-- Rumi

Love exists in itself, not relying on owning or being owned. Like the pearl, love can only buy itself, because love is not a matter of currency or exchange. No one has enough to buy it but everyone has enough to cultivate it. Metta reunites us with what it means to be alive and unbound.

Researchers once gave a plant to every resident of a nursing home. They told half of these elderly people that the plants were theirs to care for -- they had to pay close attention to their plants' needs for water and sunlight, and they had to respond carefully to those needs. The researchers told the other half of the residents that their plants were theirs to enjoy but that they did not have to take any responsibility for them; the nursing staff would care for the plants.

At the end of a year, the researchers compared the two groups of elders. The residents who had been asked to care for their plants were living considerably longer than the norm, were much healthier, and were more oriented towards and connected to their world. The other residents, those who had plants but did not have to stay responsive to them, simply reflected the norms for people their age in longevity, health, alertness, and engagement with the world.

This study shows, among other things, the enlivening power of connection, of love, of intimacy. This is the effect that metta can have on our lives. But when I heard about the study, I also reflected

on how often we regard intimacy as a force between ourselves and something outside ourselves -- another person, or even a plant -- and how rarely we consider the force of being intimate with ourselves, with our own inner experience. How rarely do we lay claim to our own lives and feel connected to ourselves!

A way to discover intimacy with ourselves and all of life is to live with integrity, basing our lives on a vision of compassionate nonharming. When we dedicate ourselves to actions that do not hurt ourselves or others, our lives become all of one piece, a "seamless garment" with nothing separate or disconnected in the spiritual reality we discover.

In order to live with integrity, we must stop fragmenting and compartmentalizing our lives. Telling lies at work and expecting great truths in meditation is nonsensical. Using our sexual energy in a way that harms ourselves or others, and then expecting to know transcendent love in another arena, is mindless. Every aspect of our lives is connected to every other aspect of our lives. This truth is the basis for an awakened life. When we live with integrity, we further enhance intimacy with ourselves by being able to rejoice, taking active delight in our actions. Rejoicing opens us tremendously, dissolving our barriers, thereby enabling intimacy to extend to all of life. Joy has so much capacity to eliminate separation that the Buddha said, "Rapture is the gateway to nirvana."

The enlivening force itself is rapture. It brightens our vitality, our gratitude, and our love. We begin to develop rapture by rejoicing in our own goodness. We reflect on the good things we have done, recollecting times when we have been generous, or times when we have been caring. Perhaps we can think of a time when it would have been easy to hurt somebody, or to tell a lie, or to be dismissive, yet we made the effort not to do that. Perhaps we can think of a time when we gave something up in a way that freed our mind and helped someone else. Or perhaps we can think of a time when we have overcome some fear and reached out to someone. These reflections open us to a wellspring of happiness that may have been hidden from us before.

Contemplating the goodness within ourselves is a classical meditation, done to bring light, joy, and rapture to the mind. In contemporary times this practice might be considered rather embarrassing, because so often the emphasis is on all the unfortunate things we have done, all the disturbing mistakes we have made. Yet this classical reflection is not a way of increasing conceit. It is rather a commitment to our own happiness, seeing our happiness as the basis for intimacy with all of life. It fills us with joy and love for ourselves and a great deal of self-respect.

Significantly, when we do metta practice, we begin by directing metta toward ourselves. This is the essential foundation for being able to offer genuine love to others. When we truly love ourselves, we want to take care of others, because that is what is most enriching, or nourishing, for us. When we have a genuine inner life, we are intimate with ourselves and intimate with others. The insight into our inner world allows us to connect to everything around us, so that we can see quite clearly the oneness of all that lives. We see that all beings want to be happy, and that this impulse unites us. We can recognize the rightness and beauty of our common urge towards happiness, and realize intimacy in this shared urge.

If we are practicing metta and we cannot see the goodness in ourselves or in someone else, then we reflect on that fundamental wish to be happy that underlies all action. "Just as I want to be happy, all

beings want to be happy." This reflection gives rise to openness, awareness, and love. As we commit to these values, we become embodiments of a lineage that stretches back through beginningless time. All good people of all time have wanted to express openness, awareness, and love. With every phrase of metta, we are declaring our alignment with these values.

From this beginning, metta practice proceeds in a very structured way and specific way. After we have spent some time directing metta to ourselves, we then move on to someone who has been very good to us, for whom we feel gratitude and respect. In the traditional terminology, this person is known as a "benefactor." Later we move to someone who is a beloved friend. It is relatively easy to direct lovingkindness to these categories of beings (we say beings rather than people to include the possibility of animals in these categories.) After we have established this state of connection, we move on to those that it may be harder to direct lovingkindness toward. In this way we open up our limits and extend our capacity for benevolence.

Thus, next we direct lovingkindness to someone whom we feel neutral toward, someone for whom we feel neither great liking nor disliking. This is often an interesting time in the practice, because it may be difficult to find somebody for whom we have no instantaneous judgment. If we can find such a neutral person, we direct metta toward them.

After this, we are ready for the next step -- directing metta toward someone with whom we have experienced conflict, someone toward whom we feel lack of forgiveness, or anger, or fear. In the Buddhist scriptures this person is somewhat dramatically known as "the enemy." This is a very powerful stage in the practice, because the enemy, or the person with whom we have difficulty stands right at the division between the finite and the infinite radiance of love. At this point, conditional love unfolds into unconditional love. Here dependent love can turn to the flowering of an independent love that is not based upon getting what we want or having our expectations met. Here we learn that the inherent happiness of love is not compromised by likes and dislikes, and thus, like the sun, it can shine on everything. This love is truly boundless. It is born out of freedom, and it is offered freely.

Through the power of this practice, we cultivate an equality of loving feeling toward ourselves and all beings. There was a time in Burma when I was practicing metta intensively. I had taken about six weeks to go through all the different categories: myself, benefactor, friend, neutral person, and enemy. After I had spent these six weeks doing the metta meditation all day long, my teacher, U Pandita, called me into his room and said, "Say you were walking in the forest with your benefactor, your friend, your neutral person, and your enemy. Bandits come up and demand that you choose one person in your group to be sacrificed. Which one would you choose to die?"

I was shocked at U Pandita's question. I sat there and looked deep into my heart, trying to find a basis from which I could choose. I saw that I could not feel any distinction between any of those people, including myself. Finally I looked at U Pandita and replied, "I couldn't choose; everyone seems the same to me."

U Pandita then asked, "You wouldn't choose your enemy?" I thought a minute and then answered, "No, I couldn't."

Finally U Pandita asked me, "Don't you think you should be able to sacrifice yourself to save the others?" He asked the question as if

more than anything else in the world he wanted me to say, "Yes, I'd sacrifice myself." A lot of conditioning rose up in me -- an urge to please him, to be "right" and to win approval. But there was no way I could honestly say "yes," so I said, "No, I can't see any difference between myself and any of the others." He simply nodded in response, and I left.

Later I was reading the Visuddhi Magga, one of the great commentarial works of Buddhist literature which describes different meditation techniques and the experiences of practicing these techniques. In the section on metta meditation, I came to that very question about the bandits. The answer I had given was indeed considered the correct one for the intensive practice of metta.

Of course, in different life situations many different courses of action might be appropriate. But the point here is that metta does not mean that we denigrate ourselves in any situation in order to uphold other people's happiness. Authentic intimacy is not brought about by denying our own desire to be happy in unhappy deference to others, nor by denying others in narcissistic deference to ourselves. Metta means equality, oneness, wholeness. To truly walk the Middle Way of the Buddha, to avoid the extremes of addiction and self-hatred, we must walk in friendship with ourselves as well as with all beings.

When we have insight into our inner world and what brings us happiness, then wordlessly, intuitively, we understand others. As though there were no longer a barrier defining the boundaries of our caring, we can feel close to others' experience of life. We see that when we are angry, there is an element of pain in the anger that is not different from the pain that others feel when they are angry. When we feel love there is a distinct and special joy in that feeling. We come to know that this is the nature of love itself, and that other beings filled with love experience of this same joy.

In practicing metta we do not have to make a certain feeling happen. In fact, during the practice we see that we feel differently at different times. Any momentary emotional tone is far less relevant than considerable power of intention we harness as we say these phrases. As we repeat, "May I be happy; may all beings be happy," we are planting seeds by forming this powerful intention in the mind. The seed will bear fruit in its own time.

When I was practicing metta intensively in Burma, at times when I repeated the metta phrases, I would picture myself in a wide open field planting seeds. Doing metta we plant the seeds of love, knowing that nature will take its course and in time those seeds will bear fruit. Some seeds will come to fruition quickly, some slowly, but our work is simply to plant the seeds. Every time we form the intention in the mind for our own happiness or for the happiness of others, we are doing our work; we are channeling the powerful energies of our own minds. Beyond that, we can trust the laws of nature to continually support the flowering of our love. As Pablo Neruda says:

Perhaps the earth can teach us,
as when everything seems dead in winter
and later proves to be alive.

When we started our retreat center, Insight Meditation Society, in 1975, many of us there decided to do a self-retreat for a month to inaugurate the center. I planned to do metta for the entire month. This was before I'd been to Burma, and it would be my first opportunity to do intensive and systematic metta meditation. I had

heard how it was done in extended practice, and I planned to follow that schedule. So the first week I spent directing lovingkindness towards myself. I felt absolutely nothing. It was the dreariest, most boring week I had known in some time. I sat there saying, "May I be happy, may I be peaceful," over and over again with no obvious result.

Then, as it happened, someone we knew in the community had a problem, and a few of us had to leave the retreat suddenly. I felt even worse, thinking, "Not only did I spend this week doing metta and getting nothing from it, but I also never even got beyond directing metta towards myself. So on top of everything else, I was really selfish."

I was in a frenzy getting ready to leave. As I was hurriedly getting everything together in my bathroom, I dropped a jar. It shattered all over the floor. I still remember my immediate response: "You are really a klutz, but I love you." And then I thought, "Wow! Look at that. Something did happen in this week of practice."

So the intention is enough. We form the intention in our mind for our happiness and the happiness of all. This is different from struggling to fabricate a certain feeling, to create it out of our will, to make it happen. We just settle back and plant the seeds without worrying about the immediate result. That is our work. If we do our work, then manifold benefits will surely come.

Fortunately, the Buddha was characteristically precise about what those benefits include. He said that the intimacy and caring that fill our hearts as the force of lovingkindness develops will bring eleven particular advantages:

- 1) You will sleep easily.
- 2) You will wake easily.
- 3) You will have pleasant dreams.
- 4) People will love you.
- 5) Devas [celestial beings] and animals will love you.
- 6) Devas will protect you.
- 7) External dangers [poisons, weapons, and fire] will not harm you.
- 8) Your face will be radiant.
- 9) Your mind will be serene.
- 10) You will die unconfused.
- 11) You will be reborn in happy realms.

People doing formal metta practice often memorize these eleven benefits and recite them to themselves regularly. Reminding ourselves of the fruit of our intention and effort can bring a lot of faith and rapture, sustaining us through those inevitable times when it seems as if the practice is not "getting anywhere." When we consider each of these benefits, we can see more fully how metta revolutionizes our lives.

When we steep our hearts in lovingkindness, we are able to sleep easily, to awaken easily, and to have pleasant dreams. To have self-respect in life, to walk through this life with grace and confidence, means having a commitment to nonharming and to loving care. If we do not have these things, we can neither rest nor be at peace; we are always fighting against ourselves. The feelings we create by harming are painful both for ourselves and for others. Thus harming leads to guilt, tension, and complexity. Sleeping easily, waking easily, But living a clear and simple life, free from resentment, fear, and guilt, extends into our sleeping, dreaming and waking.

The next benefit the Buddha pointed out is that if we practice metta we will receive in return the love of others. This is not a heartless calculating motivation, but rather a recognition that the energy we extend in this world draws to it that same kind of energy. If we extend the force of love, love returns to us. The American psychologist William James once said, "My experience is what I agree to attend to. Only those items I notice shape my mind." Perhaps this is partially how this law works -- opening to the energy of love within us, we can notice it more specifically around us.

It happens on other levels as well. If we are committed in our lives to the force of lovingkindness, then people know that they can trust us. They know we will not deceive them; we will not harm them. By being a beacon of trustworthiness in this world, we become a safe haven for others and a good friend.

The next set of benefits the Buddha points out promises that if we practice metta we will be protected. Devas, and other invisible beings, are classically taught as part of the Buddhist cosmology, but we don't have to believe in the intervention of invisible forces in order to comprehend how the practice of metta protects us. This assertion does not mean being protected in the sense that nothing bad will ever happen to us, because clearly the vicissitudes of life are completely outside our control. Pleasure and pain, gain and loss, praise and blame, and fame and ill repute will revolve throughout our lives. But nevertheless we can be protected by the nature of how we receive, how we hold that which our karma brings us.

Albert Einstein said, "The splitting of the atom has changed everything except for how we think." How we think, how we look at our lives, is all-important, and the degree of love we manifest determines the degree of spaciousness and freedom we can bring to life's events.

Imagine taking a very small glass of water and putting into it a teaspoon of salt. Because of the small size of the container, the teaspoon of salt is going to have a big impact upon the water. However, if you approach a much larger body of water, such as a lake, and put into it that same teaspoonful of salt, it will not have the same intensity of impact, because of the vastness and openness of the vessel receiving it. Even when the salt remains the same, the spaciousness of the vessel receiving it changes everything.

We spend a lot of our lives looking for a feeling of safety or protection; we try to alter the amount of salt that comes our way. Ironically, the salt is the very thing that we cannot do anything about, as life changes and offers us repeated ups and downs. Our true work is to create a container so immense that any amount of salt, even a truckload, can come into it without affecting our capacity to receive it. No situation, even an extreme one, then can mandate a particular reaction.

Once I had a meditation student who had been a child in Nazi-occupied Europe. She recounted an instance when she was around ten years old when a German soldier held a gun to her chest -- a situation that would readily arouse terror. Yet she related feeling no fear at all, thinking, "You may be able to kill my body, but you can't kill me." What a spacious reaction! It is in this way that lovingkindness opens the vastness of mind in us, which is ultimately our greatest protection.

Another benefit of cultivating of metta is that one's face becomes very clear and shining. This means that an unfeigned inner beauty

shines forth. We know in life situations how mind affects matter, how if we are enraged about something, it shows in our face. If somebody is full of hatred, it shows in the way they stand, the way they move, the way their jaw is set. It is not very attractive. No amount of make-up, jewelry, or embellishments bring beauty to a sullen, disgruntled, angry face. In just the same way, when someones mind is filled with the rapture of lovingkindness or compassion, it is beautiful to see the expression of light, of radiance, on their face and bearing.

With the practice of metta one also has a serene mind. The feeling of lovingkindness generates great peace. This is the mind that can say, "You are really a klutz, but I love you." It is a feeling endowed with acceptance, patience, and spaciousness. This great peace allows union with all of life, because we are not relying on changing circumstances for our happiness.

The peace of metta offers the kind of happiness that gives us the ability to concentrate. Serenity is the most important ingredient in being able to be present or being able to concentrate the mind. Concentration is an act of cherishing a chosen object. If we have no serenity, the mind will be scattered, and we will not be able to gather in the energy that is being lost to distraction. When we can concentrate, all of this energy is returned to us. This is the potency that heals us.

If we practice metta, another major benefit is that we will die unconfused. Our habitual ways of thinking, acting, and relating to life tend to be the ones that are strongest at the time of death as well. If we spend a lifetime feeling separate, apart, cultivating anger, giving way to frustration, to fear, to desire, that will likely be the mental-emotional environment within which we face our death. But if we have lived our life in a way that honors our connectedness, reflects our oneness, and cultivates caring and giving, that is likely to be how we will die.

The last specific benefit the Buddha spoke of was being reborn in happy realms as a result of filling our hearts with lovingkindness. The potential for rebirth again and again in various realms of pleasure or pain is part of the Buddhist worldview. For someone who subscribes to this vision of life, rebirth in a realm where one can attain liberation is most important. For those who don't subscribe to this vision, the benefits of metta can surely be seen to come to us in this lifetime.

Metta is the priceless treasure that enlivens us and brings us into intimacy with ourselves and others. It is the force of love that will lead beyond fragmentation, loneliness and fear. The late Hindu guru Neem Karoli Baba often said, "Don't throw anyone out of your heart." One of the most powerful healings (and greatest adventures) of our lifetime can come about as we learn to live by this dictum.

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