

Loving-kindness: The Revolutionary Art of Happiness

By Sharon Salzberg

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Extract from Chapter 2 – Relearning loveliness

Sometimes as individuals, or as members of a group, we may sacrifice the truth in order to secure our identity, or preserve a sense of belonging. Anything that threatens this gives rise to fear and anxiety, so we deny, we cut off our feelings. The end result of this pattern is dehumanization. We become split from our own lives and feel great distance from other living beings as well. As we lose touch with our inner life, we become dependent on the shifting winds of external change for a sense of who we are, what we care about, and what we value. The fear of pain that we tried to escape becomes, in fact, our constant companion.

The Buddha first taught the metta meditation as an antidote to fear, as a way of surmounting terrible fear when it arises. The legend is that he sent a group of monks off to meditate in a forest that was inhabited by tree spirits. These spirits resented the presence of the monks and tried to drive them away by appearing as ghoulish visions, with awful smells and terrible, shrieking noises. The tradition says that the monks became terrified and ran back to the Buddha, begging him to send them to a different forest for their practice. Instead, the Buddha replied, "I am going to send you back to the same forest, but I will provide you with the only protection you will need." This was the first teaching of metta meditation. The Buddha encouraged the monks not only to recite the metta phrases but to actually practice them. As these stories all seem to end so happily, so did this one—it is said that the monks went back and practiced metta, so that the tree spirits became quite moved by the beauty of the loving energy filling the forest, and resolved to care for and serve the monks in all ways.

The inner meaning of the story is that a mind filled with fear can still be penetrated by the quality of lovingkindness. Moreover, a mind that is saturated by lovingkindness cannot be overcome by fear; even if fear should arise, it will not overpower such a mind.

When we practice metta, we open continuously to the truth of our actual experience, changing our relationship to life. Metta—the sense of love that is not bound to desire, that does not have to pretend that things are other than the way they are—overcomes the illusion of separateness, of not being part of a whole. Thereby metta overcomes all of the states that accompany this fundamental

error of separateness—fear, alienation, loneliness, and despair—all of the feelings of fragmentation. In place of these, the genuine realization of connectedness brings unification, confidence, and safety.

In Buddhism there is one word for mind and heart: *chitta*. Chitta refers not just to thoughts and emotions in the narrow sense of arising from the brain, but also to the whole range of consciousness, vast and unimpeded. As we open to the experience of chitta, we come to an understanding of who we are, with an ability to care for ourselves. Through the force of love, the presumed boundaries between ourselves and others crumble into ash as we touch them.

What unites us all as human beings is an urge for happiness, which at heart is a yearning for union, for overcoming our feelings of separateness. We want to feel our identity with something larger than our small selves. We long to be one with our own lives and with each other.

If we look at the root of even the most terrible addictions, even the most appalling violence in this world, somewhere we will find this urge to unite, to be happy. In some form it is there, even in the most distorted and odious disguises. We can touch that. We can draw near and open up. We can connect, to the difficult forces within ourselves, and to the different experiences in our lives. We can break through the concepts that keep us apart. This is the true nature of love and the source of healing for ourselves and our world. This is the ground of freedom.

Metta is the ability to embrace all parts of ourselves, as well as all parts of the world. Practicing metta illuminates our inner integrity because it relieves us of the need to deny different aspects of ourselves. We can open to everything with the healing force of love. When we feel love, our mind is expansive and open enough to include the entirety of life in full awareness, both its pleasures and its pains. We feel neither betrayed by pain nor overcome by it, and thus we can contact that which is undamaged within us regardless of the situation. Metta sees truly that our integrity is inviolate, no matter what our life situation may be. We do not need to fear anything. We are whole: our deepest happiness is intrinsic to the nature of our minds, and it is not damaged through uncertainty and change.

In cultivating love, we remember one of the most powerful truths the Buddha taught—that the mind is naturally radiant and pure. It is because of visiting defilements that we suffer.

The word *defilement* is a common translation of the Pali word *kilesa*, which more literally translated means "torment of the mind." We know directly from our own experience that when certain states arise strongly within us, they have a tormenting quality—states like anger, fear, guilt, and greed. When they knock at the door and we invite them in, we lose touch with the fundamentally pure nature of our mind, and then we suffer.

By not identifying with these forces, we learn that these defilements or torments are only visitors. These forces are adventitious, not inherent. They do not reflect who we really are. The defilements or the kilesas inevitably arise because of how we have been conditioned. But this is no reason to judge ourselves harshly. Our challenge is to see them for what they are and to remember our true nature.

We can understand the inherent radiance and purity of our minds by understanding metta. Like the mind, metta is not distorted by what it encounters. Anger generated within ourselves or within others can be met with love; the love is not ruined by the anger. Metta is its own support, and thus it is free of inherently unstable conditions. The loving mind can observe joy and peace in one moment, and then grief in the next moment, and it will not be shattered by the change. A mind filled with love can be likened to the sky with a variety of clouds moving through it—some light and fluffy, others ominous and threatening. No matter what the situation, the sky is not affected by the clouds. It is free.

The Buddha taught that the forces in the mind that bring suffering are able to temporarily hold down the positive forces such as love or wisdom, but they can never destroy them. The negative forces can never uproot the positive, whereas the positive forces can actually uproot the negative forces. Love can uproot fear or anger or guilt, because it is a greater power.

Love can go anywhere. Nothing can obstruct it. "*I Am That*", a book of dialogues with Nisargadatta Maharaj, includes an exchange between Nisargadatta and a man who complained a great deal about his mother. The man felt that she had not been a very good mother and was not a good person. At one point, Nisargadatta advised him to love his mother. The man replied, "She wouldn't let me." Nisargadatta responded, "She couldn't stop you."

No external condition can prevent love; no one and no thing can stop it. The awakening of love is not bound up in things being a certain way. Metta, like the true nature of the mind, is not dependent; it is not conditioned. When we practice meditation and perceive this quality of mind, we also contact the essence of metta. This produces a tremendous change in perspective. At first it is as if we were sitting on the shore and watching waves dance on the surface of the ocean. Later in meditation it is as if we are under water, in the calm, still depths, watching the waves above us moving and playing. Still later we perceive that, in fact, we *are* the water, not apart or separate, and that waving is happening. This is also how metta embraces all.

The Pali word *metta* has two root meanings. One is the word for "gentle." Metta is likened to a gentle rain that falls upon the earth. This rain does not select and choose—"I'll rain here, and I'll avoid that place over there." Rather, it simply falls without discrimination.

The other root meaning for *metta* is "friend." To understand the power or the force of *metta* is to understand true friendship. The Buddha actually described at some length what he meant by being a good friend in the world. He talked about a good friend as someone who is constant in our times of happiness and also in our times of adversity or unhappiness. A friend will not forsake us when we are in trouble nor rejoice in our misfortune. The Buddha described a true friend as being a helper, someone who will protect us when we are unable to take care of ourselves, who will be a refuge to us when we are afraid.

Once, when someone described to the Dalai Lama how much fear they were experiencing in their meditation practice, he said, "When you're afraid, just put your head in the lap of the Buddha." The lap of the Buddha epitomizes the safety of a true friendship. The culmination of *metta* is to become such a friend to oneself and all of life.

The practice of *metta*, uncovering the force of love that can uproot fear, anger, and guilt, begins with befriending ourselves. The foundation of *metta* practice is to know how to be our own friend. According to the Buddha, "You can search throughout the entire universe for someone who is more deserving of your love and affection than you are yourself, and that person is not to be found anywhere. You yourself, as much as anybody in the entire universe, deserve your love and affection."