

# Mettā

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*Mettā* (loving kindness), *karuṇā* (compassion), *muditā* (joy) and *upekkhā* (equanimity) are called the four *brahmavihāras*. They are man's sublime states of mind. They are virtues which when cultivated make a man good, great, noble and serviceable. Man is endowed with immense and inconceivable potentialities. He can become a criminal. He can also become a saint. What is required is the exertion of his will power to cultivate good qualities and make himself noble, kind, sympathetic and equanimous.

He should develop loving kindness towards all beings and compassion for all those who are in trouble. His heart should melt when he sees beings in trouble and he should want to remove the trouble. He should never feel jealous of others. Even if one makes more progress and achieves greater prosperity, he should have not an iota of jealousy in him. On the other hand, he should feel appreciative joy in him. Whenever anything happens to him, which tries to destroy his mental equipoise, he should remain undisturbed, unperturbed and indifferent. He should not mind what happens to him. He must cultivate these exalting qualities in order to bring about a qualitative change in him for the better. In fact, these sublime mental states are altruistic qualities. Men endowed with these virtues never think only of themselves but they think of other human beings, nay, all living beings and work for their good.

What can be greater and more sublime virtues than these? Cultivating these virtues and practicing them sublimate man. They ennoble him. We know that anger is a great vice. It is so destructive that it destroys the peace of man. When he is angry, he burns and causes others to burn. Anger makes him so blind that he cannot distinguish between right and wrong and commits such crimes, which he would not have committed had he not flown into anger. Anger is a great evil.

It is said in the Itivuttaka:

*Anatthajanano kodho, kodho cittappakopano/  
Bhayamantarato jātaṃ, taṃ jano nāvabujjhatī//*

Anger causes harm, misery and misfortune; it upsets mind, it causes fear in one. One does not realize anger is a great evil. (Itivuttaka, 239)

This evil force can be subdued by practicing loving kindness to all. Loving kindness is an antidote to anger. It sweetens one's life and does not poison it like anger. In the Suttanipāta (Uraga Sutta), anger has been compared with the poison of a snake, which spreads throughout one's body (*Yo uppatitam vineti kodham, visaṭam sappavisam va osadhehi*). Therefore, it must be kept at arm's length. It must be subdued and put away. This is possible only by practicing loving kindness.

Cruelty is another vice. When man's heart is not soft, when it does not melt to see others in grief and pain, he becomes hard-hearted. It is this hard-heartedness, this cruelty, that impels man to commit so many crimes and atrocities. Thus, cruelty is also a great evil. It is because of cruelty that man fights wars, kills innocent men and women, deprives them of the necessities of life, takes away their freedom and liberty, subjugates them, drops atom bombs on them, causes holocausts and perpetrates so many other crimes. The antidote to cruelty is compassion (*karuṇā*).

Jealousy is also a very great vice. It leads to unhealthy rivalries and competitions. Why has he stood first in the class? Why not I? Why has he succeeded in business? Why is it that I cannot compete with him? I must compete with him and leave him far behind. This sort of thinking is because of jealousy. A jealous man always burns inside. He cannot tolerate the progress and achievements of others. The most effective remedy for this poison is to cultivate a state of joy and happiness at the success of others. He should be happy at the success of others, should be glad when others, even if they are his rivals, prosper and record achievements.

When a man feels pleasant sensations, he is attached to them and when he feels unpleasant ones, he feels aversion for them. In both the cases, he is normally upset. He loses the balance of his mind. In the first case, he feels exulted and in the other he feels depressed. In one case, he feels attraction and in the other case he feels revulsion. Thus, the forces of pleasant sensations and those of the unpleasant ones make him lose his cool and equipoise. It is by practicing equanimity (*upekkhā*) that these opposite forces can be eliminated and he can maintain equanimity on both occasions of attraction and revulsion.

*Mettā, karuṇā, muditā* and *upekkhā* are sterling qualities. In the words of Narada Thera, "These virtues tend to elevate man. They make one divine in this life itself. They can transform a man into a superman. If all try to cultivate them, irrespective of creed, color, race, or sex, the earth can be transformed

into a paradise where all can live in perfect peace and harmony as ideal citizens of one world.” (See *The Buddha and His Teachings* by Narada Thera, p 614, fourth edition 1988, Taiwan)

*Mettā* (sansk. *maitrī*) is a sublime state of mind. When a man is in this state, he is filled with altruistic feelings. He sincerely wishes the welfare and happiness of others and is ever ready to do good to them. In this state, he never thinks of harming others and causing injury to others. How does he feel when he is endowed with this divine and sublime state? He feels like the mother ‘who protects her only child even at the risk of her life’ (*Mātā yathā niyaṃ puttāṃ, āyusā ekaputtamanurakkhe/ Evampi sabbabhūtesu, mānasam bhāvaye aparimāṇam// Karaṇīyametta Sutta...*). Similarly, without caring for his own life, nay, at the risk of even his own life, he tries to save the lives of others. In fact, he cultivates boundless loving kindness towards all living beings. He always sincerely thinks of the welfare of others. His love for others is not tinged with passion. It is pure, unselfish love without expecting anything in return. *Mettā* is qualitatively different from ordinary affection.

*Mettā* transcends all boundaries of caste, race, nation, religion, political affinity, professional brotherhood and any other consideration, which divides men into different groups. *Mettā* is shown to all without any distinction of friend and foe and without any distinction of love and hate. Just as the sun sheds its rays on all without any distinction, even so, sublime *mettā* rains its sweet blessings equally on the pleasant and the unpleasant, on the rich and the poor, on the high and the low, on the vicious and the virtuous, on man and woman, and on human and animal.

*Mettā* is opposed to anger, ill-will and aversion (*Akopo ti adoso, mettāti attho. Pāthikavagga Ṭīkā 3.212*). *Mettā* cannot co-exist with them. In *mettā* is such quality that it conquers anger. Hatred can be ended by loving kindness, not by hatred (*Na hi verena verāni, sammantīdha kudācana/ Averena sammantī esa dhammo sanantano// Dhammapada verse 5*).

In the *Mettānisamsa Sutta* (Aṅguttara Nikāya), blessings of *mettā* are enumerated. Man practicing it has a good and sound sleep without any trouble. He also wakes up in the morning feeling fresh and light. In his sleep, he is not disturbed by bad dreams. He endears himself to all. As he loves others, so also others love him. He also endears himself to non-humans. When he permeates his mind with loving kindness, even ferocious animals, snakes and scorpions are attracted towards him. Practicing *mettā*, the color of his face is brightened.

*Mettā*, therefore, has great power to make him beautiful and lovable. As the face reflects the state of the mind, so, when a man is angry or jealous, he cannot have that placidity and serenity on his face, which can make him beautiful. But if he is full of loving kindness, the calmness will be reflected on his face and the chemistry of his face will be different. Such a person quickly attains the concentration of mind and when death comes to him, he dies remaining mindful and alert.

For understanding the power of *mettā*, one has to understand the chemistry of one's thoughts. There is a great difference between the chemistry of hateful thoughts and that of loving thoughts. Whereas loving thoughts produce healthy physical effects, hateful thoughts produce just the opposite. The former make man happy and calm, the latter make him disturbed and unhappy. In the words of Narada Thera, "When one gets angry, the heart pumps blood twice or three times faster than the normal rate. Heated blood rushes up to the face, which then turns red or black. At times the face becomes repulsive to sight. Loving thoughts on the contrary, gladden the heart and clarify the blood. The face then presents a lovable appearance." (See *ibid* p 622)

Who is fit to practice *mettā* and how to practice it? In the *Karaṇīyamettasuttam* the qualities of one who is fit for practicing *mettā* are described. He should be physically fit and mentally free from pollutants like pride, anger and jealousy. He should be extremely simple and straightforward. There should be no crookedness in him. He should be wise; his sense must be calm. He should not have attachment in him. He must fill his mind with loving kindness for all living beings and he should always think of protecting others just as a mother protects her only child even at the cost of her own life. He must be free from all kinds of negative thoughts and fill himself with positive ones, he should be happy and free from anger and other defilements before he can practice *mettā*.

If the people of this world—particularly the heads of states—practiced loving kindness and wished for the welfare of all people then the world would be a veritable paradise. Narada Thera says, "This chaotic, war-weary, restless world of today, where the nations are arming themselves to their teeth, frightened of one another, where human life is endangered by nuclear weapons which may be released at any moment, is sorely in need of this universal loving kindness so that all may live in one world in perfect peace and harmony like brothers and sisters." (See *ibid*,p 626)

More than anything else what is badly needed in this world, which is in the process of being globalized, is loving kindness.

How to practice *mettā bhāvanā*? Let one who wants to practice *mettā* fill his mind with loving kindness and pervade first one direction, then a second direction, then a third one, then a fourth one. In the same way, he should pervade his mind full of loving kindness above, below and in all directions. Then everywhere he should identify himself with all, he should pervade his mind with loving kindness in the whole world. And this will be very effective if his mind is wide, developed, unbounded and free from hate and ill-will.

Questions:

- 1 Define *mettā* and enumerate its characteristics.
- 2 What is *Brahmavihāra*? Why is *metta* called a *Brahmavihāra*?
- 3 ‘One must cultivate exalting qualities like *mettā* and *karuṇā* to bring about a qualitative change in him for the better.’ Elaborate.
- 4 How anger is a great vice?
- 5 *Mettā* should be practiced like a ‘a mother who protects her only child even at the risk of her life’. Bring out the great idea in this statement.
- 6 Bring out the meaning of ‘*Na hi verena verāni, sammantīdha kudācana*’.
- 7 Why is *mettā* badly needed in this globalized world?
- 8 Who is fit to practice *mettā* and how to practice it? Write in detail.
- 9 How can the practice of *mettā* make one attractive and loveable?
- 10 Enumerate the blessings of *mettā* as given in the *Mettānisamsa sutta*.