

Saṃyutta Nikāya 1.8
Karaniya Metta Sutta: The Buddha's Words on Loving-Kindness
 translated from the Pali by
 The Amaravati Sangha
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This is what should be done
 By one who is skilled in goodness,
 And who knows the path of peace:
 Let them be able and upright,
 Straightforward and gentle in speech,
 Humble and not conceited,
 Contented and easily satisfied,
 Unburdened with duties and frugal in their ways.
 Peaceful and calm and wise and skilful,
 Not proud or demanding in nature.
 Let them not do the slightest thing
 That the wise would later reprove.
 Wishing: In gladness and in safety,
 May all beings be at ease.
 Whatever living beings there may be;
 Whether they are weak or strong, omitting none,
 The great or the mighty, medium, short or small,
 The seen and the unseen,
 Those living near and far away,
 Those born and to-be-born —
 May all beings be at ease!
 Let none deceive another,
 Or despise any being in any state.
 Let none through anger or ill-will
 Wish harm upon another.
 Even as a mother protects with her life
 Her child, her only child,
 So with a boundless heart
 Should one cherish all living beings;
 Radiating kindness over the entire world:
 Spreading upwards to the skies,
 And downwards to the depths;
 Outwards and unbounded,
 Freed from hatred and ill-will.
 Whether standing, walking, seated or lying down
 Free from drowsiness,
 One should sustain this recollection.
 This is said to be the sublime abiding.

By not holding to fixed views,
The pure-hearted one, having clarity of vision,
Being freed from all sense desires,
Is not born again into this world.

Text repeated

This is what should be done
By one who is skilled in goodness,
And who knows the path of peace:

Let them be able and upright,
Straightforward and gentle in speech,
Humble and not conceited,
Contented and easily satisfied,

Unburdened with duties and frugal in their ways.
Peaceful and calm and wise and skillful,
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Let none through anger or ill-will
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Even as a mother protects with her life
Her child, her only child,
So with a boundless heart
Should one cherish all living beings;

Radiating kindness over the entire world:
Spreading upwards to the skies,
And downwards to the depths;
Outwards and unbounded,

Discussion notes

This sutta seems to be aimed at seasoned practitioners who already have a firm grasp of what ethics (sila) is all about.

These lines are a good general description of the behaviour expected of nuns (bhikkhuni) and monks (bhikkhus).

Not just expected of monastics. Laymen and women are also part of the community of followers of the Buddha (Sangha), expected to be unburdened and frugal, etc.

Here 'skilful' (upaya) means the ability to act appropriately for the benefit of others.

These nine lines contain the heart of this teaching. Although loving-kindness (metta) is not specifically mentioned, wishing that all beings 'be at ease' is synonymous. It is an ideal state of affairs, the opposite of the first Noble Truth of suffering or dis-ease (dukkha). The aspiration is that all beings, including ourselves, wherever and whoever they may be, be at ease in all situations, good or bad.

This aspiration is driven home by reference to the opposite state of mind: to deceive, despise, feel anger or ill-will. The traditional view is that such bad intentions generate kamma, therefore, to wish harm on others is to harm oneself.

The aspiration is also driven home by reference to the self-sacrificial love of mother for child. Like all other religions, Buddhism struggles to shake off misogyny, but the use of this metaphor implies deep respect for matriarchy.

The idea that the world can be pervaded with loving-kindness also appears in the Sigalovāda and Kālāma Suttas. The means are unknown, but people and other animals do indeed pick up

Freed from hatred and ill-will.

subtle external signs of the internal state mind of others: maybe by pheromones. Note that lack of hatred and ill-will is unbounded freedom.

Whether standing, walking, seated or lying down
Free from drowsiness,
One should sustain this recollection.

These four postures align with the four mindfulness practices in the Satipaṭṭāna Sutta, and with the traditional four-fold meditation practice of loving-kindness towards oneself, a friend, a neutral person and an 'enemy'. Note that both metta and mindfulness (sati) practices are also forms of recollection (anusati): recollection of the scattered mind, but also recollection of the Buddha's example.

This is said to be the sublime abiding.

Loving-kindness (metta) is one of four sublime abiding or 'divine abodes' (brahma-viharas) leading to rebirth in the heaven ruled by Brahma. The other three are Compassion (karuna), empathetic joy (mudita) and equanimity (upekkha). Note that this teaching is not specifically Buddhist, but general to most Indian religions.

By not holding to fixed views,
The pure-hearted one, having clarity of vision,
Being freed from all sense desires,
Is not born again into this world.

Loving-kindness helps in the avoidance of disputation with any one on the basis of fixed views. Notice the association of loving-kindness with vision (direct knowledge) and freedom from desire. These three are inextricably associated with the process of purification that is mentioned in the Aṭṭhakavagga and the Dhammacakkpavattana Suttas, meaning that person is 'not born again into this world' this is the goal of practice in the Theravāda tradition, in contrast to the Mahāyāna tradition, in which beings advanced on the Path (Bodhisattvas) are thought to delay their own enlightenment in order to help all other beings to join them. Rather than emphasising such a difference, perhaps it is more compassionate to emphasise the emphasis on kindness in both traditions: there is no such thing as wisdom that is not compassionate.

Khuddaka Nikāya: The Itivuttaka ¹

(112 short discourses of the Buddha collected by the woman lay-disciple Khujjuttarā)

22: Metta Sutta

(verse only)

One should train in deeds of merit
That yield long-lasting happiness:
Generosity, a balanced life,
Developing a loving mind.

By cultivating these three things,
Deeds yielding happiness,
The wise person is reborn in bliss
In an untroubled happy world.

***Discussion Note** Khujjuttarā was a lay disciple, a female servant, who attended many of the Buddha's teachings and memorised them for the benefit of other women at the court where she worked. Her collection of the discourses is unusual in usually consisting of a short prose section followed by a restatement or 'inspired' summary in verse form. Thus, the concise and emphatic format of the Itivuttaka teachings makes them particularly suitable for a lay audience who don't want to be discombobulated by elaborate doctrines.*

In this Itivuttaka version of the Metta Sutta, only three practices are recommended: giving (dāna), living a balanced life, and developing a loving mind. Dāna, particularly to the monastic sangha, was thought to generate merit in the kammic merit-demerit equation that determined an individual's future rebirth. A bit more research may be useful in working out what was meant by 'a balanced life'; presumably this phrase refers to a middle way between hedonism and asceticism, but what else could have been intended, and what actions might be covered now? 'Developing a loving mind' means changing attitudes for the better by frequent deeds of loving-kindness. Notice that the emphasis here is on the benefits of loving-kindness for the perpetrator: benefit for the recipient is taken as read.

27: Mettābhāvanā Sutta

Thus was said by the Lord:

‘Bhikkhus, whatever grounds there are for making merit productive of a future birth, all these do not equal a sixteenth part of the mind-release of loving-kindness. The mind-release of loving-kindness surpasses them and shines forth, bright and brilliant.

Just as the radiance of all the stars does not equal a sixteenth part of the moon's radiance, but the moon's radiance surpasses them and shines forth, bright and brilliant, even so, whatever grounds there are for making merit productive of a future rebirth, all these do not equal a sixteenth part of the mind release of loving-kindness...

Just as the last month of the rainy season, in the autumn, when the sky is clear and free from clouds, the sun, on ascending, dispels the darkness of space and shines forth, bright and brilliant, even so, whatever grounds there are for making merit productive of a future rebirth, all these do not equal a sixteenth part of the mind-release of loving-kindness...

And just as in the night, at the moment of dawn, the morning star shines forth, bright and brilliant, even so, whatever grounds there are for making merit productive of a future rebirth, all these do not equal a sixteenth part of the mind-release of loving-kindness. The mind-release of loving-kindness surpasses them all and shines forth, bright and brilliant.'

Discussion note *The argument that loving-kindness generates much merit towards a fortunate rebirth is mathematically, metaphorically and repetitively reinforced by reference to the radiance of astronomical bodies. But there seems to be a different argument embedded here. The motivating outcome (of ensuring a beneficial future rebirth) pales into insignificance when compared to the more immediate 'mind-release of loving-kindness'. From what is the mind released? From clinging:*

For one who mindfully develops
 Boundless loving-kindness
 Seeing the destruction of clinging
 The fetters are worn away.

If with an uncorrupted mind
 [S]he pervades just one being
 With loving kindly thoughts
 [S]he makes some merit thereby.

But a noble one produces
 An abundance of merit
 By having a compassionate mind
 Towards all living beings.²

Those royal seers who conquered
 The earth crowded with beings
 Went about performing sacrifices:
 The horse sacrifice, the man sacrifice,
 The water rites, the *soma* sacrifice,
 And that called the 'Unobstructed.'³

But these do not share even a sixteenth part
 Of a well-cultivated mind of love,
 Just as the entire starry host

Is dimmed by the moon's radiance.

One who does not kill
 Nor cause others to kill,
 Who does not conquer
 Nor cause others to conquer,
 Kindly towards all beings-
 He has enmity for none.

This too was the meaning of what was said
 by the Lord, so I heard.

Discussion note *The accompanying verse goes into more detail about the effects of loving-kindness on the agent of that attitude: 'with the destruction of clinging (upādāna) the fetters (saṃyojana) are worn away'. Once again, what is being dealt with here is the elimination of suffering (dukkha) as a result of craving or 'thirst' (taṇhā). Since these verses were addressed to a lay audience, the fetters intended were either the four 'clings': attachment to belief in a self, attachment to views, attachment to rites and rituals, and attachment to sense-pleasures; or, the list of five 'lower' fetters: belief in a self, doubt, attachment to rites and rituals, sensual desire and ill-will. These fairly basic, overlapping lists underwent subsequent elaboration over the centuries, depending on the audience and the purpose of the message.*

Notice the suggestion that the fetters are not immediately neutralised, but gradually 'worn away' by the practice of loving kindness.

Note that loving kindness is not restricted to friends and relations: it is most effective when intended towards all sentient beings without exception.

Note that the Buddhist practice of loving-kindness is directly and favourably compared to the various ritual forms of Vedic sacrifice, which were the privileged activity of the Brahmin caste. Instead of undertaking microcosmic ritual acts in order to change macrocosmic events, the Buddhist practitioner internalises the sacrifice: it is undertaken as a psychological act designed to change the mind, in advance of any practical steps designed to change the world.

It is not clear what was meant by the Vedic 'unobstructed' sacrifice, but it may have involved the release of a horse to wander without obstruction for a year.

Notice that the final verse may have special resonance for a woman working at the court of an ancient Indian petty kingdom: 'One who does not kill...Nor cause others to conquer...Kindly towards all beings'. Women are at particular risk when dominant males decide to kill, conquer and be unkind.

¹ Translated by John D. Ireland, 1997, *The Udāna and the Itivuttaka*, (Buddhist Publication Society), pp.121, 123-4.

² It is by being practised towards all beings equally and without exception, not just towards one person, that loving-kindness becomes boundless and the basis for mind-release.

³ This refers to sacrifices by legendary kings of the past.