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THE CONCEPT OF METTĀ (LOVING-KINDNESS) FROM THE THERAVADA BUDDHIST PERSPECTIVE

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ABSTRACT:

Mettā means benevolence, loving-kindness, friendliness, amity, good will, and active interest in others. It is the first of the four sublime states (Brahmavihara) and one of the ten paramis of the Theravada school of Buddhism. The cultivation of benevolence (mettabhavana) is a popular form of meditation in Buddhism. It is a part of the four immeasurables in Brahmavihara (divine abidings) meditation. Metta as 'compassion meditation' is often practiced in Asia by broadcast chanting, wherein monks chant for the laity. The compassion and universal loving-kindness concept of metta is discussed in the metta sutta of Buddhism, and is also found in the ancient and medieval texts of Hinduism and Jainism as metta. Small sample studies on the potential of loving-kindness meditation approach on patients suggest potential benefits. However, peer reviews question the quality and sample size of these studies, then suggest caution.

KEYWORDS : Mettā, Loving-kindness, Brahmavihara, bhavana, Buddhism.

INTRODUCTION

This "Brahamavira Dhamma" (Divine Abiding) expounded by the Buddha, reveals the systematic method of developing *mettā*, Loving-kindness towards all being and the way to lead a life of holiness. The Buddha has pointed out that insight knowledge; called wisdom can be gained only by way of achieving *sila* (morality), *samadhi* (concentration) and *panna* (wisdom) through the Noble Eightfold path. Wisdom, therefore, constitutes the great accomplishment for and aspirant. One who aspires should know the true characteristics of *anicca* (impermanence), *dukkha* (suffering) and *antta* (not-self) through serious contemplation on and nothing, which will finally lead towards complete liberation from sufferings. The Buddha has given us guidelines to achieve that insight wisdom by the practice of *vipassana* even while developing *metta*.

The word "love" one of the most compelling in the English language is commonly used for purposes so widely separated, so gross and so rarefied, as to render it sometimes nearly meaningless. Yet rightly understood, love is the indispensable and essential foundation no less for the growth and purification of the individual as for the construction of a peaceful, progressive, and healthy society.

Now love can be considered in two principal moods: that of lovers for each other, and that of a mother for her child. In its spiritualized form, love can draw its inspiration from either the one or the other. Spiritual love idealizing the love of lovers is often conceived as a consuming flame, and then it sometimes aspires to purification through torture and the violence of martyrdom. But spiritual love that looks for guidance to the love of a mother for her child uplifts itself to the ideal of the pure fount of all safety, welfare, and spiritual health (and a mother best serves her child if she guards her own health).

The meaning of Metta (Loving-kindness)

It is this latter kind which the Buddha takes as the basis for his teaching of universal love. Where Greek distinguishes between sensual Eros and spiritual agape, English makes do with only the one word "love." But Pali, like Sanskrit, has many words covering many shades of meaning. The word chosen by the Buddha for

this teaching is *metta*, from *mitta*, a friend (or better “the true friend in need”). *Metta* in the Buddha’s teaching finds its place as the first of four kinds of contemplation designed to develop a sound pacific relationship to other living beings.

The four are: *metta*, which will be rendered here by “loving kindness,” *karuṇā*, which is “compassion” or “pity,” *mudita*, which is “gladness at others’ success,” and *upekkhā*, which is “on looking equanimity.” These four are called “divine abodes” (*brahma-vihāra*), perhaps because whoever can maintain any one of them in being for even a moment has lived for that moment as do the brahma-deva, the highest gods.

In the Buddha’s teaching these four divine abiding, the “greatest of all worldly merit,” if practiced alone, without insight into the true nature of existence, can lead to rebirth in the highest heavens. But all heavenly existence is without exception impermanent, and at the end of the heavenly life-span—no matter how long it may last—the being dies and is reborn according to his or her past actions.

This is because some craving for existence (for being or even for non-being), and some sort of view of existence that is not in conformity with truth, still remain latent in that person, to burst out again when the result of the good actions is spent. And where one will be reborn after that is unpredictable though it is certain that one will be reborn.

The Buddha’s teaching of insight is—in as few words as possible—the training in knowledge and seeing of how it is that anything, whatever it may be whether objective or subjective, comes to be; how it acquires existence only in dependence on conditions, and is impermanent because none of the conditions for its existence is permanent; and how existence, always complex and impermanent, is never safe from pain, and is in need of a self—the will-o’-the-wisp idea, the rainbow mirage, which lures it on, and which it can never find; for the comforting illusion has constantly to be renewed. And that teaching also shows how there is a true way out from fear of pain. In its concise form this is expressed as the Four Noble Truths: the truth of suffering, the truth of suffering’s origin (craving or need), the truth of suffering’s cessation (through abandonment of craving), and the truth of the way leading to suffering’s cessation. These four truths are called the teaching peculiar to *Buddhas* (*buddhanaṃ samukkaṇṇ sika-desana*) since the discovery of them is what distinguishes Buddhas. The way (the fourth truth) is also called the Middle Way because it avoids the two extremes of sensual indulgence and of self-mortification. Its eight members are: right view, right intention, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness, and right concentration.

Pure Metta (Loving-kindness)

Metta only wishes for the well-being of all living beings. *Metta* has no expectations and desires nothing. *Metta* is very pure, without attachment and freely given. If there is attachment and worry, this *metta* is not pure or uncontaminated. When a person developing *metta* has no expectations and is free from worry or attachment to a particular person, then the *metta* can be pure and wholesome. At the beginning of *metta* practice, this is usually not possible. However, the longer one develops *metta*, the pure and clear *metta* becomes. Only *metta* that is untainted can be effective clear *metta*. That’s why we need to be careful to cultivate pure *metta*. It’s especially important for parents to be aware that their *metta* is genuine and wholesome. So, this feeling of *metta* needs to be practiced over again until we are practicing *metta* continuously. The Buddha said that *metta* is like cool refreshing clean water that never ceases to quench one’s thirst.

To prepare Before Metta Bhavana

In the *visuddhi Magga* (the path of Purification), before explaining the manner as to how contemplation should be made on pathavi *kasina*, (the earth *kasina*), the subject of preliminary arrangements (*parikamma*) to be done, has been elaborated quite exhaustively. To put it in nutshell as to what is most essential, priority should be given to the proper observance of morality, the purity of *sīla*, and then to completely settle anything to be done which many cause hindrances (*palibodha*) or create a feeling of worry in regard to the residing monastery. The next point is to accept with faith and confidence the instruction given relating to the method of developing loving-kindness (*metta*), which one intends to take up from a competent meditation teacher (*Kammaṭṭhanacaritā*)

Taking Up All Postures

Meditation can be done while walking, or standing, or lying down, which are the four usual postures. It is clearly evident that meditation exercise can be made by adopting any one of the four postures as state in the Metta sutta in the following words.

*“Titthamcaramnisinnova, sayanoyavatassa
Vitamiddhoetamsatimadhittheyya.”*

The meaning of this pali Phrase is:

Tittham-either in the act of standing, *caram*-or in the act of working, *nisinnova*- or while sitting, *sayano*-or while lying down, *yavata*-four the duration of that period, *vitamiddho*-the mind will be free from sloth or sleepiness, *vitamiddho*-the will be free from sloth or sleepiness, *ass*-and it will so happen. *Yavata*-for that particular length, of time, *Etam* satim-this practice of mindfulness which arises along with loving-kindness, *Addittheyya*-should developed by fixing mind upon it and letting oneself remain in this state of mind.

It has been clearly instructed to contemplate and note by way of assuming the four usual posture not only in respect of *mettabhavana*, but also in regard to practicing *satipatthanavipassana* relating to which it has been preached as *gacchantova gacchamiti pajanati*, etc.

Imagining the faults of Anger and Advantages of Patience

After taking up the cross-legged posture, the faults of anger or malice and the advantages of patience should be imagined and reflected upon. If these have been already reflected upon earlier, it would be quite sufficient. This has been accordingly important though. If meditated with intense faith and enthusiasm, beneficial results would be derived. Nonetheless, if one is going to undertake any kind of work or business, there may be things which are to be deflected upon or fulfilled. Rejection can be made only one sees the fault.

The fault of Anger

When giving rise to aggressive anger, it is obvious that one becomes miserable. Feeling of joy or happiness which previously pervades him immediately disappears. Mental distress takes place which then changes his looks to become grim and distorted caused by unhappiness. He would become fidgety, and the more he becomes furious, the more he is distressed and embarrassed both physically and mentally. Anger may incite him to commit murder or utter obscene words. If he makes a retrospection of his past evil deeds, he will, in the least, feel sorry and humiliated by being conscious of his own guilt; or that, if he has committed a crime, he will definitely suffer as at once in receiving due punishment for his crimes. Furthermore, in his next existence he can descend to the *apaya* realm where he will invariably have to undergo immense suffering and misery. This is just a brief description of how anger will bring about dire consequence. Such incident can be personally experienced and known by mere retrospection.

Misery caused to others by anger is more obvious. In the least, making others feel unhappy by word of mouth is fairly common. A person who is retailed at may feel awfully distressed and suffer mental pain. Angry mood may relegate to the level of killing others or causing severe suffering mentally. Even if, no terrible consequence may not take place in the present life time an angry person will land in the nether world in his future existences. If at all he is reborn in the world of human beings by virtue of his wholesome *Kusalakamma*, he will be greatly handicapped with a short a span of life, exuberant diseases and ugliness in his personal appearance. Anger cut both ways endangering both the person who is angry and the aggrieved. I would not propose to illustrate further citing relevant stories relating to the manner of reflection on the faults of anger since there is hardly any time at my disposal to tender my teaching on how *metta* can be developed.

The advantages of Patience

Next, in the matter of reflecting on the merits or fruits of ‘patience’, *khanti*.

Patience of forbearance is basically the *Dhamma* country to anger, which, in other words, is *adosa*-absence of anger. It is similar to the essence of *Metta*, loving-kindness. In particular, what is said to have patience is

to be able to endure any kind of provocation and to retain calm without anger and doing evil. *Metta* or loving-kindness is more significant of rather, far-reaching in meaning than patience. It imbibes the quality of goodwill, rejoicing with other people's happiness. The advantages of patience have been described in the *visuddhimagga* (the path of purification) in the manner stated below.

The Matter of *Metta Bhavana*

It is stated that *metta* should be developed in order to make the mind free from the ills of anger by reflecting upon its faults or evils as well as upon the advantages of patience so as to conjoin patience by letting it run parallel. One way of developing *metta* is to perfection, i.e., *paramita*, and also merit. Another way is to develop *metta* for the attainment of Jhana Samadhi. There are two kinds as just stated. *Visuddhimagga* has analytically and distinguishably commented upon in explaining the method of developing *metta* for the achievement of *jhana Samadhi*, as to who should be omitted at the initial stage of developing and transmitting *metta*, and who should be entirely excluded in developing loving-kindness.

In the matter of *Metta Bhavana*, developing *metta* through meditation, it can be exercised and developed by contemplation, dwelling the mind on any human being or other sentient being (living being) who may be seen or heard, or who may appear in the mind's eye. The manner of developing with a feeling of benevolence as stated in *Suttanta Pali* and *Atthakatha*, which say, "may one gain happiness," or "May all be happy and healthy," i.e., "Sukhitahontu," Briefly put, goodwill should be imparted in the following way:

"May all be blessed with happiness"

The truth of *Metta*

In this regard, besides developing *metta*, mentally and verbally, special care should be taken to also render physical assistance to others, whenever possible, so as to make them feel happy. On the other hand and, it would be meaningless in fostering loving-kindness, if one causes misery to others either physically, or verbally, or mentally.

It is therefore essential to do well to others, and by doing so, the act of developing mindfulness on loving-kindness, may be said to be genuinely effective. For instance, while loving-kindness is radiated from his heart to a person who is coming face to face with in a narrow lane wishing him happiness, it would also be necessary to give way to him, if he is worthy of respect. Such a behavior would then amount to honoring him with a virtuous thought and would be in consonance with one's own inner feeling of *metta*. He who develops loving-kindness to others, while travelling, would be required to make room for other fellow travellers who may be looking for accommodation in the same carriage, provided of course, there is available space. He should assist others as far as possible if he happens to find them overburdened with a heavy load. In connection with business affairs, it amounts to exercising loving-kindness by instructing another person in matters with which he is acquainted. Speak gently and sweetly, and accord a warm reception with a fine gesture and a smiling sweet face. Help a person to the best of one's own ability. These are the genuine manifestations of goodwill and loving-kindness. To speak with a sweet voice is *mettavacikan*. Giving physical help to others is *mettakayakan*.

Living with the Noblest Intentions

A person who always lives with *metta* is a noble person or *Brahmavihari*, and the word *ariya* to a virtuous noble person who always with *metta*. Becomes a *brahmim* is a virtuous person who always lives with *metta*, when someone does this, we say that person has become a Brahmin.

You can develop *metta* wherever you happen to be, sitting in the meditation hall, a chair, or on your bed. You can develop *metta* repeating the following phrases:

'May all living beings be well, happy and peaceful.
May all living beings be well, happy and peaceful.

Wherever you are doing sitting meditation and your legs become stiff, you can practice walking meditation

and cultivate *metta* by repeating phrases:

May all living being be well, happy and peaceful.

May all living being be well, happy and peaceful.'

When you go to the market, the monastery, or the office, you can also develop **metta**. While you are lying on your bed or having a meal, drinking, or eating something, you can develop *metta*. While cooking, sweeping, or washing clothes, you can cultivate *metta*. Whatever you are doing becomes an opportunity to develop metta. During every waking hour, you can develop metta in this way.

The Eleven Benefits of Metta

Whenever a person lives with metta, he/she will experience the following benefits:

1. He/she will fall asleep happily.
2. He/she will have good dreams.
3. He/she will wake up feeling fresh, clear and happy.
4. He/she will be loved by humans.
5. He/she will be loved non-human or invisible beings such as devas and brahmas.
6. He/she will be protected by devas.
7. He/she will be free from harm by knives, guns, weapons, poison, fire or water and will be free from all danger.
8. He/she will be able to concentrate easily.
9. His/her facial expression will be clear and serene.
10. At the time of death, his/her mind will not be confused, but will be peaceful.
11. If he/she attains *mettajhana* (absorption concentration) just before death, he/she will be reborn in the brahma realm.

As conclusion, if you develop *metta* for only a short time, the benefits are not so obvious. However, if you develop *metta* for quite some time; you will experience more obvious and substantial benefits. This is why you should spend as time as possible cultivating *metta*. The practice of loving kindness alone will give effect in some measure to all themembers except the first: but it is only with right view (without self-deception) that *Nibbana* can be reached. Right view gives insight into the real nature of existence of being and non-being, with all its mirages and deceptions, and it is only with its help that the practice of lovingkindness is perfected, lifted out of the impermanence of even the highest heavens, and directed to the true cessation of suffering. That true cessation comes with the elimination of deception by wrong views and with the exhaustion of the stream of craving in its two forms of lust and hate. This extinction of lust, hate, and delusion, is called *Nibbana*.

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