



LOVING-KINDNESS (METTA) MEDITATION FOR STRESS REDUCTION

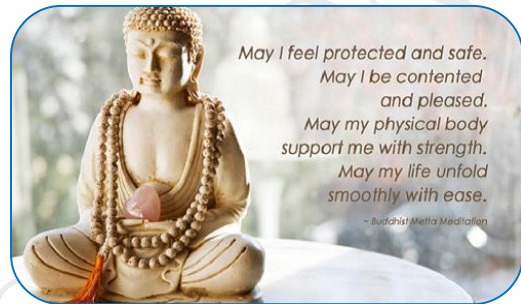
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ABSTRACT :

Buddhist philosophy is rich with teachings of mental training aimed at the cultivation of happiness, compassion, contentment and helpfulness. These mental trainings are commonly known as "meditation" or "Bhavana" which aims at purifying and training the mind of disturbances such as anger, hatred, ill-will, apathy, worries and restlessness which make people depress and stress in life and replacing them with concentration, awareness, intelligence, will-power, confidence and joy which can make people would be happy, joyful and blissful without stresses. Hereby, I would like to research and explore one of the useful techniques of Buddhist teaching to practice for stress reducing namely "Loving-kindness" (Metta) meditation techniques which constitute the foundation of the Buddhist mental training.



Rearranging external factors is not sufficient to inhibit or reduce mental stress in life. But changing internal factors in order to face psycho-social problems, such as developing mental training or by creating a stronger sense of self, will create an individual who will not easily succumb to stress, worry, anxiety, depression, intolerance and helplessness.

KEYWORDS : Loving-kindness, mindfulness, awareness, sympathetic joy and love.

INTRODUCTION

In this paper I researched the basic foundation of Buddhist *metta* (loving-kindness) meditation, both its theory and practice. In particular, I will present a kind of meditation known as the 'metta' or 'loving-kindness' meditation. In comparing *metta* with mindfulness, it should be noted that mindfulness meditation is the basis for *metta* or any other kind of meditation technique. Thereby, without having mindfulness or total awareness one cannot concentrate properly on any object or action. Therefore, mindfulness is the prerequisite for all forms of meditation.

The most immediate internal "causes" of stress are unbearable feelings and emotions such as anger, jealousy, hatred, lack of positive relationships and helplessness. Therefore, if these internal causes can be eliminated, we would have prevented stress from arising in the first place. *Metta* meditation makes to reduce stress and negative feeling of emotions such as anger, jealousy and hatred and to strengthen positive relationships, the sense of self and self-esteem in society. *Metta* is supreme virtue which people should cultivate in their mind.

METTA (loving-kindness)

The Pali word *metta* has numerous meanings such as loving-kindness, friendliness, benevolence, fellowship, fraternity, harmony, inoffensiveness and peace. In texts such as the *Visuddhimagga* and the *Vimuttimgga*, *metta* is defined as strong thoughts for the welfare and happiness of everyone, both oneself and others, without asking for anything in return. Through *metta* one refuses to be offensive and renounces

bitterness, resentment and animosity of every kind, developing instead a mind of friendliness, accommodativeness and benevolence which seeks the well-being and happiness of others.

Metta is not selfish love which "clings" or attaches to the object of one's love and pursues the self-centered fulfillment of desires. When self-centered desires arise, they may be followed by offensiveness, resentment, and animosity in later stages. Strong egocentric desires cannot tolerate the non-fulfillment of desires or the loss of cherished possessions. Negative thoughts such as resentment and anger may arise. *Metta* meditation is first of all a refusal to allow egocentric desires to proliferate by arousing the opposite desires, friendliness, benevolence, harmony and inoffensiveness.

Metta: Comparing to Others like Oneself

When one practices *metta* with pure thoughts, selfish desire is overcome by sympathy. First of all one creates the opportunity to extend positive feelings towards others by detaching oneself from one's selfish desires and aversions. *Metta* meditation creates the energy to go beyond ego-self, which is the tendency to be self-centered, or to consider only oneself and one's own interests. For instance, when the meditator practices *metta*, he is able to generate empathy and appreciate better the feelings of sorrow and pain, joy and happiness in others. The *metta*-meditator awakens his thoughts of well-being and safety for others by realizing that: "All individual beings fear being harmed; life is dear to all; comparing others with oneself, one should neither hurt nor kill nor cause to hurt or kill anyone". In this way, when the *metta* meditator generates pure thoughts of loving-kindness, she will be able to transform thoughts, undisturbed by such impediments as anger, jealousy and hatred, into the wish for the happiness and welfare of others. Thus, *metta* meditation aims to generate within oneself a warm-hearted feeling of friendliness, empathy, sympathetic joy and love, which would enhance the ability to overcome such social barriers as race, religion, gender, age and social status. It also helps one to avoid feelings of resentment, frustration, insecurity and hopelessness as mentioned earlier. The latter emotions are known as direct causative factors of stress.

The Power of Metta

In addition to the *metta* meditation technique described in the *Visuddhimagga* and *Vimuttimaggā*, there is another explanation to the *metta* technique in the *Metta-Sutta*, which is an ancient Buddhist chanting and meditation scripture. This *Metta-Sutta* explains how to follow *metta*, and what should be done by the meditator in order to prepare for meditation practice.

Before discussing the *Metta-Sutta* and its practices, we shall relate the story of how the *Metta-Sutta* originated because the story reveals an important insight into the power of *metta* in protecting oneself from negative emotions. It so happened that one time five hundred monks received meditation instructions from the Buddha and went to the forest to meditate. These monks couldn't concentrate their minds because, so they claimed, they saw terrifying visions and heard dreadful noises made by invisible deities. The monks returned to the Buddha with distressed minds and bodies, and they explained to him about the disturbing environment in the forest. After listening to the monks, the Buddha taught them the *Metta-Sutta* and asked them to go back to the forest. The monks returned to the same place where they meditated before, recited the *Metta-Sutta* and set their minds on *metta*. Eventually, the monks were no longer disturbed by the terrifying visions and dreadful noises, and they could continue their meditation practice.

What the story demonstrates is that true *metta* or loving-kindness has the power to overcome one's own mental disturbances and to change the negative attitude towards other.

When one practices *metta* as set forth in the *Metta-Sutta*, his attitude will be shaped into positive action. *Metta* is the protective and immensely patient attitude of a mother who forbears all difficulties for the sake of her child and ever protects it despite its misbehavior. *Metta* is also the attitude of a friend who wants to give one the best to further one's well-being. If these qualities of *metta* are sufficiently cultivated through *mettabhavana*; the meditation on universal love and the result is the acquisition of a tremendous inner power which preserves, protects and heals both oneself and others.

Metta: Universal Love

When one develops *metta*, his or her mind becomes free from impediments such as anger, jealousy, aversion and even selfish love, and instead fills with the wish for the happiness of not only all human beings but also all sentient beings. Now, such universal love is not possible if that love is conditioned by one's likes

and dislikes. Being human, we have our individual likes and dislikes, but if these are the ground for love, then we cannot generate universal love. Therefore, *metta* as universal love has to transcend and overcome personal likes and dislikes. I do not mean not having likes and dislikes: as humans, it would be impossible not to have likes and dislikes. But the idea here is that love is to be distinguished from personal likes and dislikes: an idea that would appear radical to us because we often equate love with personal liking. But we can unlink love from likes. Thus, with the mind of *metta*, we can show compassion even towards those whom we dislike because they are unfriendly to us.

The Benefice of Metta

When these characteristics of *metta* dwell in the meditator's mind, the mind becomes calm and tranquil due to the absence of mental disturbances which we have described above as impediments. The psychological benefit of having positive thoughts influences both the self and society as a whole. For example, when one's mind is calm and tranquil, free from anger, jealousy and resentment and one have empathy and compassion and then naturally his conduct will not disturb society. When people practice this way of *metta* meditation, their thoughts and emotions are calmed and peaceful, guiding them towards calm and peaceful conduct. Calmness doesn't mean being anti-social or lethargic: it means that one's mind becomes relaxed and full of "positive energy" and allows one to form healthy relationships with one's fellow human beings. In other words, one has less negative thoughts, such as anger or hatred. We have to emphasize that this type of practice takes a long time to develop and training should be approached with honest, determined effort. It is a life-long effort.

As long as unwholesome thoughts, such as anger and aversion, remain in the mind, it is hard to generate the characteristics of *metta* or to practice the attitude of *metta* in one's mind. Therefore, vigilantly one should watch one's mind and steadily let go of unwholesome thoughts, known in Buddhism as impediments to the calm mind. What are the impediments to establishing *metta* in one's mind? Among the various impediments, anger, hatred, aversion, conceit and jealousy are considered the strongest. When such negative thoughts arise in the mind, they create what is described in Buddhism as the unwholesome mind and *metta* cannot germinate in such a hostile soil. If someone wants to cultivate *metta*, that is, not leaving to chance the arising of goodwill only when one is pleased, he or she has to establish mindfulness and become very well acquainted with the wholesome mind. To emphasize, unwholesome and wholesome thoughts cannot go together. In other words, characteristics of *metta* such as friendliness, tenderness, sympathy and empathy do not arise in the unwholesome mind.

The attitude or characteristics of *metta* provide not only a sense of well-being to the meditator but also it gives him feelings of fearlessness and security. For example, when loving-kindness is set up in the mind, one does not look at others as actual or potential threats. By not perceiving others as potential threats to oneself, one relaxes and approaches others with friendliness. When others sense you are not threatening, they in turn may relax, perhaps even disarming themselves if they were hostile to begin with.

When one follows *metta*, they may gradually increase their ability to maintain peacefulness. This peacefulness is easier to cultivate when one leads a humble and unburdened life which is simple and frugal. This doesn't mean eliminating all desire for worldly things but it does mean maintaining contentment with what one already owns, and also, not desiring for more. When true *metta* is in the mind it is free from agitation stemming from inadequacy and insecurity: so the meditator's mind is at rest, calm, content and this allows him to be satisfied with what he possesses at the moment.

Metta : Not selfish love

Metta is not a form of attachment in that it is not selfish love for another. When one loves others out of attachment, one is ultimately aiming at satisfying oneself. One is using others for one's own satisfaction. This is not true *metta*. *Metta* is instead having happy thoughts for others, in a somewhat detached manner, much as a doctor may compassionately help one without becoming emotionally involved with: this state of mind is free from self-interested thoughts or self-satisfying thoughts. Such a doctor is full of compassion, and thoughts of safety for and happiness of the patient. When the mind reduces its selfish attachments towards worldly things, such a mind takes the opportunity to practice equanimity: the equal response to everything, by gradually reducing negative opinions or feelings such as dislike and conceit, as well as the attachment to a

desired outcome. When one is attached to the result, what started out as *metta* may turn into calculated, avaricious thinking.

The Characteristics of Metta

In practicing *metta*, it is not enough that one should behave in a good way. When one follows *metta*, his way of thinking should also change, especially regarding the welfare of others. When one's mind becomes infused with true *metta* through sustained *metta* meditation, one thinks, perceives, feels and of course, acts, in the mode of *metta*. Below I summarize for further discussion the characteristics associated with *metta*:

- (1) Non-hatred and the sharing of joy and happiness for all.
- (2) Non-hostility and the irradiating light of sympathy and empathy.
- (3) Without using harsh words and with using wholesome speech.
- (4) By restraining from destructive, anti-social behavior and by building harmony and friendliness.
- (5) Without conceit and with equanimity.

Loving-kindness and compassion neutralize and disperse anger, hostility, conceit and destructive thoughts towards others, making it difficult for the latter to dwell in the mind. In other words a mindset of *metta* forces out negative emotions and attitudes by actively putting into practice the correlative positive ones. It is only when one actively practices non-hatred and equanimity towards all beings that one can outgrow the tendency to entertain negative thoughts and emotions towards those who are disliked and perceived as a threat. However, one does not have to be fully free of negative thoughts in order to practice *metta*. *Metta* is used as a way to gradually reduce negative thoughts. When one reduce negative thoughts stress will vanish in his mind.

According to the above five characteristics associated with *metta* hatred is the desire to oppress or damage; hostility is the tendency to hurt or injure; harsh words come from the desire to make others feel pain or worry; destruction is the desire to kill or demolish and conceit is the tendency to disparage others. Each of these tendencies is rooted in antipathy and malevolence and provides a contrast with *metta*, both as a mode of conduct and as a psychological state or attitude of mind. The substitution of a negative trait by the opposite positive one implies a well-developed and mature approach to life; one should overcome anger by love; cruelty by compassion; hatred by sympathetic joy; and conceit by equanimity. When one's whole being is well established in *metta*, he is able to maintain no-hatred, no-hostility, no-harsh words, no-destructiveness and no-conceit. The end result is a well-cultured personality in a world where interactions among human beings create so much disharmony, tension and stress.

The three qualities of Metta

In addition to the above aspects of *metta*, there are three more qualities which are related to *metta*. They are compassion (*karuna*), sympathetic joy (*mudita*), and equanimity (*upekkha*). If one practices *metta* he considers everybody as his friend. If there is a sympathetic feeling of friendliness with others, this generates compassion, a deep understanding of the sorrow and pain in others. One feels others' pain and sorrow as if they were one's own. Similarly, by virtue of the sympathetic feelings generated by *metta*, one can also easily show and celebrate others' success and good fortune, even though being bothered by jealousy and envy. This is *mudita*: the ability to feel others' joy as if it were one's own. Equanimity is the response to both negative and positive events with calm neutrality. When one meditates on loving kindness and then compassion and then sympathetic joy in that order, *upekkha* or equanimity will naturally occur of its own accord.

The Buddha described these four states of positive emotions as the four sublime or boundless states or divine abodes (*brahma-vihara*). They are the fundamental functions in developing all the other types of wholesome acts, such as generosity, or honesty. For example, we can practice generosity with impartiality when we have overcome egocentric likes and dislikes and cultivated *metta*. Whereas, when we do not practice *metta*, we may be inclined to be generous only to those whom we like. The four sublime states are the basis for the performance of moral actions. We should conduct wholesome deeds without expecting favours in return. From this one can learn to forgive other people, even if they harm us. If we feel hatred towards those who harm us, as a rule the only results we may get are raised blood pressure and stomach upset. There is likely to be no positive change in the behavior of the person we hate. But when we develop and maintain *metta*, we can learn not to get upset at the behavior of others, and therefore not develop anger

towards them. We will learn not to think of them in terms of "us versus them" or superior or as inferior: this is ego-centered conceit.

Metta: Conquer all Negative Emotions

The practice of *metta* is a difficult, effortful labour for us because we have the tendency to be strongly egocentric. One has to be constantly vigilant about not succumbing to ego-centralism and its manifestations like strong greed, lust and anger. Traditionally, in the Buddhist texts, these negative emotions are depicted as enemies to developing *metta*.

Greed, lust worldly affection, sensuality—all these are said to be the 'near enemies' because they are similar in tendencies. The lustful also sees the 'good side' or 'beauty,' and therefore gets involved. Love should be protected from it lest the masquerades of these emotions deceive the meditator. Ill-will, anger, and hatred, being dissimilar emotions, therefore, constitute the "remote enemy." The remote enemy can easily be distinguished so one need not to be afraid of it, but one should overcome it by projecting a higher force, that of love. But one has to be wary of the near enemy because it creates self-deception, which is the worst thing that can happen to an individual

It is more difficult to overcome the near enemies of *metta* because they all have the appearance of love. It is important that one establishes mindfulness on the present moment in order to perceive the characteristics of *metta*. This may help one to distinguish true *metta* from self-centered desires such as selfish love, greed and egotistical fulfillment. If we cannot, the question of recognizing true *metta* can be the biggest problem. It is said that *metta* begins only when one can distinguish between the wholesome mind and the unwholesome mind, and when one is able to cope with the obstacles of the five hindrances.

Metta : Technique of Meditation

There are various ways of practicing *metta* meditation based on the *vissudhimagga*, *Vimuttimagga* and *Patisambhidamagga*. One of the well-known principle methods will be explained below.

There are four postures which meditators can choose from: sitting down, standing, walking and lying down. Most people prefer the sitting posture. Whichever posture is selected, one should be comfortable, in a quiet place, such as a quiet room, a park, or any other similar peaceful place. Keeping the eyes closed lightly, repeat the word "*metta*" or an English translation such as loving-kindness or universal friendliness a few times, while absorbing its meaning and characteristics.

A person in a happy mood cannot become angry or garb negative thoughts and feelings. One should remember that this is a mental cultivation program of wholesome thoughts; when one gets used to the practice both mentally and physically, positive images and feelings will naturally occur in one's daily activities, such as during work, studies and even resting. Soon they will occur without any conscious effort. Having freely visualized oneself beings in a happy frame of mind, now focus on the following thoughts:

May I be well, happy, peaceful and prosperous. May no harm come to me; may no difficulties come to me; may no problems come to me. May I always meet with success. May I also have patience, courage, understanding, and determination to meet and overcome inevitable difficulties, problems, and failures in life.

Next, concentrate one's happy thoughts on his parents: next, family members; next, teachers, friends, neutral people, unfriendly people and all living beings, following the same format as above. The standard and traditional order is, one should concentrate one's positive thoughts first on himself, then on those closest to himself and then towards those increasingly distant from him. One directs happy thoughts towards oneself first because it is easier to arouse *metta* towards oneself. Once *metta* is aroused, one can then direct it outwardly towards others. It's very difficult to feel positively towards others when one feels negative about oneself. The meditator directs happy thoughts in this progressive order simply because it is easier to feel positive towards those close to himself. Over time, one will more easily be able to feel positive thoughts towards neutral or unfriendly people.

The meditator should create each person's image in his mind. For example, one should visualize his parents' faces while they are in a happy mood. Following this pattern, one should concentrate on each of the people listed above, and one can expand this list to include any individual he wishes. If one has difficulties with directing loving-kindness towards somebody, who is unfriendly to him or with whom one has a temporary misunderstanding, he should wait directing *metta* towards him until his mind is well established on *metta* by practicing loving-kindness towards other people.

CONCLUSION

By practicing *metta* in the above way, one can reduce one's own ego or selfishness, according to Buddhist psychology, is the ultimate cause of all mental suffering and stress within the individual. The most stresses are caused by poor self-esteem, anxiety and lack of positive relationship with others. When one practice *metta*, they fill their minds with thoughts of loving-kindness, compassion and there would be little room for anger, jealousy or hatred. Therefore, this state of mind is able to stimulate positive relationships with other people: this positive attitude also generates a strong sense of self. This strong sense of self creates mental security which will not be destroyed by external causes of stress such as environment and society. *Metta* (loving-kindness) meditation is one of the techniques to reduce and remove stress in mind. One who practices *metta* meditation regularly is calm and peace in mind. One who is calm and peace will be happy and joy in his mind. One who is happy and joy will relax in mind.

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