

Uplifted Heart of Practice | Nine

None are Excluded from the Heart

No Exceptions

- Andrew Olendzki

Lovingkindness is a powerful heart practice for developing goodwill toward all—but should we extend it to include the jerks and monsters of our world?

The Pali word metta, based on a word meaning “friend” or “friendship” (mitra), is usually translated as “lovingkindness.” This is a quality of mind or an intentional emotional stance of kindheartedness, benevolence, and goodwill. It can arise at any time, in relation to any object. One might feel lovingkindness when gazing at a pet, hearing a favorite song, or thinking of a good friend. It is natural to feel this emotion toward some people and not others, in some situations and not others, or only when one is in certain moods. Multiple factors condition what arises in experience at any moment, and, accordingly, sometimes metta is present in the mind and sometimes it is not.

The Buddhist practice of lovingkindness meditation, or metta bhavana (literally “causing lovingkindness to be” in Pali) encourages the development of metta. Metta bhavana asks you to first evoke and then sustain a benevolent attitude for many moments at a time, thus encouraging it to arise within you steadily and without interruption. The practice has the effect of blocking out hatred (since love and hate cannot exist in the mind at the same time) and strengthening the roots of kindness within you.

In metta bhavana practice, you call to mind a person toward whom you already feel friendly and repeat phrases that support a benevolent intention for that person, such as “May they be happy; May they be well; May they be free from harm.” Gradually, you expand the field from that person to include friends, relatives, acquaintances, strangers, and, eventually, all beings.

Wait a minute—all beings? Does this mean we have to love Hitler, or Caligula, or Genghis Khan? And surely there are people alive today whom we

don’t like and who have shown themselves to be undeserving of our respect and goodwill. Do we have to direct our lovingkindness to them?

Yes, the Metta Sutta says, toward everyone, without exception (anavasesa). Metta is to be directed toward all beings (sabbe satta), all who have come to be (sabbe bhuta), with a mind unbounded toward the entire world (sabbaloka), with “no holding back, no loathing, no foe”—even people we don’t like. But why?

Simply stated: metta practice is not about them; it is about you. You do not love other people because they deserve it or because there might be a spark of goodness in the hardest of hearts. The practice of lovingkindness is for cleansing your own mind stream. It is a healthy mental and emotional state, and the more often you can conjure it up and sustain it over time, the better off you are. While radiating lovingkindness in all directions, to all beings, without exception, your conscious mind is bright and luminous, dwelling in a holy or godlike state (brahma-vihara), and your unconscious mind is being subtly transformed such that you are becoming a kinder person, one who will be more disposed to respond with lovingkindness in the future. In order for the intentional development of lovingkindness to reach fulfillment and become truly transformative, the feeling of friendliness has to encompass everyone.

Hatred, on the other hand, is inherently toxic, and anytime it emerges from the depths of the psyche and flows into your active mind, it causes harm. Hatred affects others when you act upon it by assaulting or berating them; the state of hatred itself also causes lasting damage to the quality of your own character. Enacting even low doses of hatred such as annoyance or disapproval reinforces a toxic quality of mind and hampers your ability to love. There is a lot that is wrong with our world, but attacking the things we don’t like with malice will always lead to harm in the long run. The Buddha offers the image of a person thrusting a torch at someone upwind: the intention is to harm the other, but the torchholder is the one who gets burned.

Lovingkindness is the antidote to hatred. That is why cultivating it is so beneficial. The practice is about

your being able to access and cultivate the healthiest parts of yourself, without allowing anyone to obstruct that. Why should the indisputable fact that someone is a jerk—or even a monster—drag you down and prevent you from becoming a better person? Why can't the lovingkindness you are generating permeate even the darkest corners of this world?

Lovingkindness is universal, not personal. This is what makes it so powerful as a tool for mental purification and emotional transformation. Let's even extend it to, and perhaps especially to, the jerks and monsters of our world.

Begin Your Heart Practice with Yourself

(Adapted from "How to Love Yourself and Other"
by Thich Nhat Hanh)

Metta meditation is a practice of cultivating understanding, love, and compassion by looking deeply, first for ourselves and then for others. Once we love and take care of ourselves, we can be much more helpful to others. Metta meditation can be practiced in part or in full. Just saying one line of the metta meditation will already bring more compassion and healing into the world.

To love is, first of all, to accept ourselves as we actually are. That is why for this heart meditation, "Know thyself" is the preliminary practice. We first practice seeing and understanding that causes and conditions have caused us to be the way we are. This makes an opening in the heart for us to accept ourselves, including our suffering and our happiness at the same time.

Metta means "lovingkindness" or "boundless friendliness" in Pali. We begin a kindness meditation practice with aspirational phrases: "May I be happy. etc." We don't just say, "I love myself. I love all beings." Because we have prepared our kindness practice with understanding causes and conditions common to us all, our aspiration of kindness will become a heart felt intention. Kindness will enter our thoughts, our words, and our actions, and we will notice that we have become peaceful, happy, and light in body and spirit and free from anger, afflictions, fear, and anxiety.

When we practice, we observe how much peace, happiness, and lightness we already have. We notice whether we are anxious about accidents or misfortunes, and how much anger, irritation, fear, anxiety, or worry are already in us. As we become aware of the feelings in us, our self-understanding

will deepen. We will see how our fears and lack of peace contribute to our unhappiness, and we will see the value of being kind to ourselves and cultivating a heart of compassion.

In this kindness meditation, "anger, afflictions, fear, and anxiety" refer to all the unwholesome, negative states of mind that dwell in us and rob us of our peace and happiness. Anger, fear, anxiety, craving, greed, and ignorance are the great afflictions of our time. By practicing mindful living, we are able to deal with them, and our love is translated into effective action.

To practice this meditation of the heart, sit still, calm your body and your breathing, and recite loving-kindness phrases to yourself. As you are still—you let go of other matters, so you can be kind and tender to yourself just as you are, cultivate your kindness toward all other beings just as they are.

This practice will bring to you a natural clarity to determine the best ways to express this kindness in the world.

"Kindness" covers all of my political beliefs.

No need to spell them out. I believe that if, at the end, according to our abilities, we have done something to make others a little happier, and something to make ourselves a little happier, that is about the best we can do.

To make others less happy is a crime.
To make ourselves unhappy is where all crime starts.

We must try to contribute joy to the world.

That is true no matter what our problems, our health, our circumstances.

We must try.

I didn't always know this and am happy I lived long enough to find it out.

- Roger Ebert, film critic
