

Lovingkindness in practice

Source: *SD 60.2 Mindfulness and lovingkindness* © Piya Tan, 2023 (forthcoming).

2.2.1 “Love” and “like”

2.2.1.1 SUMEDHO’S TEACHING ON LOVINGKINDNESS¹

(1) In English the word “**love**” often refers to ‘something that I like. For example, “I love sticky rice,” “I love sweet mango.” We really mean we like it. Liking is being attached to something such as food which we really like or enjoy eating. We don’t love it. *Mettā* means you love your enemy; it doesn’t mean you like your enemy. If somebody wants to kill you and you say, “I like them,” that is silly! But we can love them, meaning that we can refrain from unpleasant thoughts and vindictiveness, from any desire to hurt them or annihilate them.

(2) Even though you might not like them—they are miserable, wretched people—you can still be **kind**, generous and charitable towards them. If some drunk came into this room who was foul and disgusting, ugly and diseased, and there was nothing one could be attracted to in him—to say, [53] “I like this man” would be ridiculous. But one could *love* him, not dwell in aversion, not be caught up in reactions to his unpleasantness. That’s what we mean by *mettā*.”

2.2.1.2 COMMENTS

The practice describes here is about **lovingkindness** (*mettā*) but the section title is simply “kindness,” which is one of the terms Sumedho uses for *mettā*. Addressing the English-speaking readers, Sumedho then uses “**love**” for *mettā*, and distinguishes it from “like,” which has worldly connotations of bias for what is pleasurable, dislike for what is not pleasurable and so on. Not to cause any confusion over terms, Sumedho, as a rule, uses *metta* throughout his teaching.

Notice at this stage there is no mention of focusing the mind to gain concentration. Sumedho’s teachings only refer to the difference between love and like; that *mettā* is unconditional love: we do not say “unconditional like”! The drift of this section is simply that of keeping the mind positive and wholesome by not getting up with negative idea of liking. Hence, this is an insight teaching (*vipassanā*).

2.2.2 Thoughts and feelings

2.2.2.1 SUMEDHO’S TEACHING ON LOVINGKINDNESS

(3) Sometimes there are things one doesn’t like about oneself, but *mettā* means not being caught up in the thoughts we have, the attitudes, the problems, **the thoughts and feelings** of the mind. So it becomes an immediate practice of being very mindful. To be mindful means to have *mettā* towards the fear in your mind, or the anger, or the jealousy.

¹ Sicutto (ed), *Mindfulness: the path to the deathless. The meditation teachings of Ajahn Sumedho* [1985]. 3rd ed. Hemel Hempstead (UK): Amaravati Publications, 2014.

(4) *Mettā* means not creating problems around existing conditions, allowing them to fade away, to cease. For example, when fear comes up in your mind, you can have *mettā* for **the fear**—meaning that you don't build up aversion to it, you can just accept its presence and allow it to cease.

(5) You can also minimise **the fear** by recognising that it is the same kind of fear that everyone has, that animals have. It's not my fear, it's not a person's, it's an impersonal fear. We begin to have compassion for other beings when we understand the suffering involved in reacting to fear in our own lives—the pain, the physical pain of being kicked, when somebody kicks you.

(6) That kind of pain is exactly the same kind of pain that a dog feels when he's being kicked, so you can have *mettā* for the **pain**, meaning a kindness and a patience of not dwelling in aversion. We can work with *mettā* internally, with all our emotional problems: you think, "I want to get rid of it, it's terrible." That's a lack of *mettā* for yourself, isn't it?

2.2.2.2 COMMENTS

Lovingkindness is not directed to only people, but also to mental states (thoughts, feelings, etc), especially negative ones, such as fear and pain (3). In (5) we see the teaching on **nonself** (*anattā*): "It's not *my* fear ... an impersonal fear" (emphases added), and that it's a universal feeling, found even in animals. Nonself is one of 3rd and last of the 3 characteristics of true reality. Hence, we see here the practice of *vipassanā* through lovingkindness.

2.2.3 Conditioning: negative and positive

2.2.3.1 SUMEDHO'S TEACHING ON LOVINGKINDNESS

(7) Recognise **the desire-to-get-rid-of!** Don't dwell in aversion for existing emotional conditions. You don't have to pretend to feel approval of your faults. You don't think, "I like my faults." Some people are foolish enough to say, "My faults make me interesting. I'm a fascinating personality because of my weaknesses."

(8) *Mettā* is **not conditioning yourself to believe** that you like something that you don't like at all, it is just not dwelling in aversion. It's easy to feel *mettā* towards something you like—pretty little children, good looking people, pleasant mannered people, little puppies, beautiful flowers—we can feel *mettā* for ourselves when we're feeling good: "I am feeling happy with myself now."

(9) When things are **going well** it's easy to feel kind towards that which is good and pretty and beautiful. At this point we can get lost. *Mettā* isn't just good wishes, lovely sentiments, high-minded thoughts, it's always very practical. If you're being very idealistic, and you hate someone, then you feel, "I shouldn't hate anyone. Buddhists should have *mettā* for all living beings. I should love everybody. If I'm a good Buddhist then I should like everybody." All that comes from impractical idealism.

Have *mettā* for the aversion you feel, for the pettiness of the mind, the jealousy, envy—meaning peacefully co-existing, not creating problems, not making it difficult nor creating problems out of the difficulties that arise in life, within our minds and bodies.

2.2.3.2 COMMENTS

This section teaches us to look deeper into how we think and feel, for example, to note how we have the wish to “get rid” of a habit or an idea, but this is not something easy to do (7). In other words, it is not about *believing* in anything; rather (8), but about “co-existing” with the negative thought that we may have. We show lovingkindness to our way of thinking (9). In other words, we go down to the root of thought and clean it, as it were. This is again a *vipassanā* practice.

2.2.4 Negative emotions

2.2.4.1 SUMEDHO’S TEACHING ON LOVINGKINDNESS

(10) In London, I used to get very upset when travelling on the underground. I used to **hate** it, those horrible underground stations with ghastly advertising posters and great crowds of people on those dingy, grotty trains which roar along the tunnels. I used to feel a total lack of *mettā*.

I used to feel so averse to it all, then I decided to practise being patient and kind while travelling on the London Underground. Then I began to really enjoy it, rather than dwelling in resentment. I began to feel kindly towards the people there. The aversion and the complaining all disappeared—totally.

(11) When you feel **aversion** towards somebody, you can notice the tendency to start adding to it, “He did this and he did that, and he’s this way and he shouldn’t be that way.” Then when you really like somebody, “He can do this and he can do that. He’s good and kind.” But if someone says, “That person’s really bad!” you feel angry. If you hate somebody and someone else praises him, you also feel angry. You don’t want to hear how good your enemy is.

(12) When you are full of **anger**, you can’t imagine that someone you hate may have some virtuous qualities; even if they do have some good qualities, you can never remember any of them. You can only remember all the bad things. When you like somebody, even his faults can be endearing—“harmless little faults.”

2.2.4.2 COMMENTS

In (10), Sumedho says that he “decided to practise” being patient and kind to what he is seeing around him instead of feeling negative about it. This is where we intervene when we notice a negative through process, and replace it with a positive one. Psychologically, this is the practice of “thought displacement” (*añña nimitta*) [5.4.1.6].

In (11)+(12), Sumedho tells us that when we have aversion or anger, it is likely to cloud our thinking. This negative emotion will spill into how we see others and how we view the actions of other, especially what they have done “wrong.” We need to recognize this, so that it ends right there. The details are given in the next section.

2.2.5 The nature of faults

2.2.5.1 SUMEDHO'S TEACHING ON LOVINGKINDNESS

(13) So recognise this in your own experience; observe the force of **like and dislike**. Practising patience and kindness is a very useful and effective instrument for dealing with all the petty trivia which the mind builds up around unpleasant experience. *Mettā* is also a very useful method for those who have discriminative, very critical minds. They can see only the faults in everything, but they never look at themselves, they only see what's "out there."

(14) It is now very common to always be **complaining** about the weather or the government. Personal arrogance gives rise to these really nasty comments about everything; or you start talking about someone who isn't there, ripping them apart, quite intelligently, and quite objectively.

You are so analytical, you know exactly what that person needs, what they should do and what they should not do, and why they're this way and that. Very impressive to have such a sharp, critical mind and know what they ought to do. You are, of course, saying, 'really, I'm much better than they are.'

(15) But with *mettā*, you are **not blinding yourself** to the faults and flaws in everything. You are just peacefully co-existing with them. You are not demanding that it be otherwise. So *mettā* sometimes needs to overlook what's wrong with yourself and everyone else – it doesn't mean that you don't notice those things, it means that you don't develop problems around them. You stop that kind of indulgence by being kind and patient—peacefully co-existing.

2.2.5.2 COMMENTS

Lovingkindness is described as "the practice of patience and kindness" even to oneself. That is to recognize our own actions for what they are, and so accepting them (like how we accept a dear friend even when that friend does something wrong). Hence, lovingkindness is neither pretending that faults do not exist nor accepting those faults as "all right." Rather we know those faults are unhelpful, even bad, but we see them with lovingkindness. We accept them as they are and let them go. So we peacefully co-exist with others. These are all *vipassana* teaching in a social context.

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