

Metta Meditation: Cultivating Goodwill

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What Is Metta?

Metta is a Pali word often translated as *loving-kindness*, *benevolence*, or *friendliness*. It refers not to romantic love or attachment but to a **boundless, unconditional care for oneself and others**, grounded in goodwill.

Metta is one of the **Four Brahmaviharas** (Divine Abodes), alongside compassion (*karuna*), sympathetic joy (*mudita*), and equanimity (*upekkha*). Metta is a skillful mental quality that can be intentionally cultivated thru practice.

The Practice of Inclining the Mind

At the heart of Metta practice is the understanding that **the mind can be trained to incline in particular directions**. Some key aspects of this include:

1. **Neuroplasticity**: The brain physically changes based on how we use it. Regular Metta practice creates new neural pathways that make goodwill more accessible.
2. **Selective Attention**: By repeatedly directing attention toward goodwill, we strengthen that quality and weaken opposing mind states like ill-will.
3. **Habit Formation**: What we practice regularly becomes our default response. By intentionally practicing Metta, we create a habit of goodwill that arises more naturally in daily life.
4. **Perspective Shifting**: Regular Metta practice helps us recognize our shared humanity, making it easier to extend goodwill even in challenging situations.

Benefits of Metta Meditation

According to the Buddha and modern research, Metta practice offers profound benefits:

1. Emotional Well-Being

- Reduces anger, anxiety, and depression
- Cultivates positive emotions like joy, gratitude, and contentment

2. Stronger Relationships

- Increases empathy, patience, and compassion
- Builds a sense of connection even with difficult people

3. Physical Health

- Enhances immune function and reduces stress markers
- Improves heart rate variability and sleep quality

4. Mental Clarity and Stability

- Strengthens concentration (samādhi)
- Diminishes obsessive thinking and rumination

What the Buddha Said About Metta

The Buddha praised Metta not just as a practice but as a **state or inclination of mind** to be developed and embodied. **From the Metta Sutta (Sutta Nipāta 1.8):** *"Just as a mother would protect her only child with her life, even so should one cultivate a boundless heart toward all beings."*

Metta is not limited to meditation sessions but is meant to **pervade our entire way of being**. It's a quality of mind we bring into every interaction, every thought, every moment.

The Eleven Benefits of Metta (from *Anguttara Nikaya 11.16*):

One who practices Metta regularly:

1. Sleeps and wakes easily
2. Dreams no evil dreams
3. Is dear to human and non-human beings
4. Is protected by deities
5. Cannot be harmed by fire, poison, or weapons
6. Quickly attains concentration
7. Their facial expression is serene
8. Dies unconfused
9. Is reborn in a happy destination

Whether taken literally or metaphorically, these reflect the transformative effect Metta can have on the heart and mind.

How to Practice Metta Meditation

1. **Find a comfortable seated posture.** Allow the body to relax and the mind to settle.
2. **Begin with yourself.**
Bring to mind your sincere wish for your own well-being. Silently repeat phrases such as:

May I be happy
May I be easily satisfied and content
May I be well
May I be peaceful and at ease.

3. **Extend Metta to others, gradually widening the circle:**
 - A dear one, benefactor or someone who has cared for you
 - A neutral person
 - A difficult person (not someone deeply traumatic, especially at first)
 - All beings everywhere
4. With each, repeat the phrases with heartfelt intention.

It's okay if the feeling isn't strong—keep planting the seeds with intention and repetition.

Final Reflections

Metta is not a mood—it's a **commitment to engage with others and respond to life with goodwill**. It is a dwelling, a place to come from. The **Buddha said that appropriate mindfulness requires coming from Metta (goodwill)**. When practiced sincerely and steadily, it softens the heart, stabilizes the mind, and allows wisdom and compassion to arise naturally.

The practice of Metta is not about forcing positive feelings but rather about intentionally cultivating a mind that naturally inclines toward goodwill. Through consistent practice, we can reshape our mental habits, creating greater well-being for ourselves and contributing to a more compassionate world.

"Just as water flows downhill, the mind flows in the direction we incline it through practice."