

Mettā for Oneself: Cultivating the Conditions for Inner Friendliness

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Introduction

Last week we looked at the four brahmavihāras as a whole. This week we narrow the focus to the place where the practice most often stalls: turning goodwill toward ourselves.

Many of us find it easier to offer kindness, generosity, or forgiveness to others than to ourselves. Some of us actively resist turning goodwill inward — it can feel indulgent, or simply false. From both a Buddhist and an evolutionary perspective, this is understandable. It is also workable, for the reason that runs through everything else we practice: a pattern that formed under conditions can be changed by tending those conditions.

Two things often follow from this practice. The inner critic softens, and compassion for others becomes less strained—less something we perform and more something we genuinely embody.

What Is Mettā?

- From the Pali, *mettā* means friendliness, goodwill, benevolence. The related word *mitta* means friend.
- The practice itself is *mettā-bhāvanā* — the cultivation of mettā. *Bhāvanā* means development, cultivation, or bringing into being.
- It is the sincere wish that oneself and others be well, stable, grounded, and free of ill-will.
- It is one of the four brahmavihāras, alongside compassion, sympathetic joy, and equanimity.
- Its opposite is not indifference but *byāpāda* — ill-will. Much of what we call self-criticism is ill-will pointed inward.
- Mettā loosens clinging and aversion, and in that loosening supports liberation.

Why Begin With Oneself

The early texts do not treat self-directed goodwill as a modern therapeutic add-on. They treat oneself as the reference point from which the whole practice is calibrated.

- In the Udāna (5.1), King Pasenadi and Queen Mallikā each admit that they can find no one dearer than themselves. The Buddha does not correct them. He extends the observation: since this is equally true of everyone, one who holds himself dear should not harm another. Self-regard becomes the *ground* of non-harming rather than an obstacle to it.
- In the Sedaka Sutta (SN 47.19), two acrobats argue about who should look after whom on the pole. The Buddha resolves that in protecting oneself one protects the other, and in protecting the other one protects oneself. The two directions of care are not in competition.
- The Dhammapada (129–130) makes the comparison explicit: all beings fear violence and death; taking oneself as the measure — *attānaṃ upamaṃ katvā* — one neither kills nor causes to kill.

None of this rests on a claim about how much we are worth. It rests on how things arise. The way we treat ourselves is not a verdict we have reached about ourselves; it is a pattern that has formed — and the rest of this handout is an account of the conditions it formed under.

An Evolutionary Perspective

What follows is my own reading rather than settled research. I offer it because it accounts for something I keep encountering, and it is worth testing against your own experience.

Core tendency:

- Positive emotions such as compassion, empathy, and generosity evolved because they enhanced survival in small, interdependent groups.
- We evolved to respond to others' pain not only by addressing its cause, but by attuning to and caring for their emotions.
- This emotional attunement reinforced cooperation, trust, and the survival of offspring.

For ourselves:

- We evolved self-care instincts focused more on addressing the incident — stopping the bleeding, escaping the danger — than on empathizing with our own emotions.
- We are fully capable of inward emotional compassion, but it was not as strongly favored by selection.
- This is a tendency, not an absolute rule. Many people do feel deep compassion toward themselves, especially in grief or trauma. But the baseline wiring often favors other-directed emotional compassion over self-directed.

Implication:

- These are inherited conditions, not verdicts. They account for the difficulty without settling the outcome.
- Self-mettā may require intentional cultivation, because our default pattern is outward compassion paired with inward problem-solving.
- The capacity is already in us. It simply has to be strengthened through practice.

Cultural Amplification

A second layer of conditions is laid over the first. In many Western cultures, self-worth is tied to achievement, productivity, or moral perfection. This amplifies the tendency described above, and produces:

- Chronic self-criticism, even over small mistakes.
- Unrealistic expectations of flawless behavior and constant self-control.
- A default posture of irritation, shame, or impatience toward ourselves — inward ill-will running as background habit.

The asymmetry shows up in ordinary life. However critical we may be of others in thought, we still hold doors, offer help, nod to strangers. Toward ourselves, such gestures are rare unless we consciously choose them. Read as conditions rather than as character, this is not an indictment but a description of what has been reinforced — and of what can be reinforced differently.

Who Is the "Self" in Self-Mettā?

A fair question arises here. If there is no fixed, unchanging self, then who exactly is receiving all this kindness?

The practice does not require us to answer that metaphysically. What we call the self is better understood as a process — a continuous activity of selfing, assembled moment by moment out of sensation, memory, mood,

and story. The evolved tendencies described above are among the conditions from which it assembles. When we direct mettā inward, we are not addressing an entity behind the experience. We are changing the conditions under which the next moment of that process forms.

This dissolves the worry about ego inflation rather than merely denying it. There is no fixed self available to be inflated. What is available is a habitual tone — a way this process treats itself — and that tone is precisely what we are tending. The conditions are the only place practice ever gets any purchase.

The Best Friend Perspective

The asymmetry noted earlier is easiest to see by considering how we treat our closest friends. We are more tolerant of their mistakes. We understand their struggles without harsh judgment. We wish them well and want them to succeed. We extend the benefit of the doubt even when we disagree.

Self-mettā does not mean elevating ourselves above others, or making ourselves our own favorite person. It means extending to ourselves the same goodwill, patience, and understanding we already give to those we care about.

Common Misunderstandings

Self-mettā is not ego inflation, excuse-making, or an escape from responsibility.

It is the recognition: I am human. I suffer. I am worthy of kindness.

How to Practice

In sitting meditation, or at any other time, wish in gladness and safety, allowing a soft smile: May I be safe. May I be well. May I be happy. May I be easily satisfied and content. May I be peaceful. May I be at ease and live in kindness. Or any other meaningful, positive, and wholesome words directed at yourself.

Visualize yourself in the present moment as happy and content. If resistance arises at the start, begin with a close friend and then turn inward. Use a gentle inner smile.

Remember that the intention itself is the practice. We are not manufacturing a feeling; we are repeatedly planting an intention until it becomes a habit of mind.

Conclusion

Self-mettā is not about becoming someone different. It is about participating differently in the conditions that shape our lives. Every sincere intention of goodwill is another small condition that influences what comes next. This is bhāvanā. Like tending a garden, we need not force the flowers to bloom; we simply continue cultivating the conditions under which they naturally grow.

Reflections

- What arises when you try to direct kindness toward yourself?
- Do you notice resistance? Where might it have formed, and what does it seem to be protecting?
- How does your inner relationship shape your relationships with others?
- If you spoke to your closest friend the harsh way you sometimes speak to yourself, what would happen to that friendship?