

Practices that Support Developing Loving-kindness (*mettā*): Cultivating Mindfulness and *Mettā* Together

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“Of goals that culminate in one’s own good
None is found better than patience.

...

“One who repays an angry man with anger
Thereby make things worse for himself.
Not repaying an angry man with anger,
One wins a battle hard to win.

“He practices for the welfare of both,
His own and the other’s,
When, knowing that his foe is angry,
He mindfully maintains his peace.”

from Saṃyutta Nikāya 11:4 (Bodhi 2000, pp. 322-23).”

Many of us would like to develop *mettā*, loving-kindness or universal goodwill, to a greater degree in our lives. We may value how it enriches our day-to-day experience, how it allows us to contribute to others, or both. At the same time, many of us experience obstacles to developing or maintaining this state of heart and mind for very long.

Developing *mettā* with the support of mindfulness

An approach that helps me work with obstacles to *mettā* is to cultivate mindfulness accompanied by an intention of loving-kindness. Mindfulness, awareness that is in touch with ongoing experience as it takes place, allows for recognition of mind states as they arise, and supports the process of investigating, and letting go of unskillful or unwholesome (*akusala*) states, and cultivation of skillful or wholesome (*kusala*) states.

How is mindfulness practiced? The four establishments of mindfulness (*satipaṭṭhānas*) describe working with any of four focuses: the body, feelings, mind, and mind objects (or phenomena):

“What are the four? Here, monks, a monk dwells contemplating the body in the body, ardent, clearly comprehending, and mindful, having subdued longing and dejection in regard to the world. He dwells contemplating feelings in feelings, ardent, clearly comprehending, and mindful, having subdued longing and dejection in regard to the world. He dwells contemplating mind in mind, ardent, clearly comprehending, and mindful, having subdued longing and dejection in regard to the world. He dwells contemplating phenomena in phenomena, ardent, clearly comprehending, and mindful, having subdued longing and dejection in regard to the world.”

Majjhima Nikāya 10.3 (Bodhi 2005, pp. 281-82)

The Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta (MN 10) goes on to describe ways to develop each of these four focuses of contemplation in some detail. Here are two passages that illustrate mindfulness of mind, and mindfulness of phenomena:

“And how, monks, does a monk dwell contemplating mind in mind? Here a monk understands a mind with lust as a mind with lust, and a mind without lust as a mind without lust. He understands a mind with hatred as a mind with hatred, and a mind without hatred as a mind without hatred. He understands a mind with delusion as a mind with delusion, and a mind without delusion as a mind without delusion...”

“And how, monks, does a monk dwell contemplating phenomena in phenomena? Here a monk dwells contemplating phenomena in phenomena in terms of the five hindrances... When there is ill will in him, a monk understands: ‘There is ill will in me’; or when there is no ill will in him, he understands: ‘There is no ill will in me’; and he also understands how unarisen ill will arises, and how arisen ill will is abandoned, and how abandoned ill will does not arise again in the future...”

Majjhima Nikāya 10.34 & 36 (Bodhi 2005, pp. 286-87)

Notice how satipaṭṭhāna practice emphasizes being aware of the states as they are present or absent in ongoing experience. In the case of the hindrance of ill will, the practitioner starts with awareness of the presence or absence of the mind state, and then, over some time, directs the mind to seeing how ill will arises, how it is abandoned, and how it can be prevented from arising in the future.

Suggestions for practice

Here are some suggestions for cultivating mindfulness in a way that fosters bringing *mettā* into everyday experience. Start by developing, or reconnecting with, the practice of mindfulness that you work with in your meditation practice. After cultivating a degree of continuous mindfulness, turn your awareness to experience of feelings (see MN 10.32), of mind, or of phenomena. Notice whatever states happen to arise in the mind, and observe them as they are present, and as they pass away on a moment-to-moment basis. It may be helpful to first cultivate this practice in sitting meditation and then expand it to everyday activities. Retreats can be particularly valuable for learning to bring mindfulness from sitting practice to other activities.

When it feels right to you, while aware of any state of mind, bring to mind an awareness of your intention of good will or loving-kindness. It may be helpful to recollect a wish to not cause harm to yourself or to others, or other ways that you connect with the intention of loving-kindness. You need not overpower other states of mind that are present. Simply bring awareness of good will into the experience. Notice how bringing *mettā* into the mind affects what happens in your mind? Notice how it influences your interactions with others? Does it affect how they respond to you?

On any occasions when you experience obstacles to bringing *mettā* into the mind, take advantage of the opportunity and use mindfulness to investigate what is arising in the mind. Observe the feelings or thoughts that are arising, and allow the mind to see and understand them. You may be able to see areas you would like to address to support the development of mindfulness or of *mettā* in your life. For example, can you see ways that your actions contribute to states of “longing and dejection” as described above in MN 10.3? If so, are there steps you would like to take to address these areas?

Painful feelings associated with illness, mental states such as frustration or despair, or persistent fatigue may make it difficult to evoke a sense of loving-kindness. In those instances the most helpful practice may be to bring mindfulness to your experience, as best you can, holding it with compassion. Observing experience with kindness at these times can be an important way to apply *mettā* to yourself.

On some occasions you may be able to use the power of intention to direct the mind to more positive states, letting go of unskillful qualities. In my experience forcing this process tends to backfire. Working with the method described for bringing mindfulness to the hindrances in the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta (see MN 10.36, above), can be helpful. That approach suggests tuning in to how the mind functions, and working with awareness of that process in a gentle way to move toward the wholesome.

Experimenting with methods such as these over time can help unravel obstacles to developing *mettā*, and make it a greater and greater part of one’s response to the world.

Sources

- Bodhi, Bhikkhu, trans. and ed. *In the Buddha’s Words: An Anthology of Discourses from the Pāli Canon*. Boston: Wisdom Publications, 2005.
- Bodhi, Bhikkhu, trans. *The Connected Discourses of the Buddha: A Translation of the Saṃyutta Nikāya*. Boston: Wisdom Publications, 2000.