

Loving Kindness Meditation in Theravāda Buddhism

Gyana Ratna Sraman

In the *Theravāda* Buddhist discourses Buddha often tells the monks to cultivate love (*mettā*) towards oneself as well as other. According to the commentary Buddha establishes three levels of loving minds, they are firstly, the rudimentary level, which is merely the wish for sentient beings', secondly, welfare and thirdly, those developed at the levels of access and placement concentration. ⁽¹⁾ This article discussed the context and contents of the *Theravāda* teachings on loving kindness as well as loving kindness meditation. The presentation is based upon the *Sutta-Nipāta*, *Paṭisambhidāmagga*, *Visuddhimagga* and *Vibhaṅga*. In Sri Lanka, Thailand and Myanmar we can find some articles and books regarding the loving kindness meditation (*mettā bhāvanā*), but people does not using it as a meditation technique. As Francis Story wrote in his book that *mettā bhāvanā* scripture is recommended to recite before beginning of meditation, and again at its close, a practice, which is invariably, followed in the Buddhist countries. ⁽²⁾ In Thailand almost of the school recite this scripture before starting the classes with some other Buddhist praying. ⁽³⁾ Most of the articles and books did not give us any negative idea either *Visuddhimagga* or *Paṭisambhidāmagga* but there are bit limitations to cultivate loving kindness towards others. *Narada Mahāthera*, ⁽⁴⁾ *Sāradā Mahāthera*, ⁽⁵⁾ *Bhikkhu Visuddhācāra*, ⁽⁶⁾ *Ajhan Sumedha*, ⁽⁷⁾ *B. Ānandamaitreya*, ⁽⁸⁾ *Nanamoli Thera*, ⁽⁹⁾ *Sumanasara*, ⁽¹⁰⁾ *Ācharya Buddharakkhita's* ⁽¹¹⁾ and *Mudagamuwe Maithrimurthi* ⁽¹²⁾ explanation of *mettā bhāvanā* is much more related with *Paṭisambhidāmagga* and *Vibhaṅga* rather then *Visuddhimagga*. However, with minute observation of previous documents and publications I would like to make clear the contemporary practice of loving kindness meditation in above mentioned countries with some filed works and textual references. Hope this research works will produce a new result with a lot of references and sources for future researcher.

1. Meaning of the word *mettā* in different texts

“Love” (*mettā*) is epitomized by the heartfelt wish, “may all beings be happy.”⁽¹³⁾ In addition to instructions involving the noun “love” (*mettā*), the discourses contain teachings on the adjective “loving” (*metta*). The topics associated with each are sufficiently distinct to warrant separate consideration. Statements about the one do not necessarily apply to the other. Most of the above writers translate the word ‘*maitri*,’ (*skt.*) or ‘*mettā*,’ (*Pāli*) means “loving kindness,” “cultivation of loving kindness,” “kindness,” but *ācharya Buddharakkhita*⁽¹⁴⁾ translated it as “universal love” “friendliness,” “goodwill,” “benevolence,” “fellowship,” “amity,” “concord,” “inoffensiveness” and non-violence. *Thich Nhat Hanh* says, “the essence of nonviolence is love”.⁽¹⁵⁾ *Visuddhimagga* define *mettā* as the strong wish for the welfare and happiness of others (*parahita parasukha kamana*).⁽¹⁶⁾ The form of meditation, which helps one to acquire the ability to consider all beings in this world including animals as one's friends, is called *mettā bhāvanā*. According to the *Visuddhimagga* there are forty kinds of meditation objects.⁽¹⁷⁾ Among them four divine abiding are coming after ten recollections meditation objects. Though we can't find loving kindness meditation in separately in the *Visuddhimagga* but it's included in the four divine abiding meditation systems (*brahmavihāra*), where we can see it's appear firstly as a loving kindness or cultivation of loving kindness meditation (*mettā bhāvanā*).

The *mettā bhāvanā* system of *Visuddhimagga*, *metta-sutta* of *Sutta Nipāta*, *Paṭisambhidāmagga* and *Vibhaṅga* are also not similar. Such as *Visuddhimagga* states that *mettā bhāvanā* should not practice towards certain kinds of persons—an antipathetic person, a very dearly loved friend, a neutral person, and a hostile person.⁽¹⁸⁾ Also it should not be developed especially towards the opposite sex, or towards a dead person.⁽¹⁹⁾ But on the other hand, *metta-sutta* said, ‘let him radiate boundless love towards the entire world, above, below, and across unhindered, without ill will, without enmity’.⁽²⁰⁾ *Paṭisambhidāmagga* said us, ‘in what five ways is the minddeliverance of loving kindness (practiced) with unspecified pervasion? ‘May all beings be free from enmity, affliction and anxiety and live happily.’ ‘May all breathing things, all who are born, all persons, all those who have a personality be free from...’⁽²¹⁾ In the *Vibhaṅga* we can find that, how does a *bhikkhu* dwell pervading one direction with his heart filled with loving kindness? ‘Just as he would feel loving kindness on seeing a dearly loved person, so he pervades all beings with loving kindness.’⁽²²⁾ Also Ven. *Sāradā Mahāthera* explained, “May all beings be happy, healthy, well-extension of such thoughts towards all beings whether they are relatives, non-relative, friends or enemies, human beings or animal is loving kindness. He also mentioned Buddha is the supreme example of *mettā* in this world.”⁽²³⁾

2. How to Practice Loving-Kindness Meditation

mettā bhāvanā is the most universally beneficial form of discursive meditation, and can be practiced in any conditions. Thoughts of universal, indiscriminating benevolence, like radio waves reaching out in all directions, sublimate the creative energy of the mind. With steady perseverance in *mettā bhāvanā* a point can be reached at which it becomes impossible even to harbor a thought of ill-will. True peace can only come to the world through minds that are at peace, if people everywhere in the world could be persuaded to devote half an hour daily to the practice of *mettā bhāvanā*, we should see more real advance towards world peace and security than international agreements will ever bring us.

There is no one posture in which we cannot send thoughts of *mettā*. In intensive *mettā* exercises, one radiates loving kindness all the time in whatever position one is in—standing, walking, sitting and (if not sleepy) lying down. Loving kindness meditation can be brought in to support the practice of ‘bare attention’ to help keep the mind open and sweet. It provides the essential balance to support our insight meditation practice.

When radiating *mettā* while walking one does not really pay attention to the sensations or phenomena involved with the process of walking meditation as in *vipassanā*. One just radiates as one walks along. As the concentration becomes more intense, slowing down would be only natural. At that time one may just stand still and radiate. When the flow of *mettā* ceases one will have to stop to arouse it again. The active nature of walking is involved with the energy faculty and hence helps keep up the arousing and sustaining of the flow of *mettā*, i. e. the 1st and 2nd *jhāna* factors—initial and sustained application (*vitakka, vicāra*).⁽²⁴⁾ It also serves as an exercise for physical health.

The best posture is sitting in the full lotus with both legs crossed, soles facing upwards. The back is straight and hands on the lap with palms on top of each other, facing upwards. Because most of the people are not able to withstand the strain at the ankles, they may adopt half lotus, one leg crossed above the other. There are other variations like the Burmese method⁽²⁵⁾ where both legs are folded, but not pressing one on each other.

After sitting in the desired posture, cultivation of loving kindness must begin with oneself first. There is a profound psychological truth in this, for no one who hates or despises himself consciously or unconsciously can feel true loving kindness for others.⁽²⁶⁾ Loving kindness, therefore, begins with the thought: “May I be free from enmity (*ahaṃ avero homi*); may I be free from ill-will or mental suffering (*abyapajjho homi*); may I be free from physical suffering (*anigho homi*); may I take care of myself happily (*sukhiattanāṃ pariharami*).”⁽²⁷⁾ This though having

been developed, the next stage is to apply it in exactly the same form and to the same degree, to someone for whom one has naturally a feeling of friendship. Lord Buddha, in the *Mahā Rahulavada sutta*, advises *Rahula* thus : “Cultivate, *Rahula*, the meditation on loving-kindness, for by cultivating loving-kindness ill-will is banished.”⁽²⁸⁾

3. Selecting an Individual⁽²⁹⁾

According to their relationship to one at the time of starting meditation, individuals may be classified into 5 categories :

1. Extremely intimate (*atipiya*)
2. Lovable (*piya*)
3. Indifferent (*majjhata*)
4. Unpleasant (*apiya*)
5. Inimical/hostile (*veri*)

In selecting an individual as an initial object of *mettā bhāvanā*, one is advised to choose the 2nd, a lovable individual because metta can arise easily. The 1st may arouse attachment, the 3rd may pose some difficulties and the 4th and 5th may arouse anger instead. One is also advised against giving it to the opposite sex as it may arouse lust. What if she is his/her own mother or his/her father? Usually it is not preferred for the unstable mind may wander to another of the opposite sex. The other individual not recommended is the deceased. It does not produce deep concentration as the person is no longer present and is already in a different state.

Therefore the lovable individual should be alive and of the same sex as one. “lovable” means he (or she) inspires *mettā* in you the moment you think of him. He would most likely be one with a lot of *mettā* himself besides many other virtues like morality, concentration, wisdom, patience, humility and so on. It is someone whom you think of or meet with a lot of respect and friendliness. Someone whom does you can call a true friend. If you have known him for some time and had spent many moments and events together with little or no misunderstandings, it would be better. Then you can call up all the good that he has done for you as well as the happy events in the past to arouse *mettā*.

When you have chosen the individual then this shall be the soil and source from which your *mettā* shall set its roots deep and spread far elsewhere.

4. Arousing of *mettā*

In the Middle Length Sayings Buddha teaches that anyone, regardless of caste, could cultivate loving kindness. ⁽³⁰⁾ This practice is not only accessible to all and advisable in certain situations but also only necessary for the completion of the spiritual path. The near cause of *mettā* is the lovable person or being. Therefore we have to see the favorable aspect of the person or being. One way is to think of his or her virtues or good qualities. We can perhaps enumerate them, e. g. he is

1. Compassionate – V1
2. Understanding – V2
3. Etc. – V3

The more we have of these the better. The mere thought of one will inspire *mettā*. We may use this sparingly so that it will last us a long time. For example, when we think about v1, *mettā* arises. Every time it dies down, we can use v1 to stir it up again. After some time v1 may not be effective (for the time being), then we use v2 to arouse *mettā*. We will then continue to use v2 to arouse *mettā*. When it loses effectiveness we can return to v1 again. One can go on arousing *mettā* with v1 and v2 until both do not seem to work. Then we proceed to v3. ⁽³¹⁾

The other way is to see the livableness of the person and thus to arouse *mettā* is to recall the events one has associated with him or her that would inspire *mettā*. It may be the help given, gifts offered or just kind, gentle words. One would naturally have to avoid recalling unpleasant moments.

We may apply the principle on the use of virtues to ensure ease of arousing *mettā*. When *mettā* arises it has got to be sincere and come from the depth of one's heart. It should be encouraged to flow abundantly and freely without inhibition. There is nothing wrong with giving *mettā* to anyone, only it is to be given in a suitable manner with wisdom and guarded against attachment. When *mettā* arises one enables and urges it on with the use of 4 aspirations. ⁽³²⁾

- 4.1. May I be free from enmity/danger
- 4.2. May I be free from ill will or mental suffering
- 4.3. May I be free from physical suffering
- 4.4. May I take care of myself happily

The principle is that when we make each aspiration we do so with *mettā*. This would arouse more *mettā* to keep it flowing on. It is also important that we understand the meaning of these aspirations clearly and sincerely mean it. Before the *mettā* from the first one dies down, we make it continue on by using the next. When we have used the 4th aspiration we start again with the first. This can go on indefinitely.

The second point is that when one aspiration, e. g., “May he be free from enmity,” is very effective and can produce strong *mettā* which can last a long time, then we can let this flow go on as long as possible, in which case it would continue to deepen.

However, if the aspiration is not very effective, we may skip it or pass through it quickly.

A third point here is that there is a more positive aspect of each aspiration, which can be borne in mind. If one intends to emphasize a more positive aspect it can be used with much effectiveness looking into the meaning of each aspiration.

4.1. May I be free from harm and danger

There are two kinds of harm and danger, internal and external. Internal refers to our defilements (*kilesa*), such as greed, hatred, delusion, worry, anxiety etc., which cause us mental suffering. External refers to dangers such as accidents, natural calamities (fire, floods, landslides, earthquakes, etc.), and danger from people who might want to harm us. Nobody wants these dangers whether internal or external though the internal dangers are even worse than the external ones. We are our own greatest enemies. If we can overcome the internal defilements, we can face external obstacles without fear or anxiety.

4.2. May I be free from ill will or mental suffering

Mental suffering refers to mental anguish, sorrow, frustrations, fears, despair, irritation and all types of defilements that are present to no end, as well as the un-satisfactoriness of conditioned existence. Nobody wants mental suffering of any kind. We want to be calm, peaceful and happy always.

4.3. May I be free from physical suffering

Physical suffering will include all forms of physical discomfort, illness, ailments and incompleteness. Nobody wants to suffer any kind of physical discomfort. It is possible that the wish can be put as “may they be healthy and strong.”

4.4. May I take care of myself happily

This means that we wish that beings lived from day to day smoothly and happily. All of us need to go about discharging our various chores and responsibilities. Students need to study while adults have to earn a living. We need to get along with the people we come into contact with, such as our colleagues, friends, relatives, family members and loved ones. Unless we relate well with others, life can be difficult. So we want to be on good terms with everybody, free from conflicts, with lots of goodwill and sympathetic understanding.

Furthermore we need to take care of this body and mind daily. As for the body, we need to feed it, clothe it, give it medicine when necessary, answer the calls of nature, etc. For the mind we need to clean it too by doing meditation, exercising restraint, cultivating the right attitudes and reflecting wisely.

Therefore, when we say, “May they (all beings) take care of themselves happily,” it is a comprehensive statement covering all these various aspects of daily living.

The last of those aspirations is by itself positive. The negative variant can be “May he not have any trouble, problems, obstacles in taking care of himself.” I have tried this on others and it does have a different effect psychologically, stronger towards well wishing than negative phrasing which tends towards compassion and cancellation of suffering. This is therefore one part that is worth consideration. A possible alternative would be to use both, which would increase the aspirations from 4 to 8.

Here we also notice that too many aspirations for the beginner may not be beneficial to concentration. Hence we stick to just 4 aspirations.

Another modification can be considered if a further specification of the wish is required, such as “May he be free from the deadly disease of cancer which is afflicting him,” or may be even a single wish for a son that he may be able to do well in his studies.

These are more specific and therefore not applicable all the time and to everyone. Nevertheless, it is a wholesome wish of *mettā* and, when made with strong and deep concentration, will have its effects.

At the beginning, the flow is not smooth and does not last long. One has to guard against just merely reciting the aspiration without feeling. One has to guard against indiscriminate and uncontrolled thinking (which leads to restlessness) while trying to arouse *mettā*. One also has to guard against frustration if *mettā* does not arise. Therefore it is very important that mindfulness is present when these hindrances arise.

5. Conclusion

The above is the amazing result of practicing loving kindness meditation towards the allsentient beings. If one practices this universally with an unselfish heart, there is no question about its great results. If all people in all countries honestly practiced the development of the loving kindness meditation, no weapons would be necessary to save mankind from the disaster of a war and peace would reign over the whole earth, with the real heavenly kingdom manifested here on earth. Loving kindness is a meditation practice, which brings about positive attitudinal changes as it systematically develops the quality of 'loving-acceptance'. It acts, as it were, as a form of self-psychotherapy, a way of healing the troubled mind to free it from its pain and confusion. Of all Buddhist meditations, lovingkindness has the immediate benefit of sweetening and changing old habituated negative patterns of mind. Further more, its also clear that the scope of loving kindness of the *Visuddhimagga* has limitation to develop towards the sentient beings as well as its start by "I," "human beings" but the other text like *Paṭisambhidāmagga*, is not limited to cultivate the loving kindness to others and also start by "all beings," "all deities." Therefore, it does seem me that the *Paṭisambhidāmagga's* explanation of *mettā bhāvanā* is using with broader sense than the *Visuddhimagga*.

Footnotes & Reference

- (1) The analysis of love into three levels is not found in explicit form in the first four collections of discourses. According to the *Pāli* Tipiṭakam Concordance, the word "access" (*upacāra*) does not occur at all in the first four collections of discourses and the word "placement" (*appanā*) occurs only once. On *upacāra* see PTC., I part VII. 392. On *appanā* PTC., I part IV. 199, and M. II. 73
- (2) Francis Story : Buddhist Meditation. pp. 14
- (3) I saw its during my student life in Thailand (1989-1994)
- (4) Narada *Mahāthera* : The Way to Nibbāna. pp. 1-13
- (5) Sārada *Mahāthera* : The Buddhist Way of Meditation. pp. 10-16
- (6) Bhikkhu *Visuddhācarā* : Curbing Anger Spreading Love. pp. 60-73
- (7) Ajhan Sumedho : Mindfulness : The Path to the Deathless. pp. 35-38
- (8) B. Anandamaitreya : Buddhism Lectures and Essays. pp. 83-106
- (9) Nanamoli Thera : The Practice of Loving kindness. pp. 9-28
- (10) Sumanasara : 慈悲の瞑想 pp. 1-5
- (11) Acharya Buddhārakkhita : Metta : The Philosophy and Practice of Universal Love. pp. 11-8
- (12) Journal of the International College for Advanced Buddhist Studies Vol. VII., 2004, pp. 165-214
- (13) Pa. Vol. II., 128
- (14) *ibid.* p. 1
- (15) Love in Action, p. 39
- (16) *ibid.* p. 1
- (17) *Vism.* Chapt. IV, V, VI, VII, VIII, IX, X, XI. Gyana Ratna Thera: The Way of Practicing Meditation in Theravāda Buddhism. pp. 86-7. They are, 10 (ten) *kasīṇa*, 10 (ten) kinds of foulness, 10 (ten) recollections, 4 (four) divine abiding, 4 (four) immaterial states, 1 (one) perception and 1

- (one) defining
- (18) Vism. p.321
 - (19) Vism. p.322
 - (20) Khuddaka-pāṭha, pp.8-9; Sn. 25; The Book of Protection, p.36
 - (21) Pts. pp.317-8
 - (22) Vibh. pp.356-7
 - (23) *Sāradā Mahāthera* : The Buddhist Way of Meditation, p.11
 - (24) Vibha. pp.363-4
 - (25) Had seen the method during my field work in Myanmar from 19th to 29th December 2002
 - (26) SN. I., 75; Udāna, p. 47
 - (27) Vism. p.322
 - (28) I. B. Horner : *The Middle Length Saying*. Vol. II., pp.95
 - (29) Ven. Sujiva : *Mettā Bhāvanā*. pp.10
 - (30) MN. Vol. II. 151
 - (31) Ven. Sujiva : *Mettā Bhāvanā*. pp.10-1
 - (32) Vism. p. 322; Ven. Sujiva : *Mettā Bhāvanā*. p.11