

## **May We All Be Happy...**

*Metta meditation instruction from author and teacher Gil Fronsdal*

May all beings be happy.  
May they live in safety and joy.  
All living beings,  
Whether weak or strong,  
Tall, stout, average, or short,  
Seen or unseen, near or distant,  
Born or to be born,  
May they all be happy.

—From the Metta Sutta, Sutta Nipata I.8

Metta, or lovingkindness, is one of the most important Buddhist practices. Simply stated, metta is the heartfelt wish for the well-being of oneself and others. When describing metta, the Buddha used the analogy of the care a mother gives her only child. Lovingkindness is also understood as the innate friendliness of an open heart. Its close connection to friendship is reflected in its similarity to the Pali word for friend, *mitta*. However, metta is more than conventional friendship, for it includes being openhearted even toward one's enemies, developed from insight into our shared humanity.

Metta practice is the cultivation of our capacity for lovingkindness. It does not involve either positive thinking or the imposition of an artificial positive attitude. There is no need to feel loving or kind during metta practice. Rather, we meditate on our good intentions, however weak or strong they may be, and water the seeds of these intentions. When we water wholesome intentions instead of expressing unwholesome ones, we develop those wholesome tendencies within us. If these seeds are never watered, they won't grow. When watered by regular practice, they grow, sometimes in unexpected fashions. We may find that lovingkindness becomes the operating motivation in a situation that previously triggered anger or fear.

To practice lovingkindness meditation, sit in a comfortable and relaxed manner. Take two or three deep breaths with slow, long, and complete exhalations. Let go of any concerns or preoccupations. For a few minutes, feel or imagine the breath moving through the center of your chest in the area of your heart.

Metta is first practiced toward oneself, since we often have difficulty loving others without first loving ourselves. Sitting quietly, mentally repeat, slowly and steadily, the following or similar phrases: *May I be happy. May I be well. May I be safe. May I be peaceful and at ease.*

While you say these phrases, allow yourself to sink into the intentions they express. Lovingkindness meditation consists primarily of connecting to the intention of wishing ourselves or others happiness. However, if feelings of warmth, friendliness, or love arise in the body or mind, connect to them, allowing them to grow as you repeat the phrases. As an aid to the meditation, you might hold an image of yourself in your mind's eye. This helps reinforce the intentions expressed in the phrases.

After a period of directing lovingkindness toward yourself, bring to mind a friend or someone in your life who has deeply cared for you. Then slowly repeat phrases of lovingkindness toward them: *May you be happy. May you be well. May you be safe. May you be peaceful and at ease.*

As you say these phrases, again sink into their intention or heartfelt meaning. And again, if any feelings of lovingkindness arise, connect the feelings with the phrases so that the feelings may become stronger as you repeat the words.

As you continue the meditation, you can bring to mind other friends, neighbors, acquaintances, strangers, animals, and finally people with whom you have difficulty. You can either use the same phrases, repeating them again and again, or make up phrases that better represent the lovingkindness you feel toward these beings.

Sometimes during lovingkindness meditation, seemingly opposite feelings such as anger, grief, or sadness may arise. Take these to be signs that your heart is softening, revealing what is held there. You can either shift to mindfulness practice or you can—with whatever patience, acceptance, and kindness you can muster for such feelings—direct lovingkindness toward them. Above all, remember that there is no need to judge yourself for having these feelings.

As you become familiar with lovingkindness practice during meditation, you can also begin to use it in your daily life. While in your car, or at work, or in public, privately practice metta toward those around you. There can be a great delight in establishing a heartfelt connection to everyone we encounter, friends and strangers alike.