

Love and Compassion in Meditation and in Action

Ven. Bhikkhu Bodhi

1. The Need for Love and Compassion

Love and compassion are qualities essential to our stature as true human beings, and jointly might be considered the capacities that most distinguish us from the animals, except that animals sometimes display more kindness towards one another—and towards people—than we do. In the teachings of the Buddha, love and compassion are regarded as the foundation of ethics and important criteria of right speech and right action. They are also qualities to be developed by meditation. The Buddhist texts call love and compassion *brahmavihāra*, “divine abodes,” for they manifest our inherent divinity even while we dwell in a human body. For Buddhism love and compassion should be balanced by wisdom, insight into the real nature of things, which alone can permanently eradicate the mental defilements that bind us to samsara, the “round of birth and death.” But the meditative practices of love and compassion purify the mind of such constricting emotions as resentment, ill will, anger, and callous indifference, which cause misery for ourselves and others. They promote communal harmony and break down the barriers that confine us in the prison cage of the ego. By developing love and compassion, our hearts can expand and radiate immeasurable good will to everyone we meet.

In popular Buddhism, love and compassion are sometimes spoken of as if they were near-synonyms, but Buddhist philosophical texts represent these two qualities by different words, each with its own distinct meaning. In Pali, the language of the oldest surviving Buddhist texts, these words are *mettā* and *karunā*, which I render respectively as “loving-kindness” and “compassion.” While the two are closely connected, they are distinguished by a subtle difference in tone. The *Visuddhimagga*, a fifth century meditation treatise, explains loving-kindness as the wish to promote the welfare of beings, and compassion as the feeling of empathy that arises when we feel the suffering of others as our own (chap. IX, §§93-94).¹ Loving-kindness is opposed to ill will and hatred, while compassion is opposed to cruelty and violence. A person of loving-kindness doesn’t bear ill will or resentment towards others. A compassionate person doesn’t wish harm for others. Such a person’s heart is stirred on seeing others suffer, and he is moved to act to remove their suffering.

Loving-kindness is said to be the basis for compassion, for in order to feel empathy with those who suffer we first must sincerely wish for their well-being, and precisely this is the function of loving-kindness. It is the feeling of love for beings that

¹ I refer to the translation by Bhikkhu Nanamoli, published under the title *The Path of Purification* (Kandy, Sri Lanka: Buddhist Publication Society, 1975).

makes us care about their happiness and suffering. Consequently, when they meet suffering, we feel their pain as our own and make an effort to relieve them of their pain.

2. Meditation on Loving-Kindness

According to Buddhism, through the appropriate methods loving-kindness and compassion can be awakened and systematically intensified. They are cultivated through a deliberate type of mind-training. The aim, of course, is for love and compassion to become natural, spontaneous, and all-embracing, but at the outset we must rely on specific techniques to replace our habitual mental dispositions, rooted in the sense of ego, with these selfless virtues. In many ways the mind is analogous to the body. Just as athletes regularly practice the skills they need to succeed in their sport, so a person who aspires to be loving and compassionate has to work regularly, even daily, at nurturing these qualities. The mind, according to Buddhism, is normally weighed down by the debris of old habits, but it is also an astoundingly malleable instrument that can be molded through persistent practice.

Buddhist tradition recommends particular strategies for developing loving-kindness and compassion. Since loving-kindness has a wider scope, as a meditative training it is normally developed first, and thus I will explain it first. Then I will explain the method for developing compassion. What makes these methods particularly practical is that, while they emerge out of the Buddhist meditation tradition, they are not necessarily tied to Buddhist doctrine in any restrictive way. Thus they can be practiced by followers of any religion or of no religion; they are openly available to anyone who aspires to become a more loving and compassionate person, even when this aspiration is not rooted in a specific system of religious beliefs.

As worked out by the tradition of Theravada Buddhism,² the method for developing loving-kindness involves two components, the *recipients* and the *formula*. The “recipients” are the people to whom we direct loving-kindness. The “formula” is a set of words used to generate the feeling of loving-kindness. By applying the formula to the recipients, we can awaken and gradually intensify loving-kindness.

The recipients of loving-kindness fall into a number of categories, which are to be rotated in a particular sequence. The *Visuddhimagga* (IX, §11) recommends the following types, in this sequence: oneself; a dear and respected person such as a teacher or benefactor; a dearly beloved friend; a neutral person; and a hostile person. The people chosen to represent these types should all be presently alive, for we cannot wish for the happiness of one who has already died. It is also said that one should not choose a person with whom one has a romantic or sexual relationship, or feelings of romantic or sexual attraction. In such cases, there is a risk that we might mistake these passionate feelings for success in developing loving-kindness.

² The form of Buddhism followed in southern Asia (Sri Lanka, Myanmar, Thailand, Cambodia, and Laos), based on the Pali Canon. It preserves the most complete surviving version of the early Buddhist teachings.

The formula is a verbal statement that we repeatedly turn over in the mind as a means of arousing loving-kindness. I will explain the meditation on loving-kindness on the basis of a formula that I have found helpful. However, the formula is not fixed and inflexible but may be varied according to one's own disposition. The formula that I will use is the following, with X representing the recipient: "May X be healthy. May X be peaceful. May all X's good purposes be fulfilled." The formula is to be directed toward each person chosen as a recipient.

The Buddhist meditation manuals suggest that we begin developing loving-kindness towards ourselves because in order to generate real loving-kindness towards others—that is, to arouse a true concern for their welfare and happiness—we first have to feel genuine love for ourselves. When we recognize that the deepest urge of our own being is to be well and happy, we can readily understand that every living being also wishes the same for themselves. By extending our sense of identity to others, we can then feel their desire for well-being and happiness as our own.

To practice loving-kindness meditation, you should sit in a comfortable meditation posture, either cross-legged upon a cushion on the floor, or, if you find this difficult, in a straight-backed chair. Keep the body upright but not stiff and rigid. Place the hands on the lap, right hand over the left, thumbs lightly touching, and let the eyes close gently. Then, before your mind's eye, call up an image of your own face, smiling and happy. Repeat mentally to yourself the wish: "May I be healthy. May I be peaceful. May all my good purposes be fulfilled." Do not use the words as a mechanical formula, but with each phrase try to *evoke the feeling* that corresponds to the words. Go through the formula several times until you can generate a soft and warm feeling in the heart, a true desire for your well-being and happiness.

After you have applied the formula to yourself for a few minutes, move on to the next person in the cycle: the dear and respected person, who can be a teacher, mentor, elder friend, or benefactor. Call up the image of this person in your mind's eye, smiling and happy, and then mentally repeat the formula: "May this good person be healthy. May he/she be peaceful. May all his/her good purposes be fulfilled." Running through the formula for several rounds, again try to generate that soft and warm feeling of loving-kindness towards this person. Again, after a couple of rounds pass on to the dear and beloved friend or close relative, and once again run through the formula for several rounds, trying to generate that soft and warm feeling of loving-kindness in the heart.

Almost invariably, success in this endeavor requires patient practice. Normally, at the beginning, we can't generate genuine loving-kindness. The best we can do is incline the heart towards real loving-kindness. But we use the formula as a means to arouse genuine loving-kindness. The training consists in connecting our thought-process with the words of the formula in such a way that we actually come to feel the wish signified by the words. This is not, as some may think, a process of self-hypnosis. Proper practice means that we proceed with mindfulness, fully aware of what we're doing. The practice is a process of gradual training and gradual accomplishment that demands time, patience, and effort. We might compare the development of genuine loving-kindness to heating

water in a pot to make tea. If, after we put the pot on the stove, we leave the heat on for a minute or two and then turn it off, we will never get hot water to make tea. To make tea, we must wait patiently until the water starts to boil.

For a beginner, I recommend working for some time—perhaps twenty or thirty minutes daily for several weeks—exclusively with the first three persons. It is only when you succeed with these three persons—“success” being marked by a softening and warming of the heart—that you should bring in “the neutral person.” This is a person whom you might see regularly but with whom you have no personal relationship; it could be a neighbor, a clerk in the post office or bank, or a distant colleague at work. Normally, we regard this person with indifference or a mere minimum of human sympathy. To arouse genuine loving-kindness, we have to make a special effort to put ourselves into the other person’s skin and thereby cultivate a sense of empathy, or *identification*, with the person.

You might work with the first four persons for a few weeks, until you can generate that warm and soft concern for all four. At this point you can bring in the hostile person. You have to be especially careful not to dwell on negative thoughts about the hostile person. If such thoughts do become persistent, you should put this person aside and revert to the first four persons. Only later should you bring in the hostile person. To break down your resistance to this person, you can use the same reflections that you used in relation to the neutral person, perhaps even elaborating on them in various ways. Work with this person again and again until you can feel a genuine heartfelt concern for this person’s well-being and happiness.

At this point you should run through the whole gamut of persons—from yourself through the hostile person again and again—until you feel a warm, sincere feeling of loving-kindness for all of them. The ideal is to be able to generate love to all persons in the different categories equally, without discrimination. This stage is called “the abolition of the barriers” (*Visuddhimagga*, IX, §§40-43).

Beyond this lies the extension of loving-kindness, which I can only treat briefly here. Loving-kindness is first extended by spreading it to all the people in widening geographical regions of the earth thus: “May such people be healthy! May they be peaceful. May all their good purposes be fulfilled!” Begin with your place of residence, your home or building. Then extend loving-kindness to everyone in your neighborhood, then to everyone in your state, then to everyone in North America. Next, take each continent in turn: North America, South America, Europe, Africa, Asia, Australia and the South Pacific, then the whole earth simultaneously.

Next, based on classical Buddhist cosmology, one extends loving-kindness to all the different classes of living beings in all realms: to the deities, humans, animals, unhappy spirits, and beings in hell. Finally, one extends loving-kindness simultaneously to all sentient beings in all the realms of existence throughout the universe.

The formulas for systematically developing loving-kindness are included as an appendix to this article.

3. Meditation on Compassion

The classical Buddhist commentaries hold that before one can meditate on compassion, one first has to master the meditation on loving-kindness. However, I consider this position too stern. I have found that when you are able to stabilize a warm feeling of sincere loving-kindness for sentient beings, you can begin to cultivate the meditation on compassion. Even though the feeling may not be powerful, you will be creating a positive disposition towards compassion. As you continue your practice, your compassion will gradually become stronger. Practice, growth, and fulfillment are the three watchwords of Buddhist meditation.

Compassion has a different characteristic from loving-kindness, a different “flavor” or “felt tone.” When one practices both, one can distinctly feel this difference. The two are as different as vanilla and almond ice cream: these two kinds of ice cream look the same but their taste is quite different. Specifically, compassion means the feeling of empathy with those afflicted by suffering. Therefore, to develop compassion as an exercise in meditation, one has to focus on those undergoing suffering.

In the meditation on compassion, the recipients are thus people afflicted with suffering. The initial recipient does not have to be a person one knows well; it may even be better not to choose a close friend or relative, for this may give rise to stress and anxiety. Because one has previously practiced loving-kindness meditation, one already has generated a wish for the welfare and happiness of all beings. Thus one can take even a complete stranger who is undergoing suffering. I personally recommend taking *a child living under unfortunate circumstances*. Thus, to develop compassion, I often reflect on a report I read about a mother in Sri Lanka who lost both her children in the tsunami that struck the island at the end of 2004. The mother was in the house, the children were playing in front of the house. The waves came and swept the children away, leaving the mother struck with grief. Alternatively, you might think of a child in Africa who has lost both parents to AIDS, now in the care of his or her grandparents. Or an abandoned street child in India or Brazil, begging for food, with no chance to go to school, no home, no warm family relations. Feel the child as one’s own, share that child’s suffering, and generate a strong wish for that child to be free from suffering.

As a formula, you can use the simple phrase: “May this person be free from suffering, may this person be free from affliction!” Focus on the suffering this person is experiencing, identify deeply with the person, and generate a sincere wish for that suffering to end. Do this over and over, until the compassion makes your heart shake and tremble. When we dare to look directly into the suffering of the world, without flinching, without anxiously turning away, often our heart breaks open. If this happens, let it happen. Just sit back and relax into it, as the compassion swells up and suffuses your heart. As you become familiar with this feeling, your mind will gradually settle down, and you will be able to balance compassion and calmness simultaneously.

To extend the feeling of compassion, choose next a few people undergoing different types of suffering. You might choose people from events you have witnessed, or from reports you have read, or from news that you have heard. Initially, however, you

shouldn't take groups of people; instead, you should choose four or five individuals. For example, you might think of the peasant in Afghanistan who lost his wife and daughter in an attack by a Predator drone; of the teenager in Cambodia whose legs were blown off by a landmine and who has to beg for food every day; of a mother in Sichuan province in China who lost her children when their school was destroyed by an earthquake; of a woman in Sierra Leone who was raped and gave birth to the child of her rapist; of the woman in Niger whose children are mere skin and bones.

In each case, develop a deep sense of identity with these people, feeling them as being the same as yourself. Go through them in a cycle, from the first to the last, then back to the first, over and over, until the compassion shakes your heart. If you find it hard to arouse compassion, think of the person as your relative. Thus if you choose an older person, think of that person as your mother or father. If you choose a person your own age, think of them as your brother or sister. If you choose a much younger person, think of them as your son or daughter.

When the compassion flows smoothly, continue to strengthen it. Then you can expand it, just as you did with loving-kindness. You can take whole continents: briefly radiate compassion over all the people in one continent, until you distinctly feel the radiation; then move on to the next continent. Then take the different realms of existence, thinking of how beings in every realm are afflicted with their own distinctive suffering: the deities are blind to the fact that they might fall to lower realms; human beings suffer from hunger, war, poverty, exploitation, anxiety, and depression; animals suffer from fear, hunger, and violence; the unhappy spirits suffer from insatiable hunger and thirst; and the hell beings suffer the torments of hell. All must undergo old age and death. Finally, extend compassion to all sentient beings in all realms, and throughout the entire universe of the ten directions.

4. Putting Compassion into Action

One of the strong points of Buddhism is its powerful meditative methods of developing loving-kindness and compassion. While all great world religions praise love and compassion, Buddhism stands out in offering precise, step by step techniques for awakening and cultivating these sublime virtues. It is perhaps because of this valuation of love and compassion that so many people who have visited traditional Buddhist countries have found their citizens warm, kind, and friendly.

At the same time, however, I believe that traditional Buddhism has a critical weak spot. This is an insufficient emphasis on expressing love and compassion in concrete action aimed at promoting a more just and equitable social order. We Buddhists tend to treat love and compassion as exalted mental states, which we value because they help us overcome negative personal qualities like anger, hatred, ill will, and spite. In my opinion, which some might find provocative, traditional Buddhism does not sufficiently stress the need to mobilize love and compassion as motives for pursuing social justice and a more harmonious world. While Christians have shown a keen interest in learning from

Buddhism how to live a contemplative life, I feel that Buddhism has much to learn from Christianity about how to express love in action.

If our meditative practice of love truly plants in our hearts a genuine concern for others, we should do something positive to promote their welfare. If we truly have compassion for beings, we should work to relieve their suffering. Suppose we were to come home one day and see that our house had caught fire. Knowing that our children are inside, we would not merely stand outside, thinking, “May my children escape from this burning house!” Rather, we would do whatever is necessary to save them, and we would not desist until we were sure that our children had been rescued. Similarly, we should think of all humanity as our own children, beset by various sufferings, and do our best to bring them relief.

The ideal Buddhist practice, in my opinion, is one that unites inner meditative development with external action in the world. When we cultivate love and compassion as a meditative practice, we create in our hearts a powerful force that can be unleashed and effect momentous transformations, bringing benefits to many. But the love and compassion in our hearts have to find channels to flow out in the form of concrete action. How we express love cannot be left to chance or to the whims of raw emotion. For love to be an effective agent of change, we need to examine the opportunities available to us to help others. Then we have to select a movement or a worthy cause that awakens our passion and inspires our wish to be of service.

What exactly should one choose? The choice we make will vary from person to person. To find a suitable way to be of service, we should carefully consider the problems the world faces today, our own capacities, and the opportunities available to us to make use of these capacities. Such problems that call for our attention and concern include: global warming and the need to develop a sustainable economic model; poverty and economic inequality; hunger and chronic malnutrition; war and militarism; social oppression and the denial of basic human rights; cruelty and other forms of unethical behavior towards animals.

In this present age, so full of danger and confusion, spirituality and social engagement cannot remain separate domains each sealed off by rigid boundaries. The major social upheavals of our age have an internal origin. They all stem from a deep crisis at the core of the human soul. To heal the maladies that afflict humanity calls for something far more potent than international treaties and technological innovation. A more stable solution must be ethical and spiritual. The only solution that can truly work must begin at the foundations, within the depths of human consciousness. Most of all we need a global awakening of the wisdom that embodies timeless standards of justice, and a boundless love and compassion that extends to all living beings. But to heal the crisis of our age, love and compassion must serve as more than lofty spiritual ideals. They must become spurs to action, moving us to work indefatigably to eliminate the suffering of others and to promote their long-term welfare and happiness.

Appendix: The Formulas

A. Loving-kindness towards specific persons

May I be well. May I be happy. May I enjoy good health. May I be peaceful. May all my good purposes be fulfilled.

May this respected person be well. May he/she be happy. May he/she enjoy good health. May he/she be peaceful. May all his/her good purposes be fulfilled.

May this beloved person ... [as above] ... May this neutral person be well ... [as above] ...
May this hostile person be well. May he/she be happy. May he/she enjoy good health.
May he/she be peaceful. May all his/her good purposes be fulfilled.

May all human beings be well. May they be happy. May they enjoy good health. May they be peaceful. May all their good purposes be fulfilled.

B. The geographical extension of loving-kindness

May my neighbors be well. May they be happy. May they enjoy good health. May they be peaceful. May all their good purposes be fulfilled.

May all the residents of this city/town ... country ... continent ... each continent ... all human beings on earth be well. May they be happy. May they enjoy good health. May they be peaceful. May all their good purposes be fulfilled.

C. The cosmological extension of loving-kindness

May all the deities be well. May they be happy. May they enjoy good health. May they be peaceful. May all their good purposes be fulfilled.

May all human beings... all animals ... all afflicted spirits ... all hell-beings be well. May they be happy. May they enjoy good health. May they be peaceful. May all their good purposes be fulfilled.

D. Universal loving-kindness

May all sentient beings everywhere, in all realms, in all world systems, be well. May they be happy. May they enjoy good health. May they be peaceful. May all their good purposes be fulfilled.

Note: If one prefers a simpler formula, one may reduce it to: “May X be well. May X be happy. May all X’s good purposes be fulfilled.” Or even more simply: “May X be well. May X be happy.” Which formula one chooses depends on nothing more than personal preference.