

Mettā - Spiritual love in the sense of the Buddha's teachings

Christina Garbe

Loving-kindness (*mettā*) is a present, clear, unblinkered mental factor of non-aversion in the moment that arises and passes away from moment to moment. It is full presence.

The consciousness is completely, without adding anything, focussed on the object of the loving attitude of mind.

Loving kindness leads to a turning towards and attention to the other, to whom appreciation, attention and gentleness are given. It is genuine kindness, friendship, sympathy, without hypocrisy, because the mind is in a present, focussed state. Well-developed *mettā* is also not limited to one person or to a family setting. Loving kindness is open to all beings.

Pure *mettā* can be described as true love. True love means helping oneself and others to create the causes of lasting, true happiness. True happiness only arises through wholesome actions. True love therefore expresses itself in the endeavour to help oneself and others to completely overcome unwholesome actions in body, speech and mind, to completely overcome mental defilements. This is the only way to achieve true happiness.

Mettā is the highest love, namely love without the desire to possess someone. Pure *mettā* knows through direct experience that in the ultimate sense there is neither possession nor an owner. Things in body and mind arise and pass away due to conditions, they do not belong to anyone.

This love neither selects nor excludes. To exclude someone comes about only through aversion and would be the opposite of love.

Mettā is love without partiality. It is love not only towards those who are useful to us and show us gratitude and consideration. *Mettā* is love that heals and leaves no wounds. *Mettā* means charity, love of neighbour, friendliness, benevolence, good will. *Mettā* includes states of mind such as non-opposition, agreement, peace, non-angry, patience, forgiveness, modesty, gentleness, kindness, restraint.

Mettā only towards family and friends is inferior *mettā*, *mettā* towards all beings is sublime *mettā*.

Mettā is love without self-centredness. Conventional love attempts to complete the imperfect ego through a partnership or familial bond. Loving kindness in the Buddhist sense is about completely overcoming self-centredness as the fundamental cause of suffering.

In conventional love, the mind is completely absorbed by the idea of perfection through another being. This makes the mind narrow and only capable of limited cognition. With *mettā* for all beings, the mind becomes open and broad and thus capable of realising the true nature of existence.

On a spiritual level, *mettā* leads to spiritual love, which is boundless and universal, and shakes the view of an 'I' through profound experiences in meditation, but does not allow it to be fully overcome. To overcome the view of a non-existent 'I', one must practise *vipassanā* meditation.

Mettā is not only to be distinguished from conventional, emotional and possessive love, but also from interpersonal relationships characterised by indifference. *Mettā* is also not love that can be used to assert interests, to functionalise people or for economic purposes. That means *mettā* is also an antidote to unkindness. *Mettā* sees other beings with their needs, cares for them and radiates human warmth.

Mettā sees beings as individuals and tries to support other beings in their development in order to enable them to achieve true happiness.

Some people imagine that when they practise *mettā*, they must be in the same state as when they are newly in love. However, *mettā* love is different from this love. Being newly in love is focussed on one being, often with great euphoria. The desire for well-being is projected onto the one person.

Since being in love is therefore connected with desire, it is a foggy state, because desire is always connected with delusion. Falling in love is captivating and exciting.

In contrast, *mettā* love is rather quiet, not spectacular, but clear and can be sustained for a long time. It is autonomous, not grasping or demanding, not associated with fantasies.

It is particularly clear and calm when you can reach *jhāna* with it. The Buddha describes the third *jhāna*, the highest spiritual level that can be attained with *mettā*, as follows:

"Again ... (a person) enters with the overcoming of joy, dwelling in equanimity, mindful and clearly understanding, full of ... happiness of the entire mental body [the group of mental factors - kāya], into the third absorption (jhāna), of which the Noble Ones say: 'Happy dwells he who is full of equanimity and mindfulness', and dwells in it." MN 66

Possessive, emotional love, if not satisfied, is often a cause of many physical and mental illnesses. Loving kindness, arising from a wholesome consciousness, is a spiritual foundation for physical health.