

# Mettā-Bhāvanā



Venerable  
Chanmyay Sayadaw



# Mettā Bhavana

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## Foreword

I delivered a Dhamma talk on *mettā*-meditation on a meditation retreat in New Zealand in November 1992. The talk is now transcribed by meditators and printed in a book form after it has been edited. The book is published in commemoration of the second ceremony of Acariya Puja in honour of the most venerable Chanmyay Sayadaw on January 17, 18, 19, 2015.

## ***Namo Tassa Bagavato Arahato Sammāsambuddhassa***

*Mettā* means a mental state wishing for the welfare of all living beings, *hitakarapavattilakkhana mettā*. The meaning is that *mettā* has the characteristic of wishing the welfare of all living beings. The mental state that wishes all living beings to be happy and peaceful is *mettā*. When you develop the spirit of loving kindness or *mettā* towards all living beings, that is called *mettā-bhāvanā* or *mettā*-meditation.

### **Mettā and Tanhā**

In the Burmese language the word *mettā* is used in two senses. One is the sense of loving-kindness; the other is the sense of sensual love. When a man is in love with a lady it is said that he loves her, he has *mettā* for her. In this case *mettā* is not used in the sense of loving kindness wishing the welfare of that lady; it is used in the sense of sensual love or desire. The sensual love or desire is *tanhā*, not *mettā* (loving kindness).

When we deliver a discourse on *mettā-bhāvanā* we have to clarify it, repeatedly distinguishing between the two senses of *mettā* and *tanhā*. *Mettā* has the characteristic of wishing the welfare of beings without attachment while *tanhā* has the characteristic of clinging to the object. *Mettā* is cool while *tanhā* is hot. *Mettā* makes the mind pure, calm, cool and concentrated while *tanhā* makes the mind defiled, distracted and hot.

Some people say that you should radiate your *mettā* towards all living beings. Unless you develop *mettā* in yourself, how can you radiate it to other living beings? If you have developed the spirit of *mettā* abundantly in yourself, you need not intentionally radiate it to other beings. Your mind is naturally radiating *mettā* to them all.

When you wish the welfare of other beings you have *mettā* in yourself. When *mettā* is well developed in yourself, your face

looks calm, serene, pleasant, happy and peaceful. Sometimes your face looks smiling. Anyone who meets you and sees your face, feels happy and peaceful by the power of your *mettā*. He has the feeling of *mettā* for you. These are some benefits of *mettā-bhāvanā*, *mettā*-meditation. More benefits of *mettā*-meditation are mentioned in Buddhist scriptures. Lord Buddha explained eleven benefits of *mettā* in his teaching.

## Eleven Benefits of Mettā

In the Anguttara Nikaya, the Omniscient Buddha explains eleven benefits of *mettā* as follows:

1. The *mettā* meditator sleeps well.
2. He wakes up happily, feeling refreshed.
3. He has good dreams.
4. He is dear to human beings.
5. He is dear to other beings such as Devas.
6. He is protected by Devas.
7. He is not harmed by weapons, poison and fire.
8. His mind is easily concentrated.
9. His facial expression is calm, clear, serene and peaceful.
10. At the time of death, he passes away peacefully without confusion.
11. When he has passed away, he is reborn among Brahmas.

## A Young monk

In the Visuddhimagga commentary we find the story of a young monk who practised *mettā*-meditation. In ancient times in Sri Lanka a young monk, named Visākhā, practised both *mettā-bhāvanā* and *vipassanā-bhāvanā*. He stayed at a place for four months, he did not stay longer at one place. In this way he moved from one place to another. At one time he stayed in Cittalapabbata Vihara. He intensively practised *mettā*-meditation there.



After he had stayed there four months, he was about to leave Cittalapabbata and go to another place. In the last night he practised *mettā*-meditation while walking. At that time he heard someone crying nearby. He looked for the person who was crying. He did not see anyone. So he asked, “Who is crying?”

Then he heard, “Venerable sir, I am the deity who lives in this tree”. Then Visākhā asked, “Why are you crying?” The deity answered, “Venerable sir, you are going to leave this place tomorrow, so I am crying”. Then Visākhā said, “My leaving this place has nothing to do with your crying”. The deity said, “Venerable sir, before you came and stayed here, some Devas in this forest were quarrelling and fighting one another. We had to stay always unhappily. There was no unity and no peace at all. When you came and stayed here, all Devas here were no longer quarrelling nor fighting. All Devas loved one another. We live very happily because of your *mettā*. Now you are going to leave here. Devas will quarrel and fight again. Then we will have no peace and happiness again. So, Venerable Sir, I request you not to leave from here”. Venerable Visākhā, an intensive *mettā*-meditator, considering the welfare of all Devas there, decided not to leave Cittalapabbata and stayed on there. So, the Devas loved one another and lived in peace and happiness all the time.

This story of a young monk is described in the Visuddhimagga to prove some benefits of *mettā*-meditation.

## **Mettā-Meditation**

When you wish to practise *mettā*-meditation, you have to take any person or any beings as the object of meditation because you wish to develop *mettā* to some persons or beings, wishing him peace and happiness. For example, you wish to practise *mettā*-meditation for your mother. You must focus your mind towards your mother and reflect on her peace and happiness, thinking about her good character, good deed and good speech

and say mentally, “May my mother be well, happy and free from suffering”. These *mettā* sentences must be recited repeatedly. They arouse the feeling of your *mettā* for your mother. However, the sentences should be two or three, not more than that. They also should not be long, but should be short. If the sentences are many or long, the mind sticks to them. Then the feeling of *mettā* does not arise. So meditators should be careful not to use many and long sentences.

## **No Need to See Image**

Some people have the idea that in *mettā*-meditation a meditator needs to see the image of the person who is the object of meditation. This is just their idea. The Visuddhimagga does not instruct to see the image of the object. Therefore, you should not try to visualize the image of the object. It is impossible to see all images of all living beings when we develop *mettā* to all living beings. So meditators, without trying to see the image of object, should focus their mind towards all living beings and mentally say *mettā* sentences, “May all beings be well, happy and free from suffering”. He may use other short sentences that enable him to arouse the feeling of *mettā*. In this way he will be able to develop *mettā*.

## **Automatic Appearance of the Image**

But sometimes the image may appear automatically or naturally in your mind without your effort to visualize it; it’s good. Later the image may disappear; it doesn’t matter. What does matter is to feel loving-kindness in yourself, recollecting all the virtues of the object, wishing him peace and happiness.

## Two Types of Mettā-Meditation

*Mettā*-Meditation is of two types. One is specific *mettā* and the other is unspecific *mettā*. If you specify a particular person or group of persons as the object of meditation, that is specific *mettā*-meditation. If you cultivate your *mettā* towards all living beings without any specification, that is unspecific or non-specific *mettā*-meditation. Specific *mettā* is called *odhi mettā* and unspecific *mettā* is called *anodhi mettā*.

### Specific Mettā-Meditation

When you practise specific *mettā*-meditation you should focus your mind towards a person whom you have chosen as the object of the meditation. Then you should reflect on his welfare and mentally say, “May this person be well, happy and free from suffering”, recollecting his good character, good deeds, good speech etc. In this way *mettā* sentences gradually arouse the feeling of *mettā* in yourself, which later will be well developed.

### Unspecific Mettā-Meditation

As to unspecific *mettā*-meditation you are not to specify any person or group for the object of the meditation, but you develop your *mettā* towards all living beings, mentally saying, “May all beings be well, happy and free from suffering”. Repeatedly, you can use such sentences as these, “May all beings be happy, free from animosity, distress and affliction”.

### Points to Note about Specific Mettā

The Visuddhimagga mentions four kinds of person who should not be the first object of *mettā*-meditation in the initial stage of the practice:

1. An antipathetic person should not be the first object of *mettā*-meditation in the beginning of the practice; if you

- put the antipathetic person in the place of the beloved one, you find it difficult to feel *mettā* and get tired.
2. A dearly beloved person should not be the first object of *mettā*-meditation in the initial stage of the practice because developing loving-kindness towards him or her, sometimes you may think about his or her misfortune or suffering. Then you will be unhappy about it and unable to feel loving-kindness for him or her.
  3. A neutral person should not be the first object of *mettā*-meditation. A neutral person is the one whom you do not love nor hate. He is just your acquaintance. If you put a neutral person in the place of the beloved one, it is difficult for you to feel *mettā* for him.
  4. A hostile person also should not be the first object of *mettā*-meditation, because when you reflect on his welfare, you may have anger arising in your mind instead of *mettā*.

The above mentioned four persons should not be the first object of *mettā*-meditation in the initial stage of the practice. When you are skilful in *mettā*-meditation, you can develop *mettā* towards them.

## **A Man Fighting Against the Wall**

There is one person who should not be the object of specific *mettā*-meditation. The opposite sex should not be the object of the specific *mettā*-meditation because the meditator may feel lust instead of *mettā*. In the Visuddhimagga an interesting story is mentioned. In Sri Lanka, a man very much wished to practise *mettā*-meditation. He asked a monk, who came to his house everyday for alms round, how to practise *mettā*-meditation. The monk told him to cultivate *mettā* towards his most loved one. At night, the man comfortably sat for meditation in his room and thought about object of meditation who he loved most. It came to his mind that his wife was best loved by him. So he

cultivated *mettā* towards his wife who slept in the other room. When he developed *mettā* for some minutes, he had lust arising in his mind and so he got up and tried to go to his wife's room fighting against the wall of his room which was bolted, but he forgot it. In consideration of this story the opposite sex should not be the object of the specific *mettā*-meditation but he or she can be the object of unspecific *mettā*-meditation. When you are skilled in *mettā*-meditation, you can develop *mettā* towards the opposite sex.

## **A Lady Meditator's Experience**

One lady who was a superintendent at a bank came to practise Vipassanā Meditation for two months. She got a three months leave. After two months of Vipassanā Meditation, she practised *mettā*-meditation. After she had practised *mettā*-Meditation for about two weeks, her concentration was very good. She felt happy, calm and composed. Her mind became clear, serene, pliable and malleable. I, therefore, instructed her to develop *mettā* towards a hostile person. Then, she remembered her senior officer who was always finding fault with her. She did not like him. So I told her to develop *mettā* towards her senior officer. She tried to feel *mettā* for him by practising *mettā*-meditation. The next day in the interview she said she was successful in developing *mettā* towards her hostile person. After one month's *mettā*-meditation she went back home. After one week she came and told me about her success. When she went back home her brother told her that her senior officer visited her house and asked her brother about her health and her meditation, which he had never been done before. When she went to the office his attitude has changed and he did not find fault with her. So she judged that this is the benefit of *mettā*-meditation that she had practised for one month. So we can say that when a meditator is skilled in *mettā*-meditation he successfully develops *mettā* towards a hostile person.

## About a Dead Person

A dead person should not be the object of the specific *mettā*-meditation. The Visudhimagga says that if you develop loving-kindness towards a dead person, you cannot attain either access or absorption concentration. It mentions a story of a young monk who developed *mettā* towards his preceptor living in a distant monastery. The young monk could not attain any concentration in his meditation. So, he went to a senior monk who was an Arahant living near his monastery and asked him why he did not attain any concentration in his meditation though he was skilful in *mettā*-meditation. The senior monk told him to seek the object. So the young monk went to the monastery where his preceptor lived. Then he found that the preceptor had passed away. He came to know that is the reason why he did not attain any concentration. Then he took another person as the object of *mettā*-meditation. He easily attained absorption concentration (*jhāna*).

## Who is the First Object?

Then we should know who should be the first object of *mettā*-meditation in the beginning. The Visudhimagga says as follows:

First of all it should be developed only towards oneself, saying repeatedly thus, “May I be happy and free from suffering”, or, “May I keep myself free from enmity, affliction and anxiety and live happily<sup>1</sup>”.

So he should first, as example, pervade himself with loving-kindness. Next, after that, in order to proceed easily, he can recollect such gifts, kind words, etc., as inspire love and endearment, such virtue, learning, etc., as inspire respect and reverence met with in a

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<sup>1</sup>The Path of Purification, ch. 9, para. 8.

teacher or his equivalent or a preceptor or his equivalent, developing loving-kindness towards him in the way beginning “May this good man be happy and free from suffering”. With such person, of course, he attains absorption.<sup>2</sup>

## **Breaking of the Barriers**

But if this Bhikkhu does not rest content with just that much and wants to break down the barriers, he should next, after that, develop loving-kindness towards a very dearly loved friend, then towards a neutral person as a very dearly loved friend, then towards a hostile person as neutral. And while he does so, he should make his mind malleable and wieldy in each instance before passing on to the next.<sup>3</sup>

Then, he should break down the barriers by practising loving-kindness over and over again, accomplishing mental impartiality towards the four persons, that is to say, himself, the dear person, the neutral person and then the hostile person.

The characteristic of it is this. Suppose this person is sitting in a place with a dear, a neutral, and a hostile person, himself being the fourth; then bandits come to him and say, “Venerable sir, give us a Bhikkhu”, and on being asked “Why”, they answer “So that we may kill him and use the blood of his throat as an offering”, then if that Bhikkhu thinks, “Let them take this one, or this one”, he has not broken down the barriers. And also if he thinks, “Let them take me but not these three”, he has not broken down the

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<sup>2</sup>The Path of Purification, ch. 9, para. 11.

<sup>3</sup>The Path of Purification, ch. 9, para. 12.

barriers either. Why? Because he seeks the harm of him whom he wishes to be taken and seeks the welfare of the others only. But it is when he does not see a single one among the four people to be given to the bandits and he directs his mind impartially towards himself and towards those three people that he has broken down the barriers.<sup>4</sup>

## Free Development of Mettā-Meditation

The Visudhimagga, in the above paragraph, explains how to break the barrier (*simasambheda*) but any meditator can practise *mettā*-meditation just to have the feeling of loving-kindness in himself without breaking of barrier. He need not follow the order of development mentioned in the Visudhimagga.

So, first of all, he develops *mettā* towards himself. After he has some feeling of *mettā* in himself he should develop *mettā* towards his teacher, preceptor or any equivalent person which is endowed with *sīla*, *samādhi* and *paññā*. After that he can develop *mettā* towards any person he has chosen for meditation. In this way he can cultivate *mettā* towards one person after another or all beings in the universe.

May all beings develop *mettā* and be happy, peaceful and free from all kinds of suffering.

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<sup>4</sup>The Path of Purification, ch. 9, para. 40–41.



## About the author

The venerable Chanmyay Sayadaw U Janakābhivamsa, born 24 July 1928, is a Theravada Buddhist monk from Myanmar.

He was born in Pyinma village, Taungdwingyi Township, British Burma, on Tuesday, 24 July 1928. His parents were U Phyu Min and Daw Shwe Yee. He started to study the Buddhist scriptures at the age of fifteen as a novice monk. He received the higher upasampada ordination in 1947 and continued advanced studies of Buddhist scriptures. He practised Vipassana meditation under the instruction of the most Venerable Mahasi Sayadaw from 1953 to 1954. He was then invited by the State Buddha Sasana Organization to be an editor of the Buddhist scriptures in Pali for reciting Buddhist scriptures at the Sixth Buddhist Council in Myanmar.

Starting from 1957, the Venerable Sayadaw spent six years in Colombo, Sri Lanka, where he continued his studies of English, Sanskrit, Hindi and Sinhalese languages. He returned to Myanmar in June 1963. At the invitation of the state Buddha Sasana Organisation, he took up residence at Kaba-Aye where he edited the publications of Pali Texts.

In 1967, he was appointed by the Venerable Mahasi Sayadaw as a meditation teacher at Mahasi Sasana Yeiktha, Yangon. In 1977 Sayadaw Ashin Janakabhivamsa took up residence at Chanmyay Yeiktha Meditation Center which was donated to him by some devotees and became the abbot of the center. He has been since then well known as Chanmyay Sayadaw.

In 1979–1980 Chanmyay Sayadaw accompanied the Most Venerable Mahasi Sayadaw's Dhamma Mission to Europe and the U.S.A. He has undertaken many Dhamma missions to countries in Asia, Europe, and the United States. As recently as July 2015, at the age of 87, he travelled to the UK, Ireland, and Canada giving Dhamma Talks.

