Karanīya Mettā Sutta

Bhante Bodhidhamma · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Bhante Bodhidhamma · 28:33

I was rooting around the websites and I came across a course that was written by a man called Andrew Olendzki. He was the director of the Barre Center for Buddhist Studies, which is an offshoot from IMS, which is the big meditation center in Barre, Massachusetts. That was begun by Joseph Goldstein, Sharon Salzberg, Jack Kornfield, and lots of others. He did a lot of good work while he was there and they produce a very good magazine.

Anyway, he's done a course based on the Karaniya Metta Sutta, which is what we normally go through at the end of this sitting. So I thought I'd just go through it to give you an idea of how the Buddha puts it all together. And then if you want, I'll put the link for that course if you want to take it a bit further.

Namo tassa bhagavato arahato sammā-sambuddhassa. Namo tassa bhagavato arahato sammā-sambuddhassa. Namo tassa bhagavato arahato sammā-sambuddhassa. — Homage to the Buddha, the Blessed Noble and fully Self-Awakened One.

Just in case I forget at the end, I hope you have a joyful Christmas and a great new year. I usually forget to say those things.

So the Karaniya Metta Sutta is the discourse on what we ought to do in order to develop *mettā*. That's what Karaniya means. And it comes from a very early strata of the Buddha's teachings, which was a collection of verses. Remember that in those days, they couldn't read and write. It's a bit odd to think of the Buddha as an illiterate, but he was. And therefore, because it was written as a verse, it's pretty close to what he himself would have developed.

That word mettā comes from the word mitta, which means friends. Now, to translate mettā, we can use the words that you'll see, this loving kindness. So loving is the attitude that you have within yourself and kindness is the way you express it. There's another one called goodwill. That stresses the role of intention and the will itself. And of course, it's in the Christmas greeting, isn't it? Peace on earth and goodwill to all men, or as we would say, all sentient beings.

Bhikkhu Bodhi's definition is a heartfelt concern for the well-being and happiness of others. I think that touches a bit on compassion, really. And it doesn't really mention that there's no self-interest and there's no attachment.

We've got lots of types of love: erotic, romantic, family relationships, friends, people at work. Now, those aren't evil relationships. You would still have those relationships, even if you were fully liberated. But unfortunately, because we're not liberated, there'll be some attachment to them. There'll be some

expectations of them, which leads to disappointment and sometimes to control. So that's all to do with the type of unwholesome love.

Now, Buddhaghosa, who was this writer of the Path of Purification — some of you might know, it's a great big tome, which is probably one of the great spiritual manuals of the world — in the fifth century. This was his definition. This is how he defined all virtues. Mettā has the mode of friendliness as its characteristic. Its natural function is to promote friendliness. It is manifested as the disappearance of ill will. That's a bit odd, isn't it? To manifest something that disappears. But it's basically when there's no ill will, you know that it's got to be mettā. And its footing, its basis is seeing with kindness.

Now, here's a line which I like. When it succeeds, it eliminates ill will, because you can't have those two mental states together, right? If you've got good will, there can't be ill will there. When it fails, it degenerates into selfish, affectionate desire. Those are a couple of strong lines there.

Mettā, of course, appears quite often in the Buddha's lists. It's one of the perfections. It's one of the divine abodes, which is the most beautiful mental state that you can develop. It's one of the four illimitables with compassion, joy, and equanimity. It means that you can just develop it indefinitely, right? And it's also a suitable subject to develop these absorptions, these blissed-out states.

Okay, so the first stanza says, "This is what has to be done. One has to be skilled in what is good in order to reach the peaceful state." *Santampadam*, the path of peacefulness. Now, this is about achieving Nibbāna, but you'll find if you do that course that he stretches it into peace in society, peace within yourself and all that. But it's actually, this discourse is actually about achieving Nibbāna. But it is worthwhile to notice when you're peaceful because that quality of peacefulness is a quality of the seven factors of enlightenment. It's one of those things that we ought to develop just generally.

So these are the things that we have, in a sense, he's presuming that we've developed a little bit. The first one is *sakko*, which means a confidence, a capability in doing this work. The next one is to be *ujucha, suhu chu*, which means to be upright, really upright. So this is to do with our moral rectitude, and to get away from the stuff that comes out of delusion, of acquisitiveness, aversion and fear.

The next one is *suvaco*, which means skillful speech when spoken. So it's to be, the speech has to be kindly, it has to be truthful, beneficial, and rather importantly, timely, right? It might be kind, truthful and beneficial, but you shouldn't have said it then. *Mudu* is a softness, a tenderness, and it's normally put with the word for heart. So it's a gentle heart, a tender heart, a gentle person. And *atimāni* is to be without pride, arrogance, conceit, to be unpretentious.

So those are virtues that we need to develop. And then he carries on.

Now, the next verse, he says, to be content, *santusako*, to be contented. Now, this isn't the contentment that you get when you've done a good job and you feel contented or you've found someone whom you like to be with and you feel contented. This contentment is a basic line. It's a basic attitude of contentment. To

enter each moment with that sense of this will do, this contentment. It doesn't mean you can't change something, but it underlies everything that we do, a sense of contentment.

The next one is *subharo*, which means easily maintained. This actually probably refers to the monastics. But it's a case of making a distinction between what you need, what you want, and what is actually sufficient. And that will determine on whatever you have to do in your daily life. But basically, it's really needing only little. And these days, of course, with climate change, it has a bit more meaning.

The next one is *appakicho*, which means to be less busy. Well, I think that rings a bell, doesn't it? We're always trying to do too much, trying to achieve too much, burnout and all that. So it's good to reflect upon our lifestyle, just find out where we're actually stressing and to just let go of a few things. I think it's to do with priority.

And there's also, I think what also helps in life is to make the small tasks that we do meaningful. Just washing pots, vacuuming and all that. Normally, we want to get them out of the way and get on with life. But if you see them as an occasion where you can just stop for a minute and do them very mindfully in a very relaxed way, abandoning all ill will... They become little islands, and then from there you launch into your next project. So remember the old Zen saying, when you wash the pots, just wash the pots.

Engaging lightly, *salahuka vutti*. This is not to take things too seriously, to keep mindfulness. Not to be able to relax and to have that wholesome heart attitude. It's actually, just to keep a smile on the face. The background smile really helps, so you don't get too serious about things.

Santindriyo, this is quietening the faculties. We're a very visual culture with all this YouTube and TV and Netflix and social media, and we're always looking for some sensual delight, the countryside. So we're always looking for that excitement. And in a sense, that misses the mark because it's not quite happiness, right? And that's why often excitement doesn't work for us. Whatever used to make us really excited loses its flavour. So it is a case of being more content. It comes back to being content. And to just every so often to spend some time just looking at a blank wall... And just allowing that sense to calm down a bit.

Nipako just means prudent, wise, discreet, thoughtful. So that's a lovely quality, isn't it? To be considerate, basically, to be considerate, to be aware of what other people need. We're always centering upon ourselves.

Apagabho means to be modest, to be courteous and not impudent. So again, it's about not pushing yourself. I mean, the word humility doesn't go down too well these days because we all believe in the sovereign self. But humility actually just means to be natural and to be in communication with people, to see yourself in relationship.

Well, this is, again, a reinforcement not to hanker after worldly things. So when you walk down the shopping mall or something like that, and your eyes constantly gazing at things — the clothes, the jewellery, the computer, the laptops, the phones. It's always looking for something. But if you're there to

get something specific, just go for it and then have a cup of tea.

So all this is about calming the senses, just calming down, trying to be much more contented.

The third stanza, so he sums it all up here. He says not to commit even the slightest deeds that a wise person could find fault with. So that basically sums it up.

Now, this wise person is the spiritual friend, your *kalyānamitta*. That could be a teacher. It could be a very close friend, somebody whom you can talk to about things which have a spiritual meaning. And if there isn't one, there's always the Buddha within. I mean, when I have a moral question or, in a sense, any question, if I just sit very still and just ask this Buddha within, just plunk the question into the heart... I normally get a fairly good answer. So we have a wisdom inside us, but often sometimes, of course, we're overcome with doubt and to discuss it with somebody can be very helpful.

And then we get the first well-wishing. So, may all beings live in safety, *khemino*, and in gladness, *sukhino*. The word *sukhi* just means happy. And if you put a D instead, it's *dukkhi*, that means you're not happy. And then it says, *sabbe sattā bhavantu sukhitattā*. So, may all beings develop, may become more happy.

So, that's your first thing, is giving us a hint as to what we ought to say. And it's not about me feeling happy. Well, when you're doing the mettā, it's not about making yourself feel happy. Your intention is about others. I mean, there is a point where you turn into yourself and say, may I be happy? There's no problem with that. But you're not practising mettā in order to be happy. Then it just becomes a self-centered practice. You're doing it in order to establish a relationship with the world, which is one of giving, of offering.

And then he gives us ways in which we can do this, gives us a technique. So he says, whatever beings there are, weak or strong, without exception, long or short, big, medium-sized, small, subtle or gross. Now the word here is *pāna*, which means breathing beings. So I presume this includes insects, but I'm not so sure about bacteria, if they're beings. And what he's suggesting is no matter how a being looks, it's always that attitude of offering goodwill. Doesn't matter what their physical shape is.

In the second verse, he opens it out. He says to those who are visible or invisible, can't even see them. Residing near or far, those who have already been born and those who've yet to be born. This is almost transcending space and time. So, you're really just expanding it outwards.

Now, in the sixth verse, let no one, now he's come back to, well, once you've developed this mettā, you can't do this. You can't deceive somebody. So to deceive somebody really is to take advantage of them. And let him wish no harm. Not to take advantage of somebody.

And then the next one is not to despise anybody. So you have to be careful about that. Not to be excessively, not to be angrily critical. You've got to watch out for jealousy and bad mouthing. And of course, this also refers to ourselves, what they call the inner critic. When you hear yourself lambasting

yourself, it's just... Just turn towards it and say, calm down. You have to turn it into a little devil and give it a hug.

So again, it's not wishing harm to anyone. He sums it up with that, not wishing harm to anyone.

And in the seventh verse, he points out, just as a mother would protect her only child at the risk of her own life, even so we should cultivate boundless thoughts of loving kindness towards all beings. Now, that's a very strong image, a mother protecting a child who's being threatened.

And I saw a video recently of a lion and a lioness who were beginning to mate and they were walking at opposite sides of a fence that was obviously a containment in a reservation for them and as the lion moved down one side of the fence he was giving sounds of yawning if you can imagine that like a lion yawning. And she, the lioness, was coming the other way with a companion, yawning as well. So I thought when they get together, there'd be a bit of hanky-panky and smooching. But in fact, as soon as he got close to her, he attacked her viciously. And both of these lionesses attacked him. And then he pulled away.

And I thought, well, that is so strange because there was no comment about it. But what happens is if a lioness has cubs by a particular lion, then the lion goes off. He's done his bit. If a stray lion comes past, he'll try to kill all those cubs, mate with her so that she has his cubs. And she has to defend them. And sometimes she's actually killed. But most times she just comes away with bites and bruises. So what he was doing was testing her fierceness. And then in the video, the commentator says, and now he's showing respect. I couldn't work that out, but seemingly he was showing her respect.

And of course, we have the story of the Buddha calming the elephant that had been set upon him by the dastardly Devadatta, who was a cousin and wanted to lead the order. He had lots of criticism. And that was the picture I had up before. Just in case you didn't see it, I'll just share the screen quickly.

So that's the *mudrā*. That's what we associate with loving kindness, that hand, offering it from love. It's nicely moved there. Normally, it's just a flat hand, which isn't so appealing. And in his lap, I'm taking that to be the Dhamma, the jewel of the Dhamma. It's a Thai statue, that.

So now we have a third way in which we can develop that mettā, and it goes even further, let him cultivate a boundless thoughts of loving kindness towards the whole world. And what he means there is, of course, all the worlds, all the cosmos, above, below and all around. So that's that practice of doing it in the six directions. Normally, it's a compass thing, north, south and all that. And as we do it, all beings in front, behind, left, right, below and above. Unobstructed, free from hatred and enmity.

Now, the next verse, he's saying that this should be developed all the time. It should be just a natural state of mind. So whether you're standing, walking, seated or lying down, so as long as you're awake, you should develop this mindfulness.

Now, whenever I read a translation, I always slip in "affectionate" there. It's not just mindfulness. It's an

affectionate mindfulness.

Just now, as we're all looking at each other, put a little kindling of kindness in your heart towards everybody. See, you can do it, can't you? That can be there all the time, even when we're not so aware of it. And that's what he's asking us to do. And he calls it a divine abiding. So this is like being a god.

In the final verse, he sums it up. He says, you don't want to have erroneous views. So these are the views about how we create suffering for ourselves through that wrong desire, understanding impermanence, and the fact that we have to get used to the idea that we're going to grow old, sick, and die. And this relationship we have with the body, heart, and mind of it being me. So that's the identity of having this human form. And our practice of *vipassanā* is trying to make that clear. In fact, what we are looking for is what's looking.

There's also erroneous views about *kamma* — that you can't get away with anything. It comes back in one way or the other. There's a very interesting quote from Jung that I came across. He says, "Whatever has been repressed will manifest as fate." And if you look at your life and you find yourself doing something over and over again, falling into the same sort of mistake, then underneath that, there will be some sort of suppressed or repressed mental state. I think that's really quite an insight.

So then endowed with these virtues and wise with insight. Now, the next line is a bit heavy because you have to abandon all sensual desire. But remember, it doesn't mean you stop eating. It just means to abandon the wrong desire — which is that greed, which is trying to get happiness from the sensual world as a permanent thing. That's the problem. Happiness arises and passes away like anything else.

And then he says, you don't have to be reborn again. The actual translation is "not to be conceived in a womb." Basically, you don't have to be reborn again.

So that's just a quick run through this particular discourse. So how do we practice it? Well, remember that it's good to have a touchstone. It's good to have something you can go back to, which raises that sense of warmth, that kindling in the heart. For instance, I know one teacher talks about holding a baby. You use a pet. We always love pets. Or we normally start with the benefactor — so that's somebody who warms the heart.

Now if you've got that and you've developed it a bit, you can always go back to it whenever we move into a category and you don't feel that the warmth in the heart has gone. You just go back and remind yourself of that kindling by bringing that person or the pet or whatever it is to mind. And remember that you're developing it in order to develop right attitude towards all beings.

The other thing is not to worry if it doesn't come. Because the heart has its own logic, doesn't it? You want to feel loving, you're just not feeling it. So if you obsess about that, then it becomes a misery. But just by doing the practice, I think you'll find...

I have a poet, Gerard Manley Hopkins, who some of you might know. He's known as the father of modern English poetry. And some of his sonnets are really about his own spiritual development. And there's one that starts, "My own heart, let me more have pity on. Let me live to my sad self, hereafter kind, charitable. Not live this tormented mind with this tormented mind tormenting yet. I cast for comfort. I can no more get by groping round my comfortless than blind eyes in their darkened day or thirst confined thirsts all in all, in all the world of wet."

So those first two lines I've often used — "My own heart let me more have pity." And if you can get that kindling within yourself, then you offer it out from there. I find it extremely strong. "Let me live to my sad self hereafter, kind and charitable," to my anxious self, my angry self, to my guilty self. It doesn't do much for the poem, but you can use it that way so that you can generate a warmth towards yourself. And of course, it's easier to move from that heart. But as I say, if it's not there, not to worry at all — you can use your pet or something to generate it.

Very good. So I thought what we would do is instead of usually ending with the refuge and precepts, we would start with those. And then I would do that guidance through the *Mettā Sutta*. And then we would continue until the end, when I would read the discourse, a translation of the discourse, and end off with our usual chant of *Sabbe sattā sukhitā hontu*.

I can only hope my words have been of some assistance and that by your practice of *mettā*, you will generate a beautiful heart that will lead you to everlasting peace and happiness.

Transcriptions produced locally using Swiss low-carbon electricity. Corrections and rewriting by cloud-hosted AI.