

The Practice of the Metta Sutta

By Master Jiqun

The *Metta Sutta*¹ has always been an important part of our practice, serving as both a customary ritual before discussion sessions and an integral part of our daily morning meditation. Yet, how much do we actually know about the *Metta Sutta*? Are we using it merely as a soothing background music, or do we fully meditate according to its texts, turning it into a true practice of loving-kindness?

Without the right approach, the *Metta Sutta* could just become background music, and even that is not guaranteed, as our minds may still wander with distractions while listening. To truly make the *Metta Sutta* a practice of loving-kindness, we must grasp the scripture's essence, change our fixed beliefs, perform corresponding visualization practices, and integrate its teachings into daily lives. I will now introduce seven essential aspects of practicing the *Metta Sutta*.

I What Is Metta?

Metta, or loving-kindness, is the wish to bring happiness to other sentient beings. It is often accompanied by compassion—the desire to ease the suffering of others. However, there are certain obstacles we must overcome first. Many people struggle to cultivate loving-kindness or compassion because they feel disconnected or indifferent. Some may even harbor ill will or rejection towards certain beings, taking pleasure in their misfortunes. With such a mindset, it is impossible to foster loving-kindness.

Therefore, these obstacles must be addressed. To cultivate Metta, we need to establish connections with others. This will lead us to care about them, treat them kindly, and offer help when needed. We also have to expand our hearts to embrace all kinds of sentient beings. By doing so, we can truly develop a heart of loving-kindness towards all.

II The Importance of Cultivating Metta

Some people believe they just need to mind their own business and wonder, “Why should I practice Metta towards strangers or wish them well? How would that benefit me and the world?”

¹ (Chinese: Ci jing 慈经) In Pali, the “Discourse on Loving-Kindness”; one of the best-loved and most frequently recited texts in the Buddhist world.

The essence of Buddhist practice is cultivating the mind. By cultivating a loving-kindness mindset, we can overcome our inner indifference, hostility, and hatred, becoming warm and peaceful individuals who exude positive energy. Those with Metta are agreeable, which helps them to build good relationships and create a harmonious atmosphere.

Metta also acts as a source of merit. As shown in Nagarjuna's *Precious Garland of Advice for a King*, "Even three times a day, offering three hundred cooking pots of food does not match a portion of the merit acquired in one instant of Metta. Devas and humans, even non humans, will protect you. You will have pleasures of the mind and the body. Poison and weapons will not harm you. Effortlessly you will attain your aims and be reborn in the form realm." As shown by these verses, cultivating Metta can bring boundless merits.

Loving-kindness is also a driving force for altruism, enabling us to achieve the great compassion of buddhas and bodhisattvas. These enlightened beings possess two major qualities: the attainment of wisdom and the attainment of compassion. In the Seven-Point Cause and Effect Method for cultivating bodhicitta, Metta serves as a crucial foundation. Without Metta—without the desire for sentient beings to experience happiness and the willingness to alleviate their suffering—we cannot possibly give rise to bodhicitta or perfect our spiritual practice. The Seven-Point Cause and Effect Method uses a sequential technique to help us develop Metta and compassion. It starts by making us realize that in the beginningless samsara, all sentient beings have once been our mothers. This realization evokes gratitude for their dedication and care, ultimately kindling our resolve to repay their love. After establishing Metta and compassion by using this method, we meditate on our altruistic resolve to liberate all sentient beings from samsara, which will guide us towards cultivating bodhicitta. The Seven-Point Cause and Effect Method demonstrates that we must overcome certain hurdles, such as our disconnection, indifference, and animosity towards others to nurture loving-kindness and compassion. How do we achieve this? The key lies in building connections with others by recognizing that, in the beginningless samsara, all beings across the six realms have once been our mothers.

However, merely acknowledging this fact is insufficient, as many individuals struggle to show filial devotion to their present mothers, let alone those from previous lives. Therefore, after accepting that all beings had been our mothers, we must reflect on their motherly love and pledge to reciprocate it. Both Master Tsongkhapa's *Great Treatise on the Stages of the Path* and Master Xing'an's *An Inspiration to Give Rise to the Bodhi Mind* contain sections that help us contemplate the selfless devotion of our current and past mothers. For example, we must reflect on the truth that without our mothers bringing us into this world and caring for us, our current life and all we have would not exist. As such, we can never repay her in full. Genuine Metta that can inspire action must spring from this fundamental understanding.

In conclusion, to effectively cultivate Metta, it is essential to know its importance and the correct methods to develop it. If we fail to meet these prerequisites, we may find ourselves listening to the *Metta Sutta* without fully engaging with its message, or like detached observers

merely appreciating a soothing, pleasant melody. In this case, the *Metta Sutta* would merely become another sutra that appears unrelated to our lives, providing neither guidance nor direction for personal growth.

Metta, beyond refining our mindset, can eliminate the hostility and hatred at the heart of all conflicts and wars. If more people embrace and spread Metta, they can generate a powerful field of loving-kindness that eases anxious minds and fosters social harmony. In a world where many are concerned about air pollution, the most harmful pollution is actually not in the air we breathe but in the negativity stemming from hatred and cruelty. Such a world desperately needs the purifying power of Metta.

Therefore, practicing Metta is crucial for both individuals and the world.

III

What Does the Metta Sutta Say?

What exactly does the *Metta Sutta* teach us? If we do not have a clear understanding, we may just listen to it and forget about it soon after. Even when reciting it word by word, we may be lacking sincerity. This type of passive listening and recitation will not help us cultivate the mind. The *Metta Sutta* has two components: the methods for cultivating Metta and the targets of our Metta practice.

1. Methods for Cultivating Metta

The core methods revolve around four essential wishes:

May I and all living beings be free from hostility and danger.

May I and all living beings be free from emotional harm.

May I and all living beings be free from physical harm.

May I and all living beings remain happy.

At first glance, these four phrases may seem simple, but let us deeply consider their relationship to our lives. Being free from conflicts and hostility allows us to feel truly safe and worry-free. Being free from emotional harm and physical imbalances enables us to experience lasting happiness. Is this not the perfect life?

Ask yourself: what is the ultimate goal of all your efforts? It all comes down to these four things—a sense of security, freedom from physical harm, freedom from emotional harm, and ultimately, happiness. So let us bless ourselves and all sentient beings with these four wishes. When everyone can enjoy such an ideal life, is the world not at its best?

Some may wonder: can the world really become better just by thinking positively about it? The truth is, if we approach everything with loving-kindness, our world will naturally become beautiful. Then, we can spread this beauty to all sentient beings. How effectively we can do

this depends on the strength of our Metta—is it pure, complete, and sincere? Indeed, cultivating Metta requires constant practice and nurturing. It is more than a one-time event or a simple wish made during meditation; it is a mental force that needs to be strengthened and expanded.

2. The Targets of Our Metta Practice

How do we extend a single thought of Metta to encompass all beings, everywhere, and at every moment? This involves three progressive stages.

First, we need to focus on cultivating Metta towards ourselves. Our body and mind, the five aggregates, although illusory like a dream, serve as indispensable conditions that aid our practice. This is because we can use these illusory elements to attain the ultimate truth. For this reason, we should take care of our bodies and give them blessings. It is said that those who do not love themselves cannot genuinely love others because they do not know what love truly is. When practicing loving-kindness, we need to first allow ourselves to immerse in the feelings of loving-kindness and sincere blessings. Although concepts like “loving-kindness” and “sincere blessings” may seem familiar and straightforward on paper, deeper within our minds, we may lack experience in expressing them, or we may struggle to evoke them quickly in actual practice. Therefore, beginning with self-practice is the most effective approach.

The “body scanning meditation” we are learning also starts with familiarizing ourselves with our body, caring for it, and imbuing it with right mindfulness and positive energy and strength. This helps us to dispel negative feelings, enabling us to have a healthy body and mind when practicing Buddhism and benefiting others. Only after cultivating loving-kindness within ourselves can we effectively spread it.

Next, we need to practice Metta towards people around us. We should extend the Metta we have personally cultivated and experienced to our parents, teachers, relatives, friends, fellow practitioners, monks, and lay disciples in our community. We should sincerely wish for them to be free from hostility, danger, mental and physical suffering, and hope that they experience ongoing happiness. Since these people are familiar to us, it should not be too difficult to practice Metta towards them. Still, in the beginning, it is not necessary to visualize them all at once. We can divide these people into smaller groups to make our visualizations clearer and steadier before broadening our practice to encompass more of them.

Lastly, we need to cultivate Metta towards all sentient beings. From all beings with form and name; from all saints to non-saints; from all beings in the east, west, north, south, southeast, northwest, northeast, southwest, below, and above; to all those on land, in water, and in the air; from humans to the highest deities; and to all those in the woeful planes... In short, we should wish for all beings in the ten Dharma realms to be free from hostility, danger, mental suffering, and physical suffering, and hope they maintain happiness.

In conclusion, the cultivation of Metta is an ongoing journey of opening our hearts. By gradually progressing from ourselves to others, and from close connections to more distant ones, we can eventually encompass all sentient beings as recipients of our loving-kindness. This process will help us dispel indifference, jealousy, hatred, and anger within us, as well as negative emotions towards ourselves and others. Truly understanding the teachings of the *Metta Sutta* is crucial for implementing this guidance within our minds.

IV

Making Each Sentence a Heartfelt Wish

Once we understand the meaning of each sentence in the *Metta Sutta*, the next step is to move from being a mere listener to an active practitioner. This requires acknowledging the importance of loving-kindness for oneself, all beings, and the world. Of course, it will be best if you can develop bodhicitta. But even if you are in the initial stage of the Mindful Peace Courses and cannot yet attain this level, it is still essential to at least recognize the positive impact of loving-kindness on our physical and mental well-being, happiness, and social harmony.

When we embrace loving-kindness, we leave behind indifference and opposition. Then, in our family, work, and interpersonal connections, we will actively care for others, hoping they find relief from physical and mental distress and enjoy lasting happiness. This will establish a warm and harmonious atmosphere around us. As the saying goes, “When you give a rose, its scent remains with you.” By extending loving-kindness, we not only demonstrate our goodwill to others, but also strengthen our loving-kindness. Indeed, the more we use our loving-kindness, the more it multiplies.

We should transform each sentence of the *Metta Sutta* into a heartfelt wish—just as we do when we are seriously ill and sincerely hope for a speedy recovery, or when we deeply desire something we need. Our wishes must be genuine, pure, and untainted.

By making the *Metta Sutta* a daily practice and listening to it repeatedly, we strengthen these wishes, etching the scripture into our hearts, constantly reminding ourselves, and ultimately making loving-kindness the foundation of our lives. In contemporary terms, this means turning loving-kindness into a natural reflex. Thus, our wishes can remain strong, no matter what we say or do, allowing us to evoke loving-kindness anytime, anywhere.

As the *Metta Sutta*’s teachings become our own perspectives and mindsets, we will naturally develop a desire to contribute to the well-being of others. Then, by actualizing loving-kindness through real-life altruistic deeds, we further strengthen these positive perspectives and mindsets, leading to a profound transformation in the quality of our lives.

V

Practicing the Metta Sutta: Visualization and Cultivation

When practicing loving-kindness, how can we convert the *Metta Sutta*'s teachings into our genuine feelings? Visualization is a powerful technique. We can picture loving-kindness as sunlight bathing the earth. Sunlight sustains photosynthesis, making life flourish. It also acts as a natural disinfectant, clearing away dampness and mold. Moreover, it offers warmth, particularly during winter, instilling relaxation and happiness within us.

By visualizing our loving-kindness using these three attributes of sunlight, we can get a tangible sense of what loving-kindness feels like. Once we know what loving-kindness truly feels like, we can then go back to the *Metta Sutta* and turn each wish from it into radiant beams of sunlight. Visualize this sunlight spreading across all lands, eradicating the world's animosity and threats, dispelling the mental and physical suffering of all sentient beings, and infusing their cells with energy and carefree joy. As we visualize in this manner, it should feel as if we are observing a sunrise, darkness vanishing as life thrives.

Avalokitesvara is known for responding to prayers in countless locations. In the *Universal Gate: A Commentary on Avalokitesvara's Universal Gate Sutra*, it is said that merely reciting Avalokitesvara Bodhisattva's name can free us from perils such as floods, fires, storms, weapon assaults, and attacks by malevolent brigands. How can Avalokitesvara alleviate these disasters? The answer lies in his immense loving-kindness. He has cultivated loving-kindness over countless eons, eventually achieving great unconditional loving-kindness and universal compassion for all beings, empowering him to safeguard them from danger.

In summary, to enhance our Metta, we need to integrate visualization techniques when meditating on the *Metta Sutta*. By practicing these visualizations daily, we will continuously strengthen our Metta, dispel the darkness in our minds, and nurture a growing sense of peace in our lives. If this visualization technique is challenging at first, we can start by treating each sentence in the *Metta Sutta* as a heartfelt wish, which can be powerful in its own right.

VI

From Seated Meditation to Practicing in Daily Life

When we cultivate loving-kindness during meditation, we sometimes feel really good, as if our hearts are filled with compassion. However, once off the cushion, that feeling may quickly dissipate as we encounter real-life challenges. This indicates that true loving-kindness has not genuinely arisen. We know that bodhicitta has two aspects: aspirational bodhicitta and engaged bodhicitta. Loving-kindness is similar. It is only through testing it off the cushion that we can truly understand the extent of our practice on the cushion.

First, during Metta meditation, we should make genuine wishes and use visualization to consistently cultivate and exercise loving-kindness, transforming ourselves into a reservoir and transmitter of loving-kindness. As we recite each phrase, we should spread Metta in every direction and across all the ten Dharma realms. However, at times, our Metta may be

obstructed when we think of people we dislike or feel indifferent towards. In these situations, it is important to revisit our relationship with all sentient beings, working to understand and accept even those we dislike or do not care about, and appreciate the opportunities they offer to test our practice.

Then, we must bring this loving-kindness into our daily lives. Can we treat all sentient beings with equal respect? When doing altruistic deeds, can we extend friendliness and care to all? This is the real measure of our loving-kindness. Otherwise, regardless of how much we practice Metta meditation, it may only amount to an empty promise without practical application.

Altruism is an effective way to cultivate loving-kindness, and it can be divided into elementary, intermediate, and advanced levels.

1. Three Levels of Altruism: Elementary

Elementary altruism involves understanding, sympathy, and acceptance, nurturing a mindset that takes joy in the successes of others and consistently feels grateful. Why do we get stuck when practicing Metta? Why do we find it difficult to generate loving-kindness towards certain people? It is because we are immersed in our own feelings and unable to understand others, making sympathy and acceptance impossible, let alone rejoicing and expressing gratitude. Even if we do have these qualities, they are extremely limited and do not extend to all beings. This indifference, separation, and opposition are the result of our self-attachment.

Thus, in order to expand our Metta, we must let go of self-attachment. This can be achieved by embracing the concept of dependent origination and fostering understanding and empathy, thereby allowing us to genuinely accept all sentient beings. We should recognize that those who harm us are victims themselves, ensnared by their own greed, anger, and ignorance. Like patients suffering from a grave illness, they are severely ill within samsara, causing them to act in ways that are beyond their control. This understanding can help us shift from opposition to empathy.

We sometimes impose expectations on others and cannot understand their actions and thoughts. This is also because we habitually look at situations from our own perspective. If we can learn to embrace the concept of dependent origination, we will be able to better appreciate individual differences. The principle of dependent origination reminds us that life is an infinite accumulation, and each person's character, habits, thoughts, and ways of thinking reflect their unique experiences. We should respect the principle of dependent origination, understand and accept others, and offer guidance using the most appropriate methods.

In conclusion, the greatest barrier to cultivating Metta is self-attachment, which becomes more pronounced in everyday experiences. To overcome self-attachment, profound Buddhist

wisdom is needed. We interact with three types of sentient beings: those we like and feel close to, those we are indifferent towards, and those we dislike and reject. When practicing Metta, we should transform indifference into empathy, dislike into acceptance, and distance into close connection. Only then can we approach all sentient beings in daily life with loving-kindness, rather than separating Metta meditation from our everyday experiences.

How extensive is Avalokitesvara Bodhisattva's great loving-kindness? Does achieving perfection in loving-kindness require him to free all sentient beings from samsara? Actually, it does not, because if that were the case, with countless beings still mired in samsara, how could buddhas and bodhisattvas have reached enlightenment? Having perfected loving-kindness means being able to generate Metta towards every sentient being we meet, providing help to the best of our abilities, and eradicating all traces of indifference, hatred, and opposition. Once this is achieved, we then have perfected loving-kindness.

2. Three Levels of Altruism: Intermediate and Advanced

At the intermediate level, altruism involves making the vow of great compassion of buddhas and bodhisattvas and practicing the six perfections² and the four means of conversion³.

Finally, advanced altruism is achieved by helping others while practicing equality, no-self, and no-obtain. This requires experiencing emptiness and understanding that all sentient beings in the six realms are fundamentally one. This realization helps us see that all distinctions between self and others arise from self-attachment. Only through such practices can one elevate conventional bodhicitta to ultimate bodhicitta, allowing us to engage in altruistic acts while recognizing that the three aspects—the giver, the recipient, and the act itself—are all empty. Thus, one aids sentient beings without clinging to the notion of sentient beings being saved.

In summary, the key focus when meditating on the *Metta Sutta* is to treat every sentence in the scripture as a sincere wish for the well-being of all sentient beings, whole-heartedly spreading loving-kindness. Then, off the cushion, continuously put these thoughts into practice, turning wishes into actions. The two aspects mutually reinforce each other: meditation provides guidance and a foundation for daily actions, while daily actions serve as a test and enhancement for meditation.

VII

Stages in the Practice of the Metta Sutta

While listening to the *Metta Sutta*, immerse yourself in the text and envision your mind as all-encompassing. It is formless, infinite, filling the vast emptiness, and spreading across countless world. In this way, your mind is everywhere, reaching all the void and the

² Six perfections: giving, morality, forbearance, vigor, meditative absorption, wisdom

³ Four means of conversion: generosity, kind words, helpfulness, and consistency between words and deeds

boundless Dharma realms. Thus, the device that is playing the *Metta Sutta*, too, represents your mind, and each phrase it utters is a genuine wish originating from within you. As you listen to the words of the *Metta Sutta*, you are continually reaffirming your vows, awakening and fortifying this loving-kindness wish.

The *Metta Sutta* covers a wide range of targets, from ourselves and the people around us to all sentient beings within the six realms, and even to all saints and sages. In the early stages of the practice, to thoroughly comprehend the main ideas of the sutra, it is essential to separate it into several sections and practice them one by one; otherwise, we might only develop a superficial understanding of the text. Begin by listening to the entire sutra, but then narrow your attention to work on a particular section.

For example, the phrases “may I be free from hostility and danger; may I be free from mental suffering; may I be free from physical suffering” can be practiced together or separately. By repeating these phrases, we gain a comprehensive understanding of hostility and danger and what it means to be liberated from them. Through repetition, we improve our concentration; and by maintaining clarity throughout the process, we strengthen our awareness.

We should only move on to practicing other sections when the mindset developed in the current section is clear, stable, and continuous. By “clear,” we mean knowing exactly what these wishes are and how they make us feel—as unmistakable as the distinct flavors of sugar and salt. “Stable” means being able to generate the corresponding mental state at any time with consistent intensity, rather than sporadically. “Continuous” implies that during Metta meditation, our loving-kindness mindset can be sustained without interruption between thoughts and remains undisturbed by delusive ideas. Furthermore, it means we can extend this loving-kindness into our everyday life. By achieving these three objectives, we can invoke the phrases from the *Metta Sutta* at any time, allowing us to emanate powerful loving-kindness akin to sunlight—illuminating the earth, banishing darkness, and filling all lives with love, harmony, and peace.

Meanwhile, when it comes to the target of our Metta, we also need to progress in stages. Start with yourself, then shift your focus to those around you, and ultimately broaden your Metta to include all sentient beings. In the future, we can integrate our Metta practice with the contemplations of the *Vows of Bodhisattva Samantabhadra Sutra*, merging the cultivation of Metta and bodhicitta.

Metta is often regarded as the foundation for cultivating bodhicitta. However, even after developing bodhicitta, we should continue practicing Metta. This is because bodhicitta enables us to strengthen our Metta, expanding it from finite to infinite. By integrating this with the experience of emptiness, we can truly achieve unconditional great loving-kindness and universal compassion. This is the journey we embark upon in our Metta practice.

VIII Summary

In summary, the practice of the *Metta Sutta* generally includes the following key points:

- 1. Understand Each Sentence:** Transform the content of the sutra into your sincere wishes for all sentient beings.
- 2. Incorporate Aspirations into Daily Life:** Practice and test these wishes in your daily life, bringing the aspirations from meditation into your everyday actions.
- 3. Meditative Practice:** Learn the meditative techniques of the sutra to dispel darkness, indifference, and opposition within your body and mind, and to establish friendly, harmonious, and warm relationships with others.
- 4. Bodhicitta and Loving-Kindness:** Based on the perspectives from the *Vows of Bodhisattva Samantabhadra Sutra*, develop bodhicitta through loving-kindness and perfect great compassion through bodhicitta.
- 5. Equality and Selflessness:** Cultivate boundless compassion and great empathy based on the views of equality, no-self, and non-obtain.

For those at the stages of beginner and intermediate practitioners, achieving the first three points is commendable. The last two points are the focus of advanced practitioners in the Victorious and Sagacious stages.