

Itivuttaka 3:7

One who actively develops loving kindness,	<i>yo ca mettam bhāvayati</i>
Mindfully and without limit,	<i>appamāṇam patissato</i>
Sees their attachments wane;	<i>tanu saṃyojanā hontī</i>
Their bonds become worn thin.	<i>passato upadhikkhayaṃ</i>

One who actively develops loving kindness

As gentle and natural as loving kindness can feel experientially, it is generally not something that “just happens” on its own except under particular circumstances (as when a mother gazes upon her slumbering child, for example). The Buddhist texts talk often about the need to develop loving kindness, to practice it often, and to “make it become” through an active process of cultivation. This sense is conveyed here in the stanza from the *Itivuttaka*, one of the texts in the Miscellaneous Collection (*Khuddaka Nikāya*) by use of the causative form of the verb “to be” (*bhāvayati* rather than *bhavati*), which can be taken literally as “causing to be.” Indeed the general term for loving kindness meditation uses the same construction: the development of loving kindness (*mettā bhāvanā*).

This does not mean that we need to strain or force ourselves to love when really we feel the opposite, but it does suggest the extent to which *mettā* practice, as a formal meditation, requires diligent application and sustained effort. Just like one, during meditation on the breath for example, must notice when attention has drifted from bodily sensations associated with breathing to stray mental associations and gently escort awareness back to the breath, in the same way maintaining consistency in the manifestation of loving kindness takes both patience and persistence. And as with all forms of mental training, what at first seems difficult and even odious can gradually become easier and even enjoyable.

Mindfully and without limit

Mindfulness (*sati*) and loving kindness (*mettā*) are not the same thing, but neither are they entirely different from one another. The phenomenological texts of the *Abhidhamma* have the two mental factors always arising together in the same moment of experience—when one is regarding an object with mindfulness, one at the same time has an attitude of benevolence toward it, and *vice versa*. This emphasizes the extent to which loving kindness is entirely different from love rooted in greed or desire or

attachment, and shares the quality of equanimity that comes along with mindfulness. No matter how strongly loving kindness is felt, it never spills over into grasping or clinging to the object regarded. If that does happen in experience, then one is no longer practicing *mettā* and has slipped into a near enemy of loving kindness such as passion (*rāga*).

Exercise: See if you can find this edge in your own experience, where loving kindness morphs into a more attached form of desire. Can you feel a difference between loving someone (your partner, your family, your pet?) on the one hand with a sense of equanimity, really wishing for their well being for their own sake, and on the other hand feeling love or affection for someone else that is tinged somehow with a sense of your own needs or aspirations? Sometimes we feel fondly toward someone because, in some subtle way, what they do for us, or give us, somehow feeds into our own sense of self, while at other times our feelings are more selfless or less self-oriented. Both are natural and authentic experiences; see if you can notice how experientially they feel a bit different.

The phrase “without limit” is by now quite familiar to readers well acquainted with the *Mettā Sutta*, as it is explored and elaborated upon in that text in a comprehensive way.

**Sees their attachments wane;
Their bonds become worn thin**

One effect of loving kindness practice is the loosening of the bonds that hold us attached in unhealthy ways to various sensory pleasures, habits, or points of view. There are official lists of five, seven or ten “fetters” (*saṃyojanā*), and here it is said of these that they “become thin” (*tanu*), or perhaps, become weak. Kindness has a softening effect. Notice how staying angry at someone requires that you rehearse to yourself the various things they have said or done that justify the anger, and how when you start feeling some sympathy or affection for them it is much more difficult to stay angry. The same happens with many other emotions besides anger. Loving kindness is a practice for loosening the hold many things have upon our hearts and minds.

This verse is also saying something important about rebirth and the liberating effect of loving kindness in the larger, cosmological picture. The word rendered “attachments” here is actually *upadhi*, a term used to indicate the karmic substratum or residue of unresolved unwholesome dispositions. As long as these “substrates” are present at the time of death, they will propel consciousness to re-arise on one of the planes of existence—i.e., to get reborn. The arahant is someone whose substrates are destroyed entirely, and is therefore no longer reborn; but each of us also have substrates that can become “dried up” (the literal sense of *-khaya* in *upadhikkhayaṃ* above) or attenuated by the practice of loving kindness.

So while *mettā* alone will not result in awakening, something only accomplished by wisdom (*paññā*), it can in very important ways work to prepare the ground for wisdom to arise by loosening and thinning out the various ossified emotional habits that keep us tied to renewed existence—from one lifetime to another, or from one moment to another. Any moment of loving kindness, and especially any series of moments strung together through the application of practice, will contribute to your becoming a kinder, gentler, more loving person in ensuing mind moments as the stream of consciousness flows forward. Try it, says this verse, and you will see (*passato*) for yourself that it is true.