

This is what's done by one skilled in what's good,  
Who reaches toward that most peaceful state:  
One would be capable, and straight—quite straight;  
Well-spoken, gentle, without too much pride;

*karaṇīyam atthakusalena  
yan tam santam padam abhisamecca:  
sakko ujū ca sūjū ca  
suvaco c' assa mudu anātimānī*

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### “That peaceful state”

The focus of this month's practice is upon what is meant in experience by the phrase “that most peaceful state.” It can be taken to refer to the ultimate consummation of the path, the attainment of nibbāna, but it can also be taken in any number of ways that fall short of that final goal and are directly accessible to all.

A peaceful state can last for a long time, or only briefly. It can be profoundly peaceful, or only relatively peaceful compared to what has just gone before or what will immediately follow. There can be moments of physical peacefulness, of mental peacefulness, or of emotional peacefulness. It can be an internal psychological state, or can refer to the interaction between people or groups of people. As such, one can speak of social, political, ecological or even economic peacefulness.

Indeed peace is a word that can mean many things in many different contexts, and this is what we can explore in direct experience throughout the month.

1. What does it feel like to sit quietly for some time after a period of heightened physical activity? As you sit quietly after a vigorous workout, a hard day's work, or some other form of bustling activity, see if you can explore the texture of the peacefulness that descends on the body. Feel the muscles relax; feel the breathing slow down; feel the calm as it settles upon the systems of the mind and body as a tangible state, an experience in itself. Peacefulness is not just the absence of agitation or activity, but is itself a positive quality or state that can be accessed, investigated, and understood viscerally.
2. What does it feel like to rest the mind after a period of busy activity, of multi-tasking, or of having to shove the mind through a series of words or numbers or stories in order to accomplish some task? If you have just finished some complex project, or something involving a lot of reading or listening or speaking, see what it feels like to relax the mind and let it wander free and easy. Perhaps this involves gazing off out the window, or into the landscape, or at the empty sky; perhaps it is closing the eyes and thinking about nothing whatsoever for a few moments; or maybe you can grab half an hour or an hour to sit in meditation and watch the spinning of the mind gradually spiral down and down into deeper levels of calm and relaxation.
3. What does a moment of emotional peace feel like after a period of turmoil? If you've just had a big fight with a friend or partner who has stormed out of the room (or perhaps you have stormed out), what does it feel like to have the strife and discord come to a sudden halt? Or perhaps you've just watched a movie, or read a book, or had a discussion with someone, that took you on an emotional roller coaster; or maybe you have been sitting with an ailing or dying friend, or come through to the other side of a bout of anxiety, fear, or despair. In any case it is a matter of feeling the contrast between the prior moments of agitation and the current moment of calm. What does it feel like to have something that had been raging with such intensity come to a stop, replaced with an experience of relative peace?

In each of these cases we are trying to connect directly to the **experience** of peace, to come to recognize it, to investigate it, and gradually also to cultivate it. By experience we mean not the idea of peace, or thinking about peace, or merely noticing the absence of various forms of turmoil—rather we are pointing to a way of actively exploring the texture of the mind and body in this present moment as it manifests peace.

- RIGHT NOW! What sensations are arising and passing away in the body?

- RIGHT NOW! What mental qualities are presenting themselves to inquiring attention?
- RIGHT NOW! What emotional states are reverberating in the heart?

The meditation instructions found in the *Foundations of Mindfulness Discourse* (M 10) quite early on direct the practitioner to calm the bodily activities (*passambhayam kāyasankhāram*) as part of practicing mindfulness of the body, and, more importantly, to pay very careful attention to what it feels like to do so. The same text also instructs in tranquilizing the mind and emotional states with cultivation of the tranquility factor of awakening (*passaddhi-sambhojjhanga*) when practicing the fourth foundation, mindfulness of mental objects.

This immediate exploration of peace and peacefulness is something that can happen virtually any time in almost any situation you find yourself in.

**Reflection:** What can you recollect or point to in your own experience that might correspond in some way to a “state of peace” or a “condition of calm?” What causes and conditions are generally present when you experience them? What might it take to encourage and develop these conditions in your life?

### “Skilled in what’s good”

Accessing what is good for you, implementing what is beneficial, accomplishing the noble purpose for which you aspire, achieving your wholesome goals—these can all be synonymous phrases involving a skill that can be learned. This text is telling us that whether or not we are able to experience that peaceful state is not just a matter of chance, nor is it dependent upon the will of another, or the benevolence of a deity. Rather, it is something we can learn how to cultivate, learn how to practice, for ourselves. The *Mettā Sutta* teaches how to do it.

Is this an idea that can be investigated in experience? What are some of the things you find yourself skilled at? Reading, writing, drawing, typing, playing music, playing a sport, meditating...these are all things that you could have once been incapable of doing very well at all, but over time and gradual training, became good at. Is life itself so different? This text is suggesting that achieving a state of well-being, of health and happiness, is a skill to be learned, just like any other skill. In fact, even learning what is and is not good for us is a skill, one we often develop with some considerable trial and error.

Becoming good at anything also involves knowing what we are aiming at, what we are aspiring to. The Buddha is guiding us toward an understanding of what will be of greatest value. Learning to recognize what is of most benefit, rather than what might be merely alluring or gratifying, is by no means an easy skill to develop. Perhaps we can learn how to be a good person, learn how to feel content, learn how to aspire to and work toward the most evolved and fulfilled state a human being is capable of. Surely if this were the case it would require, like every other sort of learning, making some sacrifices, applying oneself to the training with energy and enthusiasm, and repeating over and over again some basic skills as more complex skills gradually develop.

**Reflection:** How do you generally regard the presence of well-being or goodness in your life? Is it something that one gets if one is lucky? Does it come and go according to factors beyond your control? Is the sutta’s suggestion that it is a skill to be learned something you can relate to, or does it sound unrealistic?

### “What’s to be done”

Since attaining a peaceful state is a skill that can be learned, we must follow the instruction in direct practice. This is not something that we can just read about, or memorize, or otherwise acquire conceptually. It requires that we actually DO something. What is to be done depends upon what state of peace one is reaching toward.

For bodily peace, we must stop moving the body, settle into a comfortable position, and gradually attend to the physical sensations accompanying the calming of the bodily activities. For mental peace we need to stop thinking the various trains of thought that have been recently hurtling through the mind, settling attention on a particular object, or on some similar absence of complexity. Emotional peace requires the gradual tranquilization of whatever emotional states are churning up turmoil. Generally this means

calming the unwholesome or afflictive emotions, those rooted in greed, hatred and delusion, and this in part is why the *Mettā Sutta* begins its training in attaining peace with a series of ethical or moral clarifications.

As a Buddhist text, the *Mettā Sutta* will be informing us that in order to reach toward that **most** peaceful state, the calming of all formations or *nibbāna*, we will have to progress through the three phases of working with integrity (*sīla*), meditation (*samādhi*) and wisdom (*paññā*).

**Reflection:** What different responses do these different phrases evoke in you: “You should do this...” or “You must do this...” on the one hand, and “This is to be done...” or “This is what is done...” on the other? Does the change of idiom make a difference to your openness to the message that follows?

### “Capable”

It is interesting that the first quality or characteristic mentioned is capability. We begin with the confidence that peace can be attained, that it is indeed possible for each of us, in our own experience, to encounter and cultivate increasingly subtle states of peaceful well-being. Confidence or faith (*saddhā*) is the first of the five spiritual faculties or powers (*indriya* or *bala*), and as such stands as the bedrock of spiritual progress. Knowing it can be done, and knowing that you can do it, leads on naturally to the implementation of what needs to be done in order for the task to be accomplished. But knowing for sure that it is something of which we are capable, is not even in doubt from the very beginning. The reassurance that such a transformation is possible is demonstrated first and foremost by the Buddha himself, who has of course attained that most peaceful state. It is also attested by generations of practitioners—monks, nuns, and laypeople—who have reached toward it as well, with varying levels of success. Even in our own limited experience, almost everyone can access familiarity with what it feels like to attain some level of peace and well-being. That memory, however limited, of being capable of achieving peace, can become a beacon toward which the long journey ahead can aspire.

### “Straight—very straight”

Sit up straight! Rouse the body with energy (*virīya*—the second of the spiritual faculties), thereby rousing the mind with dignity toward accomplishing the goal. And when you think your body is erect, rouse it again and make it even more straight. This emphasis on rectitude sets the tone that even though peace is a skill that can be learned it nevertheless requires a good deal of energy or effort on the part of the practitioner. Nothing done well comes automatically, and all learned skills require diligence and the application of will.

The straightening of the body in order that it serve as a suitable platform for the development of concentrated mind states carries over into the straightening of behavior as well. Just as in English, the Pali use of the word “straight” here has the double meaning of not only physical but also moral integrity. It is a fundamental insight of the Buddha that healthy states of mind rely upon and consist of wholesome moral alignment. The first steps along this path of transformation thus entail practicing a series of behavioral and attitudinal reorientations.

Can you directly experience the analogy between physical and moral straightness? Can you feel how it feels “uplifting” and ennobling to protect a living being from harm, to give back something to which you know you are not entitled, to tell the truth even when it is difficult to do so? It is not a matter of obeying or not obeying an external set of rules; it is about what states manifest in lived experience under different behavioral conditions. Explore the immediate, tangible, effect on mind and body that comes from various episodes in your life when you are acting well or acting badly. See if through such explorations you might be able to build up a sense of what is meant here by straightness or rectitude. As we discover the feeling of “straightness” and rediscover it again and again in varying circumstances, it may even develop into a habit.

### **“Well-spoken”**

Although this phrase (like in English) has the sense of one being able to use language skillfully, its primary meaning in the Buddhist context is to speak kindly and without ill-will. Traditionally, speech that is well-spoken is timely, true, gentle, purposeful, and spoken with a mind of loving-kindness (A 5:198); or it is speech that is not untrue, divisive, harsh, or frivolous (A 10:206); or it is speech that is wholesome, worthy, pleasant and truthful (Sn 450). Speech is one of the three modes of action (bodily and mental action being the other two), and as such it is merely projecting outward into the world qualities of mind that are held internally. You can say “Have a nice day” with deep loving kindness, as an empty and neutral automatic phrase, or with such dripping venom and distain that it is like stabbing someone with a verbal dagger. The words are not in themselves primarily important—it is the emotional intention with which the words are spoken that counts most.

Practicing right speech is an entire area of practice unto itself, merely hinted at here with this one phrase. Suffice it to say in this context that clarifying what we say and how we say it is an important early step on the path to greater peace. Such a practice can start with noticing what other people are saying and the intent behind their words; can move on to becoming aware of the things we say ourselves in various contexts, seeing honestly the emotion underlying them; and can eventually include even those things we say to ourselves that others never hear. Are you judging yourself harshly? Are you telling yourself things you know are not actually true? Might you find yourself saying one thing but realize that your really mean something else again? Seeing these things, and gradually training yourself to let go of the habit, is an important component of reaching toward a state of peace.

### **“Gentle”**

How many ways are there to be gentle? One can be gentle of touch, gentle of speech, and gentle of thought. A gentle touch is when you connect with something or someone softly, with care, with affection, and with an intention of doing good rather than harm. Gentleness requires a level of mindfulness, of heightened awareness, toward the object touched, as well as an understanding of the context of the gesture. Gentle words are kind words, motivated by care and compassion. We speak gently to a child to sooth them if they are hurt or afraid; to a friend who is struggling with challenges to convey the sense they are not alone; to a stranger who might be agitated, in an attempt to calm them down. And gentle thoughts come naturally when one regards another with loving-kindness, with compassion, or with appreciative joy.

See if this is something that can be practiced over the entire month. Gentleness is above all a state of mind, and when it is present the actions, words and thoughts flowing out are naturally gentle. The challenge of the practice is not to do or say something that is gentle, but rather is to learn to place the mind in an attitude of gentleness. This too is something that can be practiced in almost any situation, and when one does so the three modes of action will easily become gentle.

### **“Without too much pride”**

Pride in the sense of dignity and self-worth is a healthy and appropriate state of mind. It is a component of the “straightness” mentioned earlier. This word (*atimāna*), however, means pride that is excessive, that goes too far, and as such it is antithetical to both the state of peace one aspires to and to the accomplishment of progress on the Buddhist path of transformation. That is because excessive pride involves a strong construction of self, of “the person who” is accomplished, or worthy, or capable of judging others as less than oneself.

It is not that this is an evil thing, you are wrong to do it, and a “good” Buddhist has vanquished this construction of self. Rather the construction of self is something that we are all doing all the time—the practice here is to notice it, and by noticing it, perhaps, understand better the role it plays in our lives. The process may be obvious if someone is pumped-up with great vanity or in the throes of an episode of narcissistic self-infatuation; but a similar thing is happening more subtly a thousand times a day as we become “the person who” is capable, well-spoken, or gentle, or “the person who” has very little pride.

One of the things that makes a state of peace so peaceful is an attenuation of the habit of “I-making” (*aham-kāra*) or of “becoming a self” (*atta-bhava*). It also makes the state of loving-kindness, the practice of *mettā*, possible because in order to place value and emphasis upon another person we have to reduce the emphasis on ourselves. Some of our more sublime moments as human beings are those in which we temporarily “lose ourselves” in the activity we are engrossed in, in care for the well-being of another, or in the humility of feeling part of something greater than ourselves.

**Reflection:** Reflect upon each of the six virtues or qualities mentioned in the last lines. Can you get a good sense of what each one means and feels like as distinct from the others? In what ways do these qualities overlap with one another; in what ways are they clearly distinct? See if you can go about your day, your week, your month trying hard to exemplify the virtues stated in this verse at every opportunity.

**Reflection:** This verse has generally been read in two different ways:

1. the virtues stated in the last lines are what need to be established in order to bring about the result of reaching the peaceful state;
2. the virtues are the natural expression of one who is aspiring for such a state.

The first reading takes a cause and effect approach, while the second is simply descriptive of the person who is skilled in what is good. What do you think? Would you tend to read it one way or the other? Or both? Or perhaps there is not much difference between the two?