

Devin Berry

*Metta and Karuna: Two Heart Practices to Cultivate in Meditation and Daily Life*

Week One: “The Roots of Metta”

December 3, 2022



Hello and welcome, everyone. I’m grateful to be here with you in the dharma. My name is Devin Berry. I’ve been practicing for twenty-plus years. I started in the Plum Village sangha of Thich Nhat Hanh, and for the last 15 years or so, I’ve been mainly practicing in the Theravada tradition in the Insight lineage. I’ve had a number of mentors over the years: Lyn Fine in the Plum Village sangha, Larry Yang, Andrea Fella, Carol Wilson, and Joseph Goldstein. I’ve also been influenced by their mentors and their teachers, and I also count a number of influences outside the Buddhist schools as well. I teach residential retreats at Insight Meditation Society and at Spirit Rock. I also teach at community dharma centers all around the country.

The series of dharmettes that I’m going to offer will focus on *metta* and *karuna*, or lovingkindness and compassion. Today, I’m going to start with metta. I will start with the roots of metta, the classical backstory and context of metta, and the story of how it all came about. It’s one that I’ve appreciated hearing over the years, and it’s quite close to my heart, so I’m going to share that backstory as well as the teaching that was offered within that story as well.

First, metta is generally translated as lovingkindness, friendliness, goodwill, or benevolence. It is one of the four divine abodes or the four *brahma-viharas*. Sometimes you may hear about it as one of the four heart practices. What’s interesting about metta is that it is the only one of the brahma-viharas that has its own dedicated discourse, the *Karaniya Metta Sutta*, where *karaniya* means what is wise to do or what should be done. It’s also one of the ten perfections or the ten paramis, and I’ll touch on that next week.

Metta was offered by the Buddha as a protection practice, something that safeguards our well-being that is a protection from inner harm. It is also a *shamatha* concentration practice, as well as a purification practice, something that purifies the heart.

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As I said, the *Karaniya Metta Sutta* has a backstory and context to it that I’d like to share with you now. This gives you a little sense of how it all went down back in the day.

It’s said that the Buddha first taught metta to a group of 500 monks, who went into a particularly and seemingly congenial forest for their three month rainy season retreat. The forest was adjacent to a village of strong supporters, who offered to build the monks 500 huts that they could stay in during this rains retreat. They were also happy to keep the monks’ bowls full of food during this practice period.

The monks moved in and they began practicing insight meditation, Vipassana. It’s said that the unseen beings, the forest devas who lived there, became fearful of the monks and felt quite put out of their home when they saw that the monks weren’t just visiting for a day or two. And so these forest-dwelling beings, these forest devas, began to create frightening sounds and sights, emitting some very distasteful odors, hoping that all this would make the monks go away from what they considered to be their forest, their home.

Soon enough, the monks became quite terrified, which broke their *samadhi*, or concentration, and disrupted their mindfulness. Some even developed fever and pain and dizziness in conjunction with the fear that they were experiencing. It all felt like it was impossible to continue practicing. And so they went to where the Buddha was staying, and they related their tale to the Buddha, to which the Buddha responded, “My beloved monks, go back exactly to the same forest and practice your meditation there.”

The monks responded to the Buddha’s words by pleading that they not be sent back to the forest, that it was impossible to actually practice, and the Buddha’s response was this: “Dear monks,

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because you went to practice meditation without a weapon of protection, you’ve encouraged many distractions and difficulties. So this time, I will give you a true weapon of protection.”

It’s said at this point that the Buddha offered them the metta teaching and practice. Out of great respect for the Buddha, the monks didn’t dare contradict his wishes, and so, armed with this metta teaching and practice, they went back to the forest, for a while continuing to experience the feelings of fear and anxiety while at the same time they were diligently and virtuously practicing metta.

Soon, because they stuck with it, there were no more fearful sights or sounds. Whereas the devas had previously been hostile towards the monks, their anger and resentment began to diminish and disappear, and they began to feel the monks’ metta. In fact, the feelings of respect and reverence began to be the devas’ experience, along with the sense of being connected. The inclination then arose to provide an environment of safety to protect the monks from the particular dangers of the forest so that they could practice meditation peacefully.

After recovering and strengthening and deepening their concentration and open-hearted presence through the practice of metta, it is said that all 500 monks at some point began practicing Vipassana again with metta as their foundation. It is said that because they were able to practice meditation calmly and peacefully, they all became arhats, these fully enlightened beings.

Now, I’d like to share with you the teaching that the Buddha gave to the monks while they were in the forest, the *Karaniya Metta Sutta*, that we know as the Buddha’s words on lovingkindness: “This is what should be done by one who is skilled in goodness and who knows the path of peace. Let them be able and upright, straightforward and gentle in speech, humble and not conceited, contented and easily satisfied, unburdened with duties and frugal in their ways,

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peaceful and calm and wise and skillful, not proud and demanding in nature. Let them not do the slightest thing that the wise with later reprove, wishing in gladness and in safety, ‘May all beings be at ease. Whatever living beings there may be, whether they are weak or strong, omitting none, the great or the mighty, the medium, short, or small, the seen and the unseen, those living near and far away, those born and to be born, may all beings be at ease. Let none deceive another or despise any being in any state. Let none through anger or ill will wish harm upon another.’

“Even as a mother protects with her life her child, her only child, so it is with a boundless heart should one cherish all living beings, radiating kindness over the entire world, spreading upwards to the skies and downwards to the depths, outwards and unbounded, freed from hatred and ill will. Whether standing or walking, seated or lying down, one should sustain this recollection. This is said to be the sublime abiding. By not holding two fixed views, the pure-hearted one, having clarity of vision, being freed from all sense desires, is not born again into this world.”

Thank you for listening. I hope you enjoyed that, and I look forward to seeing you next week as we explore a little bit of stealth metta. Thank you.