

Maitriya (friendliness) in Buddhism Pulsating with mother-love



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For the Buddha, true religion consists, not in union with a meta-cosmic being, but in harmonious interpersonal living. He replaced the hubristic ambition for union with an Eternal and Absolute Being with compassionate concern for the transient, finite, fragile and mortal.

Mettā (Sanskrit *Maitriya*) is a distinctively Buddhist emotion and attitude of mind and heart, which eludes adequate translation into a Western language. It is derived from the same root \sqrt{mid} as the Pāli word *mitta* (*mitra* Sk) ‘friend’. It has the connotation of ‘spreading’, ‘expanding’. *Maitriya* is the emotion of radiant, boundless – *apramāṇa* – feelings of friendliness towards everything that lives. It is the outcome of the realization of *anatta* – no permanent self – *ātman* – outside one’s actual life conditions. Once the sense of ‘not I’ and ‘I’ – *aparalpara* dissolves, existential anxiety disappears and one is filled with boundless feelings of oneness with and friendliness – *Maitriya* – towards all sentient beings. The Buddha taught two training methods – *bhāvanā* – for cultivating the senses and attaining moral perfection – *Satipaṭṭhānabhāvanā* – establishing oneself in right mindfulness and, *Metta bhāvanā* cultivating boundless friendliness. *Metta bhāvanā* directly activates the heart to open up to others in selfless compassion. The final outcome of *satipaṭṭhāna* and *metta bhāvanā* is the same. Right Mindfulness is Boundless Friendliness and Boundless Friendliness is Right Mindfulness. The method for cultivating boundless friendliness, - *metta bhāvanā* – has been handed down in the Metta Sutta – Discourse on Universal Friendliness (Sutta Nipāta 1.8). It is also known as *mettakaraṇīya bhāvanā* – cultivating boundless friendliness. *Maitriya* is the pinnacle of the Noble Path, the Pulsating Heart of the Buddha Dhamma,

One who seeks to be skilful in what is good
and wishes to attain Nirvāṇa should act thus:
Let him be able and upright and conscientious,
of soft speech, gentle and not proud
Content and easily supported, having few cares,
with few burdens and with senses calmed and discrete,
not arrogant and greedy with regard to one's family.
Let him not do anything mean for which others
who are wise might reprove him.
He should cultivate his mind thus:
'May all beings be happy and secure,
may they be happy minded'.
Just as a mother at the risk of her life
watches over her own child, her only child,
so also let every one cultivate
a heart of boundless friendliness towards all beings.
And let him cultivate goodwill towards all the world,
a boundless heart of friendliness,
above, and below and across, unhindered,
without hatred, without enmity.
Standing, walking or sitting or lying, as long as he be awake,
let him maintain this mindfulness.
This way of living is the best in the world.

“Maintain this Mindfulness” – *Sati*. The meditator calls to mind all living beings without any discrimination and suffuses his heart with feelings of friendliness towards all of them. Gradually this becomes a life attitude. For the Buddha, maintaining oneself in right mindfulness is the same as suffusing the world with universal friendliness: right mindfulness - *Sati* is *Maitriya*; *Maitriya* is *Sati*. A person who has Right Mindfulness is a Compassionate Being. A Compassionate Being has Right Mindfulness.

Maitriya is the dissolution of the division between thinking and feeling. Instead of trying to feel with head; one thinks with the heart. *Maitriya* is not the lofty sentiment of a hermit who contemplates the woes of the world from a distance, wishes it well, but leaves it well alone. *Maitriya* is active friendliness – and friendliness is an interpersonal relationship. A solitary hermit or

yogi is rapt and wrapt in himself. He may be friendly in mind but is not friendly in practice. He cannot be. Only a person who has interpersonal relationships can be a friend in deed. A person whose social sensitivity is deadened is a sociopath. He does not have feelings of friendliness towards anything that lives. In the *Maitriya Sutta*, outgoing feelings of friendliness towards all are awakened directly, unmediated by rational argument or the commandment of a Supreme Being. Theistic religions begin their formal acts by praising and glorifying an Almighty Being. The comparable Buddhist benediction is: May all beings be happy and secure! May they be happy-minded!

Mettā is not the same as romantic love – *amor*, (*sneha* – Pāli), or Christian *Agape* – disinterested love of the Other – God and other-others – the neighbour. *Maitriya* is direct knowledge and exhilarating experience of the stream of life, its ceaseless ebb and flow – a marvelous and ever moving pattern of interdependencies, interactions and co-pulsations. The Buddhist term for this experience and emotion is *anu-kampa* – ‘pulsating along with’. It is not ‘feeling for’ but ‘feeling with’. An arahat does not see him/herself as a separate being, hermetically enclosed in a sack of skin, with its unique bundle of sinews, organs, flesh, blood and bones owned by a mind-spirit, which is ‘other-than’ its physical mass. The thresholds between the ‘outline’ and the ‘in-line’ have disappeared. This tremendous feeling along with – *anukampa* – is at the same time a feeling of boundless bliss – *ānanda*. The sense of being an alien in the world disappears.

Buddhism pairs insight (*prajñā*) with compassion (*karuṇā*), which is the appropriate attitude of the organism to its social and natural environment when it is discovered that the shifting boundary between the individual and the world, which we call the individual’s behaviour, is common to both. My ‘outline’, which is not just the outline of the skin but of every organ and cell in my body, is also the ‘in-line’ of the world. The movements of the outline are my movements, but they are also movements of the world – of its in-line. Seeing this, I feel with the world (Alan Watts, *Psychiatry East and West* 1973: 66).

Whenever the Buddha sought to explain the noble ideal of selfless compassion, sharing and service, he used the metaphor of mother-love. The Brahmins regarded the maternal birth process as unclean and the law-giver Manu prescribed a second birth through a birth-rite – *jāta karman* for the three Ariyan ranks – the *brahmins*, *kṣatriyas* and *vaiśyas*. No birth rite is prescribed for women and *sudras*. However in the Great Discourse on the Destruction of Craving (Majjhima Nikāya), the Buddha observed “When an infant is born, the mother feeds it with her own life-blood. For according to the Noble Norm – *Ariya Dhamma* – mother’s milk is life-blood (Majjhima Nikāya 1. 322).

In the *Maitriya Sutta*, the Buddha explicitly uses the metaphor of mother-love to describe *Maitriya* – which according to him is the noblest human sentiment. In primitive understanding, Woman Magic and Earth Magic are one. Man stands outside and above Nature and has sought to dominate and rape it. Woman, like the Earth, takes the seed and brings forth new life-forms. For the Buddha every human life is *yonī jāto* – womb born. The source of every human life is the flesh, blood, milk and water of a mother’s body. And, a mother, the Buddha says, is ready to risk her own life to protect her child.

By eulogizing mother-love, the Buddha reverses the values of patriarchal cultures which divinize father-love. *Maitriya* like mother-love is symbiotic. It is direct knowing and feeling that the ‘other’ is oneself. The use of the maternal metaphor should not be understood as a replacement of ‘masculine’ truth with ‘feminine’ truth, but a recovery and a disclosure of an aspect of human (beyond male and female) experience which had been covered over and forgotten in the affirmation of the Masculine-Paternal Order as Transcendental Truth and Almighty Power. A mother’s love is symbiotic. Father-love is distant and authoritative. When a mother, even at the risk of her own life, protects her only child, she does so out of a direct and concrete knowledge that her child life is the physical externalization of her own flesh and blood, what was once part of her – the fruit of her womb. She feels *anukampa* with her child which is a synthesis of the masculine and the feminine in her womb.