

What Should I Do Instead?

If we spend enough time near the dharma, we eventually hear about mettā, or lovingkindness. We have all seen it parodied: someone repeating soft phrases to themselves, trying to wish their way into feeling better. It can look a little silly from the outside. But mettā, like most things in recovery, is not really about the results, it is about the doing. And it can feel genuinely uncomfortable at first, especially when it is new. Repeating phrases of goodwill can feel like spiritual grandstanding, or like shouting into a void. Mettā is not a promise of warm feelings, it is a turning of the heart, and it can be better than the alternative.

So, setting aside what we expect from it, what are we actually doing when we practice mettā? Let us make it concrete with a specific phrasing: "May all beings be peaceful, happy." Those words can be said without a single feeling attached to them. We might even notice that we do not want to mean it. Do we really mean *all* beings? What is it like to say it with someone left off the list?

Here is the reframe that changes everything. When "may I be happy" produces nothing but hollowness, we tend to decide we have failed at this too, and we slide back into the old despair, the old sense of not being enough. But we cannot will a feeling into being. Mettā was never a feeling to manufacture. It is a direction we turn the mind, an intention we repeat, a wish we keep making. The feeling, if it ever comes, is a byproduct. It is not the task. That takes the whole thing out of the register of performance. We are not trying to feel love on command. We are practicing goodwill as an intention, the same way any groove in the mind gets worn, a little at a time, through repetition.

Seen this way, mettā becomes a practice of asking, "what can I do instead?" Instead of the same conditioned thoughts we have lived with our whole lives, we try something radically different. Not because we expect it to feel better, but because we already know exactly where the old thoughts lead. We are simply putting something else in front of the mind. Where it usually reaches for its wanting, or picks up its grievance, we hold a simple wish for wellbeing instead. That is the whole mechanism. It is humble, it is repeatable, and it does not wait for us to mean it first.

There are gentler ways in. First, it is worth noting that mettā is not affection, and it is not fondness. It is just the wish that a being be well. We can start with someone easy to love, then someone we feel neutral about, and only later

someone we struggle with. Each is a chance to hold the same intention. Sometimes it helps to practice by direction rather than by person, wishing wellbeing to all beings to the north, the south, and beyond, which quiets the part of us busy deciding who does and does not deserve it.

Mettā is the first of the four heart practices, the brahmavihāras. They are sometimes called the divine abodes, not because of anything supernatural, but because they are meant to become the places the heart can return to and dwell in, rather than places we visit once and forget.

For those of us in recovery, the hardest direction to turn it is almost always inward. Wishing ourselves well can feel undeserved, even false, like something we have not earned. It can call up memories of things we have done, or things that were said to us that still leave a mark. This is the moment the practice stops being pleasant and starts being real. It is worth sitting with just how hard it is to wish ourselves well, and noticing that the harshness we turn on ourselves can feel a lot like justice.

And yet moving through that discomfort is the heart of the whole thing. If we follow the wish for our own wellbeing far enough, we may begin to feel the seeds of forgiveness, where we loosen our grip on the case we have built against ourselves. That is hard, precisely because the case feels fair, an honest reckoning with real harm we may have caused. But the forgiveness here is not pretending the harm did not happen. It is setting down the habit of using it as a weapon against ourselves, over and over. And once we can begin to set it down for ourselves, we find we can begin to set it down for others too. The practice that started as an awkward exercise turns out to be a doorway to the very thing we needed most and believed we could never do.

In a way, our first step onto the path of recovery was already an act of mettā. A moment when we looked honestly at how things were going and said, this is not what I want for myself. Widening that small opening, through the wish for happiness and safety for every being, does not promise us some shining state on any particular day. But it is a very different road than the one that got us here, and walking new roads is the whole reason we're here.