

Worldly Love Versus Metta

Metta – the quality of loving-kindness. What do we mean by this? How can we develop a discerning understanding of it?

One way to understand loving kindness is to contrast it to what is called love, by which I mean love on a mundane or worldly, rather than spiritual, level.

Mundane Love

- Centered on the self
- Perceives selected people or things as special, sets one or some apart from others; good and bad, better and worse
- Often rooted in craving and clinging – Seeks to possess, control, dominate, immobilize and enslave
- Joy is derived from possession and control, from getting what the self wants
- Has a story about the past and an agenda for the future. Even a happy Now is a temporal object, to be manipulated and controlled. “I’m so happy I wish this moment could last forever” and “You are so perfect. Never Change”
- When happiness is experienced as contingent on holding onto the story and fulfilling the agenda, mundane love narrows down our life space. The “love” becomes a channel, connecting the self to the other, and excluding the rest of experience. “I only have eyes for you”. “You are my life” “I’m nothing without you” “I’d rather die than live without you”, leading at its extreme to a worst case that's hard to imagine but which we read about over and over in the news: “I’d rather kill you than have you live without me.”
- Deeply embedded in this thinking is the traditional economics of limited resources – There is only so much love, so it can’t be given freely, even to the beloved. There is a limit to what I can give, and I need to be sure I’ll get something valuable back in return, either in kind or in equivalent value.

Metta

- Not centered on or construed as being about the self
- The uniqueness of people and things is discerned, but not in the interest of judging and setting apart, making one better at the expense of others. Rather metta cares about our individuality in the interest of being responsive to unique patterns of needs and preferences.
- Based on open-hearted acceptance; not the desire to possess, manipulate, control or freeze
- Joy is derived from presence. “It’s an honor to be here”
- There is no story or agenda.
- Happiness is not contingent on things staying as they are, or turning out a certain way. Impermanence is understood and honored, even enjoyed. Loving kindness recognizes the beloved is changing, even in each instant. In this sense, we not only love what is, we love whatever is coming to be – even when that means the beloved is moving on. That which is not possessed cannot be lost. (“Life is just a bowl of cherries” - “The best things in life to you were just loaned, so how can you lose what you never owned?”)
- Not coming from the self, metta cannot be exhausted. We may be too tired or distracted to perceive and channel it, but it's still there, available to us whenever we are refreshed enough to attune ourselves to it. It's in us and all around us. It's available to see everywhere and in everyone. There is no economics to it, anymore than there is economics to sharing air with each other. Our effluent nurtures plants, their effluent nurtures us.