Balancing Lovingkindness With Equanimity

The key elements of Wisdom in the Noble Eightfold Path are Right Understanding and Right Intention. Right Understanding frames our experience within the context of cause and effect—every moment of self-organization is caused by impersonal mental functions, and the effectual consequences are determined by these impersonal processes.

Right Intention as a function within this process acts as a filter that organizes the process of cause and effect, in ways similar to the way filters over a camera lens control the colors that stimulate the receiving chip in the camera. Lovingkindness, along with the other of the “Divine Abidings”, guides the intentional formation of wholesomeness in the mind.

When unwholesome intentions cooperate with Wrong Understanding (There is a Pali term for Wrong Understanding called *Ayoniso Manasikara* [ah-yo-nee-soh mah-nah-see-kah-rah], which is translated as *Unwise Attention*), the resultant consequence is *dukkha* (doo-kah), which I prefer to translate as *distress and confusion*. *Distress* refers to the emotional discomfort associated with that self-construction, either pleasant or unpleasantly stressful, and *confusion* represents the associated distorted view of the experiential world. *Confusion* is the consequence of craving (the urgent reactivity associated with distress) and clinging to the belief that there is an enduring/autonomous self.

The focus of this talk, the first of three, is on the cultivation of a balanced experiential flow of selfing moments organized around the intentional cultivation of *lovingkindness*, which in Pali is rendered as *metta* (meh-tah). Metta provides a filtering process that “colors” the flow of selfing through the integration of Right Understanding, which, in Pali, is *Yoniso Manasikara—Wise Attention*.

Metta can be considered as filtering Benevolent Intention generally, while other filtering functions that are subsets of metta are Compassion, Karuna (kah-roo-nah), and Sympathetic Joy, Mudita (moo-dee-tah). These two functions of metta will be reviewed in subsequent talks.

These three filtering functions are attitudes that are brought to bear on the process of self-organization and must be balanced in their functioning by Upekkha (oo-peh-kah), translated as Equanimity. When metta, karuna and mudita are not effectively monitored by Mindfulness and Right Effort, they devolve in their manifestations, becoming the “near enemy” or “far enemy” of each of the three. The near enemy represents a moment of selfing that seems to represent that function but is instead unwholesome—kindness that is attached to a desire for self-gratification. The far enemy represents the opposite of the three—in regard to metta, the experience of aversion and/or ill-will.

Equanimity, the fourth element of the Divine Abidings, represents a balancing function for the other three, and can also be manifested as a near or far enemy. Equanimity has a quality of purity regarding intention—an ability to understand and function as kindness in a way that does the morally correct thing behaviorally without a need to defend or gratify one’s ego. The *far enemy* of equanimity is partiality or clinging to a particular belief or course of action that is driven by ego, and therefor lacking kindness. The *near enemy* of equanimity may seem like balance, but actually has the characteristic of numbness or dull indifference to the effects of an attitude or behavior; this also leads to dukkha.

The focus for the remainder of this talk will be on defining the characteristics of metta and the cultivation of a balanced and equanimous manifestation of lovingkindness, monitored by mindful investigation and the self-regulating function of Right Effort. Upekkha must be cultivated to produce a benevolent manifestation of metta, karuna or mudita.

The characteristics of metta present a subjective experience that is kind, inclusive, patient, cooperative and flexibly adaptive. Metta is an open-hearted flow of supportive caring; in Buddhist teachings, one is encouraged to cultivate an expansive quality of kindness and tenderness “…as a mother would care for her only child”. The experience of metta is the manifestation of Benevolent Intention, one of the elements of Wisdom. It is the recommended antidote for the experience of aversion/ill-will, one of the Five Hindrances. The practiced cultivation of metta begins with self-experience. This quality of kindness regarding one’s self-experience then acts as a filter in cooperation with Right Understanding in terms of relations with other beings.

The subcategories of Compassion and Sympathetic Joy will be reviewed in more detail in future talks; for this review, it is sufficient to describe compassion as the manifestation of kindness in the context of witnessing distress and confusion, either in oneself or others. Sympathetic Joy is the manifestation of kindness in the celebration of someone else’s success or happiness. The near or far enemy of each of these will be part of those future reviews, along with appropriate suggestions for cultivating the integration of each with Equanimity.

There is an evolutionary benefit regarding the cultivation of metta, karuna, mudita and upekkha. We are fundamentally empathetic creatures. We are pack animals, and empathy generates the benefits of group cohesion; this capability is hard-wired into the human nervous system. There are two areas of the brain that are commonly called “mirror neurons”. We learn many of our behavioral patterns and social understandings through mimicry. Additionally, neurological research suggests that when a person witnesses another person who seems to be in pain, certain areas of the brain are activated that reflect empathy, whether that witness is even consciously aware of this reaction!

Along with the altruistic functions of the brain, there exist fundamental instinctual drives that are left over from earlier generations of humanity—desire and aversion/hatred/aggression. Lovingkindness is a countering instinctual drive, but humans must train the brain to use kindness, compassion, generosity and equanimity to manage the more primal instincts.

This view of the instinctual empathetic components of human consciousness describes instinctual empathy as ethically malleable—how a person interprets and responds to empathetic attunement depends on how they have been previously conditioned, primarily in his or her family of origin, but also, to a degree, by societal norms. If these conditioning factors are wholesome, then the capacity to be kind, compassionate, and supportive regarding the joy and success of others has evolutionary value, provided the empathetic response is filtered through and conditioned by kindness, integrated with equanimity.

Alternatively, wisdom-deprived empathy, organized around greed, hatred and ignorance, can also guide such antisocial thoughts and actions as hatred, jealousy and greed, which disrupts interpersonal harmony and societal cohesion. The near or far enemy of metta, karuna, mudita and upekkha are unskillful, distorted responses to mimicry and empathy.

In the Buddhist conceptual view of personality organization, humans create an ideal identity—to think, feel and act in previously conditioned ways, depending on gender and other sociocultural conditioning functions. We tend to unconsciously project these identity expectations onto ourselves and others. Thoughts, emotions and behaviors constitute one’s own subjective experience, described as personality, and can either be reflective of Wisdom or the absence of it. I cannot generate kindness or compassion for another being when my own consciousness is conditioned by greed, hatred or ignorance.

Here is an example of how previous conditioning affects interpersonal dynamics: When I meet someone there is always an underlying empathetic tone—we both interpret and idealize each other and act accordingly. This idealization can be filtered by desire/attraction or aversion/ill-will. These assumptions and expectations are always based on prior conditioning. The ways we idealize our self-identities and others’ appearance inform behaviors that will produce either pleasant or unpleasant interpersonal relations. We also idealize the other person(s), hoping/expecting that they will respond in ways that we can fit into our previously conditioned beliefs.

We can call this initial period of idealization the “honeymoon phase” of a relationship; however, no one, either ourselves or others, can reliably live up to (or, perhaps, live down) the idealized self, and then “the honeymoon is over”, and it seems justifiable to at least feel at least confused, perhaps disappointed and annoyed at ourselves, the other, or both. This idealization/de-idealization process can occur in a variety of situations, romantic or otherwise, and is a normal part of human relations.

Here is an example that can illustrate the near and far enemy of metta: I take a job in an unfamiliar social situation, wanting to make a good impression—the idealized socially successful self. I notice something about another person who seems to respond favorably to my behavior, and therefor feel some attraction, “friendliness”. I imagine the other person has a favorable view of my behavior, I think highly of them, and we get off to a good start—the honeymoon phase. The empathetic response has been conditioned by the near enemy of metta—an idealized rendering of the relationship plays out for a while. After some time together, I can no longer maintain my idealized “attractive” behaviors, or the other person does something that “disproves” my idealized view of him or her. In response, I might start to become angry at myself and/or the other—at that point aversion/ill-will, the far enemy of metta, emerges.

How do we manage this situation, which often occurs during relationships that are brief and inconsequential, as well as those that last decades? What about personalities we don’t interact with personally—entertainers, influencers, or politicians? The balancing effect of equanimity applies here—the ability to maintain lovingkindness regarding oneself and the other person(s)—but equanimity doesn’t just occur because it is a good concept. *The ability to be mindful, investigate our idealization process, and regulate the flow of attention towards Wisdom applies here*. These mind-conditioning factors, also found in the Seven Awakening Factors, train the mind towards realizing the beneficial effects of lovingkindness.

Mindfulness involves ongoing self-awareness—an ongoing internal self-monitoring process. Investigation involves the ability to differentiate among various patterns of thinking and reacting effectively, discerning any ineffective or dysfunctional options. The self-regulating process is integrated through the effective functioning of Right Action, disregarding those dysfunctional options and guided by Right Understanding and Right Intention.