

A PERSPECTIVE OF LOVE: POSSIBLE MISINTERPRETATIONS OF METTĀ



Phra Abhijato

ABSTRACT

This paper discusses the possible problems in interpreting mettā as an entity disconnected from an immaterial consciousness that exists as material energy or vibrations. It is suggested that this interpretation may be a reification of mettā. Understanding mettā as empirically sensed energy might be a modern interpretation of an ancient concept. A scientific explanation of this concept as something that is empirically evident in the body or environment might not be what the Buddha intended when describing it. Instead, the Buddha may have meant that mettā is simply a quality of immaterial consciousness that promotes love to all beings from the perspective of the observer always residing within that observer's consciousness.

Keywords: Mettā, Reification, Consciousness, Material, Energy

INTRODUCTION

The Buddha describes mettā as a quality of consciousness, one that lets the observer see others with love and friendliness. There is a modern idea of mettā that interprets it as actually material energy, and that it manifests itself physically in the body, in this case the brain, or that it is material waves. These waves are sometimes sometimes described as vibrations that exists in the world as an entity itself disconnected from consciousness as it is transferred from one individual to the other. This paper argues that this may not have been what the Buddha intended when discussing mettā.

This modern idea of mettā as energy may be a modern reification of a quality of consciousness into an observable phenomena that can be sensed empirically. This reification may make mettā easier to understand and believe in the modern world. It is common to not believe in something until there is actual proof of its existence, this proof many times coming evidence that is empirically sensed. This reification of mettā may be a process of accepting its existence and seeing it as an actuality.

This paper suggests that this modern interpretation may be incorrect, and that the Buddha was simply describing mettā as a quality of immaterial consciousness, a feeling of love and friendliness that one has towards others. This explanation would not make mettā any less powerful, rather it may make it more so from certain perspectives. Mettā being a quality of consciousness requires it to be completely in the control of the observer and disconnecting it from consciousness may diminish that control.

METTĀ

Mettā is a quality of consciousness that promotes love to all beings. This love is free from judgment and allows one with devolved mettā to see others without hate or discrimination. According to Bhikkhu Bodhi, “Mettā’s function is to prefer (living beings) welfare. its manifestation is the removal of ill will. its proximate cause is seeing beings as lovable.”¹

¹Bhikkhu Bodhi, *A Comprehensive Manual of Abhidhamma*, (Kandy: Buddhist Publication Society, 2012), p. 86.

Mettā is explained in the Chakavathi Sutta:

Herein that a brother abides letting his mind fraught with love pervade one quarter of the world, and so too the second quarter, and so the third, and so the fourth. And thus the whole wide world, above, below, around, and everywhere, and altogether does he continue to pervade with love-burdened thought, abounding, sublime, and beyond measure, free from hatred and ill will.²

Mettā seems to be an immaterial internal characteristic of the mind. This quality of consciousness wishes no harm and only well being to all creatures. Here seems to be point of departure for misinterpretation: is mettā a characteristic of the mind that wishes love to all beings or is it an actual entity disconnected from an immaterial consciousness that exists as material energy. As mettā is described as being a quality of consciousness, that being an immaterial quality, and not an entity in itself that exists as material energy, it seems the reasonable interpretation is that it is a wish for all beings to be happy from the perception of giving mettā to all beings within consciousness, not that mettā disconnects and becomes an entity in itself. That being said, mettā seems to be an inward devolvement that sees all outward beings with kindness and benevolence.

REIFICATION OF METTĀ

The Suttas describe mettā as an internal quality of consciousness, one that allows the observer to interpret other beings with love and friendliness. The explanations in the Suttas do not discuss mettā an entity disconnected from an immaterial consciousness that exists as material energy that is transferred from being to being. Understanding mettā as material vibrations that exists outside of consciousness and travels from one being to another may be a misunderstanding of what the Buddha meant when he discussed mettā. Gwankas understanding of mettā as vibrations that exist in the atmosphere may be a reification of mettā into an explanation that is more modern and easier to understand in today's understanding of how the world works.

²T. W. and C. A. F. Rhys Davids **Dialogues of the Buddha**, (Bristol: Pali Text Society 1899–1921), vol. 3, page 76.

Knowledge in the modern world is very empirical and scientific. There seems to be a requirement of proof associated with people's acceptance of something being an actuality in the world. Many times a phenomenon is not accepted as anything to be taken seriously unless it has been empirically studied. This may be a very modern way to look at the world. To reify mettā as an entity disconnected from an immaterial consciousness that exists as material energy may be an attempt to make mettā more real within this modern understanding.

Rick Hanson describes the brain as being the cause and cure, including love for all beings, for suffering in *The Buddha's Brain*:

For if the brain is the cause of suffering, it can also be its cure... Virtue [including love for all beings] simply involves regulating your actions, words, and thoughts to create benefits rather than harms for yourself and others. In your brain, virtue draws on top-down direction from the prefrontal cortex.³

Here Rick Hanson seems to be attempting to reduce love for all beings, mettā, to a physical response from the brain. The internal nature of mettā then becomes material and disconnected with the immaterial consciousness. Other modern interpretations not only describe mettā as a material internal quality of the brain, but also as external vibrations.

An interpretation of mettā as physical vibrations can be seen in a paper presented at the seminar on vipassana meditation convened at Chamma Biri, India December 1986 by S.N. Goenka:

The practice of mettā bhavana (meditation of loving kindness) is an important adjunct to the technique of vipassana meditation—indeed, its logical outcome. In mettā-bhavana one radiates loving kindness and good will toward all beings, deliberately charging the atmosphere around with calming positive vibrations of pure and compassionate love.⁴

³Rick Hanson *Buddha's Brain: The Practical Neuroscience of Happiness, Love, and Wisdom*, (Oakland: New Harbinger Publications, 2009), p. 12.

⁴S.N. Goenka, *The Art of Dying*, (Chicago: Pariyatti, 2014), p. 147.

Gwanka says that mettā is vibrations that beings can feel in the atmosphere; he then gives an explanation from the Tipitika in his speech that says nothing of this vibration mettā, but that reaffirms the idea the Buddha taught that mettā is immaterial. Understanding mettā as vibrations may make it easier to believe it actually exists. This understanding, while fitting in with the scientific view of the world today, may not be what the Buddha intended though.

A further description of mettā as physical vibrations can be seen in Sayalay Susila's article, *Mettā Mediations*:

Loving thought produces good mental vibration, and vibrations can travel far.... In Abhidhamma teaching, it is stated that any mind state can produce four elements in the body. Among the four elements of earth, water, fire, and wind, the fire element can generate and reproduce another generation of the four elements. The four elements, together with color, smell, taste, and nutritive essence, arise in a group called kalapa, or particles. So, the fire element that is the product of a loving mind has the potential to produce another generation of kalapa inside or outside of the body. These are manifested as good vibrations or energy emanating from us that have a positive effect on ourselves and others.⁵

This description of mettā as material appears to contradict The teachings of the Abihdahmma. The Dhamasanghani seems to clearly state that mettā is a cettaiska of the citta.⁶ This means it is a quality of the immaterial mind. It is never an entity that we would call physical, which are represented by the 28 rūpas, none of which are mettā.⁷

⁵Sayalay Susila, **Mettā Meditation**, (http://sayalaysusila.net/ebooks/english/Sayalay_Susila-Metta_Meditation_16-1-2013.pdf, retrieved 5,2,2017), p.5.

⁶C. A. F. Rhys Davids (tr.), **A Buddhist Manual of Psychological Ethics**, (Bristol: Pali Text Society, 1900), p. 54.

⁷Bhikkhu Bodhi, *op. cid.*, p 239.

CONCLUSION

Implying that mental and material acts founded in mettā are somehow transferred into material energy and that energy is influencing others may be diminishing the will of the actor and the receiver of such acts. An act of mettā with such strong conviction that one is able to communicate to another the compassion and love one feels is an extremely virtuous act, one that may be cheapened when reduced down to a non-conscious physical vibrations or “energy”. The receiver of such a message is also acting on his or her own will, and conceptualizing the message into something one understands themselves may be much more powerful than a material force. The recognition of love in a message, and more importantly, the decision to act in accordance with it, is very powerful, perhaps much more powerful than simply explaining the dynamic by way of material vibrations.

Communication is more active than an entity disconnected from an immaterial consciousness that exists as material energy seems to be. If someone communicates love then that is being transmitted from one person to another, the love is sent from one particular person, if energy is sent by one person, does the receiver know that the energy is sent from that person, or do they just feel the love? Cognitive decision, meaning to act with intention, is important in the Dhamma. The Buddha said that intention is kamma. When the Buddha or monks communicate to others, that communication is an interaction between them and the intended receiver. Having the receiver see act of kindness in verbal and body language, and responding to that in a way that shows interaction is happening is more of an active process of kindness than just reacting to some energy floating around in the air. Reducing these acts of mettā to just an entity disconnected from an immaterial consciousness that exists as material energy may take some of the intention out of the receiver in that they may not be reacting in an interaction with an intelligent communicating being but just reacting to physical vibrations that happen to feel pleasurable.

Describing mettā as energy may be a modern inclination to explain things empirically. Making mettā more than a quality of consciousness might make it more real in a physical sense and this may be a more favorable way to articulate a quality what we can be sure exists in modern times. Saying metta is sensed is giving it that empirical evidence. This may not be what the Buddha was implying when using mettā though. It is described in the suttas as a quality of consciousness that allows the observer to see other beings with love and friendliness. Disconcerting mettā from consciousness and attempting to make it an entity in-itself maybe taking attention from what is important, that mettā is the quality of someone’s actual love for another, not the objective nature of love itself.

REFERENCE

- Bodhi, Bikkhu. **A Comprehensive Manual of Abhidhamma**. Kandy: Buddhist Publication Society, 2012.
- Goenka, S.N., **The Art of Dying**. (Chicago: Pariyatti, 2014).
- Hanson, Rick, **Buddha's Brain: The Practical Neuroscience of Happiness, Love, and Wisdom**, (Oakland: New Harbinger Publications, 2009).
- Rhys Davids, C.A.F. (tr.). **A Buddhist Manual of Psychological Ethics**. Royal Asiatic Society; reprinted with corrections, Bristol: Pali Text Society, 1900.
- Rhys Davids, T.W. and C. A. F. (tr.). **Dialogues of the Buddha**. vol.3. Bristol: Pāli Text Society, 1899–1921.
- Susila, Sayalay. **Mettā Meditation**. (http://sayalaysusila.net/ebooks/english/Sayalay_Susila-Metta_Meditation_16-1-2013.pdf, retrieved 5/2/2017).