

# *Infinity*

*September 26, 2023*

All too often we come to the meditation straight from the narrative of the day, and then the narrative becomes part of the meditation, where it interferes with the mind's settling down. If you managed to do something klutzy during the day, then if your meditation is not going well, that becomes part of that same klutzy narrative. Something upsetting or disturbing happens, it becomes part of the narrative of the meditation, too.

This is why it's good to start the meditation with thoughts of all beings. Open your mind to infinity for a while. As I said earlier, it's the way the Buddha approached the night of his awakening. He started with his own narratives, and if you think you have lots of stories from the day, he had eons. The question for him was, why were there so many different narratives, so many different lives? There were Brahmans during his time who said that whatever you were in this lifetime, you're going to be in the next lifetime. That obviously wasn't the case, because he had changed identity so many times.

There was actually one strange belief that all beings after they died went to the Moon and fed off the Moon —which is why the Moon looks so mottled: It's being eaten. Then they would fall as rain, and then turn into plants, and then, depending on what animal ate them, they would become that animal. That was obviously not the case, either.

So the question was, what determined all these different levels of being? To answer that question, he got out of his individual narratives and started looking at the cosmos as a whole. He extended his mind in all directions to all beings. He found that they, too, had many lifetimes. They, too, kept changing identities. But he began to see a pattern. They went up and down depending on the skillfulness or lack of skillfulness in their actions.

He also saw that it was a complex pattern. Sometimes you would do something skillful in this lifetime and go to a bad destination next time around, either because of something bad you had done before, or because of some bad action you did afterwards, or because you had wrong view of death. And vice versa: You could do bad things in this lifetime and go to a good destination next time, either because you had a fund of good karma from the past, or you changed your ways, refrained from harmful actions, or developed right view at death.

But the basic principle held. Just because you escaped a bad destination for some bad actions in this lifetime didn't mean that those bad actions wouldn't

eventually lead to pain or suffering someplace down the line—or vice versa.

So he saw that it was through your actions that you shaped your life. It was through your intentions based on your views, and your views based on who you respected, whether you respected the noble ones or whether you respected your greed, aversion, and delusion more. That was how you determined the course of your lives.

But the power of your views at the moment of death alerted him to the fact that mental actions in the present moment could have a lot of power. So it was with that understanding that in the third watch of the night, he focused on his present mental actions. What kind of views, what kind of intentions would lead outside of the cycle? As part of his second knowledge, he had seen that the cycle just goes around and around. It's not really a circle. It has a lot of complex feedback loops. But it goes nowhere. You go up and then you go down, then you go up again and down again. In some cases, it's almost as if *samsāra* were a sick joke. You do lots of good things, you're generous, you're virtuous, you get rewards for that in a future lifetime, but then, in enjoying those rewards, you eat away at your own good qualities. You get lazy again, get impatient again, and you fall.

So he wanted out. Which meant that the question was: What kind of intentions, what kind of actions now, what kind of views right now, would lead to the way out? As the answer to that question came, he saw that the way out was to see things in terms of the four noble truths, to understand what suffering is, what he was doing right now to cause suffering right now. He also saw that you could stop doing those things, but that it would require a path of practice. You didn't just stop. There's a path of practice you have to follow. That was the noble eightfold path.

So he followed the path, completed all the duties with regard to the four noble truths: fully comprehended suffering, abandoned its cause, realized cessation by developing the path. That's how he gained awakening.

It's good to reflect on the pattern of that night, going from his narratives to infinity, the cosmos at large, and then back to the present moment. In the same way, it's good to start each meditation with thoughts that spread out as far as you can think.

The Buddha has you think about all beings in two major contexts. The first, of course, has to do with the brahmaviharas, starting with goodwill. You wish all beings to be happy. Sometimes you hear the word *metta* translated as loving-kindness, but that doesn't seem to do justice to the attitude the Buddha's recommending. Pali has a separate word for love, which is *pema*. And the Buddha didn't place his trust in *pema* or recommend it as a universal attitude, because as

he said, sometimes love leads to love; sometimes love leads to hatred; sometimes hatred leads to love, or hatred to hatred. Love leading to love means there's somebody you love. Someone else treats them well, so you're going to love that second person. Love leading to hatred: Someone mistreats someone you love, so you're really going to hate that person. Hatred leading to love: If somebody mistreats someone you dislike, you're going to like the person who mistreated the object of your hatred. Then hatred leading to hatred: You hate somebody, somebody treats them well, you're going to hate that second person. It's all very arbitrary, and not very trustworthy.

What the Buddha trusts more is the simple wish, "May all beings be happy." Think of that second sutta we chanted just now. We thought about how to express goodwill for all the snakes and all the creepy things, and then said, "May you depart." In other words, it's not in the nature of things that snakes and human beings can get along well through close proximity. They're better off if they keep to their separate ways.

A lot of human beings like that, too. So goodwill or metta doesn't mean that you're going to love other people. Sometimes it means simply respecting their desire for happiness and hoping that they can look after their own happiness: "May they all look after themselves with ease."

And although metta is meant to be a limitless attitude, the Buddha does talk about it as restraint. He talks about it as a determination that you keep in mind. Now, if limitless goodwill were innate in all of us, you wouldn't have to do any of these things. You'd just express your innate nature and that would be it.

The problem is that we as human beings tend to be partial in our metta. Some people we like; some people we don't like. Some people we wish well; some people we wish ill. So to lift our minds from our human state to the level of the brahmas takes work. It's a determination you have to make up your mind that you're going to do it. Then you have to be mindful to keep that in mind so that you don't forget. And you have to restrain yourself from any impulses that go against goodwill for all—which means you also have to protect your goodwill.

That's the meaning of that passage, by the way, where the Buddha is talking about the mother's love for her child. Sometimes we hear it interpreted as, "Just as a mother cherishes her only child, so you should cherish all beings." But the Pali doesn't say that. It says, "Just as a mother would guard with her life her only child, in the same way you should guard your goodwill for all beings." That's something different. After all, you're going to be meeting with lots of beings who are not especially lovable, but you've got to have goodwill for them. The image the Buddha gives is of bandits who have come to grab you, pin you down, and they're

sawing you up in little pieces with a two-handled saw. He says even in a case like that, you have to have goodwill, starting with them and then, from them, spreading to the whole cosmos. Otherwise, if that ill will take over your mind at that point, you'll be reborn in line with that ill will, and that will lead to a life that's not especially auspicious. Whereas if you protect your metta, you may lose your life, but you protect a treasure inside that will lift the level of your mind.

So as we reflect on goodwill, we realize it doesn't stop with just thoughts of, "May all living beings be happy, happy, happy." It's an attitude that you have to protect, to maintain, and to bring into all of your encounters with others.

This is where it's good to think of some of the other images the Buddha gives of thinking about other beings. One is that if you see someone who's really wealthy, powerful, has every advantage in life, the Buddha says, "Remember that you have been there, too." If you see someone who's really poor, destitute, suffering from a disease, you've been there as well. These thoughts can, one, induce a fellow feeling in everybody you meet. You've probably been like that person in the past. So that's something you have in common. You shouldn't be jealous of those who are more powerful, and you shouldn't look down on those who are more miserable than you. Feel empathetic joy for the first, compassion for the second.

But also, the Buddha says, when you start thinking about that, it should give rise to a sense of samvega: All things are possible.

This relates to another passage where he has you think about all animals. Just focus on the common animals, he says, and you realize how variegated they can be. Everything from tiny, tiny insects to whales, and everything in between. Not only the creatures we know of now, but all the creatures that have been in the past that we know only through fossils. He says just think about how variegated the animal world is, and realize that your mind is more variegated than that. In other words, it's because of the mind that these animals have taken on those shapes, taken on those characteristics. And your mind has those potentials as well. That's a scary thought. Do you want to go back there? Well, no. So watch out for any thoughts of your mind that would go in that direction.

Ajaan Mun once said that he, on recollecting his past lives, could remember a period where for 500 lives he was reborn as a dog, because his mind was satisfied with the pleasures of dogs. What happened to him has probably happened to us.

And if we don't get our act together, we're headed back in that direction. This is where thinking about all animals leads beyond goodwill, empathetic joy, compassion, and equanimity. It goes to samvega. That's a sense of terror at the prospect of having to go through all this again and again. It leads to a sense of having enough of all this and wanting to get out.

That gives you good motivation for meditating, getting the mind under control, regardless of what the narratives of the day may have been. Think about that reflection we have. “I’m subject to aging, illness, death, and separation. Whatever I do, to that will I fall heir.” In the original sutta, it doesn’t stop there. It goes on to remind you that all living beings are subject to these things, too. No matter where you might go in the cosmos, no matter what the level, you’d be subject to these things. The Buddha says that when you think about that, it gives rise to a sense of *samvega*, and then from the *samvega*, to a desire to get on the path.

So it’s good to think about these things. Air out your mind with infinity every time you sit down to meditate. It’ll give you much better perspective on what you’re doing right here and why.