Mettā Practice: Difficult Person and All Beings

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This afternoon we'll continue exploring the metta practice, and today we'll explore offering metta to a difficult person and all beings.

These instructions on the metta practice offer us a way to find representatives of various relationships we have to beings in the world: those who support us, the benefactor, the easy being, ourselves, a dear friend, a neutral person, a difficult person, and then out to all beings.

Part of the reason for this is to begin to explore, to begin to recognize the ways in which the wish for metta runs up against those relationships. We might have the overall idea that yes, I do want everybody to be happy. But then when we think of a specific person, we think, well, maybe not that person. And so this begins to show us whether there's any delusion in our wish for well-being for all beings. It points out where the rub is. And that's not a mistake.

Guy Armstrong—I learned the metta practice from Guy Armstrong during a month-long retreat; he and Carol Wilson were my teachers for that retreat—he said that the metta practice is like taking a metta magnet and running it over your heart. What a magnet does is attract its opposite. And so as you run that metta magnet over your heart, it's going to pull out anything that's not metta to be seen.

I also like the washing machine analogy. If we think of our minds like a washing machine and the clothes like the thoughts and ideas and opinions in our minds, the soap is like the metta, and the water is like our consciousness. We put the clothes in the water and the soap in the washing machine, and we add some energy, some agitation. The chemical function of the soap as it gets pushed through the clothes is that it attaches, it binds to the dirt and pulls it into the water. The soap, like the metta, attaches to things that are not so helpful in our hearts and brings them into consciousness where they can be seen. In the washing machine, the water is drained away and fresh water comes back in. This is the function of how metta works.

We may think when we're offering or wishing metta to beings that we're supposed to feel metta—supposed to feel good or feel that sense of connection and care. And we may, at times, feel that. But part of the function of the metta practice is to help us recognize when we don't feel that. As we notice that, we can say, "Thank you, metta, for showing me the resistance to the metta."

This gets particularly highlighted as we bring a difficult person into our practice. We see various relationships along the way. With the easy being or the benefactor, that's usually the easiest, the least complicated relationship to metta—the easiest place for metta to flow. But at the same time, there can be

things that are a little in the way. I've heard people say sometimes that this person doesn't need my metta, or I'm not worthy to give metta to this person. There's something in the way there.

For ourselves, we have complicated relationships with ourselves, and so there may be some real struggle there. For me, this was one of the hardest places, actually. It was probably the most difficult being I had. I had to come at it from different directions to find my way to really recognizing that wish, that yes, I actually do wish to be happy and healthy and at ease.

These relationships are highlighted in this metta practice as we offer the phrases, say the wishes—simple phrases like may you be happy, healthy, safe, at ease. It points out the places where we have some clinging or resistance. With a dear friend, it may be that yes, I do wish this friend happiness, but they did that thing, and that was not... And so it pulls to mind the things we have issues with in the relationship. Can we open our hearts to them, even including that difficult thing?

With the neutral person, often the relationship is one of almost just disconnection. It can be, though, for some people, that the neutral person is actually one of the easiest beings to send metta to because it's so uncomplicated.

And then the difficult person—the difficult person being someone we have difficulty with, someone with whom there's some challenge in the relationship. This kind of person can often be quite difficult to wish well. Thoughts of the difficult person can bring up aversion, anger, even hatred, resentment, or even cruelty. I want them to suffer. They did all these things to me; I want them to suffer. Again, it can be so humbling to see this.

It was so humbling for me to see that I actually wanted somebody to be miserable. And in the seeing of that—there was mindfulness present when I saw it—it kind of broke my heart. There was compassion for myself and compassion for the world. It was like, "Wow! No wonder there's war." That was the recognition: this mind, which I think of as belonging to a basically good person, was holding that wish for someone to be miserable. It was so humbling and yet so opening of the heart. No wonder there's so much struggle in the world. May this practice help free us all from these struggles and suffering.

So it opened me to a deeper connection with all beings through seeing how my own heart held this wish for cruelty. Again, it's not a mistake when these things are seen. In the metta practice we explore a really wide awareness and wide arms for holding whatever comes up—seeing if it's possible to just continue with the phrases, understanding that this thing is being seen, it's coming out in the wash. Can it come out in the wash and be released? We can think of the metta practice as functioning in that way.

In sending metta phrases to a difficult being—"may you be happy, may you be healthy, may you be safe, may you be at ease"—my understanding of the wish is not that they be happy doing unskillful things, but that they find true happiness. It's not about condoning actions they've done. It's not about saying, "Yes, I'll have this person in my life." We can explore that wish for them to actually find a kind of happiness that's

not dependent on greed, aversion, and delusion, without thinking they have to be part of our lives.

Sometimes in this exploration with a difficult person I've had the thought, "Yeah, may you be truly happy—that way you won't cause so much misery." Thinking it'll be better for me if they find true happiness. But this wish is actually a wish for them, for their own sake. So there's perhaps a near enemy here to watch for: wishing the difficult person would be happy for other people's sake, rather than including the wish for them to be happy for their own sake.

In choosing a difficult person—many of you may have done the metta practice before and have some thoughts about who you might choose—it's helpful to pick a specific person. I think touching into the actual relational aspects tickles something in us about the specifics of a relationship that can point out specific kinds of clinging. So it can be helpful to explore with a particular person for a while, as opposed to thinking of a general category of people you have difficulty with. Pick somebody for whom this is perhaps not the most difficult person. But if you're up for it, maybe try somebody more challenging. If you've done this quite a lot, you could play with an edge a little bit.

Some tools to use while offering metta to the difficult person: You can envision them at a distance, someplace far away, as opposed to right up close to you. You could envision them in a place or circumstance where they can't possibly harm you. You might envision them as a child, perhaps, when there was more innocence in their being. Recognizing again the conditionality—beings do the things they do, are the way they are, based on conditions. If we had lived the life that person had lived, how would we be? How would we be responding to the world?

Another thing that can be helpful with a difficult person: I have found that the metta phrases as stated in English—"may you be happy, may you be healthy, may you be safe, may you live with ease"—sometimes create a little more of a rub when directly wishing happiness for somebody with whom I have so much difficulty. The metta phrases in Pali, the ones in the *Metta Sutta* chant—that's a great chant, I love it because it gives you all the metta phrases—use different phrasing. *Ahaṃ avero homi, abyāpajjo homi, anīgho homi*—all of those begin with the "a" in Pali, which is a negation. Essentially the wish is: may you be free from danger, may you be free from mental distress, may you be free from physical distress. The negative phrasing is actually what the Pali uses for those first three phrases—the wishing for not having misery in your life, not having physical ailments.

So the language might be easier: "May you be free from struggle, may you be free from physical distress, mental distress, may you be free from danger." Those are actually how the Pali phrases the metta wishes. I find it easier to use that negative phrasing for a difficult person. You could play with that, see if it's more supportive for you in offering metta to a difficult person.

So let's practice together. We'll start with wherever it's easiest for you—either the easy being, or yourself, or perhaps a neutral person.

Just whatever being has been easiest for you to connect with the metta in some way. And then we will go right to the difficult person.

This is actually the way I learned the progression of the categories—that as I progressed through the categories each day, I'd start with where it was easiest and then move to the category that I was working with.

If you find it very difficult to be with a particular category—this is a general instruction in the metta practice—if you're working with a category that feels challenging and it feels like the mind is getting really caught, doesn't feel like you can hold it in that space of "oh, this is just coming out in the wash," then the first exploration within the metta practice would be to simply drop that person and go back to where you know it's easier, to a being for whom it is easier for you to connect with metta.

Or perhaps you might explore bringing in some support. Sometimes it can be easier to feel like you can offer metta to a difficult person if you feel like your benefactor is standing next to you, offering metta to the difficult person with you. So there are other ways to support yourself in offering metta to a difficult person, but you can also just drop it and shift to an easier metta person. Then try going back—slip in a phrase or two for that difficult being, then maybe return to the easier being, then slip in another phrase for the difficult being, then go back to the easier being again.

You can be playful with the metta. There aren't really rules around it. We offer it in this structured way, but you can find the phrases that are meaningful for you. You can linger as long as you want with one being. You can play with having your benefactor support you in offering metta to other beings. So you can be playful with it.

We'll start with an easier being and then move to the difficult being. Then I'll open it into a guided meditation partway through, expanding to all beings.

Finding a posture that feels comfortable. Relaxed. Maybe a place or a way where your heart, your heart area, can feel open. Maybe explore the sense of the breath through the heart as a kind of soft breeze, or a softening in that area of the heart.

Just notice how your heart feels in this moment. Just the sense of that area around the heart. And maybe begin with dropping in a wish for yourself. May the heart relax. Not trying to do it, but just seeing—how does the heart feel? How do body and mind respond to that wish? May the heart soften and relax.

Just taking in how your heart is in this moment. No judgment, just connecting with awareness of the quality of the heart in this moment. And if it supports you, you are welcome to put your hand on your heart. Sometimes that can bring a sense of connection to that area.

Bringing to mind the person or being for whom it's easiest for you to connect with these wishes. Perhaps remembering something you appreciate about that being, something that feels connecting or caring.

If it's useful for you, if you have access to an image of that being, that can be a support for the metta. Sometimes it's easier to just connect with a name.

Begin with whatever phrases you have found are supportive for you, offering the wishes of well-being, ease, happiness, safety to this person, to this being.

It can be helpful to take your time with the phrases. When I was doing the metta practice for a month, I really slowed it down. With each phrase, with each wish—may you be happy—I stopped and kind of took in the meaning of that phrase. How does it feel to make that wish? What's the experience? How does that phrase land in the heart, in the being?

Each phrase may have a slightly different flavor of landing, so be available to receive how those phrases affect your heart, affect your body, affect your mind.

Continue to wish this being metta in your own phrases, in your own time.

Now I'd like to invite you to bring a difficult being to mind. And even as you explore bringing that being to mind, notice your heart. No judgment. See if you can explore holding this being with you in some fashion in your heart.

You could explore whether there are any qualities that you appreciate about this being at all.

Begin offering the wishes, the phrases of well-being to this being. Remembering that it's not about condoning any actions but about wishing them true happiness. That phrase can sometimes be useful: May you know true happiness. Or perhaps the negative phrasing: May you be free from struggle.

Again, with each phrase, take some time. Almost like you're dropping the phrase into your heart, like you would drop a pebble into a pond. See how the phrase, when holding that being, resonates in your heart. What are the ripples?

It's okay if there are ripples of aversion or resistance or resentment. Let those ripples ripple out.

Can they be held with a wide heart? For their sake, may they be happy, healthy, safe, at ease.

Continue exploring with the phrases that work for you and the timing that works for you in this exploration of metta for this being. If it gets too challenging, you're welcome to go back and practice some metta for yourself, for a benefactor, a dear friend. And if it's more easeful for you to drop the metta for a while and just practice vipassana—a kind of metta vipassana, holding that difficulty, metta for yourself with that difficulty, with mindfulness. I think a form of mindfulness really is a metta practice for ourselves when difficulty is arising. So continue to explore metta for this person as it works for you for the next few minutes.

Letting go now of the difficult person, we'll explore expanding metta to more beings, ultimately to all beings. One way in that has worked for me has been to start by bringing my benefactor to mind,

envisioning us together, standing together, and making the wish together: May we be happy. May we be safe, healthy, and live with ease.

So rather than just holding one being and wishing them well, hold both of you together. May we be well.

And then envision your dear friend joining the two of you, joining in the metta wishes. May we all be well. Happy and peaceful. Free of danger.

And then invite your neutral person to join you. The four of you standing together, sitting together, walking together. With the wish: May we all be at ease.

And then invite the difficult person to join you. May we all be free from danger, be happy, healthy, live with ease. All five of you standing together, being together, wishing all of you well.

I had a teacher suggest that from here you can basically open it up and invite anybody who wants to join you to join you. I was surprised at some of the people who showed up. Just let people come who want to join this wishing of well-being for this gathering of beings. Let anybody who wants to show up, show up. And continue the wishes: May we all be happy, healthy, safe, at ease.

This is an opportunity for anybody who's been knocking at the door. *What about me? Can I be part of metta too?* Anybody who wants to show up. Friends, distant family, people you haven't seen in ages. The postal worker you remember. The cashier at the grocery store. Let the space be big so as many people can join as want to join.

And then perhaps think of that gathering as a kind of metta engine for well-wishing for many beings. Allow the metta to expand out beyond the gathering, a sense of letting the quality of metta radiate as wide as it wants to go. And express or explore the wish: May all beings be safe, at ease, happy and healthy. Like that metta wave radiating out, just like the rays of the sun that land on everyone. Everyone who wants to stand in that can receive it.

May all beings be happy, healthy, safe, at ease.

And remember that you are one of all beings—both sending it out and receiving it yourself.

For the last few minutes of the sitting, explore the possibility of being the recipient of metta. Beings are wishing metta for you. Can you receive that?

Thank you for your metta practice. It is quite a rare thing, I think, to be in a gathering like this, and for so many weeks to be part of a community that is cultivating these beautiful qualities. It's not an easy thing to do. And it is so beautiful. Thank you for your practice.

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