Mettā Practice: All Beings

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And today we'll explore the metta practice in relationship to all beings.

The practices we've been exploring have followed the standard Theravada method of metta practice, which comes from the commentaries more than from the suttas, using categories of beings. From my perspective, one of the real benefits of this method is that we get to see where the rub is with individual beings before we explore opening to all beings.

The teachings in the suttas basically just express this: one should abide pervading the directions with loving kindness. And it can be easy to deceive ourselves, to delude ourselves, thinking, "Oh yes, I do wish all beings to be happy." But if a particular being were to come to mind—maybe not that person.

And so the use of self, benefactor, and dear friend begins to help us see where metta is generally somewhat easier. With benefactor, it's often easier. Often it's easier with self, though for some of us it's not as easy. But then we get to the dear friend, and with someone we often think it should be easy, we frequently remember incidents. "Oh, but they did that thing." And it gets in the way of our open heart. We see that with specific individuals, it may not be so easy to simply say, "May all beings be happy."

And so we explore the specifics in this way, with the teachings from the commentary helping us recognize where we may have a little bit of challenge with the feeling of metta in offering metta to particular beings.

With the neutral person, sometimes there's more a sense of not caring so much or not feeling a connection. For others it may actually feel easier to offer metta to a neutral person because there isn't the specific history. In some ways, the neutral person is really a stand-in for all beings, because the vast majority of beings on the planet are neutral to us. We don't know the vast majority of beings, and so that neutral person begins to point to any rub we might have about connecting with this deep wish for well-being for all beings.

With the neutral person, we also realize that we have to connect more. The connection with somebody we don't know needs to come from the place of just our common humanity, our shared humanity. Sitting in the Vipassana practice, looking at our own minds and hearts, we see what goes on in our own minds and hearts—how hard it is to be a human being, what our joys and sorrows are like at a human level. That's the level at which we can connect with all beings: just our common humanity.

And then of course the difficult person really begins to reveal the rub, where it's truly hard to wish this person well. We begin to recognize that we can not close a being out of our hearts, even if the actions of that being have been unskillful. Wishing a difficult person well isn't about saying or converting any sense

of something that person did that was unskillful. We don't have to dismiss that or push it under the rug. What we explore is not closing our hearts to beings even though there have been unskillful actions. We can see this in our own hearts and minds too—that we have behaved unskillfully at times. Again, the humanness of that. And so there's some sense of keeping the heart open, even for challenging beings.

In exploring metta to all beings, we are taking in all of these categories of beings. There are different ways to explore metta to all beings. We can simply use the phrases: "May all beings be happy. May all beings be healthy. May all beings be safe. May all beings live with ease." And just continue with this holding of all beings in mind.

Yet it can be challenging to envision all beings. One way I've practiced with this form is to just allow my mind to wander through the planet, let those phrases come, and let my mind envision beings—human beings, non-human beings, insects and spiders and snakes, this person or that person. We can let the metta be infused with a little bit of specificity as we let our mind roam through the world of beings.

Another way to express the wishes for all beings is through certain phrases that help us connect to all beings in different ways. "May all beings be happy. May all breathing beings be happy." For me, that actually evokes something different. "May all breathing beings be happy. May all living beings be happy. May all personalities be happy." These are just different ways to frame or language all beings in our minds. Sometimes that evokes something for us that can support the quality of metta.

The way that metta is taught in the suttas, using directions, is what I'd really like to explore today. This will be the main approach I'll offer in the guided meditation—this use of directions for the metta practice.

The texts say, and I think you've chanted this, at least those of you who've been here in the evenings: I'll read this part with respect to loving-kindness.

"I will abide pervading one quarter." One quarter here means a quarter section of space—the quarter of space in front of us. If we're dividing the space, this 360-degree space around us, into four pie-shaped pieces: front quarter, to the first side, to the back, to the second side, and then above and below.

This is what the instructions are pointing to: "I will abide pervading one quarter with a mind imbued with kindness. Likewise the second, the second quarter, the second direction. Likewise the third, likewise the fourth. So above and below, around and everywhere, and to all as to myself. I will abide pervading the all-encompassing world with a mind imbued with loving-kindness, abundant, exalted, immeasurable, without hostility and without ill will."

The teacher I first really connected with for the radiating metta practice was Bhikkhu Anālayo. He uses the sutta teachings in his practice for metta, and that's a piece of what I'd like to offer in the guided meditation—how he explores this.

The way it starts is basically to connect to something that gives you a taste of the flavor of metta. In one of

the questions this morning, somebody asked about doing the metta practice when there were times the feeling was just there. It felt really good, and so there was this question about whether that was kind of cheating, or not what they were supposed to be doing if they were supposed to be sending it to others.

Well, in this form of practice, that's where we start—connecting with this feeling as best we can, and then exploring the possibility of just letting that feeling spread out in space, in this direction to the front, as far as it wants to go. In this style of practice, we aren't even necessarily needing to think about the beings. This is about feeling the quality and allowing the quality to expand as far as it wants to into space.

My image of this is that whatever beings are in that space, they receive that metta. And so it's pervading the space, which is what the teachings here in the suttas encourage about this practice: "I will abide pervading one quarter with a mind imbued with kindness." It's not particularly pointing to any particular beings, and yet as we pervade the space, there's a sense of the metta kind of washing over whoever's in that space—whatever beings in the air, walking around on the ground, small beings, medium-sized beings, large beings, seen and unseen. Just allowing that feeling to spread.

When Bhikkhu Anālayo taught this, the thing that really struck me is that he encouraged not trying to push the metta out. He said it's as if you have a curtain with a light behind it. You gently open the curtain partway, and that light would just expand, spread into the space. If the light is like a candle, it may spread so far. If it's a spotlight, it may spread further. We don't have to try to have an agenda to push the metta. It's more just allowing it to go as far as it wants to in this form of practice.

We'll explore this in the guided meditation, but to begin with, there are really two parts. One is a technique of allowing the individuals we have been working with to come together. We'll call them up one by one—yourself, your benefactor, your dear friend, your neutral person, your difficult person—and it will be as if we're creating a little group of folks standing with us. Then we'll explore the possibility of offering metta for this group. This group essentially is a stand-in for the whole variety of different kinds of beings that are out there for us. It's just a way into beginning to generate some of this quality of metta. Then we'll shift to the directional practice.

Allow yourself to find a comfortable, relaxed posture. It is often helpful to let the attention rest in the area of the heart, maybe having the feeling of breathing through the heart center. Just opening to whatever is there. An act of kindness to yourself—to not have to have it be any different than it already is. That itself is metta for yourself, this allowing your heart to be as it is.

Allow yourself to call yourself to mind, however that is easiest for you—either just this experience of sitting here, or maybe an image of yourself. Put your hand on your heart if it's supportive to connect to this area.

We'll start with the phrases, just for yourself for a few moments:

May I be happy.
May I be healthy.
May I be safe.
May I live with ease.

Let yourself see how that lands in this area of your heart, to make those wishes.

For another minute or so, just in whatever phrases are most resonant for you, wishing yourself well.

Now, allowing your benefactor to join you—either standing face to face or side by side, whatever feels most comfortable for you. Letting your benefactor in your imagination stand or sit or lie with you, and allowing them to join with you in offering metta to both of you together.

May we be happy. May we be healthy. May we be safe. May we live with ease.

This begins to evoke part of the quality of metta not being exclusive—that in wishing metta to more than ourselves, we are also wishing it for ourselves.

May we be happy.

Taking another few minutes to connect with your benefactor in this way, the two of you offering metta to each other.

And then allowing your dear friend to join you. The three of you standing together.

May we be happy. May we be healthy. May we be safe. May we live with ease.

It can be fine too to play within your imagination with where you are located on the planet.

And allowing your neutral person to join the circle, join the group, however you find yourselves situated. And if you can't have a sense of the neutral person joining in, or don't have that sense arise, that's fine. Just continuing with this reflection. The four of you standing together.

May we be happy. May we be healthy. May we be safe. May we live with ease.

To me this also evokes that this metta, the metta quality, is not giving over our happiness for the happiness of others. It is a mutual wish for all of us to be happy.

And then letting the person with whom you have some difficulty also join the group. And exploring the possibility of continuing the wish.

May we all be happy. May we all be healthy. May we all be safe. May we all live with ease.

Continuing for a few minutes to explore this offering of well-wishing to each other, in whatever words or phrases are most resonant for you.

If you have in this exploration a taste of even a small kind of sense of openheartedness or well-wishing, that can be the starting point for the next part. And if this part has been challenging for you, then I invite you to bring to mind a being that makes you smile. And that smile, that quality—that's where we can begin here.

So with that quality, however subtle or however it may feel for you, first an exploration of recognizing that the feeling is inside. Perhaps a feeling of it being inside, and allowing that feeling to just spread from wherever it is through the tissues, through the heart, maybe through the chest and bones of the body in the front of your body.

And as it is possible, maybe envisioning this curtain that Analayo talked about—drawing back a curtain and allowing that feeling to just spread as far through this body and into space, maybe like bubbling off of the body into space, as far as it wants to go. Sometimes in doing this I have a sense that it just goes maybe a few inches out, sometimes further, sometimes more expansively, and this fluctuates. So just connecting to this feeling.

And you can refresh the feeling if you wish, contemplating your group of five wishing each other well, or this being that makes you smile. And then letting the feeling expand into space in front of you as far as it wants to go.

And then allowing the curtain to open a little further to the second quarter. Letting the feeling pervade through that part of the body in that direction. Bubbling, rippling, perhaps a feeling of waves or just energy moving outwards in space to the side, as far as it wants to go. And any beings in that space, seen or unseen, small, medium, or large—they get to participate in that quality.

And allowing the curtain to open still further around the third quarter, to behind you. Exploring letting the metta also, the feeling also, pervade through the tissues and bones and spaces of the body in the backward direction, bubbling off, rippling off the body to the rear, as well as to the front and side, just as far as it wants to go.

Sometimes in my exploration of this, there's a sense of certain directions being easier than others, and that's fine. Just noticing how it is for each direction. In a way this is kind of analogous to expanding our awareness—we're allowing our metta to expand as far as it wants to go.

And I find relaxation really helpful here. We're not pushing.

Then allowing the curtain to open to the fourth direction, allowing the feeling to penetrate through the body. I think of it as starting in the heart, penetrating through the spaces and tissues and bones of that side of the body—perhaps tingling or bubbling or rippling through, then bubbling off the surface and expanding into space as far as it wants to go. To the front, to the first side, to the rear, to the second side. This is allowing the feeling and letting it expand as it wishes.

Then, as though there were a curtain underneath you, letting that quality pervade the body in the direction down towards the floor, towards the earth. Allow the metta to go through the earth as far as it wants to go. We don't have to think about the earth as being a block—it's very porous, the earth. The metta can go right through it.

And then the final direction: above. Gently drawing back the curtain above us, allowing the feeling to move through the body upwards, through the shoulders and neck and head, off the top of the head into space. In all directions, however far the quality wishes to expand. To the front, to the side, to the back, to the other side, below and above—in all directions.

If it feels like it dims or weakens, just refresh the connection with the quality. Whatever way is supportive for you—it may be through the use of a couple of phrases, or thinking of a particular being that makes you smile, or thinking about your benefactor offering you metta. Then let that feeling spread as far as it wants to, into space, in all directions.

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