Guided Mettā (2)

Andrea Fella · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Andrea Fella · 45:28

So we'll continue the metta practice today at this sitting. I'd like to speak for just a few minutes to elaborate and expand on what Greg talked about yesterday.

Just to refresh or remind you about the mechanics of the metta practice: the practice is one of intention, actually. The phrases that we use—may I be happy, may I be healthy, may you be safe, may you live with ease—these phrases are expressing the wish for happiness for ourselves and for other beings. We're also trying to connect with a feeling of warmth, of kindness, of caring as we express that wish. But that feeling may or may not come naturally right away.

You may be sitting here doing the metta practice and not have a sense of that feeling of warmth or caring, and that's fine actually. What this practice is doing is through that expression of that wish—may you be happy, may you be healthy—as we express that wish, as we connect to that phrase and understand what it means, we're inclining our minds towards the feelings that are connected with that wish. We may not be feeling them right away, but we're beginning to incline our minds in that direction.

So be patient with yourselves if you're not finding that feeling of warmth or kindness or caring. There were times I did a period of extended metta practice of one whole month, and during that month, there were definitely times where I just couldn't find the feeling at all, but I could say the phrase in my mind and understand what it meant—just saying the phrase and understanding the meaning. And through that practice, the feeling began to kind of be kindled.

This actually brings me to another aspect I want to include today, which is making the practice connected to our bodily experience, in particular in the area of the heart. This was the instruction that actually made the metta practice finally come alive for me, because it's so much words—we're saying the phrase, we're connecting with an image or with a feeling of being with the person. There's a lot of wordiness going on.

But for me, when one of my teachers finally gave me the instruction: every time you say a phrase, take a moment to just come back and check in in the area of the heart and see what has been the impact of making that wish. So you express the phrase, you understand the meaning, and then check back into the body in the area of the heart and see what's happened. There's no right or wrong to what happens there, but just give yourself an opportunity to check in and see what has come, what has happened.

For myself at that particular period of time when it felt so dry, what I discovered was I could say the phrase and understand the meaning. I could bring up an image, a brief moment of an image of the person, and then it would disappear. And then I would say the phrase and understand the meaning, and then

check in with the area of the heart. After some time, what I began to see was there's just a little subtle feeling of opening and just a subtle feeling of wishing well, of caring for this person. It's very small, almost like a little ember.

And then as I continued saying the phrases, understanding the meaning of what I was saying, and checking back in, it was as if every phrase was like—as Greg said last night with the chanting—the phrases were like a bellows that fueled that little ember of goodwill into a more broad and open feeling of what I understood to be metta, really the open connected feeling of kindness, caring, and well-wishing.

It doesn't have to be—one of my friends says it doesn't have to be like a Hallmark greeting card kind of feeling that we're going for. It can be just a really simple feeling of well-wishing.

As we do this kind of practice, the practice of metta is what's called a practice of purification. So it tends to bring up in our hearts the opposite of the direction we're kind of going for. You may notice sometimes when you're doing the metta practices that feelings of anger, of frustration, of ill will come up. And contrary to what you might think—you might think, well, this practice isn't working—actually it is working. This is how the purification works.

One of my metta teachers, Guy Armstrong, compared this practice to running a magnet, a metta magnet, over your heart. So the metta practice is like you have a big metta magnet and you're running this metta magnet over your heart. What do magnets do? They pull out their opposite. So what happens as we run this metta magnet over our heart is that the opposites kind of get pulled to the surface so they come into consciousness and we're aware of them.

So it's not a mistake if you find while you're doing the practice that feelings of frustration, of annoyance, of irritation, of anger are coming up. There are a few different things I'd like to say about that, because sometimes they can be mild and sometimes they can be strong. It's helpful to have a sense of how to work with those energies as they appear in the metta practice.

The first instruction around working with difficulties as they come up—and these kinds of difficulties, just to put it in the metta language, are what is called the far enemy of metta. They're experiences that come up that are not going to be mistaken for metta; they are kind of the opposite quality to metta. In working with these qualities, the first instruction that we try is just simply to keep going. Allow that feeling of ill will, of anger, of frustration to be there, but in the background. You don't have to get rid of it. You don't have to do anything with it. Just stay connected to saying the phrase, understanding the meaning of the phrase, and connecting with the being that you are wishing the metta for. It's very simple, just letting it be in the background.

When I did this month of metta practice, this actually was kind of a relief for me when I first understood how this worked. It was kind of like, oh, you mean I don't have to actually dive in and figure it out? I can just let it be and then just keep going with the metta?

And what happened often, when you can keep going with the metta and just let that feeling be in the background, is that the feeling runs its course. It passes away, and then you're just left with the practice of the metta—and perhaps a little bit of an opening of the heart as that feeling of ill will dies away.

So it was really quite a revelation to me to recognize the power of just letting something be in the background. We don't always have to turn and look at everything that comes up. It's not that we're repressing it. It's not that we're trying to fight it or push it down. It's simply that right now, we're going to keep going with this metta.

Now, sometimes these difficult energies are strong—much stronger—and they aren't going to stay in the background. They're going to come much more front and center. And if these energies seem to be connected in particular with the being that you're wishing well to—like, for instance, wishing metta for myself, saying "may I be happy, may I be healthy," and what comes up is all the reasons why it's not possible, or why I'm not worthy of it—those kinds of thoughts can arise in the mind. If they get really strong, then it can be helpful to move or shift the metta practice to an easier being. So if you find it easier to wish metta towards a benefactor or a very easy being, you can switch the practice and see if that allows those difficult energies to be held or to release.

And if they're even stronger than that—if they seem to have taken root, these difficult energies—then you can drop the metta practice for a short time and bring mindfulness to your experience. Just allow yourself to turn towards that feeling and explore: How does it feel in my body? How does it impact my mind? If the difficult feeling dies away with the mindfulness practice, then you can simply return back to the metta practice.

So that's working with the far enemy. And then there's also what's called the near enemy of metta, which is a kind of energy that is similar to metta—so it might be confused with this quality of connection and love—but it's got a little bit of clinging, a little bit of attachment to it. It's a quality of caring with an agenda, a quality of caring with an expectation of something in return. It's got this selfish attachment; it's just slightly not unconditional. The pure quality of metta has no conditions on it. It's an unconditional well-wishing. No need for anything in return.

So if there's a sense of "I'll love you if..." or "I hope you're happy, but I hope you make me happy"—that kind of hoping for some reciprocity—just notice that. Again, just notice that there is some attachment there. There's no need to try to push that away either. Just recognize that that energy is present for you.

So let's begin the practice.

It's helpful for metta in particular to find as comfortable a posture as you can, allowing your body to be relaxed—as relaxed and comfortable as you can. You might want to start by just allowing your attention to rest in your heart center. And just notice what's there. What's the experience there? No right or wrong—just getting a sense of how the heart feels right now.

Sometimes I find it helpful to have the sense of breathing through my heart. You can play with that. If it doesn't resonate, just let it go.

And then, allowing yourself to call to mind—choose for yourself whether you'd like to begin this afternoon with yourself or with an easy being, a benefactor, a being for whom it's very easy, an uncomplicated relationship, for whom it's easy to feel that sense of connection and well-wishing. Choose for yourself whether you'd like to start with the benefactor or yourself.

Calling to mind for yourself a sense of either being with that person, if it's the benefactor, or an image of that person—or for yourself, perhaps the felt sense of yourself sitting here right now, or perhaps an image of yourself at a time in your life when you were particularly happy, a time when you felt good.

And for this being—either yourself or the benefactor—call to mind things that you like about that being. Qualities that you appreciate, or actions that you've appreciated. It's said that seeing the beautiful, seeing these kinds of qualities, is the near cause or the proximate cause for metta to arise. So it can help to reflect for a few moments about these qualities.

And begin connecting to this being, either yourself or the benefactor, with the image or sense of the being. And begin expressing the wishes of kindness, of caring, of goodwill.

May you be happy, or may I be happy. With each phrase, take a moment after you've expressed it to come back and check in, in the area of the heart. Just check in again—what's happening there? And then the next phrase: May you be healthy. May you be safe. May you live with ease.

Continue the mental practice with your own phrases. I know that Greg suggested some alternatives and encouraged you to think of your own. Whatever phrases feel most congruent or resonant for you, continue with them and practice for this being. After some time, switch to the other—to self if you're doing benefactor, and to benefactor if you're doing self.

Now call to mind the other being. If you've been doing benefactor, switch to self. If you've been doing self, switch to the easy being. Again, start by connecting with qualities that you appreciate, kind actions, allowing your attention to rest in the heart as you recall this being. Begin to express the wishes of goodwill, refreshing and reconnecting with the feeling in the heart center with each phrase.

Now open out the metta to express the wish of happiness and goodwill towards all beings everywhere. For me, this initially felt kind of conceptual, but just say the phrase—may all beings be happy, or whichever phrases you have found that resonate for yourself. Then kind of relax and open your mind to perhaps senses or images of beings that may be around the planet, whether they're animal or insect or persons, whether they're struggling beings or happy beings, whether they're children or adults or teenagers. May all beings be happy.

Again, refresh the sense in the area of the heart, connecting with how it impacts the heart to make this

wish. May all beings be healthy. Sometimes it's helpful to imagine waves of metta spreading out over the land and just meeting whoever's in its path. May all beings be safe. May all beings be at ease. Continue expressing the wishes of goodwill towards all beings everywhere.

I've left a few minutes in case there are any questions about this practice. Does anybody have any questions about the metta practice?

Someone shares: "I found that at times it was a little hard to breathe, and even my heart felt as if it was pounding."

All kinds of things will happen to us. Just see if you can accept that. Were you wishing metta for yourself or for the other? When was it happening? Did you start with yourself and then switch? And when you switched to benefactor, did it make it easier?

So that could be in the terrain of difficulties that come up—there's sometimes for ourselves a little constriction around this wish. This was a surprise to me. It seems to be a surprise to Asian teachers. The Buddha, in teaching this, treated it as the most natural thing in the world—that of course we all wish ourselves happiness and love. It's not even a question that this is easy to do. Our Western culture seems to have a different way of raising beings, because we seem to have this widespread sense of it being more difficult to wish ourselves well.

There can be a kind of contraction or tightness. I used to feel like there was a band of steel around my chest, this tightness whenever I tried to do the metta practice—not only for myself but for others. It was very, very painful, almost physically painful. So just notice that, breathe with it, breathe through it. If it helps, in practicing on your own, see if switching to the easier being allows it to release, to relax a little bit.

One thing you can play with—and this comes from my colleague Gil Fronsdal—he suggests that when you find a being that's pretty easy to wish metta for, if you have difficulty wishing metta for yourself, just from time to time while you're wishing metta for that being, slip yourself in there. Just once. Let yourself ride in that wave of goodwill that's generated for that being, and then go back to the benefactor again. Get the sense of the possibility of having that feeling of connection with yourself.

Greg offered yesterday some different ways to include this practice during the day. I'd just like to echo that: if you find this practice helpful, you can pick another sitting during the day in which to work with it, or perhaps begin each sitting with a little bit of metta.

And we'll end the day, every day, with the metta chanting that we do.

If you find this practice really challenging, if it's hard and you don't connect with it very much at all, you don't have to force yourself. I would encourage you to just come to this sitting and sit in the field of working with this practice for this period, but you can let it go for the rest of the time.

It was a number of years before this practice really resonated for me. It took a long time for my heart to

really soften. And for me, the softening came through the mindfulness practice. These two—the mindfulness practice and the metta practice—really can work together. The mindfulness practice can be a heart-opening practice as well. And for me, that's how my heart began to open: through meeting experience, just being willing to meet experience in this nonjudgmental, nonreactive way.

A nonjudgmental, nonreactive quality of mind is a quality of metta. And so the mindfulness practice will be cultivating this quality of metta.

But if this practice does resonate for you, use it. Use it as much as feels appropriate and helpful for you.

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