Guided Mettā (4)

Andrea Fella · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Andrea Fella · 47:26

So today I'd like to continue exploring the metta practice, and in our progress or movement through this practice, we learn about offering metta to different categories of beings.

We begin by offering metta to ourselves and to an easy person, a benefactor, and then move towards friends and dear ones. Then we move into the realm of people that we don't know at all—what we call a neutral person—and then we'll move on to people that are challenging.

In the practice of offering metta to specific beings, we are picking representatives of the range of categories of relationships that we have. We have relationships with ourselves, relationships with people who are dear to us, relationships with people we admire and respect and love greatly, relationships with people we don't know very well, and relationships with people who are difficult.

In this expanding practice of moving to offer metta to all beings, essentially what we're doing is trying on or playing with offering these wishes of kindness and goodwill to specific beings. Because sometimes when we offer metta to all beings, it's easy to overlook the fact that we can kind of delude ourselves—we overlook that we're in our minds wishing metta to all beings except this person or except that person. The practice of offering metta to people that we don't know very well and people that we have difficulty with begins to break through some of the barriers around wishing people well, some of the ways in which we may hold back from wishing people well. This begins to highlight for us some of the ways that we may resist sending metta.

Today I'd like to explore the neutral person, and this is kind of a turning point in the metta practice in terms of exploring offering the wishes of goodwill, for a couple of reasons.

One is that the practice is moving towards offering well-wishing to all beings everywhere, and the vast majority of all beings are really unknown to us. They fall into this category of what we might call a neutral being—we don't know much about them, so we don't really have an opinion one way or the other. When beings are in that category, when they're neutral to us, there's almost a sense of not caring too much. They're out of our realm, out of our line of sight, and we don't think too much about offering them good wishes. So this practice is highlighting this kind of person that we don't know very well and beginning to offer the wishes of goodwill. That's one reason why it's a turning point: it's moving us in the direction of really being able to connect with what it means to offer this heartfelt wish of well-being to somebody we don't know.

The other part of it is that in this exploration, we're moving from beings that we actually have some

connection with—where there may already be a sense of that movement of kindness and good wishing—to beings that we don't know, and beginning to see that we can connect with a kind of shared humanity.

When we bring up somebody in our mind that we don't know well, it might be a good idea to start thinking about somebody you could choose for this category—a person that you can create an image of or know who they are. A bank teller, a grocery store clerk, a postal carrier. Maybe one of the other people on retreat, although by this point in the retreat there may not be true neutrality between you; there may already be a sense of connection or a little bit of struggle. Just pick somebody that feels relatively neutral to you.

One of the ways we try to connect is this: with people we know, one way to explore the metta practice is, in each phrase, to envision the person a little bit. If you have a visual sense, you could call up that person—"May you be happy"—and envision them doing something they really love. If you know that person really loves cross-country skiing, you might envision them doing something they're genuinely happy doing. Or with "May you be healthy," if you know some ways that person works to make themselves healthy, you can call that image up in your mind, and it makes for an easier connection to that phrase.

When we move to neutral people, we don't have any idea what would make them happy in the specific. But we do know some general things that would make people happy, just from knowing ourselves. A human being is happy when they're surrounded by people that care for them, when they have nourishing food and can take care of themselves. So we move into a place where we're exploring our shared humanity with people. This is another really powerful aspect of this exploration of the neutral person.

As we do this practice with the neutral person, there can be some difficulties. One kind of difficulty that people often run into is a sense of not having a connection with that being. Think of your postal carrier—we kind of lose interest because there's not that connection. Sometimes there can be a struggle: we get a little bored or lost because we can't really connect to the feeling.

On the other hand, sometimes it can actually be easier for people to work with the neutral person. For myself, I found that in working with a dear friend or people that I know, the way my mind works—some of you may have noticed something like this—is that I'd be saying, "May you be happy," and then immediately the mind would pick up and remember, "But then you did this and this. You did these things, and that wasn't so nice." My mind would pick up on almost the opposite. I talked about that metta-magnet: it was picking up on the opposite of metta with people I knew well because of the intimacy of the relationship. No intimate relationship is all perfectly wonderful.

With the neutral person, you have the advantage of not having that complication. For me, it was actually kind of nice moving to the neutral person because I could just have the sense of, "Well, this is a human being that wants to be happy."

And I wish that for them, whoever they are, whatever they like to do.

Another piece to clarify is that in wishing happiness for people, if somebody gets happiness out of being cruel, that is not a true kind of happiness. So we're not wishing for them to be happy in a way that is unwholesome. I just want to make sure you're aware of that. In wishing happiness for somebody, you're wishing for them to have the most beautiful kind of happiness, the most wholesome kinds of happiness and health and well-being.

The way this practice can unfold is that we begin by cultivating this quality of an open heart—this heart that can wish well for ourselves and for beings we're friendly with, the places where it's hopefully easiest to have that sense of openness. There's an analogy sometimes used in exploring how this practice works. If you envision a mountain stream where there are different pools—I think of a place in Hawaii, on Maui, called the Seven Pools, where there's a waterfall with these pools—the water flows down from the top and fills that first pool. When that pool is full, it overflows and goes down to the next pool. Then that pool fills and flows into the next one. There's a kind of refreshing of the flow because it's always welling up and then overflowing.

It's a similar image for mettā. We connect with this quality of the open heart, this well-wishing. And when we can resonate with that, there's a natural way, as the practice deepens, in which that well-wishing wants to flow over. One of the first times I really got this sense, I was in Burma, practicing mettā for about twenty minutes at the beginning of every sitting. At one point there was a real sense of mettā and happiness in my own being, and there was just this immediate sense of, "Oh yes, this is such a lovely experience, this kind of happiness and well-being. Of course I want others to feel this." So it very naturally moved outward.

I think sometimes we have a mistaken notion—at least I certainly had a mistaken notion—about happiness before I really connected with this practice. I thought happiness was a zero-sum game: if somebody else had some happiness, I wouldn't have access to happiness, or if I had some, it meant somebody else didn't have it. But it doesn't work that way, actually, this deeper kind of happiness. Perhaps the happiness of having material goods works that way, because there's a limited amount of material goods in the world. But the happiness of the open heart grows and can be unbounded. The more you connect with that possibility in your own heart, the more you wish it for others. And the more you see that quality in others, the more you feel it in yourself. It really grows. It nourishes itself. I don't think it has a limit to its possibility.

So in moving to the neutral person, the way we'll do the guided meditation today is to start with self for a few minutes. What I found as I actually started to connect with the mettā practice and was able to do it for myself—which took a while—was that very naturally, as I began to connect with that feeling of well-wishing for myself, it wanted to move outward. If I spent too much time doing mettā for myself, it began feeling a little stagnant, because it wants to flow outward.

So we'll begin today by offering mettā to ourselves for a few minutes, then move to either your friend or benefactor, whichever feels most congenial to you, and then on to the neutral person. We won't do everybody today because I want you to have some time to spend exploring the practice with the neutral person.

And again, if you find difficulty at any point in this practice, I'll remind you of the ways to work with that. You can start by seeing if you can let the difficulty be and keep going with the mettā for whoever you're offering it to. If it's too difficult, you can shift the person you're offering mettā to, moving to someplace or someone that's easier. And if you find that the whole thing is too difficult, shift back to the mindfulness practice and do mindfulness on the difficulties that have come up. If that eventually allows that wave of struggle to pass through, then you can come back to the mettā practice.

So we'll start by finding a comfortable posture, allowing your body to relax and settle. Bringing your attention into the area around your heart, just noticing what you feel there. No right or wrong—just whatever you're experiencing in that area. I like to sometimes have the sense of breathing through the heart area, the heart center, as if each breath can soften and relax, releasing holding in the heart.

Calling to mind some qualities that you like about yourself. And if this is a difficult process for you, I'll offer you some qualities that we all share here: this interest and willingness to meet our experience, to meet our struggles, our suffering, opening our heart to our own difficulties, opening our heart to this practice of wisdom, of compassion. This is an amazing thing we are engaged in here. So that's something you can appreciate about yourself.

However it makes the most sense for you to connect with yourself as a being—you could envision yourself doing something that makes you happy, or perhaps just connect with the feeling of yourself sitting here, the bodily sense of being here.

In offering the wishes of kindness to yourself, there is both the sending and the receiving of that wish. You could almost think of it as sending out this wave of metta, perhaps a mist or fog of metta that simply envelops you, and you are being drenched and soaked by this mist of metta.

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

Continue for a few minutes offering yourself these wishes of goodwill, in whatever phrases work for you.

Now call to mind either your easy being, your benefactor, or your dear friend—whoever seems most present for you. Take a moment or two to recognize and recall the good qualities, the things you appreciate about this being. Then begin offering the wishes of goodwill, of kindness, of friendliness to this being. Say the phrase, understand its meaning, connect with the being, and with each phrase, refresh or reconnect with the area of the heart, just noticing what's happening.

Now bring to mind a neutral person, someone you don't know well. It can be helpful to offer a kind of

transition phrase with the neutral person: "Just as I wish to be happy, so too may you be happy. Just as I wish to be healthy, so too may you be healthy. Just as I wish to live with ease, so too may you live with ease. Just as I wish to be safe, so too may you be safe." Continue offering these wishes of goodwill to your neutral person.

For the ending of the sitting, open up to offer metta to all beings, all beings everywhere. I often find it helpful to recall in this part of the practice that each one of us is one of all beings. So we are receiving this wish as well as sending it.

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

Continue for a couple of minutes wishing metta to all beings.

After this sitting, a question arose about staying with one neutral person. When others kept popping into mind during the practice, this meditator wondered if that was problematic. I asked whether there was an energy of kindness as these people appeared, whether there was a sense of connection to the metta. When they confirmed there was, I encouraged them to let that happen.

There are two sides to metta practice. One side is the cultivation of this quality of metta—that's primarily how we're offering it this week. The other side is that it functions as a concentration practice. You can use metta to allow the mind to get very concentrated, very still, very settled. If you're using metta as a concentration practice, we usually recommend picking one being for each category. Then when we move to all beings, we allow various beings to pop into mind. But for concentration, we let ourselves settle and stabilize on one being because it supports the quietness of the mind.

In this retreat, however, we're not primarily trying to develop concentration through metta. We're really interested in allowing the metta to flourish. So if people naturally arise and this supports the metta, go for it. That would also be a wonderful way to practice in daily life if metta resonates for you.

Sometimes what I do is simply let my mind pick up on somebody. I don't do it in categories—I just allow myself to remember this dear friend, and then by association there's another one, and another one, and another one. It's as if they're almost knocking at the door: "Me too! Me too!" And I just let them come. There is that sense of metta being a kind of spontaneous opening towards these beings that come knocking on the door. I would encourage that.

Another question came about whether a neutral can be a group of people. When we move to all beings, we do tend to work with groups—all men, all women, or even categories like all those who are in a state of suffering, or all those who are in prison.

We do kind of move into that. But when we're doing the first part, we tend to try to move to the specific, because we don't want to—I mean, even in a group there can be a way that we're deluding ourselves. "Oh

yes, I wish well to all this group," but if you actually pick that one person out of the group, there might be a sense of some contraction. And so the practice is to look at the specific initially.

"So, you know, I'm finding once I'm in this state, it's nice to offer this out. And so maybe I'm not going deep enough in finding resistance into the images that I'm bringing to mind. Is that possible? Because you..."

So are you asking that you find yourself in this state of this well-wishing state and that it just is very natural for it to move outward? I would not worry about that. If it feels like that sense of—like I described for myself earlier—it's like, "Oh, of course I want other people to feel this way." I mean, why wouldn't I want everybody in the world to have this sense of happiness and well-being? If everybody in the world had this sense of happiness and well-being, what a different world it would be.

And so there's that natural movement out. Just keep going, but I would encourage you to be specific with the beings you're sending it to. And I wouldn't worry about trying to find the places of conflict, trying to bring up the conflict, because the metta is there in spite of the conflict. That conflict can be there and the metta can be there.

So we should move on to the walking practice. Enjoy your walk.

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