Mettā Practice: Working with Difficulty

Andrea Fella · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Andrea Fella · 58:49

For the metta practice today, we'll continue with the dear friend that Guy introduced on Friday. Before we go into meditation, I'd like to expand on and reinforce some of what the others have said.

Guy talked on Friday about what he calls a four-part metta: starting with the image and connecting with the sense of caring about the being, saying the phrase, and understanding the meaning of the phrase. The fourth part is to check back in, in the area of the heart, and see how it has been for you to make that wish.

For me, that fourth part was what really allowed the metta practice to begin to make sense to me. When we express the wish of metta—may you be happy—it's an intention, an expression of something that we may or may not be feeling. But intentions have an impact; they rebound on us. What I found is that if I'm willing to express that wish and come back and check in—how was that to make that wish?—it begins to allow the metta practice to become an embodied practice.

An example for myself: on one retreat I was doing metta for a month. Metta was the only practice I was doing for the month, and it went in and out of feeling juicy and able to connect with the experience of metta. I remember at one point I was in the dining room and it felt so dry. I reminded myself, well, all I really have to do here is say the phrase and understand the meaning of the phrase, then check back in. How did that land? How did that land in the heart to say the phrase and understand the meaning?

What I discovered was that the first time I made that wish and checked back in, there was just a subtle shift in the heart—a subtle shift of maybe a little bit of friendliness, the subtlest little shift. Then the next wish, and I felt back into the heart. I found that this practice of checking back in allowed the feeling to be nourished. It was almost as if the feeling in the heart was a little ember, and each phrase was like a gentle wind encouraging that ember to grow. So I really encourage that part of the practice that Guy described. For me, it was a huge shift to have metta begin to feel like an embodied practice.

Another piece I'll mention is that in moving to the dear friend in particular, we can start to have maybe a little bit of reactivity around wishing our dear friend metta. It can slip into what's called the near enemy, which I believe Guy talked about on Friday. The near enemy is a kind of love with a requirement—attachment, an attached kind of love. I'll love you if you'll do this for me, or I'll love you if you love me back. That kind of exchange feeling about metta. It's very natural for metta to a dear friend to have that kind of quality.

The reason it's called the near enemy is because it's an experience or a state of mind that could be confused with the quality of metta. It's similar, it's close. There's a sense of connectivity, but it's got some

skew to it, a little bit of skew.

The far enemy of metta is a state of mind that is so different than metta that you're not going to confuse it with metta. The far enemy, which can come up as we're doing the practice, is aversion, ill will, even a sense perhaps of hatred, a sense of competitiveness, of not enough for me, perhaps.

When I first was doing the metta practice, it kind of surprised me, in doing metta for a dear friend, that these states would come up. I thought, well, I'm wishing my good friend to be happy and healthy and well. And what comes up in my mind instead of those wishes is, yeah, but they did that thing. The very bringing into the mind this wish—it's like it brings out the opposite.

Another thing that Guy sometimes says, and maybe he said it on Friday, is that the metta practice is like running a metta magnet over your heart. What a magnet does is pull its opposite to it. So the practice is working when these things come to the surface. It's not that we're not supposed to have these things come—the near enemy of metta, that attached love, the far enemy of metta. Having them come into consciousness essentially means the practice is working.

Another form of reactivity around the dear friend, which I think is probably the far enemy for me, was a sense of fear in wishing my dear friend metta—a fear that if I'm wishing her metta, it means I'm wishing myself unhappiness. Somehow my mind had believed that happiness was a zero-sum game: if my friend was happier, it would correspondingly mean that I was less happy. This belief is just an idea that there's only so much happiness to go around.

I think it may come a little bit from the material world. We associate happiness sometimes with material possessions, with having things, and maybe there are only so many things to go around. But states of mind are very different. It was quite a shift for me to recognize that actually, when I could take happiness in my friend's happiness, something opened.

It's like happiness can multiply—there's no limit to happiness.

So the fact that these states come up for us in our metta practice, again, it's not a mistake. And working with these difficulties, the first exploration would be simply allowing them. We can think of the metta practice as being like washing clothes. The metta is the soap. You're putting the soap into the washing machine. If you're washing clothes, the soap attracts the dirt. The soap pulls the dirt out of the clothes into the water, and then the water gets rinsed away.

So we don't have to have an adversarial relationship with these difficulties that come up. It can simply be, "Oh, okay, there's the near enemy. May it be washed away with this metta practice. Oh, there's the far enemy. May it be washed away with this metta practice." The first way to work with difficulty is simply to recognize that these other states are coming up along with the metta, and to just keep going, if that's possible.

For myself, when it gets difficult, at least for me, sometimes it feels like the heart begins to squeeze. If the near or far enemy is a little too strong, each phrase feels like it's adding a squeeze to the heart, and it gets harder and harder.

If it gets too difficult, there are some fallbacks. Perhaps the first fallback would be to shift to a person, to shift to one of the categories that's easier. Back to your benefactor, back to yourself if that's easier for you. Unlike vipassana practice, where we're meeting suffering and working with that, with metta practice we are encouraging finding where it's easiest. So it's not cheating. If it feels easier to go back to where the heart feels more open, where you can connect with another person, that's perfectly fine. Use another person for a while and then perhaps try to bring in your dear friend again.

And being playful around the categories—we don't have to say, "Okay, I'm on dear friend now, that's all I do." We can have it be a little more fluid. Maybe one or two phrases to your benefactor, then one round to your dear friend, then one round to your benefactor and one round to your dear friend. Alternating in this way and seeing if you can allow some of those near and far enemies to come into the wash and be released by alternating other people with your dear friend.

If that still feels difficult, there are a couple of different approaches you could use. For me, metta was not an easy practice. It took quite a while before I could really feel like I could connect with it and not just be torqued into pain. On one daylong retreat where I was doing metta, it was going okay for the morning, but by the afternoon it didn't matter which category I was trying to send metta to, which person I was choosing—every phrase brought so much pain in the heart that I couldn't even remember the metta phrases. It felt like this constriction, this steel band around my chest. It was so painful to even try to think of the phrases that I couldn't think of the phrases.

The teacher on that retreat suggested, "Try compassion practice for yourself." That was doable, because suffering was what was happening for me. The quality of compassion is the quality of the heart that can meet suffering. And so when I could express the wish, "May I be free from this suffering," that I could remember. I could connect with that wish.

So that's an option also—if it feels too painful, if the practice is bringing up so much constriction or tightness that it feels very difficult to continue with the metta practice, you could try switching to compassion practice. Compassion practice is really simple: one phrase, "May I (or you) be free from this suffering."

I don't know if Guy mentioned this about the dear friend, but it is helpful when doing the metta practice to pick a dear friend who is not undergoing a lot of challenge at this moment. Because when your dear friend is struggling with something in their life, as you recall them you'll probably recall that struggle, and it evokes more the sense of suffering. That evokes the quality of compassion. The quality of metta is the quality of the open heart, the connectedness, the free-flowing connectedness. When that open heart meets suffering, it shifts to compassion.

So in general, when picking a dear friend, pick someone who is generally feeling okay in their life at this point. And if you have a strong wish to bring a person who is suffering into the room for the metta practice, you may from time to time find using that compassion phrase to be more resonant with what's actually happening for you. The phrase "May you be free from this suffering" is the expression of the open heart meeting suffering.

And then, if none of those things is resonating for you in terms of working with the difficulty, you can always drop the metta practice and use mindfulness.

Just shift to mindfulness practice to work with whatever has come up in your own heart and mind in that moment. Simply be with it, allowing, accepting—this is what has arisen. Can I be with that? The same tools that we've been using.

So let's explore the practice. I'll do a little bit of guiding at the beginning, in a very light way. Use your own phrases. I'll suggest some phrases, very simple phrases to begin, but you don't need to feel like you have to use my phrases for yourself. We'll stay with benefactor or self—I'm going to suggest you just start where it's easiest. Then we'll switch to friend. At some point in the guided meditation I'll suggest a timing for switching, but if it feels productive and appropriate for you to stay with wherever it's easiest, just stay there.

Guided Meditation

Allowing yourself to be as comfortable as possible. Allowing the mind and body to settle. And allowing the attention to just take in, connect with whatever's happening in the area of your heart. No right or wrong there. Just how is your heart in this moment?

Allowing yourself to call to mind whoever's easiest—whether it's yourself or your benefactor—bringing that person to mind or bringing yourself into your heart. And allowing yourself to recollect some qualities that you appreciate about yourself or the benefactor. It's said that the proximate cause for metta is seeing the beautiful. Allow yourself to connect with the beautiful of yourself or the benefactor.

And begin expressing the wishes of kindness, of friendliness, of caring. May I or you be happy. May I or you be healthy. May I or you be safe. May I or you live with ease.

Continuing to express the wish of metta for yourself or your benefactor. With each phrase, checking in—how does it land in your heart to make that wish? Feel free to play with flowing between self and benefactor as it feels appropriate for you.

Bringing your dear friend into your mind. Allowing yourself to recollect some qualities you appreciate about your friend. Beginning to offer the phrases of goodwill to your friend.

Bringing up an image of your friend, if that's accessible. If not, perhaps a sense of being with your friend. Saying the phrase, understanding the meaning, and touching back in—how does the heart feel having

made that wish?—with each phrase.

If difficulty arises while doing the metta, knowing it's a very natural part of the practice. If it's okay to keep going, just continue. And also knowing it's fine to change to another person, switch to compassion practice, or use mindfulness with whatever is arising.

End of Guided Meditation

Do you have any questions about your metta practice?

A practitioner shares about noticing attachment arising when practicing with their sister—wanting her happiness to look a certain way.

Yes, that is near enemy, I think, because it is that sense of really wanting something specific. In effect, it sounds like it's in the terrain of compassion, because compassion comes with that wish to help. So it sounds like your sister's perhaps in a little bit of struggle.

The practitioner clarifies: "Not right now, but I want her to be accepted. I want her happiness to look a certain way."

I see. Yes, so just notice that. Notice that it's not just wishing her happiness—it's happiness with an agenda. Yes, that is near enemy.

So yes, just notice that and allow that, but see if you can release the agenda in a way.

When you get into a state of concentration, do you continue with the words, or do you stay with something else? There are different ways to explore it. When I've done metta as a concentration practice, I have continued with the words. In fact, it felt like I got concentrated on the intention towards metta more than the feeling of metta. If you have more of the feeling of metta going, then you can let go of the words. But the words are kind of the engine that keeps it going.

It depends on how deep the concentration gets—at a certain point the words will fall away. But generally, you can keep going with the phrases. It actually supports the concentration to deepen, to keep going with the phrases.

A question about metta practice and compassion practice—are they different? And referring to the story I told about changing to compassion practice for myself on that daylong where it got so difficult to do the metta.

In compassion practice, there is a difference. In metta practice we're connecting with the quality of connectivity, of the open heart, friendliness, caring—those kinds of qualities. With compassion practice we're highlighting suffering. It's a similar quality of heart, and that quality of the open heart, when it meets suffering, resonates with compassion. So it's a different quality, and we may actually do some compassion practice later in the retreat.

In that case what we do is we actively bring suffering into our minds to cultivate that quality of compassion—the heart that can stay open in the face of suffering. And so when I did that for myself in that daylong retreat, what was coming up for me was suffering. It was much more natural for me to use the compassion phrase, which is very simple: may I be free from this suffering. That resonated. I did wish to be free from that suffering. It was a very natural wish, and it made the practice doable. So it felt different to me. It is a different practice because with compassion practice we're actively trying to meet suffering.

A question about pace, about staying with a category—the moving between benefactor and friend in a qualitative way. Sometimes if you go into concentration, it moves a lot more slowly.

I can speak from my own experience around this. There are probably many different ways. One thing I really appreciate about practice is that there are so many different doorways and so many different ways it works for different people. So the first thing I'd suggest is to notice what works for you. Trust your experience. If you find it's supportive to just stay with one category and that helps deepen the concentration, that's great—do that. If you find it's more helpful to switch categories, if you find the metta stays more lively when you're switching, play with that.

For myself, I've seen with concentration practice that it stabilizes—at least for me—to stay with one person for a while. The person becomes much more clear. The experience of directing metta towards that person is more clear.

About going more towards the pervading—we haven't really gotten to that yet in these instructions, but I have been playing with it in my own practice and actually find it fairly natural. When the feeling is present, you let go of the person, let go of the object, and allow the feeling to spread. That's also a possibility, especially for concentration. It does feel very natural to do that.

So I really would encourage you to discover what works for you, but those are just a few thoughts around that question.

For me, when I did that month-long metta practice, I stayed with self and benefactor for two weeks. I didn't even switch categories. I really allowed it to stabilize there, and that allowed the concentration to deepen.

It depends partly on whether you're using it as a concentration practice or not. When I'm not using metta as a concentration practice, and I'm more looking at just allowing the heart to vibrate and resonate in sympathy with people, I kind of just let whoever pops up, pop up. I'm not so concerned about stabilizing the mind with one particular person. So it partly depends on your purpose. Are you using it for concentration? And if you are, then I think staying with one person over sittings, over days, is helpful.

Someone mentioned adapting the phrases for themselves to very specific issues that were coming up in the retreat, moving far away from the standard phrases, and then when moving on to friend or benefactor, returning to the more traditional ones.

Again, the answer is different depending on whether you're doing it as a concentration practice or you're more interested in cultivating the quality of metta just for itself. Generally, I find if I'm just cultivating the quality of metta for itself, I explore what works. That may be different phrases for different people. It might be switching categories more quickly, allowing different people to pop in, being really creative, envisioning people in different situations that reflect what they're doing.

When you're exploring it as a concentration practice, generally simplifying the phrases is helpful. And then over time, when I was doing it as a concentration practice, even the whole phrase "may I be happy, may you be happy" began to feel like too much. And it was just, "Oh, happy." Just using that simple word. Having the phrases be able to collapse down to a simple word was helpful. But again, it depends.

Someone shared that what was coming up with these metta practices felt like beauty, overwhelming at times, with the body kind of contorting.

So what I'm hearing is that when you're doing the metta, something comes up that feels like beauty—a beautiful state of mind—and it's strong, it's overwhelming. This sometimes happens. I found for myself, in my early years of practice, aversive states of mind were really comfortable for me. I could be angry and know I was angry, and this was not too difficult. But joy, happiness, love—those were really hard. They felt overwhelming to connect with, so unfamiliar in a way.

What I'd suggest perhaps, if it feels overwhelming, is to switch to mindfulness rather than continuing with the metta practice. Switch to mindfulness and see if you can allow the feeling. For myself, the little bit of wisdom that was helpful when beautiful states would arise and I couldn't deal with them, when they were overwhelming, was this: "It's okay, this will pass." And that was actually really great, you know.

What would seem to happen was that the resistance to that state would let go, and then the state would get strong. It would even get more intense, but then it would be like a wave that flowed out. And then on the other side of it, it was much more tranquil. So that little bit of wisdom—it's okay, this will pass—allowed it to do its natural movement.

I would encourage mindfulness of that experience. Let go of the metta phrases for a while and just explore: how is it to allow this beauty? You may notice some contraction, some resistance, some fear, some confusion. Allow all of that, and perhaps this reminder: it's okay, it will pass.

So we need to stop. Thank you for your metta practice. It's such a beautiful thing to sit in a room where this is what's happening.

What great karma.

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