Mettā Practice: Self, Benefactor and Friend

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For the metta practice this evening, we'll continue exploring metta for self, benefactor, and friend. I think you've already had quite a bit of suggestions about how to work with the practice, so I'll just offer you one particular piece that was the turning point for me with respect to having the metta practice make sense—what the key instruction was for me and how that worked.

The metta practice is a practice of intention, and we're using words to evoke a quality. Saying the phrase, understanding the meaning of the phrase, is essentially pointing the mind in the direction of metta. The way this works, at least in my understanding, is that words are pretty powerful. You may have noticed this in your meditation—if a thought arises about something, how quickly an emotion can be born in relationship to that thought. What this practice is doing is using thought to evoke this beautiful, wholesome quality of loving-kindness, expressing wishes of kindness.

For me, the key was when I began with each phrase to say the phrase and understand its meaning, so that it's not just rote saying of the words, but really understanding what the meaning of the phrase is. This is just simple dictionary definition; it doesn't have to go any further than that. Just know what the words mean as you say them in your mind. And then take the time to check in: How did that wish, how did that thought, resonate in the heart? I would put my attention in the area of the heart and physically check in. Did that wish have any kind of resonance or impact?

As I explored this, I really began to see metta as an embodied practice and not just a mental practice. Before that, it had felt so much in my head. Coming in with each phrase, checking out—how is the heart right now? What's happening? This also slows down the process of practicing metta, taking the time with each phrase to check in.

At one point, on a month-long metta retreat, I was going through phases in metta, much as you do in the vipassana practice. There was a period where the metta got very dry; there wasn't much going on. I was sitting in the dining room at Spirit Rock, and it just felt so dry. I remembered: I can say the phrase, understand the meaning of the phrase, and just check in. How did that land? How was that in the heart, to express that wish?

As I did that—said the phrase, understood the meaning, checked in—it was as if with each phrase there was the tiniest little shift of warmth or openness or connection. Each time I said the phrase, it was like a gentle blowing on an ember. And the metta just grew. With that experience, I began understanding how the practice of metta can be an embodied practice. That's when it began to make sense for me.

In the guided practice today, we'll start with self, and then at various times I'll suggest that you might want to switch to the next category—to benefactor, to friend. But remember that the metta practice is really a very personal thing, and so the timing I suggest may not be where you are. It may be appropriate for you to either move on more quickly or to stay with one particular category for a while.

Also remember the tools for working when it gets difficult, when the metta is feeling challenging. Challenging doesn't necessarily mean just that it feels dry. If it feels like there's a struggle with working with a particular being, with a lot of hindrances coming up, it's okay to just keep going with that being and let the hindrance be to the side. That was another big aha for me with the metta practice—it was almost a relief not to have to turn and focus on every hindrance that came up. They can be there; just let them wash by. That's a possibility.

But also remember that it's always okay to go back to where it's easier. If it's particularly challenging with one particular person, you can go back to a person where it's easier. Shift back to self or benefactor.

At one point in my practice, I found that even any of the categories—it was just so painful to try to do the metta for my benefactor, for myself. It was as if every phrase put a tightened clamp around my heart. If that happens, one tool you can explore is shifting the phrase to a compassion phrase. For yourself, for instance: "May I be at ease with this suffering," or "May I be free from this suffering." It's fine to shift to compassion if the suffering is what's really strong in your experience.

And of course, if a hindrance is very strong, it's fine to set down the metta, explore the hindrance with mindfulness, and as the hindrance dissipates, come back to the metta.

And just a refresher, a review of the tools for working with difficulty.

Finding yourself in a comfortable posture, allowing the body to be as relaxed as possible. Let the attention settle, rest, take in the experience—the actual felt sense of what's happening in the area of the heart. This area is very sensitive, the seat of feeling in a way. And however you are, whatever feeling is present for you in this moment, that's okay. It's simply like checking in: How is this being right now?

Since we'll begin with metta to self, allow yourself to reflect on, recollect qualities that you appreciate about yourself. If this feels challenging for you, as it was for me, I will offer you this reflection: you are here with the intention to open your heart to suffering, to understand your hearts and minds. What you're doing here is a very rare and amazing thing. Let yourself take that in. Appreciate that you're here. And if you can't appreciate it for yourself, borrow my appreciation. I appreciate you for being here.

Begin connecting with yourself in some way, whether as an image of yourself or perhaps just the felt sense of yourself sitting here. And begin offering yourself the wishes of kindness.

May I be happy.

Remembering with each phrase to understand the meaning of the phrase and check in the area of the

heart. Not looking for anything in particular, but just noticing—how is it for you, having made that wish?

May I be healthy.

May I be safe.

May I live with ease.

Continue for the next few minutes to offer yourself thoughts of goodwill, noticing with each thought how it resonates, vibrates in the heart. If you don't notice anything in particular, that's okay. Just keep checking.

Now, allowing yourself to bring your benefactor to mind if it feels appropriate to shift to your benefactor. An easy being. Allow yourself to connect with the benefactor, perhaps using an image, or maybe using your benefactor's name. Sometimes I found the felt sense of sitting with that being helpful—having them sitting here right with me. There's a different quality to the experience when imagining another being in your field.

Reflect for a few moments on things you appreciate about your benefactor—kind things they have done, qualities you appreciate. And begin offering the wishes of goodwill to this being.

Sometimes I found it helpful to play with the perception of where the thoughts come from. We often feel as though thoughts originate in our head, but that's a perception. Thoughts don't really have a location. So you can play with that perception and have a sense as if the thoughts are coming from your heart. Keep your attention in the area of your heart and allow your heart to wish thoughts of goodwill for your benefactor.

May you be happy.

Noticing how the heart responds to that wish.

May you be healthy.

May you be safe.

May you live with ease.

Continue for the next few minutes to wish lots of kindness and goodwill to this being.

Now, if it feels appropriate for you, allow yourself to connect with your dear friend in whatever way works for you—whether with an image, a felt sense of being with them, or using your friend's name to evoke your friend. Begin exploring, offering the wishes of goodwill to your dear friend.

Remember that metta is a purification practice. It's not a mistake if something that feels counter to metta arises as we practice it.

It's part of the process.

For the last minute of the sitting, let's allow our wish for metta to expand to all beings. May all beings be happy. May all beings be healthy. May all beings be safe. May all beings live with ease. May all beings be free from suffering.

Do you have any questions about the metta practice?

One participant shared that she was experiencing very strong attachment and missing of the people she was practicing with. She wasn't quite sure how to work with that.

This experience of attachment and longing is related to what is sometimes called the near enemy of metta. The far enemy is what is so far from metta that you wouldn't confuse it for metta—anger, hostility, cruelty, that kind of state. The near enemy is more along the lines of attached love and stickiness, the expectation of "I'll love you if you love me," or that kind of thing. It's in that terrain of being close to the quality but having some clinging to it.

So it's a very natural outcome of the metta practice for that to arise. As we've said, metta being a purification practice will draw to the surface, will draw into consciousness, things that are not metta. The fact that it's coming up is not a problem, it's not a mistake—it's actually part of the way metta works, highlighting for us: "This isn't quite that completely open-hearted connection, that connection of love without any expectation or any need for anything in return." As we explore the metta practice, we begin to see the ways in which we are attached, the ways in which we are holding and clinging.

So first of all, it's not a mistake. And then you could explore it by simply knowing that it's there—continuing with the phrases while recognizing the stickiness that's happening.

Sometimes I use an analogy about the purification practice being like a washing machine. If you put clothes that are really dirty into a washing machine with soap and water, the agitation of the machine forces the water to go into the clothes. The way soap works is that it chemically binds with the dirt and pulls it out of the clothes and into the water. The water gets all dirty, but that's part of the process of how the cleaning happens.

It's kind of like what's happening here with metta. You're bringing up the phrases and it's like you're sitting in your little metta washing machine. It's allowing the things that aren't metta to come out into consciousness, which is like coming out into the water. So if you can just keep going and simply be aware—"Oh yeah, there's some wanting happening here. There's missing them happening. May you be happy. Oh, I wish you were here"—just knowing that that's going on. It's part of the process.

If it gets a little too sticky, if it feels like you get lost in the thoughts, you could try switching to another being for a little while, one that's a little less sticky for you. Remind yourself what that quality of the open heart without stickiness feels like, and then bring that being back.

But we're really not going to get through either our vipassana practice or our metta practice without this purification happening. So we need to find ways to be okay that it's happening. It's not a problem that it's happening.

Another question came up about a friend who is experiencing some suffering in their life right now. The person wondered about using compassion phrases instead of the metta phrases, or whether to simply switch to a different person.

There's no one right answer to this. Sometimes the metta practice is taught as a concentration practice, where we are using the quality of metta, cultivating that feeling as a doorway towards concentration. If that's the way you're exploring the practice, if that's what you're doing—using it as an avenue towards concentration—then I would suggest picking a friend who's not particularly suffering right now.

When you bring up that friend who is suffering, it changes the quality. When the open heart meets suffering, the natural response is compassion. So if you're really interested in cultivating the quality of metta in which you can become concentrated, bringing someone into your mind who is suffering will change the flavor of the metta, making it a little less of a stable object to get concentrated on.

If you are simply exploring the quality of metta in your heart and in your practice, and this is a dear friend you'd really like to connect with, I would suggest that it would probably be easier to stay connected if you switch to the compassion phrases for that friend. Often what arises when you bring up a friend who has some suffering is that the suffering becomes quite present. And the phrase that most directly connects with what's happening there is the compassion phrase.

So hopefully that was contextualized enough that you can decide for yourself what would be most appropriate.

Thank you for your metta practice.

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