Day 6 Brahmavihāra - Mettā: Dear Friend (Retreat at Spirit Rock)

Andrea Fella · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Andrea Fella · 43:41

In the metta practice as passed down through the commentaries—which is where we're bringing this particular practice from—the Buddha offered in the suttas more of a radiating style of practice. And yet we appreciate the version of metta that's offered in the commentaries, because it really helps us to pick particular people in these various categories.

We've been doing easy being and self, and today we'll expand to dear friend, then in subsequent days to a neutral person and a difficult person. These categories—self, easy person or benefactor, dear friend, neutral person, difficult person—pretty much anybody in the world can fit into one of those categories.

And yet if we try to think about the general category of dear friend, for instance, we might just kind of generally think of people we like. But with bringing in a particular person, we touch into the specifics of relationship. That's really, I think, what's so brilliant about this form: we're touching into the different kinds of relationships we have through these categories, but looking at it through a particular specific relationship. And because we're looking at it through a particular specific relationship, we probably touch into some of the particular specific challenges of that relationship.

We might contemplate doing loving-kindness for all beings, and that might feel really lovely. But then if a particular person comes to mind, it's like, "Oh, well, but that person, hmm." So we go through these specifics in order to touch into and pull out some of the sticky places in our relationships. We go through these categories and pick particular people for each of them and work with that relationship.

Today we're going to be exploring the dear friend. We'll start in our practice together with the easy person and self, because one of the approaches with this kind of metta practice is that we tend to try to start where it's easiest and begin to cultivate the quality of the open heart, the connected heart, this quality of metta, of kindness, of caring. We start where it's easiest, where it may be more naturally arising for us.

The image that's offered is that with each of the easier beings, we have the opportunity for our heart to kind of fill up with this quality of metta, and then it can start to overflow. The image is offered of water filling a pool and then spilling over down to the next pool, then filling and spilling to the next pool. So we start where it's easiest and then shift to the next person as we feel like our heart has expanded a little more.

This also brings in a general tool: in exploring the metta as we go through these different categories

through the days and weeks, if it gets difficult for you—I mean, we do work with difficulty and I'll talk a little bit about some of that today in the metta practice—but also, if it gets too challenging with a particular being, we can simply go back to where it's been easier. We can shift back to ourselves or to easier relationships.

With the dear friend, while I'm talking about qualities that may be useful in terms of considering a person, just be thinking in your mind of who you might want to choose. It should be someone that you have a good connection with, with whom it feels relatively easy to have that sense of caring. It's helpful if that person is pretty happy in their life right now, because we're going to be bringing this person into our mind. If they're struggling in their lives right now, it's not that you wouldn't want to wish them well, but it does shade more towards the compassion practice than the metta practice. So keeping it simpler that way—thinking about finding a person who's relatively happy in their lives right now, not going through a lot of struggle.

It's also helpful to choose someone to whom you're not sexually attracted. But it's okay if you want to play with it. I did a month of intensive metta practice, and I definitely picked someone for each of the categories that I wasn't sexually attracted to. But sometimes what happens in the metta is that we start feeling so much heart opening and care and love that it can feel kind of close to that kind of attraction. So it can be helpful to just be really clear about the difference—that this kind of open-hearted caring, that kind of connection, can be there when there's not the sexual attraction. It simplifies things, really. Choosing someone to whom you're not sexually attracted is a way of simplifying. But if you want to play with it and see what happens, you're welcome to.

I will say, if you're doing metta as a concentration practice—I know some of you here are doing metta intensively as a concentration practice—in that situation I would really strongly encourage not choosing someone to whom you're sexually attracted.

With a dear friend, in terms of offering the phrases, probably the other teachers mentioned different possibilities of connecting with the other being, of either just using their name or visualizing an image of them. Sometimes for me, visualization, active visualization, was a little of a challenge. It wasn't easy to call up an image necessarily of another being. What I found helpful is, kind of with my eyes closed, I imagined as if the other person was sitting in front of me. You might play with this right now. Just close your eyes and imagine one dear friend sitting in front of you, as if that person is with you. You don't even have to visualize it, but just as if that person was there. To me, that created a kind of field, as if I was with that person.

Now what I'd like to suggest is: pick somebody else to sit in front of you and see if the flavor of the field changes a little bit. That quality of using almost the kinesthetic sense of being with the person is available for some people.

That worked for me. So I also offer that as an option.

With a dear friend, there may be some kind of a little more ease with knowing what makes them happy. The phrases, the basic phrases that we use—may you be happy, may you be healthy, may you be safe, may you live with ease—you may know some things about how the person would be or what they would be doing in happiness. One friend I did this for was an artist, and I just envisioned her in her artist studio as a way of thinking about her being happy, and then wishing, may you be happy. So sometimes with a dear friend we can be creative with the images, connecting to kind of knowing how our friend feels safe and how our friend feels happy and healthy.

And then because they are a dear friend—in picking a dear friend, part of the way the metta works is that especially when we pick a specific person, as I was talking about getting the specifics of the relationship in the mix, bringing a dear friend to mind and wishing may they be happy, sometimes what our mind will produce is all of the things that they've done that have irritated us. And we'll feel that. We'll feel that annoyance, we'll feel that frustration. And this is the metta practice at work. It's designed to work this way. It draws to the surface what is not metta.

It's kind of like a washing machine. We have a washing machine and we have our clothes that have stains in them. And this is like our minds—we've got in there the well-wishing and we've also got some of the grinchiness in there. So there it is. We have all of this stuff in our minds, and it's kind of like the stained clothes. We put the clothes in the washing machine, we fill it up with water, and we put some soap in there. And the soap dissolves in the water and then pushes through the clothes. Because of the way the chemical nature of soap works, it attaches to the soil in the clothes and pulls it out into the water. And that's kind of how the metta works. The effort of saying the phrases is like massaging the soap through the clothes. It's massaging those wishes through our mind. And it kind of attracts everything that's not metta, binds to it, and then pulls it into consciousness—like the soap pulling the soil into the water so that it can be rinsed away.

So this is how the metta practice works. It's not a mistake when we're doing metta and suddenly we're having these thoughts of, well, why did they do that thing? It's like, oh good, the metta practice is working. So not fighting it and not feeling like you're doing something wrong. This is the way it works. It's helpful to have an allowing attitude with whatever is arising for you during the metta practice.

The metta, as with all the other brahma-viharas, comes with what we might call near enemy and far enemy. The near enemy is a kind of relationship that's similar to the quality of metta but has some clinging in it. For metta, that would be a kind of attached love, a conditional love—I'll love you if you love me, or that neediness around love. There are different flavors of this attached quality of love. And with the dear friend, this can begin to happen. As you're connecting to these phrases, there might be a little bit of that leaning towards and wanting something back from them. So that's just something to notice. And again, the metta is designed to pull whatever is not that unconditional quality of love into consciousness. So we'll see this. It's not a mistake to see this when it comes up.

The far enemy is a quality of mind that we're not going to mistake for metta—anger, hatred. And this also can come up during our metta practice. Working with this, particularly when the aversive reactions arise, there are different things we can do. The first approach would be simply to recognize, oh yeah, this is the metta doing its work, and keep going. It's just like, okay, there it is, it's out into consciousness, let it be rinsed away—that kind of quality. It can be a little bit of a relief for those of us who are the dive-in-and-look-at-everything kind of people. When I did that month of metta practice, there was a stretch of time I was doing the evening dishes after the late night dishes, so I was the only one in there doing dishes and putting things in.

And I was doing metta for all beings at that time, because I was doing metta nonstop all day. It was during one of the February retreats, and I was just doing metta around the clock—well, probably not literally around the clock because I was asleep a good chunk of the time. But when I was awake, I was really inclining back to that practice.

While I was doing the dishwashing, something would happen. The door would be a little hard to close, or the button wouldn't respond quite right when I pushed it. And the mind just exploded: "Who designed this stupid machine anyway?" Oh, there it is—that kind of anger. At that point it was just, "Oh, I don't have to do anything with this. I just go on." And the next phrase: "May all beings be healthy. May all beings be at ease." It was kind of a relief in some ways that I didn't have to stop, put the metta down, and investigate the aversion. It was just the metta doing its job. There was a little bit of relief, and it passed.

So we can play with it in that way, just letting these near and far enemies come up and continuing with the metta practice.

If it feels a little stickier than that—say you're working with somebody specific, a dear friend, and some particular story has gotten stuck in your mind—you could explore the forgiveness practice that James talked about yesterday with that person. You could shift and instead of doing metta practice, work with forgiveness practice.

Another approach would be, as I said earlier, if it feels really sticky, you could let go of working with that being and step back to self or an easy being. Give yourself a break from that challenge. You do not have to hold yourself in there.

And then, if it really feels appropriate—and you can discern this for yourself—there are times when something comes up strongly enough that it feels right to let go of the metta practice and turn to vipassana practice with whatever has arisen. Just, "Okay, this is anger arising, this is frustration arising. How does it feel in the body? What's happening around that? What's the attitude? What's the relationship to this?" That's also another strategy that can be helpful: put down the metta practice and bring in the mindfulness practice around a difficulty.

And then sometimes—it varies for different people—I found that doing the metta practice at all different

stages, with the different beings, there were times when my mind felt so compressed and contracted. It felt physically painful at times to be trying to orient to metta. This mind has had a lot of the aversive nature in it, and so while metta is its antidote, it also creates a kind of challenge at times.

One of my metta teachers suggested that if it's really painful for yourself, switch to compassion practice for yourself. It's still in that terrain of the Brahmaviharas. And that I felt like I could do. Actually, at one point during a daylong metta retreat, by the middle of the afternoon I could not even remember the phrases because it just felt like I had this steel band wrapped around my chest. It was so painful. The teacher said, "Well, try doing compassion practice for yourself." That I could do, and I could remember: "May I be free from this suffering." That was very resonant with what was being experienced. There was that ability to connect—yes, there is this wish to be free from this kind of contraction.

So that's another option. Let me review them again. I know this is a lot, but here are different approaches if difficulty arises during metta. First, just notice that something's arising and keep going. You don't have to stop just because there's a difficulty arising. Second, shift to forgiveness practice. Third, shift back to an easier person—let go of doing metta for that person and shift to someone easier. Fourth, do mindfulness practice with the difficulty. And fifth, shift to compassion practice.

You're welcome to just play with how it works, how those tools support you in your metta practice.

So we'll practice this together, and we'll start again with self and benefactor, or self and easy being.

Finding a posture that feels comfortable. It's really helpful to have ease of posture in the metta practice.

Beginning with checking in to the area of your heart, just seeing how it is right now. What's happening in that area? Nothing right or wrong—just noticing what's happening there.

And then perhaps having the sense of even breathing through the heart center, with a sense of connection and care for yourself.

Beginning wherever it's easiest for you, either with yourself or with an easy being. Let yourself first connect with qualities you appreciate, either about yourself or about the easy person or being. It could be a pet, somebody really easy, some being very easy for you. Qualities you appreciate about yourself or that being. This recollecting of beautiful qualities is said to be the proximate cause for metta to arise. So connecting to that appreciation.

If it supports you, putting your hand on your heart—sometimes that can help connect you with this area.

Allowing an image to come to mind of either yourself or this person, or the felt sense, or the name of the person. Beginning to express, to offer the wishes of kindness:

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 for the next few minutes, offering these wishes of kindness.

It can be helpful to stay connected with this area of the heart and almost envision the heart as a pool of warm water, each phrase being like dropping a flower onto the surface of that water, ripples arising as the flower lands. What are the ripples in the heart as you make that wish? Staying connected with the felt sense of the heart with each wish.

Now, whether you've been working with self or easy being, allow there to arise a sense or an image of the two of you together. We'll take a transitional time here, exploring what it might feel like to allow that easy being, that benefactor, to send metta to you—that you're receiving the well wishes from that being. Envisioning them expressing to you:

May you be happy.
May you be healthy, safe, and at ease.

What does it feel like to receive those wishes?

And now shifting. If you did self before, shifting to easy being. If you did easy being before, shifting to self. Exploring well wishes for yourself, for the easy being, for a few minutes.

And now allowing your dear friend to come into your mind. Taking a few moments to reflect on qualities you appreciate about your friend. Ways they've supported you, cared for you. Things they've done, ways they've supported others that you appreciate. Allow yourself to appreciate your friend.

And begin offering the wishes of kindness to your friend:

May you be happy.

Again, taking the time with each phrase to check in on how it feels to make that wish. Noticing the ripples. Dropping that wish like a flower into the warm water.

May you be healthy.
May you be safe.
May you live with ease.

Continuing for the next few minutes, wishing kindness, thoughts of goodwill for your friend. Noticing how it affects the heart to do so.

For the last couple of minutes of the sitting, I'd like to invite you to imagine yourself, your easy being, and your dear friend together—the three of you together, perhaps facing each other. And imagining the three of you wishing together:

May we be happy.

Reminding ourselves that wishing happiness doesn't mean that we're denying it for ourselves. In fact, just the opposite.

May we be happy.

May we be healthy.

May we be safe.

May we live with ease.

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