Working with the Dear Friend

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Today we're going to continue the formal metta practice using the phrases and exploring in a little more depth the category of a dear friend.

I'd like to speak to begin with just a little bit about this form of practice that we're offering. The question came up yesterday about wondering if this is a more modern form of the practice. The form that we teach here, with using the phrases and using the categories—the phrases themselves are pretty old. The phrases are found in the Sutta Piṭaka, in the Pali Canon, the Sutta basket, in a text called the Paṭisambhidāmagga, which is not from the time of the Buddha. Most scholars think of it as being a little bit later, like second century common era. So it's not time of the Buddha, and the teachings, the Sutta teachings attributed to the Buddha, do offer a more expansive or pervading teaching of the loving-kindness. So the more specific form of practice was somewhat later, but certainly not what I would call modern—thousands and thousands of years old.

I did hear from one teacher—Gil Fronsdal, I believe—who said that this practice of metta may even predate the Buddha. I couldn't find any verification of this in the time that I was looking at this yesterday, but if so, it's a pretty ancient practice, this practice that we're doing here.

The categories that we use, the staging through first looking at self and then picking a particular person in a category, that's found in the Visuddhimagga, which is a commentary in the Theravada tradition that's about fifth century common era. So that's also fairly old, this going through the categories.

I appreciate the different options for exploring metta practice. I think there are different times where the different forms or styles of metta practice might be useful. For myself, the formal metta practice was challenging at the beginning. It was not something that allowed me to have ease in the mind. And that's really important in the metta practice—we do begin with that ease. For me, the way into metta was insight practice. As the insight practice softened my heart and mind, the allowing—"this is the way it is, it's okay that it's this way"—all that allowing practice that I did in insight practice took me to the place, after several years, where the metta practice was available again, and very powerful.

So there can be different approaches. Sometimes we can cultivate metta through the insight practice, through recognizing when metta arises, through cultivating that quality of love through being with experience, loving what's here. There are a lot of different ways into metta practice.

The form that we're teaching has some advantages and supports for us. One of the benefits of the phrases is that it uses a capacity of our minds—the intention, the aspect where we can put a thought into our

minds. Thoughts have a very powerful shaping capacity in our mind. As the Buddha said, whatever one frequently ponders becomes the inclination of the mind. So if we frequently bring in thoughts of goodwill, that begins to shape the mind, even if the feeling of goodwill is not there. This is a powerful tool to support cultivating this quality of love, of kindness, of care—thinking thoughts, bringing thoughts of goodwill into the mind.

It's supportive in a way that we can do this practice even if we're not feeling the metta, if we're not feeling that sense of goodwill. For plenty of time when I was doing the metta practice, I was not feeling the feeling, but I could connect with the wish. May I be happy. May you be happy.

In fact, there was one experience I had. I did a month-long retreat at Spirit Rock one February, a month of entirely metta practice. I was in the dining hall one day, not feeling a lot of metta, feeling kind of miserable, feeling sorry for myself, a lot of pain in the body. I was like, "I cannot feel metta at all." But I was committed to doing it the whole time, so I just said, "Well, I can say the phrase and know what it means. I can bring that into my mind and I can know what it means. And with each phrase, I can check in: How does it land? How does it affect the heart to feel that, to make that wish?"

So I began wishing myself well. "May I be happy today." Say that, know what it means. And then feel in the heart this tiny little shift, hardly barely discernible, but just a tiny little shift. Then another: "May I be at ease. May I be healthy. May I be safe." With each phrase checking in: How did that one land?

And it was as if each phrase was like touching a little ember of metta in the heart. The expression of that wish, the expression of the metta, was like gently blowing on that ember—just a gentle breeze blowing on that ember. And within about twenty minutes, my mind was completely shifted. I was just so happy as I got up and walked up the hill from the dining hall. It was such a teaching for me, such an eye-opening revelation about the power of using this formal practice.

That said, there are many times in my practice where the phrases were not helping—where doing the phrases was making me more and more tight. And so we do have to honor where we are. We have to honor what is happening in our hearts and minds. I found in the formal metta practice this quality, and Dawn mentioned this the other day: saying a phrase and checking in to the heart. And for me it was not only heart but body, checking in—how does it land to make that wish? So that it's not just saying the phrase, it's saying the phrase and being aware of how that phrase impacts or affects your experience. And maybe it's not much of a shift, or maybe it's a subtle shift, or maybe it brings up the opposite. Maybe it brings up anger or frustration, and that's okay. That's part of the metta practice too.

As both Dawn and Bob mentioned, sometimes that's the function of the metta practice—to draw out everything that's in the way of the metta. I sometimes think about the metta practice as a purification practice. It's talked about as a purification practice, and the washing machine is an interesting analogy.

In the washing machine analogy for metta practice, I think of the water as our awareness. The clothes

with dirt in them—that's the mind with all of its messy stuff. And the soap is the metta. So you put the soap in the water in a washing machine, and then you have some agitation. You have to agitate the machine, turn it on. And that massaging of the soap in the water through the clothes, it pushes the soapy water through. The way soap works, it latches onto the dirt and pulls it out into the water.

That's what the metta does. The metta is the soap, and the continuing of the phrases, the energy of the practice, is like that machine turning away. It will massage that metta through our minds, and it will latch onto anything that's not metta and pull it into consciousness. It's not a mistake when that happens. It's the metta doing its work. So sometimes that is what happens—we feel the opposite of metta when we're practicing it.

In the formal practice of metta, the way we've learned it from our teachers—Sharon learned it from Sayadaw U Pandita in Burma, and I learned it from my teachers here, plus my teacher Sayadaw U Tejaniya in Burma—this way we've learned the practice, we generally start where it's easiest, as we've been doing the last couple of days, starting with an easy being. And then moving into beings with whom we perhaps have a little more complex relationship.

So today we're going to explore the possibility of offering these wishes of kindness to a dear friend. Now, we might think that it would be easy to offer metta for a dear friend, but as we rest with the friend in our mind, in our hearts, and begin to express, "May you be safe, may you be happy," sometimes what comes up—that soap of the metta going through our minds and the thoughts that come up with the relationship—is that they did that thing, they said that thing. How can I wish them well when they did that? And so it can get a little more complex sometimes with a dear friend.

This is actually part of why the use of these different categories is useful for us. Because if we are exploring the metta, and sometimes I've done this, touched into a kind of open-hearted quality that feels like, "Yes, may all beings be happy," and then a particular person comes into mind and their specifics come into mind—there's some constriction there.

The mind, in the "all beings" category, if we're just pervading metta, sometimes that pervading quality can be a little diluted. It can be not really taking in the specifics. And if we bring in a particular person, there may be that feeling like a wrench in the works. It feels like the washing machine gets stuck because we're connecting with particular things or actions, things they've done or said where we have some rub, where we have some challenge in opening our hearts. And so that's part of the reason for specifically turning to specific beings.

Each of the different categories involves picking a specific being to help us find the terrain of where that particular category challenges us.

For someone we're close to, we may have expectations that they wouldn't do something that would hurt us. And then when they do, there's a barrier. For someone who is doing things that are harmful or hurtful

to us, we may feel like there's simply no way we could even feel that kind of well-wishing for them. So picking specific beings helps us find the ground-in dirt in our relationships.

In exploring the dear friend, we may find a little bit of this rub. And it's okay if that comes up. When there's difficulty in the mettā practice, sometimes we can just hold it and say, "Yes, this is the mettā working." That's fine.

At one point I was doing my yogi job during a retreat where I was doing mettā all the time. I was doing the dishwashing at Spirit Rock, and I was finding the machine a bit hard to work with. I was doing "may all beings" at this point—"may all beings be happy"—and the machine would get a little stuck. I'd think, "Who designed this stupid machine?" The anger would flare up in my mind, and then I'd notice, "Oh, there's the mettā. There's the anger. Okay." I didn't have to drop the mettā and look at the anger. I just noted, "Yes, that comes out into the wash," and kept going.

If we can keep going, noticing that kind of rub or grinchiness or reactivity coming out into the wash, that's fine. That's what happens in the washing machine—the dirt comes into the water, and then that water can be rinsed away. The reactivity can come into our consciousness and then be released. We can appreciate that the mettā is doing its job when that kind of reactivity happens.

So if we can keep going and hold the phrases, the well-wishing, and the reactivity all together, that's fine. Sometimes, however, the reactivity does get stronger. If that happens, it can be useful to let go of that particular being. If the reactivity feels like it's escalating, it can be useful to let go of that being and go back to where it's easier in the mettā practice—to yourself or to the easy being, wherever it feels more comfortable, more useful to practice.

There's an analogy with mettā that in starting where it's easy, it's like we're filling up a pool of water with that quality of mettā. As that pool fills up, it can overflow and begin to fill up the next pool. We may find that we can start with the easy being or with ourselves, and that creates a container for well-wishing. Then, bringing in another being where there may be a little more difficulty, the mettā from the prior work or practice can support us. But if that pool dries out completely, we may have to go back and nourish it again, returning to an easier being.

Another support—and I think this will come in tomorrow's session—is to shift to another practice in the flavor of the mettā practices: forgiveness practice, either forgiveness for ourselves or forgiveness for other beings. If it's too hard to wish well, sometimes we can explore the forgiveness practice. And it's okay also, if the reactivity is too strong, to let go of the mettā entirely and just work with mindfulness with the reactivity.

So these are tools for navigating difficulty. First, if difficulty comes up, stay—just keep going if possible and allow it, knowing that this is the mettā working well. Then, dropping back to an easier being, using forgiveness practice, or shifting back to mindfulness practice.

Let's explore the practice again together today.

Finding a posture that feels comfortable. Allowing a relaxation in the body. Perhaps taking some time to connect with relaxing the body and mind.

Then connecting with the area of the heart. Just allowing what's there to be there, completely okay. Whatever's there in this moment, allowing that to be as it is.

If it's supportive, sometimes it can be helpful to remember—as was suggested yesterday—that many, many beings have been offering mettā to all beings: all beings now, all beings to be born. We are the recipient of mettā. Somebody right now, somewhere on the planet, is offering mettā to all beings. You are one of them.

Opening your heart to the worthiness of yourself to receive that mettā.

Then allowing an easy being to come to your mind. That may be yourself, it may be a benefactor, maybe a pet, a child. Beginning by recollecting something that you appreciate about that being—something kind that they've done, or that you've done if you're exploring yourself in this moment. Things they've done, or qualities you appreciate about that being or about yourself.

This reflection on what you appreciate about a being is said to be the proximate cause for this quality of care and connection.

Holding this being in your mind in some way—it may be as an image. For yourself...

It may be your sense of yourself now, sitting here. Sometimes it might just be the sense of being with that person—not an image, but just as if they were sitting in front of you while you sit with your eyes closed, knowing they're there. Sometimes that can invoke that being. A connection. Exploring a connection with this being.

And beginning to offer or wish those phrases. *May you be safe.* With each wish, each offering, expressing that wish and understanding what it means to make it. But then coming back—how does it feel here to make that wish? Nothing needs to happen particularly. It's more of a checking in, in the area of the heart. *May you be safe.* How does it feel in the heart, in the body, for you to have expressed that wish? *May you be happy. May you be healthy. May you live with ease.*

I'm going to offer some silence now for you to explore this on your own—connecting with the being, saying the phrase, seeing how it lands. And you're welcome to be creative with the phrases, whatever phrases are resonant for you in this well-wishing. Taking your time and exploring a relaxed connection with the easy being, the phrases, and the response in your heart.

And now perhaps offering an inner bow to your easy being. In a way, saying goodbye to that being for now.

And allowing yourself to greet a dear friend. Imagining perhaps an image, or as if they were sitting in front of you. Sometimes using their name can be a way to evoke some sense of them in your mind. Creating some kind of connection with this friend. Reflecting for a few moments on what you appreciate about your dear friend—qualities that you appreciate, kind things that they may have done or said.

And if your mind is also including things that you don't appreciate, just kind of say, "Thank you for that opinion, but we're focusing on the things we appreciate right now."

Then whatever appreciation you may feel, that can be a support for offering the phrases. *May you be safe.* And then how does it land in your heart to make that wish? *May you be happy.*

You can be creative sometimes with the images or connection. Sometimes when I'm exploring connecting with a dear friend, I know what makes them feel happy. One friend I've offered metta to is an artist, so I envision her in her studio for that phrase. So you can be creative with the connection part if that feels easy and natural for you, keeping it relaxed. *May you be healthy. May you live with ease.*

Exploring for the next few minutes offering these wishes of kindness to your dear friend. If some kind of rub or something non-metta comes up in this process, that's just part of the process, part of the way metta works. But if it feels too challenging, you're welcome to drop back to the easy being. Refresh that quality of connection and care. And then after a few minutes, explore coming back to the dear friend.

Exploring your connection with your dear friend in this moment, I'm going to offer a revised way to practice with the dear friend. And that's an alternation between yourself and the dear friend. Envisioning yourselves together, you can envision both of you doing this together. With each phrase: *May I be happy. May you be happy. May we be happy. May I be healthy. May you be healthy. May we both be healthy. May I be safe. May you be safe.*

May we both be safe.

Continuing that exploration, if it seems supportive for you—this alternation of wishing yourself well, wishing your friend well, and wishing you both together the wishes of kindness.

For me, this is a way to address a particular belief in my own mind that somehow happiness is a zero-sum game. That wishing happiness for someone else means I'm getting less of it for myself. I discovered this pretty early on in doing my metta practice—this belief that wishing somebody else well triggers a response of, "Well, what about me?"

But it's not a zero-sum game, actually. When we wish somebody else well, it can nourish us as well. This kind of alternation was a way for me to acknowledge that wishing myself well and wishing somebody else well are not mutually exclusive. And then bringing the two together—"may we be happy"—explicitly acknowledges that it doesn't have to be a zero-sum game.

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