Guided Mettā Practice: Neutral Person (Retreat at Spirit Rock)

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Today in our metta practice we'll be expanding to another ring of beings. In this expansion, the teachings point to starting with where it's relatively easier and working out towards where it might have a little more challenge. So we start where it may be easier to really feel that connection.

Traditionally it is said that the self is easiest, and in our own culture we've often found not necessarily so. So we begin in this place potentially of what we call self and easy being—someone for whom it's easy to feel that connection. Then we expand out to a dear friend, where there may be a lot of love and a lot of connection and a lot of more spontaneous caring. Yet often in a dear friend category, with someone who is in that relationship with us, there are often rubs. We know them so well, they know us so well, and there are rubs. You know: "Well yes, I love that person, but why did they do that thing?" This brings up some of what Greg talked about as the far enemy potentially, or the near enemy with the dear friend—the confusion between that unconditional love and the kind of reciprocal expectation.

Today we'll be expanding out to what is often called the neutral person. This is someone that we don't know very well, someone who we may have contact with but don't really have much of a relationship with. This kind of represents, in a way, a turning point in our metta practice. We can think that the neutral person is a stand-in for the vast majority of beings on this planet that we don't really know—almost a representative of our relationship to all beings in a specific person.

I find the use of specific people helpful rather than thinking generally of categories, like "all of my dear friends" or "all of the people I don't know." What bringing in a specific individual does is really highlight the relational aspect—what our relationship to that person is and how we feel, what happens when we try to wish that being well.

When we try to wish our dear friends well, we may sometimes just have it flow and feel like, "Yeah, I really want my friend to be happy." And then sometimes we come up with that rub. We're not trying to deny that rub. Perhaps one of the other teachers used this analogy: Guy Armstrong sometimes uses the analogy of metta being like running a metta magnet over our heart. And what does a magnet do? It pulls its opposite. So we can think of this practice of bringing these phrases up, bringing the wishes, the intention towards well-wishing, as being the magnet that will pull out into consciousness our resistances to that well-wishing.

In choosing a neutral person—again, an actual person that perhaps you've seen—it could be somebody

here on retreat that you just don't know very well. It could be somebody in your daily life that you've seen a lot: a postal worker or a clerk at the store, somebody that you've seen a lot but don't have a strong relationship with, where there's a feeling of kind of not knowing much about them. Just a neutral kind of feeling there.

As we bring the phrases or the wishes of well-being to a neutral person, often when wishing well for a benefactor or for ourselves or for a friend, we know something about what it would mean for them to be happy or for ourselves to be happy, healthy, safe, and at ease. With a neutral person we don't know the specifics of their lives. On one retreat I did a month-long intensive metta practice here, and I picked a dear friend who's an artist as my dear friend person. I would just envision my friend in her artist studio, knowing that that was a place where she was really happy, and that kind of brought in that quality of, "Yeah, I really hope you have that connection with your art and love and express yourself in that way."

But with a neutral person we don't have that information, so we more explore the well-wishing through what it means to be a human being that might be happy. Just the general happiness of having loved ones around us, the happiness of having people care for us, the safety of having a place to live and having food, the health of being able to take care of ourselves. The connection with these phrases—may you be happy, healthy, safe, and at ease—is more reflecting on the human wishes, the wish for all humans to have that in our just basic human ways, in a way connecting with our shared humanity in this part of the practice.

There are kind of two sides that people sometimes have in their relationships with the neutral person. Some people actually find that the neutral person is their easiest being, precisely because there isn't the complication. It seems simpler in a way to just wish somebody that we don't know, "Yeah, I hope you're happy." For some of us, the well-wishing for a neutral person is a little more challenging because there's not the specificity. It may be harder to connect with those wishes, harder to deeply care about somebody that we don't know. We might find our mind wandering off, getting bored. That's okay. This is part of the filings that are not metta being pulled out by exploring this. So we just notice our relationship.

The practice of metta, these phrases that we offer—may you be happy, may you be healthy, may you be safe, may you live with ease—they are expressions of an intention from our heart, wishing other beings well.

As an intention, the use of a phrase and the connection with that intention means that essentially we're connecting with a thought here. I think of metta practice as a reflective practice. We're bringing thought into our mind and using that in our meditation. So bringing in that thought, we connect it with our embodied experiential level. How does that wish—expressing that wish for that being, "may you be happy"—how does it feel?

Guy Armstrong suggests that having made that wish, we step inward to the heart area, the heart and chest, and simply see how it feels to have made that wish. To me, this was a huge benefit for metta practice, because before that it had mostly been in my mind. I was thinking of it as just a mental practice

of saying these phrases. But saying the phrase—how does that thought affect your experience now? Give yourself an opportunity to feel it.

It might be that there's a little bit of an opening, a releasing in the heart. Or it might be that there's a contraction. That's just what we recognize. This is how it feels to make this wish right now. And if you do feel a contraction, just remember: it's the metta magnet doing its job, making these relationships of resistance, of holding on, conscious. Making them available to be released. To be seen and known.

Another analogy I like for the metta practice is that of a washing machine. The clothes we put into the washing machine—maybe they have dirt ground into them. That's what we're putting them in for: to pull the dirt out. We have the water, and then we put the soap in there, and then there's the agitation of the washing machine. The water I think of as our consciousness, our awareness. The soap is the metta phrases. And the dirt ground into the clothes is all of our relationships—the habitual old habits and patterns of relating to people around this relationship of well-wishing.

We put the clothes into the washing machine, turn it on, and it agitates. The job of the soap is to attach to the dirt—it's got a stronger connection. The chemical nature of soap is that it connects to the dirt, so the soap grabs onto it, pulls it out of the clothes, and puts it into the water so that it can be rinsed away when the water goes down the drain.

Similarly, in our metta practice, the metta phrases are like the soap searching out those old habits and patterns that are deeply ground into our minds, pulling them out into our consciousness so they can be washed away. And the repetition of the phrases—it's like that agitation of the washing machine.

I'll say one more piece before we step into practice again today. When there's difficulty in the metta practice—with the neutral person in particular, I mentioned there might be boredom or disconnection or dryness—you just notice that and keep going. It's just, okay, that's the relationship right now. That's what's being pulled out into the wash. Yes, there's a dryness there. Just keep going.

If it gets too challenging, if there's a lot of aversion, sometimes we can just let the aversion come up. It's like the metta is releasing it. On that retreat I mentioned, where I was doing metta every moment that I remembered when I was awake, I was a dishwasher here in the dining room. I was doing the metta phrases as I was doing the dishwashing. And I would see myself get frustrated as the door would stick and the switch wouldn't work very well. I'd find my mind just explode in this aversive state: "Who designed this stupid machine anyway?" May all beings be happy. Not having to hold on to that—just, oh yes, there it is being released. May all beings be happy.

You don't have to necessarily stop as soon as any kind of aversion or difficulty comes up. See if you can just keep going, because sometimes it's just a release into the consciousness. It's the release of the dirt into the water, and it can be washed away.

If it gets more activated, if the aversion begins to gain an upper hand, or the desire begins to gain an

upper hand, then there are some useful tools. As we move further along in this practice with different beings, one helpful shift we can make is to go back to a place where it's a little easier. If you're doing the neutral person and you find it's getting really dry and you space out for minutes at a time, it may be useful to come back, bring in the easy being, the benefactor again, and see if you can connect with that quality of well-wishing. Then go back to the neutral person. That's a good first step if you find it too challenging: go back to a category where it's a little easier to feel the connection. Then, of course, you can shift to vipassanā practice for the difficulty.

And another thing that I found useful is to shift the phrases from being stated in the positive—may you be happy, may you be healthy, may you be safe—to being stated in the negative: may you be free from distress, may you be free from illness, may you be free from danger. The same sentiment, just expressed as "may you be free from" rather than "may you have something." Sometimes I've found that's a little bit easier to connect with.

There are two interesting pieces to this. One is that in the Pali, the metta phrases have that quality—the words that are used have that sense of "may you be free from something" as opposed to "may you have something." The other piece is that it's a little bit closer to the compassion sentiment: may you be free from suffering, may you be free from danger, may you be free from illness. That's in the terrain of the compassion phrases.

This is another thing that can be useful if you're struggling with the metta practice. Sometimes you can just shift to compassion. For myself at times, I found the metta practice so challenging. I felt like I had this steel band around my chest—so painful I couldn't even remember the metta phrases. Guy Armstrong, one of my metta teachers, said, "You could just try shifting to compassion for yourself." The phrase there is just one phrase: may I be free from suffering. And that was quite easy to shift to.

So that's another option if it's challenging to work with metta, challenging to work with a particular being. In terms of difficulty: first of all, can you just stay with the phrases and let it come out in the wash? Then there's shifting to an easier being, shifting to vipassana practice, shifting the phrases to the negative phrasing, or shifting to compassion—and potentially compassion for yourself.

We've been doing this for a while now, so we'll start. I'll begin with just a little bit of a reminder about how to settle in, but then as we go, I'll offer a few gentle reminders—now you might want to shift to the next category, now you might want to shift to a dear friend. I won't be saying the phrases continually. There will be much more room for you to explore this in your own way.

Connect to your posture. Find a posture that's comfortable—as comfortable as can be—both relaxed and alert. Let your attention connect in the area of your heart. Just feel whatever is there in this moment.

How are you? That kind of question itself is a kind of metta toward ourselves. How are you right now? As if a dear friend were asking that question and really wanting to know the answer. Not wanting you to

cover over anything. How are you right now?

Perhaps reflect on something that you appreciate about your own goodness. If this brings a little bit of a ripple in your mind or feels challenging, I will just offer you my appreciation for your willingness to be here right now. It's a rare, beautiful, and amazing gift to yourself and to the world. So let yourself appreciate that. It's a beautiful quality. We all share this here.

Today we'll begin with self. Allow yourself to connect with some sense of yourself—perhaps the felt sense of yourself sitting here, or an image of yourself. And begin offering these wishes:

May I be happy.

Let yourself feel how it affects the heart and mind to express that wish.

May I be healthy.

May I be safe.

May I live with ease.

Continue for yourself for the next few minutes.

If it feels appropriate for you, bring in an easy being or a dear benefactor—someone who has truly supported you in your life. Let yourself connect with this being, taking a few moments to feel that relationship. I sometimes envision myself standing with the person and simply feeling the energy of being in their presence.

Again, with each being, it's useful to reflect for a moment on something you appreciate about them. Notice how that reflection affects your heart and mind. And begin offering the wishes of well-being to this being:

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

Continue with yourself or your benefactor—whatever feels most resonant for you in this moment.

And if it feels resonant, allow yourself to bring a dear friend into your mind, to connect with a dear friend. Reflect for a few moments on something you appreciate about this friend, and begin offering them the wishes of well-being.

Now allow the connection with a neutral person, someone you may not know well. It may be a little harder to visualize this person, but see if you can hold them in some fashion in your mind—perhaps recalling places you've seen them.

In terms of appreciation, if it's somebody in your life like a postal worker or someone who works at a store, simply reflect on how that service supports you—that we are all connected, we all support each other in this life. We wouldn't be able to live without this interconnectedness that we share. If it's a person here on the retreat, just recollect that they are doing something here, wiping tables or chopping vegetables. That too is a gift, something to appreciate.

Begin to offer them the phrases of well-being, the wishes of kindness.

At any time, if it feels too challenging to work with this particular person, you're welcome to shift to where it's easier—to your dear friend or easy being, perhaps, or to yourself.

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