Mettā Practice: Self and Benefactor (Retreat at Spirit Rock)

Andrea Fella · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Andrea Fella · 47:53

Our path of practice is about cultivating qualities of heart and mind that support our capacity to meet our experience as it is, to see and understand suffering, and to move in the direction of the ending of suffering. The whole of the Buddhist practice, the Buddha said, is encapsulated as, "I teach suffering and the end of suffering." All of the tools, all of the practices that he taught can come at that in different ways. And so he taught the mindfulness practices, he taught concentration practices, and he taught these loving-kindness practices that we'll be offering in these afternoons.

Actually, the version of the loving-kindness practice that we'll be offering—it's possible that it predates the Buddha. We don't exactly know when this particular frame of the mettā practice came. But we do know that the Buddha taught the imbuing of the heart with the quality of loving-kindness. In the suttas it's expressed something like: "One abides pervading one quarter with a mind filled with loving-kindness. Likewise the second quarter, likewise the third, likewise the fourth. So above, below, around and everywhere, one imbues the whole world with loving-kindness—abundant, exalted, immeasurable, without hostility and without ill will."

So that's kind of where we're headed with the loving-kindness practice. But there were some very wise people who realized that just imbuing the world with loving-kindness in all directions may not be so easy, and they came up with some ways to support our capacity to see both where we can offer kindness to people and where we get stuck.

This practice of mettā is one of the Brahmavihāra practices, and during this retreat we'll be offering some exploration of mettā in the first few weeks, and then we'll also offer some exploration of the compassion practice. We're not going to try to go through all four Brahmavihāras in the February portion of this retreat; we'll cover the mettā practice and the compassion practice.

Practicing these qualities is part of wise effort. The Buddha pointed us to cultivating the skillful qualities that support the opening of the heart, that support wisdom. And this is a direct cultivation of wholesome qualities—to explore opening the heart in loving-kindness.

The quality of mettā, as the description in the suttas points to, is a boundless quality that has no restrictions. It's not dependent on conditions. The quality of the heart that feels that is one that feels open, connected, caring, not resistant to what's here, friendly.

And as James said in his talk last night, when that quality—kind of the way these Brahmavihāras fit or work together—when that quality of the open heart is in the field where someone or some experience is having suffering or struggle, the heart that is open, that is caring, that is connected, that's not resistant, that heart will feel that suffering and resonate with it. A kind of quivering in the heart. And that meeting of this heart of kindness with suffering is compassion.

And if that heart that is open, connected, and caring is in the field of someone or a situation that is joyful, where someone is experiencing goodness or joy in their lives, then that open heart resonates in empathy with that, with the quality of muditā, empathetic joy.

So these qualities, these first three Brahmavihāras, are intimately connected. The open heart is the open heart, and then it is open to whatever is here. It doesn't try to convert sadness into joy. It meets whatever is here.

And the fourth Brahmavihāra, the Brahmavihāra of equanimity, creates conditions, supports the mind to have that balance—to not be overwhelmed by the sorrow or swept away by the joy, but to understand: it's like this in this situation. There can be joy here. There can be sorrow here.

The practice that we offer, that we teach as mettā practice, as I said, provides a way for us to see where we can meet and share and offer that quality of well-wishing and where we struggle with it. The people who put this practice together—I think they really are quite smart to see that we can kind of delude ourselves in a way. We might say, "Oh yes, may all beings be happy," this boundless wishing of loving-kindness, until we think of that particular person. And then there's a constriction. "Well, maybe everybody but that person I wish boundless loving-kindness for."

And so the practice here is to bring—we structure the exploration in categories. The encouragement is to start where it's a little easier to cultivate the kindness, the love. And classically, interestingly, classically that's said to be with ourselves as the easiest place to cultivate that feeling of well-wishing. Well, here in the West, often for many of us, that is not the easiest place to start. And so for some of us, an easier place—we start with what we call an easy being. And we could call that being a benefactor, someone who has supported you or helped you or served you. Someone who you have no question cares for you.

And for me, even that I was struggling with a little bit. And then at one point, sitting in this very hall, Joseph Goldstein was offering the mettā practice, and he said, "For this category of being, just think of a being that makes you smile." And my cat popped into my head.

And I thought, yeah, I can wish my cat that kind of love. No barriers to that with my cat. So that was a place for me to start.

So we start where it's easy to wish well. And that's maybe a little different than we sometimes think when we want to cultivate something. We may think we need to lean into where it's hard. But in this particular practice, leaning into where it's easy creates the conditions and supports the heart's capacity to stretch

and to feel that quality of loving-kindness—really beginning to touch into that, the embodied feeling of that quality in our hearts.

So starting where it's easy with this easy being or benefactor, then over the time in this retreat, we'll gradually open to offer the suggestion to include different groups of beings. Moving to a dear friend as the next group. We generally suggest you just pick one person, almost as a representative of that category. So you pick a person, a dear friend, and then you explore the possibility of well-wishing for that person.

Now, with a dear friend, we often do have a sense of care and concern, but we often also have the feeling of, "Oh, but yeah, they did that thing." And so we start to feel where it's hard, that our well-wishing may be conditional. We explore this in our practice.

One of my colleagues—at that point when I was exploring this in one long retreat, a February month-long entirely doing metta practice—Guy Armstrong said, "Think of the metta practice like you're running a metta magnet over your heart." A magnet, its job is to pull its opposite to it. And so every time you're expressing these wishes of kindness, it's like you're running this magnet over your heart. What it can do is evoke or pull into consciousness what is not metta, the opposite of metta.

As we explore this practice with these various groups of beings, we may see we don't feel happiness and joy and love and connectivity. We feel that clench, that "Oh, but they did that thing and I wish they hadn't done that thing." When that happens, you can think of the metta magnet as doing its job. It's not a failing of the practice or a failing of how you're doing the practice. It's designed to pull out the things that get in the way. And then we work with that. We'll talk about all of this over these sessions—how to work with this.

Each subsequent category can add a little more difficulty or different kinds of difficulty. The dear friend can evoke the sense of betrayal sometimes when things come up. Then we shift to a neutral person, someone we don't know very well at all. That being may evoke different kinds of things, like just a sense of disconnection. A sense like, "Well, how can I care about somebody I don't know?" So we explore that feeling of disconnection. Or maybe sometimes for some people the neutral person is actually easier because there isn't anything specific getting in the way. We see these things as we explore these very specific beings.

I think this is the brilliance of this practice—that we are bringing particular people into our minds and exploring how that connection feels. How does it feel to try to connect and wish them well?

After the neutral person, we open to a difficult person, someone with whom we have active struggle, and try to explore well-wishing in that context. There it can get quite challenging. And so we explore ways to meet that. Again, we'll talk about each of these over the subsequent days. I'm just laying out the arc of the practice right now, what we'll be doing over the month.

The practice has this form of bringing a particular being into mind from one of these categories. Today

we'll start with easy being and self. We bring a particular being into mind and then offer or express wishes for them, saying phrases in our mind. These phrases are expressions of the wish that they be happy, healthy, safe, and at ease. It's essentially a wish for their well-being. What we're exploring is seeing how it feels to make that wish.

The wish is an expression of an intention. "May you be happy." Feeling that genuinely expressed is an expression of metta, an expression of love and care and connection and concern in the heart. May you be happy.

So the phrase is an expression of an intention. We may or may not feel the quality of love there. Again, that may be what the metta magnet is drawing out—"Well, I can connect kind of with that intention, but I don't really feel it." That's okay.

You simply notice how it is.

The phrases that are often offered as a standard set in English are: May you be happy. May you be healthy. May you be safe. May you live with ease. These phrases are offered while bringing a particular being into the mind, and the phrase is directed toward that being.

For me, the practice began to become more alive and resonant when I really started exploring with each phrase. Language is actually quite powerful. Saying a phrase like this, if we're attuned and mindful and paying attention—being attentive to how we are after having made that wish, particularly in the area of the heart—we may notice that the phrase evokes something. It may be constriction. It may be a feeling of connection. It may be a feeling of confusion.

When I started connecting with the person before every phrase, saying "May you be happy," and then taking a few moments to feel how it felt in the area of the heart to have made that wish, the practice transformed. Essentially, I was using mindfulness during this practice. At first it had felt like just a lot of words, trying to connect through language. But when I started to touch into the feeling—whatever it was, maybe just a little bit of a shift, not even sure what that shift was, but simply touching into the area of the heart and asking, "How does it feel to have made that wish?"—and then moving on to the next phrase, touching in again, "How does it feel to have made that wish?"—that's when something opened.

So we're inclining the mind toward a quality of well-wishing through using these phrases, but being very honest with ourselves about what is actually here.

I think that's enough for the basics. Let's practice. Let's do some practice together.

Starting by finding a posture that feels relatively comfortable—as comfortable as you can be. It can be helpful to remind yourself about relaxation. Bring your attention to the area around your heart. For some of you, it may be helpful to put your hand on your heart as a way to connect with that area. You're welcome to keep it there for the whole sitting or just when it feels helpful to connect.

Simply touch in, being aware of the experience or the sensations here in this area. How is the heart right now? Just feel what's here, honestly opening to that. No judgment around it—just, "Oh, it's like this." Maybe it feels a little tired or tender or tense or tight. That's okay. It's okay however it is.

Now bring to mind a being that makes you smile. Maybe a dear teacher, or a child in your life, or someone for whom the relationship does not feel too complicated. It might be a pet. Spend a minute or two reflecting on what you appreciate about this being. This reflection on appreciation of the good, what we appreciate, is said to be a support for metta. What do you appreciate? Ways they've supported you. Notice how it feels to make this reflection. It's possible to think and feel into the heart at the same time, remembering what you appreciate about this being.

Find a way to connect with this being in some way—to imagine them here with you perhaps, or hold an image of them. I sometimes would, just sitting with my eyes closed, pretend they were sitting next to me or in front of me. I didn't have a lot of imagery available, but I could have the sense of them being with me. That may be possible for you too—a kind of felt sense of them, connecting with their energy in some way, their being. For some it can be useful to include the name of the being in offering these phrases.

So with a connection, an image or feeling of being with this being, begin to quietly in your mind offer them these wishes.

May you be happy.

Offer that phrase, and then check in.

Almost, perhaps, think about not only offering the phrases to the other person but dropping them into your own heart. May you be happy—and how does it resonate? What happens in your heart with that wish?

May you be happy.

And no demand for any particular feeling or experience. Honestly noticing how it is.

May you be healthy.

May you be safe.

May you live with ease.

Connecting with the being, expressing the wish, and noticing how it affects your heart to make that wish.

May you be happy.

May you be safe.

May you live with ease.

Now I'll give some time for silence for you to explore this on your own. Connect with the being, say the phrase, and then touch into the felt experience in the heart. How does it land to make that wish?

Whatever is arising with this, can there be a sense of it's okay that this is arising? That is also an expression of metta for yourself.

And now I'll encourage you, or invite you, to explore the possibility of opening to metta for yourself. Let your easy being stay present. Just kind of connect with yourself. This may be as an image of yourself, or just the felt sense of you sitting here in this moment.

Take a moment to reflect on something you appreciate—things you appreciate about yourself, kind things you've done. And if that feels challenging, I will offer you that you are here, at a retreat where you have the intention to open your heart and connect. That's a rare and amazing thing. Let yourself appreciate that about yourself. If you can't feel it, borrow my appreciation for you. Because it's amazing that you're here.

Connecting with yourself, beginning to express these same wishes for yourself.

May I be happy.

Again, noticing how it lands. How does it feel, dropping that wish into your own heart? How does it feel to make that wish?

May I be healthy.

May I be safe.

May I live with ease.

And if this is challenging for you, it's okay that it's challenging. One way in might be to envision the easy being you were just offering wishes to, and imagine that they are offering you well wishes. That your easy being is standing in front of you, with you, wishing: May you be happy. Sometimes we can receive it more easily that way.

Exploring this possibility of receiving metta for yourself.

May I be happy.

May I be healthy.

May I be safe.

May I live with ease.

Continuing in silence for another few minutes.

And to close the sitting, I like to sometimes bring back all the beings I've been exploring in this session. So

today, the self and your easy being. Envisioning yourselves together, wishing together:

May we be happy.

May we both be healthy.

May we be safe.

May we be at ease.

And then allowing that well-wishing to expand, as best you can imagine, to all beings. The two of you together, wishing: May all beings be happy.

Again, remembering to check: how does it land to feel, to make that wish? May all beings be healthy. May all beings be safe. May all beings live with ease.

You are welcome to explore this practice. In fact, we encourage you to explore this practice. You could explore it at a particular time—perhaps this sitting could be a time when you explore this practice. Or you could play with it in the walking period. Sometimes it can feel easier to do it outside or with a little more space. I would often do it with walking, imagining the being was walking next to me. So you are welcome to play with exploring this practice in sitting or in walking. Maybe a sitting or a walking a day, two, if that feels good to you—exploring this cultivation, this softening of the heart.

It will support your mindfulness practice to have this softening. Sometimes in the midst of our vipassana practice, the mindfulness practice, we may find challenges arising. And for some people, it can be helpful to remember the metta practice at those times. Look at what supports you.

For me, I will let you know that this practice was very challenging for a long time. In fact, I did not come to this sitting for several years because it just tied me up in knots. And for me, the metta was being cultivated through the mindfulness practice. I could feel it more in the "oh, it's like this"—so much stuff happening, and it's okay that it's happening. That is cultivating metta too. The mindfulness practice cultivates metta for ourselves. It is a metta practice for ourselves. The allowing that we encourage—that is metta.

And yet for some, the metta practice provides an easier doorway. For me, it took a while. At one point during one long retreat in Burma, I discovered—my teacher there said, "Try some metta practice before your sitting. It will help you." And I thought, well, you don't know me, but I'll give it a try. And I found, to my surprise, that enough metta had been cultivated through the mindfulness that it was right there. Yes, I do wish myself to be happy and healthy and at ease. It was very powerful. And yet I needed that time.

So if you struggle with the metta practice, talk to your teachers in the interviews about it. There are supports that can happen, and it may or may not be something that is serving you at this time. We have to be aligned with our own system in this practice. In the metta practice, we start where it is easiest. And for myself, in the entirety of the practice, it was easiest to start with mindfulness practice and not do the

metta. But at this point, I love the metta practice. I have a strong connection with it. Just touch into what is supportive for you and check in with your teachers about it.

If you struggle with it—I mean, I tried for a while before I finally realized it was not working for me. If it is a little uncomfortable, or if it feels like, "I'm not feeling boundless love," that may just be the mental practice working for you. The rough guideline would be: if it feels like the metta practice is tying you up in knots, it may not be the right practice for you at this point. At this point. And that is what it was doing to me at the beginning.

If it feels like sometimes you can touch into the quality of openheartedness and caring, and sometimes it feels like a struggle, then drop back to where it is easier. That is the instruction with the metta practice. If you shift to a being where it is more challenging—if you are doing yourself and it is hard, but you found you could connect with the easy being—just drop back and do it for the easy being. You do not have to push with where it is more challenging.

You can find a place where you can connect with the easy being, where the practice flows naturally.

So thank you for your practice, remembering just how amazing it is that you're here. It is a rare thing in this world, what you're doing. Thank you for your practice.

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