Love and Wisdom

Andrea Fella · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Andrea Fella · 47:41

The other day, one of you left me a note with a question, and I responded with about three sentences. As I was reflecting on what to talk about tonight, I realized I could turn those three sentences into a Dharma talk. This is how it works sometimes.

The question was: what is the place of the brahmaviharas in this style of practice? This is a question I hear with some regularity. This is a wisdom-based practice, and we don't actively teach Brahmavihara practices on this retreat. On many Vipassana retreats, there's a metta period in the middle of the afternoon to talk about that practice, that style of practice—and it's a separate practice. I think most of you may be familiar with it.

I did speak a little to this question in the first reflection I gave on the first night of the retreat: that the very orientation of wise view, observing experience from a perspective of things as they are, allowing things to be as they are—it feels very much like a wisdom perspective, and sometimes it can be interpreted as a purely wisdom perspective. Just the way the teaching lands: just notice things as they are, receive things as they are.

But as I said that first evening, that opening to allowing things as they are, the feeling of this practice more and more becomes such that this perspective of wisdom is felt as care, as love, as connection, as intimacy. These qualities of love, of compassion, of joy, of equanimity—they come along for the ride. And so while the practice, in terms of hearing what we're doing, sounds dry, the experience in the practice becomes anything but dry.

I wanted to explore this question from a couple of different perspectives. First, just to elaborate a little on what the Brahmaviharas are, for those of you who may not be so familiar—there are a few of you who are newer to the practice here.

The Brahmaviharas are four qualities of mind that are naturally cultivated as we practice. They are wholesome qualities worth cultivating, and worth actively cultivating. There are different ways to actively cultivate wholesome qualities. These four are: metta, or love, loving-kindness; compassion; sympathetic joy or empathetic joy—joy in the joy of others, in the success or beauty of others; and equanimity, the quality of balance of mind. These are qualities of heart and mind. They naturally arise sometimes, and there are also ways to actively cultivate them.

The Brahmavihara practice is often what people are asking about when I hear this question: what's the place of the Brahmaviharas in this style of practice? People are often really asking: can I do Brahmavihara

practice in this style of practice? Can I use that ever? Is it cheating if I bring that in sometimes?

The practice of the Brahmaviharas, again just to fill this out for those who may be less familiar, is a practice of using thought. We consciously bring—it's usually practiced in a relational perspective—so we bring people to mind, beings to mind, including ourselves, and explore wishes related to each of these brahmaviharas. We actively explore well-wishing for ourselves and others: May I be happy. May I be healthy. May I be safe. May I live with ease. With compassion: May I be free from suffering. With sympathetic or empathetic joy: May your joy and delight continue. May your success and well-being continue. And with equanimity, a reflection on understanding that beings make their own choices and live their own lives, and we can't make their choices for them. We wish them well, but we can't make them happy.

The practice of the Brahmaviharas is explored through bringing those thoughts into mind. The thoughts themselves are expressions of the wishes, expressions of those qualities. A heart that would be feeling those qualities would naturally have those wishes. So it's using the tool of thought to incline the mind towards these qualities.

For me, I actually found that knowing and understanding the way thoughts work, how thoughts shape the mind—the way I would practice this is I would drop one of those thoughts into my mind: May I be happy. And then I would settle back and ask, what is that thought? How does that thought affect the system? Sometimes it would bring more contraction, sometimes more openness. But actually, this way of practicing the Brahmaviharas shows a kind of interface between this style of practice and Brahmavihara practice. Because we're bringing a reflection into the mind, and we use reflections in this practice—sometimes more encouraged as wisdom reflections.

This is nature. We're not trying to make ourselves see it as nature, but we're inviting the mind to open and see what the effect of that reflection is on our system. The Brahmavihara phrases work similarly—they're love reflections, compassion reflections. How do they land? How do they affect the being?

So this is the formal Brahmavihara practice with an added dimension: we recognize that what we're doing is conditioning the mind, and we observe the effect. We bring a thought into the mind—what's the effect? How does it affect us? We explore how wisdom reflections affect us in this style of practice, and bringing in love reflections, compassion reflections, is equally possible. The orientation would be to notice what's the effect of those thoughts. How do they land? Not particularly trying to find the metta, but simply: "May you be happy"—how does that make the being feel?

The Brahmavihara practice itself is more of a directing of the attention, a directing of the mind towards specific qualities. In this style of practice, we are more opening to what's here, what qualities of mind are present. And yet, as we've said a number of times, there are moments when the momentum of something challenging is stronger than the momentum of our mindfulness. Sometimes it feels to me like the momentum of a pattern is like a tsunami, and mindfulness is like a little trickle. When that's happening,

mindfulness doesn't really have the capacity to meet the experience. We all learn our own ways of recognizing that. Alexis mentioned the other day that if we can see something with interest, that's a good sign there's enough capacity of mindfulness to meet the difficult pattern. One thing I often use is noticing whether the pattern seems to be getting stronger, or the reactivity to the pattern is intensifying—that would be a time to bring in a skillful means.

We've talked about various skillful means, both in the groups and in the hall, so I'm not going to make an exhaustive list here. But one of those skillful means is metta practice. If, for you, in those moments where the mind is overwhelmed by a reactive pattern, metta is grounding—if metta is a way to stay with your experience—please use it. Use it for as long as the mind needs to come to some stability and balance, and then explore the possibility of letting go of that as a skillful means and opening again to what's here. Maybe after you've done some metta practice, what's here is some metta. So that's what you can notice.

For me, Brahmavihara practice was something that came late. It really wasn't until I began exploring it from this perspective—what's the effect of these phrases on my system? How do they change my being when I drop that phrase in?—that the metta began to resonate. But this is not one of my go-to skillful means, so it's not one I think about offering so much. I know that for many people, metta is really powerful. So this is your discernment. It's your practice. It's for you to discern if a skillful means is needed when mindfulness can't just meet an experience, or is being pulled into the rabbit hole. If it's being pulled into the rabbit hole, use some skillful means so that you're not pulled in. And perhaps metta is one of those for you. All of the Brahmavihara practices are fine to use as skillful means.

So that's one way the Brahmaviharas can come into this practice—really individual, up to you whether it's an appropriate skillful means for you.

Most of the way that the Brahmaviharas connect to this practice is in understanding them as qualities of mind, recognizing that they are natural capacities of our heart and mind that may be a little weak at times.

So beginning to be curious about the experience of these qualities of mind—this is one of the main ways that they begin to be recognized.

As I said at the beginning, one of the key ways, and this is all very natural. Last night, Nisha gave a beautiful talk around both the nature of the natural unfolding of the way our habits of mind work and that we can watch that. The watching of that puts us on a path where there becomes a natural unfolding of the deepening of awareness and wisdom. This is a lawful process, the way the practice unfolds.

And so it's a lawful unfolding that these qualities of love, compassion, empathetic joy, and equanimity begin to, we could say, come along for the ride with this practice quite naturally. The first way that they begin to come along for the ride is that the orientation of wise view carries metta in it. That perspective of—as I said at the beginning, but just to reiterate—that perspective of "this is allowed." What's happening

now? Things as they are. Everything is allowed. Everything is valued.

Sometimes we think that "everything is equal" feels like it diminishes things, but it actually elevates things. Everything is valued. All experience is valued. And that perspective is one that brings metta to the practice.

We can remind ourselves of this much as we bring in wisdom reflections at times. "This is nature" is a reflection that for me is one of the most powerful wisdom reflections. When the mind is kind of wobbly about some experience, a little bit identified with it, just that reminder—this is nature. It's just causes and conditions unfolding. It's like, of course this is happening. It's been conditioned. Look at the history of this being. Of course this is arising.

When that reflection comes into my mind, I open to how does that reflection affect my capacity to meet the experience? What happens? What happens with the experience? And quite often it creates a little bit of space. It creates a sense of balance. Maybe some sense of equanimity is there. So in using those wisdom reflections, we get curious about how they affect our meeting of experience.

If you're not feeling metta in this practice, or a sense of—like I said, it doesn't feel dry, it feels quite intimate, quite connected, quite caring to be meeting myself—I think I said that the very first night: if somebody were to sit in front of you and say, "You be you. I'm here. I'm here with you. No matter how you are, I'm here with you." Most of us would feel that as a kind of love—to be seen, to be witnessed, to be held in that space of allowing us to be how we are. We would feel that as love, and that's how it can feel with our mindfulness and wisdom. It can be this container of loving attention, kind attention, caring attention—sometimes with the flavor of compassion, sometimes with the flavor of joy, sometimes more with the flavor of equanimity.

If you're not feeling that, there could be a little bit of a wisdom reflection or a little bit of a question, an investigation dropping in. When it feels like you're connecting with experience, when it feels like things are okay, you might have a curiosity: what other qualities are here with that okayness? How does that okayness actually feel? There are so many flavors that we can begin to really touch into. The different flavors of the Brahma Viharas can be present in how we're meeting experience.

If there's a struggle, sometimes that flavor of care has the quality of a feeling of compassion. If there's a feeling of things going smoothly or well, that flavor might have a flavor of joy and delight. And I've even seen—I don't know quite how it works, but...

Seeing anger, it's like, wow, look at that—and having so much joy. I think the reason the joy is there now, as I'm remembering that experience, is because I understand that I'm no longer caught by the anger when I'm seeing it. There's that sense of having some release, some kind of sense of yes. That's the heart resonating with something delightful. So sometimes the quality can even be joy, even in the midst of working with a challenging experience.

We can have some curiosity about the flavor, the experience of what it's like when the mind is meeting experience with some balance and ease. That's a place where we can begin to feel these Brahma Viharas, to feel them as qualities in the mind, in the heart. And as we've said again a number of times, when we touch into and see with wisdom wholesome qualities, it nourishes them. It creates the conditions for them to become stronger.

The recognition of those qualities kind of coming along for the ride—it's really valuable to actually check in and notice. Oh yeah, there's joy here. Oh, there's compassion here in this okayness with being with experience. That strengthens and cultivates those qualities.

Then we can open to the qualities when they naturally arise. And they may begin to naturally arise as you become more familiar with them. We begin to see them more. This is another way that they're strengthened—we can begin to notice when they naturally arise.

I mentioned the other day that during one of my sitting periods on a long retreat, I kept having thoughts about friends from the Peace Corps arise in my mind. And I was like, you know, come back, come back to what's here. Thoughts of friends from the Peace Corps. Yes, I know I'm thinking, but come back. I had that relationship with the thoughts. But the thoughts were so persistent that I finally kind of surrendered and was like, okay, what's here with these thoughts? And it was metta. When I finally began to attune to the thoughts and what was going on with them, metta was obvious. And attuning to that quality of metta, the thoughts didn't need to continue. There was just the feeling of metta.

Sometimes we can notice this in ordinary moments. We're in the lunch line and we see somebody we know getting something that they like. Or we see somebody doing something that touches us. This was one that I saw one time with a friend: I was doing walking meditation at a retreat center, upstairs in a room with a window that looked down into the courtyard at Spirit Rock. My friend was doing walking meditation down there. I saw her and it was so clear she was really mindful. The experience was joyous—mudita for her, for that. May that continue. There it is. There's mudita arising as what's obvious. That can be known. And so that's another way these qualities are strengthened: when they arise, we notice them.

There's another place I want to spend a little more time with. As we meet a challenging experience, sometimes as those challenging experiences fall apart, we may see a connection to metta in the midst of a difficult experience. Let me unpack that a little bit.

Sometimes metta can be revealed not so much in the way I was talking about a moment before—where we're exploring something challenging and the way we're looking at it cultivates the qualities of compassion, metta, joy, and equanimity. This is different. Here, metta can be revealed as something that's kind of a mixture within the pattern itself.

Metta, the wishes for well-being, are often bound up in a tangle with our struggles and reactivity. This is, I

think, partly why some of those patterns are so potent for us. Those habits, those patterns we've grown up with—the reason they're so strong and pervasive is because essentially they think, these patterns, that they're going to do something that will make us happy. They're trying really hard to make us happy. But fundamentally they're going about it in a really misunderstood way. They've fundamentally misunderstood what happiness is.

Greed's idea of happiness—within greed, the belief, the movement is: I'll be happy if I get that thing. That's the delusion embedded within the movement towards something. With aversion: I'll be happy if I get rid of that thing. So that "I'll be happy if" is right in the mix.

And so many of these strategies are self-strategies, habitual tendencies. It's as if they've tried to take care of us for our entire lives. They've done the best they can. They've tried really hard. And yet, they don't do such a good job.

In my own exploration of this, I began to see that right in the midst of anger is a wanting to be safe, a wanting to have a sense of "I'm okay." Even self-hatred—there's a wanting to be loved, actually, in the midst of that one. Feeling like I was not lovable. Hating myself for not being lovable. But within all of that is this wish to be happy, healthy, safe, at ease. The wish for safety is often tied up in fear. So within our habitual reactivity, quite often—maybe even always, though I haven't found a counter-example yet, so I won't say always—within our struggles there is this wish for well-being.

And often what happens is that wish for well-being, which is a natural wish, a human wish, a wholesome wish, a mettā wish—I think this is partly why these patterns have such a hold on us. When anger is saying, "I'll take care of you, I'll help you get rid of these things that are problems," when greed is saying, "I'll take care of you, I'll get these things that'll make you feel better"—when those patterns are operating, they don't have the perspective that there's another way happiness can happen. They don't understand that there's another way well-being can arise.

So those patterns in the mind will really resist a view that they have to go away. That idea of "I'm going to look at this so that it will go away"—how many of us do that? It's so habitual. It's such a way we orient ourselves.

With my anger pattern, when I first started looking at it, first started seeing it, I felt like everything that was going on in there was wholly bad. It felt like a tumor. That pattern—it's bad, it's not good for the system. I need to get the scalpel and cut it out. Take that whole thing, get rid of it. But because, I think, part of the reason that movement runs up against resistance—when we try to do that, and I tried—when we try, some part of the system is saying, "No, I need to be taken care of." And it doesn't understand that there's another way. There's that sense of "Wait, what?"

So the wishes for well-being are kind of connected and tangled in these patterns. If we think of our entanglement as a big ball of tangled threads, one set of those threads are the wishes for well-being. And

the other set of threads that comes into play is the nature of life itself. It's impermanent. It's unreliable. It's not amenable to our conscious control all the time—even much of the time.

And what happens when these wishes for well-being bump up against reality? "May I be safe"—but things are unreliable. Things are uncontrollable. That's where the tangle is. It's this tangle between mettā and truth. Our habitual minds don't understand that these can coexist.

So our habitual minds sometimes, as we begin to meditate, start to understand about impermanence, unreliability. We feel into vulnerability. Yes, that's truth. Vulnerability. We touch into some of those truths—yes, uncontrollable. But then, "No, I want to be safe." And we might bludgeon ourselves with the truth.

"I know things are uncontrollable, so I shouldn't want to be happy." That will not fly in our minds, because metta is a wholesome, natural wish. And so if we are at all telling ourselves that vulnerability means we shouldn't want to be safe—that's the confusion about how these two things can coexist.

It is possible to know vulnerability, to know the unreliability of experience, to know that experience is not controllable, and to simultaneously recognize the wish for happiness, safety, well-being. But what happens often is that we haven't learned this perspective that these can coexist, and the habitual patterns become the tangle.

The interesting thing about the tangles is that there's nothing extra there. It's a tangle of views—views around how it's not okay. Sometimes if we're holding the metta wishes, we feel somehow betrayed by reality, that things are impermanent and unreliable. So it's one side or the other; we feel like there's a problem. And that feeling like there's a problem is the tangle.

Think about a cloth with tangled threads in the middle. If you take scissors and cut out the knot, you end up with a hole in the cloth. But it is possible to untangle the tangle—to recognize how these wishes for well-being and these truths become knotted together. I think of mindfulness practice with these tangles as being like a lubricant, something that loosens the tightness of the knots. It's not getting rid of any of the fibers. It's loosening the tangle. And at some point, we may begin to see that these can coexist.

In my experience, through not holding tightly to the metta or bludgeoning myself with truth—just being with the pattern, recognizing self-hatred when it arises, asking what's here, what's showing up, meeting depression, meeting whatever comes, again and again—sometimes I've seen the metta quality, the threads of metta, revealed.

The wisdom side was more apparent in my mind's tangle. Understanding that I don't have control—that was apparent. But the metta quality was not so visible. Let me share an example of how this unfolded.

I was watching a pattern of fear. It was after the September 11th attacks, and I was on one of the first flights after air travel resumed. I flew through Houston, my flight was delayed, and I missed my

connecting flight, so I had to stay at the airport hotel. In the middle of the night, there was a power outage. As you might imagine, right after those attacks, my mind went immediately to terrorist attack. There was a lot of fear. I looked out my window and all of Houston—or all that I could see—was dark.

As that was happening, I could feel the uncontrollability of the situation. I watched the mind producing all kinds of disaster scenarios, noticed the fear, just noticed it. And then spontaneously, I noticed the mind begin doing metta. *May all beings be happy.* It wasn't just about me. *May all beings be safe.* That one really resonated. Yes, that's what I wish. May all beings be safe. As that thought moved through my mind, there was a sense of yes. And then the fear would return.

And I saw the deep connection between the fear and the wish. The fear was a response to the wish—but it had a demand embedded within it, a demand about needing to be safe, an insistence that uncontrollability is not okay. The fear was that response: *This uncontrollability is not okay. This need for safety is paramount.*

But when the mind was connecting to that experience of "may all beings be safe," that feeling of the mettā wish, there was the understanding of: *Yes, this is the way it is, and may all beings be safe.* And then the fear would come back.

I got to see that happen over and over again—how the fear was connected to the wish. That was my first real experience of seeing that these defilements, as we sometimes call them, are not wholly bad. There's a misunderstanding in there that's not useful—that's where the defilement is. But there's also something true and beautiful woven within.

To bring this back to the brahmavihāras and cultivating them: so many, if not all, of our patterns and habits of reactivity have this nature of being a tangle between basically love and wisdom. Whenever there's a reactive pattern, looking at it with mindfulness, looking at it with allowing awareness, it's an opportunity to see that all of those reactive patterns have in them threads of love and truth.

If we're willing to meet that experience, the tangle can untangle. It untangles itself. And then we experience the love and we understand something about the truth.

So this too is a way that the brahmavihāras happen. These beautiful qualities of love and compassion and joy and equanimity—they happen as our hindrances fall apart. It's not that they disappear exactly; they untangle, they get reoriented. And there's a weave of cloth that emerges.

Essentially, I think of the brahmavihāras as being the emotional map of the heart that is not clinging. When greed, aversion, and delusion fall away, the brahmavihāras are what's there. There is a deep connection between love and wisdom.

Now let's just sit for a moment.

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