The Practice and Pitfalls of Mettā: Developing Universal Goodwill

Bhante Bodhidhamma · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Bhante Bodhidhamma · 32:28

Namo tassa bhagavato arahato sammāsambuddhassa
Homage to the Buddha, the Blessed, Noble and Fully Self-Enlightened One.

As I say, this is just really covering a few major points around this practice of *metta*.

The first thing is to understand the power of intention and the role of intention in the Buddhist teachings, because all the conditionings that we have in the mind begin with an intention. If you think of anything that human beings have done, it always starts with some intention, whether it's the intention to fly or how to fry an egg. It turns up in the mind as an intention and then the mind works on it and then it begins to manifest. It manifests as some language or some action and so on.

Our intention here is basically to develop goodwill. And so long as that remains our main intention, it's actually beginning to condition us. Some of you will know that desire, the Buddha said that desire was the cause of suffering. The English word is a bit foxing because the original Pāli word really refers to those desires that are based on a self, on selfish, on pride, on thinking only of oneself, on seeking happiness in the world. So it's actually a desire based on wrong understanding.

But this word desire also translates another word which can mean both a wholesome desire and an unwholesome one. So here the desire to develop goodwill is considered beneficial. So you've got to be careful with this intention and desire.

When an idea comes into the head laced with desire, so like you might just think tea, a cup of tea, it comes up with a desire, nothing happens at that stage, nothing has been conditioned, there's no karma, there's nothing at all. But as soon as that thought is empowered and becomes a train of thoughts or becomes a train of speech or an action, then you're producing something in the world. And that's what we mean by *k amma*.

So long as we're saying, may all beings be happy, and we're actually saying it, and we're meaning it, then it's actually producing something within ourselves, something within our minds. And it will affect the way we speak, the way we relate to people and so on. So that's how it works. We're starting the basic psychology of conditioning ourselves, conditioning the heart and mind to think goodwill. That's it.

For those of you who practice *vipassanā*, it's important because *vipassanā* tends to create a very objective stance within us. And it's that equanimity that we need in order to investigate. But equanimity can very

easily corrupt into indifference.

I like to tell my usual story, especially for those who haven't heard it, about the time I was in a particular monastery and there was a cat. I was with a monk, and there was a cat, and he'd obviously by now killed the mouse, but he was the sort of cat that definitely didn't need a mouse. It was definitely overweight. So I said, didn't you stop that? And the monk replied, no, it was cat karma and mouse karma. So I said, well, that's fine, I didn't say anything.

Anyway, I was at another monastery, this completely different time, I can't remember the sequence of how long it was, but I was sitting with a group of monks, and a cat jumped out and caught this bird. And this monk, as quick as a flash, came up and just gave this cat one hell of a bat, and then picked up the bird and lifted it and realised it had been killed, and just lifted it very beautifully by the wings into the air and chanted *anicca vata saṅkhārā*, all compounded things arise and pass away.

Of course the difference between, and that cat also didn't need a bird, and of course the difference was that the second monk recognized that his awareness was part of their karma also.

Now that engagement doesn't take place unless you've got *metta*. No matter how wise you are in terms of your understanding of the Dharma, it won't actually move, engage wise, unless there's some movement in the heart as an attitude. Now, some traditions, like the Zen, will say, of course, that with wisdom, compassion arises naturally. And I believe that's true. But I think it's good to just move it along a bit. That's basically what *metta* is doing. So it's an antidote really to indifference that can arise with *vipassanā*.

Just as an aside, a woman came to me and said that whenever she sat her partner would complain that he felt she was cold and non-communicative after sitting. So I said, so what do you do at the end of a sit? Well, just get up. So I said, well, you've got to do *metta*, and do it to your partner too, so that you re-engage. She never came back, so I presume everything's all right. Didn't end in divorce, did it?

So this re-engagement through *metta*, through attitude, begins to express itself in our eightfold path into right speech, right action, and then right livelihood. So it's something that saturates our lives eventually.

The next thing is not to confuse it with other forms of love, because we use the word love for everything. You know, you love ice cream, for heaven's sake. It's not to be confused with, obviously with erotic love, because that's very specific. You tend to only have erotic feelings towards particular people. Whereas the love we're doing is universal. And it's also not really to do with touching the essential nature of humankind. It's only really working with physical attributes.

Same with romance. That is also very particular. And it's not to be confused with *metta*. Romance is a whole set of different emotions and a type of relationship which is frankly exclusive. You can't be, it'd exhaust you if you were romantically, neurotically in love with every human being you came across. You'd be dead very quickly.

But it's also not to be confused with attachment. Now, you've got to be careful here because sometimes we think we can fall into a rather negative thing about attachment, but attachments are natural so long as we have a self. You can't, so long as the self is there, there's going to be an attachment. It's just knowing the attachment and knowing how it manifests.

So take the Buddha loves the image of a mother. For him it's the mother which is one way of expressing this *metta*. Now, it's quite natural for a mother to be attached to the child, and seemingly necessary psychologically for the child to be attached to the mother. It's part of the growth of that child's understanding of relationships.

And that attachment will manifest with being overly guarding of the child, demanding the child do what they want to do, rather than listening to the child. So in other words, the attachment always is self-centered. Which doesn't mean the mother doesn't love the child, it's just got this little kink in it. And it's up to the mother to recognise where that's manifesting, that's all. And then there's the antidote to doing the opposite. But if you're not aware of that, then the mother thinks they're doing good, but it actually can be hurting the child in some way.

So, we mustn't look upon that as evil. Some people get, I think, a bit confused with that. They think it's evil, but it's not. It's just unwholesome. It causes suffering, but it's not. The intent is not evil. This is the point.

So our love, this *metta*, this universal love is going beyond that sort of love that manifests with specific attachments that we have, specific relationships rather that we have, be they one of partners, marriage, sons, daughters, mother, whatever. Close relationships will always have that degree of attachment to them and it's just knowing how the attachment manifests that liberates us from it.

Metta is, you could, you know what is it? Well it's basically all the virtues that you would ask of a good friend: kindness, certain empathy, certain caring, also to be able to share your joys, to help you when you need a bit of help. It's just a good friend, and it's very close to the word *mitra*, which means friend. So that's the sort of attitude that we're developing.

But of course it goes beyond that into love your enemy. So don't confuse love your enemy with some sort of emotional delight every time you see them. Here, here just means not to do them any harm. That's a good place to start if you hate somebody. You determine at least you won't do them any harm.

And it also extends to the way we treat objects. You know, just gently closing the door. Just the way we eat, not to be stabbing the plate. Consider the pain of the plate as you stab it with forks and cut into it with your knife. And it's that sort of gentility with objects. Just, you know, just think how you close the fridge door. Catch yourself. There's no kindness towards the fridge and it does us such good service.

So it's a case of extending that even to our actions and the way we treat objects. When I began with Zen Buddhism, we had to treat all our crockery and stuff as it was all mingvas. That's what they taught us. And of course it did bring, it made very clear to me anyway, how I was bashing objects about. And of course

that mirrors a certain hardness, you might say.

So if we can be gentle even with the simplest things of life, it's like taking care of your pennies, you know, the big ones take care of themselves. So when you're eating, I'll remind you of this, just take your time and just see it as a process of nourishing oneself, and take care of the plates.

Metta is one of the main teachings of the Buddha, which, as I say, balances the process of insight. And the reason is that it's our basic relationship to the world. So by world we mean not only other people, other beings, but as we say, even objects, even plants and everything is to be treated in a gentle way. And that's how you can call it our default position. That's what we can return to with ease. And from there, these other two qualities, compassion and sympathetic joy, arise naturally.

So if you have a certain *metta*-love for somebody, obviously if they fall ill or something, the idea of wanting to help them just arises naturally. You don't have to work at it, shall I help or not? It's just there, you want to do it. And if a friend is successful in something, one rejoices in their success, in their happiness. And so *metta* is that default position. So that's why the Buddha puts a lot of stress to it.

These qualities, and we need to add a fourth one called equanimity, which we'll come to in a minute, are considered to be illimitables, by which we mean that there are a limitable number of beings, so there's no way you can stop at some point and say, well, I've done enough. And also, in terms of our development within ourselves, it's indefinite. Developing love is a bit like counting. No matter how big your number is, you can always add one. So it's not a case of thinking that you ever come to an end of developing *metta*. It just grows and grows and grows, until you become a great charismatic leader, and then thousands will follow you. I'm trying to develop that. Must try harder.

They're also called the *Brahma-Vihāras*, so the *vihāra* dwelling place of the highest gods. This is the most beautiful states that we can create within the mind. So they're the most beautiful states that we can create within ourselves, these particular states. And so the Buddha equates them to the most beautiful of places, the bountiful heart and the beautiful mind.

Equanimity is trying to come from a place of no judgment. It's like you're completely opening up to the person as they are and not allowing judgment to distort your ability to receive what the person has to offer, even if it's negative stuff. So that equanimity is based upon a certain calmness and a certain understanding that if you want to engage with people, then first of all you have to be completely open to them.

And that's often a fearful thing for us because we think we're going to be overtaken or somehow controlled if we do that. But in a sense you can't give a proper response unless you've listened and felt what the other person has to give you.

When we're listening, for instance, to somebody, if you catch these politicians, I don't know about you, but you can hear yourself saying, a lot of rubbish, and they're lying as usual. And it's a case of that you come

from these set positions which we never question. And we're doing it all the time because the judgmental mind is always with us.

But it's recognizing that it's there, and then just putting it to the side, and just opening up, and letting the other person express themselves into your mind and heart, and not feeling that that's a sort of takeover bit. And to do that, you have to have this position of equanimity. And because you're equanimous, although you're feeling and understanding, it's not actually entering into you, because your base is equanimity, you're not reacting, you're not saying yes, yes, yes or no, no, no.

And because of that little gap which equanimity creates, you're able to respond rather than react, that's all. So whenever you're coming from a position, you're necessarily reacting. But if you take no position, if you're completely open, then there's a much better way of understanding what the person is saying, what the person is trying to communicate. And this allows for genuine communication, which again is part of *m etta*.

So equanimity, and that's what we'll be practicing when I'm finally done, just to develop this very open, spacious awareness.

The practice is basically the use of a mantra, a verse or sentences which are meaningful to us. Now the four classic ones, the four usual ones that are used are may you be safe. Everybody wants to be safe. They want to be safe from dangers outside themselves, but dangers from within ourselves. Dangers, safe from economic crises for a start. So it's a case of recognizing that safety is really the basic platform for human existence. Everybody wants to be safe. When we're safe, then we feel we can, we're free to do. So, offering people safety, may you be safe.

The next thing is physical health. Everybody wants to be healthy. So may you be well.

The next one is happy. Everybody wants to be happy, free of distress.

And the final one is to have an ease of living, which is very difficult in our times today. But that's really something which allows us to have a deep sense of happiness if we have ease of living, in whichever way you want to describe that. It could be economic ease, it could be social ease, it could be relationship ease. It's just that the ease of living allows us to live in harmony.

So it's partly to do with an attitude of contentment, which is more about wanting what you get rather than always trying to get what you want. And it's being content to what one has. It doesn't stop one also having aspirations.

So to be contented and to live in harmony, even when the person you're trying to be harmonious with is not particularly in tune with you, the point is that you're always trying to find this nice, this peaceful, this ease, even with people whom you don't get on with.

So those are your four blessings. And you have to take your time with them because they have to be

meaningful in terms of their deliberate well-wishings. They're not like when you pass people and you say, how are you doing? I'm doing all right. Cheers, okay. Which is just a social pleasantry.

When I started doing this sort of practice, I went to work one morning and I actually said to a colleague who was coming down the corridor. I said, how are you? And I obviously said it in a way that made him think, well, this guy's really interested. So he kept me for ten minutes telling me how he was. And I got late for my class. So then I thought, no, this is not the time to really ask people how they are. So there's nothing wrong with pleasantries. It's just that what we're doing here is actually really meaning it, not just the passing hello.

Also, when we're doing it, we're doing it for the benefit of the other. Of course, we do turn it towards ourselves.

But when you say may so-and-so be happy, may so-and-so be well, may so-and-so be safe, well and happy, when you're saying that, you are meaning for them to be happy, for them to be safe. It's not like a throwaway line.

So if you can imagine the person in your mind — it doesn't have to be a strong visualisation — and re-establish some relationship with that person, and you're offering them that goodwill. Now whether it touches them or not over space and time, well maybe — some people say it does — but in terms of our practice, that's not relevant, because what we're doing is just developing the inner heart. That's what we're doing. So that when we meet the person, hopefully they'll see it, they'll feel it. I'll come to that other stuff a bit later on.

So let me just go through very quickly, because we'll do it as a practice at the end of the evening. We start with the benefactor. And over the first at least half day, try and work with — it could be just one benefactor. You don't have to seek hundreds of thousands of them. But you could actually just go through your life and realise how many people have helped you in your life. And every time you think of somebody, offer them these blessings.

It's good to start with somebody whom you don't have any problems with, if you can find somebody. It just helps to start at an easy base. And then you can extend it. An uncomplicated relationship. Somebody who, when you think of them, naturally warms the heart.

Now having said that, this *metta* practice is working even when you have no feelings in the heart, even when your heart, your emotional life, is dull, is dead, is not responding. It might be depressed, it might even be bored — it doesn't matter. You keep, as it were, meaning these phrases, and eventually the heart will begin to resonate with those phrases.

Now it doesn't mean to say that just because we're practising metta, we won't be suffering all the hindrances. They will definitely come up. So there'll be wandering mind. Your mind will start planning. It'll be thinking about past things, future things. It'll be suddenly you're saying "may you be safe, may you

be well," and you're off, you're strangling somebody. Then you know there's aversion. Then you suddenly fall asleep and you're walking around like a zombie. And then you can't handle it anymore because you're so restless and your mind's all over the place. And then you start having doubts: "Well this is no good for me. I can't be bothered doing this. It's a waste of time." So all these hindrances, Māra, the evil one, will definitely arise.

But what we do with these is unlike in vipassanā where we actually work with them — here we just park them. Now make a distinction here between pushing something away with aversion or fear, which is suppressing, which is not doing us any good, and just saying "I'll handle you another time." You're just gently parking them and then you bring your attention back to what you're doing. And then you find that they're all waiting for you next weekend!

So it's not that they go away, but you're not adding any aggression into the system. So you're very kind. You say, "Now that's a bit of hate. I see you there. I just, you hang on there for a minute. We'll deal with you afterwards," and you keep back and practise metta.

Now let me give you an image which I've got from Assagioli — some of you may know the Italian therapist. He uses it in a different sense, but it's a good image. So if you think of the mind like an egg, the bottom part is all nicely fully developed. So that's our usual stuff, the stuff that we've developed both negative and positive. But the top bit, the top part of the egg slopes away and needs to be blown out a bit. So what we're doing is we are developing the beautiful side of the mind.

But remember that in so doing, we're not treating with the underneath of the egg. That, as it were, remains untreated. But at least the mind on top of this swamp is actually growing and becoming beautiful. And it's a strengthening thing. So that when you come to practise vipassanā, those of you who've done it, you can actually imbue your investigation with kindness. You can actually give it a flavour of kindness as things come up inside you.

But for the purpose of this course we're just going to park the stuff. Deal with it another time. Now sometimes of course it does come up and you can't get rid of it. It's just full in your face. In which case, if you haven't done vipassanā then come and tell me and I'll give you a few hints before you run away. If you do, then do vipassanā on it. Just sit with it in vipassanā and wait for it to pass, wait for it to pass. And as soon as it begins to pass, just park it and start again. And in that way, on a longer retreat, you can actually develop this metta with vipassanā. And they both actually are very supportive to each other, very supportive.

So we begin with the benefactor and then usually we move to a dear friend. Again, not too complicated a relationship. And then to a neutral person. You can bring in, of course, family. You can bring in pets — dogs and cats deserve a bit of love. And then finally, at some point tomorrow, when you're doing the benefactor also guide that loving-kindness towards yourself.

So when we remember a benefactor we remember the good things they did for us. So we begin by thinking about the good things we've done in our lives. And as you remember one thing that you've done, which may be just to open the door for somebody — doesn't have to be some huge heroic act — as you remember that then you offer yourself the blessing.

So we're building up a very positive image of ourselves in connection with the benefactor. And then we begin to introduce into our practice these other people: those who are near and dear, dear friends, neutral people, people whom we see probably every day almost on the way to work, neighbours whom we see but we don't know. And we begin to offer the same goodwill towards those people.

Space outwards in a more general way — and we'll go through that this evening — to ourselves, to our neighbours (you can relocate, you don't have to do neighbours around here), and then to the country, to all people in Europe, all people on earth, and all beings in all directions. So eventually the heart is just opening out to develop an attitude. So this is what metta is.

You're developing an attitude of goodwill no matter who stands in front of you. That's the point. So whatever being stands in front of you, there's an immediate good-hearted relationship set up from your side toward them. And that's what we mean by universal.

And that's sometimes you get this non-attachment. You'll find the word "detached" used, which tends to be misunderstood. Other people are using the word "non-attachment." But all that means is that your goodwill is not dependent on whether you like the person or not. That's all. And then it becomes universal.

I think that's enough of that. Any immediate questions about that?

"I'm just curious that you don't include the difficult person as a stage."

I will do. In a sense, that comes with the forgiving as well, the forgiveness that we do on the third day.

"When you said about... do you mean specifically towards the benefactor? You don't mean reflecting on your good deeds generally, you just mean towards the benefactor?"

No, what I'm suggesting is that I might think of somebody who's done me good. So I then offer that person my goodwill. And then I might think of something that I've done good. And then I say, "May I be well, may I be happy." So there's a connection there.

And as I say, don't make the mistake of judging your metta by the emotional value that arises. That can be a big mistake. And the other big mistake is that once you start feeling beautiful within yourself, you start doing it for that reason. So you do your metta in order to feel good. So then you become a do-gooder, which is a terrible thing. So be careful of that.

Take it more — it's a gift. So suddenly you're landed with this very beautiful state within your heart, and it's very lovely and peaceful. So receive that as a gift, but don't do it for that reason. Do it in order to

develop a good attitude.

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