Brahmavihāra - Mettā

Carol Wilson · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Carol Wilson · 29:39

We'll continue going through the map, the categories of the loving-kindness, the metta practice. Since Steve introduced the metta practice so beautifully last time, we won't be talking so much in these following weeks, but simply continuing to present the whole map.

As far as the structure, we'll begin with ourselves, and then tonight we'll spend a bit more time with the benefactor, and just briefly at the end of the sitting, introduce the next being, which is dear friend.

As we begin and continue to explore this loving-kindness, this metta practice, it's really important that we practice it in the way that's easiest. In other words, picking the being, the person that we are cultivating this connecting, loving, open heart with—picking the one that's the easiest to connect with.

If that's yourself, which oddly enough once in a while it is, then when we move to benefactor or dear friend, if you start to feel lost or there's no energy there, please don't force it. Come back to yourself. Stay with yourself. Stay with yourself all through the week. That's great.

If it's the reverse, and it's really difficult trying to send metta to yourself—either it's just like a stone, nothing, or worse than nothing, anger, hatred, all that stuff—well, that's interesting information, but you may not be the person you should start with. Then really spend time with the benefactor, who for many people is the easiest person.

The benefactor is the person who really opens that heart space of connection, who connects with our own goodness. Although classically it's taught as someone who has been a teacher or to whom we feel grateful or very respectful, that doesn't always work. Many people use their grandchild or a niece or a friend or a pet—a being that just easily opens up that space of well-wishing without a lot of complications. For many people, that's the easiest category. It's meant to be. For some people, it isn't.

For that reason, tonight we'll introduce the next category, which is dear friend. Classically, dear friend would be someone that you're a little closer to than the benefactor, although if you're using a child or a niece or a grandchild, you might be closer to them as benefactor. Dear friend is meant to be, again, someone with whom we can easily open our hearts in connection, someone whose beautiful qualities we can easily tune into, and for whom it is fairly easy to wish happiness.

Generally, a dear friend might be someone we know a little better. This means, of course, we also know all the sides of that person, which is great because so far I haven't met anyone who only has perfect good sides and doesn't have a few little warts here and there.

And that's what's so wonderful about the quality of the Brahma Vihara of metta—well, of all the Brahma Viharas. Even though we practice metta by picking the person it's easiest to feel it for, this connection, this friendliness, and we practice it by deliberately choosing to focus on the goodness of that person. For example, if you're sending metta to a benefactor, you don't think of all the things they did that drove you nuts in order to cultivate metta. You really focus on their beautiful aspects.

This can lead to an almost fearful feeling of being blind, of being deluded, that we're sending metta but we're kidding ourselves because we're not really looking at the whole person. And that's what's so beautiful about metta—it's inclusive. We start by looking at the beautiful, but as we stay connected, sending all the phrases to that person, the other sides come in. The loving-kindness is an acceptance of all of the person, including ourselves, including whoever.

So you can see why we start with easier ones. We get a sense that the friendliness, the connection of metta is not at all a deluded or blind connection. It's an acceptance that really allows us to see the whole person as we go on with the practice. To be honest, when I first started doing metta intensively, I didn't quite expect the degree of inclusion, the degree of acceptance, and the clarity of seeing of the heart and mind that comes from the steadiness of practicing in this way. I just put that out. Look and see for yourselves how it is for you.

So it's graduated. With a friend you might see a little bit more that bugs you. That's okay. If you notice the mind drifting into—not just noticing, but actively getting into the being-bugged zone—well, you'll notice, okay, this isn't metta. Fine. See if you can put it down and reconnect to the goodness of the person and start the metta again. This is true with anybody you're sending it to.

If you find you're just getting caught up in the bugged zone and you can't get back to the metta zone, that's when we say, okay, let me go to the person that it's easier for. Go back to benefactor, for example, or yourself or whoever it's easier for. This is the standard rule of how we practice.

Even though in these weeks we're taking you through all the categories, it's really more by way of showing you the possibilities and giving you the chance to see for yourself where you connect most easily. There's no sense at all of thinking you ought to get it right, make a success of each category and get on to the next. There's nowhere to go. If you just stayed with yourself for six weeks, that would be wonderful.

And you might find out at the end of that time what's another wonderful secret of loving-kindness practice: you can't just stay with one person. If you only do it to yourself, you find it sneaking out and connecting with other people anyway. You find that sense of separation of me and other goes away.

In a moment of metta, there is no sense of separation. So there's not any way you can really do this in a selfish way, and there's not any way you can do it in a wrong way. So play with it. And if it really doesn't connect with you, you also don't have to do it at all. You can stay with the Vipassana, which is also wonderful. There's no way to lose here. Don't get yourself all worried about it. Just see what happens.

With metta, sit as comfortably as you can while remaining awake. This is not a practice where you need to hold yourself in a strenuous position or where you need to be dealing with pain, if you're fortunate enough to have the choice not to deal with it. If partway through the sitting you're feeling some constriction, some pain in your body, and you know moving a little bit would help, please move. That's really helpful in this practice.

Find as comfortable a seat as you can. Classically, we'll start with ourselves before moving to a benefactor or friend. But within that, feel free to go where it feels the most flowing, the most easy. And if you feel nothing—which is often the case when we're doing metta—don't worry about it. Don't try to evoke a feeling that isn't there. Just be content to offer each phrase as a gift. That's enough. We don't have to get into wanting to feel good as well. We can just offer that to ourselves or to others. It takes a load off, I'll tell you, just to offer it without needing something back.

So please sit at ease. Take a couple of deep breaths so that you can connect with the sense of your physical presence here in this room. Let your attention gently come into your body. See if you can just relax into a kind acceptance, being here with your body, so to speak—coming home into this body, however it is in this moment, not needing it to change. Just appreciate that it's supporting us so far.

Take a moment to consciously reflect on some of your beautiful qualities, some aspect of your goodness. And don't listen to the voice that's uncomfortable with that. Really let it in. It's important. It's a very important practice that we often neglect. It can be small things—any aspect of your goodness. Receive it in your heart and mind. Appreciate it. Imagine how you'd appreciate that goodness in another. Appreciate it in yourself.

Then take that sense of appreciation of yourself, feeling a sense of your presence, connecting with yourself here and now—whether it's physically, a felt sense, holding an internal mental picture of yourself, or connecting with a memory of yourself, perhaps as a child, a memory when you can connect with your goodness, when you can honestly wish yourself happiness and let it in.

From this space, use the repetition of each phrase, one by one, very simply, as a way to carry this appreciation to yourself, to honor your deepest wish to be happy by expressing it through the phrase. Not to change anything. The phrase is simply a carrier to express your friendliness to yourself, your acceptance of yourself.

The classic phrases are: May I be safe and protected from inner and outer harm. May I be happy and peaceful. May I be healthy and strong. May I be able to care for myself joyfully in this world. Or, may I live with ease of well-being.

Some people find it helpful to keep it very simple, something like: I love and accept myself just as I am.

Very gently, one phrase from the heart, just feeling each word, offering that to yourself as a heartfelt gesture of friendliness.

That's all. Just settle in and find your own rhythm.

When you wander off in thought, take a moment when you wake up to reconnect with the sense of yourself—the image or the memory. When there's just that sense of appreciation for a moment, then offer the first phrase. Don't rush back to the phrases. Take a moment to regroup, to reconnect. There's no hurry.

May I be safe and protected.
May I be happy and peaceful.
May I be healthy.
May I care for myself joyfully.

Now, if you'd like, bring into your heart or mind a sense of the being you're using for the benefactor category. If it's the one you chose last week and it's been working great, wonderful. If you found you chose someone who rationally should have been a good benefactor but turned out not to be so easy, don't worry about that. Just pick someone else. That happens sometimes.

Bring this being into your heart. See if you can bring up an internal image, a memory if it's someone you know, some visual connection. Take a moment to reflect on their goodness—the qualities of this person, this being, that light up your heart, that naturally evoke this friendliness, this openness, this connection. Even if you don't feel it now, that's okay. Just reflect on these qualities.

When you're ready, offer each phrase as a gift of the heart—not to change the person's circumstances, not even to make us feel good, just a gift of friendliness, our deepest heart wish for this person.

May you be safe, protected from inner and outer harm.
May you be happy and peaceful.
May you be healthy and strong.
May you live with ease in this world.

When you notice you're distracted or caught up by other thoughts or moods, if it's possible to simply notice and come back to the image of your benefactor and the phrases, then do so. You don't need to fight with or investigate what else is happening. If you're really taken over by anger or fear—which sometimes happens in the metta practice—then you can switch to vipassana for some moments to really meet that emotion with a metta feeling. Acknowledge it, be with it, and then come back to the benefactor and the phrases.

Now, if you'd like, bring into the room, into your heart, a good friend—someone you easily wish well, someone whose goodness and good qualities you can focus on fairly easily. It's helpful to choose someone where there's not likely to be sexually involved energy, because that just makes it more complicated in the beginning.

Connect with an image or a felt sense of this friend. Let yourself appreciate their goodness, the parts of

them that light you up. And again, when you're ready, offer each phrase.

May you be safe and protected.
May you be happy and peaceful.
May you be healthy and well.
May you be able to care for yourself joyfully in this world.

May the beneficial energies of our practice be shared with all beings everywhere, known and unknown, in all directions, in all realms. May all beings everywhere be happy and peaceful. May all beings be freed from suffering. May our practice serve for the awakening of all beings everywhere.

Transcriptions produced locally using Swiss low-carbon electricity. Corrections and rewriting by cloud-hosted AI.