Brahmavihāra Practice Day 2

Carol Wilson · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Carol Wilson · 47:30

As has been mentioned, each day we will give sequential instructions at this particular sitting in the particular style of practicing brahmavihāras that we've learned from our teachers in Burma. There are, of course, many different styles of practicing, of cultivating loving-kindness, compassion, appreciative joy, and equanimity. I'm not in any way saying this is the only way or the right way, but it's a particular style of practice, of cultivation, that we've found really helpful and that one can learn and practice on one's own. That's why we're sharing it in this way.

I'm just wondering how many of you are familiar with or have practiced this mettā practice. Almost everybody—good. That makes our work easier. So I'll just introduce it lightly and we can start.

As you know, in this form of really simply cultivating the quality of mind, of heart—and you know in the Pāli language the word for mind and heart is the same, so if we say mind, if we say heart, we're not actually making a distinction, it's both—cultivating this particular quality, this beautiful quality of mind, of heart, of loving-kindness, friendliness, acceptance. In this form, it starts with ourselves and moves sequentially through different beings standing for different categories. Classically, each category is meant to be a little more difficult to quite easily feel the sense of friendliness and acceptance. But of course each of us is different and it doesn't work the same for everybody. What may be a difficult category for some may be easy for you. No problems, no worries, doesn't matter. Just exploring and seeing.

I want to say a couple of things. Even though we're teaching this as a fairly structured form of meditation, of practice, I want to again remind us, emphasize—this is not like another way of practice that you've got to get right. Another thing to conquer. And when you can't, when loving-kindness isn't what comes up, another way to feel like a total failure on the face of the earth. That's really not why we're sharing this, and that's not what it's about. It's not about getting it right and getting quickly to the difficult person—which for some weird reason seems to be, not for all of us, but for many people that I know and have talked to, kind of deeply embedded. The faster we can do it, the better we're doing.

And so, "Never mind myself—that's completely selfish, a total waste of time." Never mind the fact that self is sometimes the hardest person to actually feel simple, kind acceptance for. We're not saying you have to swoon with love. Simple friendliness, acceptance, just not hating the fact that you're sitting here existing. Never mind that you can't do that—we want to start with Hitler. And if we can't do that, it's another sign of the fact that we really don't deserve to exist. And we're back to where we should have started in the first place with moi.

So that's not the practice.

What it really is about is a simple cultivation, a simple practice of this wholesome, beautiful quality of mind—simple acceptance, non-separation, inclusion, really. It's the counter to the separating, exclusionary, suffering quality of mind of ill will. Of not liking, all the way to hatred, but just simple ill will.

The Buddha originally, it says in the suttas, taught mettā as an antidote to fear, which is a form of ill will. But he also said, in talking to his son Rāhula, "Cultivate loving-kindness. It frees the heart, the mind, from ill will."

So, not to have grand expectations, but simply recognize that every moment we simply incline the heart, the mind towards "May I be safe and protected, may I be happy"—just using the phrase...

to incline the intention—never mind trying to feel, as that turns into wanting—but just inclining the mind in that direction is the shifting of the habit.

When we come and say, "Well, I'm not worth it," boom, that's the old habit of ill will directed towards oneself. "They're not worth it"—directed towards them. Simply shifting the habit by the simple repetition of the phrase with the intention to mean it. You can't make yourself feel it. You just have the intention to want to mean it. That's good enough. That's shifting the habit.

And so an aspect of metta is patience, as with all of our practice. Patience is essential. So it's not helpful or useful or even relevant to be looking for results. How good am I feeling about this person that I'm sending loving kindness to? And have they felt it yet? Let me go call them up and see how they're doing. Never mind that.

Just the willingness to not simply follow our usual habit of sinking into, "Oh God, I'm hopeless," or "Oh, they just bug me, to heck with them." Just not landing in that. That comes up and you go, "You know what? May I be safe and protected." That's all. That's all.

That doesn't seem like much. But our willingness to keep connecting to that again and again and again—and yes, ten million times—is what's actually the practice. That shifting of the deep, unconscious habits of our heart and mind: of greed and ill will, of wanting and judging and separation, of "these people are okay and these people aren't," and "this part of me is okay and this part isn't."

As it is, right now, I love and accept myself. Can you even stand to say that to yourself? Just as I am, I love and accept myself in this moment. And then don't think about it, don't analyze: "Well, I would love and accept myself if I wasn't da-da-da-da-da." It's just the quality of open, connected friendliness. That's really what metta is.

Sometimes the quality of heart-mind of metta—the mental state, to use the terminology that the Buddha used—has a wide range. It doesn't necessarily have to be what we would call emotional, like a big emotional feeling. And so sometimes it can be on that range. It's nice when it's this big sense of oneness

and inclusivity and love for all beings. Yeah, I mean great, we'll take it. But don't land in "that's what we're aiming for" or "that's what metta is." Metta is also just that simple movement from separation to, "Oh, just like this, may you be happy and peaceful."

The willingness to connect—whether it's a sense of ourselves, or a sense of the other person, what we'll call today's so-called benefactor—just to connect to a sense of that person just as they are, without saying, "You'd be worthy of my friendliness if you would just clean up your act a little bit." Just as you are. Just warts and all. May you be safe and protected. May you be happy. May you be healthy. May you live with ease.

And those, as you know, we begin this practice by bringing up in your mind, in your heart, a sense of the particular subject we're including. So we'll start with ourselves and then the so-called benefactor.

And here, the way we're doing it this week—which is an hour a day or more if you feel it—we're not doing this practice in the form of cultivating deep samadhi, deep shamatha. The way this practice is structured is different from vipassana, in that we are continuing to come back to the same thing: to the phrase and the sense of the person. So the structure of the practice is one that, if we were doing it only this, all day every day, it becomes a shamatha practice that can lead to absorption. And so that's one aspect, and that's part of why the structure is so specific.

So it's a sense of the person, and repeating—in the case of metta—there are four classical phrases you repeat, and I'll say how to do that. If we were doing it all day, every day, to cultivate samatha, the staying with the form without changing it a lot would be a little more helpful, supportive.

Because changing it around a lot can increase restlessness. But the way we're offering it here, once a day in the afternoon, is to more highlight the other aspect.

It's kind of a double-edged practice, this. There's the shamatha piece if you do it all the time, but the other edge is just what I've been talking about—actually cultivating this kindness, this inclusivity, this accepting, friendly quality of heart and mind, this opposite of ill will.

And so while the form of the practice is not vipassana—it's shamatha because we don't explore what else comes up much; we come back to the phrase, to the sense of the person in a very gentle way—here, what we're cultivating, what we're leaning into, is this friendly, accepting quality.

Because we, most of us teachers, have found—and nothing's for everybody; it may drive you nuts, you may want to run out of here screaming, okay? Just notice it. Try not to actually run out of here screaming. But you may hate metta. I hated it for years. A little bit of ill will there! I hated it for years until I did it intensively.

But the reason we offer it is because for many people, they find it a real support for the attitude of relaxed acceptance that really is the essence of mindfulness.

So if you find you've been approaching practice like, "Let me notice the breath, feel the breath—in, out, in, out. I notice that pain in my back—burning, burning, burning." Right? "I'm being mindful—burning, burning, burning." That's mindfulness, right? You might notice a little sense, just a subtle sense of aversion going on there. We laugh, but I've spent days like that. And all of a sudden it's like, "Oh god, that's aversion." Duh.

So sometimes just the practice of metta—you start to feel when that harshness comes in. "Oh, well that's interesting. It's actually different." Okay. Burning is like this, with that softness. So it's just to explore for yourself. That's why we're offering it like this.

But still, I'm going to say how the practice is structured while giving you a little bit of leeway here to see what's supportive for you. So it's not about getting somewhere or getting it right. And certainly, practice this, cultivate it, in as relaxed a way as possible. It's that balance of always, yes, we stay with the form, but relaxed moment to moment. It's a dance we're always kind of finding our way in.

So today we'll start with self and then the being called benefactor. As most of you have done this retreat, you know what that means, but I'll just remind us. This is from the old classical teachings, where benefactor was meant to be—first of all, they thought back in the old days of the Buddha that metta to self was the absolute easiest, which I guess just shows a cultural difference, a historical difference. Because at least I know from my own mind, and all these years of sharing practice with people in all different countries, I'd say—this is a conservative estimate—ninety-five percent of people have a really strong self-critical, self-worth, self-hatred mindset. A habit of mind.

And so that's just a different thing that makes it a little difficult for us to cultivate metta, which is why when we offer it the first day, we offer self and benefactor. Because for some people, if you find you're just getting all knotted up trying to say, "May I be safe and protected"—"I don't deserve to be safe"—"May I be happy"—"Happy? How can I be happy when there's so much suffering in the world?" You know, all of that. That can happen a little in the beginning. But if you're lost in that, go to benefactor, where it can be easier.

So benefactor is meant to be—classically they say your parents. Okay, here again we run into another difference for some of us. Not all, but some. But a person—a teacher, a grandparent, a mentor—someone that can be someone you know. It's easier. But some of us don't come up with someone, so we think of someone who inspires us.

Someone who's helped us, or who inspires us, or for whom we easily feel a sense of natural well-wishing, a natural connection. It could be a teacher or a mentor. We often say now that people may think of a niece or a nephew. Or if you're old enough, a grandchild—skip a generation where it's a little bit easier.

"Easy" doesn't mean that this person you should love more than your parents or your child or something. There's just less complications. And notice your mind right now if it goes to, "Yeah, but I ought to be able to go right to my parents," or whatever. That's our trip. Just look at how it is. Someone less complicated.

I heard there's a Tibetan saying which I love: the teacher that's easiest to send metta to is one who lives two valleys over—because you don't know so much about him. This isn't to support delusion. It's simply to support the ease of connecting and well-wishing.

That's why when we move to a good friend, it's someone you would naturally wish well for, but there's just been a little more rubbing, a little more stuff going on. So while you're sending metta, suddenly you think, "But what about that time they borrowed that thing and never gave it back, and I said I didn't care. Why do I care? I do care." And then all of that arises. So just coming back to the simplicity.

For the benefactor, see who comes up for you. Maybe you already have one, and that's fine. You can keep using the same person. It's not that you have to go through everybody who's ever been kind to you. Pick one. Keep it simple. Because it's not about sending metta to everyone. It's about cultivating this quality—the ease, the recognition of this quality in our heart and mind. So it becomes more familiar. So it becomes more of the default mode instead of criticism, instead of separation, instead of self-judgment.

It really can happen. I'm here as living proof. It comes and goes—I'm living proof of that too. Nothing's steady state. But we can learn to trust it a bit more.

So start where it's easiest. Whenever it starts to get complicated, go back to where it's easiest. And that's not just for today. That's not just for these next two weeks. That's for the rest of our lives. Because what we're doing is cultivating this quality of mind and heart, and whatever helps us do it is the most helpful.

I could keep going, but I actually want us to have a little time to practice. Back to the benefactor though—even if you can't find someone, a pet is fine. A pet is a living being. Unless you have a pet rock; I don't know about that. But a living being, anyone that you can tune into, just as they are.

The aspects of the formal practice: take a moment to get a sense of the person. We'll start with ourselves and then the benefactor. If you're visual, a visual sense memory can be helpful. For yourself, some people like to just get an image of themselves in a mirror. That might be a little tough. So often people use a memory of themselves when they were younger—more innocent, before you turned bad. When you can actually have some sense of meeting yourself. You know I'm talking tongue-in-cheek, right? You haven't turned bad. Well, I don't know. I mean, I don't know you. Whatever helps.

Now, if you're more kinesthetic, which I am, I find loving-kindness to myself is actually easier because I feel a felt sense of my body sitting here now, just as it is. If your body is a painful body, that can be a little harder, because it's important to feel as comfortable as you can. If touching your body with your awareness brings up pain and aversion right away, that's going to be too hard to cultivate metta to begin with. You really can't push through pain. So sit in a way that's comfortable. If the body part doesn't work for you, then do try to go to a memory of a happy time, or whatever helps you connect with yourself.

When we get to benefactor, again, think of the person, the animal. And if it's someone you don't know, some people use a being in the world who's really inspired them, even if they don't know the person, but

they can get a real sense of them. Maybe they've seen them someplace or heard them, where you get some living sense of their goodness, or some aspect that inspires you.

With yourself, when you tune in, actively take a moment to feel into your own goodness. The sincerity of your intentions, for example. Just being here for this month manifests huge qualities of integrity, of purity, of wisdom and compassion. Because someone who's really lost in a harsh way of life, really suffering, really violent, really not having a sense of living in an ethical way—trying to sit here for a month would be so much suffering. So just appreciating your goodness. And we all have other stuff too.

Metta begins by tuning into the goodness, the wholesomeness. You might find your integrity, or times you've been kind, or your sincere intention. But metta is not blind. It starts by acknowledging, "Just as I am, may I be safe and protected." It connects and then spreads out to include our whole being, just as we are. So as you're doing loving-kindness to yourself, if anger comes up, fine. "Okay, just as I am. This anger too, it's painful. May I be happy. May I be safe and protected." It's not a rejection of anything. But it's triggered by tuning into the wholesomeness, the goodness. We do that with ourselves and then with benefactors.

So let me guide us briefly now. Sitting in as comfortable a way as you can. There's no perfect comfort, but relatively comfortable. Awake, of course.

Just take a breath and let your mind and body relax. Not make it relax—let it just relax. Stop fighting whatever's going on. If it's tense, and you notice it's tense and it stays tense, you relax. Let the mind relax around that. Just as the body is right now, it's fine. Just as your heart and mind is right now, it's fine.

Right now maybe you're not feeling friendliness. Maybe you're tired, maybe you're bored, maybe you're pissed off—whatever's going on, it's like this now. Notice how that accepting movement is actually the movement of metta. Just as I am in this moment.

Let your attention connect with your body-mind. If an image is more helpful, experiment with that. Just relax, let it come. Nothing to push, nothing to achieve.

Take a moment to reflect on or tune into whatever aspect of wholesomeness arises—sincere intention, kindness, honesty, generosity, whatever comes up for you. Don't push it away saying that's not good enough, whatever it is. Just let yourself say, "Yes, that's an aspect."

Just as I am in this moment, may I love and accept myself. Not to make it so, but to feel that softness, that connecting quality of heart and mind to ourselves in this moment. You don't have to change one bit to be worthy of friendliness, to be worthy of loving-kindness in this moment. We all are, by virtue of simply being.

When you tune in, don't try to make yourself feel anything. Just tune in. And I'll offer the classical phrase, which you gently repeat in your heart.

Don't try to make it so. The phrase is like a carrier for our intention. We say it, we offer it to ourselves, we let it go into the universe. Don't look for results. And if these phrases don't work, you'll find your own—but don't spend the whole time trying to get it right. That's one of our sidetracks.

So classically: May I be safe and protected from inner and outer harm. Or in short form, may I be safe and protected. May I be happy and peaceful. May I be healthy, or may I live with physical ease. And the fourth one: may I live with ease of well-being, which means may my life not be such a struggle. May I live with ease.

And so then we just keep gently repeating in your own time, your own rhythm. Connect with the sense of yourself, your goodness, and simply offer this next phrase as a kind of movement from the heart area. Let it go. Connect again. Offer the phrase. Sure, it will become rote sometimes—that's okay. Sure, you'll get lost in thought—that's okay. When you recognize that, we simply go, all right, come back to yourself. Offer the next phrase. That's the practice. Just simple, relaxed, accepting, just as I am, right now. May I be safe. May I be peaceful. May I live with physical happiness. May I live with ease.

So now, if you'd like to experiment with bringing in a sense of a benefactor—whatever being you've decided to use or who comes to heart, to mind—just let yourself be and take a moment to get a sense of this being. Whether it's a memory, or a memory of a photo, or a time together, whatever helps you connect. Just for the moment—you don't have to hold on, just for the moment. And again, consciously tuning into some beautiful, wholesome aspect of their heart, their mind, their actions. Something easily accessible to you, to think of, to connect to. It doesn't have to be anything big.

And starting from that moment of connection, that appreciation, just simply offering the same phrases we offer ourselves. Not to change them, not even to make them happy—you know, we can't actually do that. But it's an expression of this quality in our heart that holds this friendliness. May you be safe and protected, feeling what meaning that might carry. May you be safe and protected from inner and outer harm.

And no rush. Have a sense, connect again, because you'll probably lose the sense of the person—the mind wanders. Lose the sense, connect again. May you be happy and peaceful. May you live with physical happiness, or may you be healthy. May you live with ease in this world.

And whatever else comes up in your mind—different things, different emotions—no problem, don't struggle with them. But if it's possible for now, we don't investigate much either. Just let them be and reconnect with the benefactor and offer the next phrase, just as it is. Just staying very simple and relaxed. Just relax. Offer the phrase without looking for result.

May all beings everywhere live in happiness and freedom from suffering and confusion.

So we're, as I said, just offering this for you through the days, if you find it useful.

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