Brahmavihāras Day #7

Carol Wilson · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Carol Wilson · 44:51

So today in the offerings in the formal progression of this loving-kindness practice, we'll bring up the so-called neutral person. I'll talk about that a little bit.

But first, a reminder which probably has been said every day: just remember that we're cultivating this loving-kindness practice not to achieve anything or prove anything or get somewhere or do it right. And it's not about moving quickly through all the categories to get to the difficult person or all beings or anything. Simply, moment to moment, as Kate was saying yesterday, we are inclining the mind, the heart, towards this state of mind and heart, this quality of friendliness, acceptance, patience, inclusion, kindness. All of those are words that express some angle, some part of loving-kindness.

My belief is that in terms of all these different practices offered by the Buddha, they all, from different angles, are cultivating and working towards the same end, which is this purification of the suffering, confused habits of our heart and mind. The habits where we respond to whatever situation by either greed or hatred, fear or delusion. Deep, deep habits that we think make sense. It's basically what we talk about every night in one way or another.

All the techniques of vipassana are working in that way to purify a moment of the mind stream, the heart stream, and then we can recognize accurately. Concentration, shamatha meditation, is doing the same thing. And all the brahma-vihāras are, from another angle, offering us a different direction to come in to simply shift the habits of the inclination of our heart and mind. So that's what the loving-kindness practice is doing. And technically, it's kind of like the opposite of ill-will, the opposite of anger.

You'll also see often, in terms of the so-called purification that comes up when you're practicing mettā here or on your own, you may have noticed once in a while other states than mettā arise in your mind and heart. States such as aversion, or self-aversion, or ill-will, or fear. Besides just the regular boredom and wanting and daydreaming. Sometimes you think, "I'm practicing mettā and I'm just filled with self-loathing. That doesn't really seem like what we're trying to do here."

But that's kind of how the old habits get highlighted. And our practice of this mettā, again, isn't to stop self-loathing and immediately feel boundless love. We would if we could, but we can't, so we don't, and it's better not to try. But recognize: this is self-loathing, it's not mettā. That's already good. And then gently come back and see if you can just incline the mind, the heart, to connection, to friendliness, to well-wishing. As Kate was saying, it doesn't matter if you don't feel it. But just that inclination—each time, in a moment, we incline towards this friendliness, this acceptance of ourselves, of friend, of benefactor, of neutral, of all beings. It really doesn't matter which category, which being. That moment of inclining the

mind, the heart, is a moment of shifting the habit.

That's why often we think we're practicing and practicing and nothing's happening. And then at some point, now or having lunch or three years from now, suddenly in a situation where you would normally get really averse or annoyed or react in some way, suddenly friendliness and mettā arises instead. And you think, "What's going on? This can't be me. I didn't do this on purpose. It's just happening."

And that's really what happens. We think anger is just happening, but it's just happening because we've practiced it for a really long time. So the more we practice this loving-kindness, the more that comes to be the inclination, the habit of mind.

I'm saying this in terms of why we're going through the different categories—because they highlight maybe different aspects of where it's easy, where it's difficult, or different specific habits may come up in our heart and mind. Perhaps for some people the being you're using as a benefactor is more easy to naturally feel friendly, connected, accepting than oneself or friend or whatever. But that's why we also say we offer the different categories for you to see, for you to practice, to explore—not to conquer.

And when in any category you're really getting lost in the reactivity, or there's no connection at all and you're just lost in thought, or the energy has just dropped out, then go to where it's easy. If you spend the whole retreat just with benefactor or self, if that's easy, that is cultivating the loving-kindness.

As I think I said the first day I was talking about it: any moment that there's just a pure moment of mettā—it doesn't have to be the big feelings, but just that purity, that wholesomeness of mind, heart, mind stream, rather than the fear or aversion—in that moment, whoever might happen to walk in front of you, the heart-mind would accept them with mettā. So you're not wasting your time if you can only send mettā to benefactor or yourself. That's great. For yourself, some people—we've talked about that. You think it's selfish and all of that.

So wherever you can feel the connection, that's cultivating it. That's great. Don't think of it as hierarchy, please. Or should.

Sometimes, as we say, self is the most difficult. We have the idea that we need it, that we should do it for ourselves, but in doing it to ourselves, we're just running into a brick wall over and over. Go back again to wherever it's more connected. Stay there a while. And then you can slip yourself in through the corner and see what happens. Just not to think of it as a hierarchy, and really have this flexibility to see right now what's helping to reconnect the heart, the mind, to incline the intention in that direction of friendliness, inclusion, well-wishing.

So-called neutral—and most of you have done this, I know from the first day, so you know, but I have to say it anyway. It's not that the person we pick is a neutral person in themselves. It's someone we don't really know. You know them enough to be able to remember them or somehow bring up a hazy image, but it's someone you don't have much to do with, most likely, because it's someone you don't have very strong

feelings about one way or the other.

Some people find there's no one who's absolutely neutral. Fine, don't go crazy. Some people come and say, "Well, I picked someone, but I'm starting to feel a little bit of liking towards them, a little bit of metta, so do I need to stop now and find another neutral person?" No, no—that's how it's supposed to work. It's good. Stick with them. But you might find a person where there's a little bit more on the pleasant side, a little bit more on the unpleasant. Pick the one a little bit on the pleasant.

Some people find it's hard to think of someone who's neutral because right away our mind has formed opinions. So just be as mellow as you can with it. Occasionally someone will say they were shocked to find how many people were neutral—almost like people we didn't really pay much attention to. Don't go on a trip about that either. Just pick someone you don't have a big story going on about or a lot of experience with.

If it's still possible after a week here that there's someone in this retreat who's relatively neutral, someone you haven't got a whole story playing about, that's helpful because then you can catch a visual as you're walking around. That may be too late for that. You could pick the person behind the counter at the supermarket where you always go, something like that. Just see who pops up.

It's meant to be a bit more difficult simply because we don't know much, if anything, about this person. If there's someone here, we can impute to them being a human being. We can see: just as I want to be happy, just as I deeply want peace, so too do you. And just wishing that for this person as a representative of humanity. Just as I feel, so may you be happy.

You may know what their work is. You don't know anything about them, but you can see it's the guy working in the dry cleaner and he's friendly when you come in. Or it's somebody in the gas station and they're always there doing their job, the best they can. Don't go into too much story-making. Just find a way to connect. If anything, you can just get a hazy visual and a sense of just being with them, remembering them as a human being. Offer them the phrases one at a time: just as I want for myself, so too may you be safe and protected.

We'll start with self and then go to whichever has been easiest for you—benefactor or friend—just to kind of get the mind and heart a bit collected to start. Because to start right off with neutral, one of the ways you may experience it if it's difficult for you, it may not be so much the opposite coming up, but just the energy falling out. No real connection there, and the mind just goes off into wandering.

That's why I said don't deliberately make up stories. That's one of the ways the distracted mind fools us in metta practice. It goes off on endless stories about the person we're supposedly sending metta to. Have you noticed that? You kind of half feel you're doing the metta—oh yeah, the guy in the dry cleaner, and he goes home and he has a nice dog and he must be happy and I wonder if he's got kids. Oh, sending metta. You're not sending metta. You're just thinking about stuff.

So notice that. Notice that with all the metta in your heart. It's not bad. It's just not metta. We just want to know what's what. That's one way neutral gets difficult. We kind of lose the thread.

So then again, pick it up if you can. But if you just keep getting lost, again, return to where you can connect a little more steadily, a little more easily. Spend some time there—self, benefactor, friend. And then again, experiment with this so-called neutral person. Just see how it is. In a way, it's not exactly all beings, but I find it kind of a beginning entryway, because we don't have the personal connection to hook onto—just that they're a being, worthy of love and acceptance, just as we are, just as we all are. No better, no worse, no different.

So let's practice together for a little bit, purifying, cultivating the wholesome in our hearts, in our minds, sharing that with ourselves, with our friend, benefactor, neutral, and ultimately all beings.

Finding your comfortable posture, much as you can. And you know what we always say, what I hope you often do, is just take a moment to relax into how it is right now with this body, with this heart-mind. We're just including all aspects of your present moment experience, not starting metta in some kind of struggle with what's going on. It's like this right now. Just relaxing into the sitting position. Receiving the sensations of the physical sitting posture. Just into this field of acceptance, of non-judgment. It's like this now. May this body be happy and healthy.

Feeling whatever's occurring in the heart, the mind, whatever weather system's going on. It's like this now. Sleepy, restless, bored, happy, frightened, lonely. It's like this now. And however it is, it's one momentary aspect of states of mind-heart that we all share, we all participate in. How my mind is expressing in this moment is this particular representation of all beings, of life, of nature.

Just as the heart-mind is in this moment: May I be happy, safe, healthy, living with ease.

And so if spending time with yourself has been accessible or useful, then please let your awareness just completely come into a sense of yourself, whether it's physical—feeling yourself sitting here—mental image, sense in your heart, your memory. If self is really, really difficult, don't fight with it right now, but go to benefactor or friend where it's easy. We can't really be doing this fighting with experience. It's like this now.

So if you're doing self, just tuning in: just as I am in this moment, may I love and accept myself just as I am. Consciously tune into any aspect of your sincerity, your goodness, total worthiness as a human being—which is true for all of us, for everyone. The sincerity of your intention, of your practice, whatever comes up for you. Nothing is too insignificant an aspect of your goodness to appreciate.

And just gently keep on connecting the sense of acceptance, friendliness, and using whichever phrases have been useful for you. The phrases are not to change anything, but as an expression of this warmth, this tender inclusion of all aspects of heart, of ourselves.

May I be safe and protected. May I be happy and peaceful. May I be healthy and may I live with physical ease. May I live with ease, may I be able to care for myself happily in this world.

Sometimes we're the offerer, sometimes the receiver of this simple, friendly, kind energy. And don't worry or get upset if you get lost, if the phrases become rote, if some other feelings are going on. Just simply recognizing that's happening now—that's already a shift from reactivity to friendly acceptance. It's like this now.

And then see if you can just gently connect again with yourself, however you're feeling, feeling the body, connecting with your goodness, and start again, simply offering the next phrase. Just very simple, like a gift. We offer the phrase—may I be happy and peaceful—without looking for any result, just an offering of the heart, and it goes off into the universe. Connect again with the sense of myself. Offer the next phrase in the same way.

And then if sending to yourself, receiving for yourself seems to be flowing, if it's easy and you want to stay there right now, great—please do so. If you'd like to instead bring in either friend or benefactor, this could be a time to do that. Just whichever one naturally seems easy. The sense of getting a sense of the being is simple. You can connect to their wholesome, lovable aspect and just relatively simply feel inclusive, friendly, accepting, and just offering each phrase.

So whichever being comes up for you, friend or benefactor—the easy one: May you be safe and protected from inner and outer harm. May you be happy.

May you be healthy. May you live with ease in this world.

And now I suggest, if you're interested in exploring, offering friendly, kind acceptance and well-wishing to a neutral person, you could bring that sense of that person in now—a memory, a visual sense, whatever works for you.

Just give it some time. No need to push or try. Be a bit patient with this if it doesn't connect. Some people find that neutral is actually the easiest. We never know. We're all different.

Stay steady for a little bit. As best you can, get a sense or image or a felt sense of the person, or remember them in some place where you've seen them or heard them. Connect, just knowing that as a human they also want to be happy and living in peace.

And just offer: May you be safe and protected.

After that, if you've lost the sense, take a moment to connect again and then offer again. Connect to the image or felt sense or hearing, and then offer. If you lose the thread, simply start again—very patient. See how it goes. This too is an aspect of metta: patience.

But if you find you're really getting lost, as I said, simply switch back again to where you can connect with

a bit more steadiness. And then you may try neutral again. We're just exploring here.

For the last few moments of the sitting, only if you want to, sometimes I imagine the metta as a simple warm glow in the heart area, the chest. And I just imagine spreading this out to include all of us in this room—moving from neutral to a sense of just including all of us without preference or exception. All our fellow travelers on the path.

May we all be safe and protected. May we be happy and peaceful. May we be healthy. May we live with ease.

May the fruits of our practice be shared with all beings in all walks of life. May all beings everywhere be happy, be freed from suffering and confusion.

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