Loving Kindness; Reflecting on our Goodness

Guy Armstrong · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Guy Armstrong · 36:08

Every day at this time we'll have a guided meditation. Normally what we'll do in the afternoons is move through the other Brahmaviharas so that we'll give pretty detailed instructions for how to meditate with compassion, appreciative joy, and equanimity. We also add forgiveness, which is almost like a fifth Brahmavihara. So in the other afternoons we'll be moving through those, but we felt it was a little too much for the first day, so this afternoon will be a guided meditation on loving-kindness.

But I'm going to emphasize something that has been mentioned but not maybe fully developed. And that is the importance in doing metta practice of reflecting on our goodness. The Buddha recommended this again and again. And when we hear this as Westerners, it kind of comes out of the blue. It seems like an instruction we may never have heard before or we thought was vaguely sinful. Because it sounds like a form of pride. Like, I should step back and think about the good things I've done? Isn't that a little arrogant or something?

But it's said that the proximate cause for loving-kindness to arise is seeing the good in someone. So in order for metta to arise toward ourselves, we need to see the good in ourselves. And all of you have a lot of good in you. I haven't met all of you yet, but I can tell. So it's just a matter of discovering where that lies.

In the meditation, I'm going to give a few instructions for how to discover those qualities in us. And I wanted to explain it at the beginning so you won't feel shy or like you're going off into strange territory, but this is really an integral part of the metta practice. We learn to do it for ourselves. We also learn to do it for our benefactor and the other individuals that we'll be bringing in later. And it really is a good way to open the heart to somebody. If you're having a struggle with somebody in your life and you can turn and remind yourself of their good qualities, it can often shift the relationship, even if it's just a little bit. So that will be included in the meditation as we go into it.

So please sit comfortably. Be relaxed in your sitting posture. At the same time, be a little bit upright. Have a sense that your spine is supporting you with some strength, that you feel some dignity in your posture. If you're comfortable, you can let your eyes gently close. If you're more used to meditating with your eyes open a little bit, that's fine too. Generally, we allow the eyes to be softly closed.

You might begin by letting go of any obvious areas of holding. And let the forehead be smooth. The eyes be soft. The jaw be relaxed. The shoulders be dropped. Let the belly be soft, not clenched. Then let the hands rest easily on one another, in your lap, or on your thighs.

So bring your awareness into your body as you sit, feeling the whole body, open to the whole body, just

letting it be as it is. And then bringing the attention into the heart center, area in the center of the chest. And maybe feeling this area from the inside, not just on the surface. The heart center is a place where a lot of emotions get felt, get experienced.

So as you connect to the heart center, come in touch with your sense of who you are. And you might do this by just feeling your body and mood, just as they are here and now. Usually a very familiar sense of the body, familiar mood. You might like to bring up an image of yourself. Sometimes it's helpful to recall an image where you see yourself in a place that makes you happy, remembering a photo when you were smiling.

And so as you connect with yourself, either through the felt sense or through an image, take a few moments and reflect on some things you like about yourself. Some of your good qualities as a person. If you met somebody who was just like you, wouldn't that be wonderful? Someone to share your sense of humor, your good taste in retreat centers, your love of nature. Taking a few moments to reflect on the things you appreciate about yourself. Could be your care for the environment. Your willingness to look after pets. Generosity with friends. Care for those who are struggling.

Sometimes when put in this abstract way, it may be hard to find many of our good qualities even though they're there. So another way in is to remember some good things that you've done—some things you've done for others that show your caring, show your kindness.

Take a moment and reflect on some actions you've done that have benefited others. It doesn't have to be a big thing. It can just be little things. A time you reached out to a friend who was sick, or checking in on an aging parent, or an act to preserve our environment. Donating to a good cause.

And as you remember a few of these small things, take a look back and remember: what was the intention? What was my motivation in doing that act? And so getting in touch with the fact there's some kind of generosity, some kind of kindness or compassion, some caring about another. These are all forms of goodness that have been shown through our actions in the past.

And anytime we do loving-kindness for ourselves, it's helpful to remember a few of these. These are the grounds for us to feel friendly, appreciative toward ourselves. So we begin with a kind of faith that these good qualities are already there in us. They've been shown through many actions in the past. And so metta is a natural fit where there's goodness, where we can see this kind of caring.

So we can start to direct the phrases of loving kindness now to yourself with that faith in your own goodness:

May I be safe and protected from harm.
May I be happy and peaceful.
May I live in harmony with my body.
May I live with ease.

So continuing to just gently repeat the phrases of loving kindness for yourself. And if one phrase really connects, you can stay with it for a while.

And if you feel ready, you can move on to the benefactor. And so bringing in the benefactor perhaps by saying their name, bringing up an image of them. Imagine them sitting in front of you or next to you. Whatever active imagination you can do to bring the sense that they're alive in the room at this moment. Because when you get a strong sense of their presence, the connection is easier.

So once you've connected with the benefactor, you can also take a few minutes to reflect on their good qualities. What are the things you really love and appreciate in this person? There can be quite a few, so take a little time with this. So it's like looking at your benefactor from a lot of different angles. Like you'd look at a piece of crystal to see all the facets. You might see their happiness, contentment, their generosity, compassion, their skill in communication, the care they take with their conduct and speech, their wisdom, their good heart.

It's helpful to do this a little bit each time you begin to meditate on someone. Remember what you like about them. And then it's also helpful to remember sometimes they've been kind to you. Benefactor is often someone who's helped you, supported you, taken you under their wing, shown you the right way. So let yourself recall some of those particular incidents when you've been with a benefactor and felt their benefits.

So now having a sense of their good heart, confidence in their goodness, you can begin to direct the thoughts of loving kindness to your benefactor:

May you too be free from danger.
May you have mental happiness.
May you have physical happiness.
May you take care of yourself happily in this world.

You can take your time with each phrase because offering it with this sincere spirit really is an act of generosity. So it's like offering a gift to the person. You can take the time to say it and then sometimes afterwards you might like to feel how that felt to offer that phrase, that wish. And you can come back and place the attention in the heart center and just feel how that felt—to connect with your benefactor, wish them well, have that connection.

When you've rested a little bit the mind at the heart center, you can begin again with the next phrase. If it feels like the presence of the benefactor has faded and it's hard to connect with them, you can renew that sense of their presence by doing what you did at the beginning: saying their name, bringing up an image, recalling their goodness. And then begin again with the phrases.

And then as a way of ending the sitting, you might begin to send some loving kindness thoughts to the people right around you—although sitting right around your seat, if you can remember any faces or socks

or clothes, holding those people in your heart...

And extending the same phrases, have a sense that maybe it can radiate around you, the wish.

"May all of you be safe and protected from harm."

We all have the same deep wishes.

"May all of you be happy. May your body support you with strength. May you live with the ease of well-being."

You might reflect on their goodness at this moment, reflecting on all the work they've done today. Not an easy practice. Appreciating their determination and courage and effort. Extend the phrases again to them.

And then letting the loving kindness go out in an unlimited way, including all beings everywhere. All beings have the same basic wish to be happy and not to suffer. So letting your wish extend in all directions—above and below, right and left, back and front.

"May all beings everywhere be safe and protected from harm. May all beings be happy. May all beings be healthy. May all beings live with ease."

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