Brahmavihāras: Mettā

Guy Armstrong · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Guy Armstrong · 58:19

So we're beginning today this afternoon practice, which we'll do every day, of a guided meditation in one of the four Brahmavihāras, or in English, the divine abidings.

These are four states of mind that the Buddha talked about again and again in the texts as important to cultivate as an aid to our overall development in the Dharma. And these four qualities—we'll have time to explore all of them for a little while in the month of February. Normally, if you go on a shorter retreat of seven days, you just have time to go through one. It's usually loving kindness. But because we have four weeks, we'll go through all four.

We're going to spend more time on the first one, which is loving kindness. The Pali word is mettā. Actually, we call it "metta," but that's a mispronunciation. It's "mettā." So those of you who are living in the first dorm, you are in Mettā. It's even sweeter than "metta," isn't it? Kind of has a nice ring. But because we're so used to the English pronunciation, I'll probably just call it metta.

And the second of the four is compassion. The Pali word is karuṇā. The third is appreciative joy or muditā. And the fourth is equanimity or upekkhā. So we named these four residence halls after these divine abidings. We could have named them after the four noble truths—dukkha and taṇhā—but we thought that wouldn't be as appealing.

So these are the four practices. The first three are very strong heart practices: loving kindness, compassion, and joy. The fourth is the balancing factor or strengthening factor that's really the foundation for the other three. It's a cooler quality emotionally, but it's very important as a way to hold the opening of the heart.

We really recommend these practices as a complement to the Vipassana practice. And some people will find they love these practices more than the insight practice. The Buddha talked about two kinds of disciples. He said there are those who are Dhamma followers—we could say wisdom types—and there are those who are faith followers, and you might say faith or heart types.

In our tradition, the wisdom practice, the Dhamma practice is Vipassana, this development of clear seeing of the way things are, and it's the one that frees the mind. The heart qualities are really important also for our development because they lend a sweet quality to our experience of life. And they give the mind the strength or the confidence or the buoyancy that lets us let go. And it's the letting go that opens us to insight. So the Vipassana practice and the Brahmavihāra practices really support one another and make a good combination as we walk this whole path.

For the first two weeks of February, we're going to focus on the development of loving kindness through the cultivation of this quality of mettā.

Mettā, as many of you know, is a kind of love that's not self-centered. So it's a kind of caring for ourselves and others that isn't looking for something back. You know, with romantic love, there's a wish for something in return. And if that something isn't forthcoming, the romantic love tends to stop. But this altruistic caring of mettā cares about others without putting strings on it, without asking for conditions. So we say sometimes it's an unconditional caring for ourselves and for others.

It's intended to be developed and felt for all beings everywhere. We'll get to this point, but we'll work up to it. Traditionally, we work up to it through several different categories of individuals before we open to all beings everywhere. So we'll probably spend the first week and a half working with different individuals on the way to all beings.

The recommendation is, with all the Brahmavihāras, start where it's easy. Isn't that a nice relief? Vipassana often seems like we have to go into the hardest stuff first before we get to the dessert. But with the Brahmavihāras, go where it's easiest first and use that as the foundation to work to where it's more difficult.

So in the teachings of the tradition, the person who it's generally easiest to care about is oneself. So that's where we'll start. We'll start by sending the caring to ourselves. Then who's next easiest? Someone who's just been generally very kind to us. And this is the person that we're going to call the benefactor. So these are the two people that we'll bring into the meditation today: ourselves and the benefactor. And I'll explain each of them in a little detail how to practice with this.

Even though it's said in the tradition that self is the easiest, often when we do this practice, we find self is the hardest.

Because as we tend to feel caring or loving towards ourselves, all the reasons we're not lovable can come to the front. Objections come and reservations come, and we hold back from a real sense of tenderness for ourselves. So we want to put some extra time and effort into this developing of loving kindness for ourselves. We'll recommend that you include it in every period, even as we go through the different categories up to all beings.

So what is this quality and how do we develop it? Basically, as you start to care for somebody, what you find is you hope for their welfare. That's kind of the essence of caring—you wish for the person's welfare. If you have a sincere wish that someone be well, whether it's yourself or another, that is the essence of loving kindness.

We'll develop this quality by repeating phrases that express that wish in different ways. Some of you may already have very established phrases for loving kindness. It's fine to use those. If you don't, then we'll recommend that you start with some form of the traditional phrases.

There are four traditional phrases that are used to develop this sense of caring. They can be applied to you or to anybody. The first is you take a look at the person's situation in life and you hope that they're not in danger. How are we in danger? We can get harmed from outside or we could harm ourselves from within. The difficult and dark places that our own minds go to are generally more harmful to us than what happens to us day by day from other people. So this wish for safety is felt by everyone and it applies to both external safety and internal safety.

Second area that we look at is someone's overall sense of mental well-being. You could say their quality of happiness. If you want yourself and your friends to be well, you wish for their mental well-being or their happiness.

Third, you wish for their physical well-being. You hope that they're not ill or injured or suffering a lot of physical pain.

And fourth, we hope that people find their way in the world easily. In terms of making a living, being able to support yourself, having supportive relationships of friends and family, you hope that goes well for people.

So these are the four areas that the traditional phrases of loving kindness will cover. As we get into the meditation, I'll suggest some different ways that you can say these four wishes.

The beautiful thing about these four phrases that we'll offer in variation is they apply to everyone. They apply to all human beings and they apply to all non-human beings. You can think about the squirrels that you see running up the trees and you can wish these same four things for them. You can think about beings on other planes, if that's part of your view of the cosmos, and you can have these same four wishes for them. So they're very universal.

As you get familiar with the phrases and how they apply to every being, you start to see that we all really want the same things. All beings everywhere have these same basic wishes. So this universal nature of our aspiration is something that joins us with all of life.

The practices of the Brahma Viharas are considered very uniting. They take away all kinds of divisions—divisions based on age or race or gender or class or part of the world that one lives in or ethnicity, even the differences between human and animal start to get worn away as we see we all want the same things: safety, happiness, health, and ease.

So these are the four things we'll focus on in the traditional phrases. As I said, if you have phrases you're already comfortable with, you don't need to change them. But these four phrases are good phrases. They've been used for 2,500 years, and they work. So they come with that endorsement.

The feeling of loving kindness doesn't have to be a very strong one. Sometimes people think, well, if I'm going to be becoming more loving, I have to have a really strong, passionate feeling for someone to say

that I feel loving kindness. But it's not like that. It can be a little flicker of just sincere caring. I just care that you're well. That's the beginning. It can grow to be much stronger, but it doesn't need to be.

So as we do the meditation, which we'll do by repeating these four phrases again and again, don't try to push your heart into feeling anything. Trust in the practice and let whatever feeling comes, let it come. It will grow in its own due course.

The head already puts a lot of pressure on the heart to feel certain emotions and not to feel others. In the loving kindness practice, we want to give ourselves lots of care also. Part of that is don't put pressure on your heart.

As you repeat these phrases, let the words settle into your heart rather than just passing through your mind. Feel the quality of intention behind each wish.

May I be happy and peaceful.

And here you can think of happiness in whatever way feels natural to you - perhaps a sense of contentment, or joy, or simply the absence of suffering.

May I be healthy and strong.

This includes not just physical health, but mental and emotional well-being as well.

May I live with ease.

May the difficulties of life not overwhelm me. May I find a way to move through challenges with grace.

Continue repeating these phrases at your own pace, letting them resonate in your heart center. If your mind wanders to other thoughts, that's completely natural. Simply notice where it went and gently bring your attention back to the phrases and the intention of caring for yourself.

You might find that certain phrases feel more natural or meaningful than others. Feel free to emphasize those, or to modify the language slightly if that helps the meaning come alive for you. The traditional phrases are: "May I be happy, may I be healthy, may I be safe, may I live with ease." But you can also use phrases like "May I be at peace" or "May I be free from suffering."

The key is finding words that genuinely express your wish for your own well-being. Don't worry if you don't feel a strong emotional response right away. Sometimes the practice works more quietly, planting seeds that will blossom later. Trust the process and simply maintain the intention of kindness toward yourself.

As we continue, notice any resistance that might arise. Sometimes we find it difficult to offer ourselves the same kindness we would readily give to others. If you notice self-criticism or the voice that says you don't deserve happiness, simply acknowledge those thoughts with compassion and return to the phrases. This

resistance is normal and part of what we're working with in this practice.

Let the rhythm of the phrases create a gentle, soothing quality in your mind. Like a lullaby of loving wishes for yourself.

May you live with ease.

So we're expressing the same wishes for wellbeing, but now directing them toward this person who has shown us kindness. As you repeat the phrases, notice how it feels to send these good wishes to someone you care about. Often there's a natural warmth that arises, a sense of genuine care flowing from your heart to theirs.

And just as with the self-directed practice, after completing a round of phrases, pause and return your attention to the heart center. Feel the resonance in your body of having sent loving wishes to your benefactor. Notice what emotions are present—perhaps gratitude, affection, or simply a quiet sense of connection.

Sometimes with the benefactor, the loving kindness flows quite easily. This person has earned a place in your heart through their kindness, and it feels natural to wish them well. Other times, you might notice thoughts arising about their current circumstances, worries about challenges they're facing, or even guilt about not being in closer contact. Whatever arises is perfectly normal. Simply return to the phrases, trusting in the power of your sincere intention to wish them well.

The benefactor stage serves as a bridge in our practice. We move from the sometimes challenging territory of self-love to the more accessible realm of caring for someone who has cared for us. This helps establish the feeling of metta more strongly in our system before we venture into more challenging categories of beings.

Take your time with the benefactor. Let yourself really feel what it's like to send loving wishes to someone who has been good to you. This feeling of warmth and care that you cultivate here becomes the foundation for extending metta more widely. We're strengthening the muscle of loving kindness, learning to access and direct this natural capacity of the heart.

May you live with ease.

And just continuing to repeat these phrases directed toward your benefactor. Try to stay connected to the sense of your benefactor's presence. Sometimes if the phrases are getting a little dry or impersonal, then renew your connection to the benefactor—bring them to mind again, see their image, hear their voice. So you really feel the wishes are directed to this particular being.

Remember that metta is not about necessarily feeling a strong emotion so much as having a sincere wish for the other's welfare.

May all beings be safe from harm.
May all beings be happy.
May all beings be healthy.
May all beings live with ease.

So these are the basics of the loving kindness practice. If you find it helpful, you can bring it in throughout the day in any sitting. You could do ten or fifteen minutes. You might take one sitting a day where you do the whole period of loving kindness. It can be a very helpful mood softener.

Even as you're starting a Vipassana sit, just remembering that the intention is really to be kind and take care of ourselves can bring a softer attitude as we go into the mindfulness practice. So you can experiment a little bit with combining these, and we'll do a guided meditation every day at this time and then bring it in throughout the day if it's helpful for you.

At this time, we have some time for questions. A lot of you have heard and done much metta instruction and practice and may prefer to go to walking. So if you'd like to just stay quiet and begin the walking, please feel free to go. If there are questions, we can take a few minutes for those.

[Question about grace and whether talks are being recorded]

So the question is, could I say something about grace and its connection with ease? And the second is, are these being recorded?

The second is easier. Some of them are being recorded. Max is going to be here some afternoons to record, and they will be available later. What I think we'll try to do is record every time we add a new category. Like today we did self and benefactor, and we'll do this for a couple of days. So the instructions won't change so much for a couple of days. Then we'll add another category and another category. So we'll try to record the changes. Most of it hopefully will be recorded.

Grace is a word that isn't used a lot in Buddhism, but I like the answer that I think it was Sasaki Roshi who gave. He said something like, in regards to grace, God has already done his part and now the rest is up to us. So that's one angle.

Another angle is that by putting our sincere energy into our practice, good things happen for reasons that we can't always explain. And so by setting the seeds of our good intentions, grace follows based on that. So I think this particular practice is a really good way to invite the quality of grace.

[Question about attachment arising during metta practice for health]

Traditional metta has brought me joy when directed to myself—it feels good and nice. However, right now there's something I want so badly for my physical health that when I did the four phrases and got to "may I

be healthy," even though I'm generally healthy, there's something I really want for my physical health. Instead of it feeling good, I feel myself constricting. I know I also want to accept things just as they are, but at the same time, I notice my wish for my physical health becomes permeated with grasping, and I wonder what you could suggest about working with constriction and attachment.

This is such a beautiful and honest question. What you're describing is exactly the dharma in action—you're seeing how desire and attachment work, how they create suffering even in the context of a loving practice.

It's a good question. When she practices the phrase for health, instead of feeling caring, it reminds her of something she's concerned about regarding her physical condition, bringing up worry and anxiety rather than the intended loving-kindness.

This can actually happen with any of the phrases. I've known people who, when they make the wish for safety, find memories arising of times they didn't feel safe, or become aware of current situations where they feel vulnerable. When this occurs, it's better to find a different phrase.

You could either skip that particular phrase on health, or use something that cultivates acceptance of present conditions. One alternative people have found helpful is "may I live in harmony with this body." This invites the mind toward equanimity and opens us to accepting things as they are right now.

I'd suggest either approach—find a phrase that genuinely brings equanimity and acceptance, or simply focus on the other three phrases. Both are skillful responses.

Another participant raised a fascinating question about wishing all beings to be safe and happy, noting that in nature, many beings need to eat other beings to survive. Sharks, for instance, aren't going to be healthy without consuming other creatures. How do we reconcile this with our loving-kindness practice when the happiness of some beings requires the death of others?

This touches on why equanimity serves as the necessary foundation for all the Brahmaviharas. When we contemplate sharks eating seals, it can bring up worry, reservation, and certainly compassion. There are several skillful ways to work with this.

One approach is to develop greater trust in our equanimity around such situations, accepting that this is simply how nature functions without seeking a final resolution. Another is to let these images guide us naturally from metta to compassion practice. If the image of a shark eating a seal arises, we can extend compassion to the seal, and perhaps even to the shark—after all, it's not particularly pleasant to survive by killing others.

When disturbing situations arise during metta practice, we hope our equanimity can hold them, but if it's not quite steady, moving consciously to compassion is perfectly appropriate. Then we can deliberately turn our attention to beings who don't harm others in order to be happy, changing our focus rather than

wrestling with an unresolvable logical dilemma.

There's no perfect philosophical solution to this aspect of existence, but there are practical ways to work skillfully with it. I'd recommend the practical approach, remaining open to how your relationship with these realities might evolve over time. It is indeed a heart-wrenching truth of animal existence.

A participant shared a beautiful insight about working with resistance toward adults. She noticed that when sending loving-kindness to adults, complicated relationships sometimes create obstacles. However, when she envisions them as children, her heart naturally expands with pure caring. She finds the same openness when seeing the child within herself during self-directed practice.

This is actually quite skillful. Many of us can more easily access unconditional caring when we see the innocent child within the adult. There are several ways to work with this recognition.

In about ten days, we'll explore the "difficult person" category, where we deliberately choose a complicated relationship and practice extending sincere caring to that individual. When we can find genuine metta for one challenging person, it demonstrates the possibility of extending it to others with whom we have complex dynamics. So there's real value in occasionally staying with the difficult adult relationship, even when the loving-kindness doesn't flow easily.

At the same time, it's perfectly fine to shift perspective and see them as a child, allowing that pure form of metta to flow through. Both approaches have merit, and we simply acknowledge that some adult relationships carry complexity that affects our practice.

They're going to take a bit of work, and so we're going to put in the work and see if it can shift. This is one of the beautiful uses of this practice. Once we discover the power of this tool of loving kindness, we can use the formal meditation to transform these complicated relationships.

Because ordinarily, the wish for the other's happiness isn't the first thing on our mind when we relate to them. But we find if we can tune into their welfare and our wish for their welfare and come from that place, it can completely change the quality of the relationship. And then they start to feel it too. That's what's remarkable about these things. As we change inwardly toward a difficult person, they start to feel it and they change in relationship to us.

So that's one way to go. The second way, as you mentioned, is to think of them as a child. Another way is to think of their suffering, and it moves into more of a compassion flavor than a metta flavor. You could still use the metta phrases, but you focus on their suffering or pain, and what comes through is more compassion—but it's still a way to hold them.

And the fourth approach, which is what I usually recommend, is to go to someone easier. So at this point, if you're engaged and the person you bring in is complicated, go where it's simplest. Benefactor, good friend—and we'll get to the difficult relationships a little later. Thank you. It's a great thing to work with.

Maybe time for one more. Was there a question? Yes.

Just kind of a utilitarian question. After repeating the phrases twice, he felt he was done. Should he keep repeating even though he doesn't really have much feeling with it?

And the answer is, yes. I did this practice—I've done this several times on six-week retreats where this was all I did for six weeks, was repeat these phrases all day long, in sitting, in walking, in meals, in showering. The feeling keeps changing. That's the beauty of it. Impermanence manifests through this practice all the time.

So it may go flat for a little while, but then it will wake up again, and it'll get stronger, and it'll get really strong, and then it'll go flat again. And then we want to give up, but we just keep going. And then it wakes up again and it gets strong again. So the steadiness with keeping the phrases going is an interesting way to look at what the heart does with that.

Because the heart keeps opening and closing. And it's one of the things we learn. I don't know of any heart that stays open all the time. So I think its rhythm is that it opens and there's metta feeling. Then it closes for a while and things are neutral. And then we keep going and it opens again.

So for me, it's really interesting watching the seasons of the heart as we just keep steady with our effort in saying the phrases. And it becomes interesting to watch how they change and how our response changes. Yeah, I encourage you to just try it. Just try it.

Okay, so it's quarter to five. We have thirty minutes of walking before tea. And so I hope you'll take the metta with you as you walk. Walk happily. Thank you for listening.

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