Morning Instructions: On Mettā Practice

Guy Armstrong · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Guy Armstrong · 40:51

In the loving kindness instructions for today, we'll continue to work with the two or three people that Sally started us with yesterday, which includes beginning with self. So I recommend in every sitting, in every walking, you include some time on mettā for self.

This may not be the most warm, alive, juicy part of your meditation. But it's really important to keep bringing those attentions back to self. It's what starts to change our relationship to our self.

Then we'll work with someone who will be in the category for you of either benefactor or friend. So after a third to a half of a session of sitting or walking, begin with self and at some point you can switch to benefactor or friend if that seems skillful for you, if that seems appealing and helpful.

If you start with mettā for self and you find this is really connecting, this is really where I want to be, you can just stay with mettā for self. People have discovered in the mettā practice, mettā for self is really filling up a thirsty hole they didn't know existed. And they have stayed with mettā for self for years before moving on to another person. And it's fine to do that if that's what feels appropriate for you, if it feels really a strong draw.

But if it feels easy, be with mettā for self for fifteen or twenty minutes or so, and then move toward the second person—let's say a benefactor or a friend—wherever the relationship feels warm and pretty easy, pretty uncomplicated.

If you're looking for someone in a benefactor category, in the West sometimes we don't have so many benefactors growing up. Family members are at a distance. Maybe we haven't connected with a mentor or a teacher in a really personal way. So there may not be anyone that stands out for us as a benefactor in that classical sense.

Then you can also think about using a child or a pet in this category. The benefactor should be a being who evokes a lot of affection and where there's not much ambivalence when you turn to them. So children can really open the heart really well. It could be your own child. If they're adult and the relationships become a little more fraught, you could think of them as a youngster. Or it could be a niece or a nephew or a godchild or it could be one of your grandchildren if you happen to have grandkids.

And then if you'd like to bring in a friend as well in that category, you can do that too. You can have both a benefactor and a friend, and bring them in as they seem to fit.

So in these first days of the mettā practice, we'll be focusing mainly on people in these three categories:

self, benefactor, and friend.

One of the things you may find as you do mettā practice toward, especially someone who's an adult whom you've known for a lot of years, is you bring them in and a lot of memories about them will come up, and memories about yourself in relation to them. This is natural. You might think, "Oh, I've really backslid because when I was with the breath I wasn't having so many thoughts, I wasn't having so many memories and now all these are coming up. Am I losing it?" No, this is natural with mettā practice. It's a relational practice. And so it tends toward this kind of relationship review, let's call it.

As memories of the person come up, you may remember things that were beautiful, warm, loving, happy. You may remember areas where there was friction, where there was some conflict or disagreement and things may not have turned out so well.

So in practicing with mettā, if memories come up, don't fight with that. Don't try to push them back down. Don't try to suppress the thoughts. Let them be there but in the background. So it's best if the memories can kind of come just as images without a lot of words. And you can let the images be in the background while you continue to say the mettā phrases for that person or for yourself.

And essentially what's happening as we bring someone into a field of unconditional acceptance, which is mettā, we start to see the ways that our relationship didn't line up with that in the past. And so essentially what the memories are saying is, help me get aligned with mettā in my relationship with this person. So we're kind of updating them from our old ways of living into our new ways of Dharma understanding. And this is a healing process. This is helpful.

So not to fight the memories, but also try not to go on long thought excursions around them. Let the thoughts come, let them go. Images can stay in the background and keep returning to the mettā phrases.

Beginning the meditation. Sitting easily, comfortably. It's really hard to generate a lot of mettā if your body's in pain, so be easy and relaxed in your sitting.

Begin by connecting into your body. Just feeling yourself in sitting. We want the mettā practice not just to be a mental line of words, but we want it to be an embodied experience of whatever it is that comes.

Feeling your presence in the body, and perhaps within that, bringing your attention into the heart center—this area in the center of the chest, where so many emotions are rooted and felt.

As you connect with the heart center, get in touch with this wish which is behind all metta practice: the wish for the welfare of all beings everywhere. This is what we're aiming toward, and we're building toward it through various individuals. But in its basic form, the wish of metta is for all beings to be well and to be happy.

So have that sense of an expansive awareness that's very wide and open, inclusive—standing in a kind of boundless way all around you. Just realize that whatever beings there are in this wide awareness, our

intention toward them all is for their welfare. You might verbalize that with a few repetitions of this phrase: "May all beings be well, happy and peaceful."

And recognize that included in all beings is you.

Now bring the attention to yourself. You can still rest the attention in the heart center and connect with your sense of yourself. As you do, remember some of your good qualities. This might be your taste in art, your sense of humor, your caring for friends, or being there for your children or parents, caring about the earth and environment and showing that. What would one of your friends say they liked about you if you asked them?

Then bring to mind a few things you've done—a few actions you've undertaken that have shown your care for others. Calling someone who's ill to check in. Sending a card to someone who might need support. Looking after your pets and seeing they're well-fed and healthy. Just little things.

As you remember some of these kind actions, get in touch with the intention behind each one. Notice how you are responding to someone's need or wish through a motivation of caring for their welfare. As it's said, the proximate cause for metta to arise is to see the good in someone. So it's helpful to remind ourselves of the good in ourselves.

And especially for all of you, think about your commitment to the Dharma. How you've dedicated so many hours to growing in understanding, growing in love, growing in compassion for the benefit of yourself and the benefit of the world. This is a rare and beautiful motivation.

So in touch with your own goodness, begin directing the phrases for loving-kindness to yourself, using the phrases that you've found feel suitable for you:

May I be safe and protected from harm.
May I be happy.
May I be healthy—and this always carries a sub-clause: *And if that's not possible, may I hold my limitations with grace.*
May I live with ease.

This phrase especially refers to taking care of ourselves in the world—the phrase about our relationships and livelihood. When those are in order, we can feel we're living with ease.

Stay in touch with yourself—this could be the felt sense of your body and mood as you sit. It could be through an image of yourself somewhere that you're comfortable or happy. Stay in touch with yourself and repeat these phrases of loving-kindness. There's no need to rush with your phrases. It's not a speed affair. See if you can take the time to feel the sincere meaning in the wish as you say it.

Now, if you feel ready, you can move on and bring in your benefactor or friend. Connect with them by remembering them, perhaps calling to mind an image of them someplace where they feel comfortable. Or

it might help to say their name.

As you get in touch with them, remember something of their good qualities. What has made you like them so much? It might be their wisdom, their integrity, their compassion, their ethical lifestyle...

their humor, or simply the warmth of their presence. Then you might reflect on a few kind actions you've seen them take. It could be kind things they've done for you, kind things they've done for others, or acts of care for the earth itself.

With a sense of the goodness of your benefactor, begin to repeat the phrases for them that are more or less the same as the ones you use for yourself—the same basic wishes. As I want to be safe, may you too be safe and protected from harm. May you too be happy. May you be healthy. May you live with ease.

Continue to stay connected with the benefactor, either through an image or a felt sense of them, occasionally saying their name, and extending your wishes in the form of the phrases. A nice rhythm might be that you call up an image, say your phrases for them, and at the end of a set of phrases, bring your attention back into the heart center. Feel what it feels like in the body and see if any emotion or mood is present. Could be strong, could be subtle. Could be the flavor of metta, could be a little bit of compassion. Could be one of the hindrances, or could just be calm. All of those are fine. Notice the mood as you connect back into the body. Allow it to be just the way it is, and connect with the next set: image, phrases, heart center, and feeling.

As you're connecting with your benefactor, you may notice different feelings come up in relation to them. Could be gratitude or appreciation or friendliness. Could be one of the hindrances—some memory of a conflict or disturbance comes in. All of those are fine, a natural part of the meditation. So if possible, allow that emotion to be there, to be felt, and continue connecting with your wish for the benefactor's welfare and expressing that through the phrases.

For the last minutes or so of the sitting, reconnect with that wide sense, with an expansive awareness of all beings everywhere. Human beings, creatures, beings seen and unseen. All beings everywhere have the same basic wish that we do for happiness. Just reconnecting with that wish for all beings again with a simple phrase: May all beings be well, happy and peaceful. May all beings be well, happy and peaceful.

So as you go through the day today with the sittings and the walkings, continue with the metta practice. Remember to always spend some time with yourself and then, if you feel ready and inclined, move on to a benefactor or friend as well. It's helpful to use the same phrases for all the beings you work with—first, because it strengthens concentration, and second, because it really brings out the fact that all beings want the same basic things in life: safety, happiness, health and ease.

We have a few minutes for questions, if there are any. And just to remember, I don't know if we've mentioned this, but sometimes staff will come in to sit and staff are welcome to leave after the sitting. They're not required to stay for the questions. You, on the other hand, once you come, we'd appreciate if

you'd stay so there's not too much turnover.

So are there any questions this morning?

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