Mettā - Guided Meditation

Rebecca Bradshaw · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Three-Month Retreat (IMS 2007) · 42:40

Tonight we will start our weekly Brahma Vihara practice, beginning with metta. I'd like to speak for a few minutes before we begin the actual practice to set the stage. I know some of you may already be quiet and ready to start meditating, but since this is tonight's focus, let me say a few words about what we're doing with metta meditation.

We'll be offering this meditation once a week for the next twelve weeks. It's actually not just metta but the whole four Brahma Viharas, which I'll explain in a few minutes. It's good to set the stage and talk a little about what metta practice is and how it's different from what we've been doing.

This word metta is translated in a number of different ways. Sometimes it's translated as goodwill. Loving-kindness is the most common translation. Loving friendliness, I've heard, is a more literal translation. Sometimes we even call it unconditional love, because with metta we are developing a kind of open-heartedness that is unconditional—an open, friendly heart that wishes others well, no matter what.

With metta practice, we're developing the intention to bring kindness and gentleness to our hearts and then to share that first towards ourselves and then towards others in ever-widening circles, eventually to all beings everywhere.

The wisdom practice also opens our hearts—through understanding and through peace. When through understanding we feel at peace with life as it is, then we don't need to be defended. Then our hearts are naturally open. The metta practice is a more conscious way to develop this open-heartedness, this friendly heart. It's about cultivating our innate capacity to feel friendliness, to extend friendliness. So it's not something that we have to create, but rather something that we access and cultivate. It's like within our hearts we have these embers of love, of friendliness, of metta. And with metta practice, we fan them so that the energy of these embers grows.

The metta practice softens and strengthens our hearts, both. Very beautiful in that way.

The wisdom practice and the metta practice really balance each other. There's a well-known quote by Sri Nisargadatta that explains this. He says, "Wisdom tells me I'm nothing. Love tells me I'm everything. And between these two, my life flows."

The risk of doing the wisdom practice without this warmth of metta is that it can become dry or cold. The risk of doing the metta practice without wisdom is that it can lead to attachment, not based in the reality of life as it is. So we really need to develop both in our spiritual practice.

Metta is the first of what are known as the four Brahma Viharas, or divine abodes. There's loving friendliness, which is the foundation practice. Then there's the compassion practice, which is turning that friendliness towards the suffering that's in this world and in others' lives. Then there's the mudita or appreciative joy practice, which is turning our attention to the happiness and success in others' lives and appreciating it. And then there's the equanimity practice, which is about understanding and accepting life as it is with the full range of joys and sorrows that we all experience.

These four together make a really nice balanced practice in how we can relate to other beings in this world—relate to their joys, their sorrows, relate to life as it is.

The metta practice is going to feel different than the wisdom practice we've been doing. It's much more active. Some people feel it as more work because it's so much more active. What we're going to do is call up the metta that is in our hearts and then extend it to others.

The traditional order is that first we turn this loving friendliness towards ourselves and wish ourselves well. Then traditionally the next person is known as the benefactor—that's the easiest person we can think of. Then we turn this metta towards another person that we love. So we start out easy. And then we include a neutral person, somebody we don't know well. And then a difficult person, somebody we are having some struggles with. Then we go from personal categories to what are known as the impersonal categories, or groups of beings, and then all beings everywhere.

There are various ways that we can support this feeling of metta in our hearts. One traditional way is to remember our own goodness, or the goodness of whichever person we're cultivating metta for. Another way is with phrases that I'll offer while we do the practice—phrases that are meant to help us bring forth that feeling of friendliness and kindness.

Some of you have probably done metta practice at some point, and some of you may just love metta, think it's great. And some of you may not like it at all. I just want you to know that all those responses are just fine.

My first eight years of practice, I hated metta practice. When they did this thing in the hall that we're doing tonight, I wouldn't come. Now I love metta practice. So you don't have to force it if it's not what your heart wants to be doing—it's fine. You can just do the wisdom practice and notice hearing when I interrupt with thought guidance for this practice. You can't force metta. You can see that that wouldn't make a whole lot of sense. It's a friendly kind of energy. You can't force it.

Also, when you're doing metta and we're doing the practice, we have this intention to touch our open-heartedness, our friendliness. We use the supports of the phrases or remembering the goodness. And then we just see what happens. Sometimes we may feel friendly and sometimes we may not. Sometimes the metta practice actually brings up the difficulties, the blocks to our love, and that's part of the practice. So sometimes we may feel irritation, actually, when we do metta practice. And that doesn't

mean that you're doing it wrong. It just means that the purification process is happening—seeing where your heart is blocked. It's part of the practice. And then other times it may flow very nicely. So it's really about letting go of expectations, like we've been telling you with the wisdom practice, to let go of expectations and to see what happens and to include and hold whatever happens.

Just a couple more words about the two categories that we'll be working with tonight: self and benefactor. I will be guiding the meditation, so I'll be giving instructions, and then there will be some periods of silence while you practice.

Self I don't think I need to say a lot about, but I do want to say a few words about the second category, which is the benefactor. It's traditionally called the benefactor. Sometimes it's just called the easy person. It's really meant to be the person that we find the easiest in the whole world to feel unconditionally friendly towards. Traditionally, when this is taught in the East, it's often recommended that it's somebody who you respect a lot, or a mentor or a teacher, or somebody who has really helped you a lot in life. Sometimes here in the West, people relate more to perhaps a child—perhaps not your own child, because that's not always the easiest person, because attachment comes up very easily—but perhaps your grandchild or your niece or your nephew or a revered relative, a grandparent, aunt or uncle. Just whoever you can think of for whom your feelings are least complicated. So that's our benefactor, our easy category. At some point in the meditation, I'll suggest that if you wish to, you can work with that person.

When we do metta, we'll be working with an image of the person, the sense of metta, and the phrases if you'd like. They're optional, but some people find them useful and others don't.

So, at that, we'll start with metta. It's really important to be comfortable, so take as comfortable a position as possible. Even feel free to move to a chair if you'd like to be a little more comfortable. It's hard to cultivate metta if there's a lot of physical pain going on, so it's definitely recommended to be comfortable.

We can start by settling into our posture. Feeling the connection with our body sitting here. Inviting any places of tension to relax.

Then directing your attention to your heart center to see what you notice there. Maybe you can feel the beating of your heart. You can put your hand on your heart.

Starting by seeing if you can connect to your basic goodness. You can bring an image of yourself to mind if that's helpful. Perhaps at a time when you were happy. At a time when you can connect to your own purity.

And then wishing yourself well. Knowing that you fully deserve love, care, gentleness. Extending friendliness towards yourself. Extending that heart energy of openness and acceptance.

Relaxing into the recognition of your goodness, your beauty, your purity.

If you wish, you can use the phrases to help you touch into your heart's capacity for friendliness—holding

a sense of yourself or an image of yourself and sending these metta blessings, seeing if you can receive them at the same time.

May I be safe and protected. May I be happy and peaceful. May I be strong and healthy. May I take care of myself easily and joyfully while living on this earth.

Or shorter phrases if they work better for you: *May I be safe. May I be happy. May I be healthy. May I take care of myself with ease.*

Allow metta to come from that wordless place of your heart, the depth of your heart, that friendly attitude—or if you wish, use the phrases to remind yourself of that friendliness. If you have your own phrases that elicit this feeling of friendliness and kindness, you can use them. It's not important exactly which phrases are used.

When the attention wanders, gently bring it back to cultivating, nourishing this feeling of metta—wishing for yourself the blessings of happiness, peace, safety. Each time you're distracted, see if you can gently return to wishing yourself well, either wordlessly from the intention of your heart, with an image, or with whichever phrases elicit that friendliness and kindness toward yourself. Sending and receiving the blessing of metta.

You can continue with yourself if you wish, or if you'd like, you can switch to cultivating metta for the easy person, the respected person—bringing this person to mind. Perhaps take a few moments to reflect on his or her good qualities, what it is that makes this person so easy to love. Then call forth either an image of this person or just the felt sense of them, and extend these metta blessings from your heart. Wish this person happiness, wish him or her ease of well-being, shower him or her with metta blessings.

May you be safe and protected. May you be happy and peaceful. May you be strong and healthy. May you take care of yourself easily and joyfully while living on this earth.

Find the way that you most easily connect with this person. It may be a wordless extension of metta from your heart. It may be short phrases or just simple words—happy, safe, peaceful—or it may be the longer phrases. If any obstacles arise, see if you can gently put them aside, extending the metta wishes, the intention to wish well.

We end our metta sit tonight by taking a moment to appreciate our sangha, our community here, and to wish our fellow yogis well as we journey on together. Extend our metta to fill this hall, reaching all the yogis and other beings that may be here.

May you be safe and protected. May you be happy and peaceful. May you be strong and healthy. May you take care of yourself easily and joyfully while living on this earth.

Extending our metta outward to all the beings on this land—the staff that serves us, the birds and the crickets, the little chipmunks, the deer, the flies, the frogs, beings both seen and unseen. *May you be happy.*

And extending our metta outward in all directions to all beings everywhere. *May all beings everywhere be safe.*

May all beings everywhere be happy. May all beings everywhere be healthy. May all beings everywhere experience ease of well-being while living in this universe.

If you find that the metta meditation resonates with you and proves useful, you can feel free to begin your sittings with a few minutes of metta practice, if that helps you to gentle and soften. Or if you'd like, you can choose one sitting each day to dedicate entirely to metta practice. Feel free to incorporate it in whatever way serves you best throughout your day.

One caution: it's often not as useful in the middle of a sitting to switch back and forth between practices. It can become confusing because there is a distinctly different flavor to these two different practices. So it's often useful to know when you're going to do your metta practice, do it at that time, and then do the wisdom practice knowing clearly that that's what you're doing.

The schedule this evening is a little bit different. You probably noticed, but if you didn't, there's walking for forty-five minutes, then a sitting at seven forty-five, followed by another walking and another sitting—just slightly different times than when we have the talk in the evening.

May you be happy.

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