Guided Mettā on Self and Benefactor

Sally Armstrong · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Three-Month Retreat (IMS 2012) · 45:34

Tonight is our weekly session of practicing and developing the brahmavihara of mettā, or loving-kindness. The fact that we do this only once a week does in no way reflect the value that I feel this practice has. It's an incredibly important and beautiful complement to mindfulness practice. To find a way for yourself to weave these two together, to incorporate the quality and practice of mettā into your time here, would be very valuable. So please don't confine your mettā practice to just these forty-five minutes.

As most of you probably know, this is a systematic practice where you move through different categories of beings, beginning where it's hopefully easiest—with oneself—and then to the benefactor, someone you can easily open your heart to, moving on to the dear friend category, then neutral, difficult, and finally all beings. Especially if you're doing this practice formally in an intensive mettā retreat or developing concentration, it's very helpful to stay with that systematic progression. There's a real power to it, a wisdom and steadiness that supports the deepening of mettā.

But as we're doing it here in this retreat, really as a complement and support to mindfulness practice, you can be much more intuitive about how the mettā practice unfolds for you. Tonight we'll continue the sequence and work with the dear friend category, but if you want to spend more time with yourself, that's a wonderful way to deepen the mettā. You can never do too much mettā for yourself. If you ever have a thought that maybe that's selfish or you should be spreading it out, please know that if you can really and deeply develop mettā for yourself, it will spread out. It will have an impact on your relationships and your capacity to open your heart to others. Creating that foundation of mettā for self is really very helpful. So even as I move on this evening, please trust yourself if you want to stay with mettā for yourself.

Mettā is this beautiful quality usually translated as loving-kindness. I love that whoever came up with that translation put the word kindness in there, because if we simply think of it as love, that's a very charged word for most of us, certainly here in the West. We think it has to be some exalted experience, some pure experience, some ecstatic kind of experience. Mettā at its heart isn't pointing toward that. Another literal translation I've heard is goodwill—just basic friendliness, simple kindness. At its root, mettā is acceptance. It's accepting our inner experience, accepting ourselves, and certainly accepting others.

When we develop this practice, it's really helpful to have that range of understanding of what we're cultivating. If we're waiting until the heart is just open and glowing and all beings are held unconditionally in love—great if that happens—but sometimes we can be waiting a long time for that and judging ourselves for not moving immediately into that space, as though there's some kind of mettā switch we should be able to turn on. We say a few phrases and the heart should open. I'm sure you know it's not

that way.

It's actually a difficult practice. It's a purification practice. Whatever for us is an obstacle to these wishes and aspirations of mettā, sooner or later it will come up. This is definitely the field in which mettā works: What's obstructing the heart from opening? What's the sense of limitation or barrier to being open and caring, particularly toward ourselves, but certainly toward others as well?

So we do this practice with a kind of—somehow the word ferocity came, that's not quite right—but some willingness to go through what this practice might bring up for us, especially if we do it with intensity. Perhaps forty-five minutes once a week may not get you to that edge of intensity, but those of you who have practiced in a more deliberate way will know the challenges of coming back again and again to wishing for happiness, wishing for safety and ease. There's a whole development that happens when you practice intensively.

But it's really important to begin with understanding what mettā is in its simplicity. It's just kindness. It's just wishing well. It's basically looking around and saying, "How are you doing? Hope you're okay. Hope things are good for you." In the gentlest kind of way. And to be able to do that for ourselves, to check in and have this sense of caring, of well-wishing toward ourselves—sometimes it's life-changing to actually feel that possibility. To go from a sense of always a slightly critical stance, not quite good enough, always something needing improvement, to just saying, "Right here, it's okay." Just some fundamental okayness.

This is what this practice is pointing to: that we can actually cultivate and incline the mind and heart toward that. It's not something you either have or don't have, or maybe you'll have in five or ten years if you get rid of that habit and improve this aspect of your life. But actually, here and now, some sense of kindness or acceptance. And it's possible to train in that, to incline the mind and heart. This for me was one of the revelations of this practice—that I didn't just have to wallow in my sense of lack of self-worth. I could actually cultivate a caring and a kindness.

And it wasn't easy. I had a lot of struggles in this practice, but it really changed my practice, and I could even say changed my life to do this practice intensively.

So when we begin, as we do, we just say the phrases, and sometimes there's a heartfulness to them and sometimes there just isn't. As I said, there's no metta switch. So we're just right where we are. The classic image is that we're planting seeds—not to judge the practice, we don't know when they'll flower, but filling the mind with these kinds of thoughts has got to be better than sitting here with aversion and mistrust and ill will. Even if there's not a great deal of heartfulness in it, it's a skillful way to use the mind, to direct the mind.

So keeping the practice really simple, keeping it really in the moment—not some idea of how it should be, but some recognition of the direct experience in the way we're doing the practice. I always say you've got to do metta with metta. Ajahn Sumedho would talk about using metta as though it were a big club, but it's

got "metta" written on it. It's like, "That part of my life—metta!" And you know, the office always says the notes that are most critical are always signed "metta." It's not a weapon that we use to get rid of what we don't like. It really is a coming into some kind of alignment with the way things are, but bringing kindness and acceptance to that.

So this is where we begin. As you do this practice, I think it's always helpful to have it really based in the body. Metta can feel like a kind of mental exercise in the repetition of the phrases. And we are training the mind—that's an important part of it. But it's really helpful to have the practice grounded in the body so we stay in our experience and in the present moment.

Just as we do in mindfulness meditation, drop your attention into the body. Feel your body sitting here. How is the body right now? Can you bring a sense of relaxation and ease into your experience of the body? Consciously invite relaxation, shifting the posture if you need to in order to get more comfortable. Do a body scan so that you can actually relax any places that feel tight or tense, so that the practice begins from a sense of connectedness to your experience right now.

Some people find it helpful as a focus for the metta practice to rest the attention in the center of the chest, the area of the heart, noticing whatever sensations are present there. Perhaps there's emotional response, perhaps not. Not looking to make anything happen or push anything away, but just as a place to rest the attention. You can notice the breathing moving in and out of that area of the heart. Perhaps even feel the heart and its pulsing, its life. When you get lost in the practice, that can be a place to come back to.

Sometimes you can even bring all the aspects of the practice together, so that the phrases seem to be coming out of the heart, the heart center. Some people find it really helpful to actually rest their hand on the heart and just feel that tenderness or warmth, that softness that comes as we make this gesture of touching our chest, our heart, with softness and kindness. It can help us connect more easily to the body, to this moment, to ourselves. If it works for you, you can try that for a few moments or the whole time.

It's traditional to begin the practice of metta by reflecting on the good qualities of the person you're sending metta to. So we begin with ourselves. The idea or the intention is that this should be an easy place to bring metta to. But for many of us, we have a sense of deficiency or unworthiness, and it can actually be quite difficult to wholeheartedly wish ourselves well.

Just reflect for a moment on the sincerity of your intention in coming to practice here for six weeks or three months. This is a huge amount of goodness and integrity and trust and faith—a wish, an interest, a love of waking up, of kindness, of wisdom. These are some of the best qualities that any human being can manifest. Just acknowledging that, just the fact that you're sitting here expresses that.

And out of that sense of appreciation for your willingness to do this work, begin to say the phrases of metta for yourself. Perhaps with the hand on your heart if that's helpful, or just feeling into the heart center.

May I be safe and protected from harm.
May I be happy and contented.
May I be healthy in body and mind.
May I live with the ease of well-being.

Say the phrases at a pace that allows you to connect with the meaning of the words. I find it helpful to actually integrate them with the breath, so you can see if that's helpful for you.

Something like being silent on the in-breath, saying a phrase on the out-breath. Or saying a phrase over the whole in-breath and out-breath, but the next in-breath and out-breath just silent—sitting in the echo, the resonance with the wish you've just made. There's a sense of care in the way you actually say the phrases.

Sometimes with metta for oneself, a phrase I find really helpful is simply: May I love and accept myself just as I am. Just to say that one phrase, even if you don't mean it, has a power to change the attitude, change the mind, change the heart.

Sitting with metta for yourself. A sense of yourself as you sit here, a visual image of yourself now or in some place where you're happy or at ease. Perhaps an image of yourself as a young child when you felt this openness of metta, felt loved. Or perhaps at a time when you didn't feel cared for, loved, and accepted. Can you somehow bring that young child into your heart and share the wish for happiness and ease right now with this being, your younger self?

And now, if you feel ready, bring in the person you chose in the category of benefactor. This is someone who inspires you, who has supported you, who has helped you in your life in some way. It could be someone you know; it might be someone whose books you've read, or a teacher whose voice you've only heard. But when you think of this person, your heart naturally opens in appreciation and affection.

Take a moment to connect with them, your sense of them, an image if you have it. If it's someone you know, perhaps imagine them in a place where they're happy and at ease. Feel into their good qualities. Often we find in the benefactor that they manifest qualities we ourselves would like to strengthen, so we feel that resonance with them, that sense of appreciation, affection, respect, caring.

Sometimes, though, the benefactor is a young child, and it's just their sense of love and wonder and gentleness that inspires us. For some people it's their dog or their cat—some representation of unconditional love. Whoever this being is, connect with them, say their name, get a sense of them, and begin to say the same phrases of metta to this person: May you be safe. May you be happy. May you be healthy. May you live with ease.

And lastly, if you feel ready to open up the field of metta, bring in someone in the category of dear friend. Maybe someone you usually use in your metta practice. Perhaps you want to include someone new, someone different. Perhaps there are many people who might be in this category for you. But just as in the

other categories, we choose just one person—not to be making preferences, not declaring "this is my best friend"—but rather this is simply someone who represents this quality of caring in you, and you want to spend this time with them.

Choose this person, and again the same process: reflect on why they're your friend, what you appreciate about them. Their sense of humor, their compassion, their kindness, their willingness to help, their generosity, their quick wit, their artistic ability or energy. We start the metta from that place of connecting with appreciation and affection.

Every time we bring a new person in, it's really natural that a flood of memories and associations come in. The practice is not needing to push those away but actually using them to get the sense of connection—without getting lost in the story. We just need one image, one memory, one thought to help us connect with this person. So it's a little dance we do at the beginning: acknowledging the interrelationship, the connections with this person, but mostly putting that aside and just seeing if we can settle into the feeling of connection, of friendliness, of kindness.

And of course, with the dear friend it can get a little more complicated. Perhaps they're mainly a good friend, you do love them dearly, but they've hurt you at times or been neglectful. Again, we don't ignore that, but it's not what we dwell on. This is the training that's so important in metta: we don't deny where there's difficulty, but for this time we choose, we deliberately incline the mind toward what's good and lovable about this person. We keep coming back to that. It's a powerful mind training to be able to do that again and again.

So we come back to caring. Out of the connection, a visual image or felt sense, the sound of their voice. If you have a visual image, imagine them smiling at you. Perhaps their eyes are twinkling a little—you've shared a joke, as you often do. Imagine them in a place where they're happy, at ease. Perhaps they're sitting right next to you, walking together, holding hands. Whatever helps you feel that immediacy of connection. Say their name. And then, out of that sense of connection and caring, begin to express the same wishes for happiness and ease to this person.

I think it's really helpful to do some more periods of metta—at least one other formal period every day. If this practice connects for you, do a sitting or a walking period where you can have the practice unfold in your own rhythm, paying attention, directing it to wherever it feels most beneficial. It's just really helpful; it invites this warm attitude toward oneself and one's experience, but it's also a concentration practice. Staying with the phrases in a steady way is actually a good training of the mind. So please include that. And it's wonderful that every evening you're finishing the day with the chanting of the Karaniya Metta Sutta.

So just to have that woven through the day—to use metta as a formal practice, to do it for sitting or walking, whatever feels right.

It can also be a great and helpful response when we find we're stuck in some way, caught in some kind of difficulty, when the mind is struggling. Perhaps there's some aversion going on. Metta is the antidote to aversion. It's said that metta and aversion cannot coexist at the same time. You might find yourself flipping back and forth really quickly, but in the same moment they cannot coexist.

So again, if you find yourself with some irritation or anger—perhaps it's toward someone here—to invite the metta in can really help to balance and soothe that tendency of mind.

Our first impulse is nearly always to do metta for the other person if we're in conflict in some way. And that's a good impulse, but actually where it's really needed is here, with ourselves. So don't forget—that's actually the most important place to keep connecting with metta for self, and have that be the foundation out of which the rest of the practice develops.

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