Guided Mettā - Neutral Person

Joseph Goldstein · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Three-Month Retreat (IMS 2012) · 44:09

This evening we're going to continue with the metta practice, loving-kindness. I'd like to say just a few words about metta in general, and then specifically about the category of people we'll be working with this evening.

The word metta, as you know, is usually translated as loving-kindness. I've found that it's often helpful when I emphasize the kindness part rather than the love part. Because love is such a huge, small word. It has so many meanings and there's so much projection on it. Am I loving enough? Could I ever be that loving? There just seem to be a lot of complications involved in that word. So much of it is just our idealization of it from what we see in the movies. Whereas kindness somehow seems very down to earth, just very pragmatic, very accessible. Are we being kind? Are we being kind to ourselves, kind to others? So that's just a simple reflection which you might consider.

The feeling of metta, however you hold it, the loving-kindness—it's important to understand its simplicity. It's the basic feeling of goodwill. It's just wishing well, wishing well to ourselves, wishing well to others. So it's not complicated, and it doesn't necessarily mean that we're in some ecstatic state of bliss. It's the simplicity of that intention. Be happy. What's so amazing about it is that we can wish this for everyone. There's no limit on who we can wish this well-being for.

I wanted to read just a very short passage. This was from an article in the New Yorker magazine about the French essayist Montaigne, who wrote these fantastic essays on life and different aspects of life. In this article, he was being quoted describing one of the great friendships of his life, and the relationship seemed to me the perfect expression of metta.

He said, "In a truly loving relationship, rather than drawing the one I love to me, I give myself to him. Not merely do I prefer to do him good, rather than to have him do good to me. I would even prefer that he did good to himself rather than to me. It is when he does good to himself that he does most good to me. If his absence is either pleasant or useful to him, then it delights me far more than his presence."

It just struck me how uncharacteristic that is of many of our relationships, when we're more possessive. The only wish in that expression is for his friend to be happy, and whatever makes the friend happy makes Montaigne happy. I felt like that was a good way of understanding the feeling of metta, of loving-kindness. It doesn't really expect anything back. It's just the expression of goodwill.

So this evening we're going to move on. I think you've worked with self and benefactor and friend. This evening we're going to work with a category of neutral people. When I was doing intensive metta practice

the first time in India with Munindraji, my first teacher, when he came to talk about directing it to a neutral person, I wasn't even quite sure what he meant. It didn't register right away. He said, well, pick somebody that you just don't have much feeling about one way or another.

At that time I was in India living at the Burmese Vihara, and there was an old gardener, an old Indian gardener who worked there. I thought, oh, I'll do it for him. And just that recognition that this gardener whom I saw every single day was neutral, that I just didn't have any feeling about one way or another, was a bit shocking to me. That I could have such a lack of feeling or absence of feeling toward somebody who I was in contact with, even though we didn't really converse. But there he was in the same small surroundings, and I just had no feeling about him. So that was a bit shocking.

I started doing the loving-kindness, the metta. This was intensively, so I was doing it all day, every day. He became my love object. And what was so extraordinary—and this is what I think is so striking about working with a neutral person, and this was a transformative insight—was the realization that how I feel about anybody is up to me.

He didn't change at all. He was just going about doing his thing, and I doubt that he even knew that I was sending all this loving kindness his way. But for me, it totally changed how I felt about him—and the relationship from the inside. I started having these genuine feelings of kindness and care and wishing him well.

So just that insight: that how we feel totally depends on ourselves. It doesn't depend on the other person. It doesn't depend on the behavior of the other person. This is really an empowering understanding. It's only up to us whether we feel loving or not, and it's something we can practice. And we do practice it.

Let me guide us through a few minutes of practice, starting with ourselves, and then for this evening just spending a few minutes with either a benefactor or a friend—you can choose somebody for whom it's simply easy to have these feelings arise. Then when we get to the neutral person, just pick somebody. It might be somebody here that you don't know, or someone from your life situation that you meet every day but you really don't have any particular feelings about. See if you can just choose someone whose image you can call to mind, somebody who's neutral, and then we'll begin sending these loving wishes, these kind wishes to that person.

It's quite transformative, this practice. And it's very noticeable with this category of neutral beings because they go from being neutral to somebody we actually care a lot about.

As you know, it's helpful to choose phrases that are meaningful to you. I'll repeat some phrases as we start the meditation, but there's no need for you to use the ones I'm using. An important part of doing metta practice is really finding phrases that are meaningful to you and feel appropriate to the person you're sending it to, so that there's a real connection—you can get behind the wish. If you're just using phrases that somehow don't fit, then the practice gets a little mechanical.

It's helpful to sit in as comfortable a way as possible. You might take a few deep breaths and even center the feeling of the breath at the heart center, so that the awareness, the attention, rests in the area of the center of the chest, the heart, feeling the breath move from that place.

Start with the phrases directed to yourself, whichever ones are meaningful.

May I be happy and healthy. May I be free of all harm and danger. May I live in peace.

Connecting with the feeling of basic goodwill for yourself. See if you can inhabit the meaning of the words.

May I be happy and healthy. May I be free of all harm and danger. May I live in peace.

Whenever you're ready, you can call to mind either a benefactor or a good friend, somebody for whom it's easy to have these kind and loving feelings. Sometimes it's enough just to call the image to mind. We can feel that warmth, that goodwill. Take a moment to settle into the feeling itself. Let the words be the expression of that.

When you call your friend or benefactor to mind, notice the simplicity of the good feeling—simply wishing them well.

As you're resting in this field of goodwill, let the image or sense of a neutral person just slide into the field. Begin expressing that feeling of basic kindness towards this person.

May you also be happy and healthy, free of all harm and danger. May you live in peace.

Keep bringing the image of this neutral person to mind so that there's a feeling of connection. See if you can inhabit the words, the meaning of the words that are expressing your goodwill. It's as if we embody the words in each phrase.

Now spend a few minutes extending these loving feelings out to everyone in this room.

May everyone here be happy and healthy, free from all harm and danger. May everyone here be at peace.

Let this basic feeling of goodwill and kindness extend to all beings everywhere.

May all beings be happy and healthy, free of all harm and danger. May all beings be at peace.

In doing the metta practice, there are three components to it. There's the feeling of goodwill, there are the words we use to express it, and there's the person or beings that we're expressing it to. It might be interesting for you to explore if any one of these three is easiest for you to connect with. Some people might find it very easy to connect just with the feeling, even without words. For some people, the phrases are what connects us.

For some people, holding the image of the person comes very easily. You can keep that person, the image of them, very clearly and steadily in our heart-mind.

It's fine to give emphasis to any one of these three. There are ways of doing metta where we're just residing in the feeling, calling different people to mind while the feeling remains what's strongest. For other people, the feeling might not be so strong, but the meaning of the words is very clear—so then give emphasis to that. And for those of you who can hold the image very clearly, you can make that the predominant aspect of the practice, holding the image and letting the feeling and the words come in response to that image.

There are lots of ways of playing with the nuances of this practice.

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