# Guided Meditation: Mettā for the 'Difficult' Person

Carol Wilson · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Three-Month Retreat (IMS 2012) · 43:15

So as we continue in the trajectory of the loving-kindness instructions, today we come to the so-called difficult person.

Just to say a few things, as I'm sure has been reiterated hopefully many times: this practice is not about achieving something or proving something to yourself or getting it right. I'm often surprised in speaking with people how often there's a kind of underlying, maybe not quite conscious, idea that if they're doing it right, they'll get to the difficult person soon. The sooner you get there means the better you're doing. That somehow proves we're understanding metta. So I'd just like to suggest, if you happen to have that, put it down.

Remember, all we're doing here is exploring how the mind and heart can be developed in the wholesome. Just training and learning to trust how one moment of a wholesome mind state influences the next. Just changing our habits. Just investigating and exploring, each of us in our own experience, what that quality of mind is that is really not holding ill will.

As many people have said, sometimes there's a real feeling you might call love or outflowing well-wishing. Sometimes it's a simple kind of kindness, friendliness. For me, sometimes I think the essence of metta is simply connection—just connecting the heart-mind with the sense of the person without judgment, without saying, this part okay, that part no good. Just exploring it for yourself.

As you already know, a lot of the practice is also seeing how the habits of mind and heart that are the opposite, or that seem to obstruct the open flow of non-ill will, of friendliness, come up. Not a mistake, you know. We meet those with kindness.

Of course, we'll start with self, go to whatever person has been easy, and then I'll suggest difficult, if you want to explore that. Again, I would suggest not choosing the most difficult, scary person in your whole life, or someone you don't know but who is someone in the world you cannot bear to even think about. This isn't about achievement. It's about exploring. So we say pick like a nudgy difficult person.

It doesn't mean they in themselves are a difficult person, right? It means when you think of this person, something other than metta arises naturally in your heart and mind. And we're learning to change the channel.

Calling them "the difficult person" doesn't mean they are difficult. That's part of what's interesting to begin

to explore—seeing how someone that we have resentment towards, or who has hurt us, how the habit of our mind can be that when we look at or think of that person, they become completely defined in our mind by their difficult behavior. That hard thing they did to us, or that really annoying habit they have, becomes almost like who they are when we tune into them.

Part of this is, just as with ourselves, learning in a way to see. Metta isn't blind. Metta doesn't say, "Oh, no, no, it's really okay that you go around kicking puppies. It doesn't matter." It's not that. Metta sees clearly unwholesome actions, but without the judgment. It sees that unwholesome action doesn't define who anybody is. We're all such a mix.

The interesting thing is, with this person, to see if you can tune in, remember some aspect of their goodness. Everyone has some. As I'm sure has been said, the proximate cause for metta to arise in the mind—this friendliness, this non-judging connectedness, acceptance—the proximate cause is said to be seeing the good in someone.

Sometimes you're surprised: the person pops up you think will be difficult, and it's really not a problem to wish them well. But if it is, just explore. See if you can take a moment to imagine them either doing something kind you know they do, or imagine them being happy. See if you can tune into them in another way, including their difficulty, but not just focusing on that.

If the person you're exploring working with here is someone who has really been difficult or hurt you, you might find that part of what comes up is just a kind of fear, a kind of self-protection. I remember thinking when I was doing the long retreat, "I don't want this person in my heart." They could be happy, but I didn't want them in my heart. And that's what would happen when I would start doing metta to someone. You can again be a bit creative.

You might imagine the difficult person as a small child. I remember reading that quotation from John Lewis weeks ago where he was describing people who were beating him—if you can see the small child in that hate-filled person, something shifts.

Another approach, and this isn't just my idea but something I've read and heard other teachers suggest: depending on what your personality is like, what works for you, sometimes with a person you just don't want to be happy, someone you don't want close to you, you can play with it a little. You can envision them with a slight sense of humor—not a put-down kind of humor, but a sense of making it safe. Someone told me ages ago they would imagine the person in a little rowboat in the middle of a huge lake, way far away, just a little speck. The person isn't in any danger, but that's as close as they could imagine wishing them well while still feeling safe themselves.

And that's fine, because remember, metta for someone else never excludes metta for yourself. That's how metta, how all the brahmaviharas, partake of the vastness of the awakened heart-mind. That's how it moves into limitlessness. So if we're choosing someone who has been abusive and we think we have to

have metta for them in a way that makes us feel unsafe—drop the metta and come back to yourself. Reconnect with metta for yourself, with the sense of "may I be safe and protected." If metta for somebody means shutting out metta for yourself, come back to where it's easy, because that's not metta. That's some idea of what we should be doing.

With all of this, we're just exploring. If you get lost in thinking too much, or it becomes too difficult, or a lot of aversion comes up—self-aversion, whatever—come to where it's more simple and direct. Whether that's yourself, or benefactor, or friend. And just play with going back and forth if you get into striving.

So we'll start as usual with ourselves. Then I'll come in after a while and offer a suggestion, but you can find your own timing of moving from self to whatever has been easiest for you—whether that's benefactor, friend, or neutral person—whatever has been helping you connect with the sense of well-wishing, the sense of connectedness. Then I'll suggest, if you want to explore a difficult person, taking a moment to connect with them, looking for their good, and beginning your phrases.

Finding whatever way you have been using, whatever you've found supportive, to bring your heart and mind and body together here in this moment. Let your attention, your awareness, relax into the body. And let your mind relax. Whatever's going on in the mind, in the heart, in the emotions—acknowledging, letting it be, just like this.

Just as I am in this moment, may I love and accept myself.

If you have trouble receiving metta for yourself, some people find it helpful to imagine sitting surrounded by your friend, your benefactor, other loved ones, all sending metta to you, and you simply let yourself receive it.

I'll say my phrases; you use yours.

May I be safe and protected from inner and outer harm. May I be happy. May I have physical happiness. May I live with ease of well-being in this world.

If you'd like now, bring in the person who seems easy for you. If that's yourself, wonderful—stay there. Or benefactor, friend, neutral person. If you're bringing them in, just take the time to get a sense, an image of them. Let your mind connect, tune into their goodness, and then begin offering the phrases as an expression of the intention of goodwill in your mind, in your heart.

And if you would like to explore bringing in someone a bit difficult, you could do that now. Again, just taking your time. A mental image or sense or memory of the person. And while not denying the difficult aspects, see if you can let your attention notice also some good. Or imagine the person happy, or in a way where they're safe but you also feel safe. Offering just one phrase as a connection.

Ajahn Sumedho has said he thinks of metta not particularly or necessarily as liking or loving anyone or anything, but as its potential to see the difficult without creating anything around it. I love that. May we

see the difficult and the good about someone simply being present, bearing witness with kindness.

May you be safe and protected from inner and outer harm. May you be happy and peaceful. May you be well. May you live with ease in this world.

Just one phrase at a time.

For these last moments, if you like, come back to yourself. Reconnecting with your own goodness and friendliness toward yourself. And then imagining this kind of well of loving-kindness, of simple, friendly, connecting energy.

And just allow it to spread out and include all of us in this room, in the field of each of our loving-kindness, of our well-wishing. Wishing for all of us just as we wish for ourselves.

May we be safe.
May we be happy and peaceful.
May we be healthy and well.
May we live with ease in this world.

Just letting this friendly energy spread out and fill and touch all beings in this room.

And may the beneficial energies of our practice be shared with all beings everywhere, in all realms, in all phases of life.

May all beings be happy and peaceful.
May all beings be freed from suffering and confusion.
May our practice be a cause for the liberation of all beings.

---

*Transcriptions produced locally using Swiss low-carbon electricity. Corrections and rewriting by cloud-hosted AI.*