Mettā For All Beings: Guided Meditation

Susie Harrington · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Three-Month Retreat (IMS 2012) · 41:08

We continue with the metta practice today, moving to loving kindness for all beings. I think this is a really interesting and powerful place in the practice.

We tend—and you've been moving away from this with working with the difficult person and the neutral person—but we tend to think that the feeling of metta has something to do with the object. As we move through into these different people, into the more difficult person, and then into all beings, it becomes really clear that metta is an expression of what's here, what's here in our own heart.

As we move out to all beings, the discrimination that someone might be worthy of the loving kindness, some being is or isn't—all that has the opportunity to break down. We realize that our hearts are as big as the world and that we can open them completely and let all beings in. When we're in this fullness of metta, it's limitless. It's limitless.

There's a wonderful story in the commentaries that is considered a challenge of your metta practice. Some of you may have heard this before.

So this is the challenge: Suppose a person is traveling with a friend, a neutral person, and a difficult person, with him or herself being the fourth. Then bandits come and say, "We need one of you for human sacrifice." This is a made-up story, it's just a test. So think about it for a minute. One of you has to go. What are you going to choose? How would you choose?

Now, if one thinks, "Let them take this one or that one," she or he has not yet broken down the barriers. And also, if he or she thinks, "Let them take me, but not those three," they have not broken down the barriers either. Why not? Because he seeks the harm of him who he wishes to be taken and the welfare of only the other three. No matter what the choice, you're wishing one not as well.

It is only when he does not see a single one among the four to be chosen in preference to the other three, and directs his mind quite impartially towards himself and the other three, that he has broken down the barriers.

The realization is that it's not possible to choose. It's not about martyring ourselves or preferring others over ourself. It's realizing that there's completely no preference.

You might see and feel in this—the other night I talked about equanimity—and you can really feel the equanimity aspect coming in and supporting the loving kindness as we move out to all beings. The practice you've been warming up for five and a half weeks, all the different elements that you've been

doing, allow this quality to develop.

Once we move to all beings, there are a number of different ways to do it. I want to mention a couple just so you have them.

One of the ways is to think of the different categories of beings. Here's one list that the Buddha offers: all breathing things, all creatures, all persons, all who are embodied, all women, all men, all noble ones, all who are not noble ones, all deities, all human beings, all those in states of deprivation. You can, if you're doing the practice, go through each one of these categories and wish the loving kindness phrases, just as you've been doing them, for each of those categories.

Another way to do it is in the directions: to the north and east and south and west, and up and down, as the Buddha suggested. Here's his actual language: "May all beings in the eastern direction be freed from enmity, distress, and anxiety. May they guide themselves to bliss." And so on into the north, the south, the west, and the intermediate directions. May they all guide themselves to bliss.

This quality that we're sending out—many of you have been chanting the Karaniya Sutta every night, and I think it's wonderful. Hopefully you've had the chance not just to chant the Pali words but to actually consider the words and the meaning of them as you do that. If you haven't yet, I really suggest in the next couple of days that you take the time to check in with the words. It's an amazingly beautiful offering—that's why we chant it.

"Whatever living creatures there be, without exception, weak or strong, long, huge or middle-sized, or short, minute or bulky, whether visible or invisible, those living near or far—may they all be happy."

And then there's a quality to the metta that, with this open heart, also has a lot of strength to it. I think this is important to remember: that metta is not weak. There's an amazing power in its fullness. Sometimes we sense this with people like the Dalai Lama or Thich Nhat Hanh, or perhaps you have people that you feel this from.

In the Sutta it says: "Just as with her own life, a mother shields her child, her only child, from hurt, let all-embracing thoughts for all beings be yours." Protecting her child, her only child—you can feel the strength in that.

So I'll guide us in the practice. I'll offer phrases that are fairly standard, though everybody seems to do them slightly differently.

Use your own phrases, as I invite you to do. I'll bring us into it a little differently at the beginning, so follow along with me at first, and then as we move to the phrases, allow your own to come in and fill out the practice for you. We'll be doing it directionally, radiating out from near to far.

Begin as we always do with the metta practice by making sure that you're as comfortable as you can be. This is not a place to struggle. If you need to move in the middle, allow yourself that.

It's often helpful at the beginning of the metta practice to flash for a moment on your own goodness, realizing your intention for being here, for this effort. Feel how naturally, as you do this day after day, the earnestness, the kindness that is already here in you, and your intention to let that fill and flower and open.

I invite you, as you sit here feeling yourself in the midst of this place, to rest back into the support that is already here. Feel how a quality of generosity and loving-kindness supports you in this place that has been sustained with generosity—this building, the people who have offered support to your being here, ongoing. Feel the support and nourishment. Receive the gifts of the food. And in the food, the rain and water, the gifts of the sun and the earth.

Feel, as we sit here, the gifts of each breath. As we breathe, we're receiving the breath offered to us by all the plants, the trees, the algae of the oceans that breathe out this oxygen that we can then breathe in. Feel how we are supported on all sides, and let that come into us.

Offering first to ourselves the phrases: May I be safe and protected from inner and outer harm. May I be happy and find joy in each moment just as it is. May I be healthy and strong, and where that is not possible, may I accept my limitations with ease. May I be peaceful and live with ease.

Feeling the support, breathing in the air as this gift, the strength in your body, the water. May I be safe. May I be happy. May I be well. May I be peaceful and live with ease.

Continue for a few minutes with your own phrases, nourishing yourself. Allow the nourishment to come up through the earth, through your sit bones, through the base of your body, through your feet. Allow the nourishment to come through the air. Allow yourself to be filled.

If it feels helpful to you, you can also include your benefactor—perhaps letting them come and sit beside you, letting this well-wishing flood the both of you.

Let yourself rest into the beauty and wonder that you've seen in this place: the trees and leaves, light, animals. Receive the nourishment of the cooks and the teachers. Feel the nourishment and support of each other. Allow yourself to feel those around you, those whose paths you cross all day.

As we begin to move into sending this loving-kindness out, even though the language is moving out from you, always include yourself. Allow this sense of loving-kindness and support that is coming towards you to merely flow through you, to overflow from you.

Starting with the people just right around you now, just a sense of them, offering them your phrases: May you be safe. May you be happy. May you be well. May you be peaceful and live with ease.

As you feel the sense of it, allow it to flood through the room. Perhaps let images of people that you see each day pass through, letting them go by—no story, just the essence of the person, seeing the basic goodness there and wishing them well.

Continue with the phrases, letting either specific people or perhaps just a sense of all of us here in this room arise, realizing everybody here is offering this metta, and it comes in and flows out.

Begin to let it overflow from this room out into the building, out into the grounds around the building, bringing to mind now the people here and the other creatures—some that you've seen and so many that you haven't. May you be safe. May you be happy.

Now let it stretch, this wishing of well, to all the creatures, all the men, all the women, all the seen and the unseen, the human beings and the other creatures. Send this metta out to the north in a big extending arc from your heart. May all beings in the northerly direction be safe. May all beings be happy.

You can start closer in. Perhaps send to some people, some beings in the States, stretching out as you move north into Canada. As you do this, allow different images that represent different people and creatures to float through, knowing that they are merely representatives of all.

Extending out, going far, far north. It might be helpful to remember that to the north is behind you, if that orientation assists, though it can be more abstract than that.

Then send out metta to all beings to the east, to your left, beginning close by, extending out into the woods. If you've been out there, standing out towards the metropolitan center, Boston and beyond that to the ocean. The creatures of the ocean, creatures of the sky. Across the vastness of the ocean—may all beings be safe.

Continue, remembering to keep your attention, as we have throughout, in your heart center, radiating out from your heart. If you start getting lost in images, come back to the heart.

Then bring the attention back into your heart. Perhaps come back to the room for a moment. Offer some metta to yourself, to the people around you.

Then allow the metta to radiate out from you to the south, straight ahead, out from your heart. Let each phrase carry this wish across the air—all the way across the states and creatures, those that live above the ground and below the ground, those in the density of cities and in the open space of the country. Coming to the edge of this continent, allow yourself to continue south, going broader and broader, the oceans into Central America. Continue further south into South America and all that vastness, allowing it all to come in, to be included. All the way down to Antarctica.

Then come back again to right here. Feel this place and yourself sitting here in your own fullness, the fullness of heart. Then send out, radiating from here to the west, sending out your phrases and your well wishes with them. Out to the edge of the continent and out into the vast ocean beyond, and across that vast ocean to the land beyond—the many lands beyond the ocean.

Then begin to send out in all directions at the same time. May all beings everywhere, in all directions without limits, may they all be safe. May all beings everywhere be happy. Continue with your phrases,

including up and down and out across the universe, leaving out none.

May all beings everywhere be safe. May all beings everywhere be happy. May all beings be well. May all beings be peaceful and live with ease.

For those who haven't heard it, I want to read to you the benefits of metta. And you may feel them right now:

A person sleeps in comfort and wakes in comfort. They dream no evil dreams. They are dear to human beings, dear to non-human beings. The gods guard them. No fire or poisons or weapons will harm them. Their minds are quickly concentrated. The expression of their face is serene. They die without falling into confusion. And even if they fail to penetrate any further, they will pass on to the world of high divinity, to the place of ease.

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