Loving Kindness Meditation (Mettā)

Winnie Nazarko · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Three-Month Retreat (IMS 2012) · 42:55

Good evening to you all.

The first few days of retreat are always a challenge, as are the rest of them. So we need metta to do this.

If you think of the Buddha's Eightfold Path, the second step is wise intention, which is usually talked about in terms of renunciation. But it also includes the cultivation and understanding of metta and compassion as being integral to the process of liberation.

You can really see, doing the sitting, doing the work that you're doing here, how important it is to have at least provisional friendliness towards yourself and towards what you're experiencing. Because if that's completely absent, then when things arise in the mind that are difficult or painful, we can get into a real struggle with them or take them as evidence about something about us that usually isn't very complimentary from the position of our ego.

But if the mind is loyal to itself in some basic way, has a foundation of kindness, then we believe in ourselves in a certain kind of way. We just see what we're experiencing, which may be difficult, as simply something that's difficult. And it calls forth compassion and kindness and metta to be met.

This quality of metta is pretty powerful stuff. It's usually taught at these retreats, especially longer retreats, in conjunction with Vipassana practice. It can bring a softness of mind, a softening of the heart. It can bring a kind of brightness to the mind and happiness as well. It helps to relieve the dukkha—the suffering, the difficulty, the contraction of mind that sometimes happens when we come into contact with things that are unpleasant or unwanted. So it's powerful medicine.

There's a lot that can be said about metta, and it's important. So let's talk about this.

What is it? M-E-T-T-A, metta—the Pali word usually translated as loving-kindness or friendliness. Goodwill is another word that's used. It's a naturally occurring human quality. We have it naturally in our minds.

The Dalai Lama often points to the fact that humans have a very long dependency period. When you think about it, when we first arrive, we're utterly incapable of caring for ourselves.

and usually more than one person, to take care of our basic needs and protect us and bring us forward into childhood, keep us on the right path, and help us develop until we become able to care for ourselves in late adolescence.

So we all receive a lot of caretaking as we grow up. Maybe it wasn't the best or ideal from our perspective,

but someone—or some combination of beings—has offered us love and care, or we never would have survived.

You've all experienced this quality within yourself, arising kind of organically, usually most easily with people you know closely and love. Sometimes people recognize this quality most strongly not with other human beings, but perhaps with companion animals. Some may feel it in relationship to the great chain of beings. For others, they recognize this quality most strongly in some figure they know and respect but may never have met—someone like Gandhi or Martin Luther King, Jr.

So we've all known this quality, we've all touched into it. And we've all touched into what are considered the opposites of metta, the enemies of metta: aversion and hatred, anger, fear. This is all part of our mind stream too. And this is, at least in part, our animal inheritance. If you look at our physical setup, we have this primitive brain stem that's hyperactive and vigilant, always looking out for what can get us. It's easily triggered to either attack what's perceived as dangerous or to run away from it.

So we shouldn't take the presence of anger or aversion or fear personally in a way. But it's clear we don't want to cultivate it. The Buddha talks about anger as picking up a hot coal in order to throw it at somebody else. He really points to the fact that cultivating that particular quality of mind in self-defense is actually self-defeating, because it burns ourselves. It's unpleasant and painful. And when we act out of that kind of mind, we create a lot of chaos—and part of that chaos and injury comes back to ourselves as well.

Now, one thing I want to touch on briefly, though much more could be said about this in a future talk—so I suppose I'm announcing I'll do a metta talk—is this: sometimes we get the idea that if we don't have anger to protect us, we can't protect ourselves. That somehow it's going to make us a victim or an easy rollover for anyone who chooses to exploit us, that we can't set boundaries. But that's not really the case.

We may also think that if anger is present, we can't act, or we shouldn't act. That's not necessarily true either. There are many, many mind moments in any kind of action. The action itself may be wise and necessary, and yet there can still be moments of anger woven into it. It's a question of what it's coming from at its most basic level, and what the intention is. We can't necessarily act with totally purified mind streams because we don't have them. We have them intermittently maybe, on a good day, during a good sitting. But it's a tapestry—a tapestry of dark and light in all of us.

The near enemy of metta is attachment or desire. And again, to quote the Dalai Lama, human beings usually have attachment in our closest relationships. We love and care for people, we genuinely wish them well and want them to be happy. But we also want them to stick around, and we want them to continue liking us in the way we like to be liked. This is human too.

You can see that when attachment is strong and goes unseen, it can create behaviors that cause alienation—even on the part of the very object of that mixed metta and desire. It becomes controlling and

clinging in order to continue some desired relationship of something like ownership. We usually don't think of it that way, but sometimes that can get triggered.

So the question becomes: how can we use our minds in a way that really strengthens this metta in its purest form, its most powerful form? How can we do that?

This is really the genius of the Buddhist system. I don't know about you, but I was raised in a particular Christian religion. Christianity is full of encouragement to love one another, toward agape—it's very much a predominant strand in that religious view. But what I never got a clear answer about was: how? I understood that you should. And I was on board with that—yes, that's good, you definitely should. But the question is how, given the mixed texture we have in the mind stream. How do you encourage the wholesome, the good?

How do you purify metta, strengthen it, and extend it? This practice of metta is how we do that. It's one of the ways we do that.

There are basically three strands to this practice. First, there's the generation of the intention to summon metta and to offer metta. Then there's a connection with the being to whom we're going to offer metta—this can be done by bringing up an image of a person, or perhaps a felt sense of the person. Some sort of way where you energetically and psychologically, psychically, however you want to say it, connect with that being and hold them as a focus. And then there's the offering of the metta phrases that represent this intention, extending these phrases towards the person. Those are the three strands of the practice.

The way the practice works is we start with wherever it's easiest in terms of who we're offering metta towards. You want to start with where it's easy—this is a basic premise of metta. Wherever it feels most organic.

Now, generally, the way this is traditionally taught, you would start with yourself. There's an assumption in that, which is that you're okay with yourself, that there's not super strong hatred or active dislike going on. It's common in our Western psyches for there to be a lot of self-criticism and self-hatred, and the reasons for that—well, I guess that will be part of the meta-talk. If that's the case for you, then don't start with yourself. Start someplace easier.

You could start with what's called a benefactor—someone who has, as my niece says, done you a solid. Somebody who's done well by you. It could be somebody who's been a teacher, somebody who picked you up literally when you were a mess and helped you out. Somebody for whom you feel gratitude and respect. Perhaps a parent or a grandparent, or maybe somebody that you really respect for standing up for human rights or whatever. Somebody that you can form an image of and feel a felt connection with, and at least initially, a somewhat unambivalent desire for their well-being. You could even use a pet if that's an easy place for you. Wherever it's easy.

The progression would be: you start wherever it's easiest, you work with that being for a while. When the

metta is pretty well established in the course of the practice, then you move on to the next ring out. That might be the benefactor at that point. Then you work with them for a while, and when metta is established and flowing, you move out to a dear friend. Then you move out to what's called a neutral person—somebody you don't really know, maybe you don't think much about them, either pro or con, they're just kind of there. Then you go to what's traditionally called the enemy, or it's softened sometimes now as a difficult person, but sometimes it actually is enemies. And beyond that, metta gets extended through working with a number of different categories of beings until it's global, until it includes all sentient beings in all dimensions.

So you can see what's happening and how this has developed. There's the progression of going from where it's easy, getting it going, and then seeing: can this same attitude and intention be pushed out? Okay, it's going. How about here? How about here? Eventually we're moving in the direction of repeatedly summoning this quality of mind, bringing it to mind again and again, strengthening it as a tendency in the mind—this tendency towards goodwill and wishing for the well-being of others. By the time we get to the more difficult people, we've got some momentum going. It carries over.

This is how we as human beings can learn to do what we really need to do, individually and as a species: to take that capacity we have for caring and connection and broaden it. Pascal talked a little bit last night about the village. This is the village of us now, however we are, whoever we are, as we are here. The world would be tremendously different if it was us—if it was just us, if everybody was us, if it's all us.

So this is how we can learn to do it. All right, are you ready to do the practice?

Settle in and make yourself comfortable. With metta, you want to be comfortable. With vipassana, you might be encouraged to stay with discomfort when it's there and predominant, working with it skillfully. But with metta, if it starts to get uncomfortable physically, feel free to ease your posture. We're starting with ease of mind.

It can be useful to begin with a reflection, so I'll offer one and then guide you through the practice.

Allow yourself to bring to mind something that happened in your life—a period of time where there was difficulty and you were met with kindness or support from another. It doesn't have to be a big thing. It might even be your dog coming to you at the door, all happy when you came home from a hard day at work. Or it might be a grandmother who cared for you when your parents couldn't. It could be anything.

Remember how it felt to be met with kindness and warmth and appreciation—to feel responded to and cared for. Then, knowing this, consider the value of this attitude of care and goodwill. The way that friendliness and warmth can connect us and support a feeling of safety and community with others can remind us that we're not alone.

Allow the intention to develop this potential for metta to arise in the mind, seeing its value.

Bring to mind an image of a being to whom you wish to offer this goodwill and friendliness. If it's easy access for you, pick yourself. If that's not accessible right now, pick someone else—someone for whom you do have at least basic goodwill.

You may not be feeling a lot of warm fuzzies right now, and that's okay. The feeling of metta may or may not be present while you're doing metta practice, and it doesn't have to be present. You can invite it if you wish by putting your hand on your heart. But if it doesn't come, the practice still works.

It's all about the three strands: the intention, the image or felt sense of the being to whom you're offering metta, and the recitation of the words that extend this wish towards them.

Hold the image or felt sense. It might be clear, it might be fuzzy. Maybe you don't feel much. Maybe you don't see much. That's okay. Just shoot it in their general direction. If it's not clear, it's still good.

Begin to offer the metta phrases:

May I be happy. Or *May you be happy.*

May I be safe. Or *May you be safe.*

May I be healthy. Or *May you be healthy.*

May I live with ease of well-being. Or *May you live with ease of well-being.*

These are some of the classic ways of saying this, but you can use your own words. You can make them your own. You could say, *May you be protected from harm.* You could say, *May you always have enough.* You could say, *May you be as well as you can be.* You could say, *May you live in joy and awaken.*

I'll repeat the classic formulation, but use your own if you wish.

May I be happy. May I be safe. May I be healthy. May I live with ease of well-being.

May I be happy. May I be safe. May I live with ease.

You may experience the opposite of metta.

Sometimes this practice can bring up the opposite of metta—anger or sadness may arise. This is okay. Metta is a purification practice.

Now, if you wish, you can either stay with the person you're offering metta to, whether that's yourself or someone else, or you can bring to mind a benefactor—someone who has helped you or inspired you, someone you respect and find it relatively easy to wish happiness for.

Remember that person. Bring them to mind in some way—an image, a felt sense, perhaps how Grandma's kitchen used to smell. Bring it up.

May you be happy.
May you be safe.
May you be healthy.
May you live with ease.

May you be happy.
May you be safe.
May you be healthy and live with ease.

Now imagine your metta has the power to radiate out from your heart in all directions, touching all sentient beings and creating the well-being that you wish for them.

With the intention to offer metta to all beings, you can offer the phrases:

May all beings be happy.
May all beings be safe.
May all beings be healthy and live with ease of well-being.

May we all be happy.
May we all be safe.
May we all be healthy.
May we all know ease of well-being.

May all beings be protected from harm.
May peace prevail on earth.

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