# Mettā Meditation

Joseph Goldstein · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Joseph Goldstein · 1:07:43

This afternoon I'd like to continue the discussion and practice of the mettā meditation.

As Jill introduced it yesterday, and just as a reminder, it's really a very simple quality of wishing well for people. The most simple expression of it is "may you be happy." And it's not wanting anything back, it's not in exchange for anything. It's just the development of that capacity for well-wishing.

And it has a lot of different nuances in terms of the feeling. Fifty shades of mettā. So, lest you be taken down the wrong path, I'd like to read a few poems which express some of these different aspects of it, different ways we can manifest this feeling. And then we'll get into the practice a little bit and talk about some different styles or ways of cultivating this quality.

The first poem is called "Shoulders" and it's by the Palestinian-American poet Naomi Shihab Nye. I don't know if you're familiar with her—she's a wonderful poet. This is what she wrote:

*A man crosses the street in the rain, stepping gently, looking two times north and south because his son is asleep on his shoulder. No car must splash him. No car drive too near to his shadow. This man carries the world's most sensitive cargo, but he's not marked. Nowhere does his jacket say fragile, handle with care. His ear fills up with breathing. He hears the hum of a boy's dream deep inside him. We're not going to be able to live in this world if we're not willing to do what he's doing with one another. The road will only be wide and the rain will never stop falling.*

It's just such a beautiful image—a father carrying his son on his shoulders across the road with that care. "We're not going to be able to live in this world if we're not willing to do what he's doing with one another." Sometimes just simple images can evoke the quality of mettā within us. Either a poem or an image of someone is a way of calling forth that feeling within us.

This next one is an informal rendition of a poem by the Persian poet Hafez, created by Daniel Ladinsky. The title of it is "The Sun Never Says":

*Even after all this time, the sun never says to the earth, "You owe me." Look what happens with a love like that. It lights the whole sky.*

That's the quality of mettā. It's never a quality of "I love you and you owe me for this" or "I want something in return." It's just like the sun shining on the earth. It's that quality of radiating the felt wish, "may you be happy."

I love the practice and the discussion of this because it's about a feeling that is at the same time incredibly simple—it's not complicated—and so profound in terms of how it affects how we are in the world.

This last one is from the French essayist Montaigne. He's describing a platonic relationship he had, the deepest friendship of his life, and it was a profound relationship for him. The way he expressed it, I think, captures just another shade of mettā:

*In a truly loving relationship, which I have experienced, rather than drawing the one I love to me, I give myself to him. Not merely do I prefer to do him good 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.*

To me, that just captures the completely selfless quality of mettā—that it's really about the happiness of the other person. That's what we're wishing for. That last line: if that other person's absence is pleasant or useful to them, that gives me more happiness than his presence would be for me. Do you see the beauty of that?

It's really selfless. We're not in it for what we're getting.

The last reading I want to share is a wonderful poem by Galway Kinnell called "Saint Francis and the Sow." This is just part of the poem, the first stanza:

*The bud stands for all things, even for those things that don't flower. For everything flowers from within of self-blessing, though sometimes it is necessary to reteach a thing its loveliness. To put a hand on its brow of the flower and retell it in words and in touch, it is lovely, until it flowers again from within of self-blessing.*

Really, in our metta practice, that's what we're doing. We're reteaching a thing—whether it's ourselves or other people—we're reteaching each one of us its loveliness. That's the power of metta and the effect of metta: until it flowers again from within of self-blessing.

So all of these images capture different aspects of metta: the father carrying his son with tremendous care across the road; the understanding that the sun shines on all of us without any expectation, no "I owe you" or "you owe me"; Mang Teng's understanding that in this feeling, it's really about the happiness of the other person, not something we get back (though what we do get back is the happiness that comes from that very feeling); and the understanding that metta really does reteach us all loveliness.

As Jill mentioned yesterday, there are many ways of practicing this. There are two main purposes of doing metta meditation. One is that loving-kindness can be used as a vehicle for developing concentration—not only for the metta quality itself, but as a technique or method for developing strong concentration, even to the point of absorption or jhana. There are very specific techniques for that.

The other purpose or aspiration with regard to its practice is not so much for deepening concentration, although it will have that effect to some extent. Rather, it's more the aspiration, as we do the practice in a

more general way, to cultivate that capacity in ourselves for metta, for caring, for loving-kindness. Here the main objective is not absorption, but rather to fill the heart with that feeling and to be able to express it in the many ways we do.

In this second understanding or way of practicing—which is what we're doing here—you can be very creative. We'll offer some suggestions for how to practice it, but in terms of the language one uses, the phrases one uses, how it's done, we'll offer a variety of approaches. As you sit and practice, experiment a little and see what resonates the most, what connects you most deeply to this practice.

Traditionally, there are three components in doing the metta practice. The first component is having a clear perception of who we're sending it to. That could be ourselves, or it could follow the traditional list: a great benefactor for whom it's very easy to feel metta, a good friend, a neutral person (somebody we don't have many feelings for one way or another), a difficult person, or all beings. There are many different categories of beings we can direct the metta towards. We know who we're wishing well to; we have a clear sense of direction for the metta.

The second component is the support for the feeling, which consists of different phrases that we actually repeat in our practice. It almost becomes like a mantra of loving-kindness. We settle on some phrases that express our wish, our kind wish, and we repeat those phrases, concentrating on the meaning, directing it towards the image or the sense of the person. The phrases themselves become a vehicle for cultivating the feeling.

As Jill mentioned, there's a lot of creativity in finding phrases that express metta in a way that you resonate with. "May you be happy. May you be peaceful. May you live at ease. May you live in safety." In a way, it's finding two, three, or four phrases that express what you would most wish for yourself. In your life, what is most meaningful in terms of what you would wish for yourself? Because when you connect with those particular expressions,

you'll be most connected to the wish for others. Because you feel it in yourself. Yes, just as I want to be happy, so may you be happy. And just as I want to live in safety, so may you live in safety. Just as I want to be free, so may you be free.

So this is the second component of the whole practice. The first is who we're sending it to. The second are the phrases that we use to express this wish of care and kindness. And the third aspect is the actual feeling—the emotional feeling of loving-kindness, of kindness, of care, whatever words resonate with you. It's that feeling of wishing well.

Keeping in mind that there are these three components, each of you may find it easier to give emphasis to one or the other. For example, for some people who can visualize easily, it's very natural to hold the picture in the mind of the person you're sending it to. Again, it could be yourself or anybody, but you're really holding the image of that person in mind. Very often, especially when it's somebody for whom we

already have a lot of love or care, simply being with the image evokes the feeling. You might think of a good friend, a really dear friend, and the image comes to mind and you may not even need any words. The feeling is there, and when you see them, it's like we're with them. We can feel the feeling of metta arise. So for people for whom that's easy, you might want to give some emphasis to the image—keeping the image steady as a way of evoking the feeling.

Some people find holding images in the mind quite difficult. The mind doesn't particularly work in that way. For them, the repetition of the phrases might be what's worth emphasizing. We're repeating this mantra of metta phrases. It's good to settle on two or three so we can just really sink into each one and feel each one, repeating over and over again. And as we drop into the meaning of the words, the meaning evokes the feeling. May you be happy.

So some people may focus predominantly on the image, some people predominantly on the repetition of the phrases, and some people, in a very easy way, may feel connected to the feeling of metta already. For some people it's very accessible—it's right there. We just have to kind of drop into the heart space and it's there. For people who have that connection, you might give emphasis simply to the feeling. Let yourself drop into the feeling of metta and then let it radiate, let the feeling radiate out towards the person or towards all beings.

In all of these cases, we most likely will be using all three—the image, the phrases, the feeling. But I've found it helpful, since we are all conditioned somewhat differently in terms of what comes easily, to use any one of those three doorways into the practice predominantly.

One last little thing before we drop into a little time of practice. I've done quite a bit of metta practice over the years, and it was transformative—and it wasn't easy. When I started, it was very difficult for a lot of reasons. Sometimes it was just because of an aberrant understanding of the practice.

At one time I was doing intensive metta practice for a couple of months at a time. And for about a week or so, I had this crazy idea that the faster I said the phrases, the more metta would come. I don't know where that came from. I was in Burma at the time. I don't know if it was a whole week, but it was more than a few days. I was just revving the whole thing up. It was ridiculous. So it took me a little while to realize this is not the way.

Like any other practice, for some people it's just really easy from the beginning, and for other people, for whatever reason, it's challenging. It doesn't matter. The practice itself, as you do it and continue, is deeply transforming. It really changes how we are in relationship to the world and other beings.

In terms of a little technique that came as I was doing the practice: I realized that one way was actually to have the feeling and the words be directed towards whoever, whether myself or other beings. And then at a certain point, I just played with a different perspective. This became more viable when I got more connected with the feeling and it was easier just to sit in the feeling. After you do the practice in whatever

way and you really are connected—yes, you just have this feeling of wishing well.

So that becomes like a field, just a field of metta. And then I would simply imagine different people walking through the field. So I wasn't directing it outward. I was just sitting, creating the field, and then friends would walk through, and difficult people would walk through. It was lovely because then it was much less the feeling of me sending metta to you. It was just creating that feeling field and then basically inviting everybody into it. And it was lovely. Then it can be very spontaneous about who we think of to invite in. You can just play. You can be there and invite all the people you really love a lot in. Then when you're feeling particularly brave, invite some of the people who are challenging in your life. Let them enter your field of metta. So you can play with these two different ways and see what works for you.

Okay, so let's settle into the practice for a bit. In doing the metta, it's generally helpful, as much as possible, to sit reasonably comfortably. If you're in a lot of pain, that can be distracting for the cultivation of metta, unless you're actually sending metta to the pain. So sit in a way that is reasonably comfortable, where you're not struggling with your posture.

I find it helpful to just let the attention settle in the area of the heart center, the area in the center of the chest. Simply begin by feeling the breath there, just the feeling of the breath. You could think of it as going in and out of the heart center, or just feeling the energy at that space in the body. Resting in that area, breathing gently.

Then call to mind somebody for whom you have a natural feeling of love or friendliness or care. I suggest you pick an uncomplicated relationship—just somebody where it's very simple and easy. You think of them and you feel good. You think of them and you want them to be happy. Just call them to mind.

Play with the image, see if you can hold it. Maybe it will be steady and maybe it will be flickering, however it is, but you have a clear sense of who you're sending the metta towards.

Then pick a few phrases of what you would most wish for yourself. You might even spend the first minute or two with a linking phrase: just as I want to be happy, so may you be happy. Just as I want to be peaceful, so may you be peaceful. Find your own phrases. Don't rush through them. Connect the meaning with the person.

In a very light way, tune into the feeling behind the phrases. Keep the person in mind—an image of the person or just somehow the felt sense of the person—expressing what you most wish for them. Notice what it feels like when you're most connected with that loving wish. What is that feeling like?

Let either the image or the phrases be your anchor. Notice those times when they evoke a particular noticeable feeling of well-wishing. May you be happy and peaceful. May you live in safety and live with ease.

There will be many times when you're repeating the phrase and you don't have any particular feeling

with it. That does not mean that you're devoid of metta. Just keep with the phrases, keep with the image. Sometimes the feeling is stronger, sometimes it's weaker, sometimes it's not even noticeable. Just keep going with the phrases, with the sense of the person. And then sometimes with a particular phrase we do have a noticeable feeling—oh, yes, this is what goodwill is, this is what metta is.

You can either stay with the same person or call someone else to mind, surrounding them with the feeling of loving care. It might be directing the phrases toward the image of them, or if you're settled into the feeling of metta, invite them simply into the field. Let them cross the field of your loving-kindness.

When the mind wanders, you can come back to the image, to the phrases, to the breath at the heart center. Sometimes it is necessary to reteach a thing its loveliness.

Settle the awareness on the breath at the heart center. Let each breath radiate the unspoken wish of loving care.

Sending each breath out into the world.

We can have a few minutes for questions about the practice if you like, but also for those of you who would like to stay in the silence and the field of metta and begin walking, that's fine. Feel free to do that.

*What did you mean when you said to tune into the meaning?*

Right, so tuning into the meaning behind the phrases. Actually, there were two different suggestions. One was to drop deeply into the meaning of the phrases, because one of the things that can happen is that the repetition gets mechanical. We just start repeating them, they become kind of dry, and we're simply going through the motions—disconnected from the depth of meaning of what we're actually saying. So it's a reminder to pause and ask, what is it that I'm actually wishing?

The second suggestion was this: as we connect with the wish, as we're really present with the meaning, one way of recognizing the specificity of the metta feeling is to notice where that wish is coming from. What's the feeling of the intention behind it? This isn't meant to be overly analytic, but simply inquiring: what's the heart space out of which we're wishing? And that often brings the recognition—oh yes, it's goodwill. Yes, like that.

*This is the first time I've tried the field approach, although I've felt something like it before. I was trying to let some of the more challenging people in, but the issue for me is one of safety. Could you talk about discernment—knowing that we're resting in Buddha nature, in consciousness, as love really, but also needing discernment?*

Yes, a few things with regard to that. First, I would recommend not starting with the most challenging people. Really strengthen the field of metta with people for whom it's easy to feel, so you become established in it. Then, when you're feeling somewhat stable, you might have them do a run-by. Because if you keep them there, it will probably start evoking all the complexity and concern about safety—all the

issues which are very real. So you want to modulate how much attention you give to that category or that particular person as you're inviting them in.

Depending on who we're sending it to, it's also very important and effective to change the wish so that it's appropriate to the situation. Just as an example, I was teaching a retreat just after 9/11, and there were a lot of New Yorkers there. We were doing metta classically, going through the categories, and when we got to the enemy or challenging people, quite a few said, "There's no way I can send metta to people who flew planes into the World Trade Center." It was so traumatic.

This made me reflect deeply. The Buddha spoke of metta as universal, as encompassing all beings. But what does that mean? "May you be happy"—in that situation, that's not what's going to arise naturally. In reflecting upon it, I realized we need to change the language. For example, even toward people who cause tremendous harm, one could wish: may you be free of hatred. Is there anybody you would not wish that for? I don't think so, because if we want to express metta, it's precisely those mind states—hatred, delusion—that are the cause of all harmful actions in the world. We can have metta in that sense for all beings, but we have to tailor the way it's expressed so that it's appropriate to the situation.

So in all these ways, you can work with it. But it takes care. Nothing should be forced. Dance with it.

*Sometimes what arises isn't exactly metta—it's more like compassion for their suffering.*

Yes, here's where metta can morph into compassion. Compassion is really metta directed specifically toward people who are suffering. That's what evokes it. The wish becomes slightly different, though close to the metta phrase. When we're doing compassion meditation, we visualize the person suffering, and the wish is: may you be free of suffering. We're there, connected with the reality of that person's experience, and that single phrase—may you be free of suffering—becomes the heart of the practice.

What's so remarkable in doing this practice is quite amazing, actually. But let me back up a moment. There's a concept in the teachings of the near enemy of all these states—a state that looks like metta or compassion but actually is not. With metta, the near enemy is often attachment. We take that to be love, but it's not.

It's a different state. The near enemy of compassion is sorrow. Because it's easy, especially with people we love and their suffering, to go into sorrow. But sorrow is not compassion. Compassion is the wish to alleviate the suffering. It's like, how can I help? Or, may you be free of suffering.

The remarkable thing as we do this practice—and you might spend a little time with it, in fact we will during the retreat, we'll be offering specifically the compassion meditation—what's so amazing in doing it, even as we're addressing the suffering of an individual or the world, the feeling of compassion is uplifting. And that really highlights the difference between compassion and its near enemy of sorrow.

So as you do the practice, it would be interesting for you to play with that and begin to see what the effect

is of your doing the compassion practice. You may find that you drop more easily into the uplifting aspect of compassion rather than the sorrow. In the sorrow, there's really aversion to the suffering. It's colored by aversion. We hate it. We don't want it. Whereas compassion is more positively expressed. It's the wish for somebody to be free of suffering. That's a beautiful wish. And as you repeat that and drop into it, even as you're relating to the suffering of that person, you find a heart that's very open and tender.

But all of this you have to see for yourselves. These are just suggestions for your own practice to explore. You don't have to believe me or any of it. Just try and see. Experiment.

One practitioner shared, "I was thinking about a couple of lifelong friends and I started with these general phrases—may they be healthy, may they be free from pain. And then I got really practical. I thought, why not? We wish for people what they want, if it seems in the realm of the wholesome."

Absolutely. I wouldn't worry so much about whether it fits the classical dictionary of metta terms. My basic mantra for all meditation practice, whether it's metta or vipassana, is whatever works. These are all skillful means. The idea behind the practice is to develop that feeling of care and love and strength. So whatever supports that is good.

Another question arose about techniques for developing the field, with the practitioner wondering if it might take a lifetime or more to figure out. But don't buy into that assumption. Rather than having an idea that there's some specific way to create the field, I think it's much more that we just do the practice, start in a more traditional way of sending the phrases, and then at those times when you feel connected, when you actually have a lot of goodwill—and it doesn't have to be spectacular, it can be very low-key, but you're just connected, you really are wishing this for this person—in those times when that feeling is there even in a mild way, just back off a little from the phrases, from the doing aspect, and drop back into whatever that feeling may be. Again, it could be very light, just a good feeling of kindness. In that dropping back into it, the field is created. You don't have to do anything more than that. Play with it. Have fun.

Someone else observed that they hadn't tried to use metta as a gateway into concentration before, but they were wondering if radiating metta, which they found really enjoyable, might work well since it has less doing, less self in it. Indeed, even if you're not specifically doing it with the aim of deepening concentration, it does have that effect. And if at a certain point you want to use the metta for the specific purpose of really deepening concentration and absorption, then you should work with a teacher. There are many teachers now who can teach that.

So you might do a retreat where you emphasize the particular techniques for that. It's somewhat different—you're using the same basic foundation of practice, but then there is a series of progressive instructions in terms of emphasizing the concentration aspect of it. The basic practice is the same, but what changes is what we do to emphasize the one-pointedness.

*Question from participant about what "uncomplicated" means in choosing a metta recipient*

Do you have a dog? Or a pet? It sounds funny, but I ask because sometimes people find it so easy with a pet—it's very uncomplicated. If there's such a being in your life, that can work beautifully. But another way, if you don't have Fido, is you might want to just start with a good friend, where there aren't necessarily the complexities of a strongly intimate relationship, but just somebody who's in your life, who you're good friends with and care about.

Don't overthink it—just play, try some different people, and see which person becomes easiest for you. Because even with a complicated relationship, it would still be possible if you visualize them and limit your consideration of the person during this particular time to just that sense of, "Yeah, I really do wish you well"—not getting into an analysis or the history of the whole relationship. You can simplify even a complicated relationship, but you could also just start with somebody you're not so entangled with. Again, experiment. Just play around.

*Question from participant about the intensity of doing metta for oneself*

Yes, it can be quite a lot. Just to reiterate again, play with it. Start with your dog, let the feeling arise—it's so easy—and then you might start directing it, before you go to yourself, to another person that it's fairly easy to feel the loving-kindness toward. Then maybe just start in a very brief way. Bring yourself into it, repeat the phrases a few times, see what you feel. If it feels like you're dropping into all the sorrow, then in terms of the metta practice, maybe pull back from that. Go back to your dog. Re-establish the actual feeling of simple well-wishing. Then you can bring yourself back into it, or you might visualize yourself with the dog.

I used to do that, actually. I had a good friend—it wasn't a complicated relationship—but a good friend who always had his little dog with him. So when I was doing the metta, I would just picture him and his dog. And it was lovely. It really brought a lot of joy.

Do you get the sense that you can be creative and see what works—and when it's too much, back off? In Vipassana, it's different. In Vipassana, if you begin to feel the sorrow, then we really turn towards the sorrow itself as an object of mindfulness. That's a different approach.

As with all of this, you will learn from doing it. Just as I had to learn that speed metta wasn't the way. I had to do a whole bunch of really stupid things. But that's how we learn. We see what works, what doesn't work.

I would just encourage you to incorporate this into your practice. And even in the walking—sometimes it's beautiful just to be walking and doing the metta, either towards a particular person or maybe you start doing metta towards everybody.

that you're passing. Maybe you're at home and walking down the street, and with everybody you see: *May you be happy. May you be happy.*

It's worth playing with and developing and cultivating, because it becomes more and more who we are—not something we do.

Thank you.

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