Divine Abiding: Goodwill, Mettā - read by Biddy O'Connell

Noirin Sheahan · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Noirin Sheahan · 41:20

I want to continue the exploration of the four divine abodes, which in Pali are known as the Brahma Vihara. The focus tonight is on Mettā, which is the basis for all the Brahma Vihara.

Mettā is often translated as loving-kindness, or more simply as goodwill. It can also be described as inoffensiveness and non-harming. In positive terms, it describes an open-hearted attitude, warmth, friendliness, benevolence, care. The analogy the Buddha gives is the ideal mother's love for her only child. She is totally devoted, giving attention and affection without expecting anything in return. She forgives misbehaviour instantly and harbours no resentment. That is the ideal we have to aim at—quite a challenge.

True mettā is based on altruism rather than mundane self-interest. It is universal, applying to strangers, animals, and other beings as much as to ourselves and our closest family and friends, to those who have wronged us as much as to those who have cared for us. When the heart is filled with mettā, it brings out the best in us and others. Life seems simple. We smile, we're interested in the other person, we're easily pleased, we speak and act benevolently in any company. The fall from grace only comes when we perceive others or the world as threatening.

All of our spiritual practice is aimed towards understanding that our essential nature cannot be threatened. When we are fully enlightened, mettā will be our natural state. Until then, mettā practice helps us coax and cajole ourselves in this direction. We don't have to feel happy and benevolent to practice mettā. It's the kindly thought or act that counts, not the feeling. We can feel miserable but still do our best to make things pleasant and easy for ourselves and others.

It is said that the Buddha taught the Metta Sutta to monks whose forest dwelling was also the home of evil spirits who were trying to frighten them away with noises, visions, and stinking odours. When the monks started practicing mettā, they were probably feeling scared stiff rather than in any way kindly. Nevertheless, the spirits began to calm down and eventually came to worship the monks as their benefactors. Mettā softens not only our own hearts but also the hearts of those around us.

The far enemy of mettā is ill-will, which can manifest in many different hues and intensities: mild irritation, impatience, exasperation, despising, fear, blame, hatred, and all the way up to murderous rage. Its expression depends on personality and circumstances. Sometimes there is an explosion of anger. Sometimes anger is more contained—coldness, withdrawal, sulking, refusing to cooperate. It can be

expressed openly or more subtly: sighing heavily, grimacing, speaking ill of the person behind their back, undermining them.

All expressions of anger, open or subtle, endanger our relationships. Well-meaning friends become wary of us and may lose touch altogether. On the other hand, anger attracts people with a negative disposition, who then further exacerbate our own ill-will. Negativity escalates as tit-for-tat reactions spark between quarrelling parties. It can spread like wildfire and turn into chronic feuds and gangland violence. On a large scale, we end up with the atrocities of war.

Ill-will can also be directed inwards towards ourselves. We blame ourselves for our lack of success, our financial problems, our poor health, and all the other dukkha in our lives. This might not get us into the trouble that goes with outwardly directed anger, but it can be equally destructive for our well-being. As there is no effective opposition, we can hammer ourselves black and blue without any reprimand. Over time, habits of self-blame can lead to chronic anxiety and depression. We become afraid of our own judgement and feel completely hopeless about life.

The near enemy is attachment. In this case, we are clinging to the other in a needy way. It could be great passion—the beloved becomes the centre and meaning of a person's whole existence. It could be a mother over-protecting her child. At a simpler level, most human relationships involve some degree of anxiety about keeping the relationship on friendly terms.

Attachment can manifest in a variety of ways. We might worry about our beloved's relationships with other people, jealously guarding our own share of their time and affection. We buy them gifts, delightedly anticipating their gratitude. If they go on holidays, we secretly hope they'll miss us. We chatter inanely, anxious for their interest and approval. While attachment is a normal aspect of human relationships, we need to be careful not to foster it. If it gets out of control, it damages the relationship.

The needy person neglects their own development, projecting all their inner goodness and strength onto the other, who in turn feels burdened by those projections and needs.

Mettā meditation is a powerful antidote to all the miseries described above. Here we wish ourselves and others well in four areas of life: basic safety, physical health, mental well-being, and social and family life. The phrases are some variant on "May you be safe, well, happy, living in harmony with the world." We direct these toward all the categories described last night.

If the phrases don't work for you, then try to imagine the person in a happy situation. Alternatively, the breath may carry an embodied sense of goodwill—almost as if you're blowing up a balloon of goodwill with each breath. This is completely valid as a mettā practice.

All the hindrances we experience in vipassanā can emerge in mettā: wandering mind, dullness, doubt. In the first instance, we just acknowledge these and bring our attention back to generating mettā. Remember what we said yesterday about dodging round the hindrances. Some of these dodges we've already learnt

in vipassanā: opening our eyes or standing up for dullness and lethargy; calming ourselves for a few breaths for the wandering mind, restlessness, and worry. If the hindrance persists, we switch attention back to the easiest of the mettā categories and re-establish goodwill before reconnecting with the more challenging category. Basically, do whatever you can to make things easy for yourself.

Perhaps the greatest challenge is when all our grudges reappear the moment we think of a person—even our best friend—or else we start worrying what they think of us. This is quite natural. It's part of the purification process. Keep reminding yourself that there doesn't have to be a feeling of loving-kindness. It's the willingness to keep trying that counts.

If you keep getting carried away into angry or anxious thoughts, direct mettā towards yourself in the shade of compassion. For example: "May I be free from ill will," or "May I be free from anxiety." Stay with this for the full session if needed.

What is more troublesome is when the near enemy goes unnoticed. We're wishing everyone well, heart soaring with goodwill, but subtly identifying with that sense of goodness and friendliness. We might only notice the problem afterwards. We're beaming radiantly at our family over breakfast, but when someone makes a snappy response, our bubble bursts. The fall from grace can be very sore and bring out the worst in us. Suddenly we hate everyone.

If you notice this pattern, try taking it easier during mettā practice. Allow a few breaths between each good wish and be sensitive to feelings of friendliness. Acknowledge and appreciate them. Then they can energize and strengthen your mettā without leading you into delusion. It helps to keep in mind that we're not practicing mettā in order to feel good. Feelings come and go. What matters is that we're willing to gently nudge our attitude towards goodwill in all circumstances.

On the opposite end of the spectrum, we can judge our goodwill to be so paltry that we believe we're not really practicing at all. This is self-doubt, doubting our own powers of goodness. It underlies the fear of failure we spoke of last night. In the first instance, just carry on regardless of any belittling comments you hear. Perhaps you can smile at them or insist, "This is enough. I will not despise my goodwill offering." Try putting a hand on your heart or any gesture you find supportive.

If that doesn't work, try self-compassion, reassuring yourself over and over of your essential goodness—just as the ideal mother would reassure her only child. Alternatively, shade the goodwill towards equanimity, encouraging yourself to take it easy and don't believe self-doubt's belittling judgments. Instead, see this meditation session as a deep purification.

If none of the suggested remedies for the near or far enemies is working, then switch to vipassanā, acknowledging whatever emotion is coming up. And don't think of any such session as a failure. It's a very central and necessary part of mettā practice to know when to call a halt and switch to vipassanā. A successful explorer will often say that their most precious quality wasn't determination or strength, but

the ability to turn back when things were too dangerous.

Mettā practice is a deep exploration of the heart. It shows us how threatened we feel deep down, due to our confusion about ultimate reality.

When our mettā can no longer dodge and dive around the demons we've unleashed, we need to respect their power and listen to their story in vipassanā.

In daily life, we cultivate mettā in acts of friendship—making someone a cup of tea, taking time to visit. Or we could join a local club, donate towards a community project. In all cases, we need to keep reminding ourselves that our actions are for our own and others' welfare. Otherwise, we can easily slip into attachment: being friendly so that we'll feel good, or so that people will like us, and then getting a shock when our expectations aren't met. That shock can lead on to resentment and other manifestations of ill will. Altruism is quite a tough practice.

I remember my first clear seeing of this. I was on retreat and noticed a hammer had been left in the garden—probably someone forgot it after doing some work. I picked it up and brought it back to the tool shed. I noticed how strongly I wanted to leave a note explaining where I'd found it and what I'd assumed. But I also felt the neediness underlying this. Basically, I wanted them to know how caring and kind I was. It seemed like such a waste just to leave the hammer back without getting any recognition for my good deed. But luckily, I had the sense not to encourage my neediness, and I sadly left it back with no note and no mark of recognition.

After that, it was easier to spot the bonds of attachment in almost every so-called good deed. Just seeing was the really important thing. Then I had a choice. I could cut out whatever aspects of my good deed were really about getting praise and recognition. I could acknowledge the sense of loss in all this, and I could make the good wish—even though this was usually with a tight grimace.

This is an example of how mettā brings up the near and far enemies. If we find ourselves anxiously anticipating our friend's next words, we need to acknowledge that this is attachment and step back to regain our equilibrium. Perhaps we just go quiet for a while, directing mettā towards ourselves. Or we might need to remove ourselves physically to avoid the temptation to seek reassurance or otherwise burden them with our needs.

Caring for ourselves builds up the confidence needed to overcome emotional dependency. We do this in a very deep way when we devote time to meditation. But every activity—washing, dressing, eating, working—is part of caring for our human life. We need to remind ourselves that our motivation is kindness. Otherwise, these easily slip into autopilot and emotional self-neglect. "May I take care of myself happily" is a good phrase to remember as we go about our daily activities.

This can bring up another shade of the far enemy. For myself, the practice around eating has shown up a lot of guilt. If I find myself looking in the cupboard for a snack, I prefer to do this without any reflection

rather than say, "May I take care of myself happily." The reflection brings up all kinds of questions like: Do I really need this? Should I be having this? Isn't this self-indulgence?

At first, the only way I could deal with the situation was to close the cupboard door and go without that little perk. And I'd feel pretty bad for having even tried to take a snack. But then half an hour later, I'd be munching my way through the biscuits anyhow. The desire would have slipped through and got me to the cupboard.

After a bit of reflection, I started experimenting with mindful indulgence as a way of working more skilfully with the desire and guilt cycle. I needed to plan a few treats which were obviously not just for the sake of nourishing the body—like cheesecake and ice cream. I would eat slowly, pausing whenever the guilt surfaced, letting it ebb away into a good wish for my own happiness. And when the treat was over and the guilt would be persuading me to be very judgmental about my unnecessary indulgence, I would instead thank myself for having given myself this little perk to cheer myself up.

Gradually, this has undermined the automatic guilt which surfaces around pleasure. I can more willingly resist unnecessary treats and feel grateful that my better judgment overcame the habit of desire. And I can more easily admit that if I'm feeling a bit low, a biscuit—or maybe cheesecake and ice cream—will cheer me up.

So in daily life, we need to find skilful ways of working around the patterns of ill will that so easily manifest, rather than expect too much of ourselves in the mettā department.

In daily life, the attempt to practice mettā can also get twisted around to ill will when we identify with the feeling of mettā. We want so much to think of ourselves as kindly and benevolent. But when people who push our buttons show us that we're nothing of the sort, then we fly into a rage at the most petty remark. So now we have a new reason to hate them.

It's the old problem of identity. If we start bringing "me, a benevolent person" into the equation, we end up in trouble. We need to keep reminding ourselves that until we're fully enlightened, "me" will become all kinds of different characters depending on the situation. The rotten-hearted, fizzling-with-rage me is our reminder to cultivate self-care.

When our nearest and dearest have managed to push that button and we are on the verge of a blazing row, it's usually best to beat a hasty retreat before we say anything to worsen the situation. If we say something nasty—which of course seems perfectly justified in the heat of the moment—it ends up making things an awful lot harder for ourselves. The Buddha put right speech amongst the three steps on morality in the Eightfold Path.

This may be because most of us involved in spiritual development would think carefully before thumping someone or doing any physical deed that would harm them. But harmful speech comes out so easily when we feel threatened. It can slip out before we've had time to think. "The tongue like a sharp knife kills

without drawing blood," as the ancient Chinese proverb tells us.

It helps to have a stock phrase in mind, something like, "I can't think clearly about this right now, I'll get back to you later." Then we go off somewhere quiet to let ourselves fizzle out. When we've calmed a bit, we often feel the sorrow underlying our bout of rage. Often this is linked to the truth of anattā, showing us how little control we have over others and even over our own emotions. Although the facts are, as you have heard a thousand times before, the feeling of not being able to control that which we care about always challenges us to the core.

Rather than give out to ourselves about our limitations, we need to learn to offer ourselves mettā in compassionate terms—perhaps some comforting gesture like stroking our hand and reassuring ourselves that it's all okay. Eventually we may be able to tune into the basic humanity of whoever it was that angered us and wish them to come to no harm.

Let's turn now to look at the Buddha's teachings on the value of spiritual friendship, or kalyāṇa mittatā in Pali. One teaching starts with Ānanda remarking, "This is half of the holy life, Lord—admirable friendship, admirable companionship." The Buddha replied, "Don't say that, Ānanda, don't say that. Admirable friendship, admirable companionship is actually the whole of the holy life. When a monk has admirable people as friends, companions and colleagues, he can be expected to develop and pursue the Noble Eightfold Path."

At first sight this seems a bit odd. The Buddha is more often heard advising people to withdraw to some secluded place to meditate. Now here he is telling Ānanda that friendship and companionship constitute the whole of the holy life. Sounds great, doesn't it? Maybe we can just hang about chatting while the Dhamma somehow filters in.

But the sutta doesn't end there, and in the next paragraph the Buddha is back to his more usual form: "And how does a monk who has admirable people as friends, companions and colleagues develop and pursue the Noble Eightfold Path? There is the case where a monk develops right view dependent on seclusion, dependent on dispassion, dependent on cessation, resulting in relinquishment." Right view is the first part of the Noble Eightfold Path, and he says the same about all the other parts.

So we still have to do all the usual hard work. But the point being made here is that the work is done in the context of friendship. This emphasises the humanity in the Buddhist teaching. Too often we hear words like seclusion and dispassion and think of the path as a solitary, antisocial, lonely affair. But here the Buddha is placing human friendship as the essential frame for all our work.

He describes the friendship we need for spiritual life as admirable and gives this definition: "And what is meant by admirable friendship? There is the case where a lay person, in whatever town or village he may dwell, spends time with householders or householders' sons, young or old, who are advanced in virtue. He talks with them, engages them in discussions." The language gets complex from here on, but the gist of it is

that the person emulates the best in each of them—copying the generosity of the generous friend, the wisdom of the wise friend, and so on.

Basically, we are to seek out virtuous friends, find the best in them, and copy that. If we are lucky enough to have a Dhamma group, we already have a source of admirable friendship. This is such a wonderful gift. I found a meditation group in the mid-1980s, and over the past thirty years they have become my best friends. When we chat about our various challenges and inspirations in life, we end up framing this in the context of the Dhamma. So quite naturally our attitudes, speech and lifestyle have become better aligned with the Dhamma just by spending time in each other's company.

Now let's look at his specific advice to seek out the best in each of our friends and copy that. At one level this happens naturally. In any group you get norms for behaviour. So if getting drunk every night is a badge of honour in your friendship group, then you'll probably feel odd, even a bit ashamed, if you're not a drinker. The Buddha counsels against making unwise friendships like these, saying they are a drain on our resources.

But amongst our wise friends, generosity, caring for others, going on retreat or daily meditation practice might be badges of honour. So our own behaviour naturally tends to move up towards the group norm. Our goodness rubs off on one another at a subconscious level.

Can we also bring that to the level of conscious choice? Can we actively seek out what's most admirable in our friends and copy that? Certainly we can, though we might often run into obstacles on the way. Ireland, for example, has been described as a nation of begrudgers. We seek for the downside in every success story, the cloud behind the silver lining. To the extent that a begrudging cultural norm rubs its way down to each of us, we find it hard to trust and value goodness in our friends and even in ourselves. So the Buddha's advice offers valuable balance to any cultural tendency to suspect the worst in everyone.

To take an example, I have some wonderful friends who have a greater capacity than me to smile at human weakness, to not get too hung up about it. My own tendency is to get depressed when I hear someone's making a mess of things.

And when I see my friends smiling, I can find myself wondering, do they have no sympathy? We've talked about this at various stages, and I completely trust that their smile is based not on a lack of sympathy but on having a wider perspective on the situation. To put it in Dharma terms, you could say that they see the first noble truth in action—that life involves suffering—but trust that the other three will eventually save the day.

The effort I've had to put into understanding and trusting their perspective illustrates how hard it is for us to value virtues that we haven't developed strongly in ourselves. Much easier to ignore these, or even quietly dismiss them as a vice rather than a virtue—for example, my tendency to interpret their smiles as lack of sympathy.

Recognising a virtue that we haven't developed strongly ourselves is hard enough, but copying it is even harder. My laryngectomy operation was a case in point. My friends were better able than me to see things in perspective—a huge loss, yes, but not a major disaster. This allowed them to care for me very effectively and incredibly generously throughout the whole episode.

At times, though, my sense of the situation was that all the goodness had gone out of life. I just couldn't understand how they could be happy. It felt like treachery. In meditation, as I tried to bring their smiles into consciousness, a knot of tension would gather and I would recoil in agony. All my aversion was projected outwards onto them, seeing them as uncaring and even cruel.

But with the practice of dropping the thoughts and noting each emotion, I would eventually unwind into compassion for my sorry state. In the kindly gaze of compassion, I could admit that the basis of all this turmoil was nothing to do with my friends at all. Instead, it was aversion to having lost my voice. With that admission, I could begin to see the value of moving on, accepting this new situation, working with it as best I could. At that stage, their smiles were seen as friendly and encouraging, and in my mind's eye I could stretch out my hand gingerly towards them, let them lead me into my new life.

So the Buddha's advice—find the best in your friends and try to copy it—is extremely valuable but very challenging. It brings up vanity, the way we cling haughtily to "I'm better than you" as our inner begrudger dismisses their virtue. Or we collapse into the despair of "I'm worse than you" and curl up into a ball of jealousy. Or we cling tight to the pleasant notion of "we're just the same" as our imagination pulls them into our gang—people we can understand and feel easy with.

All of these, the Buddha says, are forms of vanity, clinging to the notion "I am." But this clinging doesn't do us any justice. We're trying to define who we are, fit ourselves into a box, when in fact we're continually evolving and changing. We're on our journey to the end of suffering. It doesn't matter whether our friends are more or less developed, only that they're willing to help us along our path and we're willing to accept their help—and vice versa, that we're willing to help them.

Any practical help must start with goodwill. Otherwise we'll end up trying to impose our supposed wisdom on them. So we bring them into our hearts in mettā practice—the basis for spiritual friendship.

I want to close with the final part of the Buddha's conversation with Ānanda:

And through this line of reasoning, one may know how admirable friendship, admirable companionship is actually the whole of the holy life. It is in dependence on me as an admirable friend that beings subject to ageing have gained release from ageing.

He goes on to say the same about death, sorrow, lamentation, pain, distress, and despair, before concluding:

It is through this line of reasoning that one may know how having admirable friendship, admirable

companionship, admirable camaraderie is actually the whole of the holy life.

Here the Buddha is inviting us to reflect on his life and the many people who have benefited from his teaching, and thus to develop gratitude and admiration for him. This sits a bit uneasily with his teaching of not-self. If nothing in his phenomenal being had any permanent substantial essence, what is it we are admiring and being grateful for?

Although we can't identify a permanent essence with anything tangible about the Buddha, we can acknowledge that his dedication to finding an escape from dukkha and teaching others what he discovered had an enormous impact on the world. As a result, here we are on our own path to enlightenment. We can admire and be grateful for his dedication, energy, patience, compassion, and all the other qualities that fuelled his spiritual life. Chief among these are his wisdom and awareness, satipañña. Using these faculties he discovered that which is unborn, undying, the end of all suffering.

And while we can't paint a mental picture of whatever in him enjoys the perfect peace of Nibbāna, we can each in our own way attempt to take that mystery to heart. For myself, this would mean allowing myself to wonder: what is it in him that is unborn, undying, the end of suffering? Of course, I have no answers. Sometimes my mind conjures up a bright light and I feel myself basking in its warmth. Often the initial pleasure turns to some form of dukkha, perhaps grief that I can't grasp onto that light, hold it forever in my heart. But the grief is sensed as healing, teaching me to let go of attachment to any image or notion of what enlightenment might be. Recognising this, gratitude comes up, and a deeper commitment to this contemplation.

Now, of course, our begrudging attitudes show up here too.

Who does he think he is asking everyone to adore him? Does he think he's God Almighty? But we know the drill. Know thoughts as thoughts. Feel the feelings. Trust things to evolve in the light of awareness.

As I take on this practice, what happens is that I feel myself developing a personal relationship with the Buddha. My imagination can be drawn towards the details of his life—remembering his shock when he realised the futility of his princely life, seeing him say his last goodbye to his wife and son, creeping out of the palace to take up the life of a wandering ascetic. Later on, after years of hardship, accepting the rice milk from Sujata. That's a very inspiring image for me. I see it as the moment he recognised that his humanity and bodily needs form part of his spiritual path.

Another very touching moment for me is during his last temptation before enlightenment, when Mara, his inner begrudger, sneers, "What makes you think you could be enlightened? What have you done to merit that? Who do you think you are?" This is the hindrance of self-doubt, a challenge for every human being. In all the other temptations, he was able to sit still and not be swayed. But here his resolution is shaking. He feels the need of support. He stretches his hand down to touch the earth, calling it as witness to his right to come to the end of suffering.

As I contemplate these and other stories from the life of the Buddha, he becomes a more tangible presence in my life. Imagining his serenity under the rose apple tree, I feel serene. Imagining his courage in leaving home, I feel myself grow in courage. Seeing him reach down to the earth in his moment of self-doubt, I feel myself as part of the earth reassuring him, encouraging him to press on.

This growing sense of friendship, companionship, camaraderie makes it a bit easier to contemplate his enlightened state. The touch of friendship extends beyond my understanding, encouraging me to make peace with the mystery of the unborn, undying, the end of suffering. There is a growing trust that whatever it is or isn't, there is nothing to fear.

This is the practice of devotion. Those of us brought up in Christianity will be familiar with the approach. Contemplating the life of Jesus as we say the Rosary, for example—devotion is a way of opening the heart. It's a form of mettā practice, where we make the Buddha the object of our mettā. One teacher calls it falling in love with the Buddha.

Now, of course, falling in love is not plain sailing. It can evoke great inner turmoil. We can fall in and out of love at a great rate. Wandering mind, dullness, restlessness, aversion—all the hindrances come up as we bring the Buddha to mind. At times we'll be able to simply note these and then come back to the main focus, the Buddha. At times we have to give our full attention to whatever hindrance is uppermost, trusting that it will eventually burn itself out in the light of awareness. So we can switch between devotion and mindfulness as appropriate. It's like any relationship. At times we can be completely focused on the other. At times we need to withdraw and tend to ourselves, maybe to lick our wounds.

This retreat is an ideal opportunity to follow the Buddha's teaching on kalyāṇa mittatā, spiritual friendship. If it weren't for the people around us, we wouldn't be spending so many hours a day in meditation. So everyone here is our spiritual friend. We could devote a portion of our meditation practice to bringing each other into our hearts, being grateful for our connection within the group. Let's vow to look for the best in one another and copy that.

And for those of you who like falling in love, then give in to the temptation. Fall in love with the Buddha. Or you might prefer a somewhat more Buddhist phrase: become the Buddha within.

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