

Mettā for a Cold Heart

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Metta for a Cold Heart!

A cold heart is the antithesis of the friendly goodwill of metta. The coldness may seem impenetrable, but if we mindfully follow the process of enmity we might see how it is generated by greed, hatred and delusion. We may notice the enticement of delusive, unanswerable questions like „why did this happen ...how could you do this?“ the seductive longing for the downfall or our enemy, as well as self-judgement which condemns such vengeance. As we let the thoughts go we might feel ourselves caught in a sore, hurting state. Vengeance pulling the heart and mind and flesh in one direction, self-judgement blocking their path, delusion compounding the misery with its attempts at explanation. If we watch all this drama until we see that this is self-torture, then we accept defeat. We cannot knowingly torture ourselves forever. At that point it's often possible to find, buried within the confusion and humiliation of defeat, the willingness to move towards peace, to acknowledge what is good both in ourselves and in our enemy. Thus vipassana naturally undermines our tendency towards enmity and develops our capacity for friendliness and forgiveness. But the seeds of greed, hatred and delusion are sown deep within us, and the whole battle can be re-enacted with even the slightest encouragement. Metta, the Buddha taught, is the antidote to hatred. We develop goodwill for ourselves and others by repeating phrases such as „May I / you be well & happy'. A sense of kindness may arise and we might feel our body soften. These healing feelings further encourage us towards peace and reconciliation.

Sometimes a deep seed of hatred can be excavated by meditation practice or by some traumatic life event. At those times, practicing metta may be even more painful than vipassana as we feel ourselves squirm away from any possibility of goodwill or trust or forgiveness. Instead of feeling soft and warm we may feel the tension of anger rising and gripping us. The words „May I / you be well' may seem ridiculous and be rejected in derisive scorn. This can lead to even deeper turmoil. How rotten can I be that I can't even wish myself well, or my friends or family, or even my dog!

At such times I find it helpful to remember the words of Thomas Merton, „Prayer and love are learned in the hour when prayer becomes impossible and your heart

has turned to stone.” I encourage myself to see cold-heartedness as a revelation of deep suffering, a state to be honoured rather than despised. If we saw a dog injured on the roadside, would we kick it and say “You disgusting animal, clean up that wound before I see you again.” But yet we can easily compound our emotional hurt with such self-disgust. I try to tread very carefully here – noting the self-disgust, the wish to turn away, as well as the turmoil or coldness I am turning from. Sometimes the words of metta may seem aggressive – a desperate attempt to cover up a wound even with a dirty bandage. If so I relax as best I can into the simple experience of the hurting state. Sometimes it can seem OK to receive goodwill from friends, family (or the dog!). At other times receiving is also out of bounds. But if I keep gingerly investigating my condition I may eventually find a chink in my armour. Then I might be able to turn towards my closed heart, saying perhaps “For as long as you need to be closed that’s OK, I’m willing to wait, I will wait.” Even the coldest heart-states ultimately succumb to patience.

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