

## Metta's Many Chambers of the Heart

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This talk is about metta, and the many chambers of the heart we encounter when we practice with it. We should probably start with a review of what metta is.

In the first pages of the Dhammapada, the Buddha explains that what we think determines how we feel and whether we are happy. We are exhorted to abandon negative thoughts about others, even those we think have wronged us, and instead, "live in love."

In the sutta called the Parable of the Saw, the Buddha said that no matter how others speak to us, or behave toward us, however extreme, "We shall abide pervading that person with a mind imbued with loving-kindness, and ... abide pervading the all-encompassing world with a mind imbued with loving-kindness, abundant, exalted, immeasurable, without hostility, and without ill will."

So, metta is a very big thing. It is love for the "all-encompassing world." That's love for all beings, for all that *is*. With no exceptions. It is universal love. And unconditional. The Parable of the Saw says even if a gang of bandits cuts you to pieces with a two-handed saw, you should dwell in good will and love.

Wow. That's a difficult sutta to teach. Most people easily accept the idea of love and the idea of loving "all beings." It's hard, though, to put faces to this idea. Especially the nasty ones, like bandits carrying around a two-handed saw.

For our purposes tonight, the definition of metta in the Visuddhimagga is best. It says, "The characteristic of loving-kindness is to promote [the practitioner's] well-being. Its function is to prefer well-being. Its manifestation is the removal of annoyance. Its proximate cause is seeing the loveliness of beings. It succeeds when it makes ill will subside, and it fails when it produces... [self-absorption]."

Traditional metta practice has us bring to mind in order ourselves, a benefactor, some neutral person, a friend, a difficult person, and all beings. With each category in mind, we silently repeat phrases of good will. My teachers offered a variety of phrases and said we should feel free to modify them so they worked for us.

There's a value in this progression from someone easy to love, then continuing gradually to more complex, even difficult, people to focus good will on. I have what's almost a mantra: don't start with Hitler. Maybe don't try him for the first decade of your practice. Or ever.

Many people have trouble offering love to themselves, not wanting to be “selfish,” or feeling they’re not worthy. Rather than argue with them, I suggest starting with someone they do love, who they would like to “shower with love.” Then eventually try themselves again.

The idea of the benefactor is a way to keep this shower of love simple. The benefactor has simply done something nice for us. We don’t owe them anything, we have no ongoing relationship with the usual complex feelings, we just feel warmly toward our benefactor.

When you get to someone difficult, which a friend could turn out to be, remember that you’re not actually interacting with any being. You’re just encouraging your heart to open. When it won’t, many people feel bad about it, even blaming themselves.

I adored my sister Debra all my life. She died five years ago and I grieved for... well, I still do. For the second year after her death, I felt anger over all the ways she’d hurt me. I didn’t decide to feel angry, I just did. I didn’t feel bad about this anger, because I’d had enough experience with love and grief to know the many feelings that can be mixed with love.

There’s no reason to blame ourselves. Metta can visit all the many chambers of the heart, revealing to us how multi-dimensional love can be. When we practice with it, it’s like we have the best seats in a theater to watch the dramas of our lives. We can sit back, relax and be comfortable, knowing that love underpins whatever else we feel.

Most complaints I’ve heard about traditional metta practice over the years is that the phrases feel wooden and tedious. They can be, that’s true. They are also used in concentration practice, where they are slightly more interesting than watching the breath. The purpose is to narrow attention into concentration, which is different than opening and expanding the heart, which metta practice intends to do.

For the purpose of opening the heart and making it easier for us to accept the truth of the moment, metta phrases serve several functions. They incline the mind toward lovingkindness. As we continue with the practice, the phrases are like drops of water on a stone, shaping our minds over time and making it easier for us to be happy.

A problem of mine, and many other students’, is that the phrases feel like magical thinking, when in fact they can’t have any impact in the world around us. They can do that only by changing our behavior, which does happen – gradually.

To avoid the impression that we’re calling on some external power to improve the conditions of people’s lives, instead of, “May you be happy,” I say, “May you *feel* peaceful, may you *feel*

happy.” For me, without any hint of magic, this reinforces my goodwill for others. And that is the purpose of these metta phrases.

What we get from metta practice can be limited by what we expect from it. If we expect it to make us blissfully happy as we’re doing it, or to have an actual impact on others, we can end up feeling that we, or the practice, failed. It’s very unlikely a session of metta meditation will transform us into people who love everyone completely all the time.

Almost all of us have someone in our lives we dislike or can’t forgive for something. If we cling to the idea of getting results from our practice by “sending” them metta, well, that’s dukkha: a step backward. My teachers on metta retreats warned us not to expect to feel anything in particular, and still we strived to feel a desire for the person’s happiness.

We can be shocked and disappointed with ourselves when we feel bitterness instead of love toward some beings, even toward ourselves. This does not mean we’ve failed at metta or meditation. It just means we’ve seen into our hearts. And that’s an invaluable thing to do.

In fact, some of the richest moments in metta practice are when we think we’ve failed at it. These uncomfortable responses to metta practice are like buried treasure in our hearts. Going through them shows us our own depth and complexity. Accepting their existence with love makes us wise.

The brilliance of metta practice is that we encounter these forms of resistance at a time when we have been inclining the mind toward love. This means that the struggle we feel is held in a more accepting attitude than it otherwise would be.

We get a chance to look at ourselves, the other, and our relationship with clear eyes and a relatively open heart. Even if the stress is so great that we back away from seeing all that the moment has to show us, we have still seen more deeply into our hearts.

Afterwards, our minds will work to re-integrate what we’ve learned with our previous ideas and emotions. We don’t have to do this work of re-integrations. It’s better, actually, if we don’t try to “figure it out.” Overthinking our practice can rob us of its benefits.

In the “Introduction to Meditation” course I teach each year, during the second week of interviews, I’m usually advising most students to devote ten minutes of their daily meditation to metta for themselves. By then it’s become obvious they need it. We can be so hard on ourselves that it interferes with our ability to meditate at all.

We can easily lapse into habits of berating ourselves for misdeeds that can be ridiculously minor. Six weeks of intentionally loving ourselves can reorganize our perceptions of ourselves and the beings in the world around us.

Taking this time each day to tell ourselves we are lovable makes life easier. It makes us more relaxed and able to accept the truth of how things are, especially how *we* are. After a few weeks, some of my students went on to practice metta for others, or all beings.

Repeating metta phrases isn't the only way to cultivate metta. We can definitely practice metta without them. I have spent many an hour with the phrases. In the past several years, though, my practice has focused on mindfulness in daily life.

One of my favorite practices is to appreciate people, animals, plants – the whole planet and universe. I do this formally in the morning while doing a little Qi Gung, and then when I encounter a squirrel or bird or person or dog. Or flowers. Each time I focus on some being with metta, I can feel my heart open. It makes me happy.

I know people who practice metta by way of generosity, holding in their hearts the beings they're helping to benefit as they lend a hand or give money. Metta isn't just a method of repeating phrases in your mind. It can become a way of life.

I know a lot of people who give a lot to political causes, and there are definitely two ways of doing this. Their motivation can be the well-being of us all, or anger at those who seem to threaten others. Activists who go door to door with metta probably influence more people, while actions driven by aversion will bring dukkha – however subtle – to all parties.

When we are at odds with people we love, it's so beneficial to remember metta. All of the four Brahmaviharas work together: love, compassion, joy at others' happiness, and equanimity.

Bringing any or all of them to mind before or during our contacts with difficult people may not magically solve the conflict. It *will* improve the interaction and how it makes us feel, however subtly.

It will also give us a chance to look at our dukkha and understand why we're feeling it. We will probably see that our unhappiness comes from our love for them, mixed in with our cravings or aversions. This is a painful mixture. And, seeing this mixture gives our unconscious mind a chance to sort it out.

When we want what we're not getting or dislike what we get, that's dukkha – and it's painful. Adopting a mindset of metta shows us that, like all instances of tension, it can be overcome,

not by hatred, but only by love. As the Dhammapada says, that's an eternal and immutable truth.

In whatever way you cultivate metta, I hope for you that it becomes a way of life. That will bring a world of happiness. May you feel peaceful, may you feel happy, may you live with ease and accept your self and all beings just as we are, every moment.

Thank you