

Metta Meditation

It's helpful to take time every day to practice metta meditation.

In and of itself, metta meditation is beneficial. It's calming. It's healing. Practicing metta, we experience pleasant, blissful states. But we should remember that metta meditation isn't meant to be a stand-alone practice; the main purpose of the meditation is to help us strengthen our ability to take actions that are an expression of lovingkindness and good will. As always, it's all about action.

There isn't much point in practicing metta meditation if, after getting off the cushion, we don't take skillful actions.

Try to practice metta meditation every day. That's the recommendation. Practice every day for at least five or ten minutes.

You might practice at the beginning of your daily period of sitting meditation, before you practice breath meditation. Or you might do the metta meditation after practicing breath meditation. Or both. Or you might do it at some other juncture during the day.

Here are some basic instructions:

Find a comfortable sitting posture. It's helpful in metta meditation if you're able to maintain a comfortable posture; you don't want to have to put much, if any, effort into dealing with physical pain.

Close your eyes. However, if you begin to feel dull or sleepy, keep your eyes slightly open. There needs to be a degree of energy in order to get the most out of the meditation. Without sufficient energy, it's going to be difficult to connect to the heart.

Take a few moments to center yourself in your breath. Then enlarge your awareness. Be mindful of your entire body.

Then bring your attention to your "heart center," the place, probably somewhere in the upper body, where you connect to the feelings of lovingkindness, good will. Put your focus there.

If you like, place your hand on your heart center.

Keeping your attention on your heart, begin to see if you can get a felt sense of your wish to be happy.

As I've said, we all have the wish to be happy. Deep inside, we wish true happiness for ourselves. This is the most foundational statement of metta. It's an expression of self-love.

We have the wish to be happy. It's innate. But we're usually not connected to it. We're cut off from it. We've lost the signal, the way we might lose our internet connection. Our primary task in metta meditation is to connect to this wish.

As you connect to your wish to be happy, remember that in using the term "happy," you're not alluding to the happiness that people seek in following the ways of the world, the temporary happiness that derives from sense pleasure, gain, status, praise. You're referring to a greater happiness. True happiness. The happiness of the heart.

It's very important to learn to connect to a felt sense of your wish to be happy. You want to learn to feel this wish. Actually feel it. In the body. In the heart. You want to learn to know

it. The same way that right now you know the feeling of this book in your hands, the feeling of your body against the chair you're sitting in.

I learned to connect to a felt sense of the heart from the meditation teacher Michele McDonald. The suggestions I'm offering in this section are largely a reflection of what I've learned from Michele. Her teachings have made an extraordinary difference in my capacity to connect to my heart, to open my heart, to encounter life with an open heart. As Michele says, we want to learn to practice wordlessly. Or at least as wordlessly as possible. It will be necessary to apply some thinking in order to guide yourself toward your wish to be happy, the felt sense of the wish. But it will be to your advantage if you keep thought fabrication to a minimum. You might think of thought fabrication as scaffolding. You'll need some scaffolding in order to connect. But you don't want to mistake the scaffolding for the building. Your objective is to enter the building of metta. The scaffolding, the thought fabrication, just helps you get there.

Metta meditation, Michele McDonald says, is all about learning to connect. As spiritually-minded people, we might be interested in talking about things like love and compassion, but we might not be able to connect to these qualities. Practicing metta meditation, we learn to move beyond the thinking realm to the felt sense. We learn to get out of the head, into the body, into the heart.

It may be hard at first to connect to a felt sense of the heart. The felt sense may seem elusive. Going inside, being sensitive to what's inside may seem alien, incongruous, like finding yourself in room with people who are speaking a foreign language. But it's definitely something you can learn to do. Like everything, it takes practice. Practice, practice, practice. I've seen many students, at first unable to get in touch with their wish to be happy, eventually able to connect with great facility to the felt sense.

If it's hard to connect, simply incline yourself toward knowing a felt sense of your wish to be happy. Orient yourself toward the felt sense, like somebody looking toward the horizon, watching for the sun to rise. Develop the intention to connect. It all begins with intention.

Connected to a felt sense, put your attention right there. Focus on the felt sense of your wish to be happy. This is how we cultivate any quality, by focusing on it, shining the light of awareness on it.

Connected, let the felt sense unfold, expand. Deepen into it. Absorb into it.

As you cultivate the felt sense of your wish to be happy, you'll begin to feel lovingkindness. You'll begin to feel the love you have for yourself. The feeling may be characterized by a warmth, a tenderness. As you connect to this feeling, put your attention on it. Allow the feeling of lovingkindness to suffuse your heart.

As the feeling of lovingkindness radiates, let it radiate, let it flow out, into your body. Let it move, out, beyond your body.

This is precisely the Buddha's instruction for cultivating the heart.

"That disciple of the noble ones — thus devoid of covetousness, devoid of ill will, unbewildered, alert, mindful — keeps pervading the first direction (east) with an awareness imbued with good will, likewise the second, likewise the third, likewise the fourth. Thus above, below, & all around, everywhere, in its entirety, he keeps pervading the all-encompassing cosmos with an awareness imbued with good will — abundant, expansive, immeasurable, without hostility, without ill will." (AN 10.208)

Metta is a real thing. It's something you can feel. It's not just an idea. It's not just conceptual. For many of us, love is a concept. A fairly abstract concept. But when you cultivate a felt sense of the heart, in the manner described here, you come to know that it's a real thing.

Your ability to connect to the heart will develop, slowly, over time. If you keep making an effort, the results will begin to show. But you can't force the results. You have to watch out for the desire to make things happen too quickly, to obtain fast results. You have to be careful not to push too hard. Remember the simile of the lute. The key, as ever, is to apply the right amount of effort. If you don't make enough effort, you won't be able to connect to your wish to be happy. If you make too much effort, you'll foil your attempts to connect. You'll create dis-ease. You'll give rise to something quite the opposite of lovingkindness. If you become disappointed in your progress, if you become frustrated, impatient, you'll jam the signal, you'll sabotage your capacity to connect.

In practicing metta meditation, it's sometimes helpful to use "metta phrases." As we've said, we want to practice as wordlessly as possible. We want to put up as little scaffolding as possible. But at certain times saying phrases may support our efforts to connect.

Phrases might include:

"May I be happy of heart."

"May I have true happiness."

"May I be safe and protected."

"May I be healthy and strong."

"May I live with ease and well-being."

In general you'll want to begin the meditation by following the guidelines we've set forth: put your attention on your heart, connect to a felt sense of the wish that you have to be happy. If it's difficult to acquire a felt sense, you might want to try using some phrases. If you think that saying phrases will facilitate your ability to connect, by all means try it. With your attention on your heart, say the phrases softly, silently. You may want to use just one phrase.

“May I be happy of heart.”

Say the phrase. Maybe once. Maybe twice. Then let the phrase go, let it drop, as though you're letting it drop down, into your body, into your heart, as if you're dropping a stone into a pond. The stone drops, down, into, through, the water. Ripples form, spread out.

As you say the phrases, see if you begin to detect a felt sense of your wish to be happy. If you notice a felt sense, put your attention there. If you're not able to connect to a felt sense, that's okay. You're developing intention. You're planting seeds. Sooner or later, they'll sprout and blossom.

In using phrases, you may want to say the phrase every now and then. You'll want to experiment, find a suitable pace, a rhythm. You may decide to say the phrases at certain intervals. You may choose to use just one phrase, such as “May I be happy of heart.” Or you may choose to use several phrases. See what works for you, what supports your efforts to connect to a felt sense of your wish to be happy.

There may be times when you'll decide to repeat the phrases, again and again, perhaps in synch with your breathing. This strategy is often useful when the mind is dull, sleepy; saying the phrases may help you to rouse energy, stay alert.

When using phrases, pay attention to the way you're saying the words. Sometimes there's a tendency to say the phrases in a dull, monotonous fashion. Be careful of sliding into this sort

of affectless pattern. Try instead to say the words with a degree of wholeheartedness, earnestness.

Try to have an appreciation for what the phrases mean. When you say, “May I be happy,” know what that implies. Understand the subtext. Understand that when you’re speaking about happiness, you’re referring to the Buddha’s happiness, you’re not alluding to the sort of “happiness” that comes when you scarf down a piece of cake or buy a new cell phone. You’re talking about true happiness.

Begin the meditation by connecting to your wish for true happiness. Then develop your wish for true happiness for people you love, family members and friends for whom your heart is open, people who support you in your life. Begin to connect to the wish you have for these people. Put your attention on the felt sense.

If you like, you might try using some phrases, such as, “May you have true happiness.”

As you practice, certain people will appear in your mind’s eye; when that occurs, focus on the person. Connect to your wish for them that they have true happiness.

It often will help to have a visual image of the person.

During a meditation, several people who are dear to you may come to mind. Wish each of them well. Connect to the heart.

It’s important to remember that cultivating the wish that somebody find true happiness doesn’t necessarily mean that they’ll find it. In the final analysis, whether somebody discovers true happiness depends on what they do, the actions they take. We cultivate metta for others so that we might strengthen our ability to relate to them with greater skill, greater kindness. We cultivate metta so that, in interacting with others, we might support the other’s efforts to know true happiness.

Next, you can develop metta for other people you know. There are, of course, many people with whom we have relationships, with whom we engage, with whom we cross paths as we travel the days and nights of our lives. With some people, such as co-workers, we might have a more involved relationship; with others, such as the cashier in the local supermarket, our relationship may be less involved. But in practicing metta, in cultivating the heart, it's important to remember all the people we come into contact with, all those we know, regardless of how well we know them.

In developing metta for others, it's very useful to think of the practice as one in which we're extending good will to the other. While it may be a challenge to open to the notion of loving a broad spectrum of people, we may find it not-so-difficult to offer them our good will. When we extend good will to others, we're not saying that we're going to take care of the other, be there for them no matter what; we're simply wishing them well, we're wishing them inner peace, ease, well-being in their lives. In many situations, for many of us, extending good will will be more realistic, more truthful, than seeking to extend love. Many students find it far easier, in practicing with others, to extend good will.

As you continue, bring to mind people you find difficult, people for whom you feel aversion. This is often a challenging part of the practice. It's always wise to move slowly through this rough terrain. Don't take on more than you can handle. Don't over-do it. In each meditation, you may want to choose one "difficult" person to work with; each time you practice, you can choose a different person.

And you don't have to choose the person who's most difficult for you; as you begin practicing metta meditation, you're probably better off if you don't choose to work with your arch-enemy.

It's always helpful to remember that in cultivating good will for a so-called difficult person, we're not condoning any unskillful behavior they might engage in, behavior that may have caused us to dislike them. We're wishing that they find true happiness, the happiness inside, the happiness of the heart. After all, if these hard-to-deal-with people find an inner happiness, they'll be much less likely to act in unskillful, harmful ways; they'll almost certainly be much easier to interact with.

Lastly, you can develop good will for all beings. In extending your good will to all beings, you might let your awareness radiate out, to the east, west, north, south, above, below, as you attempt to include all beings in your thoughts.

One of the benefits of metta meditation is that it helps us learn to connect to our wish to be happy. As we've noted, we tend to be cut off from this elemental wish. When I was child, I had a keen awareness of my wish to be happy. But as the years went on, I lost my connection to it. My wish to be happy was gradually covered over, obscured, like a kitchen wall covered with numerous layers of wallpaper. As we journey along the Buddha's path, we strip off the old wallpaper. We re-awaken to our wish to have true happiness. As I began to practice the dharma, I began to remember my wish to be happy. Metta meditation helped me strengthen my ability to be in touch with this wish, to open my heart to myself.

As you practice metta meditation, you'll gradually be more able to connect to your heart as you go through the day, as you engage in your daily affairs; you'll be more able, when taking action, to connect to your heart. As you become more connected to your wish to be happy, you'll be more able to recognize the wish that others have to be happy. You'll be more able to interact skillfully with others. You'll be more able to meet life with a sublime attitude.