Day 2 Afternoon: Introduction to Mettā Meditation

When we reflect on loving-kindness and use it as a meditation, it’s good to reflect on its foundation. One of the ways that Ajahn Sumedho describes this is “not dwelling in aversion.” That’s a helpful way to look at loving-kindness.

In the Noble Eightfold Path, there is *sammā saṅkappa*, Right Intention or Right Thought. There are three aspects of this: *nekkhamma saṅkappa,* the aspect of renunciation or not drifting into sensuality; *abyāpāda saṅkappa*, not thinking with ill will or aversion; and a*vihiṁsa saṅkappa*, thoughts of non-harming. The last two are often equated with loving-kindness and compassion.

For loving-kindness to arise, there have to be thoughts of non-ill will, non-aversion. These thoughts are fundamentally simple. We often think to ourselves, “I should be thinking these sublime thoughts of love for all beings, everywhere.” But it’s a great start if you can just not get averse to other beings. It’s easier to begin this way as well. You can then encourage yourself along the way.

Encouraging ourselves is very important. That in itself is an act of loving-kindness, encouraging ourselves in something skillful. Bhante Gunaratana tells a lovely story. He was going to teach in Europe, and when it was getting close to the time that he was to leave, the person who invited him called and asked him, “What do you teach?” He said, “I teach mindfulness. I teach *vipassanā*.” And she said, “You don’t teach loving-kindness do you? I hate loving-kindness!”

In actual fact, loving-kindness is a major foundation for Bhante G’s teachings. The reason why the sponsor hated loving-kindness was she felt that she was supposed to have it for everybody. She had been through the Second World War and, being Jewish, had lost many family members and her culture. So she had the hope, “You aren’t going to get me to do loving-kindness.”

However, when you reflect on loving-kindness, you realize that not to dwell in aversion is an act of great kindness to yourself. The reality is that the very first person to receive any of the loving-kindness you are able to conjure up in your heart is you, whether it is directed to yourself or not. Classically, the way the instructions were set up from the time of the earliest commentaries on the Buddha’s teachings, when loving-kindness meditation was structured and systematized, was to direct loving-kindness towards yourself. You establish loving-kindness towards yourself before going on to generate loving-kindness for somebody else.

This has a very strong psychological foundation. You can’t really share anything until your cup is full, or at least until there is something in your cup. So you should direct attention to the cultivation and bring into being thoughts of loving-kindness towards yourself. We can complicate this with feelings of uncertainty, doubt, or guilt: “Maybe I shouldn’t be doing it towards myself, because I’m not worthy.”

One of the monks in Australia, Ajahn Brahmavamso, teaches people that if you can’t start with yourself, start with anything that evokes a feeling of loving-kindness—a little puppy, a kitten, anything like that—because in reality, the cultivation of loving-kindness is not the repeating of the words and phrases. It’s about the actual experience of loving-kindness, warmth, acceptance, openness—the feeling tone of the heart, including concern for the happiness of yourself and others. It’s about generating that feeling.

In terms of meditation, it’s directing attention to the feeling or emotion of kindness and well-wishing and then finding ways to support and shore that up, to allow it to become stable, suffuse your own being with it, and spread it out. That requires mindfulness and attention, which is one of the reasons why I’m only introducing loving-kindness on the afternoon of the second day of teaching.

It’s important to see that loving-kindness has a context of the Refuges, precepts, mindfulness, and attention to the body, as well as faith, confidence, and effort. It is necessary to cultivate and develop all the spiritual faculties. A particular skillful and wholesome quality then arises, which you can then draw your attention to, while shining it forth.

When loving-kindness has a stable base, you can allow it to shine more brightly. Then if, for some reason, the feeling fades, you won’t say to yourself, “Oh, I’ve completely blown it. I came on a mettā retreat and I can’t keep the mettā going at all.” That’s not really the point. The point is that there is a comprehensive spiritual path to be cultivated. Loving-kindness is an opportunity or an option that we can direct attention to and see where it goes. We bring attention to the different faculties of our spiritual cultivation in meditation and, having built that base, we can then recognize that there is an opportunity to hone in on a particular mature emotion and allow it to come forward.

This is very powerful, useful, and healing, but it’s also only one of many aspects of the meditation. It’s not a matter of succeeding or failing: it’s seeing the opportunity that we have of cultivating the path and then seeing what comes up when we direct attention to loving-kindness. We can set our intention to the cultivation of loving-kindness and then start to be flooded by memories of something very painful. Perhaps there can be a lot of fear or aversion mixed in, but we can then direct attention to non-aversion: “Can I not get hooked into aversion and ill will?” Any practice that opens doors into the heart might result in not being sure what you find there, but they’re your own doors. It’s learning what is behind these doors that is important.

Again, this is one of the reasons why it’s so important to have the foundation of precepts, generosity, restraint, reflection, and investigation. This gives you the solidity and stability to be able to not be shaken by what appears out of the doorways of the mind. One of the popular images from Ajahn Chah’s teaching is the pond in the forest and how many wonderful creatures come to drink at that pond. It’s quite a benign image, with nice, little bunny rabbits and furry creatures, but that’s not all that comes to the pond. Aggressive ones with big teeth might like to drink there, too. This is nature as it is, and the mind is nature. Recognizing that it’s all a part of nature, nothing is a problem.

This is also a wholesome result of loving-kindness practice. As we cultivate loving-kindness more and become grounded in it, the perception that nothing is a problem becomes clearer and clearer, and we are always established in well-wishing.

It’s not that we *need* to wish for others’ happiness and well-being. This is just the way it is at a cellular level. This is the way the heart responds when it’s not being self-protective, when it’s not buying into its complications. We gain confidence in this. Doing loving-kindness as a practice makes this very conscious. As it is cultivated, it becomes second nature.

I think of Ajahn Chah as a stellar example of somebody with loving-kindness. People wanted to draw close to him because of that kindness. I remember once we were walking around Ajahn Chah’s monastery, Wat Pah Pong, with Ajahn Liem, after Ajahn Chah had passed away or maybe around the end of his life. Ajahn Liem, an excellent monk and teacher, said, “Ajahn Chah had such loving-kindness. That’s why so many people wanted to be with him, come close to him. That’s why I’ve opted for equanimity.” This loving-kindness creates a lot of work! People who have met Ajahn Liem know he has that air of equanimity. He’s in the midst of everything and his attitude is, “Oh, it’s just the world.”

In consciously cultivating loving-kindness, we use phrases. One of the ways of doing the meditation is to use a phrase and then let it resonate for a bit—such as the phrase of sharing loving-kindness, “May I be well, happy, and peaceful.” Set an intention of well-wishing and then allow it to resonate for a bit and settle in the body. Loving-kindness is not separated from what you are feeling in the body. Relax and settle. You are using the phrases as a meditation tool, a *parikamma*, a repetition that helps the mind to focus.

The articulation of loving-kindness in thought or verbalizing it helps you to see: this is the present moment. If this is the thought, then what’s the feeling? You can then draw attention into the heart. What’s the feeling? Relax, paying attention to the body and using the breathing to soften.

I’ll do this as a guided meditation. Then it will be something you can use on your own as a practice, at your own speed. I will do it at the speed that I feel comfortable with when teaching a group, which doesn’t necessarily mean that is how I do it when I’m on my own. To do the meditation, tune in to the body, paying attention to and relaxing your posture, allowing the breathing to settle deeply—tapping in to the rhythm of the breathing and planting a seed within that sphere of relaxation. Then pay attention to the feeling.

I can’t emphasize enough that *mettā bhāvanā*, the development of loving-kindness, is not about getting proficient at memorizing the lines or coming up with really neat new lines: “the revolutionary art of cultivating loving-kindness, new and improved!” Pay attention to the feeling and then allow that feeling to permeate, suffuse, and spread through the body, mind, and heart.

At the beginning there will just be little flickers of loving-kindness and the feeling that we associate with a sense of warmth, kindness, or loving attention. That’s fine. Recognize how to nurture that. The way of nurturing it is using phrases that seem meaningful. When Jayantā asked me if there was anything such as copies of different loving-kindness phrases she could bring, I said yes. Some of the phrases might resonate with you, and some might not. There is a whole array of different formulations. Become familiar with what actually resonates within the heart.

It’s the nature of the mind that once you have something that works quite nicely and you use it for a while, the mind gets inured to it. It’s then helpful to come at it from another angle and use other phrases, keeping it fresh.

The bringing up of the phrases is an act of mindfulness; being attentive and following a sequential pattern requires a certain mindfulness, attention, consistency, and application of mind. That is part of the cultivation. Bringing up and sustaining loving-kindness takes patience in using and repeating the phrases and techniques.

When loving-kindness appears, it is of course important not to grab on to it. Don’t take hold of this feeling of loving-kindness and desperately try to make it stable and steady. That is like taking a tiny little bird in your hand and squashing it. As with any other meditation object, you have to hold it very lightly, and if it stays, fine. It’s like shoring or propping it up and allowing it to grow. It’s very difficult to force that feeling.

As you direct attention to positive thoughts of well-being and well-wishing, it’s important not to try to fend off any negative thoughts. If negative thoughts of irritation and aversion come in, establish the mind in non-ill will towards them. There is a whole series of discourses in which the Buddha is sitting in the forest and Māra, the evil one (Buddhism’s Lucifer and the embodiment of the forces of darkness) comes and whispers in the Buddha’s ear: “You’re not really enlightened. It’s just a cop out,” or “You really should be taking more responsibility.”

The Buddha’s response is, “I know you, Māra.” That’s all it takes for Māra to pack up his gear; he’s done for. It’s the same for our own minds. The forces of Māra come whispering, “This is unbearable. . .” The response is, “I know you Māra.” We don’t have to destroy, annihilate, or get rid of the ill will. As soon as it’s seen clearly, the forces of Māra have no ammunition or traction. There’s nothing they can do.

This is a personification of what goes on in our own minds. If things come up in the mind, whether it’s something we’re really attracted to, want to distract ourselves with, or doubtful about, it’s really helpful to say, “I know you Māra.” And then bring constancy to the cultivation of loving-kindness or whatever meditation we are doing. Today we are using loving-kindness, but this really applies to our whole practice.

As you use the phrases, experiment with them. As you continue your practice, experiment and see what is helpful for sustaining the feeling of well-wishing. It’s like lighting a fire. You have a lighter or a match, and then you have a small flame. You light some paper, get some kindling and some bigger wood, and you can build a bigger and bigger fire.

You do the same thing within the heart. You have a small flame of “May I be well.” Just attend to that, nurture it, and protect it from the wind. Slowly get more fuel for that positive feeling. Start with a small spark and then allow it to gain momentum.

That’s the quality we bring into the practice, that intention of nurturing, of protecting, of bringing into being something that is very wholesome, positive, and precious. Take care to allow yourself to do that. Sometimes we don’t give ourselves the time or space simply to allow a feeling of warmth, vulnerability, care, or security to establish itself. It’s a curious aspect of the human condition, but there it is. It’s a great gift to be able to give ourselves that time and space.

I’m going to do a guided meditation using particular phrases for the sharing of loving-kindness. This is quite a classical way of doing it. The phraseology might not be classical, but the approach is classical in the sense of directing loving-kindness towards yourself, your parents, and your teachers—the people who are most karmically important and binding. Then start to spread it out to your family, friends, and then even those who are unfriendly because loving-kindness starts to be non-discriminative. Even those who are unfriendly—they’re suffering, and we wish for them to be happy. Then extend loving-kindness out to all living beings without distinction.

*(Guided Meditation)*

Again, begin by settling into the posture, relaxing any tension you are feeling in the shoulders, around the eyes, the jaw. Allow the breath to settle into the abdomen, letting yourself be very comfortable. Allow a spaciousness in the mind. Then think the thought, “May I be well, happy, peaceful and prosperous.” A sense of well-wishing toward yourself, emotionally and materially: “May no harm come to me. May no difficulties come to me. May no problems come to me.”

On a certain level, we know that there is always going to be some difficulty, some problems in life. That’s the way things are. But just set the wish, “May no harm come to me, no difficulties, no problems.” Allow that sense of ease and well-being that comes when you do not have to deal with anything like that in the moment.

“May I always meet with success.” I think I’d like to add a word to that: “May I always meet with *spiritual* success.” The sense is, “I have the wish to cultivate that which is truly good.” That’s a spiritual aspiration. “May I have success in my spiritual endeavors.” That’s a true aspiration.

“May I have the patience, courage, understanding, and determination to meet and overcome inevitable difficulties, problems, and failures in life.” That well-wishing encompasses the reality that there are difficulties and problems. There is always going to be some sort of failure or another, but may I have the qualities that will allow me to see those through. May I have patience.

Ajahn Chah once said, “I don’t actually teach very much at all. I just teach people to be patient.” That patience is courage, a willingness to be present with things, whether they are pleasant or unpleasant. There is a curiosity to want to understand and see things through, and a determination and willingness to stick with things.

I think all of us, if we’ve taken on spiritual practice and stuck with it for a long enough time—certainly I can vouch for the monastics—are all pretty stubborn, actually. We need to allow that stubbornness to become discerning determination. We have the opportunity to do something really skillful and wholesome and to stick with it. These are the qualities that allow us to pass through things. That’s an act of kindness. Allow it to be grounded in loving-kindness.

I’d like to repeat the phrases again. It’s important that we don’t just skip to “May everybody else receive loving-kindness.” It’s really important that we’re willing to take the time to direct it towards ourselves and allow it to become established within our own hearts. “May I be well, happy, peaceful, and prosperous. May no harm come to me. May no difficulties come to me. May no problems come to me. May I always meet with spiritual success. May I have the patience, courage, understanding, and determination to meet and overcome inevitable difficulties, problems, and failures in life.”

Then direct these thoughts of well-wishing, that sense of gratitude, to one’s parents, particularly if they are still alive, but even if they’ve passed away. Even if you have had a difficult relationship with your parents, at least you’ve made it to this point. That’s a big deal. “May my parents be well, happy, peaceful, and prosperous. May no harm come to them. May no difficulties come to them. May no problems come to them. May they always meet with spiritual success. May they always have the patience, courage, understanding, and determination to meet and overcome inevitable difficulties, problems, and failures in life.”

Now direct attention of loving-kindness towards your teachers, whether it’s teachers in worldly skills and knowledge or your spiritual teachers. We are able to cultivate a path of spiritual development because of our relationship to teachers that we have had and still have. It’s an important connection to be grateful for and to honor and delight in. “May my teachers be well, happy, peaceful, and prosperous. May no harm come to them. May no difficulties come to them. May no problems come to them. May they always meet with spiritual success. May they also have the patience, courage, understanding, and determination to meet and overcome inevitable difficulties, problems, and failures in life.”

Allow attention to be directed towards family, whether it’s spouses, partners, children, aunts, uncles, cousins, nieces, nephews, or anyone we’re related to by reason of *kamma*. “May my family be well, happy, peaceful, and prosperous. May no harm come to them. May no difficulties come to them. May no problems come to them. May they always meet with spiritual success. May they also have the patience, courage, understanding, and determination to meet and overcome inevitable difficulties, problems, and failures in life.”

Allow the attention to broaden, encompassing your friends and friendly acquaintances: “May my friends be well, happy, peaceful, and prosperous. May no harm come to them. May no difficulties come to them. May no problems come to them. May they always meet with spiritual success. May they have the patience, courage, understanding, and determination to meet and overcome inevitable difficulties, problems, and failures in life.”

Then we can bring to mind those whom we are neutral towards. We may have some acquaintance with them, but there is no strong feeling either way. “May those who are neutral to us be well, happy, peaceful, and prosperous. May no harm come to them. May no difficulties come to them. May no problems come to them. May they always meet with spiritual success. May they have the patience, courage, understanding, and determination to meet and overcome inevitable difficulties, problems, and failures in life.”

Now allow your attention to include even those who we feel are unfriendly towards us, people we’ve had difficulty with or whom, in normal circumstances, we wouldn’t think of in a kindly way. Recognize that we’re all in the same boat of birth, aging, sickness, and death, and that they’re worthy of our well-wishing, our kindness. “May those unfriendly to me be well, happy, peaceful, and prosperous. May no harm come to them. May no difficulties come to them. May no problems come to them. May they always meet with spiritual success. May they have the patience, courage, understanding, and determination to meet and overcome inevitable difficulties, problems, and failures in life.”

Allow the heart to be non-discriminative, expansive, and unlimited in its wish towards all living beings. “May all living beings be well, happy, peaceful, and prosperous. May no harm come to them. May no difficulties come to them. May no problems come to them. May they always meet with spiritual success. May they have the patience, courage, understanding, and determination to meet and overcome inevitable difficulties, problems, and failures in life.”

You can take the next period of sitting to work with the practice on your own, as feels comfortable, meaningful, or useful to you.