

Metta Week 2: The Brahma Viharas From Chris

Metta is the basic human heart quality of kindness, goodwill, friendliness, benevolence. This is often taught as the first of a set of four “*Brahma Viharas*”: kindness (*metta*), compassion (*karuna*), appreciative or sympathetic joy (*mudita*) and equanimity (*upekkha*). *Brahma* means the best, the highest. *Vihara* is a place to live, a dwelling place. These are the highest and best places for our hearts to dwell. Of these four, kindness and equanimity are included in the list of paramis.

One way of including all these qualities in the paramis is to think of *metta* as including or implying the other two. It transforms into the other two as appropriate. When a kind heart encounters suffering, it expresses itself as compassion. When a kind heart encounters the happiness of another, it resonates unselfishly with appreciative or sympathetic joy. Just as a white light passing through a prism shows a rainbow of colors, the heart of pure goodwill encountering the conditions of life responds appropriately.

As they mature, all of these qualities are permeated by the quality of equanimity. We will discuss this quality and its relationship to the others more next month when it will be our focus.

This week we’ll look more at compassion and appreciative joy, the expressions of the heart of kindness faced with conditions of suffering and happiness.

Compassion (*karuna*)

What happens when we encounter suffering, our own or that of others? Suffering is a response to some kind of condition we would rather not have. Without much wisdom or *metta* in our hearts, we tend to turn away from it in denial, hate it, fear it, blame someone else for it, or feel shame or guilt that we are unable to make it go away. With the wisdom that knows that difficulties happen to everyone simply due to the nature of life, and that those other forms of response add the pain of contraction, separation, alone-ness, and closing of the heart.

Compassion is the wholesome response that can arise when our wisdom knows that none of these other responses really help and when we have an open heart of *metta*. The kind heart is moved to do something to alleviate the suffering. When there is some way to make conditions easier, we’re moved to do it. Or if not, we simply to bear witness, keep company, keep alive the connecting flow of goodwill and kindness to ourselves or others. It’s about recognizing our common humanity, that none of us were born completely wise, none of us has that much control over our circumstances, we must all make our way, we will all make mistakes, face frustration, criticism, pain, loss, illness and eventually death.

Sometimes we can get overwhelmed by the amount of suffering in the world, especially if we misunderstand compassion and think it means taking on the emotions of others, feeling them as our own. We need to clearly recognize the positive wholesome response of compassion

which is quite different than jumping into the fire of others' reactivity. We can learn to recognize that someone's fear and anger is a normal human response albeit temporary and perhaps unhelpful, so not add our own fear and anger into the mix. And we can let go of any belief that although others can't fix everything, somehow we ought to be able to. That is a recipe for guilt, frustration and burnout. Neither condescending pity, nor emotional anguish are true compassion. Can we stay grounded in whatever sense of well-being we have, and from there do what we can or simply keep company?

As with metta, compassion begins at home, with our own difficulties and our very human responses to them. We are made up of many strands of motivation, many layers of maturity, many strategies for coping. It can be very helpful to see our difficult emotions, fear and anger, as the ways that younger or more deeply conditioned parts of us try to protect us from harm. If we don't add self-hatred, frustration or shame to the mix, then we might be able to turn these energies into helpful strengths, or at least understand their points of view and hold them with compassion and understanding, even as we don't need to believe the messages of those less than skillful strategies. Being able to open to and not see clearly our own reactions to suffering allows us to listen to, accompany and support others as they work their way through difficulties.

A crisis like the COVID-19 pandemic brings out so many inspiring acts of compassion, small and large. Medical people and other needed workers risking their own lives to care for others, the bottom up efforts to sew masks and make plexiglass face shields using idled pizza ovens, the people of Italy and New York serenading each other and the workers from their balconies, the outpouring of free classes and events on the internet, parents staging at-home prom nights for their disappointed teens.

But perhaps the simplest act of compassion is deep listening, something we can offer to each other any time, in person or by phone or screen. Rachel Remen says "Listening is the oldest and perhaps the most powerful tool of healing. It is often through the quality of our listening and not the wisdom of our words that we are able to effect the most profound changes in the people around us. When we listen, we offer with our attention and opportunity for wholeness. Our listening creates sanctuary for the homeless parts within the other person. That which has been denied, unloved, devalued by themselves and others; that which is hidden".

As a meditation, you might try offering phrases from your heart such as "May I/you be free from pain and suffering", or "May I/you be at ease with the conditions of my/your life" to yourself, loved ones, neutral people and perhaps when you're ready, difficult people using the waterfall model discussed last time.

Appreciative Joy (*mudita*)

There is also joy, happiness, beauty, talent, skill and good fortune in life. As we are learning through our practice, these come and go. Any kind of clinging, craving and grasping tend to detract from the joy rather than increase it. The notion that the good things of life can only be

appreciated if they are “mine” leads to the unpleasant yet common feelings of envy or jealousy when we consider the happiness of others. We can practice to learn that true happiness is not a “zero-sum-game”. That is, more for you need not mean less for me and vice versa. With the practice of the Buddhist path, the possibilities for joy and deep happiness are abundant and not based on possessiveness or identity. As the Dalai Lama says, the practice of *mudita*, learning to feel happy in response to the happiness and good fortune of others, increases your chances of happiness by about 8 billion to 1!

It’s best to begin to tune into this wherever its relatively easy. You might smile in responses to smiling babies, share enjoyments with close friends, perhaps appreciate seeing the skill and joy of other people playing music or sports together. Gil suggests sitting in a public place (someday we’ll do that again!) and picturing everyone around you with a big genuine smile on their face, opening your heart to everyone’s potential for happiness. I’ve enjoyed sitting and just watching the flow of joyful greetings and reunions in the international arrivals area at SFO.

We also may need to practice opening to and allowing even own happiness. If it’s difficult to allow yourself to love and appreciate the beautiful aspects of life, it may not be easy to resonate with those feelings in others.

True *mudita*, of course, doesn’t demand that people act happy all the time. It’s also not the exuberant self-identified love of watching your team win, or vicarious browsing through news of the rich and famous. The point is to open the heart and counter our tendencies to envy, jealousy and self-centeredness.

Compassion and appreciative joy balance and support each other. The great Buddhist scholar monk Nyanaponika says “*Mudita* will also vitalize and ennoble charitable and social work. While compassion is, or should be, the inspiration for it, unselfish joy should be its boon companion. *Mudita* will prevent compassionate action from being marred by a condescending and patronizing attitude which often repels or hurts the recipient. Also, when active compassion and unselfish joy go together, it will be less likely that works of service turn into dead routine performed indifferently. Indifference, listlessness, boredom (all nuances of the Pali term *arati*) are said to be the 'distant enemies' of *mudita*. They can be vanquished by an alliance of compassion and unselfish joy.”

If you have difficulty letting in happiness, you might offer the phrase “May I open to joy and happiness” to yourself. You might bring to mind someone who is happy and try offering a phrase such as “May the conditions for your true happiness and good fortune continue” to loved ones, neutral people and perhaps when you’re ready, difficult people.