

Living in Beauty - Buddhist Loving Kindness Practice

A Preface

with quiet astonishment, and gratitude...

Most of the following essays were written while on retreat, in 2012 and 2013. I have my host, Roger, to thank for providing me with such a peaceful place in Washington State, far away from city living.

When I set out to go on retreat, I hadn't intended to write as much as I did, but in the Fall of 2012, I started to wonder how I'd handle being apart from others for a year. Even though I'd brought plenty to study, with Winter coming, I was a little concerned I'd get a version of 'cabin fever', and so I started to augment my meditation with metta, or loving kindness practice. I did this at first just to keep a clear feeling of being connected to all those I care for. I'm happy to report it did this for me, and more.

I soon found that metta is also a great support for quiet, and insight meditation. Just like the traditional teachings say, it brightens and energizes the mind, and it brings with it joy and ease. I re-read many of my favorite books on metta, and I also had the good fortune of listening to talks by teachers in the Spirit Rock Tradition, such as James Baraz, Donald Rothberg, Sylvia Boorstein, Sharon Salzberg, Joseph Goldstein, and others.

As the months rolled by, I noticed two things: the first was that the different aspects of metta gradually opened up for me. This is what I've written about in some detail in the pages that follow. And second, I began to see how I could relate all I was concerned with to this one practice. From the different aspects of Traditions and personal development, to the arts and social activism, all seem to fit harmoniously now into this one way of life and practice.

Over the last few years I have written on what I call A Life Giving Vision, that is so needed in these times, and I thought I might add to that set of writings while away. Instead, I found these earlier ideas fitting well into the overall view and teachings on metta.

In the past, I learned to see all aspects of Buddhist practice as having a healing function: from precepts to quiet meditation, insight practice, as well as its prayer, mantra and ritual. Now I've come to think of metta as encompassing all aspects of Buddhism, psychology, contemplative disciplines, progressive values, activism, and life in the world. It gathers all disparate parts together, and makes me feel whole to read and meditate in this way.

The original subtitle 'essays on metta for our times' was meant to highlight that, precious as the traditional teachings are and always will be, we need to bring them into our lives as they are now. This is how we'll get the most from them.

It is my hope that good teachings on metta be read and heard by as many people as possible, now, and in future generations, and this collection of essays is my small contribution. It's the kind of book I wish I had at beginning of my retreat. It's also a statement about an outlook and way of life that I feel affirms the best in us. This is also something I wish I had years ago. It turns out that what I have here, and what I can offer now, is one of my favorite books, on my favorite subject, that of love. How wonderful. Looking over these pages today, I am amazed, and simply grateful with all my heart to my teachers.

A note on a couple of ways this book can be read: though some people may like to go through a collection of essays such as this from beginning to end, it works at least as well to just read whatever fits the need of the moment. This is how I've been using this material this last year or so, to pick myself up, and to strengthen and clarify whatever understanding I may have. Of

course, if the traditional metta teachings are new to you, you may like to read the opening sections early on, since metta is the heart of it all.

May all people benefit from the teachings on metta; May they have all good conditions for practice, and may all generations together celebrate the beauty and richness of this path of love.

Jason Espada
San Francisco,
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Living in Beauty - A Collection of Essays on Metta for Our Times

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Metta as the most useful method of meditation for people in the West today

Most people these days don't have a lot of time for meditation. The week is divided between work, caring for their family, and relationships. From what I have seen, all methods of meditation can be helpful to us. There are a few ways, however, that metta, or Buddhist loving kindness meditation *especially* matches our needs here and now.

The first is that it helps us to be on better terms with ourselves. A lot of people have the problem of not liking or respecting themselves, and metta includes methods of developing kindness towards ourselves. Since we're always with ourselves, any amount of a greater acceptance, or goodwill we can generate will improve the quality of our life *right there*.

Not content with only proposing an ideal, such as 'just be kind to yourself', metta is creative in its approach to developing a sense of kindness for oneself. Although it's traditionally the first category used for cultivating metta, teachers in the West have been adapting this to meet our needs. We're encouraged to start with whoever is *easiest*, and *least complicated* to have feelings of kindness and well wishing for. Once we've developed some experience of directing thoughts of goodwill to them, we can return to ourself. Slowly, we can begin to offer ourselves the same quality of kindness that we direct to our most loved ones. One dear friend said that being kind to herself is like medicine. We all need and deserve this.

It's said that one of the traditional benefits of metta is that it helps us to settle comfortably, with a clear mind in meditation, and with a fundamental goodwill towards ourselves. This is an important point, and one that is often overlooked in how meditation is taught and practiced in the West these days. Have you noticed?

If we are not on good terms with ourselves, we won't be able to go very deep in meditation. We may escape into fantasies to avoid what is difficult

to be with, or we may develop a spiritual ego that is not very stable. There's no way around this. We need kindness towards ourselves to do the sometimes difficult work of deepening our self understanding, healing and transformation.

Another reason metta practice is especially needed by us today is that it helps us to know our connection to others. It's in our makeup that we need the support and love that comes from being connected to friends, family, teachers, and all others. In our modern society, people have become more and more isolated, and metta counters that.

We can re-awaken our connection to friends and family, and learn to have more warmth, attentiveness, goodwill and concern for all others we meet. This is pretty radical stuff because it goes directly to the quality of all our relationships.

We are so diverse here in America. It's a point of pride for us, in fact, something we identify as a real strength. The shadow side of it, however, is that we may have trouble finding common ground.

Which brings me to the third reason why I'm thinking that metta is the most useful method to know about, and practice, and share with other these days. Metta is universal. It can be taken up and understood by people everywhere.

You don't need to be Buddhist to practice metta meditation. Of course, people are free to explore the tradition this method comes from, but that's a personal matter. We should do whatever works for us, and follow the path that will lead to the fulfillment of our deepest aspirations.

I have one more reason why I'm looking at metta as having the greatest value for us today, and that is that it's the teaching and practice of what has true human value. This is the complete opposite of the materialism and self centered indulgence, narcissism, pettiness, avarice and aggression that are so common these days.

Metta is just the method we need when we meet fear and mistrust, self-denigration, and the denial of the worth and rights of others. Metta can actually heal us, and our world, and for this reason, in times of despair, it offers hope.

I know a lot of people will appreciate how quickly we can see results from loving kindness practice. After just a week or two of regular practice, each day, in any circumstances, to and from work on the train, for example, if we are attentive, we can see an improvement in our temperament, and relationships. We may notice, for example, that we are a little more patient when standing in line at the bank, or at the post office, which is surely a gift of kindness to ourselves and others.

Metta is inherently enjoyable, and, together with this cycle of positive reinforcement, the practice naturally develops. For people with an affinity with metta, it's natural that they'll want to make it a part of their whole life. As with other methods of meditation, the more we practice, the more we'll see the results.

As the Buddha taught in the Kalama Sutta, also known as the Buddhist Charter of Free Inquiry,

*Don't believe something because it sounds good,
or because it is part of a tradition;
or because a famous person said it,
or because it agrees with your opinions,
but try it out and see –
if it works to bring you greater satisfaction in your life,
greater peace, well being, and happiness,
then accept it,
cultivate that practice,
and share the benefit of it with others*

My friends, this is what I've found to be most useful for us as lay practitioners, in these times in the West. I've seen the good that can come from it, and so I'm glad to be able to share this.

May all people everywhere find methods of practice, and ways to live in this world that bring them peace, health and well being, and happiness for all their days.

Metta and Courage - Unfolding the Qualities of Love

Whenever we have a challenge, we need to bring out what's contained in that one word, 'love'. We have all these treasures within that we can draw from, qualities we need when things are uncertain or difficult.

Last year I wrote about de-constructing fear, and it occurred to me today that when we have a feeling of fearlessness, that it's also composite. I can see it in myself when it arises, and so I thought it may be useful to write out a few things on what goes to make up fearlessness, or courage, so I and others can take it up again when we need to.

The factors that go to make up courage, I would say, have a common root in love. Let's look at this together.

In love, there is naturally patience, gentleness and strength, and mindfulness;

there is an appreciation for our circumstances, with what is right about it – gratitude for our friends and family, our education, and this extraordinary world...

When we pause and take this in, we can say it is a pure moment of love, simple, profound, and nourishing.

Yet this love has even more to it.

I thought before of how fear is the feeling that we're not up to something, together with imagining some bad outcomes. The opposite of this is feeling capable. I don't have any doubt now that metta practice can open us to our innate resourcefulness.

There is a light of creative intelligence and joy in all of us, that often gets covered over and forgotten, and that's where we can get stuck. When we don't know our inner richness, we worry, and get agitated and aggressive, which just veils the mind more. We do things to numb out, and move still further from what we really need, which is a greater sense of our own capacity. Metta practice changes the course of all that.

At first, we may have only brief glimpses of our potential, but gradually these get longer, and at some point, we can feel enthusiasm welling up again from within.

What is it that has real meaning, and the most value in a life, if not meeting challenges? Accomplishments and enjoyments are all well and good, but going out to meet the needs of ourselves and others, now that's where real, deeper human satisfaction is found.

Suppose you were going on a long journey – what would you need? Besides knowing where you wanted to go, you'd need provisions along the way. What we call love is also something that enables us to sustain ourselves, day by day, as we go.

To look at our lives, our heritage, and this beautiful world of ours with a heart of love is, in a very real sense, to be fed by it. Compared to when we don't have this quality awake in us, we can receive so much more. We can become spiritually well nourished. It's true.

On our journey, we'll also need a creative, adaptive intelligence, that is not just set on going one way, but that's able to adjust along the way. Love empowers us to do this. We can feel it. When it rises up in us, we know, without any doubt, that we will find our way.

One more quality we'll need, for sure, is confidence. Now confidence is a tricky one, because we can have some experience of it, and that can take us

some distance, but if our confidence is just based on a memory, we may falter.

One of the great things about metta, loving kindness, is that it is a fresh stream of inspiration. When this quality is awakened and active in us, we know it by the joy we feel throughout each day, and by a quiet assuredness. In this way, metta brings peace as well. We know we will meet what life brings with the best we have in us.

They talk in Buddhism of the gift of fearlessness that we can offer ourselves and others. This is related to wisdom, or insight into the truth of our living. I'd say one aspect of this is pointing out the innate richness we all have to meet challenges.

When we know this for ourselves, they say it's like when a person puts their hand in their pocket and knows there's a gem – we know we can make our way. We can also afford to be generous as we go. This is what we draw from.

One of the results, in time, of metta practice is that it brings a certain steadfastness of character, which I'm thinking of now as the quality of the Fourth Brahma Vihara, or Divine Abode. Where does this come from? I can see how it comes from a commitment to our ideals, and a long familiarity and deep knowledge of our capacity to meet and transform challenging situations. If not for those two – having clear aims, and knowing absolutely that we can effect change, our heroes would have given up long ago...

As heroes here, those who didn't give up, and who are shining examples of strength of character, I think of Martin Luther King, Nelson Mandela, The Dalai Lama, Thich Nhat Hanh, and, in the political sphere, Cesar Chavez, Howard Zinn and Noam Chomsky. They all demonstrate a calm, deep steadfastness of moral character, based on love and wisdom.

In each case, it's true. Think about it. And it can be true for us as well, on our own personal scale.

When we are uncertain, what can we rely on? In fact, we do have support from the spiritual dimension, and this is something I rely on. We also have the support of family and friends. Most of all though, we need to find those reasons for self confidence in ourselves, and assuredly, this is something we can do through love.

In all that needs to be responded to in my life, in the lives of my loved ones, and in this world, I'll take my stand here.