

When Rick taught about mindfulness two weeks ago, he suggested six practices in support of mindfulness:

1. Intention: set an intention focus attention on intention, incline the mind toward some wholesome wish – for clarity or openness or allowing in the meditation.
2. Warm-heartedness: very close to what we'll be talking about tonight – a kindness or friendliness, goodwill, an embracing of the practice.
3. Safety: a sense of refuge in the practice. That someone or some benevolent energy cares and protects – someone has your back; someone is minding the store, so your mind can relax it's vigilance about your own well-being and relax its grip on the sense of self; it's OK; it's safe to let down the guard and open.
4. Positive emotions – like a sense of gratitude or joy or reverence and awe, again positive emotions do create a sense of safety and trust, can relax into being in the mind rather than doing. Also create left shift in brain, moves us to noting and naming our experience from left hemisphere of brain, more approach than more avoidance of right hemisphere.
5. Spacious awareness: Let go of how we construct our reality moment by moment and relax into more spacious openness, become more like the sky that clouds or birds are floating through, again shift in processing in brain. literally more spacious out here lateral than focused in the midline.
6. Taking in the good – any positive benefit we experience from practice, take it in, don't take it for granted or even ignore it, take in savor it, let it fill you up.

All of these are practices of the mind and heart that make it safe enough and benevolent enough to actually be mindful, to stay in contact with our experience as we become aware and see clearly.

The Brahma Viharas are very much the heart practices that support our mindfulness practice. Thanissaro Bikkhu says they are the Buddha's primary heart teachings. These dharma teachings that help us and others find true happiness is the greatest gift. They are anchored – as all dharma teachings are – in the Wise View of what is the true nature of reality and what causes and conditions lead to our deepest happiness. That our true nature is radiant, serene, pure in heart. All phrases the Buddha uses in metta sutta, peaceful calm wise and skillful. Brahma Viharas teach us how to incline our mind and direct our behaviors toward the deepest happiness of this true nature.

They are stances of the heart – approaches toward our experience designed to keep our hearts open when they might otherwise contract so that we can be aware, and wise in our choices about what to do about what we are being aware of. To direct our behaviors toward the intention of

deepest happiness. Send us in the direction of our deepest happiness. And then we begin to trust our intentions that other people also find their way to their deepest happiness.

The term Brahm Viharas has been translated as heavenly abodes or divine abiding or sublime attitude. Many of you familiar already with these four heavenly abodes: as states of mind and heart that are the direct experience of our True Nature and a series of pragmatic exercise that help us cultivate and express these four immeasurables in own lives - unlimited loving kindness or friendliness or goodwill toward ourselves or others, unlimited compassion for the suffering of others or ourselves, unlimited joy at the welfare of ourselves or others, unlimited equanimity in the face of life's joys and sorrows. Meaning when our hearts are fully open to experience – avoiding or rejecting nothing or no one, judging nothing or no one, then these states, kindness, compassion, joy, equanimity, are where we naturally dwell. . This is the true nature or true home of the open heart and fully awakened mind. We are there, and we are that.

The Brahma Viharas are also taught at practices to get there. They are the path as well as the fruition of the path. We move toward these unlimited abodes or four immeasurables by practicing here in our own hearts, however limited.

These practices meant to keep us open to all experience, are pretty much taught through keeping our hearts open to other people and to ourselves, as a creature vulnerable to the challenges and suffering of the human condition. However closed or contracted we experience our heart to be, it wants to open. As such, they focus on benevolence; they are intended to evoke a loving presence, not simply presence. Thought it's difficult to keep our hearts open to other people to our experience with them even to experience of parts of ourselves, these practices open the heart and steady it in the face of dukkha so that we can keep our minds open in the face of dukkha.

You may have been practicing the Brahma Viharas for years already. Tonight maybe your first introduction. Either way, I'm encouraging us to stretch in our practice tonight – to find your growth edge and lean into what would be the next layer of opening for you.

We begin with loving kindness or metta, also translated as goodwill. In Thannisaro Bikkhu's view, goodwill was the underlying motivation that led Buddha to seek the path of awakening and then to teach the path to others.

Loving kindness: practices of warm-hearted well-wishing for happiness and well-being, directed toward ourselves or others, even when that's difficult. A steady loving kindness practice helps us to meet every moment of experience and every other being in our lives with more openness and friendliness. Opening the heart in loving kindness is cultivated through the practice of wishing well. There are traditional phrases – may you be happy, or may you know the deepest happiness. May you be healthy – may you be resiliently healthy in your body, your mind, your heart, your spirit. May you be safe – May you be safe from inner and outer harm. May you be free. May you be free of suffering, from all causes of suffering, and from causing any suffering. There are traditional phrases; phrases can evolve. When I first began practicing metta, the phrase that were the most powerful for me were May I know that I am held safe and secure (the safety Rick suggested) may I trust may I know that I am loved and lovable, may I love others with understanding, compassion and forgiveness. Those phrases are what allowed my heart to

open as I needed to, and asking that for others is what kept opening my heart. James adds to the traditional phrases, may you be happy, may to be at ease, may you feel my love for you.

When we begin a metta practice it's helpful to come into a sense of the Buddha Nature for ourselves or the person we are sending our wishes to for ease and well-being, sense the pure innate goodness deep at the core of each person, or even at the core of every part of ourselves, a part of Buddha nature, even if it got confused or caught.

There are traditional categories of people we focus our well-wishing on. Sometimes, easiest to begin with a benefactor, someone who has helped us, guided us opened our hearts, loved us. Over all positive nourishing experience, the gratitude we feel helps the practice of the well-wishing come alive. When metta is taught as the concentration practice that can open our hearts and minds to the jhanas, the state of rapture and bliss that can lead to tranquility and calm abiding of full enlightenment, begin with sending metta to benefactor.

Then stretching the heart open a bit more to dear friend because the dear friends can be positive and challenging. We live life's salient ups and downs with our friend, dear as they are. So, cultivating the phrases for someone dear to us that we want to keep our heart open to: may you know the deepest happiness; may you be resiliently healthy; may you be safe from harm; may you be free of suffering.

Then we extend the practice to opening our hearts to a neutral person. Someone who is in our field of view but we don't know their life story. We don't know their joys and sorrows, their failures or triumphs. Whether they are a good person or a bad person. We only know they are a human being and subject to all the forces and challenges human beings are subject to. So, we choose a person to focus on, could be someone here tonight that we haven't met yet, or a neighbor we haven't met yet, or a clerk in the grocery store we see from time to time. We simply practice opening our hearts by sending them whatever wishes we are practicing with, and notice that our hearts continue to open and stay open and we can even become quite fond of them.

The next category in the traditional order is the difficult person, or sometimes called the enemy. This is where the rubber meets the road. Goodwill is antidote to ill-will. When our hearts are contracted around someone because of their unskillful unwholesome behavior, what can seem like malevolent intent out of their confusion or ignorance or their being caught in greed or hatred, the stretch is for our hearts to stay open in the face of that. We recognize or acknowledge there are 10,000 causes upstream that contribute to the person behaving the way they do, even when we don't know what they are, and that if we fully understood those causes, we might eventually come to compassion and forgiveness for them.

Poet Henry Wadsworth Longfellow: "If we could read the secret history of our enemies, we should find in each man's life sorrow and suffering enough to disarm all hostility."

This from Thomas Merton, Trappist monk, Jack Kornfield opens his book *Wise Heart* with: "Then it was as if I suddenly saw the secret beauty of their hearts, the depths of their hearts where neither sin nor desire nor self-knowledge can reach, the core of their reality, the person

that each one is in the eyes of the Divine. If only they could all see themselves as they really are. If only we could see each other that way all the time. There would be no more war, nor more hatred, no more cruelty, no more greed. ...I suppose the big problem would be that we would fall down and worship each other.”

Gil Fronsdal: this phase of metta practice of wishing well to a difficult person, includes breaking down the barriers; we look for similarities and inter-connections between us and this difficult person; we see below the surface to deeper dimensions, we begin to experience the flow of loving kindness does not depend on them, or their behaviors, or them changing their behaviors. It is the flow of goodwill from our own heart that is the fruit of the practice. We use our imagination to, as James Baraz suggests in *Awakening Joy* to see them as the Dalai Lama would see them. We practice forgiveness if that's genuine and appropriate. We become mindful of our own feelings as we endeavor to send loving kindness to the difficult person. If we lose our focus, we go back to offering metta to our benefactor, friend, neutral person, to re-establish the goodwill flowing in our hearts. We build up a head of steam and try again.

So we practice stretching keeping our hearts open to this difficult person, not knowing the story but knowing there IS a story, and we focus on our own practice of staying allowing, accepting, be loving in our own heart, independent of them.

There's one more category of person to cultivate kindness toward before we expand the heart to sending wishes of loving kindness to all beings, and that is our self. As one of the forms of being on this planet that is endowed through our human birth and human life with Buddha Nature or True Nature, and experience our own knowing of that Buddha Nature obscured again and again by our own confusion or grasping or aversion, we send love and kindness to ourselves. To any and all parts of ourselves that don't know they are lovable, that they are worthy, that they are good at heart. For all kinds of reasons of the experiences of conditioning we are prone to here in the West, the sincere wishing of kindness and love to ourselves, or parts of ourselves, may be the hardest part of the practice.

It's just as essential. The Buddha's instructions in the metta sutta say, omitting none, and that includes us, all parts of us.

So I'd like us to practice metta tonight in the sense of stretching our practice. I've identified several phrases from the Buddha's teaching in the metta sutta (copies)

Wishing in gladness and in safety – to being our practice there;

Omitting none – we progress through all the categories until we have a heart as wide as the world, in Sharon Salzberg's phrase;

Let none through anger or ill will wish harm upon another – goodwill is antidote to ill-will;
So with a boundless heart should one cherish all living beings, outward and unbounded – we begin to experience the heart has no limits, just as awareness has no limits;

Free from drowsiness, one should sustain this recollection – we all fall asleep at the wheel; we drift. Setting the intention to practice and remembering to practice is a big challenge to any practice. Why we practice – to experience the benefit of practice so we reinforce our desire to practice.

What I'd like us to do is to take a minute in gladness and in safety, to focus inward, as you get in touch with your own sincere desire to cultivate an open heart, or you want to send wishes of love and kindness to the part of your heart that wants to stay contracted, or fears opening up. Let yourself feel your way into knowing, recognizing, what would be a stretch for you here tonight. Is there a part of your heart that has difficulty opening, is there a person or something about a person that is difficult to keep your heart open around, let yourself settle on that person or part, and simply being saying the simplest of metta phrases may you be safe, may you be free of suffering, may you be at ease, may you have peace in your mind and heart. We say these metta phrases or whatever phrases come to you as sincere, silently over and over for a few moments. If your mind wanders, come back to gladness and safety and begin saying the phrases again.

What did you notice, or what do you notice now as you reflect? Comments or questions.

Traditionally you can practice metta for an entire meditation period or an entire day or entire retreat. Very often when we are experiencing challenges in being mindful, the bare open spacious awareness of vipassana because there are so many things to become aware of; it's skillful means to practice metta again and again for days or weeks until the mind and heart feel safe enough to settle down again to and open.

Experiential exercise: We do this exercise in a group of four. Each person shares a moment of kindness that they experienced coming from another person, or that they offered to another person. In the remembering that moment of kindness, notice what it feels like in your body, right now, to remember that moment. After everyone has had a turn recalling and sharing a moment of loving kindness in their lives, go around the group again, reflecting on what it is like to share that moment of kindness with other folks; what do you notice as you feel received in your sharing, as you receive the stories of kindness from other people. (De-brief)

I want to set us up for practicing loving kindness every day, many times a day, in the coming week. Start where you are. We set the intention to practice and to feel the benefit of every openness, every moment of gladness of heart as we wish well to others; rejoice in every increment of heart opening and love flowing. Steadying and deepening our practice; that's where the power of it is. Steadiness of mind and heart helps us anchor more confidently in these divine abodes.

Set up what phrase would be a stretch for you. What person would be a stretch for you. Do the practice. Steady the practice make it a habit, at the grocery store, sitting in traffic, metta for other drivers, waiting room for an appointment. Intention to practice is becomes a way of life. Heather Martin uses the metaphor of getting the hoop (that children used to play with) rolling down the street and just touch it with a stick to keep it rolling. Loving kindness or goodwill is the antidote to ill-will, hostility, fear. Sylvia Boorstein tells a story of a time on a plane when one of the engines went out; the pilot had to make an immediate emergency landing. During the entire 25 minutes coming in for the landing, which went well, Sylvia was focused on sending wishes of loving kindness to her family, to friends, to colleagues, to students, and in the last few minutes heading into the airport, expansively to the whole world.

Just this morning I learned of a friend's "toothbrush" practice. My friend has been battling with acute leukemia for the last two years. Even in her difficult and weakened state, in the 30 seconds it takes her to brush her teeth in the morning, she sends out a prayer of loving kindness in that time. Her "cue" and her practice.

Closing meditation:

Kindness is more important than wisdom, and the recognition of that is the beginning of wisdom.
- Theodore Rubin.