

Last week, we talked about the balance between insight (wisdom) and the heart (love and compassion).

Metta is a specific meditation practice used to cultivate the openness of the heart. The power in it lies in the connection one makes within the heart to the meaning of the words. The practice of metta turns the mind to the possibility that the loving sentiments expressed align us with the heart's innate openness.

Whenever you invoke something, the barriers or denying forces to it will also show up. Thus, we need to look at both sides of the coin. If we do only one, the unseen side will eventually engulf us.

The two sides are:

- 1) Noticing when the heart is closed
 - 2) Cultivating then open heart - we started with metta practice
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Don't do this with a sense of duty or discipline. This should feel positive, learning something new. Expect good things, expect it to be meaningful and opening.

That said, for some of us, or all of us some of the time, this actively challenges the parts of us that feel un-used to happiness, or believe that we don't deserve it, or that it's not possible.

The path is to meet this directly: noticing when the heart is closed. It's not considered a problem, but an opportunity to see more clearly and deeply.

Let's start with some comparison.

What does it feel like when the heart is open? Our responses were:

- engaged: energy is flowing, energy levels rise.
- we feel slower, more relaxed
- trusting
- centered

- curious
- alive
- allowing, accepting of others, connected
- feel happy, content with what we have

What encourages the heart to remain open?

- stability and confidence
- spiritual practice
- loving friendship, and seeing this modeled
- guarding the sense doors: taking care for physical needs and ingesting the right kinds of mental and emotional influences
- humor
- certain kinds of conversations and interactions
- taking time to be present
- beliefs in this path, in ourselves: our innate good nature
- beauty, music
- self acceptance

First, see this clearly. Then choose to move towards what encourages open heartedness.

When we look at this closely, we realize how important it is to cultivate our own skillfulness to BE the kind of people who are in the heart opening category for others - and for ourselves.

Now let's examine what the other side of the coin feels like.

What causes the heart to close? What are the barriers to loving kindness?

- fear, anger
- lack of trust
- judgment
- lack of good boundaries
- unsupportive conversations and interactions
- beliefs that fight how things actually are
- self doubt
- not being present

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- physical pain

What do we do with these?

First of all, we hold them with presence.

When we examine carefully an experience like being angry, we realize everything we think of as 'being angry' is actually an attempt to push it away and not feel it. Raising our voices, slamming a door, walking out, turning on the TV or scrolling to distract ourselves, becoming distant or numbing out are all ways of trying to discharge the energy, control, push away, not be with.

And the most significant of all is the way the voice in our head goes into action: complaining, rehearsing, judging, commenting, fixing, repetitive thoughts of all kinds - trying to make us a little bit more comfortable and justified.

Accordingly, the first response in our practice, which often is the only response needed, is to move away from all these avoidance patterns and invite the emotion in.

An image that is helpful to me is imagining this emotion as a small child experiencing it, coming to me for comfort and holding. As a parent, it is natural to say: I have you. Stay as long as you need to, your feelings can be as big as they need to be. I'm here. This is being present with.

A difficult feeling is a physical sensation in the body. So we turn our attention to the body and find the felt sense of this feeling. It could be a contraction in the chest, an uneasiness in the belly, a tightening in the jaw or the throat. We find it, and we hold it. We don't try to fix or make it different. We simply hear it out without condition. W

When the avoidance patterns arise, we see their presence, and simply do not feed them. The suttas advise us to abandon them. This is not pretending they are not present, or trying to beat them into submission, or fix them. We simply do not feed them.

We don't 'fix' ourselves when we notice our energy is low and our hearts are closed. We notice what opens and closes our hearts, and get to know how this works more deeply and clearly.

We become deeply present with the closing energies, giving them the time they need to be seen and allowed, which is the only way they can begin to dissolve and release their energy back to us.

HOMEWORK:

- 1) Keep up with your practice, continue metta practice as part of your formal sitting.
- 2) Start a notebook of when your heart is closed and what the emotions arising are. Keep this simple, such as:
 - Late, caught in traffic. Anxiety and irritation
 - Had conflict with co-worker. Anger, judgement
 - Read news report. Despair, hopelessness.

As best you can, work on being present with the feelings, both in practice, and during the day. We'll explore this more deeply in our next meeting.