

Angry

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In the forest tradition, it's rare that anyone would practice metta as a basic practice. As Ajaan Mun said, you have to focus on the body as your basic practice and deal with the mind's issues around the body if you're going to get really far in the practice. But he would also recommend that people develop metta as a framework practice. In other words, first thing in the morning, spread goodwill to all beings; last thing at night, goodwill to all beings. That frames the day to remind you why you're practicing.

The fact that you want happiness is something taken for granted. The fact that you want a happiness that doesn't harm anybody is an attitude that has to be cultivated. So as you think about what you're going to do or say or think in the course of the day, you want to have in the back of your mind that "I don't want anybody to be harmed." That gives a structure to your practice.

Then, within the context of that, you do the rest of the practice. You're generous. You observe the precepts. You try to train the mind to get rid of its greed, aversion, and delusion because this practice is a way of showing goodwill to yourself and all other living beings. These are ways of finding happiness that harm no one.

The problem is that even within the framework, no matter how much you do metta practice, there are times when anger comes up. Now, anger is different from ill will. Ill will is wishing to see someone suffer. Anger is simply aversion. It can come in many levels of strength.

Even though you set your mind on metta, you find it slipping back. So you have to look at why. Part of it, of course, is that we're very good at anger. It comes very easily to us. It can go from zero to outrage in one sixtieth of a second. But you have to remember that it's something fabricated. It's a habit you've developed. I remember watching my niece, Gigi, grow up. For a long time, she was very docile and reasonable. Then one day she visited another family. One of the kids in the family threw a tantrum. Two days later, Gigi threw her own tantrum. She'd gotten the idea from the example she saw. The thing is, if you live with people who are easily angered, it's very easy to pick up their habits. It's very easy to think that if you don't show your anger, people are going to push you around. So your way of freeing yourself from what you don't like is to get angry.

That's a perception you have to look into, because if you allow your anger to take over, there are a lot of things you don't see. You can do a lot of damage to yourself and other people.

Here it's good to remember the Buddha's way of analyzing emotions into those three kinds of fabrication: one, the way you breathe; two, directed thought and evaluation, which means the way you talk to yourself about things; and then three, mental fabrication, which are feelings and perceptions.

When you fabricate anger, one, you breathe in a certain way that gets the breath all constricted. Two, you focus on why it's good to get angry and why that particular person deserves your anger and why it's perfectly okay to think those thoughts and act on them. Then, three, there are perceptions. What images are you holding in mind? One of them is that if you don't show your anger, you're going to be victimized. Another is that in passing judgment on others, you're very far away from them, you're way above them, so you're not going to be affected by your judgment. As for feelings, the way you breathe, even though you may not consciously think of it, aggravates a sense of having something inside you that you've got to get out. Part of you will say, "Well, the only way of getting it out is either to express the anger or to bottle it up and get cancer." So you just let it out into the world.

The Buddha offers alternative ways of fabricating these things. But first you have to have the motivation to follow his alternative. This is what goodwill does: It reminds you that, for the sake of your own true happiness and the happiness of others, you've got to learn to get some control over your anger.

So look at the way you breathe. Can you breathe in a calm way even though other people are doing outrageous things? Remind yourself that, at the very least, if you can breathe more calmly, you can think more calmly. And calm thinking doesn't mean not caring. It means looking at the situation as it really is rather than through the red eyes of anger. Wherever you've found that you've built up feelings of tension or tightness in the body through the way you've been breathing, okay, breathe through those, because that gives you the alternative to getting it out by expressing the anger or bottling it up.

Here's a third way of dealing with it. You dissolve it. You dissolve those feelings in the body.

Then you look at the way you think about things. Goodwill is not the only antidote to anger. You can try *samvega*, thinking about how petty a lot of the issues are that we get angry about. And how someday we're all going to be in our graves and it's not going to matter that much, yet here we are creating karma with one another. It just drags us down.

Think of the Buddha's image of human beings as being like fish in a dwindling pond. The water's drying up, and the fish are struggling to lay claim to that last little patch of water. But it doesn't really matter who wins. They're all going to die. When you think about that, it gives you a sense of real compassion for those poor fish and then compassion for the people who are struggling and struggling and struggling and trying to grab their happiness and snatch it away from others. They're all going to suffer as a result.

As the Buddha said, if you find someone who has no good qualities that you can focus on to help alleviate your anger, then you've got to have compassion for that person. That other person's really digging himself into a hole. Then remind yourself that by expressing your anger you're not necessarily getting out of a bad situation. All too often, you're making it worse.

I think I've told the story of my grandfather teaching my older brother before he went to school. My grandfather didn't like the names my mother gave to her sons. He was a farm boy and we were farm boys, but my mother gave us fancy names. My brother's name was Galen, and my grandfather could think of all kinds of ways that the kids would make fun of his name. He had been a boxer when he was younger, so before Galen went to school in first grade, he taught Galen how to box. They tried sparring a little bit and he taught Galen a few different moves. Then he started getting more aggressive—and Galen lost it. He started flailing. Grandpa put his hand on Galen's head to stop him and said, "Look, when you get angry like that, you've got to grow cold. Then you can punch the other guy. If you just give in to your anger, you flail around and open yourself up to all kinds of problems." So hold that image in mind.

The Buddha's not saying that when you should kill your anger you should also kill your desire to improve things in the world. That's not the case. It's just that when you can get past your anger, you can see things more clearly. So change the story line. And change the perceptions: in particular, the perception that anger is what frees you. Anger is actually what ties you down and skews your perceptions.

All of this falls under the principle that we tend to fabricate our experience of the world, our emotions, out of ignorance. And as a result, we suffer.

The problem with the anger is that it takes that sense of suffering and blames it on somebody outside. You're already making yourself suffer and then on top of that, someone does something you don't like. You feel the suffering inside and you attribute it to what they're doing. That just compounds things. So you've got to turn around and look: How are you fabricating your present experience? Do it with knowledge and it becomes part of the path.

Look at the Buddha's teachings on breath meditation. In the first tetrad, you get sensitive to the breath and then you get sensitive to what he calls bodily fabrication, i.e., the impact that the breath has on the body, and then through the body, how it has an impact on the mind. Then you calm that. You let the breath fill the body and then you calm the effect of the breath. In the second tetrad, you get sensitive to ways of breathing that give rise to pleasure and rapture, and then you notice how they have an impact on the mind. In other words, you're sensitive to mental fabrication, seeing how those feelings and the perceptions affect the mind. Then you adjust the feelings and the perceptions so that they calm the mind down.

In the meantime, you're talking to yourself about this. That's verbal fabrication. So you're using the breath as a way of getting more sensitive to how you fabricate things. Look for the way you breathe. Look for the story lines you're telling yourself. Look for the perceptions, the images, you're holding in mind. And say, "Okay, to get past this particular habit, I need to develop new habits of fabrication." The Buddha gives you lots and lots of images to hold in mind, lots of ways of thinking, and he gives you those instructions on the breath.

He gives you, basically, instructions how to fabricate well. Part of your mind may object and say, "Well, this doesn't seem natural." But this is all fabrication to begin with, and the reason why some things seem natural is simply because you've been doing them a lot, fabricating them again and again, for a long time. You can't really blame the habits you picked up from your parents on them or on your family because, after all, in that chant that we have, we're related through our actions. If you didn't already have those kinds of tendencies, you wouldn't have been born into that kind of family. So it doesn't do any good to try to trace back: Where did this habit begin with?

Trace down right now: How are you doing it right now? And is it really in your best interest to keep on doing it that way? If you have trouble imagining other ways of doing it, well, look at what the Buddha has to teach. Look around you for good examples. Then try to start fabricating your experience with knowledge, keeping in mind that larger context that we're here to find happiness in a way that doesn't harm anybody.

Metta, goodwill, as the Buddha said, is a form of mindfulness. It's a recollection. As I said, the desire for happiness is taken for granted, but the realization that if we really do want to find true happiness, we have to have goodwill for all: That's something we have to train ourselves in. We have to determine ourselves that this is what we're going to do. We want to keep this in mind as we speak, as we think, as we act, so that we can straighten out our ideas

about where our suffering is coming from and put an end to the cause. That way, we can find the harmless happiness that deep down we really want.