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Notes on metta

This is a supplement to the chapter 39 in Joseph Goldstein's Mindfulness.

There are many ways to examine the function of the cultivation of metta, loving-kindness.

There is the view from the immediacy of a sitting practice. As I am sitting here; where am I dwelling? If my heart is constricted, how do I open perception to include loving-kindness. Joseph Goldstein refers to this a "changing the channel". This points to the nimbleness of the meditative mind: learning how to let go of our attachment to patterns of clinging and aversion in this mind-moment and move toward openness of mind and heart.

It is helpful to also hold this view of this immediate moment of awareness and "change channels", as well as look at the cultivation of loving-kindness as a naturally unfolding process, moving toward dwelling in that abode where loving-kindness is an integral part of awareness itself. For this perspective, we can think of loving kindness as a vector rather than binary on and off position. It is as if loving-kindness is a lode star—a direction we are moving, continually developing

Before we even consider this, we can ask the question—why even bother with this work? Why cultivate this aspect of mind?

As a metaphor, I like to think about the beating heart which, throughout our lives, continuously moves from rest to activation and back to rest, ceaselessly. Otherwise, it is not functioning as a beating heart.

In order to be healthy, we need cycle between fear/alertness/energy and letting go/rest/trust, expanding and contracting in turn. Both states are necessary. The letting go/rest/trust state often needs to be consciously cultivated to balance the other as we learn to balance energy and cultivate trust. Eventually we learn to be both alert and at ease at the same time. This is the most responsive position for clarity of mind and the cultivation of skillful means.

Metta is a practice of moving toward a place of indwelling awareness, a home base for the attention, deeply rooted in wisdom, deeply rooted in the understanding of impermanence. It requires the cultivation of trust and patience, equanimity and compassion. The journey of metta requires we refine all these factors.

We need clarity and patience as we see the patterns of arousal/anger/fear, as we take apart our dynamic experience of reactivity. Our reactivity becomes the object of investigation. Here are all the rote patterns of defensiveness, layers of patterns to be revealed. For example, anger pulled back often reveals hurt and fear.

In order to cultivate metta, we need to bring into awareness all the obstacles along the way. The obstacles are the path. Our habitual patterns of reactivity are predictable. The messes we make are rarely a surprise.

We also have specialty motor neurons which pick up the states of others. We can use that mirroring to get insight into the other as well as ourselves. Where does this arising feeling resonate within me? This is the fount of empathy.

This is what we observe as we cultivate of loving-kindness.

This requires that we move out of ignorance, stop ignoring or denying any aspect of self and requires a willingness to ask where this feeling lives within us? And what does it cause us to perceive? How does that perception limit our understanding?

We can come to understand that whatever we observe in others also lives within us, within me. I can learn where the liar and the thief lives within me. I can know my own bigotry and small-mindedness. I can begin to allow all that I try to claim is not me is simply not yet conscious. I can learn that any feeling that arises within is just a small aspect of the totality. Anything we claim we are completely innocent of is inherently deluded, because all exists in potential. Our delusions get increasingly more subtle. Innocence is the devil's secret weapon. We end of acting out those aspects of self which are outside the realm of our awareness, and we claim innocence. This is a continual process of refinement.

Clarity requires acceptance and an increasingly expansive view of our functioning self, and willingness to witness, both internally and externally, all that we are loathe to know.

We are moving toward integrating understanding, wisdom, and insight. Any binary definition of perfection will fail us and move us back toward our small judgmental minds. We cultivate the expansive view both on the pillow and in daily life, always moving to a larger perspective.

We each have our own rationale and path we take to cultivating the capacity for loving-kindness, but the obstacles are common to all of us.

And with this, we will also come across many senses of loving-kindness, and all of them need to be included and not taken to be the ultimate expression. We have the mercurial romantic love, filial love, the love inherent in piety, grandmotherly love, and the love of a teacher or benefactor. We have the personal indwelling of love and the sublime, where love is simply existent. We move toward that stance of generosity of heart where we simply abide in love, where giving and receiving are all the same.

So we cultivate metta alone on our pillows, and in the thought of others, and with all sentient beings, and the vast unknown. Like a lodestar it can give us a direction for our intention of seeking wholesomeness and wholeness.

We can learn to bring loving-kindness into all aspects of our lives: with family, friends, strangers, and those whose humanity may be quite buried within their outer shells of protection. Clarity, skillful means, and equanimity are all needed to support this practice.