

Ruth King

Week 4, *Embracing the Mad Mind*

September 22, 2014

A Balm for Vulnerability

So, welcome to our fourth and final week together with embracing the mad mind with Tricycle Magazine. In our first week together, we looked at why is attention and why is intention with a reflection and also an assignment to set an attention. In the second week, we looked at the six disguises of the mad mind and was—you were asked to think about how to start noticing the subtle ways that they appear in our waking lives and also in our sitting practice. Last week, we took the practice of RAIN, recognize, allow, investigate and non-identification, as a way of being—embracing the mad mind, leaning into the experience and knowing it more intimately.

And this week, I'd like to offer another tool for embracing the mad mind by looking at the practice of metta, loving kindness, which is a practice that will support us in cultivating an atmosphere of non-resistance as we're working with the mad mind. As we awaken to the mad mind and begin to embrace it, we may feel tender and vulnerable and begin to miss our cover, our disguises. To feel this tenderness is not only unavoidable, but it's also a good sign. The Buddhist master, Chogyam Trungpa Rinpoche, taught us about the soft spot. He says that, "The soft spot is a tenderness we can't cover up, avoid or deny, but we try. We try to cover it up with our disguises." Pema Chodron describes it this way. She says, "The soft spot is the weak link and the hard boundary of the ego structure."

Our disguises have a weak link, a soft spot that we become reacquainted with as we let go. This tenderness, this soft spot, is a gateway to a deeper freedom that we share as humans. It's a return to our shared belonging without the weight and the grip of our beliefs. These beliefs that I'm referring to are the ones that are more about suffering, that keep us divided. The Buddha taught from a boundless heart. In the *Heart Sutra* he says that "One should cultivate a boundless mind towards all beings and friendliness towards the entire world. Throughout one's waking life, one should practice this mindfulness." So that's what we're doing with our heart practice of metta.

Metta is indeed a practice. Metta is the Pali word for loving kindness or friendliness. Another interpretation of metta is to become fat with friendliness. I don't really need the fat part, but I really understand what the interpretation means. But metta is an intentional offering of good will that we offer to ourselves and to all beings, without exception. We're not deciding that some people deserve our kindness and others don't. Metta is like the high noon sun that touches all things. No one is left out with metta and metta is the antidote to the mad mind.

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Metta is the antidote. It's the quality of the boundless heart. The late Dr. Maya Angelou talks about it this way: she said, "Love has no boundaries. It jumps hurdles, leaps fences, penetrates walls and arrives at its destination full of hope." That's the quality of metta that we're talking about. Metta is a meditation practice and we can consider it a technology. It's like a software upgrade that we put into the hardwiring of our conditioning, our disguises. There is a learning curve with this software package and it's called practice and it improves with practice. What we are doing with metta in our practice is we are controlling the climate by setting the thermostat to kindness and warmth. We are readying the mind to embrace what arises in an atmosphere of non-resistance and this supports a sense of ease and clear seeing as we are embracing what's difficult.

It's a simple practice because there are four traditional phrases. "May I be safe?" "May I be healthy?" "May I be happy?" And "May I live with ease?" Those are the simple phrases. But it's not easy and the reason the practice is not easy for some of us is because we don't always feel loving and kind. We don't feel it. A lot of people that I work with say, "We're saying these phrases, but I don't feel it." But here's a way to think about metta. Metta is like composting. It may look like you're not doing anything at first, but deep inside the heat of your practice, good things are happening and in time, there will be rich, nourishing soil to feed and seed kindness. So it's an investment. It's a process that purifies and nurtures all that it will touch.

So these phrases, these simple phrases, that we will practice in a moment are not meant to eliminate what's happening in your experience that you don't like or it's not trying to have you be elsewhere than where you are. It's more environmental. It's the infusing of the climate with a certain warmth and kindness so that whatever arises in it, is held with kindness. And it's a purification process because as difficulties do arise, we can discover for ourselves when our heart is open or closed, when it contracts or it's free. We can notice when our experiences are warm or cold because we have a space, a loving space, to notice what's occurring. And when our experiences become too difficult to bear, we can practice metta with metta. We can say something like, "May I be kind to myself in this moment of suffering, in this moment of struggle? May I be kind to myself?"

So ideally, you're creating phrases for yourself that really make sense and resonate with your experience. The key here with metta is that you feel your words, you feel the vibration of your words and you feel the goodness of your intention to offer them. It's not about just saying the phrases; it's about feeling the phrases and feeling the goodness of your intention and then allowing enough space after you've said the phrases, to see what vibrates afterwards.

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It can be a very touching experience if you're not expecting something instant to happen because then you get to be with what's right here. With this practice of metta, what we're doing is creating a loving atmosphere that supports us in transforming the mad mind. So let's practice together. We begin our practice taking your seat here, establishing a posture that supports your intention to be both alert and soft, at ease. So taking a moment here to turn your attention inward, allowing yourself to make contact with your cushion.

And noticing where the breath is right now. And I invite you to recall a moment of loving presence, a time in your life where you felt really touched by love. Not that kind of love that's romantic, but a moment where you felt your heart was purest and open. It could have been a time where you were seen clearly or it could have been a time where you received. So recall the moment of loving presence. Not so much a person, but a moment with a person, a moment of love.

And imagine that person sitting right before you, right now, taking joy in you and wishing you well. And you can feel the happiness and joy that's being exchanged between you, the soft opening and accepting, allowing and relaxing. Just enjoy this exchange. And allow yourself to be touched by this recollection, in this very moment.

Allow yourself to be full from this offering of kindness and warmth, letting this exchange bathe every cell in your body. Taking your time here to allow yourself to be touched. And very gently, allow the image of this person to fade, but maintain the essence of this exchange of kind warmth, this palpable quality of loving presence. And relax and soften your awareness as I offer these phrases. "May I be safe from inner and outer harm, may I be safe." "May I be healthy and strong"

Feeling the good intention of this offer to yourself in this atmosphere of kindness: "May I be happy and content." "May I live with ease and wellbeing." Continue resting in this kind awareness, this genuine offer of wellbeing towards yourself. And from this place of well-wishing towards yourself, bring to mind a person that you're having difficulty with. Perhaps it's someone that you love, but you can't get through to or maybe it's someone at work that you're having a difficult time with or maybe someone left you in a relationship or through death that you weren't prepared for, you didn't want that, or maybe you left and it's hard to forgive.

See this person or this situation clearly in your mind's eye; see them sitting before you and imagine them receiving your messages of care here. "May you be safe from inner and outer

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harm. May no harm come to you.” Again, stay connected with your genuine offer of kindness, your intention of well-wishes for this person. May you be healthy and strong. May you be happy and content with life. May you live with ease and wellbeing. Notice how they are receiving this offer, relaxing in your awareness of what’s happening, taking your time to feel the goodness, the kindness here, the genuine wish for their wellbeing.

Now extending our metta out into the world, indiscriminately, to all beings. May all beings be safe from inner and outer harm, all beings. May all beings, without exception, be healthy and strong. May all beings be happy and content, content with life as it unfolds. May all beings live with ease and wellbeing.

The practice of metta is a practical way to train the heart. The Buddha says that the willingness to train our hearts is the highest devotion and that’s what we’re practicing. We’re learning how to train our heart, to stop the wars, the wars of the mind. So our retreat is ending, but I trust that your practice will continue. In fact, I’m relying on it. And my hope for this retreat has been that we could recognize, understand and interrupt our habits of suffering and that we could create a loving atmosphere that embraces our disguises, embraces our mad mind, our habits of defending or protecting ourselves in a false refuge.

My hope was that we would grow a bit better than bitter. We would get away from that contraction that happens when we are angry and that we could notice and allow more moments of happiness in our lives. So this is a practice and we’re not going to eliminate the mad mind because just last night—no, I won’t go there. But I hope our time together has sparked an inquiry that allows you to be a bit more curious in knowing peace directly and knowing goodness and knowing that you’re able to create an atmosphere that you can both relax and see clearly and serve in a way that is creating again, an atmosphere of wellbeing.

In the *Heart Sutra* the Buddhist says that “Just as a mother would protect her life and her child, her only child, so should one cultivate a boundless mind towards all beings and friendliness towards the entire world. Standing, walking, sitting, lying down, throughout one’s waking hours, one should practice this mindfulness.” So it’s an ongoing practice to set good intentions and live by them, to embrace what disturbs you without turning away and without judgment, knowing that it’s impermanent and to welcome the mad mind in an atmosphere of love. So I’d like to close by offering another poem from my book, *Healing Rage*. “May every one of us become more curious and less frightened of rage. May manifestations of rage be acknowledged as pain and treated with the greatest compassion possible. May we look at one another’s rage, recognize ourselves and fall in love with what we see. And may our good deeds open our hearts in ways that heal the roots of suffering

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throughout the world, for all beings.” Thank you for your kind attention and I’ll see you on the path.