

Vidyamala Burch
Week Three, *Freeing the Mind When the Body Hurts*
December 19, 2016
“And What of Love?”



Welcome back to this online retreat, *Freeing the Mind When the Body Hurts*. My name is Vidyamala and I'm happy to be here with you again. The theme for this week is, "And What of Love?" Is love important in the spiritual life? Is love important in the Buddhist life?

Before we go into that, let's just recap the previous two weeks to bring us up to date. In the first week, I talked about the *Satipatthana Sutta* and the absolute importance in Buddhism of awareness, of knowing what you experience is in each moment of life. It means you can choose how you respond to your experience rather than being trapped in reactive states. I introduced a lovely summary of the *Satipatthana Sutta* from the scholar Analayo, who says the whole text can be summed up in four words: “keep calmly knowing change.”

In the second week we had the theme, "Letting Go of the Struggle" and introduced the *Sallatha Sutta* from the Pali canon. This sutta says that unpleasant sensations in the body are like being pierced by an arrow. When we're not wise, when we're not compassionate, not aware, we automatically resist and resent that pain, and it's as if we're being pierced by a second arrow. The Buddha says that even if you're wise, if you're awake, if your mind is free, you will still have the pain of the first arrow. All physical bodies will experience pain at one time or another. However, the wise person does not resist and resent that pain, so they're not pierced by the second arrow, and they only have the pain of one arrow. It's a beautiful teaching for those of us who are living with pain and illness. How can we learn to be at ease or more comfortable with the pain of the first arrow and not automatically compound our suffering through resistance and resentment?

This week we're going to move on to the importance of love. I ask the question, "and what of love?" What the Buddha would say is that love is absolutely central to the Buddhist path. Awareness is central, and love is also central. Sometimes Buddhism is described as having two wings. It has the wing of wisdom and the wing of compassion,



like a beautiful, balanced bird, and we need each of these qualities equally if we're going to lead a full, satisfied life of freedom and liberation. Love and kindness are particularly important for those of us living with pain and difficulty, because pain can really grind away at our sense of confidence and self-worth; we may even end up hating ourselves.

The main Buddhist practice for cultivating compassion or cultivating love is called the *metta bhavana*, which means the cultivation of loving kindness or the cultivation of universal friendliness. It's a very widely practiced meditation in the Buddhist tradition. To expand the metta bhavana a little bit more, there's another set of practices called the *brahmaviharas*, or the immeasurables, or the divine abodes. They take lovingkindness as the root practice and then see what happens when lovingkindness encounters different experiences.

When lovingkindness encounters suffering, it becomes *karuna* or compassion. When lovingkindness encounters someone else's good fortune, it becomes a *mudita*, or sympathetic joy. Then the fourth brahmavihara is *upekkha*, or equanimity, and it's seen as a very desirable state in the Buddhist tradition, a state of incredible balance or poise of evenness of heart and mind. We've got these lovely four practices of the *metta bhavana*, cultivating loving kindness; *karuna bhavana*, cultivating compassion; *mudita bhavana*, cultivation of sympathetic joy; and *upekkha bhavana*, the cultivation of equanimity.

I'm going to focus mainly on the *metta bhavana*, which is the root practice of this set, and look at how can we cultivate it if we've got a body that hurts. How can we cultivate love for ourselves, kindness towards ourselves, if our body is hurting? And how can we then extend those feelings of goodwill, love, and kindness towards other human beings?

I'd like to pick up on a theme from last week, when I suggested that for many of us, at times when our bodies hurt and we've got some kind of discomfort, we contract against it



and we hold the breath. We've got discomfort, contraction, resistance, and breath holding. I encouraged you, in your home practice, to soften that resistance with mindful breathing.

You can also use this breath technique when thinking not just of your own pain, but of other people as well. Say there's a friend who you want to experience kindness, well-wishing, and lovingkindness. It can be lovely to breathe in awareness of your friend and on the out breath to imagine love and kindness bathing your friend, flowing to your friend. You could do the same for a neutral person, for an acquaintance. The in breath is the awareness, the out breath is just flowing into them, into their hearts, into their minds, into their bodies.

To get a felt sense of it, perhaps remember a time on a summer's day when the sun was warm and there was a gentle breeze. As the breeze blew over your body, you felt the warmth of the sun in the air. That's what we're trying to do. The breeze on a on a summer's day is completely saturated with the warmth of the sun. What we're trying to do in this practice is to completely saturate the breath with this felt sense of care, of tenderness, of lovingkindness.

Of course, if you don't feel that, and often we don't feel that, then you can saturate the breath with an intention of lovingkindness, an intention of well-wishing. It's been shown again and again that this has a very beneficial effect. It's a little like planting seeds in the ground in the winter. They will blossom into flowers in the spring. If we plant the seeds of intention, of lovingkindness in the breath, it will lead to greater ease, greater tenderness, and greater love towards ourselves and other people.

I'd like to take this into a deeper level of wisdom now. I'd like to think back to the first talk that I gave, when I mentioned that one of the key insights of the Buddha was impermanence, that everything is changing, is flowing, is fluid. If we take that reflection a little bit deeper and look at the relationship between the self and the other, between



myself and you perhaps, or between yourself and the person that you're at home with, it can be interesting to reflect on the deeper implications of impermanence.

If I am changing, if I am flowing, if I am the arising and passing of sensations, thoughts, emotions, habits, and you are likewise, then where are the hard edges between us? Where do I end and you begin? Perhaps we're much more porous than we realize. I think our usual perception is that I'm a concrete block here and you're a concrete block there, and we are entirely separate. What the Buddha is telling us is that there's a deeper truth of inter-connectedness, that of course we are separate—that I'm here and you're there—but that there's a much greater flow between us. We are continually influencing each other. You're being changed by listening to this talk. I'm being changed by giving this talk. There's an exchange between us that's happening that's very beautiful. It's profound to drop into this much deeper level of knowing and feeling more deeply connected to other people and to life itself.

There's a lovely story from a Buddhist writer named Jeffrey Hopkins, who was one of the main translators for the Dalai Lama when he first came to the west. He said that everywhere the Dalai Lama went, he had one message: "Nobody wants to suffer, everybody wants to be happy." All the interviews he did, he just said the same thing. "Nobody wants to suffer, everybody wants to be happy." The translator at first thought, "That's strange." He'd listened to him give really complex teachings in India that went on for days, but when he came to the West he only had this one message. When he reflected more deeply, he thought, "Gosh, how different the world would be if we all lived from an understanding of how much we share, and that we all are driven by the same basic desire: to end suffering and find happiness."

All the people we come into contact with are more similar to us than we realize. Deep down, human beings are all very alike. We're all breathing. None of us want to suffer. We all want to be happy. If we're living with pain and difficulty, what can happen when we



find this deeper reflection is that rather than the pain and difficulty being the thing that separates us from other people, it can become a point of empathy. We will realize that everybody experiences discomfort at one time or another, and none of us like it.

What often happens when we have pain or difficulty is that we feel more and more isolated, more and more separate, and we think we're the only ones. We look out into the world and we project a kind of perfection onto everybody else so we feel less than. We think everyone else has got this amazing life. I know I certainly used to do that, many years ago, with my back pain.

It's been lovely for me to drop beneath the habit of relating to other people on the basis of difference, and instead relate on the basis of that which we share, our common humanity. We're all breathing in and out, none of us likes to suffer, and we all want to be happy. Other people are no longer strangers. They become fellow human beings on this journey that we're all participating in. That's a beautiful shift, when the world becomes full of human beings, rather than full of strangers. It's particularly important for those of us living with pain who often make a habit of feeling isolated.

This is something you can take into your practice this week. If you're in the queue at the supermarket, on the bus, or on the train, look around at all these people you may have a habit of seeing as other, separate, strangers, foreign, or different. Just reflect. That's another human being. They're breathing just like me. Their life is just as complex as mine is. They want to love and be loved, just like I do. They don't want to suffer and they want to be happy just like I do. See what that's like, see if that changes your experience of life. I think it will. I think it will help you feel more connected with humanity, and that will bear fruit, and your life will become richer and more satisfying.



As in other weeks, we're going to finish with a short practice. To drop into allowing kindness to ride the breath in and out the body, and then we're going to extend that out and connect with other people.

To begin with, let's just drop into a posture again, seeing if we can find a position that's as comfortable as possible. You can do this sitting, lying, standing, whichever you want. Allow the weight to drop down into the chair, the bed, the floor. See if you can surrender the weight of the body to gravity, so you're resting in this place, in this moment, in this body.

Feel the breath in the whole body. Allow the whole body to be breathed. The back of the body, the front of the body, the sides of the body, the inside of the body, and the whole surface of the body. Feel the fluid nature of breathing, the fluid nature of sensations, thoughts, emotions: everything arising, everything passing, moment by moment.

Allow the breath to be saturated and drenched with a sense of care towards ourselves, a sense of kindness, even love. See if you can bring an attitude towards yourself that you would naturally have for a loved one. This precious human life, right here, right now. If it feels a bit dry and barren, then remembering to have an intention of well-wishing, an intention of kindness, is also valuable. There's the possibility of caring for oneself, of loving oneself, being kindly.

The whole body, whole mind, and whole heart are being bathed in kindness on the out breath. Allow each breath to soften resistance. Let go, to softness, openness and release.

Now stay centered, stay grounded, and allow the circumference of your awareness to expand and to include all the other people in your environment, perhaps in your house, or in the room if there are other people with you. These other people are so similar to you deep down. See if you can rest in this shared breath, in and out. They're breathing. They

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don't like suffering. They want to be happy, fulfilled, and well. Just breathe with these people for a few moments and allow well-wishing to flow towards them with each out breath, like a gentle wind that's bathed in warmth.

Now allow your awareness to expand on and on. We stay centered, we stay grounded but the circumference of our awareness becomes vast, inclusive, receptive. It includes all beings everywhere, all breathing in and out.

We're so very alike. None of us likes to suffer and we all want to be happy. Just see if we can rest for a few moments with this sense of common humanity. Drop beneath focusing on difference to rest in commonality. The whole world is breathing this kindly, loving breath.

Now allowing the weight and shape of the body to come into the foreground of awareness, feel the sensations of breathing in the body and of the weight of the body. As we bring this short meditation to a close, perhaps form an intention to allow the breathing to stay soft and kindly in the whole body.

As we open our eyes, see if you can form an intention to take this quality with you as you reengage with your day. I wish you well with your practice this week, this practice of connectedness, of resting and commonality and kindness being carried on the breath in our own body, and when we're with other people. I look forward to seeing you next week. Thank you.