Five Hindrances in Mettā Practice

Carol Wilson · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Carol Wilson · 55:30

So sometimes about the end of the second day on a metta retreat, once in a while people will ask us, "Remind me again how this is being kind to myself?" Because certainly you're a rare person if you haven't discovered by this time that many, many things arise in our mind and body. And many, many of them are not metta.

Even if you've done loving-kindness retreats before, we kind of tend to forget. But if you haven't, it would really be normal not to be expecting such a variation. And I know how much of the stuff that comes up is difficult, painful—pain in the body, really deep emotional pain sometimes, some that's not so deep but that's really quite painful nevertheless, just basic aversion or sleepiness or restlessness.

So I just want to reiterate that actually we don't recognize it in the middle of the retreat, but it really is an act of deepest kindness, of ultimate kindness to ourselves to be willing to practice in this way. Because with each phrase that you plant that seed, that you drop the phrase into your heart, that you repeat it—each phrase is a moment of breaking down our dream, our illusion that we live in, of separation, of isolation, of neediness, of loneliness.

And each time that we make that intention to cultivate loving-kindness by saying the phrase, we are counteracting the habits of our mind, the habits of our heart that are keeping us confused and in delusion, that are keeping us away from our true home.

St. Augustine said once, the reason why humans behave as they do is because they are not living in their true home. The context of the heart of connectedness that manifests as metta, as compassion—that's not some weird altered state we have to create. That is our true home. And we're not living there. We think greed and aversion and restlessness are really who lives here. We don't recognize that that's not our true home. And the heart of kindness, the heart of non-judging, the heart of compassion really is our true home. So what we're doing really is an ultimate kindness.

However, we don't get the instant results that—I don't know what it is—I think it's so deeply inbred in us in this Western culture that even when we think we're being patient and taking the long view, we're not even close. The long view is three months. That's the long view. Let's read the Buddha. He's talking about eons and eons and eons. I'm not saying that's encouraging. I'm just trying to give a comparison for what could be the long view. Three months isn't it. Seven days isn't it. That's not to be discouraging. That's so that we don't have completely unrealistic expectations—think that because anger is coming up in my mind on the third day, I'm wasting my time here, I might as well go home.

But that these difficult states of mind and pain in the body come up, that's normal. It's part of the practice. It's not a mistake.

One of the ways you could look at the formal practice of metta as we're doing it here is that part of what we discover is a moment-to-moment training in seeing how we create with our mind the dream, the illusion of separation, of alienation, of suffering. It's not that this sense of being separate, this sense of loneliness, this sense of neediness is some big thing that's in us, that's hanging there, that we have to chip away at. It's only this moment. And the sense of separation, the sense of distance, our sense of suffering, of fear, of neediness, is created in the moment by how the mind and heart responds or reacts to whatever particular experience is arising.

Now to me, thinking of my experience or looking at it in this moment-to-moment level is enormously freeing because it takes a huge load off—that I somehow have to undo the whole last forty-nine years of my life and make sure I never in the future, for however long, make a mistake again, both of which is obviously impossible. I can at least pay attention to this moment sometimes. Sometimes. But that at least seems within the range of the doable, to pay attention to how the mind and heart is reacting in this moment to whatever's arising.

Nisargadatta Maharaj, one of my favorite quotations, said, "The obstacles to the clear perception of one's true being are desire for pleasure and fear of pain." Sound familiar? Desire for pleasure and fear of pain—desire and ill will, right?

Greed and aversion—the first two of the five hindrances. It's not that they're evil. But when we don't recognize those habits, when those habits basically run the show, run our life—even though we think that desiring pleasure and fearing pain is what's bringing us happiness—those tendencies are actually what's perpetuating, moment to moment, our sense of isolation, of neediness.

One of the reasons that metta practice, and vipassana practice too, can be quite uncomfortable at times is because they're working from different angles on the same thing. We're counteracting very deep habits. And as you know, breaking a habit doesn't feel good a lot of the time, even though we know that once the habit's gone, or it's a lot less, we're a lot happier. But in the meantime, the habit is what's comfortable. The habit is where our mind naturally goes.

So it's natural that as we deepen in this practice—and I know you might not feel like you've deepened at all, but don't go there. That's a completely irrelevant judgment that the mind makes based on some made-up idea. You are deepening. You're still here. You're still doing it. It's deepening. You say, "I'm not deepening because more aversion, more greed is coming up." No, that's proof that it's deepening. Because as we continue strengthening the intentions of loving-kindness, each time we say the phrase, it's as if the obstacles get highlighted. I know I rather naively thought they would just vanish into the background, but they get highlighted. One of my teachers used to say that as the light of awareness shines, all the snakes come up out of their pits. And there are moments when that really feels like what's happening.

There are also plenty of moments when it's not like that at all—the goodness, the connectedness, the sense of non-judging. It's important to notice those moments too. For neither of them do you need to take credit, which makes it a whole lot easier. You only have to notice them.

So it's natural that the obstacles get highlighted. One model for understanding some of the difficult states that come up is the five hindrances, which I know, if you've done any meditation in this style before, you're quite familiar with. In metta practice, sometimes we forget to notice them. They come up in just the same way, with just as much strength as they do in vipassana practice. They might manifest in a slightly different way, and I'll talk about that at times. Also, because the practice is a little different, we don't always notice them as quickly as we might in vipassana.

The challenge for our hearts—really, how to meet these difficult emotional and physical states in metta practice—is not to think, "Well, I can't do metta because they're here," or "These are obstacles." The key is simply the recognition of desire, for example—the first hindrance—the recognition of it rather than being driven by it, and then how we meet it with our attention. That's how the metta continues: in the recognition and the meeting of what's arising with clear, non-judging attention. That's really metta. I think Sharon said something like that last night—that really connected, non-judging attention is an aspect of metta.

So when you're feeling really sleepy, or really aversive toward yourself or something that's happening, or filled with doubt, recognizing it is essential. And then notice what's the habit of how your awareness greets that. One way is what Sharon said last night—how we think, "Oh, great, come in, you live here, settle down." Suzuki Roshi once said, "In zazen, leave your front door and your back door open. Let the thoughts come and go. Just don't serve them tea." So that's one way we greet them: "Oh sure, it's your house, it's your home."

Another way is the opposite, which in my mind is personified by an old blind Swami I met in India a few years ago. I was staying in a small ashram, which was just rooms built around a kind of concrete courtyard. There was this really old Swami, a renunciate dressed in orange, a little crazy, whom they had taken in off the street and were letting sleep on a bed in that courtyard. When we arrived in the afternoon, he was just lying there, seeming out of it.

In the middle of the night, like two in the morning, the whole place started reverberating with these huge banging sounds. It just rattled everything. And it would go on for ten or fifteen minutes. You'd bounce awake, and then it would stop. You'd fall back asleep, and in another couple of hours, it would start again.

The next day, I came walking back at some point and the Swami was actually up. I saw that he was the one making those sounds. He had this huge piece of rope—like a big length he'd made himself out of old little pieces of cloth woven together, so it was very thick and frayed at the end. He would just be lying there, seeming out of it, and suddenly he'd leap up, grab this rope, and start whacking the floor with all his strength. He'd just go at it for five or ten minutes, and then he'd lie back down again.

After a couple of days, I asked one of the young guys who lived there, "What's he doing?"

He said, "Well, you know, he says when he's meditating, evil spirits come and disturb his meditation. So he's getting rid of them."

That's the second option, which I also don't recommend.

But look and see. We often engage in either whacking the unpleasant visitor or whacking ourselves for having the unpleasant visitor. Not mettā. Definitely not mettā.

So I'll talk a bit about these five hindrances in the context of the mettā retreat. Recognition is very important.

The first two hindrances, of course, are desire—or sense desire—and aversion, ill will. They're the first two of the hindrances, and they are much larger than just hindrances. They're really the key to how we keep ourselves suffering and in delusion. But in mettā practice, these two states of mind, states of heart, have a very specific relationship to the mental state of mettā.

Desire, clinging, is called the near enemy of mettā. And ill will, aversion, fear, is called the far enemy.

What does that mean? Near enemy means it's a state of mind or heart that can fool us. It can look like mettā, and we can actually think that we are cultivating mettā or feeling mettā when we're actually in wanting. Just logically hearing that, we think, "But they're not the same at all." It's really quite interesting how that happens.

If you look at the two states, they're almost opposites of each other. Look at desire in your experience when you start wanting something—whether it's some little thing like wanting the bell to ring or something special for tea, or something huge like wanting a particular relationship, wanting something major to happen in your life. Looking with your attention at the state of wanting itself, the essence of desire is separation. The sense of desire is that I am somehow separate from whatever it is. There's a sense of neediness for completion, for wholeness, for collectedness. Something is lacking and needs to be acquired or held onto. It's actually the energy of the craving or desire itself that creates and sustains this sense of inadequacy, insufficiency, neediness. But we often don't recognize that and just think, "If I had this thing, then I'm whole again."

So the whole essence of desire is separation, insufficiency, while mettā is just the opposite. Mettā is the clear connection without judgment, without creating limitation, without creating separation. It's a simple example of how desire really disturbs our essential completion, our essential peace, but we get sidetracked by it. Mettā recognizes things as they are—a sense of friendliness, a sense of connectedness, a sense of no problem, really.

I'm on airplanes a lot. On one overnight flight, I was sitting in the middle row, and about five minutes before the doors closed, I suddenly noticed no one was sitting in the rest of the row. I had been sitting

there quite peacefully—no problem, no wanting, no aversion, just at ease—until I noticed that. The pleasant thought arose that maybe I could lie down, and I clung to it.

In that moment, what had been quite peaceful became really antsy, anxious, nervous. Everybody who walked onto the plane, I was really focused on them, and I wasn't with mettā, I can tell you that—until they walked past my aisle. Then it was, "Ah, may you be happy," you know.

What had been a very peaceful situation became one where each person was evaluated, judged as my enemy, as a threat until they passed—and then they were okay. I was really, at least, noticing this as it happened. That's about all I can take credit for. But it was a really uncomfortable state.

Contrast that to the state before, where I'm just sitting there and when people come in, it's just me, just them, no problem. Me as I am, they as they are. Nothing needs to change. Nothing needs to happen. We're just right here. There's quite a sense of peace and connectedness. That's the difference between mettā and clinging.

When looked at that way, you think, "How could we confuse them?" Mettā is a divine abode. We talk about the four brahmavihāras: mettā, compassion or karuṇā, sympathetic or empathetic joy, appreciative joy, and equanimity. Divine abodes—limitless, boundless. Well, I'll tell you, the state of desire is no divine abode. And I think that's something we can really discover for ourselves in the next two hours.

So how do we get confused? Because we do.

It really is fascinating if you can take the personal out of it—fascinating to explore in your metta practice that shifting sand between the sense of friendliness and connectedness, and then subtle wanting, and then blatant wanting.

One thing is that craving, clinging, wanting as a habit arises as a result of connection with pleasant experience. When we're not paying attention and it's really pleasant, the habit of our mind is to want more, or hold on to it, or keep it going. And in the practice of metta, to begin with, we're saying deliberately focus on the good, on the beautiful in someone. So even if you're not feeling anything you would remotely describe as metta—that doesn't mean you're not experiencing metta, but you're not feeling some huge upwash of beautiful, pleasant energy—you're still focusing on the good in someone. It's very easy for that pleasantness, when we don't quite notice it in a moment, for clinging and craving to start coming up.

A simple example. I noticed on one retreat when I was with the friend category, I'd be sending metta to her. This is a pretty happy person, and so I'd be feeling happy. I'd be feeling, "Yeah, she's really nice. She's so great. Why don't we see each other more? That would be really nice, to see her more." Before I knew it, I had a whole story about when we could get together and how we could see each other and maybe I'd go call her and... That's not metta. That's wanting.

And that was relatively easy to notice. Sometimes it would move from one pleasant thought into another pleasant thought, into another pleasant fantasy. We don't really pick it up. And suddenly we're into a full-blown attack of wanting, where it's really the hindrance of sense desire. Nothing to do with a dear friend, nothing to do with anything you could remotely call the metta practice, but we're just gripped. How did I get here? I was so diligently sending loving kindness to the benefactor, and here I am off in Bali, skin diving. How did that happen?

So of course there's nothing to judge or get upset about. It's interesting. When you notice—say when I noticed, "Oh, I'm off, and how am I going to get to see her?"—rather than going, "Oh no, get back to the metta," just for a moment, notice the wanting. That leaning forward, the tightness, the sense of neediness, however you're experiencing it, so that we really recognize that it's not metta, and we really learn to recognize it. And then, not with any harshness, put it down, gently come back and refocus. In that case, I refocused on the friend, and I came back and simply offered the next phrase as a gift. So it's the starting over, over and over, but noticing the difference. And then you start to notice sooner. You'll think you're in the metta and you've just a little bit slid into wanting, but you'll pick it up sooner because it really is a different experience.

So when there's wanting as the hindrance, when it's just full-blown, eventually you'll notice that you're just wanting a different seat, you're wanting different food, you're wanting different weather, you're wanting different people sitting next to you. That's the classic hindrance that we talk about in the first days of a retreat. With that, it's simply a matter of noticing it, really noticing it, naming it, recognizing it without judging. You can take what I call a few minutes of a Vipassana break, a mindfulness break. If it's really strong, just bring your mindfulness to your body and your breath and just be with that feeling of wanting, so that you're not pretending this elephant in the closet isn't there and in some tiny little voice saying, "May I be happy, may I be peaceful," while really filled with lust or something. This is what's happening. Let's just feel it for a moment. And then from within that, you can reconnect with the next phrase, with the intention of loving kindness.

There are a couple of specific ways, particularly in the metta practice, that are a bit more subtle than this, more like what it was with my friend, where the metta gets a little co-opted by the wanting, where the wanting really is masquerading as metta.

One way is that we are doing our practice very diligently, repeating the phrases, but subtly or not so subtly, our motivating force is really wanting the metta feeling. And this is pretty hard not to fall into sometimes. We really want some kind of good feeling. I mean, why the heck would we be here if we didn't? I didn't come here to feel nothing and say these phrases for seven days. Of course we want some metta feeling. We just need to recognize it and realize that's not the metta practice—to be sitting there going, "May I be happy. Do I feel it yet? May I be peaceful. Do I feel it yet?"

So if you notice that happening, recognize it. Come back. Or we get into wanting concentration. And

there's a way with both of these where it's almost as if after every phrase or after every set of phrases, we're subtly checking back.

Am I more concentrated than before? Do I feel it a little more than before? Do I feel a little more connected than before? And if you start to feel that you're leaning forward, that's often a sign. If there is a nice feeling, which sometimes comes, you'll know that you got into wanting rather than just being with the metta feeling, because when it goes and you're really frustrated, that's always a sign that we were deep in the wanting.

None of this is with judging. This is simply to see what's what, to see where we suffer. And metta, just that simple connectedness—no feeling, it doesn't matter—but metta is not about suffering. It can connect with suffering. It's not about hiding suffering. But when we're really in that connected, present moment of metta, it's not going to cause us suffering. Wanting, expectation, ambition, holding on—these are going to cause us suffering. And all we have to do is keep noticing to see the difference.

One other subtle way that at some point most of us get into in the metta practice: in saying the phrases, whether to ourselves or to another, there's a subtle shift where we're not just saying the phrase as an offering of the heart—we're wanting something to change. I really want that person to be happy. It often comes up with phrases like "may you have physical happiness" or "may you be healthy," and if the person isn't so healthy, you notice that dichotomy more easily. But it's quite easy to slip into. In one sitting, you can go back and forth between the simple intention and suddenly leaning forward—you know, if you just did this, you would be happy. Or for ourselves, of course: may I be happy, may I be happy, may I be happy.

So it's just to notice when it's moved from the simple intention of well-wishing, the simple intention of friendliness, to wanting some result. It's also common, if you've spent a few days on the benefactor or your friend, that people want to go home and see if they noticed anything, if they're feeling better, more happy. Just notice. Of course we're interested. But don't be doing it for that, because it gets into the wanting.

These are some of the ways, especially in metta practice, that the near enemy can masquerade. But as soon as you notice it, it's no big deal. It's so obvious once you notice it that we wonder how it masqueraded—until the next time.

The far enemy, well, that's more obvious. The far enemy is more obviously opposite: aversion, ill will, all the gradations of that, including fear. But again—and this is sometimes not what people expect when they begin a metta practice—because ill will and fear really are obstacles to the perception of our true being, and they are kind of the opposite of metta, it's quite common that they begin to come up rather strongly at various periods in our loving-kindness practice. And often the person experiencing it interprets this as blowing it in some way. But you're not. It's an almost inevitable part of an intensive loving-kindness practice. If there are habits in our psyche of fear or ill will or irritation—and I suppose it's a rare being who doesn't have some habits of those—they're going to arise.

And so, again, our challenge, our practice, is not to get caught in hating them or blaming ourselves or going into a real downward spiral of self-judgment. This is really common on all retreats, but in metta practice sometimes it seems highlighted—where sending loving-kindness to oneself encounters the endless list of what's wrong with us, and the inability to really feel loving just proves what we always suspected. I don't need to say more. And from that, every unpleasant experience becomes further proof.

So I think it's helpful to take a moment, as we did with clinging, to see how aversion is experienced in the moment, to have a sense of how ill will or fear really functions in the moment. We're not talking about our big psychic patterns, but just how these states arise in the moment to begin with.

Just as clinging or craving arises when we come in contact with something pleasant and we're not particularly paying attention, when some unpleasant thing—a sight or a sound or a thought, or a physical sensation in our body, like sleepiness, which is physically unpleasant—when that unpleasant experience arises and we're not particularly noticing, it gives rise to aversion or fear. And what is that? It's a pulling away. In that moment, it's a disconnect from the reality, from the simplicity of that moment's experience. Ill will or anger is sort of like "no," lashing out, "get away." Fear is more like pulling back, retreating. But it's a disconnect, energetically.

If you tune in—say you have a pain in your knee and you notice aversion to it—you can almost feel how your attention pulls back. Sometimes our whole body pulls back like that. And of course, because of that, we're not going to see clearly what's actually happening in that moment, because we're not connected. And that is the moment.

It's unpleasant. We pull back. That moment of disconnection, that space, is all that our patterns of mind need to rush in and say, "Yes, you are sleepy. You are really hopeless. You slept for a week before you came here so you wouldn't be sleepy, and here you are sleepy, and that just proves..." And there you are, back on the downward spiral.

If we don't recognize, "Oh, this is just aversion arising," or if it's fear, we project it into the future: "I'm sleepy now. I've been sleepy the last sitting. It follows that for every sitting from now on, I'm going to be sleepy. And it's unbearable. There's no way I can do it." And then again, the spiral starts.

The more this happens, it's as if we're wearing colored glasses. Every experience that arises, once we start to fall into whatever pattern of negativity is our common one—whether it's judging ourselves, hating ourselves, fearing the future, getting angry at everyone else, whatever our particular story is—once we start believing it and not recognizing it as aversion, we get farther and farther afield from the reality of what's going on in this moment. Each moment of fear, aversion, negativity just feeds the next.

I've learned to recognize when a worthlessness pattern is operating in my mind. Any perception that comes up—a sight, a sound—when that worthlessness pattern is really strong, is interpreted in such a way that it confirms I'm worthless. It could be anything. And it gets to be funny when I notice it.

A small example: I could come down the stairs outside, and you know those rows of clips where you put notes? Usually I look and think, "Oh good, no notes. That means everyone's fine." That's a normal response, right? When worthlessness is on, I'll come down, there are no notes, and I'll look and think, "Oh my God, nobody likes me because I'm useless." That level. And when I see that, I can just laugh. It's just what the mind does.

But when we don't see it, that's another unpleasant experience that we didn't recognize. We pull back, and we're completely disconnected from reality in not much time. We wonder, "How could anyone...?" We look at ourselves and think, "I'm not that bad of a person. How come I feel like this about myself?"

This is where metta comes in. With any unpleasant experience, it doesn't have to be turned in on ourselves, but that's a significant way that the hindrance of ill will arises in a metta retreat. It could also be the lashing out where you're just hating everybody who comes into your field of vision or your field of hearing, or the weather, or maybe you've just picked one pet peeve, but it's really taking over.

I notice when I'm on a retreat and I suddenly have to write a note to the cooks—for the good of all beings—and they need to hear it. I start paying attention to the quality of energy that's convincing me I need to write the note. And now I know enough to say, "Okay, that means you don't write that note for three days." Because by that time, the urgency is gone—it was just the hindrance of ill will.

You could pay attention to this. If you urgently have to write a note to the maintenance people or the snow shovelers, if you have a brilliant idea for how the place could run better, why don't you wait till the end of the retreat and see if it still feels so brilliant? Maybe it is brilliant, but then it will still be brilliant at the end of the retreat.

Metta really is the antidote for fear and ill will. Now, the mind of ill will—and I can say this from experience—doesn't want to hear that, or doesn't believe it. Often, when one is sort of comfortable in a negative way of looking at things, or it's just a strong habit of mind, it will come up when you do metta, so metta is difficult at that time. And that's when you'll hear yourself say—I've heard myself, I've heard a lot of people say—"I hate metta. I hate practicing metta."

I'm not going to do it. And that's because it's going against a strong pattern.

We often have—and again, it's this kind of habit of ill will speaking—a mistaken concept about how metta is the antidote to ill will. This is often what the resistance, the intellectual resistance, is about. I think Sharon alluded to this the other night, when we think of metta as being stupid. Oh, I see these really difficult, painful, horrible things in myself, but I'll just say, "May I be happy, may I be peaceful," as if just covering it over, suppressing it, or pretending it's not there. Or in somebody else, it's even more obvious. They have this really harmful thing that they do, and I'm just going to say, "May you be happy, may you live with ease," and completely ignore that. That's stupid. That's naive.

But that's not metta. That's what we often think it is—just a covering over.

Or the other thing that we can quite fall into is almost the opposite: thinking that I have to really love that person, I have to love their stupidity, I have to love my pettiness. "Really, you're wonderful, and so is your pettiness." That doesn't seem realistic either. So we're kind of in a quandary. That's not metta.

Metta is simply, clear-eyed and clear-heartedly, with the attention connecting with what's happening—without judgment, without expectation. Just connecting. You don't have to love it. You don't have to think anything about it. In fact, don't think anything about it. Just connect.

From Ajahn Sumedho—do you know who Ajahn Sumedho is? He's an American man who ordained as a Buddhist monk in Thailand with Ajahn Chah, the well-known forest monk and meditation teacher. Ajahn Sumedho has been a monk about thirty years. He lives in England now and is the head of the whole Western order of Buddhist monks and nuns in this tradition. He's very down-to-earth and simple in the way he describes things. He says, talking about metta: "Metta does not necessarily mean liking anything at all. It means an attitude of not dwelling on the unpleasantness or fault of any situation inside or outside of oneself. Now with metta, one isn't blinding oneself with an ideal. Instead, one is witnessing the unpleasantness in a situation, in a thing, a person, or oneself. You're witnessing the unpleasantness without creating anything around it."

I love that. This witnessing, connecting with the unpleasantness, and you don't create anything around it. Just let it be in the light of awareness. You simply don't get into thinking, "I hate it, I hate it, I don't want it."

This is metta. I don't think that's easy, but doesn't that seem a lot more doable than loving everything that's really hard? It's the power of non-judging, unlimited, kind attention. That's really what metta is. It's so much more simple and so much more powerful than our ideals about it might have us believe.

So really, whether it's a pleasant experience or an unpleasant experience or neutral, it doesn't matter. This is really where metta leads into wisdom. The attitude, the connectedness of heart, of attention, of mind, of metta, automatically opens into wisdom. This is something I didn't really believe until I practiced it quite intensively, but it seems to.

When we allow, as Sumedho was saying, just that connecting with the unpleasantness or the pleasantness—don't create anything around the pleasantness either, such as "Isn't this wonderful? Isn't this great? How can I have more?"—just what it is. When we really allow that, the inclusiveness, which we would call metta, that sense of acceptance, that sense of all-inclusiveness, that sense of limitlessness, naturally arises. It's not that we have to try to feel inclusive about that person, this aspect of myself, that experience. But simply by steady, connected, non-judging attention in various ways, the connectedness, the inclusiveness, the lack of limits becomes apparent.

Let me read you this poem that I really like.

To me, it really expresses this—the willingness to come back and meet with unflinching kind eyes something that's a little difficult or unpleasant—and how that opens into connectedness.

It's by Mary Oliver, called "Singapore."

In Singapore, in the airport, a darkness was ripped from my eyes. In the women's restroom, one compartment stood open. A woman knelt there washing something in the white bowl. Disgust argued in my stomach and I felt in my pocket for my ticket.

A poem should always have birds in it. Kingfishers say, with their bold eyes and gaudy wings. Rivers are pleasant and, of course, trees. A waterfall, or if that's not possible, a fountain rising and falling. A person wants to stand in a happy place in a poem.

When the woman turned, I could not answer her face. Her beauty and her embarrassment struggled together and neither could win. She smiled and I smiled. What kind of nonsense is this? Everybody needs a job.

Yes, a person wants to stand in a happy place in a poem, but first we must watch her as she stares down at her labor, which is dull enough. She's washing the tops of airport ashtrays as big as hubcaps with a blue rag. Her small hands turn the metal, scrubbing and rinsing. She does not work slowly nor quickly, but like a river. Her dark hair is like the wing of a bird.

I don't doubt for a moment that she loves her life, and I want her to rise up from the crust and the slop and fly down to the river. This probably won't happen, but maybe it will. If the world were only pain and logic, who would want it? Of course it isn't. And neither do I mean anything miraculous, but only the light that can shine out of a life. I mean the way she unfolded and refolded the blue cloth, the way her smile was only for my sake. I mean the way this poem is filled with trees and birds.

So much more simple and so much more vast and powerful than anything our complicated minds could make up. We just really need the willingness—the faith, really—to trust enough to keep practicing and not be discouraged when we're caught in wanting, when we're caught in aversion, when we're caught in complete boredom because nothing is happening. We don't know. It's so much vaster than we can know. So it's really an urge to keep going.

I need to mention the other three hindrances. But first I wanted to say that sometimes people feel a strong urge to stay with themselves as they're practicing the method, to stay more with themselves than going through all the categories as quickly as we are—which is fine. But it's common to feel that it's somehow wrong or selfish or greedy. We should be sending it out to all beings, and here I am just sending it to myself. Don't believe it. Because again, just like in that poem, if you can really touch your own experience with loving-kindness, it expands outward, past the limits. It doesn't stop at some made-up idea of the edge of my body with everything out there being separate. So please trust yourself to keep going if you feel drawn to send it to yourself, and you'll see that ultimately the illusion of separation begins to break away. Even against all your best efforts, you'll find metta leaking out to other people, even when you didn't intend it.

In one of the groups, I mentioned that sometimes, if you're having trouble connecting with phrases to

yourself, or it feels like too much wanting, you might use a phrase somewhere along the lines of, "I love and accept myself just as I am," rather than trying to make yourself feel something different.

Now, the other three hindrances, just to mention: sloth and torpor or sleepiness; restlessness and agitation—that physical restlessness where you just can't sit still—and obsessive worrying spinning in the mind; and doubt. Just as in a Vipassana retreat, they arise sometimes very strongly in a metta retreat.

One thing I've noticed, because of the nature of metta as a concentration practice where we're not investigating so much other things that arise—you notice you're thinking, and you just come back to the phrases, you don't necessarily name what's happening at first if you can just come back—sometimes that's fine. There's a little anger, a little restlessness, you notice it, you come back to the phrase, and it's gone. Fine. But sometimes, because we didn't notice, all of a sudden it wallops us over the side of the head. You'll just be in a frenzy of doubt, for example, and not know how you got there. So if that happens to you, you're not doing something wrong. As soon as you can recognize it, recognize it. That's the main thing.

Again, because this is a concentration practice—we're coming back over and over to the object or focus of the phrases and the person we're sending them to—that concentration is one of the calming factors of mind. Investigation, which we're not doing as much here, is more energizing. And so in the early days of a concentration practice, you can be really right there with your phrases, feeling quite connected, and the next thing you know, you're nodding off. You don't quite know how that happened. It's just because the calm and the concentration got stronger than the energy. That's all. No big thing.

So when you notice that, do the usual things. One is to really aim more clearly at each word in the phrase. That action of aiming, called *vitaka* in Pali, is actually the mental antidote to sloth and torpor. It's not hitting it with a sledgehammer—it's just gently aiming. *May I be free from danger.* Just that little extra energy can sometimes wake us up, balance the concentration, and you're back in business.

Sometimes, of course, you're too far gone, so the usual things apply: open your eyes, look at the light, stand up. Sometimes changing the speed of the phrases can help you refocus. If they've gotten into a lullaby modality and you're singing yourself to sleep, you might want to vary the speed in how you're saying them. But it's really important not to get into judging about this—it's just a natural effect of the practice at times for everyone.

The opposite, restlessness and worry, is again recognizable: too much energy, not enough calming, not enough concentration or focus to balance it. Sometimes you feel like you need to walk more, just walk off the energy. One way we sometimes don't recognize restlessness in metta is that we find ourselves ceaselessly tinkering with the phrases or with which person to send them to. If you find you have seventeen phrases, or your phrases have become paragraphs, or you're changing them all the time—*that doesn't feel right anymore, let's try this*—or you've been through thirty-five different friends, I would at least suspect there could be some restlessness. And if you can name it as restlessness, rather than thinking, "Oh, the method hasn't clicked yet," that can be really helpful. *Oh, restlessness. Okay.* Simplify.

When you feel restless, don't complicate—simplify. Go back to only four phrases, or cut down to two phrases. Go back to only one friend and just stay very steady, very simple on the phrases.

And doubt, of course, is very interesting. We know how to recognize it: *I can't do this. This is stupid.* We're used to that, I assume, if you've done meditation practice before. One interesting way doubt can arise—if you're new to metta but you're used to practicing vipassana—is that it takes the form of criticizing and analyzing the metta practice and comparing it to vipassana. *Well, what about mindfulness? What about wisdom? What's the point of this I and you? I thought there was no self, and here we're going "may I be happy, may you be happy." All we're doing is reinforcing...* And you're thinking about all the precepts, all the things you learned from mindfulness retreats, and how metta is just the opposite, and you're completely lost in thought, thinking that you're analyzing the practice. This is major doubt. And it's very, very helpful to notice it and name it.

You'll never think your way into deciding which is better—mindfulness or metta—or whether you're doing it right, or whether metta is really emphasizing a sense of separation by the use of these words. Thinking will never get you there. And so, as with any doubt, recognize the hindrance of doubt as just this spinning in the mind. The recognition of it is, *Oh, okay, that's doubt.* You put it down and simply connect your attention. That's the antidote: connected attention. You come back to the phrase and it's sort of like, "Okay, just do it."

We're not giving up our discriminating wisdom here. It's not that we just blindly, for the rest of our lives, believe anything that's said. But it's in that famous sutta where the Buddha said, "Don't believe it just because I tell you, but try it and see for yourself."

Well, that second line is really important: try it and see for yourself. As long as we're spinning in doubt, we can't try anything, because we'll never do it. So you have to recognize, "Oh, doubt." Okay, just do it. And at the end of the retreat, definitely evaluate. See what your experience is. Of course you'll evaluate. See if it's useful. See if it's true for you. No question about that. But it's impossible in the middle of it—you're just in doubt.

So noticing, not judging it, but having the commitment to try the practice: "Oh, that's doubt." Recognize it, center in your body again, and then just start by focusing on the next phrase. And you might notice—I've noticed—that doubt rarely comes up when you like what's happening. It often comes up when what's happening isn't meeting your expectations. So that's just a little piece that you might not completely believe the doubt next time it comes.

One of my favorite lines from the Buddha is: "What the mind dwells upon frequently, towards that it will naturally incline." That's actually, I think, a very deep statement. So what we're doing here, each moment that we are planting that seed of intention, of friendliness, of connectedness, of loving-kindness—each moment that we actually say the phrase, in that moment that's what we're dwelling upon.

And if you think about what our mind dwells upon left to its own devices, what it naturally inclines towards left to its own devices—I don't know about your mind, but I can tell you in my mind it's not a pretty picture. To really have the sense that we are affecting a change as to where the heart, the mind, will naturally incline through this practice—we really are. And so that helps me enormously in those dry times when it seems like nothing's going on. But if I can just summon up the willingness to offer the next phrase, it's a very powerful act of kindness, of wisdom, and of really coming out of our dream of separation, of fear and neediness.

Transcriptions produced locally using Swiss low-carbon electricity. Corrections and rewriting by cloud-hosted AI.