# What Is Mettā

Carol Wilson · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Carol Wilson · 54:12

The first day of a mettā retreat, especially if it's your first ever mettā retreat, can sometimes leave you wondering: Is this really being kind to myself? What's the link, again, between this practice and loving-kindness? I'm sure there were moments when that question didn't arise, but the first couple of days can really be a bit difficult—tiring, wearing, hard work.

Someone asked me at dinner what I was going to talk about tonight. I said mettā, of course. That's what we're going to talk about every night. But I would like, in broad terms, to talk about what mettā is and how I think this practice of loving-kindness, as formal as it might seem, almost rigid perhaps in the beginning, is actually one of the greatest kindnesses that we can do for ourselves and for the world.

Mettā—this state of heart or mind of loving-kindness, of boundaryless, undiscriminating connectedness and acceptance—is one of several divine abodes, states of heart and mind that are expressions of the deepest truth of who we are. These are expressions of the truth that under our obvious differences, underneath and underlying all the seeming things that separate us from one another and from life, the things that seem to create our suffering—underlying these seeming differences, we are really essentially whole, complete, connected.

Mettā is an expression coming out in our mind stream, in our heart stream, in our thoughts, speech, and actions. It's an expression of this unitive nature. And the habits of mind that we so often respond or react to life from—toward ourselves, toward others, toward situations—the habits of wanting, of fear, of aversion, of hatred, of needing to protect—those habits arise from what is really our dream of alienation, of separation. It's a dream. It's an illusion. Unfortunately, we really believe it. It's a misperception.

Listen to Joko Beck: "Our misery stems from the misconception that we are separate. It certainly looks as though I am separate from other people and other phenomena. And as long as we think we are separate, we're going to suffer. We feel like we have to defend ourselves, that we have to find something in the world that will make us happy."

So that misperception that we are separate leads us to look for something in the world that will make us happy. It leads us to create, to construct, moment by moment, a kind of self-prison, a fear of needing to control and manipulate our world, whether internally or externally, to make us happy, to keep us happy, to keep unpleasant things away. These actions, these habits of mind are what continue to create and extend this experience we tend to have of feeling lonely, alienated, separate, needing to protect. We are actually misperceiving and then recreating the conditions that make us feel like we need something out there to make us happy. These are being recreated over and over.

Mettā, loving-kindness, is a wise response to life, whether it's our internal experience or our external experience. It's a wise response because it arises from a deeper understanding. And it's not just an intellectual understanding. Intellectual understanding is helpful; it's part of it. But it's not enough, as I'm sure we all know.

Mettā, even in just a moment—that moment of simple acceptance of yourself, of another, of simple well-wishing—in that moment, the boundaries aren't being created. The fear isn't there. The sense of needing to keep apart or wanting something else for happiness isn't there, just in that simple moment of mettā.

It may seem like a lot of work, like we're trying to create some really nice mind state and then hold on to it so that by the end of the retreat you have unremitting moments of bliss, never to change again. I'm glad you're laughing because that means maybe your expectations are realistic. Even mettā itself isn't unremitting moments of bliss. As either Steve or Michelle said last night, it has many flavors. I'm going to talk about some of those tonight.

What is really important as we begin to explore the range of this heart-mind state of loving-kindness is to realize we are here very much creating conditions that let us recognize and come to rest in and trust the heart-mind experience of mettā. We're creating conditions that are conducive to recognizing and becoming familiar with it. But it's really not that we are creating that mental state so much as uncovering it.

A lot of the practice—you think we're trying to make mettā happen—but what really goes on is that the psychological habits of mind that are obstacles to this free-flowing, open-hearted connectedness begin to be discovered. That's what you may not have known when you signed up for this retreat, if it's your first mettā retreat.

The mettā gets stronger along the way. What allows us to rest with more trust in the loving-kindness is becoming more familiar with the psychological obstacles, the habits of mind that prevent us from recognizing our unitive nature. So there are really two aspects to the practice: recognizing this boundless state, this connectedness, this friendliness—and understanding what obscures it.

Becoming more familiar with metta until we trust, really trust, that this is an expression of our true goodness. More so that it's stronger than fear and hatred and wanting and delusion.

At first we'll have a moment or two of metta and we'll think, "Oh, that must have been a mistake. It slipped in there, but it won't last." We don't trust it. But as the course continues, as we become more and more familiar, it's much easier to not be so entranced by the obstacles and to trust—to fall back into the expression of unity.

So we recognize metta, and as I say, the practice highlights what's obstructing. And that's great. That's part of the practice. It's not a mistake.

I want to talk a little bit about both of these aspects. Trying to describe metta, as with all of this, there are many different ways. I just want to give you some sense of the flavors.

First, why do I tend to use the word metta rather than loving-kindness? Perhaps it's just because I'm so used to English—the word love, as I experience it in English, is wildly overused. I love pizza. I love your new haircut. I love it when the lilacs come out. I love it when it gets hot and the black flies go away. I don't think love really covers all of those. So when we use "loving-kindness," I don't know—that word doesn't quite have the juice for me. Metta, since I've gotten used to it, has more depth, more breadth. So that's why I'll probably keep using metta.

In the classical Buddhist tradition, let me start by saying what metta is not. First, it's not the mistaken idea about love that one can absorb from the culture. I mean, if you really listen to all the songs and the movies, the ideas of really deep love get a little—this is just my view—a little sickening at times. "I'll die for love." "I'm yearning for you." "I need you to complete me." "I am nothing without you." Is that an expression of love? "I'm nothing without you"?

Often love can be seen as—and I've experienced it internally—this sense of looking for something or someone to complete me, to make me whole, to make me happy. Now, I'm not saying a relationship can't make us happy. Of course it can. But if I'm actually saying, "I need you to be happy," the chances of that being a happy relationship are getting slimmer. The more I need that person to be a certain way to make me happy, the more trouble we're in.

But none of that is what we mean by metta. It's really quite poignant because this looking elsewhere for completion is the very thing that hides the fact that we're already whole and complete. And if we stop looking out there, we might recognize it. So it's something that is very easy to slip into in our culture—thinking love is this loneliness, this grand passion, that love always has yearning in it. "I'll miss you so much if you're not here."

And then we think that when we really feel this grand passion of love, it's a kind of unitive bliss. In the meditation, we might look for that—a total unitive bliss, tears streaming down, a total sense of oneness—and that becomes our guideline. "This is metta, and everything else is something lesser." Again, we're in trouble.

I didn't see this, but I read a newspaper article about a particular Oprah Winfrey show a few years ago. It was based on the movie Sleepless in Seattle. She had on her show five men—I think they were all widowers whose wives had died—and all five of them had young children. And they were all highly rated professionals, doctors, lawyers, plumbers, something like that. She did this kind of Sleepless in Seattle thing: "Who's looking for a mate out there who would be interested in meeting these guys?"

Then the article said that two weeks later she came on the show with a bulldozer full of letters, because the show had received 60,000 letters from women in those two weeks—women who wanted to meet these

men, or even proposals of marriage. It made me kind of sad, you know.

Marriage is a great thing, but needing someone so much—that's not the way of love, of metta.

Another misconception that often comes up, particularly in retreats when we begin to talk about teaching metta, is that metta is a kind of weak, passive, deluded state. I was talking to a man a couple of years ago in Germany who was extremely resistant to even beginning to try the metta meditation. He said he felt it was passive, weak, that there was no wisdom in it, no wise discrimination.

A couple of years ago, Sharon Salzberg and I were teaching a retreat billed as being for burned-out environmentalists. Some of them had done meditation practice before, some not. Some were kind of dragged in by the man who organizes the retreats. Sharon was talking in our first group discussion—it was a Vipassana retreat, a mindfulness retreat, but we do a fair bit of loving-kindness as well. She came back after the discussion a little shaken. She said some of the people got really reactive. They were saying, "Don't give us this metta-shmetta mushy stuff. I need my anger. That's what helps me do what I do. I can't lose my edge. I don't want to lose my edge."

I don't think that's a totally uncommon reaction—the idea that if we feel loving-kindness, if we feel friendliness toward everything, it means we just accept anything anyone does. We can't tell the difference. Everything's hunky-dory. It's like those movies of lovers wandering through fields of daisies, everything in soft focus. They never get old, they never have an argument. The movie ends before you see any of that, and that's what we go out with: "Oh yes, that's love. Everything's wonderful. You don't see anything unpleasant."

Both of these views are untrue. Metta is both more simple and direct and familiar than really grand, overwhelming passion. And it's also much more courageous and profound. It is an expression of wisdom, of clear seeing—not of delusion, not of avoidance. It includes all, seeing clearly.

The Buddha described metta as the deliverance of the heart. Deliverance from what? Deliverance from just what I was speaking of before: from our prison of fear, separation, worrying, anger, anguish, loneliness. It's the deliverance of heart into happiness, into connectedness. Not the happiness that everything's always the way we want it to be—that's not happiness, that's based on fear. The happiness that allows us to be open and connected, seeing things as they are, but not getting so separate and tight and restricted around it.

Metta does not depend on conditions, but it does not exclude any particular conditions that may arise. It spreads out and includes whatever's going on.

So what are some ways we might experience metta? First, you could say it's just a simple good wish—a feeling of happiness and well-wishing. It's completely normal if you see a little puppy running around, or a small child. If you went out and saw a small child running across the yard playing with a ball, most of us would naturally feel a sense of happiness, wanting that child to be happy. Think about it. It's not

unfamiliar. It's not such a big deal. It's a generosity of the heart. You don't say, "Oh, I want that child to be happy and he should grow up and do good for the world," or "He should come over and tell me how nice I am." It's just: may you be happy. It feels great.

It's not always high ecstasy. But just in that simple moment of heart's generosity, it feels great because it's an expression of truth.

We can learn to trust that. It's not a mistake. Difficulties don't vanish. But there's still the generosity of heart toward ourself, toward another. The heart softens and becomes less reactive around difficulties or unpleasant experience. It doesn't dwell on them.

Another quality of metta is that sometimes it's simply experienced as spaciousness, inclusiveness. I get a sense of that when I go outside, even if it's not particularly directed at people—when I just go outside and look at nature. There's a sense of my whole being opening up. I don't say, "That tree's nice, but that one over there is spoiling the landscape a little bit." Or when I hear the birds in the morning—and I know some of you might have heard the birds and it was aggravating you; it's different for everybody—but when I heard the birds, I wasn't thinking, "That one's really nice, but that crow could take a hike." It's just openness, spaciousness, inclusiveness.

In fact, during walking meditation, if you walk outside and you're feeling kind of tight and pulled in, walking outside can really help. Unless, of course, there are swarms of black flies, and then there's a whole other element there. But if you walk outside and you're feeling too tight, just stop for a minute and send the four phrases to that bird flying by, or to one of the chipmunks, or a person who just happens to walk past. Begin to open to that inclusive quality, and then bring that same inclusive quality back to yourself.

So metta is not affected by conditions. And it's very simple and natural. Let me give you an example of how familiar it is to us. We don't need to make it so esoteric.

I spent some time in Hawaii this winter, on Maui, and with two friends we went to a local happening. It took place in a high school gym, and it was called "Honoring Our Kupunas"—Honoring Our Elders. People of all ages were there in the audience, from little kids to old people, families, church groups. The event featured groups of elder women—I'd say from late sixties up into their nineties—coming from different community groups or different churches. They'd all organized on their own. Each group came up and did the hula for everybody.

And I tell you, it was so fantastic. A ninety-year-old woman up there doing the hula, doing what she called the "naughty, naughty"—doing a little naughty hula. Women of all kinds—some could hardly move, some must have weighed four hundred pounds—of all ages, all makes. And there was no sense anywhere of making discrimination, of saying, "Well, she did it better than she did," or "What's she doing? She's too old, or she's too big, or she's not graceful enough"—either on the part of the women or on the part of the

audience. Just complete naturalness and acceptance.

I would say it was metta—not gushy love, but total friendliness. I left there feeling so happy, just seeing that this potential exists: people, some who know each other and some who don't, just being so open-hearted and accepting. I tried to imagine my mother—never mind my mother—me, going up to a bunch of strangers and dancing a hula in the middle of a gym. I couldn't get there. It was great. I thought, that's the perfect example of metta in a way that we can all experience it. You don't have to do an eight-day intensive retreat.

I say this because once we know how metta can be experienced, we'll recognize it more in our practice. Don't look for something so high and esoteric. Notice those simple moments of openness, connectedness, friendliness.

And as simple and friendly and familiar and natural as metta is, to really come to trust in it as one of the natural expressions of truth is actually extremely radical in terms of how we're brought up in our society, in our culture. Because it comes from the radical understanding that our deepest happiness, our true happiness—in fact, our true nature, who we really are—does not depend at all on how other people treat us. It does not depend on having other people love us. It does not depend on getting what we want. Rather, love is an expression of who we really are.

For each of us, we begin to discover that the more we can trust in love rather than trusting our fear, our wanting, our craving, our anger—the more we can trust to open and connect rather than needing to keep away—the more we discover that this generosity of the heart is what truly takes us into happiness. And that we each have a boundless supply of love and connectedness.

We don't know it yet. We touch moments of this understanding and then we forget. That's okay—that's what the practice is about. But to really begin to know, radically, that no one else can prevent us from loving. No one can prevent us from being happy. No one else has that key for us. We each have it for ourselves. It's just learning how to recognize it and to trust it.

Have you ever had the simple experience where someone does something that you really feel is wrong—it makes you angry, or it hurts you? And you're quite clear that you are right and they are wrong. You're kind of closed down in anger, resentment, or hurt, unhappy, waiting for them to come and apologize. Waiting for them to realize what a stupid jerk they've been, and if they would just come and grovel a little bit and acknowledge that, then you'd be happy.

I've had that experience many times. And I know now that it would be nice if they did that, but I can't count on it. How many of you have had the experience where, at some point, you could really say, "Okay, forget them—it's up to me"? And you connect again with something about that person that reminds you they're not all just this negative thing. The heart opens again. "Oh yeah, right. Just as you are, you're not perfect. I do care. May you be happy." And the anger and the pain and the suffering is gone.

Just a little example—don't pick the most difficult one in your whole life. An example like that is where you begin to really see: the key, the secret is with me. Holding out anger against that person isn't so much hurting them as it is keeping me feeling separate. We start small. I'm not saying we should all just drop our deepest pains right away, but simply begin to explore this as a possibility.

So the metta practice is about recognizing and familiarizing ourselves with metta—not about holding on to a state of mind, staying there and never moving. Second, it's about uncovering and recognizing the obstacles that arise in our hearts and minds as we cultivate the intention of metta. You may perhaps have noticed one or two today.

I'll mention only two. There are two big ones, and we'll talk about others as we go, but these are the main ones. They're called the near enemy and the far enemy in the classical terminology of metta. They arise whether we're doing metta or not, but they come up frequently in loving-kindness practice. We tend to think of them as mistakes, rather than thinking, "Oh great, I get to see these now! How is this blocking connectedness?"

I'm serious—I'm not being Pollyanna-ish. It really can be a moment of recognition: "Oh yeah, it's good to see this." Not "I wish this would go away so I could feel metta."

The near enemy is called that because it's a state of heart or mind that we often confuse with loving-kindness, with open-hearted connectedness. And this near enemy is—guess what—attachment. Love with attachment. Just plain attachment, desire.

Did you notice that coming up at any point today?

I've actually discovered in my own practice of loving-kindness that because attachment is sort of close to metta but different, when we start to pay attention, they're wildly different when you really look. But it's as if when I'm cultivating metta—just wishing well to myself, to the benefactor—and my attention flags a little or I space out, it just slides over into wanting.

"May I be free from danger. May I be happy. I would be happy if only I didn't have this particular pattern of mind. I'd be a lot happier now if, in fact, I'd gone to Aruba this week instead of coming here."

Or when you're sending metta to the benefactor: "May you be happy." And then, "You know, if you just made these changes that I think of, you'd be a lot happier. You would be happier if you only listened to me."

Or just plain desire—to be more comfortable, for something different to happen. Desire for the pleasant feeling of metta itself.

That's the tricky one. I slip into that a lot—sending metta really wholeheartedly, very honestly, and then subtly: "Well, do I feel it? Am I doing it right? I must not be doing it right. I'm not feeling it." May you be happy... Where's the feeling? It's switched then. It's not metta anymore. It's attachment. It's desire. So it's

great to see.

Play with feeling the difference—not hating it, just feeling the difference. Take your benefactor, or when we move to a dear friend, or of course people in your life pop into your mind here. We know that. Feel the difference when you can really, out of a generosity of heart, wish them happiness. And when there suddenly comes some slight condition—it can be ever so slight—a little hook comes out.

When I was doing metta for a good friend, a dear friend, and just feeling it, suddenly I noticed: "She's so great, I wish we saw each other more." Just some little condition comes in. Towards ourselves, it can be a big one. Don't judge it, but feel the difference. Attachment is called by the Buddha a "maker of limitations." Whereas a moment of generosity is just out there, as soon as some attachment comes in, some desire, there's limitations, there's conditions. This much, so far, but no further.

Sometimes "so far" just feels like that's all we're able to do. We can't suddenly really honestly send loving-kindness to all beings in the world. That's huge. That's vast. So we start really simply, kind of build up the supply of metta, the trust in the metta, and then it overflows into the next being and the next being.

That's why we ostensibly start with ourselves. And for some people, that's best. For some people, ourselves is really hard and you run into the second obstacle, the far enemy—which, guess what that is? Aversion, hatred, fear, judgment. And if the self is a hard person in that way, then maybe the benefactor is an easy person, someone that more easily evokes this generosity without the conditions.

So just play with this. When you feel the generous, open-hearted connectedness, notice—probably after it's happened a little bit—that there's suddenly some condition there. Rather than immediately going, "Oh, bad conditions," open up to that too with metta. Metta is an open-hearted connectedness. Feel what the wanting feels like. You begin to see it's very different from metta. It's not actually as similar as we think when we're not looking.

This will be highlighted. The purification Michelle mentioned last night—the way it works is by bringing up into awareness these deep-set habits and patterns of mind. So there's attachment, and there's the far enemy, the opposite, so to speak: ill will, aversion, fear, not liking. And again, I'm sure there was one or two moments when that arose today. Sometimes it arises towards ourselves or towards the metta subject, but it's not always so clear. It can just be kind of generalized aversion or generalized desire, just squirting out at anything that's going on here. And the first couple days of a retreat, that can happen anyway, as the hindrances of mind—whether you're doing vipassana, mindfulness, or metta—can get strong: attachment and aversion.

So beginning to recognize the presence of aversion or fear, rather than just letting it color our vision and thinking everything is wrong, something's bad, I'm not doing it right because I'm feeling lousy about myself—beginning to recognize it is how metta begins to surround and see what's happening without reacting to it.

Back to my friends at the environmental retreat, where I could really understand, in a way, what they were saying: "Oh, we need our edge." And anger, that real kind of passionate anger, is energizing sometimes, isn't it? I could really understand where they were coming from, feeling, "I need that energy to do the work I'm doing."

What we need to learn to see is that the energy which comes with our deep understanding and connectedness—to ourselves, to things as they are, to all life—is much more deep and profound and long-lasting than the energy of anger. Metta sees through the concept of "the other." Instead of having to be angry, holding something at a distance, it can open up and include. Clear-eyed, it sees what's wrong, but it doesn't fall into this habit of making things "the other."

And they're talking to a psychologist who's discussing how road rage happens, what we do in our mind. He says, "It used to be there was a rule of courtesy for the road, just as for writing thank you notes. Now everything is a personal insult, especially if we're in a car. If someone on the road upsets you, that individual's whole identity is encapsulated in this bad thing he did. He's not seen as a whole person." And then there's an urge to express our aggression on this anonymous other, this bad being—to think, "I can't let him get away with this." The thin veneer of civilization is removed.

What I appreciate about this is that tendency to encapsulate one being's whole identity in this bad thing they did. That's what aversion, fear, and anger do. What metta does that's different is it sees this bad thing he did—sure, it's really clear seeing, open-eyed connectedness—and it sees the rest. So it's inclusive. It's not driven by reacting to the bad thing, and it's not blindly hurt or letting someone act on us in an inappropriate way, but it's all-inclusive.

This is from Ajahn Sumedho, a wonderful American monk in the Thai tradition. He's talking about metta not in terms of this vast unity of heart, but very simply when faced with the unpleasant: "Metta does not necessarily mean liking something, or that you like everything at all. It means an attitude of not dwelling on the unpleasantness or the faults 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, in a person, or in oneself, without creating anything around it."

I personally love that. Witnessing the unpleasantness in a situation, in a person, or in ourself—with space. That's all. Not creating any reaction around it, just the spaciousness. That's an expression of metta.

He goes on to say that you simply stop the mind from thinking, "I hate it, I hate it, I don't want it." That's a huge advance in itself, isn't it? Just repeating the phrases instead of "I hate it, I hate it" is really a huge difference. Over time, I think you'll see that. Or "I want it, I want it." Some of us lean toward "hate it, hate it." Others lean toward "want it, want it." Either one—metta cuts through them both.

So witnessing the unpleasantness without creating anything around it. And where we start on this retreat, as we've been doing today, is very directly and simply with ourselves. Noticing, without creating anything

around it, how your heart and mind might have responded to some of the difficult things that came up today. Whether you're sending metta to yourself or sending metta to the benefactor, as Stephen said, it's all coming out of us. And metta really lets us see a lot of gunk sometimes. That's great. That's what the practice is. Not just the gunk, but beginning to see what are the habits of our heart and mind. How do we respond to our sleepiness, our anger, our aversion, our pain, our sadness, our jealousy, our judgment of ourself? How are we responding to all of that? Is it with more resistance? Is it, as Thich Nhat Hanh says, do we meet our anger with more anger, trying to root it out and uproot it and tear ourselves into a battlefield? That's not compassion. That's not loving-kindness.

So we begin by seeing how we are meeting the unpleasant things, the things we don't like about ourselves. As C.G. Jung said once, those parts of yourself you do not accept will become hostile to you. But I actually think that we start by being hostile to them. So begin to notice: when that particular negative tendency comes up, when that loneliness comes up, when you remember me talking about metta not being wanting or loneliness and you find yourself lost in yearning—how do you meet that? Where do we start?

When you wake up in the morning and out of nowhere comes the heartache of alienation and loneliness, could you use that as a golden opportunity? Rather than persecuting yourself or feeling that something terribly wrong is happening, right there, in the moment of sadness and longing, could you relax and touch the limitless space of the human heart? The next time you get a chance, experiment with this.

That's a perfect description of metta to ourselves. The next time, just relax. Let that pain be there. And you might touch the limitless space of our human hearts—not by getting rid of it, simply by being present, connected with spaciousness. We don't have to approve of everything. As Samaya said, we don't have to like everything, but we don't get lost in reactivity and we don't pretend it's not happening.

There's a line from the Buddha I love because I think it has very profound implications, especially in this practice. He said, "What the mind dwells upon frequently, towards that it will naturally incline." So with no mental training, when we come in and we sit—if this is the first time you've ever sat, or even if it's not—we all know, we come in from a busy life, and our mind doesn't really go where we tell it to very well, does it? Have you been zoomed in on the phrases and the method of feeling all day? I wouldn't believe you if you had. The mind's all over. And what we get to see is what the mind dwells upon frequently, because that's what it's naturally inclining towards.

For a long time, before I really did an intensive practice, I was a little resistant. Saying these phrases—you don't feel it a lot of the time. It feels either like wishful thinking or affirmations or some kind of rote repetition. The words all get mixed up. Maybe happy, maybe peaceful—no, no, no. I have a friend who ends up saying, "May I live with peas." It just gets all mixed up.

But when you think about what we're actually doing, we're cultivating the seed of intention. Each time we connect with our metta subject—ourselves or another—just that moment of open connectedness, that's planting the seed of connected loving-kindness. Each time in your heart you repeat the phrase, knowing

what it means—feeling it or not is out of your control—just saying it and knowing what it means, that's shifting where the mind dwells.

And the amazing thing is that as we shift, we have more choice than we realize about where to let the mind dwell. It's a lot of work to begin to activate this choice, but it does get easier because the mind then begins to incline more naturally towards metta. Amazing! It really happens. I was amazed. It really happens.

And we begin to have much more choice. The Dalai Lama—I know this might seem like a big leap from where we are, but it works. He says, "Each day when we wake up, we could say to ourselves, 'Altruistic attitude.'" I get the feeling he really does wake up saying "altruistic attitude." He continues: "If we have an altruistic attitude, many favorable things will come. I practice these things and I know they are helpful. I try to be sincere to everyone, even the Chinese. If I develop some kind of ill will, anger, or hatred, who will lose? I will lose my happiness, my sleep, my appetite, but my ill feelings won't hurt the Chinese at all. If I am agitated, my physical condition will become weak, and some people I could make happy will not become happy. Some people may criticize me, and some do, but I try to remain joyful. If we want to work effectively for freedom and justice, it is best to do so without anger or ill will. If we feel calm and have a sincere motivation, we can work hard for thirty or forty years. I believe that because of my firm commitment to nonviolence, based on a genuine sense of brotherhood and sisterhood, some positive results have been produced."

One gets the sense that he really practices this. And it might come up: okay, so he's the reincarnated bodhisattva of compassion. He had a head start on some of us. But we're not aspiring to be the Dalai Lama. We can, however, make that choice from time to time—where to let the mind dwell. Even when we're caught in irritation with ourselves, how we meet that irritation is where we're choosing to let the mind dwell. That's how we begin to cultivate metta, the intention of metta.

And what is another amazing aspect of how naturally the mind and heart begin to trust and dwell in metta is, again, we don't have to work so hard to create it.

The simple openness of connected attention is really enough. Because since metta is an expression of how things really are—the interconnectedness, the oneness—if we can just open and pay attention without creating the limitations, the judgments, the wanting, the aversion, the truth reveals itself. And metta is a natural expression.

John Muir, the naturalist, once said that if he touched anything, he found it connected to everything else in the universe. Even your irritation. If you touch anything, really, with an open heart and mind, you find this to be true.

I want to read you this poem. It's a little long, but I love it because it expresses precisely this—the power of simple connectedness to open us to love and to everything in the universe. It's 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. 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.*

We can't force a happy, all-inclusive metta feeling. So just give up trying right now. And what we find is that by letting go of results, by not trying to force the feeling, by not needing to fix the person we're sending wishes to, letting each phrase, each connection with the metta subject simply plant the seed of intention—just being content with that as a gift, handing the phrase to yourself as a gift, opening your heart to the benefactor as a gift—each time we do that, each moment is breaking the cycle of reactivity, the habit of limitation, the habit of separation.

Each moment that we connect with the phrase is a moment of choice about where to let the heart dwell, where to let the mind dwell. And you'll see that the metta emerges all by itself, because what we're really doing is uncovering it. It's an expression of our truest self. We actually work really hard in our lives not to see it. It takes a huge amount of energy to keep constructing this illusion of separation. And so it takes a certain amount of energy to begin countering that habit. But then it takes less and less, and the metta begins to emerge.

You can't tell what's happening, really—never mind on the first day, even in a long retreat. This is a true testimonial. I was just teaching in California, and there were two women on that retreat who had sat the three-month retreat this fall, doing loving-kindness practice just like you're doing, for the entire three

months. I know—you don't want to think about that right now. But it gets easier.

One of them came up to me and said that even at the end, she had enjoyed it, it was nice, but she kept saying to herself, "I'm not really concentrated. Nothing's really happening." Then she told me what occurred afterward: "I never would have believed it. I went back home. I was in a difficult situation—didn't have a place to live, was staying with friends in their living room, and they were getting divorced. It was a horrible situation. And I was just so present, so kind, so open—"

So loving. I kept going, I'm waiting for it to pop. I'm waiting for this to stop. I'm waiting for something else to come up." Not that there weren't other thoughts. And I've had the same experience. I come out of a mettā retreat thinking, "Well, that was nice... so what?" Because you feel like your normal self. But when you don't expect it, the heart and mind dwells in inclusive connectedness. We turn away from the woman in the painting and look back at the world, and we see beauty—in ourselves and in others.

So it's trusting that potential enough to let go of all need for result and just offer yourself this moment of pure intention as a gift. It's not sentimental. It's not passive or weak. In some ways, I think it's the strongest response we could have in this world.

I want to close with something I read just last night. It's a book review of a book by a woman named Martha Beck. She and her husband were both academics at Harvard, both teachers there. They had one young daughter and found out she was pregnant with another child—and that this child would be born with Down syndrome. Everyone, all their doctors, all their friends, everyone at Harvard, told them they should have an abortion. And she said, to both of their surprise, they didn't do it. And it's been absolutely wonderful in their lives, this little boy named Adam.

To give you the context, she's describing how she once spoke to an entering class at Harvard Medical School about her pregnancy and her decision. Adam, her little boy with Down syndrome, was asleep in her lap at the time, wearing a bow tie and a dreamy expression. After the speech, she was approached by an elderly professor who had just become the grandfather of a little girl with Down syndrome. As he talked to her, he stroked Adam's soft blonde hair and wept. He loved his granddaughter with inexplicable openness, and the experience had changed his whole life.

"Whoever said that love is blind was dead wrong. Love is the only thing on this earth that lets us see each other with the remotest accuracy."

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