Benefits of Mettā Practice

Carol Wilson · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Carol Wilson · 1:02:09

A lot of times when we have begun introducing this formal metta practice in a Vipassana retreat, a question that many people bring up—those who have been doing Vipassana and haven't really done the metta practice much—are kinds of doubts about the usefulness or validity of the loving-kindness practice.

So some questions that come up, and they came up in my own mind before I practiced loving-kindness intensively, are: Are we just saying affirmations? Is this sort of a feel-good practice? We're trying to talk our way into a nice mental state—which, in a way, you could say that. And what does that have to do with liberation? What does that have to do with freedom?

And also, another aspect is if we talk about the fact that there is no me, no self, no separate, distinct I, what's all this "I'm sending wishes of loving-kindness to you and you"? It seems that would accentuate a sense of me and other that on the one hand you're telling us doesn't exist. So sometimes people get confused.

The confusion, of course, turns out to be not in the actual practice, but as always with confusion, in our thinking about it—rather than actually just doing the practice. Which is really the way it is with all of our confusions about greed, hatred, and delusion, or not-self, or impermanence. It's only confusing when we're thinking about it. When we're actually experiencing, it's just how things are. Not much else to say.

Anyway, I was actually quite surprised, in a way, to discover experientially when I first practiced loving-kindness for a period of seven or eight weeks. It's a practice that we do intensively in the same way that we do Vipassana intensively—in other words, saying the metta phrases to the different categories through the sittings, through the walkings, from the moment you get up until the moment you go to bed. So it's an intensive practice, just as Vipassana is. And it's a different practice from Vipassana. So we're just introducing it here.

What I was really amazed to discover through my experience is that the practice of metta seemed to me to round out the wisdom of non-separation—the fact that we're not really separate. Insight comes through our Vipassana practice in many different ways, at many different times. The fact of our essential oneness, or you could say the vast emptiness—the natural expression of which in our actions, in our speech, in our mind, the natural expressions of either emptiness or non-separation, two sides of the same coin—the natural expressions are metta, friendliness, connectedness, or compassion, or empathetic joy, sympathetic joy, or equanimity. Those are the four so-called Brahmaviharas, or divine abodes of the heart, of the mind. And while they are mental states, they are varying expressions of the truth of our non-separation, so to speak.

And I was really surprised and happy to discover through my experience that while I knew that the emptiness of not a separate self, I knew that to be true, the constantly arising and passing experience—I knew that from one level. Knowing it, not just intellectually, but from our experience, from the Vipassana—there's another way that the practice of loving-kindness rounded that out, came in with that information, that experience from another angle, so to speak.

So that in the moment of experiencing just a simple sense of metta, not thinking about it but just experiencing it, in that moment—even if it was brought about by my focus on the phrase, "May you..." I think I'm sending it to a benefactor, so I have the sense that I'm sending to a benefactor these good wishes. In that moment of connection, the sense of me and other falls away, and there's just simple friendliness, kindness, however you experience it.

And over and over, I found that through the practice in my life as well, the sense, the false sense of separation, the habits of mind that are moment to moment creating the false sense of separation that we react out of so much—they start to be broken down through the practice of loving-kindness. It's really quite wonderful. And we don't notice that it's happening right away. That's a plug to keep doing it.

Metta is an expression of our essential oneness. We experience our essential completeness.

What I think the metta practice does on a practical level—this formal practice, the way we're teaching it here—is that it helps us not to deny the habits of mind that create our sense of separation, our sense of needing something to protect. The metta practice actually helps us see through these habits of mind. Because in practicing metta, we actually feel how these habits of mind—basically our old friends greed, aversion, and delusion—create separation when we're buying into them. And we feel how when we're not buying into those mental states, but rather tuning into connection, simple friendliness, that sense of separation just isn't there, because it isn't being created in the moment.

This, I think, is one of the most key, even liberating, ways of understanding the sense of separation or alienation, fragmentation, loneliness—whatever words might fit your own particular experience of it. The separation, the sense of someone separate here that I need to protect by getting what I want and keeping everything I don't want away—that's actually just a misperception of how things are. It's not something that's real, this separate me, that either vipassana or metta practice is somehow going to dismantle, leaving us frightened because something got taken apart and now how will we function? Rather, metta helps us see how the sense of fragmentation and separation is simply created in each moment by our habits of mind.

Our misery stems from the misconception that we're separate. Certainly it 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 suffer because we feel that we have to defend ourselves. We feel that we have to find something in this world that will make us happy. And then the habits of mind—wanting, needing, thirsting desire, as well as the habit of ill will and aversion, keeping things away—arise. Whether these are turned outwards

or inwards doesn't really matter. Those habits arise out of this sense that I can find something in the world to make me happy, and I can keep away everything that's going to make me suffer.

Certainly speaking for myself, when I'm not somewhat awake, when I'm not really paying attention—when, say, I'm hurrying around from place to place—what's the habitual response? If there's something that I want and somebody's in front of me, the sense is they're in the way of what I need to make me happy. If there's something I don't want and I see someone coming that's going to cause me trouble, the sense is they're trouble—get them away, I need to protect myself. It's just the habitual response when we're not even a little bit awake.

When we're so self-absorbed, basically referring everything that happens back to me—as I said the other night, me, me, me, my, my, my, how does this affect me, how can I be happy—when we do that, each moment that we're buying into it is a moment when the sense of separation and needing to protect feels very real.

I just want to say that non-separation doesn't mean we can't tell the difference between me and you. It doesn't mean the visual field gets all blurred together and you can't tell which is the curry and which is the rice. Sometimes people think, how am I going to function? How do I know whether I should be the one sitting in meditation or the one talking? It doesn't mean that. Useful distinctions still apply. But it means we don't have to buy into the absolute separation that our minds create around it.

So one thing the metta practice helps us do is begin to recognize more consciously what the space of simple connection feels like, and to recognize how accessible it actually is. Because metta practice is not about creating some rarefied, amazing, unitive state that is different from our daily experience. That would be nice, and sometimes a state comes that's so strong it feels really different from our regular experience. But what's most important to recognize is that metta is simply about connection, and it's part of our daily experience because it's really a truer expression of how things are than greed or fear or ill will.

The metta practice is helping us consciously learn how to recognize connection, have a bit more confidence that it's actually possible to access consciously, and begin to have some faith, some trust in the experience of metta, of friendliness, of loving-kindness itself. Then we begin to experientially—even if it doesn't go through our intellect—have more consciously the experience that we're not so separate.

It's like that question someone brought up a few mornings ago during the meditation period about noticing that sense of synchronicity as a retreat goes on. I think it's quite applicable here, because when we're not lost in greed and aversion, we actually notice how much more our energies all blend together, affect each other. Actually, no one here can really do something that doesn't have some effect on other people. That's just how it is. So we start to see that more. We start to believe it, to trust it more.

And we practice simply because we're so used to looking through the lens of separation that we need to

give ourselves a little oomph to trust in the other way.

This is from Nyoshul Khen, who was a wonderful Tibetan teacher, from a chapter of his book:

The chapter is called "Basic Buddha Dharma" – just the basics. And he says the difference between the impure and the pure mind, the deluded mind and the enlightened mind, is mainly a difference of narrowness and openness. In our deluded state, our mind or heart – mind-heart is the same word in these languages – our mind is extremely narrow. For example, we live for ourselves and rarely consider the infinity of sentient beings. Conversely, the enlightened Buddha mind is one who considers the infinity of sentient beings rather than being solely concerned with her own ego and individuality. Thus, the entire path from an ordinary being to Buddhahood is the gradual opening of the mind, of the heart. The concept of growth is used here: moving from a narrow attitude focused principally on oneself to an open, loving heart whose scope instinctively encompasses the infinity of sentient beings.

But we start from where we are. We don't have to think that starting from here we should naturally and completely be able to open our heart and mind at all times, in all situations, completely considering the infinity of sentient beings. We need to be realistic and start where we are.

And that's the point of this practice, of the metta practice. Because as Guy mentioned last night, when we really look with the eyes of wisdom, we come upon quite deeply the essential basic goodness that you could say is the truest expression of who we are, of our nature. I know everyone here has touched that many times. We all do. It's not so esoteric. And because of that, I don't think anyone would be here on a spiritual path at all, practicing so intensively as this, if we didn't have some inner knowing of this truth on some level.

A lot of our knowing is intellectual, of course, but not all of it. What practice does is help us continually make that move from intellectually knowing something – which is the beginning – to knowing it from the gut, from our experience in ourselves. That's very different, because that's when we can begin to respond to ourselves and respond to life and respond to situations from the deep knowing of non-separation, from knowing that the power of friendliness, of connectedness, of compassion is much stronger than the power of fear and the power of greed.

In my own mind, I think I know that. And sometimes I really know that. But there are other times when the instinctive reaction is, "No, I don't like that, get away. That's going to keep me safe." So we don't judge that, but that's why we practice. That's why I practice anyway. You find out why you practice and see – it could be for something different.

But it's not to create something new. Metta practice, like Vipassana, is not creating something new. It's simply uncovering the most natural context, the most natural expression of the truth of who we are. And then learning to trust it enough to act from that place.

So just a little bit to describe what we mean by the mental state of metta, loving-kindness itself. I think it's

really simple – just friendliness, kindness in a very natural way. Take the example: if you walk outside and under normal circumstances, no big things going on for you, and there's a couple of small children just playing and laughing and throwing a ball back and forth – under normal circumstances, if it doesn't trigger some traumatic memory or something – we just normally feel a sense of friendliness, of connection with the kids. We don't have to think about it. We don't have to dredge it up: "Oh yeah, cute little kids, isn't it nice?" Or take a puppy if you hate children. Take a puppy. Take a kitten. Baby animals have that quality – it's hard to get too judgmental.

But it's natural. That's a natural expression of metta. Simple connectedness. It doesn't have any big deal around it. You don't want something back from the children or from the puppy. You don't say, "Well, they're cute, but if they had on different colored overalls, they'd be even cuter." It's just quite a natural response of the heart – a kind of generosity. You wish them well. That's really the essence of metta.

It's more a matter of learning how we can elicit metta, how to move towards connectedness, toward the natural heart and open-hearted generosity, rather than moving towards what creates in our minds and hearts the sense of fear or wanting or separation.

Metta is also inclusiveness. It includes all aspects. It doesn't just see a part of a situation, and I'll talk more about that in a minute. It also has a real spacious quality, not narrowing down. Just to see the children playing—it's really lovely. There's a sense of connectedness, of wishing them well. You don't feel tight and closed then. It's just kind of open. And in that space, in that moment, if someone else wanders into your field of vision, it's most likely that sense of connectedness and well-wishing naturally extends to them. Just at first, before we have time to think of a reason not to. It just naturally extends. It's kind of inclusive.

I was recently in Burma, both practicing for a few weeks and also teaching up in the north. The teaching was fine—it was like a regular retreat for Westerners. But what was really a transformative experience for me was the time we spent not teaching, but hanging out with our Burmese friends: the people who were helping to run the retreat, cooking for the retreat, translating, and living in the monastery in northern Burma.

The experience was one of simple, non-judging friendliness—really metta. I felt that for the two weeks I was there, I was truly encased, surrounded in a field of metta. Just a simple friendliness that was welcoming to whoever came. It wasn't like it was specifically directed to me. I remember at one point Steve Smith, who I was teaching with and who's been there for many years, said, "Oh Carol, the people here really love you." And I said, "Yeah, well, it's my impression they really love everybody. It's got nothing specifically to do with me."

What was so nice about it is that it's just low-key, natural acceptance. Somebody comes. They're really happy to see you. And just however you are is fine. That's what's so beautiful about that friendliness. However the Burmese people were was fine. They live together. They know each other's little peccadilloes. They laugh about it. It's fine. And however you are is fine.

One man, the brother of one of the Sayadaws, one of the teachers there, was born deaf and mute, unable to speak. He must be in his fifties or sixties now. He's been living there, and his brother sort of takes care of him. But he's great because without hearing—I mean, you can see, you can get around fine—without hearing or speaking, with his hands he's like the most expressive person I ever met. He has just one little hand gesture that describes each person. If he has to talk about someone, someone has curly hair, he'll be describing the person that way. Or glasses, or if they're always frowning. Whatever it is that describes them.

And there's no sense of judgment about picking out that person. If they're really thin, if they're really fat. Whereas here, I could really imagine somehow easily getting into, "Is that what he thinks about me? Is that the main thing that he picks out about me?" All those questions. None of that there. Just this real acceptance that's actually transformative to be around—an atmosphere where it's that simple, that day-to-day and non-judging. And it feels just normal.

Like, it's, oh, this is the way we could live. This is really a possibility. And I'm not saying everyone is happy-happy. There's a lot of difficulty, a lot of suffering, a lot of problems. I'm not saying people don't have arguments. Just normal people. But there really is a deep sense of connecting, and once someone there has met you, they don't forget your name and they don't forget your face. I see how, for me, I really have to concentrate to remember names and faces. Sure, I meet a lot of names and faces, but so do they. And there's this sense of presence and connectedness that's very powerful. But it's simple. And that's the thing I want to bring out about mettā, about loving-kindness. It's just this natural, simple connectedness that we all know, that we all can begin to have more trust in.

I think I said the other day in the mettā sitting that technically, the proximate cause of mettā arising as a mental state—friendliness, connectedness, non-judging acceptance—the proximate cause, meaning the immediate preceding thing for mettā to arise, the strongest cause, is seeing the good. Seeing the wholesome or the beautiful in a being, anyone, ourselves or another.

And that's true, but it doesn't mean that we're blind, or that in seeing the good we don't see anything else—which is a lot of our intellectual or philosophical problem. We think, "Oh, this is just a diluted, mushy, soft-filter gauze on the lens, seeing the world through rose-colored glasses, and I can't trust that because there are problems, there are difficulties." Just turn it on yourself. How easy is it for us when we say, okay, sit here and really focus on the good in yourself, really let it in, do that with full commitment? It's hard, isn't it? It certainly isn't something we have a lot of practice in.

So seeing the good is the cause for this natural connectedness, this spontaneous friendliness to arise. Take the little kids again—you're just seeing their natural playfulness, the innocence of children, and boom, we're there. But it doesn't mean we can't see the whole picture. It means we actually, because of the connection, can respond more appropriately.

Say at first, the sweet kids, the innocents—we're really connected. And then we start to see that one of

them is actually a major brat. One kid is really taunting the other, not actually hurting, but really being bratty. But we see that from the place of connection. It doesn't hide what's going on. From the place of connection, rather than saying, "Oh, that kid's a brat, just throw him away, forget him," we can actually, if intervention is necessary, intervene from the place of connection rather than from the place of rejection, rather than from the place of judgment.

We, if anything, see more clearly when we're connected in a non-judging way. We see more clearly the whole picture. It's in no way a one-sided blindness. Aversion is a one-sided blindness, and desire is a one-sided blindness. With desire, we only see what we want, and anything else is in the way. With aversion, we see what we don't want. And as Guy said, it can be very skillful—as someone said this morning—to actually notice that there are other things arising in the universe than what I don't like and what I don't want. It really helps to balance.

Mettā actually works in that. Mettā is brought about by tuning into the good, but it's not at all one-sided. It's very strong and very powerful. Because we don't put someone in a box. With mettā, we see the whole picture. We don't put them in a box. "Oh, they do this bad thing, that's who they are." Or, "Oh, they do this good thing, they couldn't possibly do anything bad because they're so wonderful." You see the whole picture from the place of connection rather than from the place of fear.

So the mettā practice itself, the way we're doing it here, it's not about creating and holding onto a particular emotional feeling. And this, I think, is very tricky for us to get, practice-wise, because again, we are so result- and achievement-oriented. We feel like we need a little bit of feedback that something's happening. That's fair enough, until we have some inner trust from our own experience. And if you just sat here and said these phrases from now until a month from now, and you never felt one thing ever, it would be understandable if you had some doubts about the efficacy of the practice. So I'm saying it's natural—we want some feedback.

But it isn't about that—saying these phrases and focusing so that we're going to get this one particular feeling, and then we're going to feel better and better and better, and that feeling is just going to stay stronger and stronger, and we're going to live in a cloud of metta from now on. I think you know that I'm exaggerating. But just check it out. The next time you're doing the metta practice and you're feeling frustrated, look closely. What are you looking for? What do you think ought to be happening?

In the formal practice, it doesn't matter if we have what we would call an emotional feeling at all. It really doesn't matter. Because, as I said, the essence of metta is connection. It's simply about connecting—either with ourselves, with the sense of the being that we're sending it to, the phrases, all beings, whatever. Just that connection, which means a moment without aversion, without desire, without delusion. Sounds a lot like mindfulness, doesn't it? And the two are very closely connected. Simply a moment of connection, where we are directing attention deliberately towards that connection and away from the tendencies of mind of greed and aversion that create separation.

So we're doing this deliberately. It's a deliberate direction or inclination of mind towards connection. Basically, wise intention—the second stage of the Eightfold Path, wise thought. And the Buddha, when he talks about wise thought or right thought, specifically says that the antidote or the wise thought you substitute for thoughts of ill will is thoughts of friendliness, thoughts of metta, thoughts of kindness. It's really quite useful and practical.

So what we're doing is cultivating and strengthening the inclination of mind, the intention of mind towards connection. It's not always going to feel like a lot's going on, but each time we direct it to, say, the benefactor, and we deliberately feel a sense of their good quality, offer the phrase "may you be free from inner and outer harm"—that's a sense of inclining the mind toward connection. You may feel it more or less strongly. The intention may be more or less strong. But that's not what's so important. What's so important is that cultivation of wise intention. Basically breaking the habit of seeing how we're separate.

"Oh yes, they're really so good. I could never be like them. In fact, they're so good it's almost an insult to them for me to even be offering them loving-kindness, so paltry and feeble is my loving-kindness." You can take even the good and create separation out of it. So we're just inclining towards the connection.

The way we're teaching it here also, the inclination, the cultivation of intention, is combined with a concentration or samadhi practice. Hence the focus on the image of the person and the repetition, one at a time, of each of the phrases, just coming back to that over and over. I think I mentioned last night that the samadhi aspect that begins to come in gives a real steadiness, a power, a confidence to the recognition or the intention of mind of metta, the recognition of what that connectedness feels like. It just really empowers it in a way.

So this particular form of the practice brings these two things together: the wise inclination of mind, wise intention, together with a concentration, an absorption practice. In all different aspects of Buddhism, in the different schools, there may be many different practices that also cultivate loving-kindness and compassion and the other brahma-viharas. I'm not saying one's better than another. They might bring out different aspects. This is just the way, in this Theravada tradition, we're teaching it to you as we've learned it. So it combines these two things.

Now, some of the difficulties that come up in our metta practice are the same difficulties that come up in vipassana, in terms of coming back to the breath. The mind just basically doesn't want to do it. It's like a two-year-old having a temper tantrum—it doesn't want to come back. It wants to run off and do its own thing. So we've talked about that, and it's just the same exact thing going on.

Another aspect that comes up—that we sometimes think is in the way of the metta practice but is actually part of the purification, the transformation of our confused, deluded habits into a strengthening of wise intention—is that we really deeply experience at times the habits and reactions of our mind and heart that block, that get in the way, that obstruct the experience of connectedness. Which are, guess what: desire and aversion. They basically block our experience of anything that is more deeply true.

But it's very easy to think that something's wrong because you're trying to send metta to yourself and you keep running into loathing, or anger, or just impatience with the practice. Or you're trying to send metta to a good friend and you end up fantasizing about the incredible vacation the two of you could take together when you get out of retreat. How did I get here? I'm just trying to send some kind wishes to this person.

But this is really an intrinsic aspect of the loving-kindness practice, because in cultivating, in inclining the mind towards wise intention, we will necessarily run into the habits of falling into our unwise ways of thinking—the desire, the wanting, and the ill will, the aversion. In fact, it's almost as if the purification of the metta practice highlights these habits of separation in big relief, so to speak. And instead of thinking there's something wrong with that, if we can actually recognize what's happening, then we also begin to see how these habits of mind—of desire and ill will—create suffering and separation. And this is really freeing. I'm serious.

This is really where I learned so much about freedom and non-separation through the metta practice: by seeing experientially how desire and yearning could be mistaken for metta, except that we start to suffer and feel separate, and how ill will is actually creating a separation that doesn't need to be there. So it's fascinating.

I want to say a little about those. In the classic way of teaching this practice, from the commentaries of the Theravada tradition—this isn't so much in the suttas but in the commentaries—when talking about the practice and the state of friendliness, kindness, spacious metta, they describe two mental states called the near enemy and the far enemy. Each of the Brahma Viharas has a near enemy and a far enemy. I'll just talk about metta tonight.

The far enemy is sort of obvious. We have these warrior-like terms—"enemy"—because the Buddha came from the warrior clan. And if you read the suttas, really a lot of the metaphors are very much warrior and battle prone. That was just the culture. The far enemy is the opposite, basically ill will. That makes sense. We can understand. As Guy said, if there's ill will, there's not metta, and vice versa.

The near enemy is a state that can actually be confused for metta when we're not quite paying attention. And that near enemy is sometimes called lust. I would say it's more desire—affection, but just desire in itself, a kind of yearning, craving, that oddly enough we can confuse with loving-kindness. And loving-kindness practice tends to highlight it, to bring it up.

You might notice when you're practicing, say to yourself or to a friend, and you start just connecting. You really feel the sense of their goodness, the quality about them that you can connect with. You're offering the phrases, just wishing them well. And the desire can creep in in many ways. It can creep in about wanting to feel the metta a little better, wanting to feel good, wanting them to know and feel the metta that you're sending them. Wanting the metta to somehow fix them or change them or make them happy. Have you had that? If you do it well enough, then they'll really be happy always. Sometimes people want

to leave a retreat and go call up the person and say, "How are you doing the last few days? Have you noticed any difference?" This is a move from metta to wanting. It's a little subtle, but after a while, not so subtle. It feels different.

Or what's more common even is sending the wishes but suddenly you start wanting something back. I first noticed it when I was sending metta to a good friend and suddenly I started noticing how I wished she would call me a little bit more. We really ought to spend a little bit more time together. I wonder if she really feels the same for me that I'm feeling for her. And this really easily creeps in when it's family members or partners or children—the "what if" aspect. Real metta doesn't have conditions. It doesn't have that neediness that wants something back.

It doesn't have that sense of "I'll love you because you love me." It doesn't ultimately have anything to do with making ourselves feel better. In that moment, it's just an open-hearted generosity of heart. Of course, the paradox is that in that moment we feel great, but we're not doing it to feel great. That's the trick. In that moment of just really wishing someone well, it's completely spacious, non-needy, non-wanting.

Play with this. Say with someone that you're really close to—a partner is a good one—where you can subtly feel the difference when you're just wishing them well. You might see areas where they're suffering or areas that are difficult, but you really can connect to that love and wishing them well. Even when you might have something you want to tell them, it's out of a place of metta. And then notice when it subtly changes. You might be saying the same thing. You might be wanting to share with them the same insight you had about them. But suddenly, it's so that they could treat you a little bit better. Notice the difference in how that feels. You'll get a sense of the difference between metta and wanting, between metta and yearning.

Another way we get confused is when we're feeling that sense of not being enough, of insufficiency or isolation, and the thought of metta as love becomes more a sense of needing—love as needing something to complete us. But we still think of it as love, a kind of yearning. And if we're not careful, we can call that love and equate it with metta. But it's not the same at all.

This is from Mark Epstein: "When we're plagued with a sense of unworthiness, it's easy to feel deficient, not enough, and to think that the love of another person is the only possible solution to this plight. Meditation tends to work against this assumption of deficiency by restoring the capacity for connection from the inside. In doing this, it challenges the common assumption of our culture about where connection comes from. In the Buddhist view, connection is already present. We're not as separate and distinct as we think we are. Connection is our natural state. We just have to learn to permit it, to allow it."

Desire, insufficiency, neediness—the Buddha called it a "maker of limits." It constricts and narrows our heart and mind. The friendliness, the generosity of heart, of metta, of simple connection and acceptance, opens us to spaciousness, to vastness. You can almost feel this experientially.

Aversion being the far enemy of metta, ill will being the far enemy—that's not hard to see. What can be difficult for us is to really trust that the way of connection, the power of friendliness, of acceptance, of loving-kindness, is really stronger and more of a protection for us than fear and ill will and anger are. It's easy for me to think that ill will is a natural response to something unpleasant. Of course it should be kept away from me. Who wants to connect with something that's unpleasant or scary, or somebody that I don't like?

One thing to remember is that metta doesn't necessarily mean liking, and it doesn't mean approving of harmful or difficult or unpleasant behaviors. It simply means connecting with what is unpleasant rather than fearing, and seeing in that connection a way for a more appropriate response.

I remember some years ago I was teaching a retreat that had some very active environmentalists in it. I was teaching with Sharon Salzberg, and in the early days we were in a group describing the loving-kindness practice, which we would introduce in the afternoon, much as we do here. Some people in the group, not having practiced the loving-kindness yet but just hearing about it, were saying, "Well, I don't want to—it's too mushy. I don't want to practice that. I need my anger. I don't want to lose my edge." That sense of needing anger.

But I think we can confuse anger with discrimination. Actually, when Guy talked about aversive types and greed types, the so-called flip side of the aversive type is discriminating wisdom. And myself being an aversive type, one thing about being aversive is you also think you're right. You see things clearly. It just has this tinge of negativity that's completely extra. And it doesn't always see things clearly, but it really thinks it does.

But it's quite possible to have a very incisive, discriminating wisdom together with connectedness and friendliness.

It doesn't have to be fueled by aversion. But often we think the anger is our protection—we don't want to let it go.

In this retreat, I remember one person in particular who was very strong about not wanting to do the metta practice, and who had been very active for years in environmental work. At the end of the retreat, it was one of the most... I don't know, really touching experiences of my teaching life. This person was weeping, basically, and said that through the years, anger had really been fueling him in the environmental work he had done. He felt that it had served him. But he was also seeing that he couldn't just isolate the anger to when he needed it to do the work—that it was spilling over into his family, into his life, and basically eating him up from the inside.

And that's what happens, you know. And just seeing that there's another way—how to be clear, how to be strong, without making who we don't agree with or what we don't like into "the other." We take what we don't like about someone, put them in a box, and they become the other, the enemy. That thing we don't

like defines them. And it's so hard sometimes to find the courage, or even how to connect, without denying the difficult—but to also see that there's something else.

As Thich Nhat Hanh talks about, bringing up seeds of joy in the difficult doesn't deny the difficult; it just sees there's something human somewhere about this person. We start from that connection, and then we can spread out and see.

Often, that person is ourselves. That's why it's very important to just find one little kind thought you had a year and a half ago. Think about that and really let it in. It doesn't take much to make a crack in that web of otherness and begin to relate.

I read a little incident in a biography of Martin Luther King that really spoke to me—how he had this deep commitment to nonviolence, and it manifested really by not making people the other. So this incident: I think he was on a plane in the early 1960s, and a Justice Department lawyer was talking to him, trying to convince Dr. King that one of his advisors, a New York attorney who was close to him, had previously had some kind of communist connections—or maybe once he went to a communist meeting, who knows. If you remember the 1960s, the government was really paranoid about anything that had anything to do with communism.

So this Justice Department lawyer was really grabbing Dr. King's ear, telling him, "This guy's a communist, he's really bad for you, you can't keep using him as an advisor, he's going to make everything you do suspect," and on and on. Dr. King was listening very politely, taking in what he said, but clearly not agreeing.

And suddenly the lawyer got it. Just like a light went off. He said, "Oh. This is a man who is so committed to nonviolence, so committed to the path of love, to not ever choosing hatred as a motive"—which I read somewhere else Dr. King once said. That even if the worst segregationist church bomber were to come up to Dr. King in a moment of sincerity, wanting to talk to him or even shake his hand, he would never shut him away. So he's not going to make someone like that the other person. How could the lawyer expect him to say he wasn't going to have anything to do with one of his friends because the guy went to some communist meeting sometime?

I just love that—that sense that you don't make anyone the other, while doing everything you can from that place of connectedness to try to change harmful, really harmful, terrible behavior. But you don't reject the person.

So that's, to me, one of the more powerful aspects of the strength, the power that can come to our own motivations, our own actions and responses in the world—to ourselves and to others—when we can consciously access connectedness rather than believing that fear and separation is our best protection.

Try it. In little ways, you know. Don't go for the biggest one. Try it when you're in line at the supermarket and the person in front of you is in the express lane with fourteen items when you're only allowed to have

ten, and you're in a hurry. How many times do you count their items and think, "Don't they know? Can't they see?" Instead, just try and connect with some aspect of them. Could be me next time.

Or when you're in traffic and you're really in a hurry, and the light is just turning orange, and the car in front of you stops—and easily three more cars could have made it through that light, but that car in front of you stopped. Can you meet that? Meet that person as a person? Or are they the other, blocking traffic, a complete nincompoop?

Just practice in little ways. And it's amazing, honestly. The first time I'll connect, the first phrase will go, "May you be free from danger." Yeah, right. Give me a break.

You know, the mind is saying, "Don't even try. You're being ridiculous." Just try again. Try again. And I often find that by the second repetition of the phrases, it's really like "us" instead of "me and them." Just for a moment. It's not a huge thing, but it is a huge thing.

Just practice it in little ways here—in the food line, when the person in front of you is going through the door so mindfully and you just want to wring their neck. See if you can feel a sense of appreciation for their mindfulness rather than thinking it means something bad about you.

So with this practice, we start where we are. And mindfulness is also a place where loving-kindness, connection, and acceptance show up. Metta, as this aspect of non-judging connectedness, is actually intrinsic to a moment of sati, a moment of mindfulness, isn't it? It's not like you're only going to experience metta if you're sitting here saying, "May I be happy." We experience it often.

Notice how you meet a moment of your experience as you go through the day. Maybe just reflecting on the difficult things that came up today—how did you meet them? Boredom, discomfort, anxiety, fear, sleepiness. How did you meet the beautiful things? Compassion, gratitude, joy, calm, peace. Did we make those unpleasant things the other? Did we make ourselves somehow bad for experiencing them? Did we set up a sense of separation when those things happened? Or did we simply meet it? "Oh yes, this too. Oh yes, awareness of discomfort is like this." That's metta in that moment.

The same with the beautiful, with the lovely, with the things that we like. We just meet it. "Oh yes, calm is like this. Joy is like this." And when it goes, that's fine. Or is there that clutching, that need to hold on to it to make ourselves feel okay? To give ourselves some sense of being somebody, or at least just being okay to ourselves.

So really seeing that a moment of metta is accessible anywhere—in that sense of friendliness and clear seeing, just with whatever's arising in the moment. And we start where we are.

Again, my friend in Burma, being held in that metta field, it gave me a really powerful experience. I was having a conversation one day with one of the men who was translating. At the end of the talks, Sayadaw would talk one day, and then either Steve Smith or I would talk another day. Steve calls them "fusion

retreats," where you have the really straight Burmese-Asian teaching, and then we would modify it the way we teach here. And you don't really know how much we modify it. But as Gil said, the instructions are: you sit down, you're told how to note everything that arises, you're given a half-hour instruction, and that's it. You go do it.

And the Sayadaw would say things like, "Okay, anger arises, you note two or three times and then it's gone, and you go back to the breath." So in the questions afterward, I was talking to people and they were saying, "But in the West, you describe how to be with the anger and how to feel it in the body. You don't say it just goes away in two or three notes. And in fact, it doesn't go away in two or three notes." And we're saying, "Yes, we know it doesn't." And then we explain what you actually do—you feel it in the body, the usual approach, just like I gave you this morning.

I was talking to the translator later, and he said, "Wow, that was really interesting. That was really helpful. I'd like to hear more like that."

And I said, "Why?"

He says, "Well, you know..."

it doesn't go away for us in two or three notings either."

And I said, "Oh, I always thought maybe it did."

"Oh no, it doesn't go away for us." He said, "But then..." I asked, "So what do you do?" And he said, "Well, this is very helpful, these instructions."

I explained, "We talk about it because we Westerners get really upset with ourselves. We think we're doing something wrong. We beat ourselves up. We get really negative because it didn't go away."

And he says, "Oh, we just say, 'Oh well, never mind.'"

That's the difference. It's a huge difference.

So if we could do that—okay, so there's anger. We know that it's still going to go, "Oh well, never mind." Anger's here. And just keep on noticing it without adding any other story. We're not creating some separation about it. It's amazing.

But that's metta. Ajahn Sumedho, I love the way he describes it. He says metta does not necessarily mean liking anything. It simply means an attitude of not dwelling on the unpleasantness or the faults inside or outside of oneself. 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, but without creating anything around it. It's just this—without creating anything around it. In space.

That's what I consider to be metta. Just connecting and not creating anything around the unpleasant. The

same with the pleasant—totally connecting and not creating anything around it. That allows for clear seeing. There's no sense of separation, and not even a sense of incredible unity either, because that's already a thought. It's just how things are in a moment.

It's so simple, and it's really very available, very accessible in our moment-to-moment experience—in formal metta practice, in our vipassana practice, just in walking around. Just notice that simple connectedness, that friendliness that doesn't need to create anything around experience.

So I'll just end with a little short quotation.

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