Mettā & Intention

Carol Wilson · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Carol Wilson · 59:42

In both of the groups today, it came up in slightly differing ways, but to some extent the question arose of what the Buddha was really teaching about our relationship to anger, to hatred, to love.

I want to start by reading some probably quite well-known statements of the Buddha about working with anger and hatred and the power of love. Then I'll talk a little about some of the effects of working with this practice of loving-kindness in our daily life—just some very basic, modest effects.

I want to give you a few of the Buddha's words, putting them in the context of realizing that everything he taught, according to what he said, according to what we can read, was for the purpose of freeing our hearts and minds from suffering. He said over and over, "I teach one thing and one thing only: suffering and the end of suffering." What I read into that is that the motivation, the point, the guiding principle of all his different teachings is the very practical matter of how we can bring our own hearts and minds to an end of suffering.

If we take the teachings of mettā practice, of non-hatred, of meeting everything—beautiful, difficult, neutral—with clear seeing and loving-kindness, we can see this from a point of view that is not our psychological mode of thinking or our good-bad mode of thinking. You know: "I should be this loving, kind person," or "I'm bad." We make this kind of ideal, and then when we can't meet it, which so often we can't, we think, "Well, I got angry, and I shouldn't have. To be a good person, I shouldn't have gotten angry." But then we get into our whole rationalization: "How can you not be angry? How can you possibly meet these difficult things in the world and not be angry?" And anger is—well, you all know, I'm sure.

I find in myself that kind of argument. It comes partly from the difficulty of actually manifesting loving-kindness and compassion. It is difficult. Let's not kid ourselves. But it also comes from taking it as a "should"—I should do that to be a better person, to be a good person—rather than approaching it from a totally practical point of view: I'm going to suffer more if I continue to meet difficulty with anger, with fear, with craving. Not that I have to do it to prove I'm an ideal person, but because I want to suffer less.

From that practical framework, I find it gives me a lot more spaciousness of motivation to really try out and explore and listen to what the Buddha was saying with an ear for "Well, maybe it's true—let's try it," rather than immediately concluding "I can't do it and he's wrong, so forget about it." Maybe he did know something about the ending of suffering. Maybe I could keep trying.

Some of this is from the Dhammapada. As I say, I'm sure it's quite familiar to you, but just to hear his words as far as we can know them, rather than ours. This is from a new rendering of the Dhammapada by

one of the monks in the Ajahn Chah tradition from Amaravati, Ajahn Munindo. I just found it in my mailbox the other day. That was nice—better than what's usually in the mailbox: bills and requests for money.

This is very famous, but it sets the tone for the whole Dhammapada, these first two verses:

"All states of being are determined by mind. It is mind that leads the way. Just as the wheel of the ox cart follows the hoof print of the animal that draws it, so suffering will surely follow when we speak or act impulsively from an impure state of mind."

"All states of being are determined by mind. It is mind that leads the way. As surely as our shadow never leaves us, so well-being will follow when we speak or act with a pure state of mind."

"When we hold fast to such thoughts as 'they abused me, mistreated me, beat me, robbed me,' we keep hatred alive. If we release ourselves from such thoughts as 'they abused me, mistreated me, beat me, robbed me,' hatred is vanquished."

"Never by hatred is hatred conquered, but by readiness to love alone. This is the eternal law."

"Those who are contentious have forgotten that we all die. For the wise who reflect on this fact, there are no quarrels."

"More than a thief, more than an enemy, a misdirected heart brings one to harm. Neither mother, father, nor any member of a family can give you the blessings generated by your own well-directed heart."

These are some of the very well-known, very basic, but quite profound statements. He's saying this not as nice little epigrams, but as absolute statements of his experience of what brings us to happiness. So then we are left with discovering how to do that, here and in our lives.

Not to be flippant, but we must not make the mistake of expecting too much too quickly, which is easy to do in our fast-paced society. Often, on leaving a retreat—or even moving from a loving-kindness retreat to a Vipassana retreat—if you've had even a few moments of either the strength of the feeling of mettā, or that sense of the barriers disappearing, or even an intimation of the possibility of power when the heart is open, when the mind is connected—that's important. As we've all talked about, as Michelle spoke about a lot last night, this gives us some inspiration, some faith, as Susan talked about, based on our own experience that yes, this is really true. The power of a connected heart does bring happiness for myself and for others.

As we leave, though, or switch practices, or just start to think about something else and lose that experience, it can be easy to think that we have to always be in that depth or that power of the heart—that emotional, mental experience of mettā—for it to be of value, or for it to even count at all.

And when, guess what, it's a little harder to access in the middle of work three weeks from now, it can be

easy to think, well, what was the use? I can't always be on retreat. How can I access it? And so that, I think, is a big mistake we make.

I want to talk a lot tonight about the little ways—the moment-to-moment little ways that we can consciously bring in the sense of metta connection in our life, the little ways that we can notice when it's arising spontaneously here or in life. As well as the courage it takes, the commitment it takes to keep on looking, because a lot of what we need to do is be willing to look at the habits of mind that get in the way.

I want to give you another thing from the Buddha because it's a different kind of story. He certainly had to demonstrate often in his life how to work with anger. It's not that after he was awakened and spent forty-five years teaching, everybody who came to him was completely devoted. I mean, it was India. It sounds like India then was a lot like India now, only maybe there are a lot more people in India now. But there were many wandering ascetics, many wandering spiritual teachers, and a fair degree of contentiousness. So there are lots of examples of people coming to him and challenging him, saying "what do you know anyway?" and so forth.

So anyway, there's this one pretty well-known sutta where a Brahmin, a layman, came to the Buddha and basically was angry at him, kind of cursed him, reviled him, going on and on with rude, harsh words—basically yelling at him. And the Buddha has a famous way of responding, which first was with an example: if people come to visit you, friends or colleagues, and you serve them with delicacies and food and give them gifts and all these things, and if they don't take those, if they leave them, if they don't accept them, then who do those gifts and delicacies, the food that you offered, belong to? And the Brahmin said, "Well, then they're still mine. They stay with me." And the Buddha said, "Just so. When you offer me these anger and harsh words, if I don't accept them, then they stay with you. It's all yours."

But this wasn't the end of it, because that person actually took that as the Buddha being angry with him. And he basically said, "You're an arhat. What are you doing getting angry? An arhat isn't supposed to get angry. This proves that you're not." And the Buddha said, basically, "I'm not angry." Then he gave this little stanza on working with anger:

"You make things worse when you flare up at someone who's angry. Whoever doesn't flare up at someone who's angry wins a battle that's hard to win. You live for the good of both, your own and the other's, when, knowing that the other is provoked, you mindfully grow calm."

Very practical, really. He's not saying we're floating on a cloud and everyone will be nice to us because we're trying to practice metta. He's just saying, you know, it's for your good and the good of the other. If you see the person's angry and you can mindfully grow calm, you know. "When you work the cure of both, your own and the other's, those who think you are a fool know nothing of the Dhamma."

To me, actually, that last statement is really important because it's partly what was coming out in one of our conversations—that societally, it's not necessarily so supported that our anger is the cause of our

suffering and that it's a worthy aspiration not to act from anger, to free our hearts and minds of anger. That's not always supported in this world. And often you are seen as a fool. Or we feel that we're seen as a fool or a weakling or some kind of passive person who's afraid to act, whatever. So it seems to me even in the Buddha's time, that dichotomy between what he was teaching and what some people might say to you when you try to take that stance of not returning anger for anger—seems like that was true back then as well.

So I just find that interesting. It's not that he was just saying, "Oh, be happy, be peaceful, don't get angry anymore," and he didn't have to deal with the same things. He knew. It's a difficult road. It requires from us both some verified faith—some verified faith from our own experience, which hopefully, both on and off retreat, our practice can help us recognize.

And I also find in our life, in both metta and vipassana practice, it takes a really deep commitment to ourselves, from understanding the value of cultivating loving-kindness and connection and compassion—that the value of that is worth the commitment of energy it takes to keep paying attention with care and kindness. Not only when we feel connected, but all the many times, the many, many times that we don't feel connected, or that we feel that we failed, or that we find ourselves lost in resentment again or fear again or longing again. Rather than feeling that's a failure, that's the exact place that we need to dive in with our loving-kindness, to dive in with our attention. And that's the place that we learn. That's the place that the strength of metta is developed. It's easy when everything's hunky-dory. It's when it's difficult—and a lot of the time the difficulty's in ourselves—that the strength of metta really begins to be cultivated.

So really what I've found powerful over time in my daily life is to recognize that it's just about moment to moment of experience. I think I said this the other night, but metta is very much about: how do I meet this moment of my experience?

And that's a workable piece of life—this moment. Even if I'm in the middle of a big frenzy about something, if I can remember: What's happening now? How am I meeting this moment? Even if the answer is, "I am meeting this moment with total frustration and anger and it's all your fault"—still, being able to say that already makes a shift. It's like, "Oh, that's how I'm meeting the moment. And who's suffering? Mostly me."

How we meet the moment—and what's very practical about the metta practice during all those times that we're not particularly feeling any emotion—is what I want to elaborate on tonight: the fact that we're cultivating wise intention. Intention of heart, intention of mind. Intention is what we call motivation, but it's the movement of mind and heart that can be very subtle, leading to thought, speech, and action. And intention often manifests as thought.

In terms of the way the Buddha describes and understands what really brings us suffering and what really brings us happiness in the world—what constitutes skillful action and what's unskillful action or

speech—it's not so much about the result, because as we see, that's really not in our control. It's about the motivation, the intention with which we speak, with which we act.

In fact, intention was so important in his scheme of how to live an awakened life—which would be the Eightfold Noble Path, a whole talk in itself—that it comes second. The path describes our day-to-day way of living, beginning with wise understanding: how we understand ourselves, the world, what causes suffering for ourselves and others, what brings happiness. How we understand ourselves and the world leads to how we think about the world—the intentions with which we act. And the second step of the Eightfold Path is just that: wise thought or wise intention, leading to the next three steps—speech, action, and livelihood—how we manifest in the world relationally with others.

There's a sutta where the Buddha is very specific about what wise intention is. He gives three specific wise intentions: The unwise, or really the suffering intention of greed, comes to be countered with—or transforms through understanding into—renunciation, just letting go of holding on, renunciation or generosity. The unwise or suffering intention of ill will—just basic negativity, not liking, disliking, anger, hostility, the whole range—transforms with wisdom into metta. And the unwise intention of cruelty transforms into compassion, karuna.

This happens spontaneously when we understand or just naturally feel our connection with another being. You see that happen here, I'm sure. When something bugs you and you just turn your attention to the person and think, "Oh well, they're doing the best they can. They're making a lot of noise—but maybe they're really uncomfortable." You don't have to meditate for a day for that to happen. It's just natural. Or maybe you do. But it just kind of happens quite naturally from connection. Very normal.

But also, we can cultivate it—through thought to begin with. And that's what this form of the loving-kindness practice that we've been cultivating here is about, where we're repeating these thoughts over and over. As I said the first night, it's sort of like a joke: What would we be thinking about if we weren't repeating these phrases over and over and over?

But it's not really a joke, is it? What would we be thinking about? What does the mind naturally incline towards when it's untrained, when it's unaware? It either runs on drivel—which is a good deal of the time. Maybe that's only me; the rest of you are having really wise thoughts about how to save the world. It runs on drivel, or it goes to how I can get more pleasantness, how I can get rid of unpleasantness. And how often is the pleasantness or the unpleasantness concerning another human being? At that time, that person—there's no connection. They stop being a person. They become an object, really, the carrier of our pleasure or the potential carrier of our displeasure, in which case they've got to be gotten rid of or controlled in some way.

It's good to see it in little things on retreat, but follow it to its logical expansion. And it isn't funny. It's really the source of all the craziness and the pain in this world.

And so I think what we're doing here, sitting here saying these phrases—I totally understand. So many people have said, and I've been there, completely nauseated by these phrases. "I cannot summon it up one more time." But then you find a way to. That passes, and you find a way to.

Even if you're not feeling anything, even if you're just mouthing the phrases, but you're trying at least to know what you're saying—it's very important. Because on a level that we're completely unaware of, something is happening. This is really what surprised me in my life after having done some intensive metta retreats.

We're looking for some feedback pretty regularly, aren't we? I mean, it's pretty hard to go through even a day without some kind of feedback that something good is happening. And generally that means we feel good, doesn't it? Usually. I mean, some big blow-up comes and you're overwhelmed with anger, and you come into the group and go, "Oh good, the purification's happening." How many of you really go out thinking, "Oh, really good, I'm so glad"? That's good feedback? No, we want the juicies. We want it to feel good. And a lot of the time—at least in my practice—it's not particularly feeling good.

But what really surprised me on leaving retreat and just living my life, without trying to feel like the embodiment of loving-kindness and compassion everywhere I went... I mean, let's face it, I did have that ideal in mind. Somehow we become the light of the world. And you come out of a metta retreat and everyone—I think I said this in a group—people fall at your feet going, "Oh, I can't believe you are radiating so much love and compassion. Where have you been? Let me go there too." Occasionally—honestly, occasionally—that does happen. You actually might be a lot softer, radiating something that you don't even know. I'm not kidding now. Sometimes that does happen. But when we go out trying to radiate it, well, that's a whole other story. And that's not what it's about.

But what I did notice is that on some much more modest level, that moment-to-moment shifting of intention that's happening when we're repeating the phrases and actively connecting is really having an effect. And the effect that I noticed in myself was that the natural habit of mind would still spring up, and then the metta would arise spontaneously to balance it.

Let me give you just little examples. My tendency of mind tends toward the aversive. Others might tend toward greediness. I think you've got kind of a bunch of aversives up here, except for Susan. That's just how our minds go. So that doesn't mean you're angry all the time. But I noticed—this is a little example, but it's when I really got how the habit pattern of intention, the way my aversive mind works.

I was on a day ferry in Thailand one time. And it was a beautiful day—sunny, bright, lots of people on the ferry. I was just sitting up in the sun quietly, totally pleasant. And there was a bunch of people down below, and one woman, kind of very skimpily dressed, acting out, calling a lot of attention to herself. And my mind immediately could tell she was American. And I thought, "Oh, Americans"—which of course, you know, Americans are always so obnoxious—and now everyone's going to know I'm an American, and I started shrinking in my seat. And there weren't that many Americans; there were more other

nationalities.

And I saw my mind doing this. Out of the whole field of experience, of sense experience—most of which was pleasant—my mind completely latched onto the one unpleasant sense experience. I mean, it wasn't even affecting me. It was way on the other deck. And I got completely absorbed in the negativity of it.

It cracked me up. And since then, I've watched. That's what the habit of my mind does. I'll go into an experience in the dining room—I noticed this on retreat—and there'd be one person that somehow triggered something negative. They just looked unpleasant, or they were making a noise, or they were in front of me in line and slopped some food on the counter.

Doesn't mean I wouldn't slop food myself, but never mind.

My mind would just go to that one thing. What I noticed starting to happen with the metta, completely spontaneously both in retreat and out of retreat, was that the mind would do its usual habitual movement toward the negative, but then rather than sticking there, what would come in automatically was the connecting and inclusive energy of metta. This wouldn't limit the person to that one thing, but would connect with and see the whole person. "Oh, so they're a bit of a slob, but they look like a really nice person." That's the best an aversive mind can do—you don't really get a new personality. It just broadens out, becomes more inclusive. Still cynical, but it doesn't really mean it.

Another example: I would go home to the cottage where I live, which is really lovely. I like it a lot. And my mind would walk in, and if it's kind of dirty, right away the mind just starts grousing. It sees this one speck of dirt on the floor. Everything else is beautiful, the sunlight's streaming in the window, and I'm going, "Oh my God, the dirt on the floor." But then with the metta, just automatically the mind would see the rest and look around. "Oh yeah, it's really beautiful here. I'm really lucky to live here." And that wasn't a forced "I should do that"—it begins to happen spontaneously.

For someone who has more tendency toward attachment, toward wanting, who sees the good in what they don't have, the metta could do the same thing. It expands around, includes the whole picture. "I don't have this, but I do have this—this beautiful day, this quiet moment, this soft, gentle rain." A sense of appreciation. Sure, we can do that consciously, but what you might begin to notice is how it starts to show itself spontaneously, how the habits of mind and heart are indeed beginning to change. The connection becomes a little stronger. We begin to trust it unconsciously, a little more, through the power of our loving-kindness practice.

And of course we can consciously work in this way, which is one of the ways of bringing the intention of working with metta into our daily life. We don't just have to leave it at "well, okay, that's good, and maybe when I get back to the next metta retreat I can work harder and then it'll happen some more." We can also continue to pay attention in our daily life, bringing in this spaciousness, this more inclusive quality of connection.

Thich Nhat Hanh likes to say that most of us ask the question, "What is wrong?" We forget to ask what is right. Both are useful. He says, "There are many things that are not wrong. When you focus your attention only on what is wrong, you can make the situation worse. Therefore, it is wise to meditate on your capacity to enjoy peace, happiness, and joy—your capacity to be in touch with what is refreshing and healing in the present moment."

And the example he gives shows this isn't just about something small, like being annoyed at a speck of dirt on the floor and then noticing the nice light coming in the window. That's an easy one. He's talking about being in the midst of really difficult, atrocious suffering. During the Vietnam War, when he was an activist, he writes, "We were so busy helping the wounded that we sometimes forgot to smell the flowers. Night has a very pleasant smell, especially in the country, but we would forget to pay attention to the smells of mint, coriander, thyme, and sage, so I would mention these to the social workers and peace workers so they would be in touch with them."

It doesn't sound like much, I grant you—in the midst of helping the wounded during a horrific war, to stop and smell the flowers. It sounds almost like a cliché. I know in my mind I can tend to evaluate that the depth of suffering is so strong that the sense of appreciating what is right has to be equally powerful. But it's not true. It's really about opening our intention from fear, hatred, and holding away, toward connection, toward inclusivity, toward not feeding that fear and hatred and longing in ourselves. That's what we're working with—not on the outer level, but on the inner level of our intention.

Often, in the midst of really strong suffering, if I can stop and get out of that mind state that's completely absorbed, long enough just to hear the birds singing outside the window, it moves into a much more spacious quality of connectedness to life rather than this complete absorption in all my troubles. The troubles come back, they don't go away, but the intention that relates to them can really change.

One of the aspects of non-metta—ill will or wanting—that I want to talk about more is how, when there's this non-inclusive, non-connected quality opposite to metta, our habits of mind, our unwise intentions, create either an experience or a person into being "the other." Really, this sense of "there's me and there's the other."

And I maybe want the other to make me happy or make it go away, but that distancing, that separation, is really the source of our own internal suffering, and then of the speech and actions from unwise intention that continue suffering on into the world.

A little example I noticed last fall—I think I talked about it in the retreat—of how wanting, in just a little amount of time, just a little thing, can create someone into such an object. I was driving up here from the study center for a sitting or something, but I wasn't late. And I was driving down the driveway of the study center, which, as you know, is just down the road about two minutes away. They had a retreat going on there, so it was a walking period or something. And one of the people on retreat was doing very mindful, slow walking meditation right in the middle of the driveway—the exact middle of the driveway. You

couldn't really get by on either side.

So I was driving down and saw this and had a little sense of wanting to get up here in a hurry, even though I wasn't late. And that wanting to get up here in a hurry—I saw that person there and immediately was like, "What's the matter with them? They're in my way." And they could, of course, hear the car. You can hear the car. So they moved over like two inches. Like, "I'll make a gesture, you know, I hear you"—but I still couldn't get by. So I had to stop and just wait until they kind of slowly, slowly, being a good yogi, you know, slowly, slowly...

And in that moment, I saw—really in the space of a finger snap—how I went from just a little thing of wanting to get up here in a hurry to this little burst of negativity. And that person became a total object in my way to be gotten rid of. It was scary. Then I noticed it immediately. And this is the power of simply kind noticing of the habits of mind that cause the separation. We don't have to hate them. We just have to notice them.

As soon as I noticed it, I was like, "Oh, wow, look at that. That's really painful." That's a moment of metta, mindfulness to oneself. And this is really how we confront the difficult, separating, painful, suffering-producing habits of our mind and heart. Not with hatred, not with blame, but with clear-eyed metta, clear seeing. "Oh, wow. That's painful. It's scary." And look, if I could do something, if I wasn't a little bit more restrained, I'd open the window and say, "What's the matter with you? Move over! What's the matter with you?" And it could escalate from there, as we all know. It could escalate.

And so seeing it—the moment I saw it with that kindness—the whole thing just evaporated. You really see, oh, there's nothing to hold on to here. This is just suffering. And it goes. The power of clear-hearted, clear-seeing connection of metta and of mindfulness is so much stronger really than our suffering habits of mind. It's just that we have spent so much time habituating, cultivating really, our suffering habits of mind. So much more time cultivating them than we have cultivating metta or clear seeing. And we get impatient that the metta isn't working all the time. But if you really look at the ratio of how much time we spend cultivating the suffering and how much time we spend cultivating the metta, well, actually, you see how much stronger the truth really is.

So that sense of how quickly we can go to make someone the other. I read a newspaper article a couple of years ago about aggressive driving, road rage. And I was really struck by it because it was talking about a survey made by the AAA Foundation about aggressive driving. This survey was finding that there's a huge increase in the percentage of aggressive drivers. And they say what that includes, just in case you don't know: weaving in and out of traffic, excessive horn honking, running red lights, tailgating, passing on the right, making obscene gestures, screaming, and headlight flashing. Plus, I have a friend who, I think he performed one of those acts in Texas where he used to live, and the guy behind him kind of pulled him off on the side of the road with a gun. So I mean, it gets out there, right?

But the point of this article is that they go on describing, in this regular newspaper, how this manifests,

how aggressive driving can be on the increase and how we engage in it. And the person writing, who is a psychologist, says that if someone on the road upsets you while you're in a car, that individual's whole identity becomes encapsulated in this bad thing they did. They're not someone with kids and a sick dog, hurrying to get to the vet. They're just that bad person who cut you off. He's not seen as a whole person, and there's an urge to express your aggression on this anonymous other—to think, "I can't let him get away with this." The thin veneer of civilization is removed because the car offers anonymity. You feel invincible. The car provides a buffer zone that makes it easier to dehumanize the other driver, much easier than if you were walking together in a hallway, seeing each other face to face. We'll do things and say things to someone in a car that we'd never do face to face.

And so the advice he gives his patients who have come to him because of their road rage is to practice compassion for other drivers by thinking of your own mistakes, and to visualize non-aggressive responses without acting out your aggression. It's actually so true that when people begin to study these things scientifically—as if that's what's needed for us to believe it—it turns out to be the same thing the Buddha was talking about. Lately, people keep sending me articles, and I keep picking them up myself, about various studies on the power of forgiveness, the healing power of forgiveness in one's own mind and body, of letting go of resentment even for horrific things that have happened. Not as a should, just scientific studies on what is more physically and psychically healthy.

So we can work on the level of aggressive driving, just looking at our mind and how it creates that sense of separation, that sense of the other. We can also consciously work in more active ways to bring our loving attention to meet head-on those aspects of ourselves that keep us locked in suffering, in separation, in negativity.

This is an example—I'm not saying we should do this, but it really struck me. It comes from St. Francis of Assisi, about whom I recently read a biography. I didn't really know much about him, except of course the common things: that he was really loving and saw all beings as his brother and sister, even speaking of death as his sister. That's all I knew about him.

But his life is quite interesting because he was born to a wealthy family in Assisi and basically spent his youth and young manhood as a kind of rowdy leader of the debauched section of young rich men in Assisian society. Apparently, somewhat secretly for a while before he actually came out as a renunciate monk, he was doing things of generosity. But the thing that struck me was that one of the first things he did was confront one of his deepest loathings and fears, one of the deepest kinds of separation he created in his mind with other people. And that was with people who had leprosy, which is now called Hansen's disease.

Apparently there were many people at that time in the Middle Ages in Assisi with leprosy. And as was the common practice, they would be removed from their family situation once diagnosed to stay in hospitals and homes for people with this disease. There were a few just below Assisi. Of course, anyone who lived in

the town would constantly encounter people with leprosy begging on the roads. And Francis had an abhorrence of it. It scared him. It disgusted him. He couldn't stand to see or be around anyone who had this disease.

As the biographer explains, Francis was convinced at this point—even though he was still acting like the debauched young man—that his meditations on Christ had shown him there was really only one way of radically reducing misery in the world, and that was by persuading people to love God and their neighbors without reservation. He intuitively understood that he needed to dismantle his own selfishness before he could move into a deeper, more profound level of love and connectedness.

And so he started where he was, confronting his own disgust and fear of people with leprosy. What he did first was simply go out on the road to give alms to someone with the disease, to meet the person face to face, hand him the food or money, kiss the person's hand—to really be there open-heartedly. And in that knowing, he understood it was nothing to do with that person that was disgusting. It was his own fear, his own not wanting to be with what caused fear or unpleasantness.

After that, he saw the power of it, and then he went to the whole hospital for people with leprosy, distributing alms and spending time there. Over his life, he became one of the people who worked in these hospitals and did many loving things for people with this disease. They weren't certain, but they thought perhaps when he died, one of the causes of his death was that he had actually contracted leprosy to some extent, which affected his lungs.

But anyway, it's a powerful image to me—going right to the source of one's creation of distance, which isn't the person with leprosy but his own fear, and meeting that with love. That's really stayed with me as a powerful possibility.

It doesn't mean, and I don't mean, that we should get ourselves back into some idealism of "Now I have to go confront the person who's hurt me the most, or the scariest thing in my life." We can start with the aspects inside ourselves that we're making into the other, that we're holding away, that we can't meet with acceptance.

It might be just the patterns of mind—of self-hatred, of self-judgment, of worthlessness, of negativity. I found, again, the conscious practice of this form of metta practice really helps me with that on a daily basis.

Like many people, I had a deeply ingrained pattern of self-judgment. And when it really gets rolling—which of course it isn't always rolling, and you need to notice that if that's a strong pattern of yours—it might not take much to get it going, but it isn't always rolling. Once it is rolling nice and strong, though, you could do anything, right? And it'll go, "Yeah, right, well, you're just doing that to try and make people think well of you. You're just doing that." It's endless.

It's important to recognize that pattern with mindfulness as judgment or self-negativity, to feel the pain of

it. I don't mean to push it away or deny it. But once we're familiar with it and it starts rolling, you can actually consciously decide where to let the mind dwell. Do I want to cultivate aggression, aversion, and negativity towards myself? It's the same aggression as towards another. Or do I want to switch the channel to metta? And that's what you've been developing. You're developing a metta channel. You can really change the channel.

You start by simply saying the phrases to yourself. And if you have a cynical turn of mind, the first few times you repeat the phrases, there'll be a little punctuation after each one. "Yeah, right, metta, give me a break. You're making me sick. May I be happy—forget it." It keeps going like that. But what I found, much to my amazement, by the second or third or fourth repetition, that started to drop away. And actually, suddenly, the tune—I can't do metta without it being to a tune. It just sings in my mind, always the same tune. It starts to come in, and pretty soon the heart is meaning it. It's just a made-up tune; I wouldn't inflict it on you. But it really has changed the channel. Those self-judging thoughts aren't running, and the metta thoughts are. It's really very powerful. It's not like, "Oh, the beauty of the universe," but it's quite a difference.

So don't be afraid to change the channel when you see we're going down a road that leads to suffering. You may not feel the emotion, but stick with it. It really does make a difference.

And then we can turn that same quality onto more difficult and painful aspects of our own experience—physical pain or physical illness, grief, loss, really strong pains that we've been living with. Not to make them go away, but simply to include this aspect of experience without making it the other.

Someone said today in a group that she'd been dealing with a lot of physical pain and suddenly got it that happiness is presence. It doesn't mean happiness means the pain goes away. But in total presence, which is metta, there's peace, there's ease. It doesn't mean we have to make the pain go away.

I'll just read a short piece. Susan reminded me of this. It's a long article; I just want to read a little bit. It was written by a man who had a degenerative lung disease. He was in the seventh year of it, a Buddhist practitioner, a student of Chögyam Trungpa's. And he was describing in this article the many different ways he was learning to open to, to come to terms with, to include the disease and the effects of it in an open heart and mind.

He says, you know, it implies a battle—that illness and death are assumed to be very bad news, perhaps a punishment of some kind. And I know personally it's easy to internalize that with illness, with sickness. That it is a punishment. It's a sign that I'm bad. I've done something wrong. So already, the other, and I'm bad.

And he said, "I would rather not have a knee-jerk reflex towards battle. Something's happening in my body. Do I have to go to war about it? Paraphrasing the words of Dylan Thomas, do I have to burn and rave and rage? Can I make another kind of response?"

And the response he chooses to make is to simply bring full, kind attention to what's happening and to the effects of what's happening, and to see.

This is another example: "Walking anywhere with friends, especially uphill, is an occasion for silence because I cannot walk, talk, and breathe at the same time. Every gram of oxygen must be used for locomotion. There's nothing left over. Superfluity must go."

This becomes an amazing metaphor. In my life, in my mind, what is superfluous? Anger that freezes into resentment. Jealousy, greed, gossip, ego clinging, pretense, embarrassment, running after pleasure, the discursive thought that maintains the storyline of me. These things are very costly in terms of the life energy that it takes to keep them going. They're what conversation is mostly about.

"I can't take in enough oxygen to support them anymore, except by holding completely still and doing nothing else. When the oxygen diminishes below a certain point, you must choose absolutely between feeding all your mental bloodsuckers and taking care of your true business. You can't afford to keep them around as pets."

So what an opening, what a discovery follows from that simple realization. Could I ever afford it? Can anyone? What made me think that I could not let go of this expensive baggage before now?

And he just goes on—not in a mushy way at all, but really seeing how by opening to and including the disease in his full connected attention, a whole other world of understanding opened up for him. He said, "How could I call this an enemy? How could I call this something to battle? It's simply what is."

Internally, externally, we can bring that quality of clear-eyed attention—which is mettā, which is also mindfulness—to whatever's arising that's painful, that's difficult, that's wanting, that's causing suffering and separation. It doesn't mean we can't act or respond appropriately. Not at all. In fact, as I said the other night, we can see so much more clearly that it's not that we even think, "Oh, I'm going to do a big mettā action." It's just what I heard one teacher call "doing the obvious." You just do what's the obvious thing to do in a situation for the benefit of beings.

My favorite story that demonstrates this I heard on NPR a couple of years ago—an interview with a basketball player. It was his first year in the NBA, his rookie year, which I would imagine would be the culmination of what would be possible for a young man—to make it to the NBA. They were interviewing him because his sister had kidney failure and needed a transplant. He was a match and was planning to donate a kidney to her. That meant the end of his career in the NBA.

The interviewer was like, "Oh God, you're so amazing, giving up your career to give a kidney to your sister." And the guy was just so... "What are you talking about? I have two kidneys. It's my sister. She needs a kidney. I can give it to her." He didn't say this, but what I'm saying is: it's the obvious thing to do.

That's really metta. Not "I am giving such a loving thing." There's no separation. There's just connection.

One does what's obvious.

I'll end with this short passage from Shantideva, the great Buddhist teacher from the ninth century: "Even when I have done things for the sake of others, no sense of amazement or conceit arises, because it is like having fed myself. I hope for nothing in return."

So let's feed ourselves for a little while.

Thank you for your attention. Please stay gently but sincerely with your practice tonight, through the night, through tomorrow morning. Even if you think nothing is happening, there's a lot going on that we're not able to intellectually realize at the moment.

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