Balancing Aspects of Mettā

Carol Wilson · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Carol Wilson · 58:02

The full moon of May in the Theravada tradition of Buddhism, which is what we here at IMS practice in, marks the Vesak festival. The Theravada teaching of the elders represents the schools of Buddhism from Southeast Asia—Burma, Thailand, Sri Lanka, Cambodia, Laos. This is really the most significant day in the Theravada Buddhist calendar because it's said that the Buddha was born on the full moon of May, came to his full enlightenment on the full moon of May, and also died on the full moon of May in our tradition. In Thailand, for example, where I spent about a year, it's quite a big occasion for celebrating the Buddha and the teachings that have come down to us. So I wanted to mention it since it's the full moon of May now.

This also made me think of the last time I was in Bodh Gaya, the small village in India where the Buddha is said to have reached his awakening. At the end of his six years of ascetic practices and wanderings and very intense practice, it was under a Bodhi tree in what is now the little village of Bodh Gaya where he sat and had his full, complete opening experience into enlightenment, into freedom—which he then proceeded to spend the rest of his life sharing with us.

In 1989, I went back to Bodh Gaya with several dear friends. I had not been there for maybe eighteen or nineteen years. The first meditation retreat I ever did was in Bodh Gaya. But since at that time I knew nothing about meditation or Buddhism or anything else, I didn't really appreciate the spiritual and symbolic significance of that village or its meaning as a place to begin my acquaintance with Buddhism. When we went back in '89, it turned into quite a metaphor for me of our life and practice. It was really quite a powerful experience.

Bodh Gaya is a dusty little town in the state of Bihar, which is by far the poorest state in India, if you can imagine that. It's very dusty. The people are very poor. It's very dry. And Bodh Gaya is a little village in the middle of all that. When you go, there's of course a beautiful stupa next to a descendant of the original Bodhi tree that the Buddha is said to have sat under. The stupa is located in what's a very pleasant park—lots of green and trees and bushes. It's really a very lovely spot with a little pond and walls around it that are locked at night.

As you walk up to this sacred space, which is quite a pilgrimage spot for Buddhists from all over the world, there's just the village life of India. You have to walk past a whole line, a huge lineup of beggars. They just sit one after the other. And just before you get to them, there are a couple of little guys sitting selling coins that you can buy to give to the beggars. For a rupee, which is worth 100 paisa, you can buy nine 10-paisa pieces to give. So that guy makes ten paisa and each beggar you would give ten paisa, which is basically worthless—there's nothing you can really do with ten paisa.

There are people running up with little plastic bags filled with water and fish that they're trying to sell to you, because these fish are taken and liberated into the ponds inside the temple grounds by Tibetans, people who are really valuing life and setting a life free as a way of earning merit and good karma. Then different people, Hindus, will go and catch the fish and put them in little bags and come out and sell them to people. It's just this kind of atmosphere—all of life.

We went in, and sitting underneath the tree on the wall nearby, it was a very profound experience for me. Somehow it brought to me the sense of the humanness and the reality of the fact that this isn't just some mythological story. The Buddha was a real man, a human being. And that potential for liberation that we always say is possible for all of us—I got it. It really is possible for all of us, and this is accessible here and now.

We were sitting quietly trying to meditate on a small wall near the tree. And again, it turned into a metaphor for the whole mandala of our human existence. Being inside the temple ground and near the sense of reality of it, it's also not particularly removed and peaceful. Tour buses come up constantly bringing big tour groups of Thai people, Japanese people, Indian people, Westerners coming through talking in megaphones, talking really loud, staring at us sitting there trying to meditate. There was a woman who roamed around screaming the whole time. There was a group of Tibetan monks sitting on the side for three days doing a ceremony, which was quite lovely, but with loud chanting and blowing of horns and banging of cymbals. Dogs running around. It's wild.

And still, within this whole show of humanity, it's as if it's not in spite of that—it was because of it somehow. Seeing that this potential for awakening doesn't have to be so removed. That it can happen in the midst of the whole show. That became the metaphor for me.

And that we don't have to be some kind of incredibly special, unique being—that awakening is possible and accessible for all of us if we really open to that, if we can really commit our hearts to it.

So just as there are so many ways to manifest in the world, there are also so many ways to manifest in the mandala of our practice. Sometimes our practice will be being in the world, being in the chai shop, having a tea. Sometimes we're the people on the tour bus, kind of going through, checking it out, but not quite getting involved yet. And sometimes we're taking time to do really serious, intense practice in a more removed way. All of it is part of our life and part of our growth. There's not one way that's better than another—it all comes together in a circle.

I've come to think of the way we cultivate and develop in love and understanding in the same manner. The Buddha taught vipassana, the insight practice, very much as coming to liberating understanding, coming to the end of suffering and confusion, the sure heart's release, the happiness of peace, by seeing deeply into the nature of suffering and the cause of suffering—his first two Noble Truths, the nature of suffering and the cause being attachment. In vipassana we tend to inquire along that mode.

What I'd like to talk about tonight is the ways that metta has really expanded and broadened both my understanding of the nature of suffering and also of the nature of attachment. It is another piece of the mandala of practice. I've found that intensive loving-kindness practice and its after-effects in my life and understanding provide a very important balancing effect to the understanding that comes about from vipassana.

Let me speak about what I've learned about working with aversion and noticing attachment from the view of metta practice.

Aversion first. As Michelle was talking about last night, two of the five hindrances she spoke of were aversion—anger, fear—and the other being attachment, desire, grasping. She mentioned that these two have very deep roots in our mind, much deeper than, say, sloth and torpor or restlessness.

Aversion, fear, anger, hatred—all are reactions to the difficulty or pain or suffering that we experience or perceive, or do our best not to experience or perceive, in the course of our life, in the course of a day, in the course of a sitting. When difficulty arises, we respond with aversion, fear, or else overwhelm or denial.

Very briefly, metta offers us as a balance to this the potential not to shut off to the suffering, but to be able to expand and broaden our experience so that we're not blind to the suffering, while also opening to the potential for happiness, for joy, and for love. I have found that metta lends a real breadth, a real inclusive aspect of experience, and a real strength to be with the difficulty without drowning in it.

On the other side, with attachment: as we've said several times, affection or love with attachment in it is the near enemy of metta because it's so close we can confuse it. Yet at the same time, I've found that by cultivating and becoming deeply familiar with the actual experience of the state of pure loving-kindness—and all the times that I get lost in attachment—it has very much deepened my understanding of and recognition of attachment, the nature of the suffering that attachment can bring when not recognized. Through seeing and feeling more and more deeply what the nature of true love that doesn't want something back is, it really highlights the suffering aspect of attachment.

To begin first with speaking about aversion, fear, difficulty: whenever in sitting and walking, in our daily life, aversion or fear arises, it's in response to a difficult or painful physical, emotional, or mental experience that's actually happening here and now in this moment.

Physical, that's obvious—you can tell. If you hurt, there's a response of fear or aversion to it. That's clear, it's here and now. But even mentally, we might be thinking about something that happened in the past, fearing that it will repeat itself in the future. So that actual thing isn't happening, but the thought about it is happening in this moment.

The freedom, the sure heart's release that our practice hopefully guides us to, that it points to moment by moment, comes from truly knowing things as they are without a lot of interpretation, without getting carried away into stories. And freedom comes from being able to meet directly with openness whatever is

happening here and now in this moment. That allows us to see it clearly.

This obviously makes it necessary to be able to meet fully, to open in a balanced way to the painful aspects of life. Because quite a bit of our moment-to-moment experience is not going to be pleasant—that's just the way it is. And if we cannot open to the difficult when it arises, if we need to deny it, if we need to always move away, or if we get really lost in the fear and the aversion, then rather than being able to open to truth, we end up spending our time lost in struggle, trying to control, to manipulate, to change.

Yet—and this is something that can often happen in our practice—as we do begin to truly open to the pain of the world, to the pain of our own experience, to injustice, the opening can sometimes seem so vast, and the confusion and the pain can seem so overwhelming, that we can just feel like we're drowning in it. The sense of seeing things as they are can really start to be unbalanced. We start to see and experience things through what I call a dukkha lens. Dukkha is a word for unsatisfactoriness or suffering. And there are times in life and practice, as we begin to really acknowledge the suffering in ourselves and in the world, when all one notices is the unsatisfactory or suffering aspect.

I remember one time I was on a long retreat, and I was really opening to this. I would walk in the room I was in—which was a very nice room, sunny, with a little plant in the window that made it very pleasant—and I would see the plant and think, "It's just going to die." Anything that would come into my experience I'd see through this lens of the potential of change. Two friends who had just gotten into a relationship would be walking down the driveway, and I'd think, "In two months they're going to be suffering."

Anything that came into my experience would be seen through this lens of change and inevitable loss. Yes, that plant will die. But also in the meantime, it can be very beautiful, it can bring a lot of joy, and it might be ten years from now, and death is also just a natural part of things. The view was unbalanced.

Thich Nhat Hanh, who talks a lot about working with this balance, says that it's very important for us to stay in touch with the suffering of the world in order to keep compassion alive in us, in order to keep the connection with the world alive. But getting in touch with suffering is not enough.

It can get really unbalanced. It's not the whole picture. We can start to drown. And instead of staying in touch through the suffering, instead of staying in touch with compassion, our response can easily turn to that kind of negativity I was describing, or anger, or frustration.

This is where I found the broadening and strengthening aspect of loving-kindness to be so helpful. It helps me to hold the whole range of life without having to focus on just one way or the other.

It seems like a real paradox to me that in opening to what is true and opening to beauty, to love, to interconnection, we also open to great depths of sadness and suffering—and vice versa. For all of us, this mystery can be quite hard to hold. It seems our minds have a tendency to want things either one way or the other. If there's suffering, something difficult going on in the world, then we don't know how to notice

what's beautiful, what's wonderful, what's connected. If we're feeling filled with love and happiness, we kind of don't want to hear anything about war and difficulty, because it might bring us down.

Opening to the whole show is something I have found metta to be extremely helpful with.

During the Gulf War, when it first started, I was in India. Somehow it felt much closer to what was going on, and you also got a whole different perspective on how the world felt about the war than you got from the newspapers and media here. In the middle of it, I came back to the States. It was actually quite interesting to see. In India, people basically hated the Americans and hated the war. I came back here and it was so rah-rah. It was really interesting compared to the attitude during the Vietnam War.

I was walking near my cottage down the road during the war, just feeling the pain of it and the sense of helplessness—all that goes on when we're really feeling the suffering and feeling there's not much we can do about it, but still feeling responsible in some way, part of it. It's a very lovely driveway, and as I was walking, I suddenly noticed, wow, this is so beautiful here. I had a moment of deep appreciation of what a beautiful place I live, how peaceful and silent it was. This was followed immediately by a wave of guilt and self-hatred: Who are you to think that you have the right to enjoy such a beautiful, peaceful experience when people are fighting and dying? Somehow it wasn't okay to let in both perceptions.

Talking to people here in the course of our small group meetings, this has come up quite a few times in different ways—either a feeling of guilt at taking the time to send loving-kindness to oneself, a feeling that this must be selfish to just sit here and cultivate loving-kindness when there's so much suffering and grief in the world, or even a sense of mistrust, of not being able to trust that this is true happiness. A sense that somehow we're deluding ourselves, that there's got to be some kind of catch, and when we really see the whole picture, this is all going to evaporate because it can't be true.

It's very sad to me in many ways to see how hard it is for us to be able or willing or to trust that there can be happiness and love while also acknowledging quite deeply our connectedness with all beings who might be suffering, who might be confused. We try to separate the two, when actually opening to the metta, allowing the sense of really pure love for ourselves and for other beings to be nurtured, to flower, to really grow to a depth—this actually brings us much more vividly, much more viscerally, into a real living experience of knowing our connection with all beings. But it's so hard for us to trust it.

You might not feel this profoundly on retreat, but I've noticed very much in my life outside the intensity of retreat that in subtle ways, that's where the loving-kindness begins to bear fruit—where you might find it beginning to flower, to broaden and balance our experience.

This is from Thich Nhat Hanh: "If we see deeply into the nature of interbeing, that all things inter-are, we will stop blaming, arguing, and killing. To practice nonviolence, we must first of all learn ways to deal peacefully with ourselves. If we can create true harmony within ourselves, we will know how to deal with family, friends, and associates. Most important is to become nonviolence, so that when a situation

presents itself, we will not create more suffering. To practice nonviolence, we need gentleness, loving-kindness, compassion, joy, and equanimity directed to our bodies, to our feelings, and then to other people. With mindfulness, the practice of peace, we can begin by working to transform the wars in ourselves."

I think this is very profound. It's not just nice words. By directing gentleness, loving-kindness to our bodies, to our feelings, and to other beings, we are transforming the wars in ourselves. This is the most vital place where we can then begin to open to the wars in the world and do whatever little we can to transform them. We can't separate them.

Thich Nhat Hanh offers some conscious techniques, one that's a little different from metta, for working with balancing our perception—for working with the times when we're really drowning in the suffering, drowning in the pain. What I found interesting is that through the practice of metta, the technique he offers is what naturally happens in my day-to-day life as a result of cultivating the intention of metta.

What he suggests is this: most of us ask what is wrong. We forget to ask what is right. He describes working during the war in Vietnam with the young people and students who made up what was called the School for Social Work, who worked in villages trying to ease the life of people and trying to bring reconciliation between the two sides in the war—which means that everybody hates you and nobody trusts you because you're not taking sides.

And a lot of their friends and workers were killed.

He says, "During the war, 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." He would mention these herbs to the social workers and peace workers so they would stay in touch with them.

It might sound like a small thing, but the idea behind it is that in times of difficulty, we can consciously expand our field of awareness and notice that even in the most difficult situation there can be seeds of happiness, seeds of joy—or just noticing the mint, noticing the beauty of the countryside, even when your heart feels weighed down.

What happens with loving-kindness is that this begins to happen naturally, without consciously thinking of it. And I know this is not only my experience, because quite a few people have commented to me that in small ways, when they left a metta retreat, in much more subtle ways than they expected, they found the metta would arise to counterbalance what could have been an overwhelmingly difficult experience.

You might have come in thinking that when you leave, you're going to be brimming with love for yourself and all beings and spend your life floating on a cloud of happiness and love. You might have some times like that, and that's nice. But what I've found is that in a much quieter way, I'll notice some difficulty. In fact, the metta seems to highlight states of aversion, states of fear—but it also allows them without

struggle, and immediately there's a counterbalancing response.

For example, I noticed at one period when I was doing intensive metta that I began to see just how much fear was underlying my response of aversion. When I first noticed this, it was one of those little things on retreat that shouldn't be eliciting the response it was, which makes you really ask, "What's going on here?" It was during a time when there were two lunches, one at twelve and one at twelve-thirty, and halfway through the course they changed the times.

So what? My mind went into this state of total aversion. What was interesting was that I wasn't really into food. I wasn't particularly hungry. It wasn't like I didn't want to wait the extra half hour—I really didn't care. Yet I could see my mind going into this state of aversion. As I continued doing metta, it just allowed the aversion: "Oh, that's okay, aversion. May you be happy, Carol."

And underneath began to surface a sense of fear that turned into panic. I was just sitting there thinking, "What is going on? What is this panic about?" I was tuning into the panic, this little blip of fear that arises in the conditioning of my mind whenever anything new comes into the range of experience. It was really quite fascinating.

As I kept watching the thoughts, there was panic. "Oh, I have this little table I always sit at, and the same people sit there, and now different people will be sitting. Or I might not even get to sit at that table." And then, "Who cares? I don't even care if I eat lunch." And then it would start up again: "Oh no, what if, what if?" It was just the fear of any change, of anything new.

Without the metta, I usually wouldn't see that fear. It would just move right into aversion and stay there until something major came to blast it out. With the metta, it let me see it—it highlighted the fear much more than it normally would have.

And of course, as soon as I sat down at the lunch table, because the metta was there, there was a sense of "Oh, this is really nice. These people are quite lovely. This is actually even more pleasant than it was before." And the difficulty was gone.

What I've noticed is that this same quality—highlighting the fear and the aversion, with an almost immediate counterbalancing of seeing something really lovely or appreciating something else about the situation—has come up more and more in my daily life. And it's not conscious. It's not like I say, "Oh, I should find something to balance the fear." But the cultivation over time of the intention of loving-kindness to oneself and to other beings has the effect of really broadening experience and lending a balance to the fear, to the aversion. Not blinding us to it. Not pretending that the difficulty isn't there. But simply seeing, "Oh, there's this fear—and there are also some really nice aspects to this situation."

So I'll see it now if I'm in the middle of something and the phone rings. There's this little quick fear, and then aversion: "I don't want to talk on the phone."

And then I pick up the phone and hear someone's voice and feel this surge of loving-kindness. How nice to talk to this person. So the fear and the aversion don't catch hold. And my experience of life is so much broader and not unbalanced—not unbalanced in a "let's pretend everything's wonderful" kind of way.

I also see quite clearly that this sense of aversion to difficulty, or fear, comes so much from a sense of separation, a sense of limitation. There's a fear that I need or want certain things to make myself complete, to make life pleasant. A fear that those things might get taken away. A fear that somebody else might have more, and then the mind starts comparing and begins to suffer a sense of emptiness and neediness that it didn't even have before it saw that somebody else had more.

All this is coming from not understanding things as they are. The whole sense of seeing ourselves as a separate, limited being needing something—anything—from outside to be fulfilled is the core delusion of our existence.

And how mettā is so powerful is that without our even having to have any intellectual understanding of it, as we continue to cultivate the loving-kindness just to ourselves, it begins to spread to other beings. True mettā does not discriminate. When you're experiencing a moment of mettā, there is not with it that sense of, "Well, only me but not somebody else." In fact, in that moment you're not really making any discriminations at all.

Mettā is fearless. In fact, the Buddha taught it as the antidote to fear. It's boundaryless, and at its most pure and powerful moments it's also centerless. The experience of mettā is not referring back to me having this experience, this feeling, and sending it to you. I mean, that's the way we have to think about it when we begin practicing, of course. But the actual power of it is that it leads us into a real visceral experiencing of the boundaryless interconnection of all of us, of the sense of no separation.

And from that space, from that knowing of non-separation, there is no fear. There is no neediness. There is no need for something outside to fill us up, because we're touching the essential purity and completeness of who we are. And mettā is an avenue into this understanding. It's really quite wonderful.

And so again, that leads me into talking about the way that working and practicing loving-kindness can highlight or deepen our understanding of attachment—and the ultimate suffering and confusion that comes about from attachment.

Attachment is that sense of wanting or needing something outside of us. Whether it's a sense experience, another person, a particular experience in life, another job, a particular emotion, whatever. Needing or wanting some particular passing experience to fill us up, to make us happy. And as we've just seen, that isn't true happiness. But it's so hard for us to trust that. We're so used to looking outside, and the idea that we are somehow intrinsically incomplete, intrinsically lacking—this tendency to keep looking somewhere else for the answer—this is the deep suffering that comes from attachment.

And it's so strong in our culture. I read in the newspaper, it must have been a few months ago, about an

Oprah Winfrey show. She had done a show based on the movie *Sleepless in Seattle*, I guess, which was about a couple on opposite coasts who met through hearing about a lonely widower on a radio talk show. Anyway, the newspaper said Oprah Winfrey had done what she called a "Sleepless in Seattle show." She had, I think it was five, relatively young middle-aged widowers—men who had children, whose wives had died, and who were clearly good relationship material. That's how it was set up. What can you say?

So I didn't see the show, but I guess she interviewed them all and really tried to put them in a good light. And then she said, I guess kind of casually, "Well, if any of you out there are interested, send in letters." Two weeks later—this is what the article said—she came on the show with, like, a bulldozer. She had gotten sixty thousand letters from people who wanted to meet these guys. One guy alone, I don't know what made him so special, got forty thousand.

And you know, it's funny, but it's really not. Because I just felt like, oh, it's so sad in a way. I mean, maybe somebody will meet someone. I don't know how he picked who to go out with out of forty thousand people. But how much we're really yearning—for sure, for intimacy and companionship and a relationship in life, and that's all very positive. I'm not saying that's not. But somehow the depth of the inner yearning for real love, for a sense of our completeness, for real happiness in life, and how deep the sense is that we need it from somebody else—or from something else, but really from somebody else—is much more powerful and more subtle than we realize.

And it's hard to trust when we begin to be able to connect with and actually cultivate and experience deeply a love, a pure love, that is not dependent on anybody or anything else. It doesn't fit what we've unconsciously, perhaps, grown up believing.

In practicing with mettā, getting more and more deeply familiar with that experience of pure love that has no conditions on it, that wants nothing back, and experiencing how happy, how freeing that quality of love is—it began for me to highlight more and more the difference between that love and the nature of attachment, and the kind of happiness that I thought was coming from attachment.

If you think of attachment in the really gross sense first, without moving to the near enemy where attachment and love are sort of mingled and it's more confusing—if you just tune into what attachment is, what desire or craving is in a gross way—it's easier to see its ultimately unsatisfying nature. We can see it in a moment and then forget it the next moment, but attachment or desire, being this wanting of something that grows so strong we get really holding onto it, grasping, gives us a kind of tunnel vision.

To make a very simplistic example: you're sitting, you're walking, it's very peaceful, you're very present, there's a sense of happiness or love or simply peace, and suddenly the thought of pizza comes up. Or potato chips. Or chocolate cake. Or jelly beans. Whatever it is for you. And it comes up and there's some desire. *That would be really nice. I wonder if there's pizza for lunch.* And it gets stronger. *I really want pizza for lunch.* What happened in that moment to the sense of peace, to the sense of appreciation for the environment, for your state? It's sort of like Michelle said yesterday—the happiest moment in her life and

the thought comes up, *What's for tea?* And that happy moment's gone.

But we tend not to recognize this and continue to focus on the object, the thing we're wanting. And if pizza isn't for lunch, do we appreciate what is for lunch? Not so well. Everything pales in comparison. And depending on how strong the attachment grows, you might find yourself on a pizza mission into town. It happens. I've on many occasions met yogis in the supermarket. I don't suggest it.

Attachment gives a real kind of tunnel vision. All we see or look for is what we want. Other things we're not able to appreciate. There's a saying that when a pickpocket meets a saint, he only sees the saint's pockets. We focus on what we want. And we're not happy because the wanting is suffering. It's uncomfortable until we get what we're after.

So say we get pizza for lunch and—*ah*—peace. Again, we tend not to recognize that the peace isn't the pizza. The peace is the absence of that craving, of that attachment. It's gone. It's like, *ah.* And if you just watched it—wanting, wanting, wanting—and at some point it faded away, that same peace would be here. But instead we think, *Oh, if one piece of pizza made me this happy, two pieces would make me even more happy,* and we'll have three or four. And then somehow it didn't work. Somehow we feel worse. But we still don't get it, and instead we say, *Well, okay, maybe something else.* And we keep focusing on the thing that we want and not noticing that it's the process of looking to something outside of ourselves for happiness—something that's always changing—it's that process that's bringing the suffering.

And on a slightly more subtle level, sometimes we can even confuse the process of the longing itself. You can find that kind of pleasurable. It's a little strange, but I was watching the movie *Shadowlands*, and there was one point where the character playing C.S. Lewis was teaching literature to his class. I just remember one section where he was talking about the code of chivalric love during the Middle Ages. He said something to the effect that the ideal of this chivalric love is that the knight would love a woman who could never be obtainable, someone he could never have a relationship with, because that longing that could never be satisfied was the most exquisite happiness. I was just cringing.

I thought, a life of misery, and they think it's the most exquisite happiness. It's so interesting. Somewhere in there, some of that conditioning—I can see it still in myself, somehow confusing the experience. When you're falling in love with somebody but you don't really know if it's going to happen or not, if you really look, I experience that as torture. But somehow the mind puts it into, "Wow, love! It's so wonderful." You're mooning around, you can't eat, you're miserable, you want the phone to ring—oh, isn't it wonderful, love! It's very strange. We're so inculcated not to quite see what's going on, even in something as gross and simple as attachment to pizza or a new car. Then moving into how confused the messages become when we start to think of romantic love.

When we begin to work with metta, or when it becomes concerned with someone we do truly love—whether someone we're romantically involved with or a very dear friend—you can see, if you haven't already begun to explore this, how easily, without real attention, without real grounding in metta,

we can get confused. We think what we're calling real love actually is real love, without looking and seeing that it can so easily slide into a subtle mode of longing or attachment or need.

At the same time, I've found that because the two—metta and real caring for someone with certain conditions attached—can so easily move back and forth, I could learn a tremendous amount about the quality of pure love with someone I'm in relationship with, and about the nature of attachment. But I do want to say: it takes first getting really grounded in recognizing and trusting, in knowing the feel of pure metta.

That's the reason why, in giving the instructions and going through the categories of people, as Michelle was saying this morning, it's traditionally taught that for quite some time you don't use someone of a sex to which you would be attracted, or someone you're romantically close to, because the two are so easily confused. We're not really so clear about what pure, true love is. But as we spend time getting more and more grounded in recognizing the qualities of metta—the whole range from very subtle to really strong—we begin to tell the difference.

I found it fascinating, first with not a partner but just a dear friend, to see how easily and subtly what was really pure metta would begin to shade into affection with attachment. I'd be sending metta to the friend, just feeling happiness and closeness, wishing well for them, wishing well. And then: wouldn't it be nice to see each other more? Pretty soon there was this slight change of wanting something back. At first I wouldn't notice the moment of change, but suddenly I'd realize that the feeling was not this outflowing, happy, spacious movement of energy from the heart, but a little grabbing—like from a lower chakra—just a little wanting of something. A little bit of condition, a little bit of fear, a little bit of need.

Then I began to notice that as soon as that happened—and it was still quite subtle, you wouldn't call it suffering by any means, it was still masquerading as metta—the little discursive thoughts that arose, which didn't seem to have anything to do with my dear friend or myself, suddenly had a lot to do with attachment to this or that. I'd think of my house, and wouldn't it be nice to get this, and I wonder if that's happening, and what's happening with my family, and what's for lunch. Just that attachment had begun to come up in the experience, almost as if, as the metta shaded into attachment, it lifted attachment generally, making it more easy to come into my experience.

Once I noticed that, it became really fascinating to explore—not to be afraid of attachment, but to have clarity and willingness to recognize both attachment and metta, to explore the difference. I learned a great deal about it. Toward the end of a long period, very lightly and easily, I would from time to time begin to include my partner as one of the categories, just to see what would happen. As you know, when you're sending to a person you know, you get a sense of that person and send metta. Different situations I'd been in with the person would come up—a certain conversation we'd had, a certain image, a certain situation.

I really began to see how different it could be if my speech and actions came from loving-kindness, versus that subtle shading again into thinking I was wishing well, thinking I was really wanting the best for the

person, but with this little shading of attachment: "But you should act in a certain way. I want the best for you, and that means you will then do X, Y, and Z for me." Or even more subtle than that.

Coming out of retreat, I really noticed that actions and speech that on the surface might seem very loving, very caring for the person—when they came from seeming caring but with the little unspoken condition of "But what about me?" somewhere in there—the response would be one of resistance or some kind of resentment. Before really tuning into metta, my reaction would have been puzzlement, because I thought I was just acting out of love. But it feels different. And then the same speech or action coming from true metta—this unbounded moving outward of energy, truly wishing that person well, even if it means you never see them again, wanting them to do whatever they need to be happy with absolutely no conditions attached—it's so different. And the response that comes back is so different. It's amazing.

All of this might be going on at a quite subconscious level. The other person might not even consciously realize what's happening. But it's been very powerful to explore the difference. As we get more grounded in the real, open-hearted, completely unselfish quality of metta—

Even when you're sending it to yourself, the quality of metta is unselfish, unself-centered. As we get grounded in that, it becomes easier to notice when we're sliding into attachment. And we really can see that the joy, the happiness, the love that arises with the practice of metta is so much more profound, so much richer than what we call love that's mixed with attachment. It's like two different worlds.

As Thich Nhat Hanh likes to say, practicing Buddhism is a clever way to enjoy life. He says, "Happiness is available—please help yourself." That's really what we're trying to cultivate here with loving-kindness: a way where happiness and peace are always available, no matter what the external or internal conditions. It's not dependent on needing anything to fill us up.

We can be—we *are*—happiness and peace itself, if we will only trust that enough and commit ourselves to cultivating it, allowing it to flourish whenever it might happen to arise by itself.

So could we sit for a moment?

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