Aversion and Attachment: Making Friends Through Mettā

Carol Wilson · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Carol Wilson · 1:03:08

I first began practicing metta intensively, and I suppose before I practiced it, I had a bias towards Vipassana or insight practice, since that's what I'd done for so many years. I had this sense that metta would be wonderful—to really cultivate loving-kindness and this all-embracing care for beings—but that the bottom line for freedom is wisdom, understanding. I wasn't really expecting much insight to arise from doing metta practice.

I was quite surprised. I continue to be quite surprised, both in the formal practice itself and in the effect that I feel as it blends more and more into how I relate to experience in my daily life. What I've found through practice of loving-kindness is a deeper experiential understanding of the nature of both attachment and aversion—which, oddly enough, are the near and far enemies of loving-kindness. So we get to experience both of these aspects, these so-called enemies, very much in our loving-kindness practice.

The different angle that metta brought into the mandala of my practice has helped deepen my understanding and sense of freedom from enslavement to aversion, to fear, and enthrallment with attachment and clinging. With Vipassana, I could subtly have the sense—even though we say you open and accept things as they are—that I have to uproot all the attachment, uproot all the negativity, the defilements. There was a certain sense they had to be done away with. Somehow metta really strengthens my ability to make friends with these aspects of experience.

When attachment or aversion arises in my experience and I'm practicing metta, rather than "bad, get away," there's a sense of really flowing into seeing clearly and accepting this aspect of experience. This acceptance leads to clear seeing, which leads to deeper understanding and ultimate disengagement from either attachment or aversion—from these forces of suffering. That's really what I want to talk about tonight: some experiences of working with attachment and aversion as they come up in metta practice, ways that it's been helpful for me.

Really, it's in everyday small experiences, not always the big boom—which is another thing I had expected. Somehow in practicing loving-kindness, I thought the sense of all-embracing love would be so powerful that it would just supersede all other experience. And it can do that at times. But I expected it would stay that way somehow, and if I didn't hit this pinnacle of perfection of loving-kindness, I wasn't doing it right. I could get into an even deeper dejection about it.

This is a partial piece of the Metta Sutta said by the Buddha when he was describing loving-kindness practice:

Let none deceive another or despise any being in any state. Let none through anger or ill will wish harm upon another. Even as a mother protects with her life her child, her only child, so with a boundless heart should one cherish all living beings, radiating kindness over the entire world, spreading upward to the skies and downward to the depths, outward and unbounded, freed from hatred and ill will.

When I read that, when I feel it in my heart, there are times it's so beautiful, so inspiring, because it evokes that unbounded loving-kindness in all directions. I really can feel: yes, let me never harm another, let me never deceive another.

Then there are other times when I read that or hear that and my gut reaction is: it's impossible. That is so far from my moment-to-moment experience, how I live my life, even with the best intentions. I'm not there. I'm not perfect. So much ill will can still come up. Aversion still comes up. So much desire can still come up.

I want to talk a little on that level, because I used to think there was this huge gap. And I see that metta is really working, really transforming us on these little moment-to-moment levels. We don't have to think nothing's happening because we can't feel it boundlessly in all directions.

Another thing the Buddha said often is: *Hatred can never cease by hatred. Hatred can only cease by love. This is an eternal law.* It's powerful. It's beautiful. But when I look deeply into my conditioning, into my life and the way my habitual responses have been through much of my life, I'd have to honestly say: do I really believe that? That hatred only ceases by love? Is that what deeply motivates some of my reactions and responses?

Rather than blaming myself at all, it's just to begin to look honestly. And this is the attitude of loving-kindness. I can look back at how I was brought up and what I really learned in my family life. I didn't have an abusive or horrible family life at all. But I saw recently an advertisement for a book called *How to Argue and Win Every Time: Ways to Win Arguments at Home and at Work*, and I thought: yes, that's what I learned when I was growing up—that the real strength is knowing how to win your argument no matter what. Ultimately it usually came down to who could get the angriest with the most force. I don't mean actual physical force, but anger has a real power to it at times, a real sweetness almost. And it also has a real discrimination—when I'm really angry,

to the point where my mindfulness is being overpowered, the things I say can be hurtful. They're hurtful because I'm also seeing right into the other person's weakness. There's a real discrimination that goes on with anger, but used very unwisely.

Well, that's what I learned, really, about where true strength is, about how to get what you want. And although there was lip service to kindness and generosity, and there was real caring, when the chips were

down you kind of went for the jugular a little bit.

Today, I hadn't really thought of this particular aspect of my life this way before, but when I was about eleven or twelve, I started taking piano lessons. The woman who taught me I came to know very well over the years. She sort of became like a grandmother—I didn't really have any living grandparents. I took piano lessons for more years than I care to remember, considering how awfully I play the piano, although I like it. But this woman and I became very close, and in her way, she was a great inspiration to me, showing me that there's another way to relate to life.

She was a Christian Scientist, which I'm not going to try to explain because I know I wouldn't get it accurate. It's not a way of living that I came to myself. But what really deeply impressed me about her was this: as I understood it anyway, the way she talked with me and the way she lived her life—not that she was any perfect being—but there was this deep and conscious faith and commitment to live a life that was based on love. That love was really stronger, is really stronger, than pain, than our fears, than our anxieties.

As I understood the way she explained it to me, a lot of that sense of being so sure of love's power was part of not going to doctors—being so certain that love is stronger than our ideas about our materiality. I never really quite embraced that aspect. But who she was as a being, her deep faith and her commitment to try and live a life that came out of her conviction that love is stronger than pain, that love is stronger than fear—I realize now that really opened me up to the fact that there's another way of living. And not that we have to be perfect in that way of living, but that we can simply explore the possibility.

That's how I would really hope we could approach our loving-kindness practice. Not with this sense of perfection that we must get to. If the perfection is an inspiration, an opening of the heart, that's wonderful—it really can point to that boundlessness. But when we fall into aversion or self-judgment and start to compare ourselves and judge ourselves by that idea of perfection, then could we let go of it and look at our practice as simply an opening to exploration? To really explore the nature of love and connectedness. And as someone said today, in that exploration we begin to see what blocks love and connectedness.

Two of the big blockages, so to speak, that we will experience head-on in any metta retreat are the far enemy and the near enemy. I want to talk a little bit about each of those in the context of loving-kindness practice.

So this anger, aversion, fear, and all the different ramifications—irritation, grief, sorrow, murderous rage, self-judgment, self-loathing, terror, just slight irritation and pushing away. You can add your own particular flavor, whichever one happens to be coming up for you. Or maybe not, maybe none is coming up for you.

If we begin to look at what's actually going on, how do we experience whichever of these manifestations is

present at a particular moment? You see, it's not just some big amorphous blob of emotion that somehow descended from nowhere, a curse from the gods. Really, if we can bring our attention into just what we're experiencing here and now, we can see that it's arising—take aversion or fear—it's arising in this moment, here and now, as a response or reaction to some experience that's happening here and now. It's something we can really come to know quite intimately. We don't have to be afraid of it.

Something difficult or painful is happening—a physical sensation. Aversion is a reaction of pulling away, of not liking that particular physical sensation. Or it might be a particular emotional experience, or it might even just be a thought. The thought might be of something in the future, but it's the thought happening right now that actually engenders the aversion.

The thought might be, "Oh no, this pain is bearable now, but I'm never going to be able to make it till ten o'clock tonight. Forget it." We so easily think that's in the future, but what's happening is that thought, right then, projecting some experience into the future. We're experiencing fear as a result of that thought here and now.

So fear and aversion are always experiences that are reactions and responses to physical, emotional, and mental experiences happening right now. Which to me simplifies it enormously, because then I can get a handle on coming in and seeing how it's happening.

When I realize there's knee pain, and there's aversion to the knee pain, and then there's that projecting it into the future, that thought, and then there's fear—how do we actually experience the fear or the aversion in a moment of experience? It's experienceable as the mind, the heart, the attention flinching away, pulling away from whatever it is that's happening.

I remember the other night when I was talking, I mentioned how I had this feeling of real heaviness and tiredness in my body. There was a knowing of it, but when I really brought my mindful attention in to feel it fully, I saw that what had been happening in the aversion—

the not wanting to feel that way, the attention, the awareness is pulled back. It's not connecting. And it's an absolute, literal experience of disconnection, of separation. It's exactly in that moment we can see why we feel disconnected or separated. It's almost literal with the attention—it's pulled back and we're not connecting with what's happening. That's really how aversion, how fear works, so to speak. That's how they manifest when we're just exploring them, paying attention to them on a moment-to-moment level.

Now with mettā, it's the opposite. When we meet that experience of pain in the knee, or when I meet that experience of heaviness and tiredness and aversion with mettā, what happens is the attention just flows right into that experience—whether it's right into the pain, right into the heaviness, right into the emotional experience of aversion. There's no hesitation. There's no preference, no inner questioning of "Do I want to feel this or not? Maybe I'd rather go there." It's just: this is happening. Flow right into it.

And there's also no clinging to it. There's no agenda of "Let's make this stay." There's no agenda

whatsoever. Just this moving right in, into it and surrounding it. It's not blind. The mettā doesn't only see that pain and nothing else. It sees the pain, knows the pain, and whatever else is going on around it.

What's interesting is that as we are working with cultivating mettā, that's not the idea we're having. We're not sitting here saying, "May I cultivate mettā so that in a moment the attention can flow into the experience." We're very simply cultivating the intention of mettā, coming back to that over and over. May I be free from danger. May you be free from danger. But what happens is that quite spontaneously, as this intention has been strengthened, as other difficult experiences come up—whether it's physical pain or emotional pain in our own experience—almost as if all by itself, you'll find that the mettā begins to activate in that way, to really let us move into the difficult experience rather than flinching away from it.

So in a way, energetically you could say, or awareness-wise, you can see how mettā is the opposite of aversion or fear, that it works in the opposite way. And it's in this way that the power of loving-kindness really begins to manifest itself. The strength and protection that it offers us—to be with the difficult, to heal us from our sense of separation—comes not by overpowering or getting rid of what is difficult, what we don't like, what we fear. It comes by making friends with it, by including it in the whole context of our experience.

The mettā flows into and softens and includes what is difficult, but then—at least in my experience—it expands outward and beyond it. Rather than drowning, getting lost in the knee pain, or getting lost in the aversion I feel or the fear that I feel, rather than "I'm so heavy and tired, I can't stand it"—the mettā flows into that, really experiences it in a very full way, and then, because it's non-discriminating, it also allows the rest of our experience to be noticed and seen equally clearly.

So: "My knee is really killing me, I can't bear it." Flow in, and it's tingling, it's pressure, it's hard, it's tight. And then: "Oh, but you know, it's really very peaceful in this room. It's really quite nice today. I like the sound of the raindrops." It just opens up the whole field.

In some ways, that's what I meant when I said the other night that loving-kindness helps us open to the whole show of life—all the beautiful, all the horrendous, and everything in between. It helps us open to the whole show of ourselves. It does this by softening into what's difficult, but also because it gives us a whole context in which to hold what is difficult.

If all we saw were the painful, horrific, difficult aspects—which sometimes in our practice are highlighted, and we call those dukkha times or difficult times, when everywhere you look is suffering or pain or anguish, whether internally or externally in the world—we can drown, it seems, at times in that. With mettā, those aspects are included, but because the context is so much larger, because it's held in this sense of totality, of acceptance, of softness, of non-judging, the mettā can bring a real safe space to let these difficult aspects surface. We begin to feel at ease in accepting them and being with them. It gives a real safe, protected context. It's very powerful that way.

And it happens by itself. In the groups over the last couple of days, quite a few people have expressed, in varying ways, experiences of being able to be more present for difficult aspects of themselves or their personality.

Either to be able to be softer with their self-judging, to be a little more kind when a sense of worthlessness comes up. The things that normally are so painful, we try not to even feel them. Or if we do feel them, we're so aversive to them, so fearful of them, that we just shut down altogether, or we fall totally into self-flagellation.

It's painful, but the metta, because it includes it in the larger context, makes it all much more workable. Much more workable. It broadens it. It gives us the courage to see and open to the difficulties, because so clearly we know that's not all there is. And again, this is the wisdom aspect.

When you're feeling a sense of metta and suddenly some people say, "It comes up, but I don't deserve to feel this. There's something really wrong if I'm feeling happiness. I don't have that right in this lifetime." And in the context of metta, even if you're just feeling for a moment that sense of pure loving and well-wishing, it's so clear that that sense that you don't deserve it isn't really true. It's so clear on some level that that's not who you truly are. Even though, believe me, our mind wants to keep believing, "That's who I really am, and that's my conditioning." But on some level, having just touched metta, we know that's not true.

And this gives us the courage to be able to more clearly, with the metta, move into this difficult aspect and not be so overwhelmed—to really have the courage to open to it and see more and more that it's not nearly as powerful, that it doesn't nearly have the grip that we thought it did when we were afraid to be with it, without even realizing we were so afraid.

Just sharing some of my own experience of this: it's not always in the big moments. For me, it's often been in the really small experiences of opening to the difficult aspects, to fear and aversion, that don't seem like much at the time but that I really see changing my relationship to myself and to fear and aversion over the course of years in my life.

Metta, as you know, can really highlight aversion. It can really highlight fear, these difficult aspects. It's almost as if with the nondiscriminating, open, loving attention of metta and awareness, because we're not pushing things away, it sort of makes a space for the subterranean stuff sometimes to come up much more clearly to the surface.

I know some people today were expressing the sense of hitting a wall. It's going along fine and suddenly there's this wall. We each have our own particular manifestation of wall that we hit—whether it's terror or fear or self-hatred or just nothingness or disconnection, or again, fill in the dots.

But it doesn't always have to happen in the form of a huge wall. What I noticed often is just that, as I was practicing metta, the little aversions that come up would be highlighted. Because it was so—at least with

aversion and anger—you can tell that it's not metta. You can at least tell that it's different, and because of that, you really notice it. Really often my metta phrase would turn to, "May you be filled with suffering." And I'd think, "Oh, I think I've drifted off here," and kind of come back.

So the tendency in my mind towards aversion, which happens to be a rather large tendency in my particular mind—we all have different degrees of all of it—has become over the years much more highlighted. I see it in finer and finer detail. And what metta has done... I thought in the beginning that what it would do is bring me to this pinnacle of being this perfect, loving, compassionate being, kind of beatific and glowing and always saying the loving, kind thing. I've given that one up long ago, and that's a relief.

What it's done actually—and I don't know how to be encouraging to you all—what it's done is I've really made friends with the aversive tendency of my mind. It's not even my mind. I just see it as this habit of mind.

I remember one time when it became so clear to me. I was on a ferry in Thailand, about an hour and a half ferry ride. Beautiful day. Perfect day. And I was standing up on the deck. There were so many beautiful aspects to the day. I was at peace. There was no problem. And I could see down to the lower deck, and there were all kinds of people—mostly foreigners. And there was one woman whose behavior just drove me nuts. That was the only thing I fastened on. Immediately I saw her being totally inappropriate, and my mind said, "I'm sure she's an American." And I always, you know, "God, another American. I hope no one can tell I'm American."

And I really saw that out of this multitude of perceptions and sense data, my mind went unerringly for the one that was unpleasant and really stuck there and built up a whole story and got into all this aversion. It was really interesting.

It was funny because it was so clear, and I thought, "Oh, that's the tendency of my mind. Okay."

Now with metta, what happens so much is that my mind will do that about myself, about anything new that comes into my experience. I noticed when I was on retreat here a couple of years ago that anytime something changed—somebody new came into the dorm area, somebody different sat next to me at lunch, the schedule changed, anything that changed even slightly—immediately aversion would come up in my mind.

Whereas in the past I would have been quite judgmental of myself about that. "What are you so aversive? The poor person's coming here to practice and here you are sending them all this negative energy." Now I would just notice it in that same way as I noticed my mind on the ferry. And immediately in that noticing with the friendliness of metta—"Oh, look at that aversion"—without any conscious intentionality on my part, the scenario would immediately broaden. Within the context of "Oh, that person, they're making so much noise in the bathroom," the next thought would be, "Well, but they're really here practicing. Isn't

that wonderful?" And that would be true. It wasn't like a rationale trying to deny the aversion. When the aversion was really accepted, included in the field of metta, the field of experience would immediately broaden and I'd have the whole picture.

It has continued in that way, to be really lovely. I haven't changed that much. It's not that the mind doesn't still go to what's aversive. But whereas before it wouldn't have been able to notice the other aspect very well, now immediately that's included. And that's the inclusivity of metta. It makes the aversion so much more minimal, so much less powerful. I don't get reactive to it. I don't act out the whole scenario. It's just, "Oh, there's aversion, and isn't that funny?" It's almost like, "Oh yes, my old friend aversion is coming up again." And then there's a sense of appreciation for the other person, for myself, for the situation.

You see how that inclusivity of metta gives the strength and the courage to open even more deeply into seeing how aversion arises, because I'm not so afraid of it. I don't try so much anymore to put on some outer attitude of how I think I should be. I used to internally deny a lot of the little slight aversive reactions in my mind, trying to give an outward appearance of the perfect person. It just led to a whole lot of confusion. When I'm not so fearful or afraid or hating of the aversion, and I really include it, it loses its power quite a bit. I mean, I guess you have to ask my friends if I'm exaggerating. Maybe I feel a lot freer and more flowing because I'm not all clogged up. But on the other hand, I'm not censoring so much anymore either. And that's been safe, more or less.

I was reading the Dalai Lama's autobiography last year. Of course, he's always in my mind—Mr. Compassion, just one of the more wonderful beings on the planet. I was really shocked, but then I got a kick out of it when I read that he was talking about how he had all kinds of food out for the little birds, but bigger birds would come to prey on them, so he'd shoot at the bigger birds with an air rifle to send them away. And I thought, "Okay, even the Dalai Lama. I can get off my case a little bit."

So the fearlessness and the sense of true interconnectedness that can come through metta can come in these small ways—not always just living in the bounty of happiness, but in bringing a kind of general boundlessness, opening up the boundaries of our experience. When we're meeting the difficult in that way, with the fearlessness of acceptance, it allows us to see more deeply into the dynamics of what's actually going on.

Again, personally, with the sense of aversion, as I've become more and more friendly with it, more okay with it, I began to see during the last metta retreat that every time something new came in, there was aversion. When I stopped flinching away from it and was just with it, that allowed me to begin to see that really what was underneath each little hit of aversion is fear. And it was such a subtle, quick fear that in thinking about it or looking for it, I never would have seen it. But by being really okay with the aversion, I began to get much more in touch with the fear that was feeding it—the fear of being intruded on, the fear of my space being taken away from me, just the fear of instability, the fear of change. I was really beginning to see how across the board, how often that fear came up.

Again, because of the metta, because of being okay with aversion and then being okay with the fear, not thinking I had to change it, I got so I could even laugh. Remember on the three-month course how halfway through the retreat they just change which lunch you go to? I went into panic that day. And even then, part of my mind was saying, "Carol, get over yourself."

Panic, because the lunches are changing. But I could laugh at it, let the panic be there, and then just watch what little situations would bring up a new spurt of fear. Fear that somebody different would be sitting across the table. I'd been sitting across from one person, and now I had to sit across from someone else. My mind would ask, why am I afraid of that? It doesn't make sense. But it doesn't matter. It just allowed me to really begin to open into what had been such a difficult experience before—that as soon as the fear came up, my mind would react with aversion. I'd push the whole experience away and never even notice the fear. So really, through metta, it allowed a much deeper understanding of the dynamics of the process that had been going on in my experience.

And with this, again in the context of real okayness, as soon as a thought would come up—these people are really so annoying in here, so pushy, they're not at all like the ones at the other lunch, it's different people—immediately the balancing feeling would arise, the balancing understanding. Either I could feel the pain of a person who was in some kind of hyper state about the food, or who had to be first in line. It's painful sometimes around the lunch line. Really, I think an enormous amount of joy, but also suffering sometimes when I'm going through that lunch line on a retreat.

And that's another way metta is a protection, actually. When I'm in a deep vipassana retreat, very open but very tuned into the suffering, I'm really not exaggerating—I can barely stand to get through the lunch line. Sometimes it's so painful to me I almost feel like I'm going to throw up. I'm serious. With metta, there's that pain, but again, there's the love, there's the connection with the pain rather than holding off from it. And it was really a protection. I was amazed that I could go through the line, still feel the pain, but it was much more balanced, much more broad—not just that one experience.

So just in these ways I've discovered very deeply, and it continues in my daily life, which isn't really that different—how the metta, the willingness, and it's not even a conscious willingness sometimes, just to flow into the situation, naturally expands beyond it. Fear and aversion can really open into appreciation, into acceptance, into connectedness. And in that way, through the metta, experience can become more and more boundaryless.

Because the sense of fear, the sense of aversion, very much sets up a sense of me and other. Whatever I'm afraid of, whatever I'm aversive to—whether it's something in my own experience, a sense of disconnection, whether it's someone else doing or being or saying something that brings up fear or aversion—very much me and other, and somehow needing to fix it.

With the metta, almost immediately for me, the me and other somehow turns into us. And the metta is not blind. It doesn't mean we don't see and feel the difficult aspects. It just gives a broader context for it. And a

real fearlessness that comes from being able to see things as they are.

And knowing that as difficult, as sometimes overwhelming—I've been giving little experiences, but I know many, many times it's much more overwhelming than this. It just all seems to shoot up: the fear, the aversion, the terror, the rage. And it's so hard to meet that. Sometimes the metta isn't strong enough at that moment to seemingly meet it. But ultimately it is. Ultimately, love and truth are so much stronger than fear, than anger, than terror, than pain.

These difficult things can definitely seem to hide the love, the connectedness. They can definitely seem to hide what is true and what we truly are. But ultimately, the power of metta, love, and awareness cannot really even be touched by pain or fear or anger. It can be obscured a bit, but it really can't be damaged or touched by it.

A teacher of mine used to say that a spark of truth burns up a mountain of lies. And really, it can be that way. We can be struggling or angry or so caught in feeling worthless and self-blaming. And there can be just one moment, one spark of loving-kindness that comes. Even though it might fade again, in that moment it completely shines away, shines through all the self-hatred, all the fear. In that moment, however short it is, there's no room for doubt about what we're actually experiencing. We don't say, "Huh, I wonder, is this a real experience?" Well, sometimes people say, "Am I making it up?" But already they're out of it at that point and back to the self-doubt.

In a moment when the love, the connectedness is really shining, it's so clear. There's no question. It's so clear that we don't need to make ourselves different to be happy, that we don't need to somehow be perfect, make ourselves perfect in order to achieve loving-kindness, in order to achieve completion. It's so perfect that this becomes obvious in that one moment—that it's all here now and there's nothing we have to be different. There's nothing we have to actually change in ourselves to make that true. It's already true.

And then there are the times when that seems so far from our actual experience, and the memory of it—that's when we're saying, "I made that up. That never happened." When you're hitting that wall, as people have described today. I just want to acknowledge that this is a very important part of the practice. These intense aspects come up because of the strength of the loving-kindness practice. Because of the inclusivity of the heart and mind of loving-kindness, we're no longer censoring or pushing away the painful or so-called ugly aspects of ourselves. They are coming up.

It can seem like your practice has been growing stronger and stronger and you feel, "I'm really getting the flow, I'm really getting the knack of it now." And then—wham. At those points it's so easy to think, "Oh no, I blew it. I had a little period of grace but my true nature is really surfacing and this is how it's going to be for the rest of the retreat. This is what I always suspected was true all along."

So I just want to say this: it's going to happen, most likely, at some point. It's not a mistake. It's part of it.

There will be times when we can just softly be with it. Okay, wall. Just be with it and gently keep up the

loving-kindness practice. Fine. But there will be times when that just isn't feasible—when the wall is too strong, the fear is too strong, or the anger, the self-judgment. We just feel like we're contracting and beating ourselves and shrinking. That's the time to let go of the formal metta.

Our first fallback is to move to vipassana—to really open into the soft presence and experiencing of: how do I experience the wall? Where are the physical sensations? What's the emotional tone of it? Can I just consciously acknowledge it? Let it be here. Not try to change it, but be present for it.

You can hear how that's not that much different from the attitude of metta. But it's taking an attitude of metta and bringing it into conscious presence with things just as they are. Sometimes in that we can get enough grounded in what's happening that we kind of find where we are again. Whereas when something really strong is going on and we keep trying to do the metta phrases, it's like something huge is happening—the elephant in the corner—and we're over here going, "May I be happy, may I be peaceful." A huge thing is going on and we're ignoring it. When we do that, this keeps getting bigger and bigger and bigger, and the metta gets smaller and smaller. That's the time to really stop and turn around and say, "Oh yeah, here you are. Let's really be here together and see what's going on."

And then sometimes—and this can be true at times for almost everybody—what's going on just gets too strong. Or our contraction, or just the sense of trying too hard, we just get worn down. It's exhausting and wearying. That's the time to really step back, to take a break, to open up your field of awareness, open up your heart, and deliberately bring in some joy. Because that's the time when the difficulty is getting so large and looming so big that we can feel we're drowning in it. This could be whether it's a so-called internal experience, say of self-judging, or whether somehow we're just tuning into the pain of the world—and God knows there's enough—and we can seem like we're just drowning in that.

This is something Thich Nhat Hanh talks about a lot: that we have to open to suffering for understanding and compassion, but suffering isn't enough. At times, what metta does automatically is broaden the field. Sometimes we can do that quite consciously. When we say, "Okay, it seems like it's really hard right now, why don't you just put down the practice for a minute and take a walk and open up your senses—smell the apple blossoms, listen to the birds, feel the wind on your face—and just be in nature for a little bit." It's a deliberate way to try and bring in some spaciousness, some joy, to counteract the intensity of the involvement with the pain and the fear.

It's a very skillful means. So we really encourage you to find ways to consciously balance when things are getting difficult. It's not running away.

It's different from saying, well, I'm a little bored now, I think I'll get into that fantasy I had yesterday that really made the hour go fast. That's not exactly what I mean. But rather, some way that can bring in, in an aware way, something that really touches your heart, touches your mind, or just brings in some ease. It might be taking a bath. It might be taking a walk. It might be having a cup of tea. Find a way for yourself and know that this is a skillful part of practice. It's consciously bringing in what metta does by itself.

Well, there's not much time left for attachment. We're both aversion types, and when we teach with Josie, he'll go on about attachment and make it sound so wonderful, and he'll never get to aversion. But I do have some things to say about it.

So attachment is the near enemy of loving-kindness. What I experienced in doing the practice of loving-kindness is that I learned quite a lot, and I continue to learn quite a lot, about the subtler aspects of attachment. Whereas loving-kindness is this real outflowing of the heart—a joy or well-wishing or friendliness that really meets the experience wholeheartedly—its near enemy, love with attachment, can also seem to be really flowing into the experience, into the specific object wholeheartedly. But there's a certain grasping at the end of it. And whereas loving-kindness sees all aspects quite clearly and has wisdom with it, attachment is blinding, even in its subtler forms.

For example, with loving-kindness flowing towards a person, maybe even someone you don't know that well, there's just this real well-wishing, a loving joy, you're lit up, but it doesn't blind you to what that person is truly like. It's loving, it's appreciating them as they are. Attachment, clinging—there's a Tibetan saying that clinging puts feathers on the object. It prettifies it. We don't really see it in a clear way.

Think of the sense of first being in love, as we call it. There are certainly aspects of true metta, of real caring for someone, absolutely. But as we practice metta and get more grounded in what pure metta really feels like, we can see when it moves into attachment. There's some subtle sense of needing something back. Even if it's just that they love me back, or that they be a certain way, or at least that they don't hurt me. There's a subtle shift of needing something in return, and we are no longer seeing that other person or that object so clearly. It's somehow prettied up.

You know the phase after you fall in love—the other person is so perfect and so wonderful—and then suddenly the feathers fall off and you start to see that all the things you loved them for are the things that are driving you crazy now. How can that be? They've come down off their pedestal. Attachment can really feel let down, can really feel cheated. Whereas metta, there's nothing that is wanted, so there's no way that it can feel let down, no way it can feel cheated.

In practicing loving-kindness, what I saw in my own experience was that just as it seems to lift up the far enemy, I also found that it would easily shift slightly into attachment and seemed to bring up all kinds of attachments. I'll speak about this in a subtle way, not the huge blinding attachments—like "I've got to have a pizza, I've got to have it now, I don't care who's in my way, I'm getting in my car, I don't care what happens." That's really obvious clinging, blind. It's not too subtle, and we can usually tell it's happening. If we don't get what we want, we can pretty much agree that it's suffering. It's not too hard to see.

But the subtler levels—this is what I found really helpful—the way they would sneak into metta: say I'd be sending real metta to a dear friend, really wishing her well, and all of a sudden I'd find, "Oh, may she really be happy. We don't see each other very much anymore. I wonder if there's a way we could get together. I wonder if there's something going on."

I wonder why she hasn't called me. And suddenly I'd think, sort of, that that was still loving-kindness. But when I'd tune in, I could feel that the feeling had, little by little, quite shifted. From being an outflowing of the heart, it had moved a little down, and there was a little wanting coming out, and it was no longer free from suffering.

I'd find many ways that the loving-kindness, quite purely, could easily shift. One way is starting to think of things that I want back from the person I'm sending it to. Another way I find it is in how I'm relating to the practice itself—moving from truly wishing well to whoever, to wishing well in order to feel the loving-kindness, which is different. That's no longer metta, and you're not going to feel it at that point because that's not what's being cultivated. Wanting is being cultivated, and that's what we'll feel.

Another way is again in how we relate to the practice, where rather than just resting back in the wishes and the feeling and who we're sending it to, we start getting into some kind of expectation, some subtle striving for some result—whether it's concentration, or trying to get a clearer image of the benefactor, or trying to be more steady with the phrases. And just this shift, from this real settled-back flowing out, to a little leaning forward. It can get more and more subtle.

What was very interesting to me is that, the same way it worked with fear and aversion, the metta didn't make me hate attachment or fear attachment, didn't make me afraid to practice metta because I might get attached. It's like, sure, attachment is part of my life as a human being here. It's going to come up. It's not the most horrible thing that ever happened. I can see it clearly. It's going to arise. And the more I practice metta, the more I really see the difference. So it can really begin in our life—to know more and more clearly when we're coming from metta, and to notice as it shades into attachment, and to pay attention to the results.

After I'd been practicing some time and felt more grounded in the metta, really recognizing it, knowing when I was shading off, at that point I started to bring in my relationship partner. That's really one of the reasons we suggest not bringing in someone you're so close to at first—because of how subtle the difference between metta and love with some kind of attachment can be. Until we get more and more familiar with the purity of the loving-kindness, we can in some way delude ourselves. Because it can feel like really caring, but there's just that little bit of wanting something.

So after I felt a little more grounded—certainly probably not grounded enough—I would sometimes deliberately work with sending loving-kindness to my partner and just feel the difference. I'd imagine a certain situation and feel these loving feelings coming out, this well-wishing for him, really seeing how all I wanted was for him to be happy, whatever that meant. There was no "but we should stay in the relationship" or "he should change this or that." Just really wishing he should be happy. And then suddenly there'd be this little shift, and I'd see the same situation and I'd think it was love. But there was this "but"—"you really shouldn't act like that towards me anymore." And I could see, when I came out in the situation, that even if you're not mentioning it to the other person, when I would say or do something

that overtly looked the same but came from true metta, with none of that conditioning I was putting on it, he would really feel it. The response would be so much more open.

And I could say or do the same thing, and I could see now how often I had deluded myself that it was coming from pure metta, when there was really this unspoken need or want. And boy, he picks up on that right away. The response is totally different.

Now, of course, I'm not saying there'll never be need or want, or that there shouldn't be. I'm not at all saying that. But to be able to more clearly differentiate—and at times when I'm feeling really tangled up, or the communication is really breaking down, things just aren't satisfactory—when I can go and have access to some sense of pure metta, get back to that metta space where in the deepest heart of the relationship it's about really wanting the other one to be happy, to be free, not about getting what I want... when I can really access that even for a moment, at least for me, it changes all the suffering, all the need. And that was wonderful to see.

In many other ways too, attachment will come up. Not to be afraid of it. Not to think we have to hide from it. It's part of life. And with metta, you'll see that it disentangles of itself. It begins to let go of itself. The revelation to me of metta is that we don't have to do anything to make ourselves perfect. The all-embracing nature of love embraces ourselves, our humanity, deeply, just as we are.

It's a true, deep acceptance of humanity because it sees all the warts. It's not blind to any of it. This doesn't mean we can't act—we do whatever we can to bring more peace or change or whatever seems necessary. When we can see clearly, it's easier to act. But this embracing of my own humanity, not having to be different, has been such a revelation. It has led to so much more ease with myself, and so much more free-flowing happiness and ease to be present for other people than I used to experience.

Our world doesn't suddenly become perfect. As one friend said to me the other day when she's been practicing or feeling more metta: we roll with it better. We see it clearly, and we roll with it better. It doesn't suddenly change.

I want to end by reading a little paragraph that really inspired me, from a book a friend from Holland just sent me. You might have heard of it—it's called *An Interrupted Life*, the diaries of Etty Hillesum, who was a young Dutch woman in Holland during World War II. She was Jewish, and she died in one of the camps eventually. But the book is her diary, and it's really about her spiritual opening—a really beautiful person.

There are many stories of people where the sense of love can truly triumph over amazingly horrible conditions. And the triumph of love doesn't necessarily mean that those conditions go away, which is really hard for me to grasp and understand. At the same time, I find I get quite inspired by people who can manifest this. What's inspiring about this book is that she's not just this perfect being. The whole book is a struggle—feeling overwhelmed and coming back, feeling overwhelmed and coming back again.

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