The Habit of Mettā

Carol Wilson · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Carol Wilson · 53:46

I'd like to ask you, just as I begin the talk tonight, to take a moment to reflect quite deeply on what your purpose is in being here, what brought you to come to this retreat. And I mean really your deepest purpose, not the most superficial one that comes to mind—not "Well, I had nothing else to do for 10 days, and this was cheaper than Aruba." But really, in your heart, the deepest reason you come to attend a loving-kindness retreat.

And when we say in the instructions to wish yourself what is most true for your deepest happiness, what really comes up for you? What would that look like? Your deepest, most profound happiness. Your truest well-wishing for yourself. Don't be hesitant or shy—whatever it is, whatever form it takes in your mind or heart, don't be shy that somehow you don't deserve to experience that, or that it's for others but you're too blighted to be able to wish such happiness for yourself.

I feel sure in my heart that whatever words each one of us might use, on some level what we are all united in wishing or searching for is a sense of truth, of deep connectedness, unity, wisdom, love—whatever word you might want to use—inner completion. In a way, all beings are one, are interrelated in this as our most profound yearning. Although the explanations and words we give to it could be quite different depending on our own conditioning.

And why is it such a yearning? Because for many of us—I would never say all, but for many of us—what we actually experience at times, and maybe much of the time, is just the opposite: a sense of disconnection or fragmentation, separation and fear of other beings, yearning to be accepted, yearning to know love, to be loved, yearning to know how to truly love another being or to truly love ourselves, to accept and feel no longer fragmented within ourselves.

I think one of the roots of this dichotomy—that while we're yearning for completion we're experiencing fragmentation—is something that the loving-kindness practice can help us to see through and heal. At the core of our being, we don't really know or trust that we are already complete. Our sense of fragmentation is an illusion, brought about as a trick of our ideas, our interpretations, our misperceptions of ourselves, of others, of reality. Mettā can help us begin to see through these thought forms, see through these ideas we have about what happiness is, what peace is.

Mostly what we tend to do is to either look to someone or something outside of us to give us somehow love or happiness or peace. Somehow if we could arrange things in a certain way, then everything will be okay.

I read a couple of years ago in a news magazine a report on a particular Oprah Winfrey show where she

had a group of five widowers—men who had been married and whose wives had died. She was doing a sort of takeoff on the movie Sleepless in Seattle, where a woman got together with a guy who was on a talk show saying how he was looking for his perfect mate. So Oprah Winfrey did a talk show with these five eligible widowers, and they had kids—you know, it makes them more reliable. They didn't get divorced; their wife died. It was sad, but you could trust that they really wanted to be married. She just kind of had this show introducing these guys. And in a week, she received 60,000 letters from people who were interested in getting together with any particular one of these five men.

It really hit me somehow. It resonated—our loneliness and our yearning that somehow that guy on the TV show is going to make it okay, is going to bring love, a sense of richness, of fulfillment. And it would bring richness, perhaps, but it's not going to bring total inner contentment. Yet we posit it out there somewhere.

Or we do the same thing internally. And most likely, it may have even come up today in your retreat—if not, it might sometime in the next ten days—where we think, "If only this particular state of my body would stay this way for the rest of the retreat, the sitting is comfortable, then I can really get cracking, then I can cultivate some loving-kindness. If only this noise would stop, this fly would go away. If only this sense of lightness and happiness would stay. If only I could arrange my pillows in a certain way." Then happiness would be accessible. Then I could get in touch with loving-kindness.

It's really just the same thing: waiting, looking internally, trying to arrange conditions; externally looking for confirmation, trying to arrange conditions. We don't even know what true happiness is. And I think this is one of the sources of our continual yearning and our failure to recognize the fact that true love, connectedness, feeling at home is from within and is always accessible to us.

So there are a couple of misunderstandings I wanted to speak to tonight. One is actually the nature of love—real love, unconditional love. And the second is how practicing mettā can help us see through our habit of seeming fragmentation. We'll be talking more and more about that through the whole retreat, of course, but let me say a little bit about the nature of mettā.

I know for myself, before I had really practiced loving kindness in depth—just little bits here and there—when I would think of what unconditional love must be, I found my ideas about it were really colored by what I grew up with in this culture. So boundless love, undiscriminating love, moving in all directions, touching all beings—I would imagine something really ecstatic and blissful, which sometimes it can be, really passionate, almost kind of blind.

I could see that this comes from what's been drilled into my mind and heart ever since I was little about the nature of love. True love, the great loves: "I would die if you leave me. I would do anything, anything, in order to have you with me." That kind of love. Romeo and Juliet—if we can't be together, then let's just both die; nothing else is worth living. This sense of real passion and love.

Obviously—maybe—I think it's obvious that this is love with attachment. Sometimes it isn't always so

obvious to us. That's part of our problem.

A friend of mine pointed out to me a couple of years ago, and I looked it up tonight to be sure it's true, and it is, that *passion* actually comes from a Latin word that means to suffer. And of all the different English definitions of passion, only the one that means "ardent affection" was number five. The others all had to do with suffering. Ardent affection, affection with attachment, is also suffering. Only sometimes we forget to notice that. So that's not what loving kindness is.

Another misconception we might have is more on the softer, sentimental side—everything lovely and rosy. I couldn't remember the name of this movie; I just flashed on it tonight. These are really the stories of our culture—movies and TV and books. It was about two lovers, and I just remember this one scene: beautiful Mozart piano sonatas playing in the background, and they're romping through flower fields, and everything's hazy, and everything's beautiful. That's another way we sometimes think of love. Everything's nice, everything's roses, nothing unpleasant ever happens.

This is also not loving kindness. This is a really limited idea—kind of passive, no shadow allowed. I've spoken with many people who, in just hearing about loving kindness or reading a little about it or having it introduced very briefly in a retreat, feel that it's very passive, very one-sided and wimpy. It's just coloring everything, only looking at the bright side, not coming to grips with how things are.

This is also a misconception. This is not true at all. Because that would be springing from delusion. And metta, loving kindness, springs from wisdom—from knowing, seeing, experiencing ourselves, life, reality, as it is. That includes the beautiful, it includes the difficult, it includes the whole show.

The heart that is imbued with loving kindness, that comes to recognize it, can be willing and open to connect with ourselves, to connect with others, to connect with all experience, even when that may be difficult. In fact, it's one of the most courageous and powerful acts of heart that we can do. There's nothing wimpy about loving kindness. Unconditional loving kindness, unconditional well-wishing.

At times it can feel very blissful, very broad, spacious, connected—but it's not always strong emotion. That's another misconception. Sometimes it's just very simple connection of friendliness, of caring, just the natural response of the heart to ourselves and other beings: just to connect, to be present.

There's a lovely saying from Shantideva, who was a great Buddhist teacher of India—I'm not sure exactly when, around 900 A.D., something like that. And this to me embodies the simplicity of loving kindness: "Even when I have done things for the sake of others, no sense of amazement or conceit arises. It's just like having fed myself. I hope for nothing in return."

Just the spontaneous movement of heart, of mind. Loving kindness is just like having fed myself—no big deal. It doesn't even arise to think of something in return. It's just the natural response of acceptance and connection to whatever is arising in ourselves, in our hearts, and in another being in their hearts, without judgment.

Loving kindness does not make difficulties or unpleasant situations vanish. I'm sorry to tell you if you thought that's what was going to happen in these ten days. I bet you found out already.

You think maybe tomorrow that'll start. It does not make difficulties vanish, but it softens our heart, it softens the mind so that we meet the difficulties with a willingness to connect rather than from our habitual reactive mind. So in this acceptance, this softness—this is the ground for discriminating wisdom to arise. Rather than a knee-jerk reaction of "I don't like this, get out of here," there's a real soft presence, and from that we can make an appropriate decision.

One of the examples the Buddha gives in his mettā-sutta discourse is that just as a mother loves her only child—that sense of a good mother who loves her only child. I know sometimes our culture doesn't quite grok that, but it's possible: that sense of unconditional love that would do whatever is for the good of the child, which sometimes means tough decisions. It's not necessarily wimpiness. Out of mettā, out of clear seeing of the non-reactive mind, true discriminating wisdom can arise. It's quite different from everything in that soft focus that needs to hold all difficulties at bay.

So when I say the heart of mettā, the non-reactive, soft, open heart does not respond from habit—what habit of heart-mind am I referring to? That's the next thing I'd like to speak about, because it's this particular habit that fosters and keeps us locked in our pattern of fragmentation, of separation, of liking and disliking, of fear and loneliness. So how can mettā help us see this habit and also begin to see through it?

As I'm sure you've already seen today, and as you'll see more and more over the next ten days, as we continue this basically simple practice of cultivating loving-kindness—just saying some phrases, coming back to those phrases and a sense of ourselves and another being, our benefactor—it should be very straightforward. We're here with good intention. But somehow, the whole show of our experience—the beautiful, the atrocious, the boring, the whatever—it all manages to come springing up as we just quietly sit here trying to say four phrases.

And we get to discover, not only in the fact that all this stuff comes up, but in the way we spontaneously relate to it—we get to discover how we are either perpetuating our sense of separation and fragmentation or learning to see through it to the unity, the connection that's our real and natural home.

So first: how is this illusory perception, this interpretation, this idea of separation, of needing completion elsewhere, of needing love from some situation—how is this being created? Because it's created moment to moment. It's not a cloud sitting over our heads. It's just a moment-to-moment creation.

This is from John Donne, the English poet: "I throw myself down in my chamber and invite God and his angels hither. And when they are here, I neglect God and his angels for the noise of a fly, for the rattling of a coach, for the whining of a door."

Get a sense of what he means? With all our good intentions we sit down to invite loving-kindness in, but

we'd much rather get all worked up over the buzzing of a fly. It might be a black fly. It might come and land on me. I'm allergic. I get these horrible welts. I can't just sit here and be fresh meat for these flies hour after hour. It's beyond human endurance. And we can go like that. How long can we go? Oh, yeah, right. All right. May I be happy. May I be peaceful. May I be free from difficulties.

Reflect on your various experiences today. Not big adventures, just the little things that have come up in your mind, in your experience as you're sitting, as you're walking, as you're eating, as you're doing the movement. All the times that there was a sense of ease or comfort, physical or mental, that the phrases were flowing—perhaps there was a sense of warmth and connection, or maybe we were just in a pleasant fantasy, but at least the hour passed quickly. Or the other times: the body's restless, irritable, jumping out of your skin. If you hear one more cough, you're just going to lose it. If you have to say this phrase one more time with your heart feeling like a stone, you're just going to scream. The stupidest practice you ever heard of.

How did we meet each of these experiences when they arose? Because this is really the crux of our experience—whether it's one of fragmentation, of difficulty, of separation, or whether it's one of connectedness, of loving-kindness, of presence.

The attitude of heart, of awareness, of attention that is mettā, that's loving-kindness—is also acceptance, patience. Both of these are aspects of loving-kindness. So in a moment of mettā, of patience, acceptance, a moment of pure awareness is very much the same as in the vipassanā practice, the mindfulness of what is. We would meet whatever was arising—happy feeling, pain in the knee, buzzing of the fly, feeling of mettā—whatever arises, we would meet with an open-hearted sense of presence without hesitating, without discriminating: this is good, this is bad, I like this, this can go. Just meeting what arises with presence, with openness, with a relaxed attentiveness.

In that sense of full presence with open acceptance, there is no fragmentation in that moment. There's just what is. And whether what is is pleasant or unpleasant doesn't really matter.

In that moment, we're experiencing our wholeness, our unity. That sense of presence, of acceptance, of open-hearted connection, of friendliness—that is metta in that moment. And I'm sure you've all had moments, perhaps many of them, even today, where that was your experience.

But without paying attention, our habitual response tends toward fragmentation, confusion, separation. More habitually, if it's pleasant—the body's comfortable, things are going the way we think they should, we're feeling a nice warmth in the heart, the hour passes quickly—we think, "Ah, this is good. This is right. This is how it's supposed to be. I'm doing the practice correctly."

Then the next sitting, your knee is hurting, your back is itching, you're really irritable, you can't seem to keep your mind on the idea of metta or even remember the phrases, never mind bring your mind back to them. Do we meet that with the same open-hearted acceptance? Or is there some sense of, "No, definitely

something's wrong. I'm not in sync. I'm not doing it correctly. It's a mistake. I've got to get rid of this pain, get rid of this fly, get rid of this mind, get rid of this thought—get rid of whatever—in order to get back to any possibility of cultivating loving-kindness, any possibility of happiness."

This is from Mark Epstein, a psychiatrist who's also been a Buddhist practitioner for many years. He wrote the book *Thoughts Without a Thinker*:

"My experience as a psychiatrist trained in Western medicine and in the philosophy and practice of Buddhism has given me a unique perspective. I've come to see that our problem is that we don't know what happiness is. We confuse it with a life uncluttered by feelings of anxiety, rage, doubt, and sadness."

If I wasn't really thinking about it, that would sound good to me—a life uncluttered by anxiety, rage, doubt, and sadness. I'd say, "Yeah, that sounds like happiness." But he continues: "Happiness is something entirely different. It is the ability to receive the pleasant without grasping and the unpleasant without condemning."

The ability to receive the pleasant without grasping and the unpleasant without condemning. This habit of our mind, of our heart, is so deeply embedded that half the time we don't even realize we're doing it, and we're evaluating our entire world through it. We want the pleasant to stay and the unpleasant to go away, and we evaluate all of life in that way. I'm not saying that the longer we practice we won't know the difference between pleasant and unpleasant. But this confusion, this deeply held reaction of pushing away the unpleasant and holding on to the pleasant, of thinking that if we can arrange our world—internally or externally—correctly...

When you really think about it, what are we looking for? On some level, and I keep finding it in myself in more and more subtle ways, I'm somehow buying into the idea that I'm eventually going to get it so that only pleasant things happen and nothing unpleasant comes up anymore. Forget it. There's no way, because that's complete delusion. That is not the way the world is.

This is one of the basic confusions on which we base our interpretation of who we are and what happiness is, and it keeps us looking in the wrong place. This confusion does not recognize the fact of impermanence—that everything changes, that pleasant comes and it goes, unpleasant comes and it goes. To think that we can make the pleasant stay is to completely ignore a basic fact of everything in our life. And to fear the unpleasant so much, to hate it so much, is also overlooking the fact that it's going to go too. It's simply in the nature of life that everything is evolving, that winter turns to summer. We're happy when that happens. Summer turns to winter—well, it has to happen. We don't really fight it so much, although I know every November I start to say, "Oh, this is depressing, it's starting too soon." How many years do we have to live before we really open to each phase of change?

It seems obvious if we look at the world that everything is in flux. The tides come and go, the moon waxes and wanes, our breath comes in and goes out. Life is all about expansion and contraction. There are times

of health and times of sickness, times of birth and times of death. There are phases in my life when I look around and all I see—my mind is focused on the happy—couples getting married, people having babies, everyone flowering. And then there are other phases when I look around and I see couples breaking up, people getting sick, a lot of sadness. They're both there all the time, and in each of our lives we're going to experience this constant ebb and flow.

But somehow, deeply ingrained, there's a little seed of denial of this, a sense that somehow maybe I can lick it. We don't say it so crassly because it sounds ridiculous, but I keep finding myself, even in deep meditation, with this subtle sense of, "If I could just manipulate it a little bit, it would be more pleasant, thus better." And this is not freedom.

This sense of needing to push away the painful, the unpleasant, the difficult; this needing to pull in what is pleasant—this is exactly what keeps us feeling separate from ourselves, fragmented in our experience, fearful and separate from others, or needing others to validate us.

but simply boredom, sleepiness, or grief, or fear, or restlessness, or doubt, or any of the whole range of experience that comes up—none of it is actually, as we open our practice, an obstacle to happiness. It may seem an obstacle to happiness, it may seem an obstacle to practicing loving-kindness at first, but this is really what's revolutionary about our practice, about the non-discriminating, boundless quality of loving-kindness. Because when we're cultivating loving-kindness, it can meet anything with this open-hearted acceptance, this quality of patience, this quality of connectedness.

Oh, we may try to control even the weather. We may think there's something wrong when spring is so beautiful here but the black flies are so obnoxious one can hardly stand to walk outside. But that's just how it is.

I was in a cathedral town in Germany, and just this little vignette comes up in my heart a lot as a sense of holding both aspects of life and not trying to control it or just have it one way. It's Ulm, the town of Ulm. We were passing by a shop—a door with a big shop window on each side. We came to the first window, and it had all statues of the Madonna. It was a real Catholic town. "Oh, this is nice," I thought. "Sort of a spiritual icon shop." Then we passed the door and walked to the other window, and it was all beer steins and guns. I thought, "That's really interesting. Get it both in the same place." You don't have to experience a sense of separation about it. Well, that's how it is.

When we're not really getting it—that pleasant and unpleasant both are our life, and that we cannot control the change—when we're not really getting it, then the kind of happiness we're trying to build is really fragile. It's predicated on an impossibility, basically.

This fragile sense of happiness—you might know it. To bring it into retreat: if you're sitting and having kind of a peaceful, nice sitting, there can often arise a sense of, "I hope nothing happens. I hope that obsessive thought doesn't come back. I hope my knee doesn't start hurting. I hope they don't ring the bell

yet—I'm just getting into it." Already it's gone, that peaceful happiness, because we're trying to hold on to it. It's so fragile.

Any happiness, any sense of peace, any sense of love that's predicated on conditions that can change is not true happiness. It's not unconditional loving-kindness. In true loving-kindness there is no fear of losing it, because it's so clear there's nothing to lose. True loving-kindness is that outflowing movement of well-wishing—like Shantideva said, it's like feeding myself. There's nothing to want.

And you can feel the difference. When this habit, this sense of just peaceful presence with what is, open-hearted acceptance, warmth, loving-kindness—there's no fear in that. There's no iota of "I need something back." And we can feel when it starts to shift. All of a sudden, "What if?" comes in. Or "Maybe..." Or "How can I keep it going?" And it's already subtly begun to shift.

That's okay. Because these habits of attraction, attachment to the pleasant, aversion, fear, pushing away the unpleasant—these are the habits that keep us confused. They also happen to be the near and far enemies of loving-kindness. Steve will talk more about it tomorrow; I'll just mention it.

We say "near enemy." The near enemy of loving-kindness is love with attachment. Near because we can confuse it. We think it's just loving-kindness—friendliness, warmth, outpouring, connection. And we might feel connected, but suddenly there's this little "I need," "I want," "What am I getting out of this?" that slips in. It can be very subtle. It's natural that it comes up when we're practicing loving-kindness. It's not a mistake.

And the reverse, the aversion, the not liking—that's the far enemy. Much more recognizable, obviously. It's clear when we're hating something, when we're pushing it away. In that moment, we're certainly not experiencing open-hearted acceptance. It's just the reverse.

But just because we might be caught, in a particular moment, in either the near enemy of wanting or desire or yearning, or the far enemy of "I hate this, I want this to go away, I can't wait for this to leave, it's a total obstacle to my practice"—or any of the whole range in between:

And so this is often when we feel that we're drifting away from being able to say the formal phrases—because irritation has come up, or pain in the knee has come up—and we feel split. Actually, this is also a moment when we can strengthen and cultivate a quality of loving-kindness that manifests as connection, patience, and acceptance.

I'll give a couple of examples. Say you're saying your phrases and pain in the knee comes. At first you can just notice, okay, that's painful. And you can come back and continue with the phrases in the sense of loving-kindness for yourself. There's no feeling of split. There's no problem. But after a while, the pain gets stronger and the mind says, "There's no way. What do you mean, 'may I be happy'? I'm sitting here in agony. I've got to do something to get rid of this." And you get this feeling of split. To say the phrases, say to your benefactor, just feels ridiculous at that point.

You can actually take the loving-kindness and turn it onto the experience, say, of the pain in the knee. In a way, you can take your attention, gently move it to the pain, and send the phrases to the pain. Now, at first this will feel like a gimmick. And it will be, because underneath will be: "If I really send loving-kindness to this pain, obviously it will soften and go away, because that's what loving-kindness does—it makes everything nice." So we'll try that for a while, and then we'll try all our other bargaining tools, and we'll say, "Well, this isn't working, forget this."

And then we'll begin to see that what's really the problem is the aversion. With loving-kindness you can then say, "Okay, this is aversion. Can I connect my attention with this too?" And when you really connect, simply allowing aversion to be present and feel it in your body, allowing the pain in the knee to be present and feel it in the body—that moment of connection, of kind acceptance, that is loving-kindness.

And you can tell when it happens because the feeling shifts from one of "May you be happy, may you be peaceful, may you go away" to... "Oh, yeah. Things are just as they are. And it hurts, but it's okay." There's this immediate sense of connectedness, of spaciousness, and there's no longer that sense of being in conflict or fragmented. It's really quite miraculous, even momentarily, to experience this.

Another example which happened to me recently is feeling very tired, heavy, physically uncomfortable, and aware of it—but not really meeting it fully with this open, full, connecting attention. Sort of, "Yeah, yeah, tired... may I be happy, may I be peaceful... I'm so tired... may I be happy, may I be peaceful." And finally turning around and going, "Okay, really feel tired," and meeting it with a fullness of loving attention, without judgment, without wanting to change it, without interpreting it in any way—simply being fully present.

That moment of connection changes everything from feeling tired, contracted, separated, disgruntled, to feeling tired but no longer contracted, disgruntled, or separated. It's like, "Oh yeah, right. This is just tiredness." That sense of connection then immediately moves—when I no longer feel fragmented because I'm denying a part of my own experience—immediately, without even thinking about it, the next thought moment was, "Wow, what a beautiful day this is." And then a smell of the lilacs, and then an appreciation of the sunshine, and then a feeling of tiredness.

The sense of the interconnectedness of all is again loving-kindness, both an expression of it and a result of that connection with just what is in a moment. And with loving-kindness, we only need to connect with totally one aspect of our experience in any moment to see that it spreads out and connects us with all.

John Muir said once—and this is from the Wall Street Journal, which I also thought was interesting—John Muir once said, "I find that if I touch anything, it's connected to everything else in the universe." It's very much like that in our loving-kindness practice in meeting the difficulties that arise in our experience here. When we truly touch anything—a knee pain, a feeling of happiness, a feeling of loving-kindness for the benefactor, our disgruntledness, our annoyance at the sound of a fly—when we truly touch it with fullness of presence, with loving-kindness, in that moment, for that moment, we're healed from our false sense of

fragmentation.

That total presence, nothing left out of our experience, nothing that needs to be denied or hidden or kept away in order to be happy. When we're fully connected with ourselves through loving-kindness, we are fully connected with all life, with all beings. Any moment of full connection is our avenue into recognizing this interconnectedness, which is the truth of our life at all times.

And our journey together in these ten days—a great part of it is cultivating formally the heart space of loving-kindness so that we trust it, so that we recognize it more, so that we don't need to worry that it's fragile. It's stronger than anything else that our mind and heart can throw up at us, although we might not believe that yet. Because another part of our journey is to meet with this loving-kindness all the other stuff that the mind and heart does throw up at us. It's not only not a mistake—it has to happen in this way.

As the metta strengthens, as you continually develop your intention of loving-kindness with each phrase, with each mind moment of turning the heart to loving acceptance, each moment that metta strengthens, there's less fear, there's less need to keep the darkness, the shadow, that we fear away. And so, as a natural result of our loving-kindness practice deepening, all the other stuff starts to come up into the light.

It's not only not bad, but this is where we'll begin to really trust the power and depth of metta—that it really is our true home. Our fears, our self-hatreds, our fears of others, our grief—all these things are part of our field of experience. They all come and go, but we don't have to live there. We can really come to trust that metta cannot be distorted by anything that arises. In fact, meeting these difficulties will only strengthen our trust.

This is a poem from Rumi:

"This being human is a guest house, every morning a new arrival. A joy, a depression, a meanness, some momentary awareness comes as an unexpected visitor. Welcome and entertain them all. Even if they're a crowd of sorrows who violently sweep your house empty of its furniture, still treat each guest honorably. He may be clearing you out for some new delight. The dark thought, the shame, the malice—meet them at the door laughing and invite them in. Be grateful for whoever comes because each has been sent as a guide from beyond."

I'm not saying that every moment we're going to manifest that attitude. But just to bear it in mind—this really is the attitude, the welcoming attitude of metta: that love is stronger than pain or fear or disturbance, and we don't need to be afraid of anything that arises in our experience. It may shake our concentration, we may waver for a while, but then when we can turn around and meet it with the gentle strength of acceptance, of patience, the connectedness of loving-kindness, we'll see that it really was a guest that perhaps is sweeping us clean for new delights. It's nothing we have to run from. It's nothing we have to shut out. The shutting out is the fragmentation. The shutting out is what blinds us to love and happiness. We don't need to do that anymore.

As the Dalai Lama said, he believes that little children are born free of any religion or ideology, but not free of compassion. He believes that compassion and love is the basic human quality. With our practice together—the concentration practice of metta and the willingness to see that everything else that arises is part of the path, that even the intention to be willing to greet our difficulties with love, even though we can't do it, we still might have that intention—this is beginning to really clear our hearts from our sense of being so isolated and allowing us to trust from our own experience much more deeply that love and compassion really is the basic human state.

The Buddha said often that the mind is naturally radiant and pure. All these other things that come really are guests, just as Rumi said. So what we're doing is learning to strengthen our recognition, our familiarity, our at-homeness with an aspect of this radiant purity—with loving-kindness, which is an expression of our completion, of our unity.

And it takes great courage to do this. Each one of you here, to meet everything that arises with this attitude, with this intention, to let stuff that we've been trying to shove down into the sewers for ages—maybe we don't even know we're doing that—to let it come up and try to greet it with warmth of heart takes incredible courage, patience, and real compassion for yourselves. So have a real sense of kindness toward yourself, because there'll be many times when we feel like loving-kindness is the furthest thing from our experience. "What am I doing here? Who am I kidding?" Let that doubt come and go. The fact that you're still here, the fact that you have this intention, is bearing fruit in a really beautiful way. We often can't tell in the middle of it. But really, ultimately, love and compassion is stronger than fear, or hatred, or anger, or self-judgment.

And what's even nicer is that it's contagious—that you'll all catch it from each other. When you're having a hard time, someone will walk by, and just the air of calmness, of peacefulness, elicits that same thing in us. It's really quite wonderful.

I just want to close with a little story that Daniel Goleman recounts in his book *Emotional Intelligence* about the contagiousness of our peace, of our love.

It was early in the Vietnam War, and an American platoon was hunkered down in some rice paddies in the heat of a firefight with the Viet Cong. Suddenly, a line of six monks started walking along the elevated berms that separated rice paddy from rice paddy—those little mounds you can walk along. Perfectly calm and poised, the monks walked directly toward the line of fire. And this is a quotation: "They didn't look right. They didn't look left. They walked straight through," recalls David Bush, one of the American soldiers. "It was really strange, because nobody shot at them."

And after they walked over the berm, suddenly all the fight was out of me. It just didn't feel like I wanted to do this anymore, at least not that day. It must have been that way for everybody, because everybody quit. We all just stopped fighting.

Metta, compassion—these are perhaps the most courageous and strong mental heart states that we can experience. And they are our true home. And they are contagious.

So let's all catch it from each other.

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