Near and Far Enemies of Mettā

Carol Wilson · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Carol Wilson · 58:43

The question has come up a couple of times, at least that I'm aware of in this retreat, and it's one that I held myself when I first began doing intensive loving-kindness practice. The question is: how does this practice, which can seem somewhat dualistic or somewhat self-centered or "me and others" centered, deepen our understanding or our resting in the truth of selflessness, the truth of no separate self?

Some people have noticed how in the beginning it seems like we're cultivating a sense of "me" sending mettā to "you," and it can seem quite dualistic. Before I had practiced mettā intensively, I think I had a little bit of a bias against it for that reason—which was totally in my head, based on projection and not knowing what it's about, because you can only know by doing it. There was also the fact that mettā is a very helpful practice for a personality that has a tendency toward aversion. And for that reason, a personality with aversion tendencies doesn't really want to do mettā, because it's counter to what seems comfortable and normal and the natural way to be. I'll talk about that a little later.

But what I want to talk about tonight is one of the ways that I found, to my surprise and in quite a profound way, that the practice of loving-kindness as we're doing it here, very formally, is actually a manifestation of truth, of our true nature, of selflessness. It also deepens not our intellectual understanding but our experiential understanding of interconnection, of selflessness. Actually, they each lead into the other.

An Indian sage once said that to be on a wisdom path—which you could say Vipassana is—is to know. And the more that you know the truth, the more you love. To be a bhakti, being on a devotional path, is to choose the path of love. And the more that you love the truth, the more you know. I found for myself that this really rings true. Whichever form of practice I might be doing, whether it's insight practice or the Brahmavihāra practices, they are like two gateways that come around to the same ultimate truth. No surprise, really, since what's really true is what's true—any real practice is going to take us in that direction.

Tulku Urgyen Rinpoche, who died recently, was a great Tibetan teacher. He said once that the supreme method to quickly become at home with the radiance of our true nature, the supreme method for quickly recognizing and coming to rest more easily in that radiance, is devotion and compassion. And that's really what we're practicing here: devotion as mettā, and compassion, which we'll move into as karuṇā.

You could explore in your own experience a moment when your heart or mind really does feel overwhelmed or filled up with this love, this devotion—not to a particular being necessarily, but just the boundaryless energy of loving-kindness. If in that moment we were to look inwardly, to bring in

mindfulness to explore or learn to recognize what it is that we're experiencing, we would really see—this is again from Tulku Urgyen—our radiant nature, much like the image that Michelle used the other night of the sun unobscured by clouds. It can often feel like this in a moment of mettā: just this beaming radiance, this joyful energy. And in that moment of love, the empty nature dawns nakedly.

What does that mean? In the moment of love, the empty nature dawns nakedly. What's different? How is that moment somehow different from other moments when you don't feel this boundless love? What is it that's different?

If you look carefully, one of the things you'll notice is that in that moment of purity, of boundless love, of compassion, of the empty nature dawning, there is absolutely no attachment and no aversion present in the heart or mind. I want to emphasize tonight that I'm really talking moment to moment, because moment to moment we can all experience these things. If we envision that it has to be endless moments of love streaming out in the empty nature, then we all say, "Well, forget it, I don't know that experience." We're talking about one moment here of loving-kindness arising. That is an experience all of us can have. And I don't care who you are—in our daily life too, it's an experience we can all have. What we can do here is begin to explore more what that's about.

So when we say the empty nature—no attachment, no aversion, boundaryless, centerless—whoever it is, it might be me sending mettā to my benefactor, in that moment of boundless love there's not so much thinking about "me" sending something "there." There's a kind of centerless, boundaryless experience. And when we say it's the empty nature, empty doesn't mean dead or dull or blacked out, nothing happening. Empty of separate self. Empty of separation. But it could also be talked about as fullness, as a sense of inner completion, where absolutely nothing is lacking and absolutely nothing needs to be pushed away or shut out of the experience to make it better. In fact, the concept of something lacking or needing to be pushed away doesn't even occur, because it's so obvious in that moment that it's just all there is. It's perfection. Whatever word you want to use—just simple completion. The radiant nature of who we really are.

In Vipassana practice, one of the ways that we come to this understanding of our radiant nature, of the transcendence of being caught in attachment and aversion, is really by looking at the nature of arising experience. For example, really noticing the impermanence of all things that arise; the suffering nature, because things change, because we get attached to things that change, and nothing is wholly satisfying; and again, the selfless nature.

In looking at these aspects of our arising experience—whether it's the breath or emotions or a sound or a relationship or anything—the bonds of attachment and aversion, the suffering of those, become more obvious, and they gradually begin to loosen their grip. A little bit, a little bit, a little at a time.

In working with the brahmavihara practice, I find it comes to the same understanding from a different route. It comes not so much through the suffering route—you might be surprised to hear that after these

few days, that this isn't really a suffering practice. Compared to Vipassana, though, it isn't. We'll check in again after ten days. Whereas Vipassana kind of goes into suffering, this slightly moves away, eventually.

But in a way, with metta or any of the other brahmaviharas, we're coming to discern and really strengthen in the wisdom, in the intuitive wisdom of non-attachment, of selflessness, of no separate self, through experiencing over and over and learning to trust that experience of these boundless states of heart and mind. So rather than looking at and seeing the unsatisfactory nature of everything through metta, we're actually experiencing a state of heart that approaches—that is—boundless in itself. It's a manifestation. Metta, karuna, all the brahmaviharas are manifestations of the wisdom of no separate self, of selflessness. Because true metta cannot arise if we're clinging to any particular need one has for oneself. If you're clinging to any sense of separation in that moment, true metta doesn't quite arise.

So we're coming to more deeply experience the truth of selflessness through experiencing a happiness of metta, of the other brahmaviharas—a happiness that comes from living in this truth of selflessness, from living from our radiant, pure nature. And we experience every little moment of metta, even if we don't consciously recognize it. It's like we're tasting a happiness that is much deeper and much more fulfilling than the happiness of getting what we want, or managing to have only pleasant experience, getting rid of what we don't want.

And that's why metta becomes such a happy practice. It doesn't mean only pleasant things happen. It means we're beginning to learn how to recognize, cultivate, and rest more and more in a happiness that is much deeper and much more fulfilling than our ordinary happiness that comes from attachment and aversion. Until we experience something that is more arising from wisdom, we think getting what we want is really the highest happiness.

So in cultivating the loving-kindness practice and saying all these things, this really arises out of one's own experience in a very moment-to-moment way, where we not only get more and more in touch with these boundless qualities of heart and mind—and in the beginning it sounds like, "Oh yes, boundless, oh yes, metta-filled," as if they're really kind of talking in hyperbole, a bit of an exaggeration, but it sounds nice—but actually it's not an exaggeration at all. We're trying to describe accurately an experience that is much stronger than anything we might have imagined, but at the same time more simple and direct. It's not about living in ecstatic bliss all the time. It's much more a kind of moment-to-moment connecting and friendliness.

So one way that I find the practice of loving-kindness strengthened and really began to build a stronger confidence in the truth of selflessness is, as I've described, resting in these boundless states. But another way surprised me even more, because I really did have this bias that only Vipassana gives wisdom and metta is really nice and these states are really nice, but it's not going to really strengthen my understanding in any way.

What it did do, though, and continues to do in my daily life, has helped me see through much more

profoundly than I had before the so-called obstacles to loving-kindness—which happen to be exactly the things that keep us from recognizing our intrinsic radiant nature: the so-called near and far enemy, attachment and aversion. And as you've noticed, they come up a lot in this loving-kindness practice. Rather than that being a problem, it became quite liberating—not exactly the word I want, but a really profound teacher. Because in the way that they came up, and in the way that the metta begins to strengthen to meet these qualities of attachment and aversion and also to open up and disclose their nature more clearly, I learned an awful lot about them. And the metta also begins to become stronger than attachment and aversion, than these habits of mind. It's really been a wonderful practice, and it's had effects in daily life much more than I had expected—and again, on a much more simple level.

So I want to talk a little bit about how in this practice we can begin to recognize and use and explore when these near and far—I want to use "obstacles" instead of "enemy," since enemy definitely has a bit of a connotation of aversion to it, and we don't want to cultivate aversion to aversion. Not so helpful.

Nisargadatta Maharaj, an Indian wise man, said once: "The obstacles to the clear perception of one's true being are desire for pleasure and fear of pain." It's really true. These are the two obstacles that, when we're caught in them—when we're caught in desire for pleasure, when we're involved in fear of pain—it's those very activities of looking for pleasure and pushing away pain, the activities themselves, that keep us blind, that keep us from recognizing our inner completion, our potential for happiness here and now.

And so it's really a wonderful gift that they're brought up so strongly on a retreat like this, and that they're brought up in a metta space that actually allows us to meet them more fully and with more friendliness.

So I want to talk a little bit about each one of these, starting with the near obstacle of love with attachment—or simply lust, desire, attachment. And I want to talk about these pretty much as we can experience them arising moment to moment. This is not meant to be theoretical, but as something that we can experience as we sit and walk and pay attention. And in a way, it's a sort of Dharma 101—this is the basic gist of any dharma understanding: the suffering that comes from desire and aversion, that these are the two main things that get in our way of experiencing freedom.

So love with attachment, desire, lust, or a more subtle sense of clinging is basically looking outside of ourselves, looking outside of the totality of present moment experience, looking for something else to somehow bring us completion, fulfillment, happiness. I mean, that's so obvious, but that's really what we're doing over and over. And as I've said, the great revelation of loving-kindness is that that completion and happiness we're looking for is already here, always, and only right here. The more we experience metta, the more we might come to trust that—to see that we have a home that is complete, that can bring us happiness right here, right now, in this moment. Nothing needs to be added.

The real mystery is why, even if we just taste that for an instant—in that moment it's so obvious—why in the next moment are we again yearning and looking outside, somehow trying to complete ourselves again? It slips away so easily, and again we're in that desire, that subtle yearning, not realizing that it's the

desire itself, the wanting, the needing itself, that's blinding us to the potential for completion and peace right now.

So when this comes up in your experience here—I'll talk about it on a more gross level first, and then on the subtle levels of how metta shades into attachment—but when it comes up and you realize you're in some kind of clinging, some kind of attachment, don't hate it. Let the softness of metta allow you to move toward it and explore it. What is the experience of clinging or attachment in a moment of your experience?

The first thing I think it's really important to remember—it's obvious but we forget—is that the clinging is arising about something that's happening right now. It arises when a pleasant experience comes up. Maybe there's a pleasant feeling in your body, or a pleasant sound, or a pleasant sight. Maybe there's a pleasant emotion like metta. Maybe there's a thought or a memory that comes up and feels pleasant. Any of these things arise in this moment—a pleasant memory, anticipation of something pleasant when you leave here. And without noticing that pleasant experience now, the mind, the heart, the energy all sort of flow toward that pleasant experience.

Without recognizing it, you think, "Oh, when I leave here, I'm going to go and do this and see this person. I'm going to be so loving. I'm going to go patch up this quarrel." We get into the whole story without realizing that it's all a reaction to a pleasant thought arising in this moment. If we can even recognize that—oh, right, fantasizing is pleasant—and just stay with feeling the pleasantness, that's fine. Nothing wrong with that. But we tend not to notice that and fly off into getting really involved in how to get more of the pleasant thing, how to keep it going, what we're going to do about it. We get all into the story.

The second aspect is to recognize when clinging or attachment is present, whether or not you recognize what it's attached to, but that it's happening now. Look and see what's the nature of your experience in that moment. How does attachment function? Because one of the misrepresentations of attachment or desire is that without really looking at it carefully, it has a sort of connotation of pleasure with it. We keep getting into that pleasant fantasy because somehow that pleasant feeling is enjoyable. We can almost associate the wanting itself with a kind of pleasure. So it's really helpful to come back and look at what's happening when there's a moment of attachment going on in your mind. It's not evil, but it isn't really all that it's cracked up to be if we stop and look at it.

In a moment of getting lost in wanting, or wanting to hold on to something pleasant that's here, the first thing it does is create a kind of tunnel vision. Have you noticed that? If you want something, the mind gets completely moved toward that, focused on that, and everything else you either don't notice or it's in the way. It's amazing how much we cannot notice when the mind is gripped in craving.

This winter I was in Thailand, and there was a little vignette that illustrated how strong craving's tunnel vision can be. I was standing on a narrow little road through a small town. There was traffic—some bicycles, motorbikes, cars—just one lane, kind of dirt, with stores on either side and a lot of people. Fairly

busy. I was standing just close to the side of the road. I can't remember what I was looking for, but I suddenly had to look into my passport pouch. I think I was looking to make sure I had my traveler's checks or something. I was totally consumed: I've got to see this, I've got to do this right now.

Traffic was going by, and suddenly something caught the corner of my eye. About as far as from me to that wall, an elephant was walking by, driven by two little boys who didn't look like they really had it under control. The elephant had passed me and I didn't even notice it until it had gone all the way past me—and it was in my field of vision from the front. I was so engrossed with looking for whatever I was looking for. When I looked at it, I mean, it's huge. The vibrations of it are amazing. I don't know how I could have missed it. And it was scary too, because he was veering from one side of the street to the other, and there wasn't really anywhere to go, so I just kind of jumped out of the way. But I thought, wow, when you talk about the elephant in the middle of the room that you don't see, it's really possible.

So clinging and attachment can really give us tunnel vision like that, and it does it in subtle ways all the time.

Another thing it does is distort our idea or perception of the thing we're attached to or craving. You know when you first have a crush on somebody and there's that real surge—there's love, but there's definitely attachment. It's as if they're the most incredible being you ever ran into on the planet. How wonderful they are. And if that's a crush that doesn't really mature into anything, six months later you run into that person and you go, "What was that all about?" You can't even connect with all the incredible qualities that the mind of craving had projected onto them. This is how craving distorts. The thing craved becomes so incredible.

So check it out—the wonderful, beautiful fantasies that are coming up of what you're going to do the first day you leave here. Go ahead and do them, and check out if the pleasure that comes from those activities comes anywhere close to the projected incredible nature of those activities now. Maybe it will. In all my years—twenty-five years of practice—I've never had a time where what I thought I was going to do was remotely as pleasurable as I imagined it to be. Other things might have been better, more pleasurable, but the projection of craving really distorts.

And the last thing I want to say about craving, which is somewhat obvious, is that as soon as there is attachment or craving, there's separation.

Because obviously, as soon as there's craving, there's a sense of incompleteness. And our essential peace is shattered—not by the lack of that thing, but by the perceived need for it, by that movement of leaning out, of craving itself. Explore this whenever any kind of attachment or craving comes up.

Another simple example: recently I was on a night flight to Germany or somewhere, and I boarded the plane and was sitting in my seat waiting while people boarded. I can never sleep sitting up on a plane—only if I ever happen to get the whole row to lie down, which hardly ever happens anymore. I was

sitting on the aisle, on the edge of the middle row, and it was getting near the end of boarding time. I was quite happy just sitting there, very at peace. Then I suddenly noticed, "Oh, nobody's sat in these rows yet, and there's not that much more time."

My peace was totally shattered—from just sitting there quite at ease, I got really tight, really fretful. Instead of being able to just read my book, every person who came in, I tightened and watched where they went. They went past, and aversion would come up. Every person who entered the plane was my enemy. It was so unpleasant.

I managed to notice how unpleasant it was at the time, which is a great victory for mindfulness, because we often don't even catch what's going on. I just sat there, and even noticing it didn't help—I couldn't go back to my former state of peace. I was locked into "Maybe I'll get to lie down. Wouldn't that be great?" I did get to lie down, actually, so that was a nice end to the story. But just to see how the lying down wasn't that important, to have one's peace shattered like that for nothing—just a thought arising in the mind and this clinging to it, and so much suffering dependent on it.

Well, that's how much fun it is to be lost in attachment or craving or clinging. But it's such a strong habit when pleasant experience arises. I'm not saying this to make us hate it or think it's bad. Luckily, when we're practicing metta, it allows craving to come up into the light, and we can recognize it and work with it in a much softer, more accepting way.

On the gross level, like I just described with the plane, that's not masquerading as metta. You would not call that form of attachment the near enemy of metta. It's got nothing to do with metta—it's just craving, plain and simple. But on a more subtle level, and this will come up a lot in retreat, there's just plain craving. The mind's sick of the phrases, sick of sitting here, so something will come up to crave that seems to offer peace, and we get fooled by that over and over again.

But another, more subtle way that craving comes up in a metta retreat is in the form where attachment is masquerading as metta. It's a little more difficult to see because they're closer together. We don't often notice it at first, which is okay, because we begin to notice it after a while.

They're similar in that metta and attachment both follow very closely on pleasant experience. We don't usually get attached to really unpleasant experiences—although there are ways we can, but I don't want to go into that. Usually both attachment and metta follow on very pleasant experiences. The pleasantness of attachment, though, has conditions. And so while the pleasantness of attachment can seem to simulate metta for a while, it has conditions, and when we hit the limit of those conditions, suddenly the pleasure's gone out of it, and we begin to suffer. Metta can easily slide into this form of attachment because they're both so associated with pleasantness.

A very simple example: I was on a self-retreat last year in a beautifully landscaped place in South Africa, and on one of the walks they had huge iris bushes lining both sides of the path. I'd been there quite a

while, and occasionally there'd be one or two irises on a bush. But one day, after a lot of rain, I came out early in the morning. The sun was just coming up, and all the bushes were filled with these beautiful, delicate, little whitish-lavender iris flowers. It was breathtaking.

I had just a moment of real awe and appreciation, that upswelling of love and connectedness to nature and the world. That's metta too—it doesn't always have to be directed to a person. It was lovely: a feeling of real connection, pleasant appreciation, and just exquisite beingness for a few moments.

And then it suddenly started to shade. "This is really beautiful. I bet it won't be here tomorrow. I wonder if I could take a photo. I'd love for my mother to see this." Why? I don't know why my mother had to see that. But it started shading into "How can I hold on to this? It's so beautiful." Of course I could take a photo, but I don't have a camera.

How could I get a camera? Who do I know here that I could borrow a camera from? And the mind starts going. What had seemed like—what *had been*—a real metta experience, and what I still was thinking was pleasurable, was actually shading into attachment from the pleasant. And they feel similar.

Experientially, metta is a real outpouring, a real outflowing of energy. If you're feeling a sense of coming from *me*, it flows out towards and into whatever it is that the loving-kindness is connecting with. It flows into it, around it, surrounds it, completely meets it—but with no hesitation, with no discrimination, with no conditions. Just an outflowing connection.

Attachment can sort of feel like this. It starts with this outflowing, moving toward, but at some point it hardens. For me, I can feel a sense of contraction, or as if I've hit some kind of hard wall—but it's really a contraction, and somehow wanting to pull it back towards me. That's where the feeling of metta changes when it turns to attachment. But in the beginning, they can kind of masquerade as each other.

What's also interesting to see when the attachment begins to take hold is that it can feel like—it felt like—the attachment was to the image of the irises, wanting to perpetuate that. But if you look really closely, the attachment is more to the upwelling of pleasant feeling itself, just wanting to keep that pleasant feeling going. Looking at the irises was bringing an upwelling of pleasant feeling, and at some point clinging to that pleasant feeling came up: What can I do to keep having this sense or experience of seeing irises, seeing irises?

So that's how attachment can drift into metta as the near obstacle. Because metta itself, when we're experiencing it, is definitely a pleasant experience—extremely pleasant at times, which is great. We're not saying no pleasant experience should happen. But when there's real pleasant experience and then somehow our awareness drifts away a little bit, the mindfulness drops down, just a moment of not being quite deeply present with the metta and the pleasantness, without being present with the intention of wishing well—we can start to focus a little bit more on the pleasantness without realizing it, and subtly attachment starts to come in. How can I have more of this pleasantness? If the mind would be so clear as

that, then it would be good—we'd know right away attachment was coming in. But it takes more sneaky turns, of course.

I know when I first noticed how this would happen, I was sending metta to a dear friend, just feeling the love. It was coming very easily, just flowing. And all of a sudden little thoughts would come in: I really haven't seen her much lately. It would really be nice to see her more because she's so wonderful—and may she be happy. How come she doesn't call me as much as she used to? It took a while, because it was subtle, to see that somehow we'd hit up against a condition, that somehow it was so pleasant sending her love that the mind wanted more pleasantness.

So it can be very tricky. It feels like metta, but it hits the condition. This is not bad or a problem. I actually came to think that it was really far out that this would happen. And I found it happened in this subtle way the most with the people I'm closest to, obviously, because with the people I'm closest to it's really easy to feel, at times, a really boundless well-wishing. It's so easy to wish them well. And of course it was so easy to drift into all the conditions because I do know them so well. The two are very closely linked.

That's why sometimes we say that choosing your mate, or someone you're very close to in that way, as the benefactor category or the dear friend is a little bit fraught with complications—because it'll merge over either into just wanting more input back, or into sexual attraction, or maybe into difficulty. But once we really get a feeling of what the metta is, I found it very enriching to play with moving into sending loving-kindness to my partner, or my mother, or my sister, or someone I'm very close to. It can get more complicated, but it got really interesting to see the difference when it shaded over into attachment. And after a while, what had seemed subtle became glaringly obvious.

With my partner, I could be imagining him in a situation, really sending loving-kindness, and suddenly the situation would slightly shift. What I'd been saying with all the love in my heart—I was saying exactly the same words, but the tone, you know, it had just come from underneath, and I was saying it in order to get a certain response back. And it's worlds apart once we tune into that difference.

You can experiment with this in your life too. I went home and would actually do this when we were having, not a hard discussion, but just in little situations where I'd want to say something. If I really connected with metta and said something like, "It's really hard for me when you don't wash the dishes," but I was connecting with metta—which meant I really wasn't wanting something back, I was communicating from this space of love—that would be felt. And if I said exactly the same thing, exactly the same thing, trying to fool myself that it was from the space of metta, but it was really from the space of, "You stupid jerk, why don't you clean up the dishes already?"—*that's* what was felt, even though the verbal communication was identical, and even though I was fooling myself.

So the chance to notice how we slide into the near obstacle here is a wonderful opportunity. It's not a mistake. It's not something wrong that's happening. It's a chance to see: Oh yeah, this is attachment. This is how it feels.

Let me stop, come back, reconnect with myself, with the being I'm sending loving-kindness to, reconnect with their wonderful qualities, reconnect with the feeling of metta itself, and to do this over and over and over.

Just a couple of other ways that attachment masquerades as metta in our practice, other ways it manifests, is as attachment to the practice itself. I think this is pretty common, where we get attached to the pleasantness of the metta feeling, and instead of just being able to sit back and offer the well-wishes with the purity of intention, completely letting go of wanting to get anything back, we say the phrases, we mean it, but the meaning should manifest by letting us feel the nice feeling of loving-kindness. And if we don't feel that nice feeling, there's a little sense of hitting up against a wall. It's really hard to just keep saying these well-wishing phrases and not get a nice feeling to go along with it. It's hard to trust that.

And when the nice feeling comes, it's quite easy, rather than just settling back and letting it move by itself, to grasp on, to push it along, to lean into the next moment. Or the same with concentration—to try and push into the phrases or try and get deeper, try and get more concentrated, but there's a wanting there, a leaning off balance.

Another way that attachment comes in is when we move out of the purity of our simple well-wishing and somehow get involved in wanting to effect change in the person we're sending metta to, which might be ourselves or someone else. Either wanting our metta to help them, or wanting our metta to make ourselves feel better—"if I send myself enough metta, I'll stop being such an aversive person"—or just some subtle way we're moving out of the simplicity of intention into attachment to results or affecting change.

If you notice this, it's very simple to reorient. You say, "Right, just come back. What does it mean, may I be free from danger? What does it mean, may you be healthy and strong?" Just the sincerity of that wish without trying to make it be so. That continual reorienting keeps us in the purity of intention, because that's all we're really cultivating—the purity of motivation. Whether the feeling comes, whether anyone else feels it or benefits, whether we change or anyone else changes, is totally outside of anything we can control or need to control. All we're doing with this practice is cultivating, moment by moment, a purity of intention of well-wishing to ourselves or to others.

What's so amazing is that the practice takes care of itself. Without our knowing how it works, it does itself, which is really nice. If we could just keep our fingers out of it and quit trying to manipulate it, it actually works very well.

Now I don't have so much time left for aversion. I did desire first this time because I usually get really into aversion. There's always time for aversion. Aversion is my friend.

Aversion doesn't really slip up as much as attachment—it's much more noticeable. The far enemy, rather than being similar to metta, is really quite the opposite on a moment-to-moment experiential level. So

again, how do we experience aversion? It's always here and now. By aversion I'm talking about the whole range: just the subtle pulling away to anger, rage, fear, irritation. All of these are aversions.

Technically, in a moment of experience, the way aversion functions is just the opposite of craving. There's an unpleasant sense experience—maybe a physical experience, a smell, a sight, a sound. It might be an emotion, an unpleasant mental image, an unpleasant thought just passing through, arising in this moment. And in not noticing its unpleasant nature, or not realizing that by noticing it we don't have to give in to habit, the tendency of our heart-mind energy is to bounce back, shrink back, shut off and contract against that unpleasant experience. It might try to push it away by lashing out in anger, or it might contract as in fear. But in any case, the effect is one of pulling back, closing down, bouncing away from the experience. And it's always something happening right now, even if we're locked into feelings of hatred and anger about something that happened ten years ago.

Again, that moment of shrinking away, not being noticed, feeds on itself. That moment's unpleasant. Then the next thing arises—the same thought, "Yeah, and he said this ten years ago"—that's unpleasant. We're already in a contracted state, so we pull back a little stronger, contract a little more. It feeds on itself. You know how if you wake up in a bad mood, it just seems to go downhill from there until the slightest little thing can make you ready to scream, because it builds on itself.

But even if it's about something that happened ten years ago, we get lost again into the story, into the projection, into the imagination, into past or future. It's really only about thoughts, emotions, sensations, sense experience arising in this moment, because that's all there is. So if we're caught in "Oh, I can't believe he did this"—that's a thought arising right now. We can notice it. We can notice its unpleasant aspect. We can notice the flinching away. It doesn't have to build.

Now that's mindfulness practice. But sometimes when we're really getting lost, it's helpful to bring that inquiry in, to see: what is it that's arising now that's feeding this continual getting lost in aversion?

The result or effect of this flinching back is that because the attention isn't really meeting the experience, there's no way we can actually know or understand that experience clearly. We can't know something that we're not really meeting with fullness of being, with fullness of attention.

This is how metta works as just the opposite. An unpleasant experience can arise—say it's an unpleasant sound—and we shrink back. There's a moment of aversion. And that shrinking back is itself unpleasant, so that's another unpleasant experience. Then we bring in metta, just the simple feeling of metta: "May I be free from suffering." The experience of metta is just the opposite of that shrinking. The energetic feeling is that it flows out, into, around, surrounds, and meets that experience quite naturally, quite gently, but without any kind of discrimination or hesitation. Where instead of shrinking back, metta just opens up the field.

So what had been something we needed to hide from—and then we don't see clearly at all the whole

situation—the metta lets us meet it in a very kind, gentle way. Then our whole perception of things expands, broadens. Before I had practiced metta a lot, being an aversive type as I said, one sees quite clearly. Aversion has a way of being quite discriminating and thinking it sees things clearly, which some things it does. But it can tend to think it's seeing everything that clearly, which it's not—especially the thing it's aversive to. Metta balances that out. It can include the aversion, it brings the energy fully into meeting the experience, and it broadens everything.

I'll give you an example of when I first noticed how the aversive mind works. Having an aversive tendency doesn't mean you're going around locked in rage all the time. We're just talking moment to moment. I was on a ferry in Thailand one year, and it was a beautiful day. Sunny, lovely, the water was calm, just sitting on this ferry with a lot of people. Basically, it was an extremely pleasant experience. But there was one person, a tourist, who was really making a spectacle of herself. Out of all the pleasant experience, my attention was consistently drawn to the one unpleasant thing, which it would then expand on. It would shrink back: "She's probably American. You can always tell Americans when they travel. It's embarrassing to be an American." And there weren't that many other Americans. "I'm sure they can all tell I'm American too." I would just keep being drawn back to this person.

I thought, "Ah. There is an abundance of pleasant experience here, and the habit of this particular mind is to fasten onto the aversive, keep shrinking back, and then just build on it until I'm really suffering enormously."

What the metta does—and after we've been practicing it intensively, you find what it does in daily life—is that without even thinking about it, it comes flowing in. It meets these things: "Oh, well, she's just sort of ignorant. It's too bad she's making a spectacle of herself. I hope she doesn't get into any trouble. And it's really a beautiful day." Where that would have sounded really false and hokey to me some years ago, this is now just quite a natural experience. The metta balances out the shrinking back of aversion, and it is a much more inclusive, clear-seeing state. It doesn't make that sense of separation—"the rest of us are okay, she's a loser." All of us are here together. She's acting like this, I'm acting like that. There's no judgment, and there's connection with the whole thing.

I find this happening over and over and over, not just on retreat but even more surprisingly, in my daily life. I think the reason for this is just that strengthening of intention that we are cultivating on the retreat here, even when you don't feel any particular result happening. Like talking to someone today who said, "For three days, nothing. You just do it, do it, do it, and nothing's happening. Dry, dead, awful." We all have that experience. Then you might do something to shift it, but the next day somehow it breaks open and we think, "Wow, how did that happen?" We want to pin it on maybe having taken a walk or having done something different. We just tend to write off those three days. Why?

We didn't feel anything. We expect immediate feedback. But every moment that we are consciously saying the wish—may I, may you, be happy and peaceful—that is a moment of pure intention. Even if you don't

feel it, there's a purity of intention that even allows the mind and heart to say that. And it's also a moment where aversion is not being cultivated.

All those other moments—gee, I hate this, why can't it be better, why are they acting like that—all those moments of aversion are being strengthened and cultivated, and that habit is getting into a stronger groove. Every moment that you sit here and really say, "May you be happy and peaceful"—I don't feel a thing—"May you be happy and peaceful"—what's the use of this?—"May you be happy and peaceful"—every moment that you're saying that, that is a moment of pure intention.

And it seems like magic when all of a sudden it comes shooting out in our life. But it will, because it's just the law of things that intention is really the seed of karma. We're cultivating that in a very powerful way here. And sure, we'd like to have the dessert. We'd like to feel really wonderful all the time, and we'll have moments of that. But I would guess that even if you don't feel ecstatic all the time here, you might find that this has a much more powerful effect than you would expect in your daily life. On a much more simple level, just balancing out the feelings of attachment and aversion that create the sense of separation, finding that the power of metta just naturally flows out of our heart and we're again connected.

I really do find this happening a lot, which is a revelation for someone who's used to the mind just saying, "That's no good, that's no good, that's no good, this is okay." Because that's no good. Well, you know what? It's fine. And this is fine. I'll be somewhere and my mind will start judging: "Ah, the people in the dining room are so annoying. How can people be like that when I'm on retreat?" And the next thought that comes is, "Isn't it wonderful that all these people are here with such sincere intention?" And then my mind goes, "Who said that?" But it's true. And that connection is really there.

After you begin to trust this a little, there'll be times when it doesn't come quite so spontaneously, but you can remember that it's possible and simply say, "Oh, may I be happy." And you know what? That feeling of outflowing acceptance comes up. It's really amazing. And in many ways, it's much more simple than we would expect.

The Buddha said that what the mind dwells upon frequently, towards that the mind will naturally incline. So what we're doing is just helping the mind and heart naturally incline towards the connection of loving-kindness, and later of compassion and the other brahma-viharas. Think of all the time we've spent inclining to attachment and aversion. It's a lot of time. So it might be heavy going here sometimes because the mind is strongly used to inclining to attachment and aversion. Of course a lot of it's going to come up.

But the power of metta is that we meet even the attachment and the aversion with the outflowing kindness of metta. Attachment and aversion don't have to be enemies. And each time that we can do this, that inclination of heart towards loving-kindness, towards resting in our radiant nature, is strengthened. Now we don't get a little balance sheet so we know how far we've come, but you can really experience that in your lives.

And it is possible—I mean, there are rare beings who seem to be able to manifest such a power of this loving-kindness, even in situations that seem unbearable, and that's so inspiring to us. I think not because it seems impossible, but because somewhere in us we know that's really the truth. It's so inspiring to me to read about or meet someone who actually manifests that, because it touches in me the place that knows: yes, this is possible, not just for that person, but for me and for everybody.

So I just picked this one up tonight. I hadn't read this in a while. It's from a woman named Etty Hillesum. She was in the concentration camps during World War II. She died in Auschwitz. A young woman—these are her diaries. This is towards the end of her diary.

All I wanted to say is this: the misery here is quite terrible, and yet, late at night, when the day has slunk away into the depths behind me, I often walk with a spring in my step along the barbed wire, and then time and again it soars straight from my heart. I can't help it. That's just the way it is, like some elementary force—the feeling that life is glorious and magnificent, and that one day we shall be building a whole new world. Against every new outrage and every fresh horror, we shall put up one more piece of love and goodness, drawing strength from within ourselves. We may suffer, but we must not succumb. And if we should survive unhurt in body and soul, but above all in soul, without bitterness and without hatred, then we shall have a right to a say after the war.

Amazing. This is our potential.

So let's just sit together for a few moments.

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