Mettā as Liberation: Recognizing Our Intrinsic Connectedness

Carol Wilson · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Carol Wilson · 58:30

For some years in the beginning of my practice, I felt a little bit resistant to doing a long period of intensive mettā practice for two reasons.

One of them being that, especially in the beginning, it's so much work. I don't know if any of you have discovered that today—over and over, the same phrases. Sometimes it feels like digging a ditch. And the second reason is something that Sharon mentioned: my misconception that it's nice, just sort of a feel-good practice, but I'm really after enlightenment and freedom. So it's nice to feel good, but I want to get to the root of things.

I'm happy to report that that was a misconception. You're not wasting your time doing mettā practice. In the beginning it is a lot of work—that's just the facts of it. But it gets better. It ends up being a lot easier, actually, than vipassanā. But it's not just a feel-good practice by any means. It's actually a way of bringing more consciously into our experience the visceral fact of our intrinsic connection to all beings, to all creation.

Mettā is an actualization of the deepest truth of our being, of this universe: that there is no separate, alienated, independent existence. There's no way that we can live in isolation and separation. It just feels that way. And so what mettā is actually helping us do is function as a conscious tool to help us recognize, over and over again, the living fact of our connectedness. It helps us recognize and learn to rest in this truth, to be nurtured in and to really trust this truest context of our heart and mind.

Mostly we trust our aversions and our attachments and our fears. And mettā is a nice idea. But what we can learn is that mettā is really an expression of the deepest truth. Our attachments and fears and aversions and confusions are just that—confusion.

This is from Joe Goldstein: "Our misery stems from the misconception that we are separate. Certainly, it looks as though I am separate from other people and other phenomena. As long as we think we are separate, we're going to suffer. We feel we have to defend ourselves. We have to find something in the world that will make us happy." And we do this with passion—we defend ourselves and look for something in the world that will make us happy.

What mettā helps us do—the practice itself, in two ways—is counteract this. It helps us begin to and continue to deepen in the recognition of what it feels like to know that we're not separate and to trust that.

And in the process, this practice highlights the ways that we get sidetracked into defending ourselves and looking for something in the world to make us happy. Those ways of getting sidetracked are the experiences that function as seeming obstacles to recognizing our connectedness, to living in a state of real happiness, of real ease in the world with others and with ourselves.

We really do look very hard for something in the world to bring us happiness. How do we do that? Just think of all the ways in your life that you're looking for something inside or outside to bring happiness. And then think about what is the happiness that you're actually looking for. Both of these are important to recognize.

I read a couple of years ago an article about an Oprah Winfrey show that was a takeoff of this movie *Sleepless in Seattle*, which was about a man whose wife had died. He had a son and he was very lonely. Somehow he was on a radio call-in show, and a woman on the other coast heard him and knew this was the man for her, even though she knew nothing about him except for that. And then the whole wonderful, happy-ever-after story went on from there.

On this Oprah show, apparently she had five men just like that whose wives had died and they had young children. They were all very respectable—doctors or lawyers. And so they were on the show, and then she invited any woman who was interested to write in. Two weeks later she came on and she had received 60,000 letters from women—serious letters.

I'm not making fun of this because this is what we do. Relationship is wonderful. There's a lot of joy in it. But to look, to think that anything out there so unknown to us is going to do it for us—this is a source of great confusion and separation and suffering. Because if I need someone from the Oprah Winfrey show, that means that until I get that, I can't know peace.

I can't know happiness. Or we look inside, believing something in ourselves has to change in order to be happy. We have to change our hairstyle, change how we look, get a better personality, whatever. Internal, external, changing conditions—as long as we're looking there for happiness and love, we're creating in that very moment the experience of separation and alienation.

So what is metta? What is this loving-kindness? And again, we can so easily get caught up in our cultural ideas about love—just the obvious ones, and you each might have your own little twists on them. One is that love is a grand passion, and we can take it out of just the realm of being focused on one other person, but you might find that bias comes into our ideas about loving-kindness. If you're not feeling a total, ecstatic, unitive experience, if tears aren't streaming down your face, if you're not at one with all existence, the metta isn't really working. That might happen sometimes. You might feel that. I promise it won't stay. Because that's not what metta is about. It's an aspect of it.

And then there's the other side—the sort of soft focus, sugar-coated version. What Sharon was talking about: the fear of people thinking metta is just too mushy and not for the real world. I get images of some

movie a long time ago where there was this Mozart piano sonata, and all I remember about it was these two beautiful lovers romping through fields of flowers. I have no idea what else happened in the movie, but that's like one image of metta that is just too sickening to hold up. And that's where I've run into a lot of people who do avoid practicing loving-kindness because they think it leads to weakness and passivity and not seeing clearly.

True metta, of course, is none of these things. It's at once so much more simple, basic, and down to earth, and so much more courageous and profound than any of these ideas we might have about it. The Buddha called metta deliverance of the heart, and it springs from wisdom and clear seeing, not from blindness. It can be as basic as a simple good wish for oneself or for someone else. A simple wish for someone's happiness that doesn't set any conditions or want anything in return. That's simple. Just a generous movement of the heart. We experience that all the time. That's metta.

And it has courage, a moment of metta, because it's not blind. It sees whatever is painful, difficult, or unfortunate—if anything, more clearly than when we're caught in our reactions. And yet, even though there's difficulty, the heart does not react with closing down, separation, or judgment. Even though we see the difficulty, the pain, the confusion more clearly, there's still the connectedness of energy, of heart and mind. There's still the capacity to wish another well, or to wish ourselves well—even if we don't like or approve of what we see. It's a radical shift in our understanding of freedom and happiness.

And I believe we all have the capacity to be as courageous as this man—maybe you read this in the newspapers last fall, it was all over the news—a man in Florida named Chris Carrier. He recently went to visit his ailing elderly friend at a nursing home, took along some gifts, comforted the man, made sure that he was warm and well taken care of. It was the last time he saw his friend, who died later that night.

The friend, David McAllister, was a blind, frail, and lonely seventy-seven-year-old with no one to look after him. He had also recently confessed to abducting, stabbing, and shooting Mr. Carrier in the head and leaving him to die twenty-two years ago, when Chris was nine or ten years old.

Mr. Carrier says he was blinded in his left eye as a result of the shooting, but he said he did not feel that he had been permanently traumatized, adding that he bore no ill will towards the man who had kidnapped him and left him to die. "It wasn't hard for me to show compassion given his circumstances," Mr. Carrier said. He was married, had two daughters, and until recently worked as a youth minister. "I moved on. This event did not haunt me all my life. I'm glad he was able to put the past behind him."

It's in the news. Yes, it's unusual. And I'm not saying that's how we should be. What I'm saying is that potential of freedom from hatefulness and revenge, that potential of being able to meet even that amount of horrific behavior with compassion, with an openness of heart—that's the boundlessness of metta, of loving-kindness. And that boundlessness is not reserved for just an occasional person. Of course, that might not be our experience. Maybe never, maybe not most of the time, but it is our potential. And we can each experience moments of that. We don't have to start with such an intense experience.

What our practice here this week, in however long you have, what it's helping us do on a moment-to-moment basis is learn how to meet whatever arises in our experience—in our body, in our mind, internal, external, beautiful, ugly, fearful, enticing—to learn how to meet what arises with this open connectedness of heart and mind. A connectedness that sees clearly and allows it to be just what it is. A space of heart and mind that does not have to create separation in order to protect ourselves, does not have to look somewhere else for something happy in order to find peace. We discover that the capacity for love and peace is boundless in each of us, and nobody else can stop it in us.

It's not dependent on having someone love us or having perfect circumstances in our life. It's something that each of us can open to and recognize over and over, learning to trust it and living our lives more and more from this potential. No one else can stop us from recognizing this potential.

What does seem to stop us is simply our habits of mind and heart. They're simple—incredibly deep-rooted, but simple to talk about—these habits of how our mind and heart respond to situations in ways that create the sense of separation and isolation. As Nisargadatta Maharaj says, "The obstacles to the clear perception of one's true being are desire for pleasure and fear of pain." We're talking about our old friends: attachment and aversion. You can't get away from them in any talk of basic Buddhism that you ever come to. Why? Because that's the root of our sense of seeming separation, of pain and fear and confusion. It's very basic, but it's very deep-rooted.

Each moment of metta, of open-hearted connectedness to whatever is arising, is actually cutting through these habits of attachment to pleasure and fear of pain. As the metta practice continues, though, you may have already noticed this today. If not, you'll probably notice it happening at some point during the next few days. We might have the idea that we just progress in metta—metta, metta, love, love, openness, openness—and that just gets stronger. But there's a possibility that you might experience from time to time that aversion and attachment seem to be blossoming. They get highlighted with this practice.

It's easy to feel, "I came here to practice loving-kindness to myself, and instead I'm sitting here saying, 'May I be filled with suffering.' 'May I be happy'—fat chance. 'May I be healthy'—in some other life. What is going on here?" It can seem as though aversion or clinging is being cultivated. It's not that they're being cultivated, but the development of the intention of loving-kindness, the meeting of experience with openness, the non-discriminating quality of metta actually begins to highlight these confused ways that we respond to situations. It lets us begin to see more clearly how the aversion, the fear, or the attachment functions in our experience to create a sense of separation.

This is really great to see, because once we see it, we're not so seduced by these states of mind and heart. We see them for what they are. We don't have to hate them, but we don't believe them so strongly. And this is where we then, almost despite ourselves, begin to trust more deeply in the connectedness.

Is this familiar to you—what a habit of mind it is to meet most situations with either attachment or aversion? I noticed this when I sat last year for several weeks. One day it really struck me how habituated

my normal mind was, when I'm not paying attention, to constantly evaluate, to assess every situation and meet it with "this is good, this is bad, I like this, I don't like that."

I noticed this, and it's really apparent on retreat because although we're not communicating verbally, something happens with every single person who comes into our field of vision or crosses our walking path. I noticed one day that everybody who came in, there was this assessment: "They look nice. They look good. I want something from them. I want them to notice me. I want them to like me. I want them to think I'm really looking like a hot shot yogi." Or I don't like something about them, and so what I want is to create distance—keep that person far away from me. Or somehow in the assessment, some fear would come up. "I want them to like me, but they're not going to like me because they're so much better than I am." And so there's fear, and their presence becomes a threat.

This is an exhausting way to live. But I noticed it was extremely rare that if I wasn't paying attention, this wasn't just what happened. To bring in a moment of metta—just a person walks across, the assessment doesn't have to happen—it's simply, "Ah, may you be happy. May I be happy." Just a simple outflowing of energy, of connectedness. Just as you are, just as I am, that's fine. It's such a relief. It's so simple. It's so connected. There's just no problem in that moment. And there's no need for the sense of separation to be created.

So I want to speak a little bit about recognizing how these two very common energies—aversion or fear and attachment—function in a moment of experience to create a seeming sense of separation, how they seem to block the heart flow of connectedness, how they block our recognition of the fact that we are and always have been perfectly complete and at ease.

Aversion, which ranges from simple dislike to pulling back to anger, rage, grief, fear—all of these stem from the misconception that somehow I can hold myself separate from this unpleasant or painful experience. That's an almost literal description of how aversion or fear functions in a moment of experience: "I can hold myself separate from this unpleasant or fearful experience."

Something arises in this moment. When we experience aversion or fear here on the retreat, let's just keep this very simple to the moment-to-moment retreat experience. When aversion or fear arises, it's arising as a response to an experience that's happening right now, in this moment. It might be an unpleasant physical sensation, or a sound that's startling or unpleasant, or a smell, or a sight. It might be an emotion, a mood. It might be a thought that's really unpleasant or scary or painful. It might be a memory. Even if it's a memory of something that happened ten years ago that's painful, it's actually the memory as a thought arising that's unpleasant in this moment.

And this misconception that I can keep myself separate from it manifests in that moment as the energy, the attention, the heart and mind—you can almost feel it flinch back, pull away from that experience. And in that, there's immediately created a sense of separation. Because of this sense of distance, of separation, more ignorance arises, because when we're pulling back, we're not actually able to recognize clearly

what's actually happening. So, for example, it might be an unpleasant memory, and then, "Oh, I don't want to feel that, I don't want to know that," and the mind just starts taking off, and the unpleasantness, the fear is increased a thousandfold.

Metta is just the opposite of this. It simply doesn't discriminate; it doesn't say this is bad, this is good. It simply flows in, around, includes and accepts the experience of that memory just as it is. And in that connectedness, we see it much more clearly. "Oh, it's an unpleasant memory." It's still unpleasant. But the whole extra story and the whole sense of separation and fear just gets cut with the clear seeing and acceptance of metta.

Let me read you a story that's an example of this, from that well-known Buddhist writer Michael Crichton. He's talking about being in Africa on some kind of safari, in a tent with his wife and a whole group of people. They were in the tent at night, it was dark, and he wakes up—they both wake up—and there's all this crashing and banging and huge noise outside the tent. He's lying there, and it sounds like an elephant. Even though they said there were no elephants, it sounds like an elephant walking right by the tent. He went into a total panic, just lying there not knowing what to do, and the whole thing was just taking off for ten, fifteen minutes, I don't know how long. Finally, he just couldn't stand it. He took a flashlight, unzipped the tent, looked out, shined the flashlight out, and it was shining right into the big, huge eye of an elephant, maybe ten feet away.

Well, as soon as he saw that, all the panic disappeared. He was like, "Oh, it's an elephant." Zipped up the tent, went back to bed, and fell right asleep.

And this is what he says about that. He says he had really slept well when he stopped worrying, and he was very impressed with the instantaneous flip in his own emotional state—from barely controlled hysteria to a detached calm once he saw the giant eye. How had that happened?

He reflected on it and said, "I realize later we're all like that. We can work ourselves into a hysterical panic over possibilities that we won't look at. What if I have cancer? What if my job is at risk? What if my kids are on drugs? What if I'm getting bald? What if an elephant is outside my tent? What if I am faced with some terrible thing I don't know how to deal with? And that hysteria goes away the instant we are willing to look, to hear the answer, even if the answer is what we feared all along. Yes, you have cancer. Yes, you're going bald. Yes, there's an elephant outside your tent. Now the question becomes, what are you going to do with it? Subsequent emotions may not be pleasant, but the hysteria stops. Hysteria accompanies an unwillingness to look at what is really going on, and it promotes an unwillingness to look. We feel we are afraid to look, when actually it is not looking that makes us afraid. The minute we look, we can cease being afraid."

In an odd way, he's describing an aspect of metta—the willingness to just be with whatever it is that's presenting itself. We don't have to like it. We don't have to approve of it. But just in the being with it, the hysteria stops.

And we can meet what's happening with a sense of wholeness, of completion, of ease. The sense of separation doesn't come from the fact that there's a difficult experience arising. It comes from getting lost in that fear, that aversion, that reactivity to the difficult experience.

And obviously—and you'll see this probably quite a bit here on this retreat—the difficult experience isn't always an elephant outside somewhere. A great deal of the time we take that unwillingness, that sense that if it's unpleasant it's a mistake, it's bad, it's wrong, and we turn that negativity against ourselves.

Our old friend self-judgment can be elicited at times quite strongly for some people when working with sending loving-kindness to yourself. That sense of, "I don't deserve it. How can someone who's so fill-in-the-blank deserve metta?" And it could be anything that we're judging about ourselves—whatever we cannot accept. The way our bodies look. If we have some illness, if we have some disability, something we see as weakness. Certain emotions that we're experiencing that we judge ourselves for: anger, grief, sadness, rage, pettiness, jealousy, self-judgment itself. Patterns of our personality. We anger too easily. We're not as generous as we would like to be. We find that we're selfish. We find that hatred comes up.

Whatever it is, it really doesn't matter what it is. This sense that when these particular aspects of our physical, mental, emotional experience arise—aspects that we dislike or fear or judge so harshly—they're not okay. When they arise, often our deep-rooted pattern of flinching back, pulling away, creating distance is so strong that we pull back from the thing we're judging in ourselves. Say, for example, jealousy. We pull back so quickly that it's almost below the level of consciousness. Jealousy might come up, and I've pulled back and reacted and started judging myself about it before I even consciously acknowledge, "Oh, jealousy is present." And in that pulling back, that sense of separation from ourselves, that sense of incompletion, that sense of needing to somehow fix ourselves, becomes so strong. And it's actually in the service of denial—of simply not feeling the jealousy.

So our practice of metta is this: if jealousy arises or self-judgment arises or anything in our experience that we judge as not being okay, the metta simply meets it with an outflowing quality of spacious acceptance. Because as Jung said, the parts of ourselves that we do not accept will become hostile to us. Metta functions by bringing all the parts of ourselves that we don't accept up into the light. It's not always a pleasant experience, definitely. There's a reason we're not accepting these parts—we don't like them.

But what metta does, as Ajahn Sumedho describes it: with metta, one isn't blinding oneself with an ideal. In other words, we're not saying, "I'm sending loving-kindness to myself because I'm such a wonderful, perfect, ideal person." Actually, the metta gets stronger as we open to and accept all the little warts that we don't like so much. He says, "Metta isn't blinding oneself with an ideal. Instead, one is witnessing the unpleasantness in a situation, thing, person, or in oneself. Witnessing the unpleasantness without creating anything around it."

I love the felt sense that gives me. Thinking of myself, something I really detest about myself arises very clearly. With metta, with the heart of metta, we witness it in all the space of an open heart without

creating anything around it. No ripple of aversion, no ripple of "Oh, that's okay, I'm really okay anyway." It's just what it is. It arises into the space of metta, it lives its life, and it passes.

The field of metta, as Sharon says, is like the sky—you can throw anything into it and it doesn't disturb it. The field of metta is undisturbed. A beautiful quality arises, we see it as beautiful, we don't create anything around it. An unpleasant quality arises, we see it as unpleasant, metta doesn't create anything around it. There's space for it all to arise, be met with clarity, with greatness of heart, and non-reactivity of mind.

Acceptance, kindness, and patience are three aspects of metta that it's very helpful to remember, especially when we find we're getting caught in aspects of self-judgment. This is where metta begins—by befriending all these little things or big things that have been kept in the dark. When they come up in our practice, and they will, it's not a mistake. It's because the metta is strengthening and deepening. Our heart becomes more courageous, more able to allow these difficult experiences to arise, because our deeper understanding and faith in our connectedness, in our intrinsic wholeness, is getting stronger and stronger. We know that can't be blasted. It doesn't matter what arises, and so we can greet it.

We can greet it as Rumi talks about in "The Guest House":

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.

Many hidden joys and sorrows will come up. We're not going to have perfect, balanced metta with each of them, of course. But each moment—just in a moment—that there's the intention to connect with and accept and be kind to whatever's arising, that is a moment of metta. That strengthens our understanding of our connectedness.

So that's noticing how aversion, fear, and anger work to hide our sense of connectedness. This is called, in the classical terms, the far enemy of loving kindness. It's the far enemy because it's really the opposite. It comes up a lot in the practice, and it's pretty easy to notice. You know when you're caught in fear and aversion. You don't tend to confuse it with loving kindness.

Now attachment, clinging, the subtle quality of desire—this is sometimes called the near enemy of loving kindness. The near enemy, because at times, not always, but at times we can actually confuse the experience of attachment for metta.

Let me describe that a little bit. Recognizing in the moment of your experience how attachment or clinging arises and how it functions is pretty simple, pretty obvious when we're paying attention. Just as aversion or fear arises with an unpleasant experience, attachment arises with a pleasant experience. A pleasant sound, a pleasant sight, a pleasant emotion, a really nice thought about something pleasant that might happen ten years from now—but it's a thought arising in the moment, and there's this pleasant feeling that goes along with it.

When we're not paying attention, we tend to think, "Yes, this is right. This is good. This is happiness. This is how life is supposed to be." And there's just this subtle movement of energy, of mind, of heart towards that—or not so subtle. And if we're not noticing: "What can I do to make this stay forever?"

Now, I'm not saying that a pleasant experience isn't a kind of happiness—certainly it is. But it has conditions, the main one being it isn't going to stay forever, no matter what it is. And when we don't see that, what was actually experienced as happiness becomes the cause for greater suffering in the form of this delusion of separation, of needing something for love, needing something to complete me. In its grossest experience, as soon as the sense of wanting arises, we're caught in a sense of separation.

I'll give you an example. On a gross level, you wouldn't confuse this with metta because the suffering is obvious. I was getting on an airplane for an overnight flight, which I'm not fond of because I really can't sleep sitting up. I never sleep on those flights. I was on the aisle of one of those middle rows, and about ten minutes before I knew they were going to close the doors, I suddenly realized nobody had sat in the other seats. That was a moment of "Oh, that would be nice"—a moment of pleasantness.

And immediately, immediately, it turned to such suffering because of the grasping. How can I hold on to this? I've got to keep those seats. All my senses were strained. Everybody who walked through the door of that plane, my attention was just glued to watching where they were going, tightening. Hatred if they started to come down that row. Everyone on the plane became my enemy. It was a most unpleasant experience.

This, in its gross form, is how clinging works. It was just a pleasant sight, a pleasant thought—maybe I'll get to lie down—and it immediately created a sense of separation, suffering, and neediness.

It's a happy story because actually nobody sat down next to me. I got to lie down, and I also got to say, "Oh well, may everybody on this plane be happy."

So that's clinging on a gross level. We all know it. It's suffering. We wouldn't fool ourselves that it's not. But attachment often arises more subtly. Attachment and metta both follow on pleasant experience—they both arise in pleasant experience.

So we associate attachment with pleasant experience, but it has conditions. Metta also, when you're experiencing metta, is very pleasant. And it becomes more pleasant. And it's so easy for the attachment to slip in there and not be noticed. We can still think it's the metta functioning.

A couple of examples. Once I was on a retreat in a beautifully landscaped place in South Africa, way up in the mountains. It was really very exquisite. There was a circular walk lined with huge iris bushes. I had been there some weeks, and one morning I came out early just as the sun was coming up, which was my favorite time, with all this mistiness. A really beautiful spot. And all those bushes had suddenly bloomed that morning—this exquisite, very pale lavender white. The beauty was overwhelming. I can feel it now.

In that moment, standing there, there was just a sense of real appreciation. A sense of metta, really. Appreciation and connectedness to nature, to beauty, to the world. There were no thoughts. That's a moment of absolute connectedness—metta, no separation. Just as it is. A moment, two moments, three moments.

But the mind cannot leave well enough alone. After some moments of looking, this thought came in: "They won't still be here tomorrow. Maybe I should get a camera and take photos. Then I could show my mother—she would love to see this, she loves landscaping. I could show my friends. I could remember it."

I sort of noticed what was happening, but not really. It was masquerading as still appreciating with this loving, connected heart the beauty of the situation. But actually clinging had come in, and I was trying to hold on to it. Thinking I was enjoying just being present with metta, I was actually caught in clinging, in attachment. It took a little time to recognize, until I realized I had started running around—"I think I have a friend I can borrow a camera from"—and in fact, with all that beauty there, I was completely separated from it, running around like a nut looking for a camera so I could hold on to how beautiful it was.

This is what we do. It's not the irises that were the cause of the clinging or the attachment—it's the upwelling of pleasant feeling. It could have been anything. The irises, a nice thought, a pizza for lunch. It really didn't matter what it was. The attachment comes in to that upwelling of pleasant feeling. And if we're not alert, we might not notice it.

So metta, at times—in the times when all the shadow stuff isn't coming up—can be extremely pleasant. It's beautiful, that sense of connectedness, of completion, of easiness, of no need to shut out any experience. And it can easily drift into attachment.

I was sending metta to my dear friend, and I noticed suddenly, "Oh, we don't see each other as much as we used to. May she be happy. May she be free. How come we don't see each other so much? May she be free from danger." And then kind of back and forth, and suddenly there was just this little bit of longing. Sometimes longing can have a little edge of pleasantness, and you can keep going with it for a while and not quite recognize it's not metta—it's attachment.

That's attachment functioning as the near enemy of metta. It's not bad. It's not a mistake. We notice it

because as you keep paying attention, after a while you notice it doesn't feel connected. And that's the difference. "I really would love for us to spend more time together"—it sounds connected, but it's actually creating this sense of separation. "I need to see her."

I need to be together. I need something from her in order to be complete. Whereas loving-kindness is just this outflowing of "may you be happy"—it doesn't matter if I never see or hear from you again. It has nothing to do with that. It's just a total wishing of well-being and happiness. And in that, we are perfectly happy and complete. It doesn't matter who you're sending it to—yourself, your friend, a benefactor, an enemy when we can get to that. The experience of metta itself is complete and connecting.

So knowing that attachment can masquerade as metta doesn't mean we then pull away from everything beautiful. Not at all. It's a great opportunity to learn the difference. At that point when I noticed I was getting into "how can we spend more time together," I brought my attention to my experience, felt the neediness, the separation. "Oh, this isn't metta." And you simply reconnect with the person's beautiful quality, reconnect with the phrase. Again, establishing that intention.

Metta is a practice of purity of motivation. It's not about results or controlling the results. And that's another way attachment can slip in and masquerade as metta—in how we're relating to the practice itself. I would find myself getting caught in this so often. "How am I doing? Am I feeling it yet? Is this really metta? Is this strong enough? No, not really good enough, okay. Really feel it—may I be free from suffering! May I really feel it for him." And we're leaning into it. Or maybe we'll say, "Okay, it doesn't matter if I don't feel it, but if I really drop into each phrase, I'm going to get really concentrated. How concentrated am I?"

This is attachment slipping into the practice. If you're leaning forward a little bit, doing a kind of check—how good am I doing, how strong is the feeling, comparing it to yesterday, comparing it to someone else—you're slipping into attachment. Remember, all we can do is establish in one moment the purity of our intention, of our motivation. I wish to wish myself well. I can't control the results.

One other way the practice sometimes leans into attachment: we hear the phrases as trying to change how things are. For instance, if I'm sick and I'm saying "may I be healthy," that can just be the pure motivation of caring for my body—or it could be "may I really get healthy, I hate this sickness." Or for someone we really care for who's having a hard time, when we're saying "may you be happy," there's that subtle moving into thinking if I do this, maybe it'll change their unhappiness. Maybe it will, and it would be great if it does, but all we can do is cultivate the purity of the well-wishing.

If you find yourself sliding into frustration, or leaning forward, or feeling somehow out of sync, you might check and see if the practice has started focusing on results rather than simply resting in the intention to connect, to wish well. If we can just rest in that intention, it takes a lot of pressure off. We realize it's all out of our control how it goes. All we do is when we notice we're off anywhere else—oh, okay, come back. Connect with myself, connect with the benefactor, whoever you're sending it to, and just gently, delicately

drop into your heart with the next phrase. That's all. You don't have to go anywhere beyond that. In any moment we can just come back and do that. We're cultivating metta. We're cultivating this quality of loving, accepting connectedness.

It sneaks up on us. A lot of the time, we really don't notice that anything is happening. But each time we repeat the phrase, each time we connect with whoever we're sending it to—even when we don't feel a thing—that is a reinforcing, a strengthening of that intention of heart and mind. And that's all we have to work with. The intention of metta is what counteracts the habits of ill will and greed, the habits of seeming separation, confusion, and suffering. Each intention of metta allows our faith and trust in our absolute connectedness to get stronger.

I want to end with something the Buddha said. He said, "If just for the lasting of a finger snap, a person indulges in a thought of goodwill, or gives attention to a thought of goodwill, of metta, just for the lasting of a finger snap, such a person is called a bhikkhu"—which means someone who is really devoted to the practice. "Not empty of result is her meditation. She carries out the teaching. She responds to advice. She does not eat the country's alms food in vain. So what then would I say of one who makes much of such a thought?"

It's so powerful.

Just for a finger snap. Think how many finger snaps you've cultivated thoughts of goodwill already today. We have no idea of the power of that, but it's immense.

In these moments where we consciously recognize that metta, that open acceptance, over and over, we really experience the potential to live our life in another way—in another way altogether. To find an ease and a happiness of heart and mind that is not dependent on any changing circumstance.

This is really how the practice of metta opens us to true liberation of heart and mind.

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