Mettā, Tenderness And Connection

Guy Armstrong · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Guy Armstrong · 59:50

The talk tonight is called Metta, Tenderness and Connection.

We've talked before about how our basic human condition is one of great openness to a range of pleasant and unpleasant experiences of both mind and body. It's said that the human realm is actually the best realm for awakening, the optimum realm for awakening because of this mix. You see, if it was too pleasant, we'd just get complacent and we'd never be interested in liberation. And that's what it's said to be like in the heaven realms. So, God forbid you should be reborn in one of those places. Spirit Rock sometimes feels like it's tending a little too much to the heaven realm. Maybe we need a little more grit here. Nonetheless, we find enough.

If we have too much pain, then our spirit gets completely overwhelmed and oppressed, and we can't really imagine the possibility. We can't get inspired to the possibility of happiness. And you can see this in many lives that go on parts of this earth, that the conditions are so hellish that there's not really the ability to look up and imagine the possibility of freedom. But in our realm, we have a mixture that's said to be very good for showing us the possibility of freedom, but also spurring us to develop in that way.

Sometimes we might wish we weren't quite so sensitive. This openness is both a blessing and a bit of a burden at times. Sometimes we might wish that our hides were a little thicker. These horses down in the meadow have very thick hides. I don't know if you know that about horses, but Sally is a horsewoman, and she tells me you have to hit a horse quite hard, actually, to get its attention, because the hide is fairly thick, and they can live outdoors, even in cold winter weather, and that cold doesn't penetrate to their bones quite as much as you would think. We might like to be like that sometimes, but we're not.

This is from Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche: "It is as if we had a pimple on our body that was very sore, so sore that we do not want to rub it or scratch it. During our shower, we do not want to rub too much soap over it because it hurts. That sore spot on our body is an analogy for tenderness. Why? Because even in the midst of aggression, insensitivity, or laziness in our life, we always have a soft spot, some point we can cultivate. A more vivid analogy might be of an open wound, which is always there. That open wound is usually very inconvenient and problematic. We would like to be tough. We would like to come on strong. But there will always be a sore spot. At least we are accessible somewhere. So we are not completely covered with a suit of armor all the time. Such a relief."

This sore spot is the point that we cultivate in the practice of the Brahmaviharas. It's this openness of heart or tenderness of heart through which we feel not only our joys and sorrows, but the joys and sorrows of the whole world. And it is this that we can develop in a very beautiful way.

I think one reason that we feel so sensitive is our vulnerability. Due to impermanence, the conditions can change at any time. And pleasure can come or pain can come. Essentially, anything can happen in any given moment because life is so unpredictable. Anything can happen.

So this was brought home to us a few winters ago. A good friend of ours was in India for spiritual practice and holiday both. He got up in the morning and went outside of his hotel room to do some qigong on the beach where he was staying in southern India. But the date happened to be December 26, 2004. And he was out on the beach, pleasantly enjoying the warm temperature, tropical temperature, and all of a sudden a very big wave came and knocked him over, flattened him, and then swept back out to the sea.

As he stood up, he looked at the wave as it was going out, and he thought, this isn't like any other wave I've ever seen, because it left a huge hollow. You probably saw the video. A huge hollow as it retreated. This was the first wave of the tsunami. And he thought, this doesn't look right. And he went and got his friend, his partner, and said, come on, you better get ready. And they climbed on top of this concrete wall and held arms, locked arms. And our friend latched onto a palm tree that was growing up beside the concrete wall, which was about four feet off the ground.

And then, as you probably know, the second wave hit. And that was the wave that did the major part of the damage. It swept a lot of people out to sea, and a lot of lives were lost all over the southern rim of India and Sri Lanka and Thailand. But our friend, because he had a good grip on the tree and his partner had a good grip on him, they were buffeted around, but they were okay.

They were basically saved by his foresight there. So this was one time when the practice of non-clinging was not recommended. It was through clinging that their lives were saved.

So life is like that. At any time, anything can happen. As you start to open to the stories of people's lives, and even in this room, you know, so many stories of ups and downs. One of the ones that touches me, I mean there's so many, but one that touches me is the story of this famous Tibetan teacher named Yeshe Ken Rinpoche. He was one of the great Dzogchen masters of the last fifty years.

He was born in Tibet in 1932. He practiced intensively, was trained in the old system, received many years of training under the great masters of his time, and developed as a very great lama and practitioner. And then when the invasion came in 1949, he stayed on for a few more years but fled Tibet like the Dalai Lama in 1959 and found his home in India.

So here he is, one of the great masters of old Tibet, now kind of adrift in India. And sometimes he would center around members of the Tibetan community. And he said, "At those times, I gave empowerments to great assemblies of people, including dozens of tulkus, reincarnate lamas, and thousands of monks. At other times, I was utterly poor, living hand to mouth on the streets in Calcutta, wandering around with my hand out, begging for pennies. So many unexpected ups and downs. Who can describe them?"

How do we prepare ourselves for those kinds of changes in life? How do we strengthen our heart so that

we can retain the tenderness and still meet life and its changes with some equilibrium?

Just another short story. About a year and a half ago, there was a really quite lovely young man in his early twenties who came to practice at the three-month course at IMS. He got very into his practice, very inspired by the dharma, and wanted to ordain as a monk, either in the US or in England or perhaps in Asia, and was at home making plans to do that when all of a sudden he was hit by some intestinal bug. He had been spending time in India before he had been at IMS and had probably brought something back, but essentially his digestion broke down. Although he's consulted many doctors and tropical disease specialists in Toronto, they haven't been able to diagnose his condition, much less remedy it. So here he is a year and a half later, very strong desire for dharma practice, but incapacitated by some mysterious illness that has come. How should he practice? What does one tell him to do? I've stayed in touch with him and it's not easy to know what to say.

This is from Bob Dylan, his memoir called Chronicles. "My grandma was filled with nobility and goodness. Told me once that happiness isn't on the road to anywhere. That happiness is the road. Had also instructed me to be kind because everyone you'll ever meet is fighting a hard battle."

So I think one of the beauties of our brahmaviharas practice is that we use that tenderness as an avenue, as a doorway to feel out the world, to feel the hard battles that other people are fighting, to feel the battles that we ourselves are fighting, to open to our joys and sorrows and also open to the pain of the world. And it's this tenderness that really provides the doorway to connection. And it's amazing when that kind of connection happens.

There's a story that happened in the Bay Area just a couple of winters ago. You may have heard it. It was in the newspaper at the time. You probably know that humpback whales migrate down the California coast. In the winter, they're going south to Baja California, where they give birth to their young in warmer waters. So in December, this female whale was going off the coast of San Francisco near the Farallon Islands. They're about twenty miles out from the bay.

Unfortunately, she was traveling in an area that was planted with crab traps. And what the crab fishermen do is they string these ropes in the water that are weighted with crab traps in which hopefully the crabs wander and can't get out. And then they go and collect the crabs later. They're long ropes with the traps dangling off. And this female whale who weighed about, they estimated about fifty tons, she's about forty-five feet long, about fifteen meters long, got tangled up in these crab pot lines.

And a fisherman happened to notice her one Sunday morning. Some of the lines had wrapped around her body four times. And they were around her back, around her flippers, and there were ropes over around her head and through her mouth. The problem was that the crab pots were still on the ropes, and the ropes were digging into her flesh. And the fishermen said that they could see visible cuts where the ropes were digging in. Because the crab pots were heavy, she was burdened by about a thousand pounds of extra weight. And she was having trouble staying afloat and swimming back up to the surface in order to

breathe before she went down. So she was losing energy and starting to lose the fight against the weight of these things.

So this fisherman noticed her and then called the Marine Mammal Center to alert them. And they sent a team of divers out to look at the situation. This was about two-thirty in the afternoon.

The divers reached the scene and found themselves facing an extraordinary dilemma. As one diver later explained, getting into the water with a humpback whale is an incredibly risky maneuver. One flip of the tail can kill a human being. Yet there she was, trapped and struggling in this dire situation. What else could they do?

Four divers donned their suits and plunged into the bay carrying special knives. They positioned themselves strategically around the whale and began the delicate work of cutting through the ropes. One diver who worked near the whale's face later shared his remarkable experience: "The whale just floated passively in the water the whole time, giving off a strange kind of vibration. When I was cutting the line through her mouth, her eye was there winking at me, watching me. It was an epic moment of my life."

After some time, the divers succeeded in cutting through all the ropes. When the whale realized she was free, she began swimming in circles in apparent joy. Then something truly extraordinary happened—she swam up to each diver individually, nuzzling each one in turn.

"It felt to me like she was thanking me," one diver recounted, "knowing that she was free and that we had helped her. She stopped about a foot away from me, pushed me around a little bit, and had some fun. She seemed kind of affectionate, like a dog that's happy to see you. I never felt threatened. It was an amazing, unbelievable experience."

I feel touched when I read this story again, as I did when I first heard it. It reminds us of this heart connection to the rest of life that we don't often feel, but exists within us as a possibility. We have this deep, deep connection to life. We're touched by her tenderness and vulnerability, and that touches the open spot in our hearts.

The reason an encounter like this can be so powerful is that we forget this experience of deep connection. We live with one of the real sadnesses of the false sense of self or the ego—it makes us feel isolated. We feel we are unique in all ways. Each of us is unique in some ways, but we're also very alike in other ways. The ego makes us forget our alikeness, which is our connection, and focus instead on uniqueness and difference. This gives us a profound sense of isolation.

When I was teaching the retreat for scientists at IMS about a month ago, one participant reported a finding—I don't know if it's even been published yet—that one of the deepest sources of unhappiness among people is this sense of isolation. You can feel it in our culture today with the breakdown of family and community. The sense of separation is growing stronger.

The Brahmaviharas and loving-kindness give us a way to see beyond this false sense of isolation, which is so limiting. Isolation is not the same as seclusion. Seclusion is voluntary, a protection, a freedom, whereas isolation is this underlying feeling that we can't connect, that we aren't connected, or that we don't belong because somehow we're not acceptable. Metta shows us a different view. All the Brahmaviharas show us a different view.

There's a poem by Palestinian-American poet Naomi Shehab Nye called "Kindness" that speaks to this:

Before you know what kindness really is, you must lose things. Feel the future dissolve in a moment, like salt in a weakened broth. What you held in your hand, what you counted and carefully saved, all this must go. So you know how desolate the landscape can be between the regions of kindness.

Before you learn the tender gravity of kindness, you must travel where the Indian in a white poncho lies dead by the side of the road. You must see how this could be you. How he too was someone who journeyed through the night with plans and the simple breath that kept him alive.

Before you know kindness is the deepest thing inside, you must know sorrow as the other deepest thing. You must wake up with sorrow. You must speak to it till your voice catches the thread of all sorrows and you see the size of the cloth.

Then it is only kindness that makes sense anymore. Only kindness that ties your shoes and sends you out into the day to mail letters and purchase bread. Only kindness that raises its head from the crowd of the world to say, it is I you have been looking for, and then goes with you everywhere like a shadow or a friend.

The part I love most is where she says, "You must speak to sorrow till your voice catches the thread of all sorrows and you see the size of the cloth." The size of the cloth is the size of humanity—and in fact, of all beings. All beings experience difficulty as well as joy. That's the size of our cloth.

The Brahmaviharas open us to this truth. We look around at every being we bring into our hearts and minds. We see the scope of all beings in the world and recognize that range of sorrow and joy, the wish for safety, happiness, health, and ease—just like our own wish.

So that's why it's beautiful that we've reached this point in the retreat where we've opened up the metta to all beings. Then we begin to touch on this boundless quality of metta. And that's how the Buddha often spoke about the Brahmaviharas—he called them immeasurable deliverances of mind.

It's said that metta is like a gentle rain that falls everywhere without distinction. It falls on, as you've been reading, the short and the tall, the mighty and the weak, omitting none—like a rain falling everywhere, touching everyone. This is the boundless quality of it.

Sometimes it's hard to remember why that metta should be extended in a boundless way. But the Buddha offered this reflection: Given the vast span of lives that we have lived in this circle of birth, death, rebirth, we've all been born countless times. He says from beginningless time, truly countless. We have crossed

paths with each other before. So he says that it's hard in this world to meet a being who has not at some point in this past been your mother or your father, your sister or your brother, your daughter or your son.

Now you may or may not believe in this whole rebirth thing, but what if that was true? What if all of us here went back with that kind of connection and intimacy? How would you feel if that was true? It might depend how you feel about your family of origin. But nonetheless, I think we'd all feel a lot more connected than we tend to while rushing about our busy daily lives. So this is one way to open up to that boundless quality—that we may all have been in this dance for a long time together.

And so then the Buddha uses the analogy as you've been chanting in the evenings of a mother's care for her child: "Even as a mother protects with her life her child, her only child, so with a boundless heart should one cherish all living beings, radiating kindness over the entire world, spreading upwards to the skies and downwards to the depths." This is a possibility of our metta practice.

And we can activate it on so many occasions in daily life. Jack Kornfield, many of you know, one of the main teachers here at Spirit Rock, lives in Woodacre, is married, and has a daughter who is now, I think, twenty-two or so. She graduated from college this past year and wants to be a human rights activist, is applying to law schools at the moment, and took some time off to travel in South America.

So she was back home for a spell after her graduation and was driving back with a friend from Berkeley. They were going along Sir Francis Drake along Larkspur Landing. Many of you know that's where the ferries come in from San Francisco. So the bay is right on one side of the highway, and there are six lanes of traffic and then office buildings and a shopping center on the other side of the highway.

So they were driving back from Berkeley, heading west on Sir Francis Drake, and they noticed that the cars were really slow at a time of day when they shouldn't have been. They were curious what was going on, why there was a snarl in the traffic. So they got up to where the traffic was virtually stopped. Cars were just going by very slowly.

And what they saw is that a mother duck was trying to cross the highway with six little ducklings. They had plopped off one curb on one side of the road, and they were out in the middle of the three lanes of traffic—westbound traffic, heading for the bay. The cars were trying to drive around them, and people were getting annoyed.

So Caroline stopped her car in the middle lane. Her friend got out and waved all the other cars to a stop. The friend held the cars at bay while Caroline sort of shepherded the mother duck and the ducklings over to the median of the highway. The mother duck hopped up, but the little ducks couldn't quite make it—the curb was too high, so she helped each of the little ducks up.

And then she said, "Oh good, mother's safe." No—still heading for the water. She hops down the other side. And then cars are coming in the other direction, and then they start stopping and trying to go around. So Caroline and her friend stop that line of traffic, wait for the mother duck to cross, and they're helping the

other little ducks, too, across and up to the next curb.

Meanwhile, traffic is backing up behind their parked car. Some drivers also don't see what's happening, so they're leaning on their horns and hanging out the window and shouting, "What's this about? Get moving. Keep the traffic going." But the drivers who get close enough to see what's happening start standing outside their cars and applauding and cheering, until the mother duck and all the little babies are on the other side of the road and headed toward the bay.

Even as a mother protects her child, her only child, so we can cherish all living beings.

The Brahma Viharas open us up to this sense of caring. That is what our practice is: we practice caring over and over and over again.

People have asked, "Should I focus on the outcome? If I'm wishing somebody happiness or health or safety and it's not happening, does that mean the metta isn't working?" Not at all. Because what we're practicing is caring. Every time there's a sincere moment of goodwill toward another person—which means we really do care that they find safety and happiness and the rest—that metta is waking up in our heart. And by waking it up moment after moment after moment, we're strengthening that quality of mind. We're opening up that tenderness, bringing it into contact with life and making it what actually becomes a refuge for ourselves as well. I'll say more about that later.

Then eventually this sense of caring can come back around to become a motivation in our practice. And this is the quality that we call bodhicitta. If we really want to save beings from suffering, we start to realize the only way we can fully do that is to be able to help them come out of their own suffering. And in order to do that, we have to come out of ours. So we take on the motivation as a core of our practice: I want to come out of my suffering and understand it as the best way—or a really effective way—to help others come out of theirs. And this is the motivation called bodhicitta, also sometimes called the awakening heart or awakening mind.

The Dalai Lama, who as you probably know is considered to be the bodhisattva of compassion, said that when he was young in his practice as a young monk, he was very impressed by the concept of emptiness and cessation. He said, "Twenty years ago, I used to contemplate emptiness. I was very impressed by the theory and it really inspired me to seek the cessation of suffering. I thought that working for the welfare of other sentient beings—an infinite number of sentient beings—was very idealistic. Later I studied Guide to the Bodhisattva's Way of Life by Shantideva, and that changed my outlook. I still admire the idea of cessation, but these days I have a stronger admiration and aspiration for the compassion and tolerance that come with the awakening heart. The union of compassion and emptiness is something quite unique, but you can bring about an inner experience of it if you make the effort."

So we'd like to just touch on this concept of bodhicitta. It's a hard thing to really actualize in a strong way. So don't be disappointed if it's not a really, really big flame in your practice. Bring it in as a little candle

and nourish it.

The Dalai Lama says, "I cannot pretend that I am really able to practice bodhicitta, but it does give me tremendous inspiration. Deep inside me, I realize how valuable and beneficial it is. That is all."

So we take this care for others as one of the central motivations in our own aspiration to wake up and to become free.

And then we start to see that this care for others also expresses itself in our care with our conduct. As we start to tune into how sensitive we are and how sensitive others are, we start to want to move through the world without harming, even in the slightest kind of way. There are not many people who can do that really, really thoroughly, so we have to give a lot of space for our own learning. But this is the area of sila, compassionate conduct, as we took especially the first five precepts this morning.

We just remember the importance of creating that sense of safety for others. Really, it's our conduct and our care with it that creates a safe atmosphere for others. This practice of sila is called giving the gift of fearlessness—so that when people are in our presence, they can trust they're not going to be harmed by us. We take care with not harming life, with not taking what isn't given, with our sexual energy, take care with our speech, which is the way that most harm comes for people in our walk of life, I think. And we take care with our use of drugs and intoxicants.

So how well can sila be developed? How refined can it be?

Oprah Winfrey had the opportunity to interview the Dalai Lama, which I think is fantastic. I love what she does on television and in her magazine, O, because she brings into a very mainstream audience these teachings that ordinarily don't get such a wide distribution. The people who've been in O include Joseph Goldstein, Sharon Salzberg, Jack Kornfield, James Baraz—one of our usual February teachers—and this month is Richie Davidson, the neuroscientist I think I mentioned the other night. A lot, a lot of people read her magazine and watch the TV show. So I really appreciate the spirit that she's bringing to this.

A few years ago, she got to interview the Dalai Lama. She started off by asking him, "Have you ever had to forgive yourself for anything?" The Dalai Lama replied, "Small incidents like accidentally killing an insect." "Killing an insect?" Oprah said.

An insect. Okay.

The Dalai Lama continued, "My attitude toward mosquitoes is not very favorable. Not very peaceful. Bedbugs also."

"And that's it?" Oprah couldn't quite believe what she was hearing. "In your lifetime, that's what you have to forgive yourself for?"

"Small incidents every day, maybe," the Dalai Lama said evenly. "But major mistakes, it seems, no."

"No major mistakes," Oprah repeated, mulling over the idea. She fell silent and looked out the window. There was awe in her voice when she continued, "You have nothing in life that you have regrets about. That's a good life. That's a great life, to have no regrets."

"Regarding service to Tibet," the Dalai Lama said, "service to Buddhism, service to humanity, I have done as much as I can. Regarding my own spiritual practice, when I share my experiences with more advanced meditators, even those who have spent years in the mountains practicing single-pointedness of mind, I don't lag too far behind."

Some of that could be the fruit of that practice of sila. Such a calm mind to have no regrets about our conduct.

The Dalai Lama was expressing that as he has matured, he has appreciated more and more this quality of the awakening heart. Alice Walker said something similar: "As I get older, I realize the thing that I value the most is good-heartedness."

Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche continued on that theme of the soft spot. He's talking about like a sore spot on the outer part of our body: "There is also an inner wound called Tathagata Garbha, or Buddha nature. This is like a heart that has been sliced and bruised with wisdom and compassion. When the external wound and the internal wound begin to meet and communicate, then we begin to realize that our whole being is made out of one complete sore spot altogether. This is called bodhisattva fever. That vulnerability is compassion. We really have no way to defend ourselves anymore."

The bodhisattva fever is what the brahmaviharas wake up. We start to feel the emptiness, the tenderness in ourselves, the tenderness in the world, and it all comes together. We see that whereas we originally thought the game was just to clear it up here, the game becomes much bigger. It's to clear it up everywhere that nature is getting caught, everywhere that constriction and suffering are happening.

Ryokan, the Japanese Zen monk and poet, expressed this in a lovely sentence: "Oh, that my monk's robes were wide enough to gather up all the people in this floating world." All the people in this floating world. Could we gather them together and take care of them all?

As we bring this kind of generosity of spirit into our dharma practice, we start feeling this connection to the life of all beings. I was on retreat some years ago at IMS, doing a long retreat in the winter. It was November into December—cold, icy, snowy, freezing rain. You probably know Massachusetts in the winter. Every day I would go out walking by this stone wall, and even into the winter months, one of those really cute chipmunks that Sally mentioned the other night would pop up out of the cracks in the stone wall where they were probably storing acorns, right alongside my walking path. I'd get to watch them for a little bit before they got frightened and ran away. I had this really warm feeling toward the chipmunk because it was about the only sentient being I was meeting out there in that weather.

A friend happened to visit the center. A few of us were practicing and he dropped off little cakes for each

one of us and a little note with his words of friendship. I especially appreciated his encouragement because it was cold and gray and dark. I could use some encouragement. The little note that he put in with the cake said, "All beings are cheering you on. Good luck with your practice."

All beings are cheering you on. And they're cheering you on too. The devas who are fluttering up in the trees are looking down and sending their blessings.

And I had the image that that little chipmunk was standing there, standing up and yelling, "Go guy, go! Do your walking, do your sitting."

So we come with this innate capacity for connection, and I think children tend to have it if they haven't been abused in some way. But then for the rest of us too, our heart tends to get hardened by the experiences of life—just the normal knocks that life offers—and we don't yet have the wisdom to know how to stay open through the challenges that life throws at us.

So often through our teen years or maybe our early twenties, the heart starts to get covered over, and we start to contract. There are a lot of names for this process. We could say we close down or we shut off, that we start to repress our feelings, we build more defenses, we become armored in many ways. And that sensitivity of feeling that we had when we were younger isn't so accessible. We lose track of the connection, especially as we get so involved in career, livelihood, relationship, family, children, and so forth.

Freud said something really interesting. He said that the very root of neurosis, the reason that mental ill health occurs, is because of our refusal to suffer. So life gives us more suffering than we can open to, and out of our inability to stay open in the face of it, we become neurotic in many different ways. So basically the movement to shut down as a way of dealing with the pain of life doesn't work. It just goes underground and becomes a lot more complicated.

And of course then we meet those habits of denial and avoidance and the complications when we come to practice meditation. In some ways, I don't think we need to worry too much about how the pain got there. Eckhart Tolle, who is a kind of self-taught discoverer, said something really interesting in his book *The Power of Now*. He said, "All negative emotions are modifications of one primordial, undifferentiated emotion that has its origin in the loss of awareness of who you are beyond name and form."

So in other words, that basic separation from the immediate knowledge of our true nature is really what caused the loss of awareness, the cloudiness, the confusion, and the complications. That's an interesting thing to reflect on. That's a deep and possibly ancient separation.

The metta practice brings us back into the life of the heart. By looking at our own well-being and others' well-being, we touch sometimes many of these old hurts. One of the ways that we get hurt growing up is by the criticism of others. If we've been embarrassed or shamed or punished unfairly, we can take that in and really close around it.

I was very interested to see how the Dalai Lama handled criticism. He was here at Spirit Rock. In fact, he was sitting in a chair that was about three feet in front of me several years ago. He was addressing—we held a conference here of about two hundred Buddhist teachers, Asian and Western both. The format of the day—we had about a day and a half with His Holiness—the format was that individual teachers would present on a theme that was of interest to them and hopefully to the group. Then the Dalai Lama would respond.

And generally what happened is, because so many people wanted to engage him in dialogue, about three people would present, and then he would respond to three presentations along a similar theme. So three people had presented and came to the Dalai Lama's time to speak, and the first presenter said, "Your Holiness, what do you think?"

And he said, "I don't know. All gone out of my head. When you were speaking, I had some ideas, but then these other people spoke. All lost." And he just laughed. Next presentation.

But then one of the presenters said something I thought was a little bit bold. He said, "You know, Your Holiness, Buddhism is becoming quite popularized today in our culture at large. There are movies like *The Little Buddha* and *Kundun*. There are perfumes selling by the name of Samsara. There are travel agencies advertising Nirvana as the best destination. And in that, Buddhism could get lost or trivialized or degraded. And you, Your Holiness, are the biggest popularizer of them all. What do you think about this?"

Dalai Lama was just quiet for a moment. And then he said, "Some people, you see, they call me living Buddha. Other people, they call me the God King. But I am not. I am just a simple Buddhist monk. And then other people, they call me a counter-revolutionary. Or they call me a wolf in monk's clothing. But you see, when somebody says something to me like that, I look back at my own intention. If my intention is sincere, then that is what is important."

What others perceive is up to them. I don't care." And he said that really forcefully—"I don't care." For me, that was a magnificent teaching. When we're criticized, can we have that kind of strength to look at our own intention and know if it's sincere? And then, if it is, not to care what anyone else says about us.

He carries the weight of the whole Tibetan nation on his shoulders. In the face of the cultural genocide that Tibetan people are undergoing, it's only the Dalai Lama at this point who has the international stature to make any difference in that trend. I don't know if even he can do it. He doesn't know if he can do it. But he's the one, if anyone can. So all that rests on his shoulders.

And yet he can still say, "I don't remember what you said. Ha ha ha, all gone." And be so light. He's amazing.

Our very difficulties, as we open to them, can be used in the service of love and compassion. As we open to our own pain, we're better able to understand the pain of others. We're even better able to understand those actions that come out of that pain. We can see the deep roots of the pain, even if those doing the

action can't.

Aung San Suu Kyi, as you probably know, has been under house arrest for many years since the elections that should have put her into power—maybe it was seventeen years ago. She's been under house arrest for most of that time. While she's been under house arrest, she's continued to receive teachings from noted Buddhist teachers, noted sayadaws, some of whom we have known, who have gone in and given her teachings even while she's been under house arrest.

One of her practices while she's been in this enforced arrest has been the practice of loving-kindness. It's a central part of what she does. This is something that she said not so long ago: "When I compared notes with my colleagues in the democracy movement in Burma who have suffered long terms of imprisonment, we found that an enhanced appreciation of metta was a common experience. We had known and felt both the effects of loving-kindness and the unwholesomeness of natures lacking in loving-kindness."

So even through our difficulties, we can come to appreciate the beauty and the power of this quality of loving-kindness.

I mentioned a few nights ago that one of my big hindrances in meditation practice was the arising of fear, sometimes quite strongly. Mostly I worked with it with vipassana practice. That was my main avenue. But as I started doing intensive metta, that brought a quality to my relationship to fear that the vipassana hadn't brought. It was very interesting.

I think somebody may have mentioned—I think Heather mentioned in an earlier talk, Heather Martin—that metta was originally taught as a protection practice. Some monks were sent into the forest to meditate. They were disturbed by beings nearby and came running back to the Buddha in a great state of nervousness and fear. He taught them metta as the practice to take back. He said, "It's all the protection you'll need."

Metta is a wonderful protection practice. As it strengthens in the heart, what you'll find is that it keeps fear at a distance. Basically, fear can't arise when the heart is firmly in the scope of metta.

We were doing the February retreat a few years ago, and one woman who was here for the month had to leave the retreat to fly back to the East Coast to attend a funeral. A family member unexpectedly died while she was in retreat. She said, "I'm quite nervous about going out. I feel pretty sensitive. I'm going into a difficult family situation, but mostly I feel nervous about going through the airports." She wasn't getting integration time and was just being thrown into all that hustle and bustle. "What should I do? Should I practice mindfulness?"

I said, "No, why don't you practice metta? Whenever you're in the airport, you're in line, or you're sitting in the lobby waiting to board the plane, do metta for all the people around you. Then come back and tell me what happened."

So she came back and said that it was amazing. She sat and started to get nervous, and she turned her mind to metta for all the people around her, and the space turned from a space of fear to a space of loving-kindness. She said it completely transformed her experience in the airport.

It's said that metta makes the heart so spacious that anger and aggression can't land in the heart. It's like when you throw—the analogy is—when you throw paint through space, it can't stick to the space.

Metta makes the heart so spacious that anger cannot stick within it. And so there is no need for fear—one feels protected.

For myself, the shift that happened through practicing with fear was profound. Through mindfulness practice, the fear kept getting smaller and smaller, but it remained the habit of mind—that was the conditioning. In some ways, Vipassana doesn't try to shift that underlying conditioning. It just creates great space around it. So that's what it had done—created this vast space around the fear.

After I had done quite a bit of metta practice, I saw that my mind tended to move not as much in the direction of fear and more in the direction of metta. The metta changed the underlying conditioning, which the Vipassana had basically shown the emptiness of. That was quite a beautiful shift. I have to say, I appreciated that transformation.

As these difficulties come up—whether it's the deep sense of separation, the loss of our true nature, past hurts or fears or anger—as they arise in the practice of the Brahmaviharas or in metta, we simply want to hold them there in the space of that particular Brahmavihara, in the space of metta. Then that difficulty starts to get touched again by the feeling of friendliness and warmth. The metta sort of reaches out to include it, and those parts which we may have rejected—fear or anger or hurt—all of a sudden start to be included in this field of loving kindness.

This is a poem from Michael Leunig, an Australian cartoonist:

When the heart is cut or cracked or broken, do not clutch it. Let the wound lie open. Let the wind from the good old sea blow in to bathe the wound with salt and let it sting. Let a stray dog lick it. Let a bird lean in the hole and sing a simple song like a tiny bell and let it ring.

The encouragement with the practice of loving kindness is never to leave that mind of metta, never to leave that feeling of goodwill. As metta becomes more and more stabilized in our being, we start to feel this as a human possibility. It seems very remote at first, because at first metta is only occasionally available. But as it becomes more reliable and more the way the mind naturally tends, we start to see the possibility—maybe it could be there all the time as a human possibility. And that's really radical.

Normally we think it should be there if people are nice to us. And if people aren't nice to us, then we'll get angry at them. The Buddha gave a teaching in a sutta called the Simile of the Saw in the Majjhima Nikaya, where he said, "Look, even if somebody speaks rudely to you, don't get angry at them. Keep your mind in a

space of loving kindness toward this person."

But I think he thought the monks weren't quite paying attention, so he upped the ante a little bit. He said, "Look, it's like this. Even if bandits were to meet you on the road and cut off your four limbs with a two-handled saw, one who gave rise to a mind of hatred toward them would not be carrying out my teachings."

Got it? In other words, he's saying no matter what happens, if a mind of hatred arises in response to an action, it's not carrying out his teachings.

"Monks, you should train yourselves thus: Our minds will remain unaffected and we shall utter no evil words. We shall abide compassionate for their welfare with a mind of loving kindness without inner hate."

Wow, that's a challenge. Even if people speak rudely to us, that's a challenge. So, not to think that we should be there tomorrow—I'm certainly not there. I don't think I know anyone well who is. But to think of it as a human possibility—for me, that's very inspiring.

What it reminds me of from Western culture is the image of Jesus as he's being nailed onto the cross, saying, "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do." That is the human possibility. So it's beautiful, this idea that we could stabilize within the field of metta and carry it through any interaction. Wow. Amazing.

Loving-kindness takes us to this deep level of connection. We see that all beings have the same body. All human beings have roughly the same body that we do—two eyes, a nose, two ears, arms, legs. All beings have roughly the same emotions that we do. Everyone wishes to be safe and happy and healthy and at ease.

We're all vulnerable to fear and hurt and anger and criticism. So we start to see how much alike we all are, as though really we're one organism that's just been poured into these different shapes, one being poured into these different containers.

This is from Rumi's teacher named Shams: "I, you, he, she, we. In the garden of mystic lovers, these are not true distinctions."

Metta reveals this. The differences that we hold on to so strongly, that we differentiate ourselves about so compulsively—these are not true distinctions. Metta leads us to see this.

Poonjaji was an Indian teacher who was a disciple of Ramana Maharshi. Carol and Sally and Howie all spent time with him in India when he was still alive. He was once asked about bringing peace into the world. His reply was: "As long as there are two, there will be war." As long as we think that we're separate, there will be war. The Brahmaviharas show us the possibility of seeing beyond that, seeing the illusion of that separation. And when we really feel how we're in the same boat, that awakens a lot of metta, a lot of

compassion.

So I'll just close with the end of Oprah's interview with the Dalai Lama. She said, "In my magazine, I do a column called What I Know for Sure. What do you know for sure? The one thing on which you have no doubt." The Dalai Lama did not hesitate: "Compassion is the best source of happiness for happy life and happy world. There is no doubt."

And you could say the same thing about metta. Best source of happiness, happy life and happy world.

So let's just sit for a minute, please.

From Shantideva: "Whatever joy there is in this world, all comes from wanting others to be happy. And whatever suffering there is in this world, all comes from wanting only myself to be happy."

Thank you for listening.

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