Mettā: Tenderness and Connection

Guy Armstrong · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Guy Armstrong · 1:01:05

The talk this evening is on loving kindness, tenderness, and connection.

The loving kindness practice brings so many benefits into our lives. It makes life sweeter, warmer, and more enjoyable. It brings a quality of concentration, greater comfort with ourselves, and therefore greater comfort and ease with others. It reduces the amount of judgment that we bring to ourselves and the judgment we bring to others.

The Buddha said that there were eleven benefits of loving-kindness practice. I'm going to read this list slowly so that you can feel them. It says that one who has really developed the heart of loving kindness will sleep easily, wake easily, and have pleasant dreams. People will love you, devas and animals will love you, and devas will protect you. Weapons can't harm you. The mind is joyful. Your face is serene. You will die peacefully. And when you die, you'll be reborn in a happy destination.

Kind of makes it worth it, doesn't it? I'd sign up for that. That's a great list.

But I want to talk tonight about two benefits that come to us from loving kindness practice that develop rather slowly. These are the qualities of tenderness and connection. These qualities grow slowly, kind of in the same way that through vipassana practice equanimity grows slowly.

A lot of experiences come and go in doing our mindfulness practice. A lot of insights come and pass away. If we look for something that's an enduring result from years of vipassana practice, one of the things we can definitely point to is a growth in equanimity. The mind is less ruffled by the alternations of pleasure and pain that meet us. This is something that is a lasting fruit from that practice.

With mettā, I would say that these qualities of tenderness and connection are also lasting fruits. But like equanimity, they grow slowly. Different experiences in loving-kindness come and go, and these build over a long period of time.

One of my teachers put it like this. He said, "Experiences are like clouds, but true realization is like space." So experiences are like clouds in that they're always coming and going, taking different shapes, different forms, here for a little bit, passing on. Realization is like space in that it's always there, and it's a little underappreciated at first. But as time goes by, it seems to expand, expand, expand, and we realize that's where our freedom is.

So through loving-kindness practice these qualities of tenderness and connection grow over time like realization in vipassana practice. That's what I want to talk about tonight.

There is for us in being people a kind of inherent tenderness because we're sensitive beings. If you look in the animal world, for example, other creatures don't have this bare skin that's exposed to the four elements. We have horses on the land at Spirit Rock. It's fun. They're out where yogis can watch them. A lot of people do because there's not much entertainment when you're a yogi. People love to walk by and look at the horses.

What you'll find, because we do a long retreat in February when it rains a lot, you'll often see the horses standing outside while the rain is falling down upon their skin, a cold rain. Even though there's a shelter they could move under, they sort of don't bother to do it because their skin is just not as sensitive as ours.

But we have very sensitive skins, and we also have very sensitive emotions or hearts. So in our practice of loving kindness, we take advantage of this sensitivity. It's built on this quality of sensitivity, and we grow it by examining one another's welfare. The practice of loving kindness is all about: How are you doing? I hope you're safe. How are you doing? I hope you're happy. How are you? I hope you're healthy.

I hope you're at ease.

We check this over and over again for ourselves and for others, and in that way we're constantly connecting our heart to others' hearts. The whole practice is about well-being and the feeling of that.

This tuning to other people's welfare, tuning to our own welfare, starts to sensitize our hearts even more. It wakes it up, you could say, to the joys and sorrows of living. We feel those joys and sorrows in our own life. We feel them in others' lives.

The brahmaviharas as a whole are very balanced between joy and sorrow. We tend to emphasize love and compassion a lot in practice, but when we round out the brahmaviharas, there's love, compassion, joy, and equanimity. Metta establishes the caring, compassion tunes into the suffering, but appreciative joy tunes into the happiness in life—our happiness and others'. And all these factors are held within the balance of equanimity.

So we're really exploring through the brahmaviharas how happiness comes, how unhappiness comes. And we don't bias towards suffering or happiness. We open ourselves either to compassion or to appreciative joy, depending on what meets us. In a way, we're working this sensitivity to joy and sorrow all the time with metta.

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. What a relief."

So this is the beginning of our practice, this point of sensitivity, this soft spot in our being. One of the reasons that it's soft and that we're intrinsically tender is because we're vulnerable. As we've said, as human beings, anything can happen to us in a moment. A visit to a doctor can change our lives. A walk on the beach could change one's life.

We have a good friend who was taking a spiritual journey to southern India a few years ago, staying at a little bungalow on the beach not far from Madras. He went out on the beach on a warm winter morning—it's always warm in Madras—and was doing some movement on the beach, waves coming in, swaying with the gentle tropical breezes. All of a sudden a big wave came up on the beach, and he thought it looked kind of strange, this wave, especially because when it went back out, it left a huge gulf as it was leaving. He thought, this is not normal.

It turned out that it was not normal. This was the date of December 26, 2004. He was vacationing there with his partner and he saw this weird outgoing wave. He went to get his partner from the bungalow and said, "Come out, I think something strange is happening." They hopped up onto a concrete wall that was about four feet high. There was a palm tree growing there. He hung onto the palm tree and his friend hung onto him. That's when the second wave hit.

That's the wave that was the tsunami of 2004 that killed tens of thousands of people in the southern parts of Asia and Thailand. The tsunami hit. It came up high, but because he was holding onto the palm tree and they were a little higher and his friend was holding onto him, they were okay. Other people were washed out to sea and never seen again, but he was okay. It was a time when the practice of non-clinging was not advised—but by holding on, they were saved.

So you never know. You're just out on a beach on a warm morning in December, and anything can happen, anything can change.

There's a very interesting story of the life of one Tibetan teacher, Nyoshul Khen Rinpoche. He was born in old Tibet and did years of retreat practice and became a very recognized Dzogchen master. But he fled Tibet after the invasion in 1959, the same year the Dalai Lama fled, and came to India. But things weren't so well established for the Tibetans at that point in India. They were just starting to come out. And so his life had a lot of unexpected turns when he was living in India.

Because he was a very recognized master, he was in demand as a teacher and as a figurehead. But other times things didn't go so easily for him. This is his description of his life: "Sometimes I gave empowerments to great assemblies of people, including dozens of Tulkus 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?"

Life presents us with this really changing array of experiences. How do our hearts stay strong enough to be open to those experiences and not crumble? How do we meet all those kinds of changes and stay strong within? I think this is the gift of the Brahmaviharas. The Brahmaviharas are about strengthening that heart. As we tune in, we see the opportunity for love and compassion everywhere.

This is from Bob Dylan's memoir, *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."

When we can approach life from this understanding of the sensitivity that everyone is facing—everyone is vulnerable, and everyone is trying to find their way—it opens us up to a new kind of connection, which sometimes comes through fairly dramatically.

There was a story reported in the San Francisco Chronicle a few years ago about a female humpback whale that was migrating south. These whales migrate from the colder waters up by Alaska down to the warmer waters, where they tend to give birth in Hawaii. She was passing by the California coast, close to San Francisco, about ten to fifteen miles off the coast near the Farallon Islands. She was estimated to weigh forty-five to fifty tons.

But she happened to be swimming in an area where crab fishermen had set up their lines. The way crab fishermen work is that they hang nylon ropes with crab pots, and the pots are quite heavy. She had gotten tangled up in a whole bunch of these lines. Some of the lines had wrapped around her four times, and the crab pots, because they were so heavy, were weighing her down. Each line that she got tangled in, with the weight of the pots, was about a thousand pounds.

A fisherman happened to have his boat nearby and saw what was happening. He noticed that she was being weighed down and was in danger of sinking and drowning. She would struggle to come up to get air, but then the weight of the pots would carry her back down. Then she'd struggle up again, but she would exhaust herself in this cycle.

The fisherman contacted the Marine Mammal Center in Marin County, and they sent a boat out. They gathered a group of divers and went to see if they could help. It took them a couple of hours to get there, and by then she'd been struggling and was getting weaker.

When they came upon her, they looked at the situation and thought, "This is not going to be easy." The only way to save her would be for each of the divers to get in the water and cut through the ropes. But when you're near a whale that big, one splash of her tail could kill you. So there the divers were—safe on the boat, while she was drowning in the water. Do we get in and risk our lives, or do we just say it's too much?

They all jumped in.

Each diver took a special curved knife, and they worked very close to her body cutting through the ropes that were binding her. There were ropes around her back, a line that went through her mouth, one around her tail, and one that caught her front flipper. She was totally tangled up.

They worked for about an hour cutting through the ropes right close to her body. One of the divers said that all the time they were doing it, the whale just floated very passively in the water. Wouldn't you think if there were four strange people around you, you might get a little freaked out? But it seemed like she trusted them. She was just floating there very still, and the diver said she was giving off a strange kind of vibration.

One diver was working right by her face, cutting that line that went through her mouth, and he was working next to her eye. He was swimming and cutting right next to the whale's eye for quite a while, and this is what he said: "When I was cutting the line going through the mouth, her eye was there winking at me, watching me. It was an epic moment of my life."

Can't even imagine that.

So after an hour, they managed to cut all the lines and she was free. When the whale realized she was free, she began swimming around in circles in apparent joy, according to the rescuers. She then swam up to each diver, nuzzled him, and then swam to the next one. "It felt to me like she was thanking us, knowing that she was free and that we had helped her," one of the divers said. "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."

So at moments like that, this connection to life just comes through so dramatically. Can you imagine the human consciousness and the whale consciousness kind of eye to eye like that in that meeting? It's really beautiful.

This quality of love and compassion can lead to that kind of connection. It's so important because part of our delusion, part of our ignorance is we only see the separateness. We tell ourselves again and again that we're different. "I'm special. I'm unique. I'm not like everyone else." And because we tell this story again and again, we believe it. And it's only at these times of special contact that we can feel how alike we are.

So these stories are missing half the point. We are different in ways, but we're also just alike in just as many ways. And so the Brahmaviharas practices—loving kindness and compassion—reconnect us with this quality of likeness which we tend to forget.

Researchers are finding that one of the deepest sources of unhappiness for people is a sense of isolation. And we can look at Western culture and see what's happened over the last couple hundred years with the breakdown of the immediate family, the separation of the extended family as people move apart, the loss

of community, and so many families living just within their home or apartment and not mingling the way that we all used to. And so in that not mingling, we're losing the sense of the bigger human family that we're a part of.

This isolation has a very frustrating impact on us because we don't get to live as social creatures. And based on that isolation, we tell ourselves more stories about how we're not enough or we're not like everybody else. But it's not true. We're connected in many, many deep ways, and that's part of what I want to talk about during this talk.

One of the ways that we're connected is this beautiful image from the Avatamsaka Sutra of Mahayana Buddhism called the Jewel Net of Indra. The picture is a very cosmological kind of sutra. Later Buddhist teachings got very cosmological. So this one is the image of the cosmos as a vast net. So you can just imagine a big net that has vertical ropes and horizontal ropes. And at every place the two meet, they're joined by a gem, a jewel, which is at the intersection.

So there are all different kinds of jewels on this net and this net is infinite. It stretches across the whole of the cosmos. So there are emeralds and rubies and diamonds and sapphires and they're all these translucent or transparent gems. So at each intersection, there's a gem and that represents consciousness. It represents a sentient being.

And if you look inside a gem, what it contains is an image of the whole rest of the cosmos. So any jewel that you look at is reflecting all the other jewels and that whole net that ties them together. And that's an analogy for you and me. Each one of us reflects a whole universe of beings and nature and meaning. That's what a human consciousness is. That's what it holds. Each of us reflects the whole or has within us the whole, just like the gems on the jewel net.

So when you start to think about that, are you really separate or isolated from anybody? I mean, right now, in this moment, I'm part of your experience and you're part of mine. So you're in my consciousness and I'm in yours. So in this way, we're more than connected. We interpenetrate each other. We become each other. So we're connected in that way.

Then we're also deeply connected on a heart level. This is a poem from Naomi Shihab Nye, a Palestinian-American poet called "Kindness."

She and her friend got out and gently guided the baby ducks up onto the concrete divider to join their mother. But then Caroline realized the mother duck still needed to cross the other three lanes going in the opposite direction to reach the bay. So she and her friend walked over to those lanes and began waving down traffic in both directions.

Now picture this scene: a busy six-lane highway in Marin County, and all these cars—maybe fifty or sixty vehicles—coming to a complete stop so that one duck family could cross the road safely. Caroline said that as she stood there directing traffic, she looked at all these faces in their cars. Nobody was honking. Nobody

seemed irritated or impatient. Everyone was just quietly waiting, watching this little drama unfold.

The mother duck, with her babies following in a line behind her, waddled across those final three lanes. They made it safely to the grassy area near the bay, and then all the traffic resumed.

Caroline said what struck her most was seeing how readily people stopped their busy lives for this duck family. It made her realize something beautiful about human nature—that we have this natural impulse to protect life, especially when we see a mother caring for her young.

This story captures something essential about loving-kindness practice. We already have this capacity within us. It's not that we need to manufacture compassion or create it from scratch. We're just learning to extend what we already naturally feel in certain situations—like watching a mother duck protect her babies—to a wider and wider circle of beings.

When we practice metta, we're cultivating this innate quality of the heart. We're training ourselves to access that same tenderness we feel for the duck family, that same spontaneous wish for safety and well-being, and learn to offer it more consistently and more broadly.

This is why the Buddha called loving-kindness a "natural state." It's not foreign to us. It's not something we have to import from outside ourselves. It's recognizing and nurturing what's already there, this basic wish for all beings to be free from harm and to experience happiness.

They were too small. So Caroline went out and gave each of them a little boost. So the mother and the six ducklings are all up on the divider—not over yet.

Then the mother jumps down on the other side to head to the bay, and the traffic in the other direction starts backing up. People are honking and leaning out of their windows, shouting: "What's the problem? Get it moving! What's happening?" Caroline and her friend go to the other side and stop those three lanes of traffic, holding them up while they escort the duck and the six ducklings safely across, where they finally have a straight shot to the bay.

"Just as a mother protects with her life her child, her only child." I thought that was such a beautiful gesture—"I don't care if I'm going to hold up six lanes of traffic, I'm going to get the ducks across." That's metta in action.

This feeling of caring for others can become truly boundless. It's not limited in who it can be extended to. I want you to think into this a little bit, because it leads to another beautiful quality.

Suppose we're able to develop this kind of boundless loving-kindness and compassion. We realize that for all sentient beings, we really don't want them to suffer—we want them to be happy. We can generate this limitless love and compassion in our own hearts that feels authentic and genuine. We'll do that meditation in another week with the loving-kindness practice.

Then the question arises: if you really want all those other sentient beings not to suffer and to have the best kind of happiness, how can they do that? What's the best way for beings to come fully out of suffering and fully into real happiness?

As we've been discussing, the most authentic and deepest kind of happiness is the happiness of awakening. When we take metta and compassion to its logical consummation, it becomes the wish that all beings everywhere come to awakening.

Then how can we best support that? Wishing is good, but is there another way we could be more effective? We wonder: can I really help others come out of suffering if I haven't come out of suffering myself? Could I help others more fully come out of suffering if I come out of suffering myself?

This inclination can become a motivation in practice—as the most effective way to help other beings come completely out of unhappiness, I could come out of unhappiness first and then help them.

This aspiration has gotten a name in the Buddhist tradition. This aspiration to awaken ourselves in order to help others awaken is called bodhicitta. The literal meaning: bodhi is awakening, and citta is mind or heart. A beautiful translation is "the awakening heart." We can see it as the logical conclusion of metta and compassion for all beings, brought back as a motivation in our own practice.

I mention this in case you like it as a motivation—it resonates for me. At the start of every sitting, I make the aspiration: "May I come to awakening in order to benefit sentient beings." Every time I start a sit, I remind myself that's one of the reasons I practice.

This is a subtle thing. It's not generally a big flame that takes over our motivation, but it can be a little candlelight that, if you connect with it, you can nurture and it can grow stronger. It's not easy to maintain this as a motivation—doing this much work for the benefit of other people doesn't come so easily. But if we nurture it, it can become a real motivation.

Even the Dalai Lama says it's difficult. So if he says it's difficult, it's okay for us too! He said, "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."

This loving-kindness, through this sense of connection, also expresses itself through our conduct. When we think about the precepts and their meaning, we realize they really come out of a sense of loving-kindness. We wish for others' happiness, so we don't want to harm them in any way.

The Buddha said that as we develop the precepts, we're offering a gift to other beings—the gift of freedom from fear. You can feel this if you know someone who has really developed their conduct well. They create an atmosphere of safety. When people come into the field of their presence, they feel safe. This is that gift of fearlessness.

This can be cultivated to a very high degree. The Dalai Lama was being interviewed by Oprah Winfrey a

few years ago, and I have to say I have great appreciation for Oprah and her skillful editors, because they have brought teachings that help people to a very broad and popular audience through her television show, her magazine, and now her television network. Those of you from Europe may not know, but Oprah has established her own TV network in this country called the Oprah Winfrey Network, which she describes as "mindful television." You've got to love it—mindful television.

She has carried teachings from many of our friends out to this very wide audience, including James Baraz, who appeared in O Magazine, and Sharon, Jack, and Joseph. Joseph did an article on non-attachment in relationship and earned him the nickname "Dr. Love." That was Joseph's contribution.

In this particular interview, Oprah started by asking the Dalai Lama, "Have you ever had to forgive yourself for anything?"

"Small incidents like accidentally killing an insect," the Dalai Lama replied.

"Killing an insect?" Oprah responded.

"My attitude toward mosquitoes is not very favorable," the Dalai Lama continued. "Not very peaceful. Bed bugs 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 mistakes every day, maybe," the Dalai Lama said evenly. "But major mistakes, it seems, no."

"No major mistakes," Oprah repeated. She fell silent and looked out the window. "You have nothing in life that you have regrets about. 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."

Wow. That's impressive. But all that separates us is about fourteen lifetimes of practice, so we can catch up.

This is a beautiful expression of the refinement of his meditation practice and the refinement of his conduct. These two things really go hand in hand. You can't separate them because when the mind is free of greed, aversion, and delusion, it's easier to be skillful in our conduct. And as we purify these forces, our conduct becomes cleaner and more purified also. They really go together.

So loving-kindness is a foundation for sila, for conduct. It's also a foundation for dana, for generosity. It's really the source of generosity. In order for us to want to give, we have to tune in to what someone else is going through and what they really need.

There are many discouraging signs in the world today. Overall, globally, it feels like the darkest period I've ever been alive for. But there are also some very positive signs happening in the world. One thing I'd like to point to is a recent book by Paul Hawken, a New Age commentator and entrepreneur. I'll just read you the title and say a little about it: "Blessed Unrest: How the Largest Movement in the World Came into Being and Why No One Saw It Coming."

The book is about all the individuals and small foundations around the globe who have taken a look at the massive amount of problems that no governments are dealing with, and just said, "I'm going to tackle that one." Very small groups, very committed to social action, environmental action, social justice—maybe on a small scale, but people saying, "I'm going to do what I can to make a difference," and taking their time, energy, money, speaking skills and talents, and rallying these forces to make a difference in the world. One group, one individual at a time.

He made a catalog for this book and counted up something like a million organizations worldwide on this rather small scale, each doing what they can. I think that's extraordinary. I don't think that was going on at that scale when I was a kid.

This awakening of consciousness is part of a global movement happening on an unprecedented scale. I think this represents something fundamentally new in our world - this widespread impulse toward engaged compassion.

Some of these initiatives have gained recognition. Dr. Paul Farmer established health clinics in remote regions of Haiti. Greg Mortensen, despite some financial missteps, has done remarkable work with girls' schools in Afghanistan and Pakistan. Within our own dharma community, we have three friends doing extraordinary work in Burma.

Carol Wilson travels there annually, collecting donations that have grown to tens of thousands of dollars. She creates proper homes for nunneries - buildings, residences, bathrooms - allowing nuns to continue their practice with dignity. She also provides food relief to families devastated by natural disasters, families the government essentially ignores.

Steve Armstrong and Kamala Masters have established a school-building project in Burma. For just $25,000, you can build a complete school. The remarkable thing is that if you build the school, the government will provide a teacher. They won't build the infrastructure, but they'll staff it. Over recent years, Steve has traveled there with donor funds, typically constructing four to five schools annually.

Our friend Hal Nathan, former board president of Spirit Rock, established the Foundation for the People of Burma, dedicated to healthcare and sanitation improvements wherever he could find teams to collaborate with. Last year alone, he raised six million dollars to create meaningful change there.

These initiatives spring from individual caring - people who have committed incredible amounts of time and energy to manifest their vision. They express love and compassion through generous action, tuning

into suffering and responding with whatever capacity they possess. This quality of heart remains central to all genuine service.

Alice Walker, author of *The Color Purple*, captured this beautifully: "As I get older, I realize the thing that I value the most is good-heartedness." This is exactly what our metta and compassion practices generate - this fundamental good-heartedness from which so much else flows.

Trungpa Rinpoche continued his teaching about the sore spot on our body, saying: "There's also an inner wound called Tathagatagarbha, 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 up of one complete sore spot altogether. This is called bodhisattva fever. That vulnerability is compassion. We really have no way to defend ourselves anymore."

This creates a beautiful sense of connectedness with life. As this quality develops, it also creates a strong presence in the heart that naturally guards against the hindrance energies of the mind.

A few years ago, we had a remarkable opportunity - the Dalai Lama came to Spirit Rock for a day and a half. About two hundred Buddhist teachers, both Western and Asian, spent time with him. The first day's format was somewhat awkward - different people would make presentations about aspects of Western Buddhism, usually three presenters with five to ten minutes each, followed by requests for his comments.

It was quite touching to observe. Sometimes he had much to say. Other times, after three presentations, when asked for response, he'd simply say, "Oh, nothing left up here. First person spoke, I had something to say, but then other people kept talking. Now all gone." He would just laugh about his memory, completely unbothered, and remain peacefully quiet.

One presentation focused on Buddhism's growing popularity in the West. A Western presenter said something rather bold: "Your Holiness, you are the biggest popularizer among all of us. This has led to things like a perfume called Samsara and a resort advertising 'We'll carry you to Nirvana the first day.' Your Holiness, this popularization risks trivializing the Dharma. What do you think?"

The Dalai Lama sat quietly, reflecting. Then he replied: "Some people call me Living Buddha. Others say I am God-King, but I am not. I'm just a simple Buddhist monk. But then others call me counter-revolutionary, or say I'm a wolf in monk's clothing. But you see, I look back at my own intention."

He said, "I got to Bangkok and I was standing in line to buy a ticket to Paris, and I just thought about my people here in the camp. How can I abandon them? So I turned around and got on a train back to the camp."

His supporters said, "But what about the threats on your life?" And he said, "If they want to kill me, they can kill me. But I'm not going to abandon the Dharma or abandon my people."

So he stayed and continued teaching. And remarkably, over the years, as Cambodia began to stabilize, Maha Ghosananda became one of the most respected figures in the rebuilding of the country. He organized peace walks across Cambodia, bringing together former enemies to walk side by side in reconciliation. His unwavering commitment to loving-kindness, even in the face of death threats, became a beacon of hope for an entire nation torn apart by hatred and violence.

The power of his practice of metta was that it enabled him to see beyond the immediate threat to the larger healing that was needed. He understood that only through love could the deep wounds of his people be healed. This is the transformative power of loving-kindness - it doesn't just protect us from anger, it enables us to act with wisdom and courage even in the most difficult circumstances.

These examples from the Dalai Lama, Aung San Suu Kyi, Martin Luther King, and Maha Ghosananda show us that loving-kindness isn't just a nice feeling or a spiritual luxury. It's a practical tool for navigating life's challenges with grace and effectiveness. When our hearts are established in metta, we become unshakeable in our commitment to what is wholesome and beneficial, regardless of external circumstances or opposition.

This brings us to one of the most profound aspects of loving-kindness practice: it creates what we might call "fearless compassion." When we're truly rooted in metta, we're no longer driven by the need to protect ourselves from criticism, rejection, or even physical harm. Instead, we're free to act from wisdom and care for the benefit of all beings.

He said, "Oh, I had more pamphlets printed." So he had 10,000 more pamphlets to distribute saying, "Hatred never ceases through hatred. Hatred only ceases through love." And Cambodia has done a lot of work in reconciliation since that time. When the government got somewhat back together, he returned to the country and became the next patriarch of Cambodian Buddhism. He was a strong leader for years.

So this loving kindness makes the heart strong. It can withstand criticism. It can withstand anger. It can withstand fear. And it's a tremendously healing energy. This quality of love as it develops can heal a lot of our own hurts and injuries.

There's a poem from an Australian man named Michael Leunig: "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."

So loving kindness has this great healing energy and connects us through the uniting energy of care to all other beings, all other people. We start to understand that we're not so different and we're not so separate, that we're actually put together in pretty much the same way. When we look at our bodies, they're not that different. There are minor variations, but we all have eyes and nose and tongue and ears, heart and mind, belly. Our bodies are more or less the same.

As we start to understand these deeper needs and wishes—safety, happiness, health and ease—we realize that's pretty much the same also. And you start to feel like there's really just one human heart that has been poured into different vessels and then gone through different experiences and gotten shaped in different ways. But it's fundamentally not any different between any of us. It responds in much the same way in all of us.

And so, although a lot of our thoughts are about how we're different, we could also choose to reflect on all the ways that we're the same. We have the same emotional package. We have the same physical body more or less. And that's the deepest kind of connection. When we see that there's some underlying unity in this human experience, despite all the distinctions, there's some way that we're all alike. It cuts through the sense of separation.

This is a poem from Rumi's teacher Shams of Tabriz: "I, you, he, she, we—in the garden of mystic lovers, these are not true distinctions." And in the garden of loving kindness, these are not true distinctions either. We see an underlying unity despite the apparent differences.

So I just want to close with the way Oprah concluded her interview with the Dalai Lama. And before I read it, I just want to mention that in our tradition, metta is the primary of the Brahmavihāras, and it's the one that we emphasize. In the Tibetan tradition, compassion is seen as the primary one of the four immeasurables. So that's the one they emphasize. But love and compassion are not very different. So what the Dalai Lama says of compassion, we would equally say about love.

This is the conclusion of the discussion between Oprah and His Holiness: "In my magazine, I do a column called 'What I Know for Sure.' So what do you know for sure? The one thing of 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."

So let's just sit for a minute, please. Compassion is the best source of happiness for happy life and happy world. There is no doubt.

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