Mettā: Near and Far Enemies

Guy Armstrong · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Guy Armstrong · 59:11

When I was in my early twenties, before I had encountered meditation practice, I started to have very strong openings in the area of love. I connected with this experience through relating with people and through relating with nature. Although we haven't talked about it extensively, I know that nature is a really important piece for many of you in your metta practice. You almost can't go out and look at the hillsides and the deer and the turkeys without getting some connection of loving kindness for this landscape. So it was through people, through nature, through art, through music. This was the most fulfilling thing that I had discovered in my life, at least in young adult life.

But it wasn't very stable for me. These experiences of love would be very intense, but they'd come and go quite randomly. I didn't know what was behind their changing nature. For me, one of the big draws to Dharma practice was wanting to find out how to stabilize and live more from that place.

One of the things I discovered pretty early on is that to have regular access to love, I needed to understand wisdom. The wisdom was basically about not holding on, not clinging. That was an important piece. The other thing that was really important for me was discovering the practice of loving kindness. In our tradition, in our lineage, this is the avenue to love. And it's a very reliable one. It's been practiced and undertaken by men and women for 2,500 years, this very kind of practice that we're doing here. It does work. You look at somebody like the Dalai Lama and you can tell it works. This is great ground for our faith in this practice.

But one of the other things I came to learn is that the practice is not just a straight line to metta. We don't just come in and immediately get there without moving again. The practice is best understood, I think, not as a zip line to that destination, but rather the practice of metta is really an exploration. In that exploration, we go around many different mind states that all come together to lead in the direction of loving kindness, but we touch many other places along the way.

If we have the idea that only metta is valuable and all these other places are mistakes, then we'll have a lot of problems in our metta practice. But if we understand that metta and all these other points we touch are all really valuable places to learn from, then all of our metta practice makes sense. Then it all becomes workable and it's all part of the unfolding of the Dharma.

The terrain that metta wanders around—and it does this better than any other practice I know—is the territory of the heart's response, or we could say responses. What we're really exploring is how the heart responds to the changing conditions that life presents us. As human beings, we have lots of changing conditions. There are beautiful things that happen to us, sort of medium things that happen to us, and

sometimes disastrous things that happen to us. The heart has different responses, some conditioned, some less conditioned, to all that changing situational landscape of our life. So what we really want to learn about is: how is my heart responding?

This perspective accomplishes two things. Number one, looking at the metta practice this way opens up a broader view of what we're doing. It makes it easier to accept all the things that come. Number two, it shows that there's a lot of understanding that comes out of this practice. Not only are we retraining the heart to respond in the most beautiful way possible, but we're also learning about how its responses affect us in all the directions that it goes. So there's a lot of insight in this practice.

I don't know if you've ever felt this, but sometimes as a metta yogi, I get an inferiority complex with vipassana yogis because they're a little bit smug. They say, "Well, okay, you're 'opening the heart,' but we've got insight. And insight is the real thing because that's what's going to liberate us. All you're doing is poking around and feeling a little better." But I want to say that we have a lot of insight, too. So you can stand up to those vipassana yogis and say you're also on a great path of understanding and learning.

The first area that we start to explore is the area of the Brahmaviharas themselves—loving-kindness and the other three. This term Brahmavihara is made up of two words. Brahma refers to something heavenly or divine. It's a pointer to a really refined way of being and way of feeling and manner of existence. The term vihara means a spiritual home. Often a monastery or a nunnery is termed a vihara, a place to live that has a spiritual connotation. So we could call this combination Brahmavihara our divine home, or heavenly abiding, or sometimes it's called our best home.

All these, I think, are good translations.

The original teachings of the Buddha in the Pali Suttas describe these Brahmaviharas in different ways, but here's a passage that comes again and again from his words: "I will abide pervading the entire world with a mind imbued with loving-kindness, abundant, exalted, immeasurable, without hostility and without ill will." He repeats this formulation for the other three: compassion, appreciative joy, and equanimity.

This is where the journey of exploration is leading—to pervade the whole universe with this mind of loving-kindness that's abundant, exalted, and immeasurable. Immeasurable because it's vast and because it doesn't exclude any beings. It can reach and include the whole range of sentient life throughout the universe without hostility and without ill will. This is a beautiful place to be.

Because it's so lofty a vision, we understand that we only reach the fullness of this state from time to time. It's like a peak experience when we experience the Brahmaviharas in this degree of fullness. It's not that we expect to be there all the time, but we can start to get a taste for it. The immeasurability expands as we practice more and move into that space.

In our tradition, we take loving-kindness as the foundation for all four Brahmaviharas. In the Mahayana

traditions, compassion is more often taken as the foundation, but in our tradition, we see loving-kindness as the foundation. We understand that when the heart becomes open with the caring of loving-kindness, then when it looks on suffering, it automatically morphs into compassion. Compassion comes naturally when the open heart of loving-kindness sees suffering.

When that open heart looks on someone's happiness, then automatically what emerges is appreciative joy. We get happy with their happiness. If the open heart isn't being stimulated in any particular way, then it can rest in the balance of equanimity. Equanimity doesn't mean that there's no feeling, but it means that the mind is balanced and peaceful amid the changing conditions.

First we begin in this retreat by exploring loving-kindness in a simple way. We develop it through these simple phrases. Sally talked about it this morning, saying that in this practice we're really just planting seeds. I want to emphasize that—every phrase that we say plants a seed, because these phrases are expressing an intention.

The basic practice is we bring someone into our heart and we feel, "I hope you're happy." That's all it is. But that is the heart of the metta practice—to hold someone, "I hope you're happy"—and then we say it in different ways.

This "I hope you're happy" is an intention that comes out of our heart and mind toward the other person. That intention carries power because intention is the root of karma. What we're doing is planting karmic seeds of these caring and loving intentions moment after moment after moment. The way that karma works, this develops a force over time. This develops a power, and it results in fruit, because karmic actions have fruits. Wholesome intentions bring wholesome fruits.

Exactly when those fruits come, we can't say. It's just like if you're a gardener and you plant a tomato seed in your garden—can you tell when the tomatoes are going to come? No. You put it in there and you give it the right conditions: water and plant food and sunshine and hopefully warmth. But if you get too impatient and you go in there and scrape away all the soil and try to pull up the little sprout, you're going to rip it out.

We have to be really patient and understand that our job as gardeners is to plant the seed, but it's not to tell the plant when to grow—because only nature can do that. We remember that a synonym for nature is Dharma. So we plant the seed and Dharma provides the growth, provides the fruits. But it will do it at its own pace, given whatever the conditions are.

That's why in the metta practice all we need to take care of is that simple intention: "I hope you're happy," in its different forms. If we do that, we've done our job. We've planted those seeds moment after moment after moment, and then we can just trust the Dharma to provide the water and the sunlight and the warmth for those seeds to grow.

There was a lovely moment in our interview group yesterday when we were talking about the fact that

there's insight in the metta practice, and we were discussing different aspects of how to do the practice. Someone said, "From the comments in the group, I'm starting to understand that all we really have to do is say the phrases and take what comes." I said, "That's exactly right."

If we could just give that as one simple instruction, we could be done: Just say the phrases and take what comes. That really is the whole of the practice.

Of course, we want to refine it a little bit. We want to say the phrase and mean it. So it's not just a mantra. In mantra practice, you say the words and the words take care of the energy or the vibration. The words do the work. But in the metta practice, we want to say the words and mean them, because it's the meaning—I hope you're happy—that provides the power of that intention. So the more you can mean the phrase when you say it, the purer or clearer or stronger that intention becomes. And that intention is the karmic engine of the practice. That's really what makes this practice work.

All you have to do is sincerely care when you say that phrase. It sounds easy, doesn't it? All I have to do is sincerely care. But you know, about sixty times a minute and eighteen hours a day, it gets hard to do it again and again and again. Yet each time, this is all the practice needs: that simple intention of caring for ourselves and for someone else.

There's no technique that produces the caring. This is why it's a creative practice. We have to find the caring. And if we find the caring, we found the metta. It's a practice where we're asked to basically produce it on the spot. You want to have metta? Let's see it. You want to have metta? Okay, produce it in this moment.

That's really what we're doing—producing this metta out of our own heart and understanding moment after moment after moment. That's all it is. That's all we're doing. But that's not so easy. It's easy to do it once. It's not so easy to keep doing it moment after moment after moment. But the more we understand, the easier it gets, because we understand we just have to do that, and then we let go of the outcome.

I think Kamala said that on the first morning: We let go of the outcome in the sense of wanting it to change the person. And I think Sally said something this morning about letting go of the outcome in terms of trying to produce an immediate result. We say that phrase, we mean it, and then we take what comes. Because there's a deep trust that the exploration of the heart's response will lead us to greater understanding, greater love, and greater freedom.

So we don't mind if we wander. Because everywhere we wander, we're going to learn and we're going to open. It's a slow transformation, but it's happening with each phrase that we can say with sincerity. And the Buddha put it this way: "Don't disregard the accumulation of wholesomeness, saying, this will come to nothing. By the gradual falling of raindrops, a jar is filled."

That's what we're doing—filling the jar moment after moment. It's like the image Sally used this morning of the rain falling on the rock and wearing it away. Slowly, slowly, moment by moment, we're changing

our hearts.

One of the ways that we change our hearts is this: normally our intentions run to self-centered motives. I'm sure you've noticed. Normally we're thinking about what we can get from here or how we can prevent fear or threat from arising over there. So instead of those self-centered motivations that activate through our thoughts, we're replacing them with caring thoughts. This is the first and most straightforward way we purify the mind. We're dropping the self-centered motivations and putting in caring motivations. This starts to change the way we feel, starts to change the way we are.

But there's another way that we clean the heart or purify it that I want to talk about. Metta practice really acts as a scrubbing technique. It gets in and goes after those old accumulations of hurts and fears and rejections and sorrows and disappointments. And it's interesting the way it does this, because it does it through relationship reflections.

We reflect on ourselves, our benefactor, friends, other people in our lives, all beings. Through these relationship reflections, much of this old accumulation begins to surface.

This is the other part of the exploration. We start to encounter the accumulated material in the mind—and it doesn't feel like loving-kindness, though it was dislodged by loving-kindness. It's rather like taking a magnet with a certain orientation and running it through the body. Loving-kindness has a really strong positive pull, and as you draw that through the system, everything that's unlike loving-kindness gets drawn to the surface.

I'm sure you've experienced this. We turn to ourselves and wish ourselves well, and suddenly all the reasons we shouldn't be happy come to the fore. Or we direct our thoughts to the benefactor—"I wish you well"—and some little regret or feeling of hurt arises in response.

This is not a wrong direction. This is not a mistake. This is what metta practice does. This is how it purifies us. In order to clean up these old hurts, we first have to shake them loose. By bringing them into the light of awareness, we create the possibility of releasing and transforming them. This is why this practice is so healing, so deeply healing—because eventually it goes through all our relationships and cleans them up.

Relationships are mostly where we've been hurt. Human beings generally get wounded through interactions with other human beings. That's why this relationship-oriented reflection is so powerful and reaches so deeply into us.

As we explore and these other reactions arise, they too become an integral part of the practice. They're so integral that in the Brahmavihara system, they're given their own designations. As you learn the complete map of the Brahmaviharas, you discover they encompass not just the four divine abodes, but each divine abode also has a near enemy and a far enemy. The whole map actually contains three states for each Brahmavihara—twelve in all. We'll explore all of these together during our time this week.

The near enemy for each Brahmavihara is a state that closely resembles the wholesome state but carries an unwholesome tinge. It's like an imposter, masquerading as a beautiful state while missing the mark. The far enemy is the direct opposite—and the opposite of a beautiful state will always be an unwholesome state.

The near enemy for loving-kindness is a kind of affection or liking that's tinged with desire. The far enemy is the opposite of loving-kindness itself. As we've discussed before, the opposite of goodwill is ill will, hostility, or what we might call aversion generally.

So the near enemy relates to desire, the far enemy to aversion. Do these sound familiar? Desire and aversion are the first two hindrances, the basic deluded movements of mind we all experience. We're pulled toward the pleasant and want to push away the unpleasant. This is the reactive mechanism of samsara—what keeps us bound.

Metta encounters these same forces. The near enemy manifests the desire force, the far enemy the aversive force. They appear through the Brahmaviharas as well. But exploring these responses means exploring the terrain of the heart's reactions. We learn how the heart responds to relationships with wanting and how it responds with pushing away.

These are the two responses I want to explore this evening—the near and far enemies.

The near enemy involves liking somebody but with a quality of holding on, attachment, desire, or wanting woven through it. You can see how this operates. You move through life and encounter people you really like. There's this instantaneous feeling of metta with them—you like how they look, how they dress...

You like the way they speak. You like the way they carry themselves. You like the way they think. In that, there's a lot of metta, because there's an appreciation and a kind of love for the person's being. But then, because of our conditioning, we think, "I want more of that." And so we form a desire or an attachment in relation to that person. That desire or attachment is what creates the problem in the relationship.

Metta has this warmth. Love is very uniting. When there's pure love with somebody else, there's a real feeling of union and drawing closer. Well, attraction also has this. Desire has this. And that's why sometimes they're hard to tell apart.

Let's talk about how this desire force plays out in some of these basic relationships.

With the benefactor, if it's somebody that you respect, what we often want is their approval, or their attention, or their recognition, or their acceptance. I was meditating for a long time on a six-week retreat. I used one benefactor who was a teacher of mine. I discovered as I was doing this practice that my ability to really open to him suffered from part of this attached feeling. I really appreciated him a lot. I had a lot of pure metta. But I had wanted a friendship with him that wasn't going to happen because for him we weren't on equal footing—he was my teacher and he saw me as a student. So the friendship wasn't really

going to develop, although I would have liked it to.

I had to let go of that in order to just really open to my benefactor and appreciate who he was and all I'd received from him. It wasn't that I resented not having that kind of friendship, but it limited my ability to feel wholly and purely loving toward him. Often with the benefactor, that's the dynamic—we want maybe a little more than they're able to give.

With a friend, this dynamic often comes in. Sometimes it's one-sided, where there's more desire on one side and less on the other. We may be the one wanting more closeness, more contact, more intimacy, more connection. We feel the friend after a while start to pull away because they don't want it quite as close. It comes up in little things: "I invited them for dinner, but they never invited me back," or "I called them last week and they never returned my call." We start feeling insecure and not knowing where we stand. Then we start to withdraw. Sometimes friendships drift apart because there's not the mutuality of where the people are heading.

It's also easy to get resentful. If we're in the situation of wanting more contact and we're feeling rejected, it's easy to become resentful. We can also become resentful if we feel the other person is too needy in relation to us. The resentment can come from either side. Sometimes friendships end because of that imbalance, and sometimes that's appropriate. But it's unfortunate if the friendly feelings end because of resentment or frustration.

It's quite possible to have a friend who's distant—not exactly the friendship you want, but you could still have a lot of metta toward that person. Often what we find as we go through our friend meditation, which we'll start tomorrow morning, is that some of these old disappointments and hurts or rejections or feeling the other person was too needy have really clouded our ability to feel the metta. As we reflect on our friend and their happiness and their safety and their health and their ease, all these things come to light. We can see how maybe we've been obstructed in our metta for them by these old feelings. Once they come to light, there's a possibility of releasing them.

Forgiveness is a really powerful ally, especially in the friend relationship. That's why we wanted to introduce it early, so that you could begin to work with it—not just for yourself, but also when the friend is introduced tomorrow. Often we find there's a lot of forgiving that has to take place between even our closest friends, or sometimes especially with our closest friends.

Another place where there's a lot of desire is in our intimate relationships. Romantic love has this attractive quality with a very strong component of desire or wanting. There's usually desire for companionship, sexual desire, desire for appreciation and affection, desire for sharing mutual interests—all the friend dynamics. But you can especially see with romantic love, if the desire isn't getting fulfilled, how quickly the love can turn into aversion. Many romantic relationships become very conflicted because one partner feels they're not getting their desire satisfied. It can become even violent and abusive because of the frustration of the desire component.

Often romantic love starts with a big component of metta and appreciation.

But if this other side of desire isn't seen, then that part can cause problems.

I've often thought that there should be a romantic love song that captures this whole dynamic. A lot of pop songs are about this, and there should be a pop song that says something like, "I want you, I need you, I love you, and I'll kill you if I can't have you." That's kind of the gist of it, isn't it? I love you until I hate you.

And that's why often we don't use the word love when we're talking about metta—because it gets mixed up with this culture's idea of romantic love.

Sometimes it's not so easy to tell the difference between metta and romantic love or this desire component. But just a couple of things to reflect on:

Romantic love is usually limited to just a few people. Like if you look around this group, which is about 100 people, the number of people that you might want to fall in love with is probably pretty small. So romantic love and this desire force is usually very limited, but metta is meant to be universal. And I expect you will feel at the end of this retreat that you could feel metta toward everybody here. Even if there are difficult people here, I expect you will feel metta for them over the course of the week together. So far, I haven't seen many difficult people, which is lovely. I mean, this seems like a really nice group, and I hope you'll find metta for all of you really easily, because that's the way this group feels to me.

And the other thing about romantic love is that it's more focused on my desires and less concerned with the other's actual well-being. That's another difference with metta.

So most intimate relationships have a mix of metta and desire, and it's why we don't usually use our romantic partners as our friend in the practice. When we talk about the friend category tomorrow, I'll recommend that you pick somebody who's not a romantic partner for you. And the reason for that is that it's hard to tease out these two strands in our romantic relationship right away. But if you pick somebody who's a friend where there's not a romantic attraction, then the metta is usually purer or a little cleaner, and then it's easy to tell the difference. And when you move to a romantic partner, then you can feel how it changes. So that's our recommendation for an intensive retreat generally.

Over time, we really refine this relationship to our partner. Sally and I have been together now for—it's getting close to 30 years, I think it's 28. And in the beginning, I had a lot of desire mixed in with my affection for her. And it continued—we would fight about my desires. I'm sorry to say, but I was a young practitioner then and I didn't know any better.

And then I started reading books about the Bodhisattva path. And I got very inspired. Shantideva's Guide to the Bodhisattva's Way of Life. And I took the bodhisattva vows with one of my teachers. And I was reflecting a lot on becoming free so that I could help all beings come out of suffering. So I had this very inspired motivation to help all sentient beings come through their own suffering and awaken.

So I'd be doing these reflections and then I'd be thinking about what I needed from Sally. And I thought, wait, this doesn't make sense. I'm going to save all beings, but I need her to save me first? So I really started looking at that question of need and whether—for a Buddhist practitioner, I don't want to say anything about people in general, but for a Buddhist practitioner—whether the idea of need, in terms of emotional need from a relationship partner, can really be justified. And that's been my reflection and direction since I started considering that, the bodhisattva ideal, and I argue less now. I'm happy to say.

So another form of attachment that comes out of the metta practice is we can want the object of our metta practice to be a certain way. We'll be wishing them well and we'd think, well, you know, you'd really be a lot happier if you changed this. Or I would really like you better if you changed this. And maybe we even want to make a metta phrase that kind of encourages them to be a better person, the way we would see them being a better person.

So I was teaching loving kindness once in a weekend retreat, and a woman raised her hand and said that as her benefactor she was using her son, who was currently in college and living at home. And she said she got to the line that said, "May you live with ease," and she said, "Wait, he's living with way too much ease already. I wish he'd get up earlier and do his homework on time and clean up after himself. This is like way too easy." So she wanted to change her metta phrase to, "May you develop more discipline and have more backbone."

So I said that that might not quite have the quality of acceptance that loving kindness is meant to bring about. So I encourage her to stay with the standard phrase and just reflect on it a little more.

Another form of attachment or desire is that we get attached to the experiences that we have in the metta meditation. It is a beautiful practice and it opens us at times to really beautiful states and kind of peak experiences, both of loving kindness and of concentration. And then there can be a strong desire to have those again.

So this came clear to me. I was doing a long metta retreat and I was about 10 days in and the metta and the concentration were both developing really nicely and I was really enjoying the retreat. And then something came from the outside and it shook it up. It threw me off track and broke the concentration, broke the metta, and I felt like I was starting over.

But I really wanted to get back to where I was, so I worked really hard. I put tremendous pressure on myself, said the phrases as regularly as I could, and tried intensely to see the person and direct the phrase to them on the out-breath. But I was tying myself up in knots, and it was because I wanted that experience. The practice had become fueled by desire.

So I went to see my teacher, who was Joseph Goldstein at that time, and I told him, "Joseph, I lost it, but I'm trying really hard to get back, but I just can't get there. It's so frustrating." He just stopped and said, "Guy, this practice is not for us. It's for the other." That completely cut through the holding. I got it. I have to care

about the other person—not self-centeredly care about my experience right now. I have to develop the caring for the other person because that's the whole engine of this practice.

When we sincerely care about the other person, all the fruits come. But if we try to grab hold of it and control the metta to make some immediate result, then it becomes self-centered and it doesn't work. So this is a really important lesson on right effort. We have to go back to the simplest, most innocent intention, which is just to care for the person, ourselves or another. If that's there, everything else comes. But if we try to force it, that puts too much pressure on the heart.

One of the things we have to learn about the heart's responses is that the heart doesn't respond well to pressure. It doesn't respond well to forcing. It doesn't respond well to the mind telling it what it should be feeling. What it responds well to is a relaxed place of listening. This again is where the insight and the understanding become so important. If we settle back and just want to learn how the heart works, it will tell us. It will show us. But we have to go into that receptive, open, curious, innocent place in order to do it. Then it will reveal everything to us. But if we put too much pressure, it'll close down. It gets very shy, and it won't open nicely.

So these are some of the areas of attachment and desire that come up in metta practice—that's the near enemy. The far enemy of ill will or aversion also comes up frequently in doing metta practice. It is the opposite of metta practice. In the Abhidhamma, the manual of Buddhist psychology, when they list the fifty-two states of mind that human beings are capable of, they don't include metta by name. The word they use for it, the Pali word, is adosa. "A" means "not," and "dosa" means hatred or aversion. So they point to metta by describing it as the absence of aversion.

The absence of aversion or ill will shows that the mind is ready to move into metta. We see that when the near enemy and the far enemy are both absent, metta is possible. And when metta is strong, it prevents both desire and aversion from coming up as reactions. It blocks desire because metta is inherently happy and satisfied, so there's no need for anything else. And it blocks aversion because it's so loving—it opens with affection to our experience.

But aversion does come up in doing metta practice. It's an important part. One of the ways it comes in is in regards to ourselves. We start to send metta to ourselves and we remember all the different ways that we've failed ourselves or we've fallen short of our expectations for ourselves—things that we've done that are unskillful, ways we've hurt people, ways we've hurt ourselves. That whole ground is what the forgiveness practice really helps to clear up. And it can bring a lot of self-judgment, a lot of feeling that we're not worthy or not lovable or not adequate.

This is delusion. It was really beautiful—the Dalai Lama came to the meditation center in Massachusetts early on, and someone raised their hand and asked him a question: "I feel that I'm not lovable. How can I work with this?" And the Dalai Lama, in what seemed kind of uncharacteristic, just said very strongly, "You're wrong." He was pointing out that every human being is worth loving, is worthy of love, because

our basic nature is beautiful. Our basic nature has openness and compassion and love within it.

We need to recognize those good qualities. But many of us in the West carry this element of self-doubt, of self-judgment, of not feeling particularly good about ourselves.

I had just ordained as a monk in Thailand and was traveling up to practice in a forest monastery north of Chiang Mai. My preceptor said, "Look, on your way, I want you to stop at this monastery in Chiang Mai. It's my branch monastery. There's another Western monk there whom I respect. I want you to get to know him a little before you go off on your own."

So I traveled up to Chiang Mai and went to this branch monastery where there was a Western monk who had been in robes for about fifteen years. I had been in robes for about three weeks at that point, so I was very eager to learn.

The first morning I was there, he took me out on his alms round. You probably know that the way monks in Thailand are fed is they take a bowl and walk down the street, and the lay people come out and put food in the bowl—this becomes the monk's main meal for the day.

So I was going out on alms round with him early in the morning, probably about 6:30. The first thing I noticed was the size of his bowl—it was not much smaller than this bell here. It was the biggest alms bowl I had ever seen. And I must say, he himself looked pretty well fed, so I thought, "This will be interesting."

He went out in front as the senior monk. I walked behind him, and then two novices came behind us. The novices are the junior monks, usually under the age of twenty. I thought this was odd—I didn't know why these junior monks were coming, because they don't usually go on alms rounds. But I was just there to learn.

We started going down the street, and this guy knew half the town. Everywhere we went, people were lining up to offer him food. I found out that he spoke fluent Thai, meditated in silence in the morning, and then in the afternoon received visitors. Parents would come see him, children would come see him, and they'd ask advice about their meditation practice, their family life, their business. He was like a pastor to the community—very giving, very warm, very loving, very accepting.

On this alms round I saw he was clearly loved by these people. Within a couple of minutes, both our bowls were completely full. I thought, "We'll go back to the monastery now." But we didn't. We ducked down in an alley, and then I saw why the novices were there. They opened up their robes, and each had a plastic bag hanging off each shoulder. So we took the food from our bowls and put it in their plastic bags until our bowls were empty. The novices covered up, and we went back down the street with our bowls empty.

So they got filled again. We went into another alley and did that again, and so we went out on the street again. We filled up our bowls three times, and then we went back to the monastery. Everybody ate well that day. Based on his loving kindness, we fed ourselves, a bunch of other monks, the junior monks, the

nuns, and even the temple dogs with the food we brought back.

I really enjoyed hanging out with him, and as we spent time together over those couple of days, I remarked on how well-liked he was, what metta there was between him and the community. He told me it wasn't always like this. He said, "I spent the first nine years that I was in robes working through my self-hatred, because I had a lot of it when I came in. But I worked with Vipassana, I worked with metta, and it really changed my heart and my mind."

And it was so apparent—he was a being who emanated a lot of metta, and he received a lot of metta in return.

This is a common reaction as we start to meditate, as we direct metta to ourselves—this sense of self-judgment and inadequacy. But metta is very good medicine for it. The Buddha said that metta is the antidote to aversion, so particularly aversion towards self. Metta is really strong medicine.

Reflecting on our good qualities, good intentions, and good deeds is a powerful way to cultivate confidence in our own inherent goodness. In Buddhism, we understand that our basic nature is fundamentally good—this is what's pointed to by the term Buddha nature. Trusting in this understanding becomes an essential part of our worldview.

We can strengthen this conviction by reflecting on our virtuous qualities and beneficial actions. One powerful practice is to reflect on all the dharma practice you've undertaken. This work is not easy—being here, generating intentions for loving-kindness, and sitting hour after hour requires tremendous commitment. The fact that you're willing to engage in this discipline day after day stands as strong testament to your paramis: your courage, determination, loving-kindness, equanimity, and other wholesome qualities. Simply being present for this practice represents profound and powerful action.

Another helpful approach is remembering yourself as a young child—perhaps four, five, seven, or eleven years old. Connect with that childhood innocence, purity, and good-heartedness that still exists within you as part of your essential makeup. Send metta to yourself as that young girl or boy, touching that wellspring of innocence that remains alive in all of us.

You might also reflect on times when you felt truly loved and consider the people who genuinely love you. A particularly beautiful way to practice metta for yourself is to truly embody the role of receiver. When we send metta to ourselves, we serve as both sender and receiver, though we typically find the sender role somewhat easier. Sometimes it helps to simply focus on receiving.

Try imagining yourself sitting with a semicircle of your dearest friends and benefactors before you, all directing the metta phrases toward you. Your only task is to sit and receive their love, receive their metta. Working with a benefactor proves especially helpful because we can open our hearts to loving-kindness through someone we truly care about. This gives us that direct experience: "Oh, metta is alive in me. Metta exists within me in this very moment." When we feel metta alive within us, we cannot doubt our own

goodness, because we're filled with that beautiful quality, that wholesome state, that luminous experience.

This points toward that poem you've probably encountered by Galway Kinnell called "Saint Francis and the Sow," where he writes: "Sometimes it is necessary to reteach a thing its loveliness, to put a hand on the brow of the flower and retell it in words and in touch, it is lovely, it is lovely, until it flowers again from within of self-blessing." This beautifully captures what we're doing with metta for ourselves—we're teaching ourselves again our own loveliness so that we can have faith in that goodness and flower from within.

Often this reaction of aversion or ill will directs itself toward someone else, manifesting as anger or sometimes fear. It's quite common to be practicing loving-kindness and simultaneously experience strong anger toward another person. This happened to me during another long metta retreat where, by pure coincidence, my difficult person was also attending the retreat. This was someone with whom I'd had numerous disagreements and conflicts over the past year, someone who had hurt one of my friends in what I felt was a deeply unfair way.

We would sometimes cross paths during the retreat while I was practicing "May all beings be happy, may all beings be peaceful." Then I'd return to my room, sit down, and begin thinking about this person and all our interactions from the previous year. I'd become genuinely upset, really angry, spinning through that old territory again. I could get caught in these cycles for twenty or thirty minutes, unable to bring my mind back into metta.

If you've experienced this, you know that anger in a sensitive retreat environment feels particularly painful. When your body has been open and your energy feels very alive and sensitive, anger creates an intense contraction that feels absolutely terrible. I was being crushed by the anger I was feeling, and I simply didn't want to continue this pattern.

I had been somewhat indulgent, letting myself get carried away, but I became truly committed to finding a way through it. So I began examining the anger more closely. I saw that one aspect of anger contains what we call ill will. Good will means wanting someone to feel good, but ill will—as part of anger—means wanting someone to not feel good. I realized that part of my anger involved wanting this other person to not feel good.

Then I recognized that this was just one step away from cruelty. In Buddhist understanding, cruelty occurs when someone is suffering and we actually enjoy their suffering. I saw that I stood just one step away from being cruel toward this person. While I could accept seeing myself as an angry person, I couldn't accept seeing myself as cruel. Yet I recognized how close I was to that edge. In that moment, I simply decided I had to let it go.

So I'd heard that one could practice metta for one's difficult person. I'd heard that. And I thought, that's too hokey. You know, I don't even want to like this person, so I don't want to practice metta for them. But I

was desperate. So I tried it.

And it worked. I found that I actually could generate a sincere wish for them to feel well. And that transformed the ill will into good will. And as soon as I could make that move, the anger started to just fade away.

So this was a powerful lesson for me. Number one, not to indulge in anger, but to be really respectful of its power for damage, first to ourself. Of course, I wasn't able to express it, thankfully. But then if we express it, you know, the damage that it can inflict on another and on relationships. So I developed a real respect for its power and I put a lot of care into working with metta as the way to undo the ill will. So I just offer that. In a few days, we'll work on that directly with a difficult person. But it was an important part of the learning for me.

So the other way that aversion tends to go is to fear. Fear. If we don't like what the world is presenting, either we'll push it away, which is kind of the response of anger, or we're afraid of it and we withdraw from it.

So a few years ago, a woman was practicing metta in a retreat here. And by the way, if you like a week of metta, you would love a month of metta. And every February, a few of us here teach the month-long retreat. And there are always a few people who come and do metta for that month while other people are doing vipassana. So I just want to let you know that's an option if you want to do an extended period of metta.

So a woman was here in February doing a month of metta, and in the middle of the retreat she received a phone message that a relative had died. And she had to leave the retreat to go to the funeral. Wasn't a super close relative, so she wasn't terribly distraught, but she had to leave the retreat. And she was in an open and sensitive place.

So she said, "I'm really nervous about going traveling and especially through the airport because airports are so chaotic. The lines and the bustle and the security checks and the pat-downs and you don't know if you're going to miss the plane because it all takes so long and there's jostling at the counter. I really feel nervous about going into the airport. What should I do? Should I go back to vipassana?"

And I said, "No, continue to do the loving kindness. Send loving kindness to all the people who are around you at the airport." Remember Sally told the story of the original origin of loving kindness being how the Buddha taught the monks not to be afraid of the tree spirits? So it's the same principle. If you're in a situation where you might be afraid, try doing loving kindness to all the people around.

So that's what she did. She went through the airport and sent metta to the check-in agents and the security agents and all the other passengers and flight attendants boarding the plane and the passengers on the plane. And she said, "As long as I could stay in that state of metta toward them, I didn't have any fear or anxiety." So it really is a powerful protection against fear. And so if fear arises, again, I encourage you to

go to metta.

And again, that's where it's great to have this ally of a benefactor where you feel their very presence can fill you with some strength and a sense of refuge and a sense of connection.

So I'll talk tomorrow morning about more detailed ways to work with these near and far enemies when they come. Basically, you can continue to work with loving kindness. You can change to a compassion phrase, which I'll mention briefly. We'll do a guided meditation on compassion tomorrow afternoon. Or you can switch to vipassana for a while and just be with the emotions in a mindful way. These are three strategies for relating to them.

But as we start to develop this relational practice of the brahmaviharas, we start to feel more and more connected to the life of human beings, the life of creatures, all sentient life. And we start to appreciate this verse from Shantideva from the Guide to the Bodhisattva's Way of Life. And we'll let this be the closing for this evening.

"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."

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

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.

So thank you for your attention. We have about thirty minutes for walking meditation, then we'll have the final sitting with some chanting.

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