Connection to Life

Guy Armstrong · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Guy Armstrong · 58:19

The topic for this evening's talk is the connection to life.

We've talked a number of times about how we construct this sense of self through the process of grasping and how that process of grasping, done over and over again, restricts our consciousness, restricts our heart and mind. It narrows and limits our relationship to life, our view of life. And it makes it, in that narrowness, feel contracted and painful. Of course, this is also reflected in the way we understand ourselves, in the way we view ourselves. From the child's very open, wide consciousness, it becomes more and more narrow, and our sense of ourselves gets more and more limiting.

This is based on how we construct a view of ourselves, which the Buddha called *sakāya-diṭṭhi*, the view about our personality or our being. We've talked about different ways that we do this, and I want to emphasize one other tonight, which is how we consider ourselves to be different.

When we are defining ourselves and our characteristics, we will often say things like, "I'm too tall" or "I'm too short," or "I'm not intelligent enough" or else "I'm smarter than everybody else," or "I'm really not good looking enough," or else "I'm better looking than everybody else," and then we get inflated. Or we make discriminations based on our skin color, or our sexual orientation, or things like that. In all these discriminations, we are, in a way, stepping ourselves into a corner by defining ourselves in these more narrow terms.

I think in a way, this is the project of ego: to make ourselves special with these self-definitions. In doing that, what we end up doing is separating ourselves out a little bit from the whole family of humanity. So it's no wonder that we start feeling alone, isolated, cut off, or disconnected from the world, from life, from the human family, because our thoughts are running over and over about what's different about us.

When was the last time you thought, "Wow, just like everybody else, I've got two eyes and a nose. That's fantastic"? This sounds trivial, but we don't reflect along those lines. We seldom reflect on what we share. We reflect on how we're different. This carries over into many walks of life—politics and couple relationships and work relationships and so on. We so often focus on what's different, and that's what divides us and brings us apart.

But we can correct that imbalance, and meditation opens us to that very naturally by reminding ourselves of the breadth of life and what we share with that breadth of life. This project of ego, which is about making ourselves special, comes with a price tag, which is an increasing sense of loneliness or disconnection. This is especially prevalent in the West today because the extended family has kind of

broken down and communities have kind of broken down. So those normal ways of finding connection are not so available for us. In the West, I think we're more isolated than most other cultures.

Researchers in the West are finding that this sense of isolation that we live with is one of the deepest sources of our suffering. Scientific researchers have discovered this, and consequently, healing this kind of disconnection can bring a much more fulfilling sense of human life.

Part of the work of our meditation is to allow the heart to relax its grasping and relax that really narrow focus and open back up to this wider sense that we came in with, and how that wider sense unveils the sense of interconnectedness to life. So that's the theme I want to explore tonight.

In this opening and widening, there's a lot of potential for greater ease, greater peace, greater harmony with life because we're part of the whole flow. We're not stuck out on some isolated margin, but we really see how we're part of the whole flow.

This undoing is accomplished through both vipassana and *mettā*. Both of them have important roles to play, so I want to talk about how they both do that.

Through vipassana practice, when the emphasis is taken off the contraction, the mind naturally opens, the heart kind of expands, and we sort of have room to look around. A lot of people talk about the openings of vipassana as creating more space. So it creates more space, the pressure is off the heart, and in that we kind of relax and breathe and we look around and what do we see? Oh, there are a lot of other people here. So it opens us up to that.

In fact, the foundations of mindfulness point to this directly. One is encouraged to be mindful internally and externally. So we become aware of our own body and feelings. We're also instructed: pay attention to the bodies and feelings of those around us. So this happens naturally as part of vipassana practice.

Through *mettā*, we start to tune into other beings' states of happiness and unhappiness, and that becomes of concern to us. We start caring through *mettā*, compassion, *muditā*, about how other people are doing and feeling. In that, our hearts get connected. We get put together with others. And we also see some other similarities that are beautiful.

This kind of interconnectedness that exists, but that we often overlook, is summarized in an image from an ancient school of Buddhism called Huayan Buddhism that was popular in China from early years, like the sixth to eighth centuries, somewhat up until the present time.

And the image that they spoke of is called the Jewel Net of Indra. In this teaching, Indra is a great god from the Hindu pantheon, and the image describes how Indra has created this universe as a vast net of rope—strands extending horizontally and vertically throughout all three dimensions of existence. At every intersection where two ropes meet, there hangs a gem: transparent jewels of different sizes, colors, and shapes—some clear, some red, some green, some blue.

The beautiful quality of each gem lies in its clarity and transparency, which reflects all the other gems throughout the net. When you look into any single gem, you see the whole universe reflected within it. This is the profound image of the Jewel Net of Indra—each gem holds and reflects all the other gems because of its transparency, which is another way of speaking about its emptiness.

This serves as a model for us as sentient beings. Every human being, every conscious creature, reflects all the other beings in the world, in the universe. This reflection is possible because of our own intrinsic emptiness.

Our situation begins to become apparent as we deepen our meditation practice and open to this wide, choiceless awareness in which all experiences of the senses simply come and go—sight, sound, smell, taste, touch, thoughts, emotions—all arising within this vast awareness. Among those sights are all the other sentient beings.

In this way, each of us holds a universe. Each of us is a universe because of this transparent consciousness that we embody. This is how we function—our consciousness, our awareness, is like a sky that is essentially empty yet can hold everything that arises, the way vast space embraces all phenomena.

This understanding points toward what we explore in Big Mind meditation. As far as I know, the term "big mind" was coined by Suzuki Roshi and appears in *Zen Mind, Beginner's Mind*, where he writes: "Big mind experiences everything within itself. That everything is included within your mind is the essence of mind. To experience this is to have religious feeling."

I cherish this statement—when we realize that everything exists within our own mind, we have a religious feeling. This realization emerges from our vipassana meditation and provides that profound sense of connection.

You can experience this immediacy anytime you choose to tune into it. You are part of my experience right now, and I am part of your experience. Or we could say that you are in me right now, and I am in you right now. This is how we interpenetrate each other, and this is what the Vietnamese teacher Thich Nhat Hanh means by "interbeing"—we inter-are with each other.

We don't need to reach out to connect with one another; we simply need to recognize how we're already part of each other. Vipassana helps us see this through the open awareness that includes everything. Metta helps us recognize this because our hearts naturally begin to connect—we start caring about each other's wellbeing.

One discovery we make through exploring metta practice is that all beings share the same fundamental wish: to be happy and free from suffering. We are all alike in this essential desire. The many discriminations we make based on body shape, skin color, gender, or even species—while these may be valid distinctions—often obscure this profound similarity, this aspiration we all share.

Sometimes this truth breaks through to us powerfully, even across species. I treasure this story reported several years ago in the San Francisco Chronicle about a humpback whale. You may know that off the California coast, there's a sizable population of humpback whales that migrate seasonally—traveling south to Mexico for winter calving and mating, then north to California waters for summer and fall feeding. They grace our waters during both legs of their journey.

This particular humpback whale was migrating south in early December. She was magnificent—perhaps fifty feet long, weighing something like forty-five tons. Swimming about ten miles offshore, directly west of here near the Farallon Islands, a protected conservation area that also hosts crab fishermen who set their pots—heavy clay vessels suspended by floats on nylon ropes, dangling in the water.

As she swam through these waters, she became entangled in multiple crab pot lines—about twelve lines total, some wrapped around her body four times over.

They went around her back, they went around her tail, they went around her flipper, and one of them went right through her mouth, looped through her mouth. So the problem is that the clay pots are quite heavy, something like 90 pounds each, and she was carrying a lot of them—something like 12 or so pots were weighing her down. So not only was she tangled up, but the weight of them was carrying her down and she was really struggling to keep her blowhole above water so that she could breathe.

A fisherman went by and discovered her. But he didn't know what to do. He was in a small fishing boat. He didn't know what to do. So he contacted the Marine Mammal Center on the California coast and told them what was going on, and they said, "Wow, we've got to take care of this whale." So they sent a boat out with some divers, and they reached her. It was a few hours later, so she'd already been struggling and getting tired and probably exhausted when the divers showed up.

Then they looked at the situation and thought, "Wow, this is kind of a mess. How are we going to free her? This is not easy." The lines were cutting into her skin. So they were embedded in her flesh. And the divers said, "You know, if we go in the water, one flip of her tail could drown us. What should we do? Should we protect ourselves and just let her find her own way?" But they decided to go in.

So four of them dove in and they had these special knives, curved knives, and they worked very carefully around her, sawing, sawing, sawing through each place where the ropes were hanging off her—the body, the tail, the flipper. And one of the divers was working right around the mouth.

This diver who was working around the mouth said, "When I was cutting the line going through her mouth, her eye was there winking at me, watching me. It was an epic moment of my life." Can you sort of imagine that communication and that connection?

All the divers said that as they were working, the whale was just floating very passively—no longer struggling, but just kind of surrendered to what they were going to do with her. They kept cutting, cutting, cutting. It took a couple hours, but they finally cut all the ropes and pulled them away, and she was free.

Then the divers reported: when the whale realized she was free, she began swimming around in circles in apparent joy. She then swam up to each diver, nuzzled him, and then swam to the next one. "It felt to me like she was thanking me, knowing that she was free and that we had helped her," one of the rescue 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."

I think it's really beautiful, this kind of connection. All of us can feel that. You feel that when you see the deer around here? Someone mentioned running into a group of five deer on a trail the other day and just looking into that glistening eye and the deer not being afraid. The beautiful moment of being touched by that contact, by that connection. We feel their vulnerability because we know our vulnerability. So it kind of opens up into this universal quality of loving-kindness, this universal nature that all of us share.

I want to read a little more from a poem I mentioned earlier called "Kindness" by Naomi Shihab Nye. She says:

"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."

So metta is likened in the text to a gentle rain that falls everywhere without discrimination. And someone else mentioned in an interview that they felt the metta bringing this moisture to the heart, bringing a dampness. And that moisture is the opposite of dry—a juiciness to the heart. This image of the rain is beautiful because it has this universal quality.

The Buddha offered another reflection about this universal quality. He taught often on the theme of birth, death, and rebirth. And he said that all of us have gone through countless lives, being born, dying, passing away, and reappearing in another body, living that life, dying, passing away, reappearing in another body. And he said, because of all the different lives that we have lived in proximity to other beings, "it is not easy to find a being who in some previous life has not been your mother or your father or your sister or your brother or your son or your daughter."

Now I don't know how you feel about your family of origin, or this theory, but what if we all were connected like this? What if we all had been so intimate with each other in lifetimes before? What if I had been your mother? Would you want to care for me? Look after me? I think we might.

This is a line from the sutta that we've been chanting most evenings: "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 upward to the skies and downward to the depths."

There's another story that comes to mind about this that I really like. Jack Kornfield was the founding teacher here. He has a daughter who recently completed law school at UC Berkeley and decided to become a human rights lawyer. That's what she's doing now, really great service work.

While she was still in law school, she would travel back and forth between Berkeley and Woodacre. On one of her drives back to Woodacre with a friend, they were driving past Larkspur Landing, where the ferry comes in—a big six-lane road. The traffic was backed up unusually, with honking and everything moving really slowly.

As she got closer, she could see that the cars were stopped because there was a mother duck and five babies trying to get from the shoreline side of the six-lane road over to where the ferry was located so they could jump back in the water. They were trying to cross these six lanes of traffic, and cars were stopping and braking while people grew impatient and honked horns. But they kept trying to drive around the ducks.

So Caroline and her friend pulled up, stopped the car, got out, and blocked the other two lanes of traffic. They just told people to stop. The mother duck and the little ones crossed over to the center divide. Caroline thought, "Cool, all okay." But then they couldn't quite get up on the center divide—the mother could, but the little ducks couldn't quite make it up. So Caroline and her friend went and pushed them up onto the divide.

Then they hopped down on the other side, and the same thing started happening in the other direction. The other three lanes started braking, swerving around, honking, people getting upset. So Caroline and her friend went over to that side, still leaving their car totally stopped in one lane, and stopped the traffic so this family of ducks could cross the other three lanes and head toward the water.

"Just as a mother would protect with her life her child, her only child." I thought that was a beautiful, spontaneous act of metta toward these creatures.

The practice of the brahmaviharas—loving-kindness, compassion, and joy—really opens this channel of connection for us. 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 put too much soap over it because it hurts. That sore spot on our body is an analogy for compassion. 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 tenderness that's there for us, that opens through compassion and metta, is felt as a sensitivity, as a little vulnerability. It's not always so easy. But this tenderness and connection opens up so many wholesome qualities for us.

Even our practice of sila, of taking care with our conduct, is really an expression of this metta and compassion. We care for others through our conduct. We practice the precepts out of this sense of connection.

There was this beautiful story of the Dalai Lama being interviewed by Oprah Winfrey. I have tremendous appreciation for what Oprah has brought to our world because she takes these beautiful teachings—many dharma teachings—and spreads them to a wider audience than anybody else I know. She has featured, for example, our own James. Her endorsement of his book and his class brought many people to benefit from his teachings. She recently did a TV series with Jack, and she's featured Joseph Goldstein in a discussion on wise relationships—how to be in relationship without too much attachment.

After that encounter, we could affectionately call Joseph "Dr. Love." In this particular case, Oprah was interviewing His Holiness the Dalai Lama for an article that would appear in her magazine, O.

She began by asking the Dalai Lama, "Have you ever had to forgive yourself for anything?"

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

"Killing an insect?" Oprah said with surprise.

"An insect, hmm, okay," she continued, trying to process this response.

The Dalai Lama went on, "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 mistakes 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 finally 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."

That's a beautiful mind. That's a beautiful heart. I really feel that this purity of sila he's describing—this

non-harming—is part of what allows his mind to settle in such a deep way and permits that compassion to flow through him so clearly.

As we develop these qualities of metta and compassion in our own practice, we really feel that heartfelt wish for ourselves to come out of our own suffering, and we start to genuinely wish that others come out of their suffering. This is part of the opening of the eye to the rest of the world, to the situation that other human beings are in, that other creatures and animals are in. We open our hearts to the suffering of others and feel we would really like, if we can, to help them come out of their suffering.

When we feel metta and compassion in this kind of boundless way, we can enter a reflection that asks: What would be the best way I could help others truly come out of their suffering? There are many routes to help people come out of their suffering. There are so many needs in the world, so many ways to help people.

One path to help people is to help them awaken. If you really want people to go beyond all forms of suffering and reach the highest happiness—the most stable happiness—the aspiration might come: "I'd like to help other people to awaken."

When that aspiration arises, you can use it as part of your own motivation. Because how can you best do that? It's to awaken yourself. So we can take this aspiration to help others and bring it back as motivation: "I want to become free so I can help others move beyond the bounds of suffering."

This particular wish and motivation has a special name in the tradition. It's called bodhicitta. It's something we can practice, something we can develop. Bodhicitta literally means—bodhi means enlightenment or awakening, and citta means heart or mind. So you could call it the awakened mind, or what I prefer: the heart of awakening. We develop this quality, which is the heart of awakening, to awaken for the benefit of other beings. This can become part of our practice.

Sometimes when you're having trouble finding your own personal motivation, you can reflect: "It's difficult for me right now, but I really want to wake up to be in a position to help others wake up." That can help beautify and dignify the work we're doing.

This aspiration is not necessarily a huge flame in the beginning. It can be just like a little candle flame compared to our motivation to come out of our own suffering. But there's something quite beautiful about it. Even the Dalai Lama expresses it this way: "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 this is an aspiration that we can develop. Carol spoke about it when she discussed the three excellences.

At the beginning of every sitting or walking or day of practice or retreat, we can make this aspiration: "Through the benefit of my practice, may I awaken for the welfare of all sentient beings," or something

like that. You can say this at the start of every sit to remind yourself, if it's true for you, that part of the reason we practice is to benefit other beings.

Trungpa Rinpoche put it this way, continuing from the earlier quote: "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 to communicate, then we begin to realize 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.

So this is the development of bodhicitta, the sense of a compassion and care that can encompass all beings everywhere. And it really starts to matter to us. This is from the hermit monk Ryokan, who was a Japanese Zen teacher: "Oh, that my monk's robes were wide enough to gather up all the people in this fleeting world" – that wish that we could gather up all the suffering in this fleeting world.

So our practice takes on a flavor – it may not be the central element, but it takes on a flavor of motivation that we're really involved in this work for all beings, for the welfare of all beings. And it moves from being a nice phrase to being something that we feel in us.

I was sitting a long retreat at IMS one year in Massachusetts, and it was getting into wintertime. It was a November-December time period, and I liked to walk outdoors. The cold was coming in, the nightfall was coming early, the rain and occasional snow flurries were coming. It was late November, and I was feeling a little lonely. You know how autumn comes in and you start to feel, wow, it's really dark and the leaves are falling. I was starting to feel a little lonely.

But there was this stone wall that I was walking along, right beside my walking path. Very often this little chipmunk would poke up on this stone wall. He'd sort of pop up and look around a little bit. If I was still, he'd hang out there a little bit. If I moved too quickly, he'd just run away. And chipmunks are incredibly cute, you know – they sit up like this and they've got that little stripe, black stripe running down their back. They look around and then just dash into a hole to stay safe. So occasionally I would violate all wildlife warnings and bring him down some peanuts from tea and leave them out for his winter stash.

Then one day, a friend came to visit the center. He knew some of us who were on the retreat, and he'd brought us a little gift. So there's a note on the board: check the box where the managers leave things, there's something for you. I go to the box, and there's this piece of chocolate cake, which he had brought as a gift for a few of us who were on the retreat. That was very heartwarming. And delicious.

But something that was equally heartwarming was the note he wrote, just sending his love and expressing his wishes that I have a good retreat. His love for the Dharma really came through in the note. And then the last line really hit me. It said, "All beings are cheering you on."

And I really thought about that. All beings are cheering you on. And of course, some of them aren't. But if they knew what we were up to, they would be. It's just that they don't understand. But if they understood,

all beings would be cheering us on. So I had this image then of the chipmunk sort of standing up and going, "Go, guy, go!" as I was walking. Very moving.

Sometimes this compassion really comes across from a very tender and soft and vulnerable place. And sometimes it comes out really strong. Sometimes it has to be very, very firm. So I'm thinking about the people who were in the civil rights movement in the fifties and sixties and actually before that. We know a lot of these names – Dr. King and John Lewis and Ralph Abernathy. They've become somewhat famous.

And somebody that I didn't know a lot about until recently, but who I really think is a great hero of that movement, is Thurgood Marshall. So Thurgood Marshall was a lawyer who started working for the NAACP at their headquarters in New York in 1936. And he was very thoughtful about the way he approached his work. He wanted the NAACP to limit their legal cases to issues that he thought would really transform the welfare of especially African Americans in this country. And so he said, we want to focus particularly on education issues, on voting rights, and on capital punishment cases, because that's where he saw clear discrimination going on in the society and in the court systems.

So he went on to be the lead counsel for the NAACP, and he was the lead attorney who won the decision of Brown versus Board of Education, which overturned segregated schooling in this country—that 1954 Supreme Court decision that opened the way for school integration. And then in 1967, he was nominated by Lyndon Johnson to be on the Supreme Court. So he became the first African-American member of the Supreme Court.

When he was a rising star on the NAACP legal team, he would go down south, because that's where the most egregious violations of rights were going on, and he would go to trials to defend black people in the midst of these white communities that would have a white judge, white prosecutor, white police, and often all white juries. And he said of many of his cases, he never expected to win them. But he went down hoping to find some mistake on the part of the courts that could later be overturned on appeal. And he did that often. He would maneuver the prosecutor into making some overstep that could later be grounds for a retrial. So he was very successful on getting cases appealed.

But every time he went, he began to realize his life was in danger. There's this one case in 1946. He was defending 25 black men who had been accused of rioting and attempted murder in a small town in Columbia, Tennessee. And in fact, they had been provoked and they weren't really attempting to murder anyone, but they were on trial again with white judge and all-white jury.

So Marshall was a very skilled lawyer. And one by one, he managed to win the release, the acquittal of every one of the 25 defendants. So he was down there with other members of his team, and at the end of the case, they freed the last defendant. And they said, wow, now we can celebrate. Let's go back to Nashville where we have supporters. Let's go back to Nashville and we'll really celebrate.

And they were leaving town at night to drive to Nashville. As they were driving down the road, they were

pulled over by the local police, who of course were white. And the police chief said to Marshall, you're drunk. I'm going to arrest you. Get in this police car. Marshall hadn't had a drop to drink. But they pulled him into a police car and they told the other two lawyers, you go on your way. Keep going wherever you're going. You're going to Nashville. Keep going. Get out of town. We don't want you around here.

And they took Marshall in the police car. And where they drove him was down to this river where a bunch of other white people had assembled. And they were probably carrying Ku Klux Klan symbols and so on. And Marshall had happened to know that that site was the site of a number of killings of black men and lynchings. So there he was, all on his own, surrounded by this angry white mob who hated the fact that he had come into their town and gotten 25 men freed. And he was quite sure that he was going to be killed. In 1946, it would have been the end of his career.

And as he's standing by the river and getting intimidated by the police, another car starts coming down the lane. And it's his two lawyer friends who had not gone on to Nashville but had turned around and followed the police car and showed up on the scene. And where that mob felt they could get away with killing one person, they didn't feel they could do it in the face of two witnesses. And so they let him go.

So Marshall lived to fight another two decades of court cases for the NAACP, knowing every time he went to the South that his life was in danger, that he could face hostility, assault, murder. And yet, he cared so deeply about the suffering that was going on, he never hesitated. Never hesitated to show up and do what he thought was important to be done.

So this is a kind of compassion that's so strong that one is willing to put one's life on the line for what one believes, as difficult as it is to do that.

There's one other story I'll tell along these lines. I'll try to make this one brief.

Mahagosananda was a Cambodian monk. He died a number of years ago. When the Khmer Rouge took power in the 1970s, you probably know they killed most of the educated class in Cambodia, and they killed off most of the monks and nuns. They killed about two million people while they were in power under Pol Pot in the 1970s.

Maha Gosananda was not killed because he was practicing in Thailand. He was living in Thai monasteries doing Buddhist practice and was out of the country. But something like sixteen or seventeen members of his family were killed in that genocide while he was away.

The Khmer Rouge were pushed out in 1979, and refugee camps had been established along the Cambodian border with Thailand. A lot of Cambodians had fled there to seek safety from the genocide. Gosananda then went to the refugee camps and started living there, ministering to the people who had fled, who were all Buddhists by upbringing, by culture. He was one of the few senior Buddhist teachers left because most of them had stayed in country and had been killed in the genocide.

Gosananda started teaching and people started coming in large numbers to hear him. What he started teaching was having them chant the stanzas from the Dhammapada. He passed out leaflets that had a chant in Pali and a Cambodian translation. He got all these huge numbers of people chanting. And the chant that he had them do was: "Hatred never ceases by hatred. Hatred only ceases through love. This is an ancient and eternal law."

These were people who had lost their families, their property, to the Khmer Rouge. And he's teaching them to chant, "Hatred never ceases through hatred. Hatred only ceases through love."

The Khmer Rouge had infiltrated the camp as well. They were still active, even though they weren't the head of government. And he began to receive death threats. So his supporters said, "We want you to seek asylum in France. We're going to take up a collection. We want you to take a train to Bangkok and then a flight to Paris. Otherwise, we think you're going to get killed."

They gave him the money, put him on a train, sent him up to Bangkok and thought, "Great, now he's safe." About five days later, he shows up back in the camp. He'd taken the money they'd given him and bought ten thousand more leaflets that said, "Hatred never ceases through hatred." He got more and more people chanting at the risk of his own life.

This is the kind of compassion that's really dedicated, that is really strong.

Other ways that we separate ourselves out: body image is one. We often think about our body with quite a lot of different feelings. We might be proud of the way it looks. We might be more likely a little embarrassed about the way it looks—it didn't come out quite right. And we often take it very personally. We can take our body really personally.

But when you think about it, did you have anything to do with the basic way your body turned out? Whether you're tall or short, your shoulders are broad or narrow, the color of your eyes, your hair, your skin—did you choose any of that? We kind of forget that, don't we?

The body's just part of physical nature. Think about it: your mother's egg met with your father's sperm, and it gestated for a while, and then it popped out, and it got food and water and sunshine and air. Then all by itself, it just grew up to be whatever it's going to be—a little influenced by diet and exercise and things like that, but basically, it's just a physical process.

And yet we take it very personally. We can. And on the basis of that, we separate ourselves out: "I'm not good enough. It's not good enough. It should have come out different." Not ours.

Not our problem.

So that's why Ajahn Buddhadasa said, and I think Greg mentioned this quote earlier, this body came out of nature. It's part of nature and it belongs to nature. So give it back to nature. That'll be a great relief for you.

And similarly, really, with our thoughts and emotions. We can take some of our emotions very personally, thinking we're the only one in the world who knows this kind of embarrassment or shame or fear or grief or loss or sadness. And yet, again, if we look around, we see every human being has this same range of emotions—all the beautiful ones of love and joy and happiness and contentment and all the difficult ones. They're in this whole package. They're all there together.

Can we open and just allow them to be part of our mind's nature? There's a mental nature just as much as there's a physical nature. And for human beings, mind's nature includes this whole range of emotions. So can we just let them be there? Some of them are beautiful, some of them are painful. Whatever they are, can we let them be as part of what nature has offered? We didn't create them. We didn't ask for them. Nature delivered them.

So if we can hold this physical body, hold these emotions in that space of metta, letting them assume their own nature, then they open up and transform.

This is from an Australian poet 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 we open our heart to the forces of nature and that heals us. Loving kindness heals us. Compassion heals us.

We can turn our attention to this underlying unity that's below all the differences. Are we really fundamentally more different or more alike? Which is bigger? We all have basically the same body—they're just these small variations. We all have basically the same emotional package. It's just different combinations.

So the way it feels to me is we're all one organism that just takes different forms. Or you could say it's like one heart that's been poured into different vessels and then put through different life experiences. But that quality of heart, I think we all share. We all have that vulnerability. We have some fear. We have some tenderness. We have some love. The heart is very, very similar.

I'm sure you know Rumi very well, and his teacher was said to be a man named Shams who came from the town of Tabriz. Not much is known about Shams, but one poem supposedly has been preserved, and I'd like to read that:

"I, you, he, she, we—
In the garden of mystic lovers, these are not true distinctions."

I'll read it again: "I, you, he, she, we. In the garden of mystic lovers, these are not true distinctions."

In the garden of metta and vipassana, these are not true distinctions either. The true distinctions are

qualities of heart and mind and body that we all share.

So we can remind ourselves of this. We can remind ourselves of this deep unity that is always there underneath all the perceived distinctions. And in fact, we can start to choose whether we want to perceive distinction or unity, which is probably more healing. Perceiving the unity is probably more healing, and that's one of the reasons that the Brahma Viharas are such beautiful practices, because we come back to these simple wishes we all share for safety, for happiness, for health, and for ease.

And then as our hearts and awareness open up, we see we're all in the same situation. And to the extent that we can help one another, we want to help one another.

If it really is the same heart, but just in different packages, don't we want to free it everywhere? We don't have to stop with one package, because it's the same problem everywhere. Don't we want to free it everywhere?

This can become part of our motivation—the aspiration to free the heart wherever it appears. This is the journey of bodhicitta. One who is carrying out this journey is said to be a bodhisattva—one who aspires to awaken for the benefit of all other beings.

I want to close with this quotation from a Theravadan teacher, Acharya Dhammapala, from somewhere around the sixth century. He's not very well known, but he was a Sri Lankan teacher whose work appears in a beautiful book called "Treatise on the Paramis." Sometimes people say the bodhisattva ideal is not found in Theravada, but here is a Theravadan teacher from 1,500 years ago where the bodhisattva ideal is clearly articulated.

Dhammapala writes: "Through wisdom, the bodhisattva brings himself across the stream of becoming. Through compassion, he leads others across. Through wisdom, the bodhisattva understands the suffering of others. Through compassion, she strives to alleviate their suffering. Through wisdom, he aspires for nibbana. Through compassion, he remains in samsara. Through compassion, the bodhisattva trembles with sympathy for all. But because compassion is accompanied by wisdom, her heart is unattached."

Let's just sit for a minute together with this beautiful teaching: Through compassion, the bodhisattva trembles with sympathy for all. But through wisdom, her mind is unattached.

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