The Power of Loving-kindness

Guy Armstrong · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Guy Armstrong · 58:09

The talk this evening is on the power of loving-kindness.

There's a quote from Rumi that I like here. Rumi, you know, is the poet laureate of Spirit Rock, so we quote him whenever possible: "Someone who does not run toward the allure of love walks a road where nothing lives."

This is part of our path, the allure of love. And I am so grateful that we have the practice of loving-kindness within our tradition—well-established, clear instructions, easy to follow, reliable, and trustworthy.

When I was a young man in my early twenties, I had a lot of access to love. But it came and went like nobody's business. My emotions were in a lot of flux at that time, and so I could make strong connections with people, nature, music, and art, but I couldn't stabilize in it. I didn't know how it came about or how it went away. So actually finding the access to love became a really important motivation in my dharma practice.

And what I discovered, of course, is probably what you all know too. It needs the wisdom from vipassana in order to make it more stable. It needs the wisdom of non-clinging to have regular access to love. And then it's possible.

So we have a practice within our tradition that gives us an avenue to developing this quality of love in our hearts. And I'm very grateful that I found it. I've done a lot of metta practice over the years, and it has changed my life and my practice tremendously.

I want to talk tonight about some of the great things that come out of metta practice. There's probably a really long list, but I'm going to talk about five tonight. These are the powers of metta.

It makes the heart responsive, or you might say tender. It purifies the heart—that is, it cleans it up, it scrubs it. This leads to concentration. It connects us to all of life, meaning that we develop an inclusive sense of what being alive means. We allow all beings into our hearts. And it brings happiness in a very reliable way.

When we say it makes the heart tender, what we mean is that it lets us feel the joys and sorrows of life—our lives and others'—more readily. Things land on us with more impact because the heart is being trained to be responsive. And you can see this in the practice itself. What we're doing is going to different individuals and offering: "I hope you're happy. I hope you're well. I hope you're peaceful. I hope you're

healthy."

So it trains us to keep looking into the inner experience and inner welfare and inner well-being of everyone we come in contact with. The emotions of metta will go through lots of ups and downs, but this movement of caring and interest—you could say the empathy of metta—is what continues. This is how we're shaping the mind, and this is what we learn as a practice and as a habit from doing loving-kindness.

Now, not everybody who does vipassana does metta. Nor do you have to do metta. Nor should you feel guilty if you're not doing metta. If you don't want to run to the allure of love, that's your business.

Some personalities, I feel, open up to metta in a big way just through vipassana. I think about Dipa Ma, a wonderful Indian teacher, whom somebody mentioned—I think John mentioned in his talk. She was a very deep vipassana practitioner. I don't know that she ever did much formal loving-kindness practice, but she just had the heart qualities that when her suffering went away through vipassana, her big heart was right there. And metta was one of the things that people felt in her most strongly. She just had a very loving attitude to everyone she met. Joseph and Sharon used to say that when they visited her in Calcutta, they would just walk into her little house—part of an apartment—and just feel the space filled with love, which was simply her way of being.

But for other teachers who don't have a natural heart quality in personality, they can come out of vipassana practice, and I'll put it this way—their metta feels a little distant. So personally, I really gravitate to the teachers who have developed both wisdom and loving-kindness. Those teachers have shown me the possibility of development that is there for us as human beings.

So take a look at your personality. If loving-kindness is a natural flowering through vipassana, that might be plenty. On the other hand, if you feel a little dryness of heart, a little cerebral inclination, loving-kindness is a really wonderful supplement to vipassana to draw out those heart qualities.

One of my teachers was a Tibetan teacher who was giving heart advice at the end of a retreat. Tibetans have a way of doing this—they kind of sum up pith instructions they want you to take with you.

And he said, "I want you to carry three things out into the world. The first," he said, "is be natural. Just be yourself. Don't be pretentious. Don't put on big spiritual airs. Just be a nice person. Be natural.

"The second thing," he said, "is be wise. Go out, conduct yourself well. Don't make big fusses for people. Don't make mistakes in your conduct and your speech. They want to understand that good qualities come out of Buddhism. Good actions come out of Buddhism.

"And the third thing," he said, "is be juicy."

Because that's what will communicate to other people and let them know about your inner development. Now, juice is a technical term in Buddhism. It covers a wide range of qualities: love, reverence, joy, compassion, faith, kindness, humor, humility, devotion, awe. All those things are under this technical

heading of juice. And it's lovely to take those qualities back and share them in the world because our world needs more juice.

So these are the things that come out of our practice of metta. And I like the perspective that Alice Walker enunciated when she said, "As I get older, I realize the thing that I value the most is good heartedness." If we come out of Buddhist practice with good heartedness, that is going to communicate to the people we're in contact with. It will be meaningful to them and it will be our contribution to the welfare of the world.

So loving-kindness is the first of the four Brahma Viharas. In our tradition, it's the foundation for the other three. So the other three are compassion, joy, and equanimity. Loving-kindness is learning to care for the welfare of the beings that we bring to mind or come in contact with.

Compassion is not so far removed. It's what loving-kindness moves into when it looks on suffering. So if you're caring for someone and you notice suffering in them, the quality that comes out naturally is compassion. So compassion is connected with the suffering in the world.

The third quality of appreciative joy or sympathetic joy—mudita—is like the mirror image of compassion. It's beautiful how the Brahma Viharas are balanced in this way. And that is when the open heart looks upon someone who's happy, the response becomes a resonance with that happiness which makes us happy and joyful. So this is the movement of the heart in response to seeing happiness. It makes us happy to see others happy.

Then equanimity is the state that's a balance of mind that supports the other three. If equanimity isn't present, the other three aren't stable, and they also move into qualities that are not as wholesome. We'll talk about that later. So equanimity supports the other three.

If you go to teachings from Tibetan teachers or Zen teachers, they might have this same arrangement of the Brahma Viharas, but for them, compassion may be primary. And I think the Mahayana schools tended to adopt this because compassion really ties into the Four Noble Truths. Four Noble Truths are all about suffering. Buddha's teaching is all about suffering in the end. So compassion ties nicely into that.

Don't think of them as so different. Don't get into a war with a Tibetan student saying, "No, metta's the foundation," and they say, "No, compassion's the foundation." Need more equanimity. They're very, very similar. The Dalai Lama expressed this well. He said, "Compassion is basic human warmth." That's what loving-kindness is also—basic human warmth.

Sometimes Vipassana students have a little bit of a philosophical problem with metta. It seems a little bit phony, like we're trying to contrive something or forcing ourselves to feel something that's not there. And you know, philosophically, Vipassana is very elegant. Just be with what is. It's kind of like: take refuge in reality.

You don't need to change it. Isn't that beautiful? It's very elegant, and metta seems a little bit like we're

trying to get in there and interfere with reality. We're trying to put something in or push something out with this quality of loving kindness.

Vipassana is really our foundation. Taking refuge in reality, aligning our understanding and our mindfulness with exactly what is—this is the foundation of practice. And loving-kindness can really help us open to that in a very easeful and relaxed way.

So we say that we do loving-kindness in support of our Vipassana practice. We think they go together well because it's bringing in right effort, it's bringing in a wholesome state. And when loving kindness grows up, the mindfulness quality that we meet our experience with becomes very warm. So that's where we're aiming—to bring the warmth of metta with the clarity of mindfulness so we have this warm, loving attention that we bring to everything we meet.

And when you can bring a warm, loving attention to every part of your experience, conflict kind of goes out of life. So we're expanding the field where we can bring this warm, caring attention.

And then sometimes philosophically people complain, "Oh, but metta is diluted. May I be happy? But there is no I," they'll say. "Or may you be happy? But I know happiness is impermanent. What do you mean?"

So we have a solution for that. Here's a phrase for you all who have this doubt. I'm going to use it in an example: In this ever-changing stream of mental and physical phenomena, conventionally designated as Sally, may the mind state of happiness arrive ever more frequently.

So if you'd like, you can use that phrase in metta practice. Or you could just say, "May Sally be happy." That might be simpler. But actually, the way I understand "may Sally be happy" is the long phrase that I just said. So from a Vipassana point of view, we understand not-self, we understand impermanence, and still we want Sally to be happy as much as possible. And she does too.

Because when you meet somebody who has really developed this kind of loving heart, it's kind of amazing, isn't it? And I think about the Dalai Lama a lot in this regard because he has such a good heart in the face of all the difficulties that he carries in life. He has more or less sole responsibility for the welfare of the six million remaining Tibetans. There used to be seven million, but a lot died since the occupation. So the fate of his people rests on his shoulders. And that's a huge weight to carry. And yet he still has this joyful temperament that you see when you meet him.

And you've probably heard that he'll say something like, "You know, my true religion is not Buddhism. My true religion is kindness." And you feel that around him. That's what he cares about—making this kind human connection.

So he was being interviewed by Oprah one time for the magazine. And I really appreciate what Oprah has done to bring spirituality into the mainstream. I don't know of anyone else who has brought good Dharma to so many people. Oprah has a great reach through her TV shows and through her magazine.

So she was interviewing the Dalai Lama and started the interview by asking him, "Have you ever had to forgive yourself for anything?"

And he said, "Small incidents, like accidentally killing an insect."

"Killing an insect?" Oprah said.

"Hmm, okay."

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

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

"Small 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 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. And what people like the Dalai Lama are doing is reminding us of our true nature and our true capacity. Love is not something that gets generated by Buddhist practice. It's not something that's only found when we start metta meditation. It's in all of us.

One of the most loving people I ever knew was my grandmother, who was born in 1890 and had no Buddhist training at all. And yet when we were kids and came to her house for a visit, she gave us the most warm and loving embraces. So mostly it's a matter of inclining our mind in that direction and letting this innate quality come out. We're encouraging it, we're inviting it, but it's already there in all of us.

So this is the aspect of responsiveness. We train the heart to be responsive in this direction of caring.

Another big way that loving-kindness meditation works is in the area of purification of heart. And this starts with this simple intention. We connect with someone and we wish them well. That's a very pure intention. So we're developing over and over again this intention that is wholesome and caring. As we talked about—I think Aaron talked about the other day—intention is the seed for karma. This is the most transformative mental factor in all our practice: intention. The Tibetans say everything rests on the tip of

motivation. So we take care to set our motivation in a wholesome direction. And the intention of metta is a very wholesome direction. We're training ourselves to care. That's an intention that comes up again and again.

It's kind of like by turning to caring over and over, we're planting little seeds. These are karmic seeds from intention. And we continue to water them. And then eventually they sprout. They grow big and sprout.

Those of you who are gardeners know if you plant seeds, you can't tell the seed when to come up. You plant a tomato seed in early summer and you water it and you put it in a sunny place. Maybe you put some plastic over it to heat it up a bit. You can't tell the tomato, now it's time for you to come out of the ground. And if I don't see you popping up, I'm going to reach down in the dirt and pull you up. That's how I'll get my tomato plant.

But you just trust that the seed is right, the elements you add are right, and nature will take care of the rest. And that's the way it is when we plant the seeds of intention. We can't say when it's going to flower as a strong feeling of love or connection or caring, but we know that if we keep planting the seed and giving it the right conditions, it will—because this is a natural law. Metta will flower based on that intention.

The Buddha put it like this: "Don't disregard the accumulation of wholesomeness, saying this will come to nothing. By the gradual falling of raindrops, a jar is filled." This is metta. We're just dripping it moment after moment, and we let that jar fill up.

We begin with loving-kindness for ourselves because classically it's said to be the easiest, but as you may have found, it's not always the easiest. Sometimes metta for ourselves is the most difficult because it brings up feelings that we're not so comfortable with.

Some of the things that can happen are bringing up old memories of past events in our life. Every time we bring a new person into loving-kindness, we might review what's happened in that relationship. And there can be beautiful moments of friendship and caring, and there can be painful moments where we've been hurt or we may have hurt someone else. So those memories can come up. We may get in touch with feelings of not liking ourselves very much, of self-hatred, of judgment, of doubt about ourselves.

This doesn't mean we're doing the metta wrong. Rather, it indicates the purification is happening. Because the metta is a strong force, we're aiming this strong, beautiful force right at the heart. And as we do that, it's going to draw out everything that's its opposite.

That's how we get purified. If those feelings are in us but we can't feel them, we can't ever understand them and release them. As they emerge, we have the chance to hold them within this whole framework of loving kindness. The metta can then work on them, and hopefully they get released. That karmic knot unwinds and dissolves in time.

So when you find yourself doing loving kindness practice and some of these other qualities are

arising—we'll call them hindrances for now—don't worry that your practice is going off track. This is part of the natural process.

How do we work with them? It depends somewhat on the strength of the hindrance. If you can leave the hindrance in the background, recognizing that it's there while still connecting with the intention to care, do that. Just keep the metta phrase going, connect with as much sincerity of loving kindness as you can, leave the hindrance back there, and the metta will start to work on it. It will be held in the metta field and will start to partake of the metta.

We often speak about how when a hindrance is present, we move through recognition into allowing as parts of the steps of RAIN. It's important to understand that metta has a range of expressions, and allowing is part of it.

The first inkling of metta might be the quality of patience. Perhaps before we started metta practice, when something arose—whether a hindrance or something external—our first reaction was irritation. We would move to annoyance or judgment, resistance, condemning, and so forth. When metta is present, that same stimulus can be met with a quality we call patience. The Pali is *khanti*.

Patience here doesn't mean "I'm just going to wait. If I wait a couple hours, that will go away." That's not what patience is about. Patience is bearing what's not pleasant while keeping our mind in a wholesome place—an okay place, let's put it that way.

So the first sign that metta is happening is that we become more patient. Things that ordinarily irritate us, we meet with "okay, it's not pleasant, but now I can bear it."

The second step in the growth of metta is that we have a real allowing of it. More than "I can bear it"—it really becomes okay. As it warms up, it moves from patience into allowance and acceptance. Then it moves from there into affection. And then it moves from there into love. And then it moves from love into what you might say is passion and devotion in a really selfless way.

So metta has this whole range of flavors and intensity, and it starts with patience. The affliction comes, the hindrance comes, and there can be patience with it.

All the standard hindrances can arise, and then there are special hindrances that come with metta called the near and far enemies. You'll find that each of the *brahmaviharas*—and somebody in the afternoon probably mentioned this—each of the *brahmaviharas* has a near enemy and a far enemy. The near enemy is a state that looks like the *brahmavihara*, but it's not wholesome. It's an imposter masquerading as the real thing.

With the *brahmavihara* of loving kindness, the imposter is affection with attachment. So you like somebody, but it's very conditional. It's only if they act a certain way. Sometimes it's conditional affection or friendship: "I'll befriend you if you'll befriend me. And if you go back on your part of the bargain, I'm

going to take away my part of the bargain." So it's looking for a deal.

There's another way this comes out. Let me give an example. I was teaching a metta weekend one time. I didn't think people would get much in a metta weekend, but actually they did. It was amazing to see the opening. We used the phrases we're using now, including "may you live with ease."

I took questions, and a woman said, "Well, I was using my son as my benefactor because I really love him a lot. And I came to the phrase 'may you live with ease.' And you see, he's in college and he's living with way too much ease. He sleeps late in the morning. I do all his laundry for him. I go in and clean up his room."

And you know, he's not even doing that well in his studies. And so what I wanted to say is, "May you acquire some backbone and do your work better."

This is not entirely metta. This has a little bit of fixing in it. And so when we say metta for someone, we want to really accept them as they are, not conditionally based on their changing or living up to our ideas. We're not trying to use it to fix people.

And in fact, we're not even waiting for an outcome. We say to someone, "I hope you may be happy," but our hope, our care for them is not dependent on that outcome, on that result. Maybe they're not happy. We can still wish that for them. So we don't attach to the result of our wishes. And it's equanimity that gives that support to not attach to the result.

So how to work with the hindrance? The first is if it's weak enough, leave it in the background, continue with the intention of loving kindness, and it will be affected by the field of metta that you're in. If it gets stronger, it can feel like it really blocks or prevents the shift of caring. When you're really burdened with a strong hindrance—you know, could be desire, could be fear, could be worry—you're not going to be able to move into caring for someone.

So when it's like that, it's more helpful to shift away from metta and you have two options. The first that I would recommend is you go to compassion. Because in compassion, you're staying within the Brahmavihara family. So you're not moving very far away. And you have a phrase either, "May I be free from this pain and sorrow," or "May I hold this pain with compassion." Either of those is a good phrase for compassion. So you recognize the hindrance that's there and you say something like, "May I hold it with compassion." Continue with that until it subsides and return to metta.

Or, and this may be if the compassion doesn't feel right or it doesn't seem to engage properly, then move to vipassana. Open to the hindrance with mindfulness. Let yourself feel it. Do the exercise of RAIN. Feel it in your body. Allow it to be there. And sometimes that will just give it enough space that it can kind of, if it's fairly new, not too rooted, can kind of wash through. And then you can go back to the loving kindness.

This quality of meeting our own self-hatred or self-doubt is really common in doing metta practice. It's a

deep conditioning often in us that goes way back to childhood, and it's something that can take years to become free of. But the combination of vipassana and metta really can let us become free and transformed from that.

So I want to read this poem. It's a well-known poem, but I hadn't heard it for a while, and maybe you haven't heard it for a while, so I'm going to read it. It's called "St. Francis and the Sow" by Galway Kinnell.

"The bud stands for all things, even for those things that don't flower. For everything flowers from within of self-blessing, though 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, until it flowers again from within of self-blessing. As St. Francis put his hand on the creased forehead of the sow and told her in words and in touch, blessings of earth on the sow. And the sow began remembering all down her thick length, from the earthen snout all the way through the fodder and slops, to the spiritual curl of the tail, from the hard spininess spiked out from the spine, down through the giant broken heart, to the sheer blue milk and dreaminess spurting and shuddering from the fourteen teats into the fourteen mouths, sucking and blowing beneath them. The long, perfect loveliness of sow."

So sometimes it's necessary to reteach ourselves our loveliness. And that's what the practice of loving kindness is doing. It's showing us that possibility.

Now, of course, one of the challenges in purification comes when we pick up the difficult person. And this is going to be your treat tomorrow in loving kindness. It's probably the most challenging part of the practice, but then there's also good learning.

So I was doing an intensive metta retreat one time. I was practicing it for six weeks in a container a lot like this, and I was quite settled when it seemed to happen that I started running into one other person on the retreat a lot, and that person was my difficult person. It's someone that I'd known before the retreat, and they were also on the retreat, and it just seemed at this point we crossed paths a lot.

So my practice would be going really well, and I'd had a lot of love and energy and brightness. And then I'd meet this person passing in the hall. And I'd go, "I can't believe what they did. What they said and how they treated me."

I can't believe they did that. And I'd start winding myself up thinking about all the things that had happened. I'd get really growly about it.

I'd go back to my cushion and try to practice: "May my friend be safe, may my friend be happy"—but I can't believe what that person did. I would spin out for half an hour and be really worked up about it.

Then I'd sort of remember: oh, you know, they talk about loving-kindness for the difficult person. Maybe I should try it. But I said, "No, no, no, I don't want to love the difficult person. That's not part of the program that I came for."

But the anger was so annoying and unpleasant, I thought I'd better try it. So I did. And surprise of surprises, it worked.

Something really interesting came out of that. When I could generate a real wish for their welfare, the anger went away. That's all it took. I didn't have to like them. I didn't have to love them. I didn't have to approve of what they'd done. I didn't have to condone their conduct or think they were a great person. All I had to do was wish them well. And if I could sincerely wish them well, the anger went away.

As I looked into why that was, I saw that a piece of anger, for me anyway, is usually something called ill will. In ill will, it's the opposite of goodwill—we actually want the other person to suffer. I started to see that within my anger was a wish that my difficult person suffer. That is really close to cruelty. Cruelty is enjoying somebody else's suffering, but ill will is wanting somebody else to suffer. They're not that far apart.

Although I could think, "Oh, it's okay for me to be angry," I couldn't think it was okay for me to be cruel. That didn't feel acceptable. I saw how close I was getting, and I didn't want to be in ill will toward them. I realized that I now have a way to come out of ill will, and that is to replace it with goodwill.

That was a real opening for me. I recommend it as a skillful means with anger. If you can just wish well for the person, the anger can really lift.

I want to read something from one of the discourses of the Buddha. This is a text called "The Simile of the Saw." The Buddha talks about how to deal with difficult people. Difficult people have by and large said something unkind to us. The Buddha said this might happen in five ways:

They might say it at the wrong time. Have you ever been with somebody you really like and hope will respect you, and a friend comes up and gives you some feedback or says something disrespectful? It feels awful to be hurt at the wrong time.

Or somebody says something about you that's just not true, but other people hear it and believe it. That's hurtful.

Or they come and speak to you harshly. It's really clear they're angry and they blast you with that harsh energy. That hurts.

Or you know that their speaking is coming out of ill will—a wish to cause you harm—and that doesn't feel good.

Or you know that the mind they're speaking from is one of anger or hatred, and that doesn't feel good.

So the Buddha said if any of these five things happen—somebody speaks to you at the wrong time, they speak something that's not true, they speak harshly to you, they speak in a way that harms you, or they speak from hatred—you should still maintain loving-kindness for them.

This is what he actually says: "Herein, bhikkhus"—and bhikkhu means practitioners, means us—"you should train thus: Our minds will remain unaffected and we shall utter no evil words. We shall abide compassionate for their welfare with a mind of loving-kindness without inner hate. This is how you should train, bhikkhus."

This is a challenging directive. Reflect on it with people who have hurt you with their speech.

This is not easy to do—to maintain loving kindness toward those who have wounded us with their words. Yet this is precisely what the Buddha calls us to practice.

This teaching offers us a good reminder when we encounter difficult people: see if it's possible to open with some care.

I want to share the story of Aung San Suu Kyi, who was placed under house arrest for close to seventeen years by the military dictatorship in Burma. As you know, she is now free and serves as an elected member of parliament—quite remarkable.

During her house arrest—and I say "house arrest" though she lived it partly as a meditation retreat—she received visits from very well-known and respected Burmese Sayadaws. We know some of the teachers who visited her and the instructions they offered during her confinement. One of the central practices they taught her was loving kindness.

When she emerged, you could observe how she remained balanced in relationship to the military dictators, able to work with them politically. She had been cultivating metta throughout her long years under house arrest. Upon her release, she reflected: "When I compared notes with my colleagues in the democracy movement who have suffered long terms of imprisonment, we found that an enhanced appreciation of metta was a common experience. We had known and felt both the effects of loving-kindness and the unwholesomeness of attitudes lacking in loving-kindness."

She had witnessed this contrast clearly, and her determination was to approach all circumstances with love.

Nelson Mandela expressed something remarkably similar. When the white government of South Africa was considering his release from prison, their primary concern was whether he would encourage the black population to rise up against whites in retribution for years of oppression, cruelty, and false imprisonment.

They arranged a meeting to assess this risk, essentially asking whether he would incite people to turn against the white population. Mandela's response was clear: "No. I am not going to do that, and my government will not do that. Why? Because we have seen in you what brutality and fear look like. And we don't want to live like that. We are not going to repeat that."

I believe this reflects Aung San Suu Kyi's intention as well—not to repeat the mistakes of the dictators. This

is the realm of purification of heart.

The third power of loving-kindness is the power of concentration. Concentration concerns the unification of mind, and we typically approach it by choosing an object around which the mind can center. In Vipassana practice, that object is often the breath. In loving-kindness practice, the primary object is the phrases themselves.

You return again and again to the phrases of loving kindness, and the mind collects around them. As the mind gathers in this way, stray thoughts, wishes, desires, and fears arise less frequently—a genuinely wholesome development. As Bonnie mentioned last night, this represents one of the seven factors of enlightenment: the factor of concentration.

As you develop greater sophistication in your metta practice, you'll begin to notice that the mind collects not only around the phrases, but around other objects as well. There's the image of the person you're sending metta to, if you use visualization, or the felt sense of their presence if you work without images. There's the feeling of metta itself—as it grows, you can attune to it and allow yourself to be aware of it. And there's something I often recommend: returning to the heart center and feeling the body's response to the metta.

You might say there are really four objects you can be aware of during loving kindness practice, and each serves as a focus for concentration. Concentration builds with each of these elements. In fact, the more aspects you hold simultaneously, the stronger your concentration must become. It's rather like juggling—to keep all those elements moving in the right sequence, you must be genuinely present. These four aspects stretch you, and in stretching you, they build this power of concentration.

Metta is a beautiful concentration practice. We use it on long retreats to teach concentration to the depth of jhana—this is one of our approaches during extended practice periods.

Concentration unifies the mind. As you probably know, love itself unifies the mind.

Love is a really powerful unifying force. It brings families together, friends together, countries together. There's a beautiful quote from Martin Luther King where he says, "Love is the only force capable of transforming an enemy into a friend." So we hope that it will bring the nation together eventually.

Love is unifying, concentration is unifying. In the metta practice, we're using both love and concentration to build that force of unity. This is a double power of unification.

I want to read this passage from a Russian Orthodox saint from the 19th century whose name was Theophan the Recluse. I very much doubt that he had Buddhist training, but here you'll hear it coming from a Christian perspective, something that I think will be familiar:

"For as long as the mind remains in the head where thoughts jostle one another, it has no time to concentrate on one thing. But when attention descends into the heart, it attracts all the powers of the soul

and body into one point there. This concentration is immediately reflected in the heart by a special sensation that is the beginning of warmth. The sensation grows gradually stronger, firmer, deeper. And so it comes about that whereas in the initial stages the attention is kept in the heart by an effort of will"—have you noticed that with metta? It takes an effort of will to stay in the heart—"in due course, this attention by its own strength gives birth to warmth in the heart. This warmth holds the attention without special effort. From this, the two go on supporting one another and must remain inseparable because dispersion of intention cools the warmth and diminishing warmth weakens attention."

This is exactly describing the way metta and concentration support each other in this bringing about of warmth in the heart.

And another Dipa Ma story. She was teaching a three-month course at IMS on the East Coast. People were struck by her character and her being and her presence. One time, somebody had the idea to ask her what I think is a great question. They said, "What's in your mind?" I'm really glad somebody asked that.

And she said, "I have only three things in my mind: concentration, peace, and loving-kindness. That's all that's there."

That's a beautiful mind.

The fourth aspect, the fourth fruit of loving-kindness is this quality of connection. It really opens us out into a connection with other beings, beginning with a circle of friends and close people we already have, extending outward to people we don't know, extending outward to people we have difficulty with, eventually extending to all beings everywhere—human beings, animals. We care for their suffering. This is where the practice is opening up to, and there's a joy in that. There's a joy in this connection.

This is from Shantideva, who was a great sage in India and author of *Guide to a Bodhisattva's Way of Life*:

"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 this is the beauty of the path of metta. As we connect with others, that connection is really satisfying. It satisfies something deep within us because it offsets our sense of isolation. I read somewhere—so many of these things go by and I didn't note it, I can't give you the reference—that neuroscience researchers have found that one of the deepest sources of suffering for humans is feeling isolated, disconnected, lonely, not part of a community and not belonging.

Metta overcomes that sense of isolation. It puts us in touch with all sentient beings. Why? Because we find out all beings have the same basic wish we do. Every being that takes life experiences pleasure and experiences pain. Every being that takes life only wants to experience pleasure and doesn't want to experience pain. This is our common predicament. So we're all alike in this.

Any being you bring to mind, you'll find that common thread of humanity or even cross-species

connection. Animals are the same—all want to be happy and don't want to suffer. When we start to see it like this, we find that that unifying force of connection is bigger than the distinctions we've made.

What thought does is it makes lots of distinctions. It makes distinctions among us of age and race and ethnicity and class and education and sexual orientation and gender identification and ability or different ability and so on. These distinctions are real.

We are not trying to deny them. We acknowledge them. We can celebrate them as our diversity. But we don't have to obsess about them to the exclusion of seeing what we have in common. And what we have in common is more fundamental and unites us rather than providing a possible ground for separation.

What unites us is this fundamental humanity. We all have access to the brahmaviharas. We all have access to the difficult emotions. They're part of our human package. The way I feel it is we all have the same heart. It responds in the same way to pleasure. It responds in the same way to pain.

It's kind of like that one human heart has just been poured into all our different packages. And then it's been subject to really different life experiences. It's been shaped by those life experiences. So our hearts have been conditioned by the different circumstances we've been in. But underneath, that same heart is there in all of us. We're the same organism, basically. We've just been conditioned and shaped differently.

There's Rumi, and then you may know his teacher was from the area of Tabriz whose name was Shams. He's known as Shams of Tabriz. Not much is known about Shams, but he left at least one poem. Here's a poem from Shams of Tabriz: "I, you, he, she, we, in the garden of mystic lovers, these are not true distinctions." These are not true distinctions. In the garden of loving kindness, these are not true distinctions. There's one heart. It's just beating in different chests. Same heart.

So this is the force of connectedness that undoes our isolation, undoes our loneliness, and opens us up to a really deep inclusivity with life.

And the last beautiful quality of loving kindness is this force of happiness. When this caring is there, when this sense of connection is there, when the mind has become unified through love and concentration, there is a sublime quality to our experience. That's why the brahmavihara is called a divine abiding. It's sort of like the Buddha was saying, if you're going to hang out in a state, this is like the highest state to hang out in. You can hang out in Nibbana, and that has no flavor, essentially. And that's really free. But if you're going to be in the world, and you're relating, these are the states, heavenly states, that you can learn to relate from.

So metta opens this up really directly. And one of the places that you might feel that the strongest is when you're really connecting with a dear friend or a benefactor. When the quality of real care and deep affection is there in that moment and it comes to life, see what that feels like. It's kind of like there's such a richness and enjoyment to that. It's satisfying on so many levels that there's just the sense that we can drop into and rest in the contentment of that place. We can abide in that quality of loving kindness. And

it's kind of like it's a place we can feel we're home in.

So one of the reasons metta is such a good counterpart to vipassana is vipassana kind of takes us apart. I don't know if you felt this in this retreat, but vipassana kind of breaks us down into the six senses or the five aggregates, which John will talk about soon. Our experience, when we look at it closely, is just these momentary arisings of in-breath, sound, emotion, thought, sensation, out-breath, sight. There's nothing else there.

So this can make us feel like we're in pieces. Vipassana reveals this great space where these little bits of action are happening. Metta fills that space with warmth and puts us back together. We hold all those bits in the embrace of loving kindness, of acceptance, of warmth, of love. And when we're held there, we feel that goodness. We feel that goodness within us, and that becomes the source for loving ourselves, really caring about ourselves deeply. And that's something that, as practice evolves, we want to share with others.

This is another quote from Shantideva: "For as long as space endures and as long as sentient beings remain, may I too abide to dispel the misery of this world." We find this source of reliable happiness and sublime abiding, and we want to share that with others. And that is deeply satisfying.

So this is sort of the close of this interview between Oprah and the Dalai Lama.

And I just want to mention that compassion and metta can be used interchangeably in discussions like this. They're not very far apart. Compassion is primary in Tibetan Buddhism, while metta is primary for us in the Theravada tradition—the same basic principle expressed through different cultural lenses.

As this interview between Oprah and the Dalai Lama drew to a close, Oprah asked him a final question: "In my magazine I do a column called 'What I Know For Sure.' What do you know for sure? The one thing on which you have no doubt."

The Dalai Lama did not hesitate. His answer came immediately, with complete certainty: "Compassion is the best source of happiness. For happy life and happy world, there is no doubt."

Metta is too.

So let's just sit for a minute and let the metta fill the space. Let this truth settle into our hearts: Compassion is the best source of happiness for a happy life and a happy world. There is no doubt.

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