The Power of Mettā

Guy Armstrong · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Guy Armstrong · 1:01:50

The talk tonight is on the power of loving kindness.

I'll start with a quote by Rumi, who is kind of the poet laureate of the Vipassana lineage, so a suitable opening. He said, "Someone who does not run toward the allure of love walks a road where nothing lives." This spoke to me deeply.

When I was in my twenties, I had many openings and considerable access to love. It came through connections to people, to nature, to music, and to art. Those experiences were very meaningful and satisfying for me, but what they weren't was stable. They seemed to come and go with no logic that I could see. I didn't know what the conditions were that led to that availability, or what conditions made them unavailable. That was a significant part of my motivation for entering Dharma practice—I wanted to understand how to have love be a more frequent part of my life.

Of course, I found out what probably many of you realize already: the key to any kind of stability in loving kindness or mettā is the wisdom of non-clinging. The process of clinging or selfing blocks the opening to love, while letting go into non-clinging opens the channels to love. In addition, our lineage has a very powerful practice that inclines the mind in this direction—the practice of loving kindness itself.

I'm very grateful that this exists within our tradition. One of the beautiful things about the tools that the Buddha offered is that we have the power to shape our heart and mind in almost any wholesome direction that we choose. We can direct it toward wisdom, toward equanimity, toward joy, toward compassion. We can direct it to love using specific practices and specific tools that the Buddha offered.

Within our tradition, the practice of loving kindness is the primary way to develop this openness to love in all its wholesome forms. There's much that goes on with the practice of loving kindness in addition to just the appearance of the quality of mettā, and that's what I want to explore tonight—the benefits and powers that are implicit within the practice of loving kindness.

There are five particular developments I want to discuss this evening. First, the practice of mettā makes the heart more responsive. It trains us to care, and in doing that, makes us respond to and feel, with an empathetic attitude, the happiness or suffering or welfare of the beings that we come into contact with.

Second, it purifies the heart. That is, it cleans it up, scrubs it—sometimes with quite a stiff brush—but it's a very powerful agent for the purification process.

Third, mettā practice is an excellent avenue to concentration. It's described in the Visuddhimagga, that

fifth-century text compiling many techniques of the time, primarily for its benefits in developing concentration or samādhi.

Fourth, it connects us to life. It connects us to the whole breadth of what lives, and so in that way makes our practice more inclusive. It teaches us our relatedness to all sentient beings and gives us a way to bring all sentient beings really alive in our meditation.

Finally, the practice of mettā brings a lot of happiness. It's one of the most direct routes to happiness that I know of.

Let me talk about each of these five developments in detail, beginning with how the practice makes the heart more responsive. This is perhaps the most obvious thing that happens as a result. What we're really doing in our formal mettā practice is training ourselves in how to care. We learn how to care about our own well-being and we learn how to care about the well-being of any other being that we direct the loving kindness to. This is a training in heart connection.

The very phrases of mettā point us to caring about people's safety, happiness, health, and ease in life. It's easy to go through our days meeting people as they come and go without having to look very deeply into their experience. But using the phrases of loving kindness, we start inquiring: How are you? How are you doing? These are the areas that make up happiness—how are you doing in those areas? This becomes an important training in taking beings in.

In our lineage, Vipassana is the primary practice. We often say that we do the loving kindness in the context of the Vipassana practice and as a support for it. The wisdom practice is to see things as they are, and out of that seeing comes an unburdening of the heart with greater freedom.

And out of that unburdened heart, love and compassion flow more easily, flow more naturally.

In my observation, some people have a temperament such that just from Vipassana practice, a big heart opening takes place. As their personality inclines to the emotional side or to the loving side, just the freedom that opens through Vipassana allows that loving kindness to come through.

But with some other personalities, the Vipassana practice removes a lot of obstacles, but it doesn't so strongly accelerate the opening of the heart. For myself, my upbringing and temperament were such that I was probably on the cerebral end of the spectrum. I was not terribly emotional as a young person growing up. And so for me, the introduction of the Brahmavihara practices created a wonderful avenue to really bring the development of the heart to the forefront.

There was a period of time in my practice when I did a lot of Brahma Vihara practice. I would come here to the three-month course every year. I would sit for six weeks, and I would do Brahma Viharas—metta, or compassion, or sometimes all four Brahma Viharas. That brought beautiful qualities to be more accessible in my life, in my practice, and in my relationships.

It's not necessary that everyone do metta practice. It's not necessary that all Vipassana practitioners do metta practice. Usually within a group of 100 yogis, there's a very solid club called the I Hate Metta Club. So if you're part of that, that's okay too. You don't have to run toward the allure of love. But if you want to, here's the path. And it really works.

I was sitting in a retreat with a Tibetan teacher, and you may know that often at the end of retreats, they give heart advice to their students as parting instructions. So this teacher said, "As you're going back into the world, I suggest that as you take the teachings back into the world, let people know how the teachings are manifesting in your life. You're a representative of the Dharma as you go back into your life. The way you carry yourself and conduct yourself will express to people what's going on with your Buddhist practice."

He said, "I have three pieces of advice. When you go back, be natural. Just be a natural, easy person. Don't put on spiritual airs and try to be precious about the fact that you're a meditator. Just be a natural down-to-earth person. The second is, be wise. When you go back into the world, be careful with your choices. Be careful with your conduct. Don't do things that are going to be really upsetting to other people. Don't harm people. Take care with your interactions and your relationships. And the third thing: be juicy."

Juice—this is a technical Buddhist term. And it includes qualities like love, reverence, joy, compassion, faith, humility, devotion, humor, awe, wonder. "Go back and manifest this juicy heart quality, and that will be an immediate way of transmitting to people the benefits of your practice." So be natural, wise, and juicy. That was the instruction.

These qualities not only communicate to other people, they make our life so much sweeter. As these qualities come alive in us, they bring forth the beautiful emotional side that is in our human potential. Life becomes so much richer on account of them. And they also touch others.

I appreciated this comment from Alice Walker, the author, who said, "As I get older, I realize the thing that I value the most is good-heartedness." So as we go back into the world, let's manifest that good-heartedness to the people that we come in contact with.

We have four specific ways of development through the Brahma Viharas. In our lineage, metta is the foundation for the other three. There's loving kindness, compassion, sympathetic joy, and equanimity. Metta is the foundation because with metta, what we do is develop the heart that is open and caring. That's the foundation for everything in the Brahmavihara realm.

When that open heart looks on someone who's suffering, the natural movement is to compassion. That's naturally what comes through when the open heart looks on suffering. When that open heart looks on someone who's happy, what naturally comes through is sympathetic joy—a happiness in the other's happiness.

And when that open heart can just rest in the center of things, the way it expresses itself is through the

balance of equanimity.

So all four of these states are intimately related. And I love the symmetry here. With metta as the foundation, suffering gives rise to compassion, happiness gives rise to sympathetic joy. There's a beautiful symmetry in that. And then equanimity, you could say, is the support for all three. Because if equanimity is not present, the mind tips out of the balance of the brahmavihara into an unwholesome state—either the near enemy or far enemy.

If you read dharma that comes out of a Mahayana lineage, Zen or Tibetan, they will usually talk about compassion as being primary among the brahmaviharas. Tibetan Buddhism definitely has the same four brahmaviharas as our lineage, but they tend to emphasize compassion as the foundation. And this is beautiful in a way, because compassion really relates to the heart of the dharma as expressed in the Four Noble Truths. The Four Noble Truths are all about suffering and its end. And so the brahmaviharas can be focused on suffering and, through practice, its end.

But you don't need to argue with the Tibetans about this. It's not that metta and compassion are so very different. We see metta as a foundation; compassion is just what comes through when it sees suffering. So they're very closely allied. And whichever one you regard as primary works just fine.

The Dalai Lama defined compassion as "basic human warmth." And that's what our definition of metta could be also—basic human warmth. This is the stance of the caring heart.

Now sometimes from a vipassana perspective, people have a philosophical doubt about metta practice. Some people don't want to get too close because they don't quite trust it. Vipassana is so elegant—just be with what is. It's kind of impeccable, right? Who could argue with just being with what is? And in a deep way, we're taking our refuge in reality. The dharma means the truth. Our refuge is in the truth of things the way they are. That's very beautiful.

And so from this point of view, metta can seem a little suspicious. It can look contrived, sound too much like a Hallmark card, be a little sentimental, or have a feeling that it's somehow fake.

But even the faking has a good quality to it. As Carol Wilson likes to say, "Fake metta is a lot better than real aversion."

With the brahmavihara practices, we incline the mind in a certain direction, and then slowly the natural quality is evoked by that inclining. It becomes very unfabricated, very natural, very unforced.

And then other people complain that metta is deluded. You know, you say, "May I be happy," but there is no I—we know this from vipassana practice. There's no I. Or you say, "May you be happy," but happiness is impermanent. Why should I wish for something that's impermanent?

So for all you vipassana practitioners who have this view, I want to offer a different meta-phrase for you. The phrase goes something like this: "In this ever-changing stream of physical and mental phenomena,

conventionally designated as Sally, may the mind state of happiness arise ever more frequently."

I think this would satisfy even the Abhidhamma purists in the group. So you could say that phrase in your metta if you like, or you could simply say, "May Sally be happy." You can choose.

But truth to tell, when I say, "May Sally be happy," I understand that other phrase. My understanding is that she's empty of a self and happiness will always come and go. But we understand that, and we can still say, "May Sally be happy."

And it's so moving, I find, when I meet somebody who's developed the heart to a strong degree. I often think about the Dalai Lama in this regard. He will say to large groups, "My religion is kindness." And I think he means this in a very profound way: My religion is kindness.

In that famous interview, the Dalai Lama's responses revealed something profound about a mind cultivated in loving-kindness. When Oprah asked if he'd ever had to forgive himself for anything, he replied simply: "Small incidents like accidentally killing an insect."

"Killing an insect?" Oprah pressed, clearly incredulous.

"My attitude toward mosquitoes is not very favorable," he admitted. "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."

The awe in Oprah's voice was palpable as she reflected: "You have nothing in life that you have regrets about. That's a great life, to have no regrets."

"Regarding service to Tibet, service to Buddhism, service to humanity," he replied, "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."

What a beautiful mind and heart. And it only took him seventeen lifetimes to get there, so we still have a way to go. We might catch up.

Someone like the Dalai Lama reminds us of our nature and our potential. This quality of love is not something fabricated through practice—it's something natural in us. We draw it out and strengthen it over time.

I think about one of the most loving people I've known: my grandmother. She was born in the countryside of North Carolina in 1890, and she had one of the most loving hearts I've ever encountered, with no formal Buddhist training whatsoever. She was just a naturally warm, kind, loving being. When we touch someone

like that, we realize: oh, that's my possibility too. That's my potential.

The next of the powers of loving-kindness is purification. This purification begins from the intention that we put into our metta practice. When you express a phrase like "may you be safe" or "may you be happy," you're expressing an intention. Intention is at the heart of karma and has powerful impact in our hearts, minds, and eventually our lives. So we're working directly with a very wholesome intention as the seed of metta practice.

We reiterate this wish again and again—in different forms, the basic message of "I hope you're well and I hope you're happy." This creates an interesting situation because we're wishing someone else happiness, but we can't control whether they experience it or not. And for our metta practice, whether they do or not isn't really the point.

We're not wishing this to make that outcome happen, because we can't. If we could, we would, but that's beyond our power. We're wishing it as a way of strengthening this wholesome seed—the intention of caring. It's the repetition of that moment after moment that grows the feeling of metta in us.

Just as in vipassana practice we have the moment-by-moment intention to pay attention to the present moment, in metta our intention is to express that wish of caring. That's what we're doing time after time.

The metta practice doesn't work like a mantra practice. It's not enough to just say the phrase mechanically.

The more meaning you put into saying the phrase, that's what will give it the power. So we want to mean the phrase as we say it. That's where the sincere caring comes in.

And then you don't have to worry if it doesn't feel like anything's happening yet in metta. Sometimes people get impatient. "I've been saying the metta for five minutes and I'm not overcome by unconditional love." Be patient with it.

What the intention is doing—the intention is a karmic seed. We're planting the seed, but we can't make the plant grow. Just like if you're a gardener, you can plant a tomato seed, but you can't tell the plant when to push up out of the soil and start bearing fruit. All you can do is put it in the ground, water it, give it sunshine, give it fertilizer, and trust nature to do the rest.

So that's what's happening with our metta practice. Each of these intentions is a little seed. We water them with our care and our sincerity, but we trust nature, we trust the Dharma to grow it up in its own time. So sometimes as you're planting the seeds, it might feel mechanical, it might feel repetitive, the feeling may be dry. Don't worry about that. You're just planting seeds and the fruit will come in its own time.

The Buddha said it this way in the Dhammapada: "Don't disregard the accumulation of wholesomeness saying this will come to nothing. By the gradual falling of raindrops, a jar is filled." Just one drop at a time, and those seeds will grow.

With the Brahmavihara practices, we're instructed to start where it's easy. And in loving kindness, this is considered to be oneself. But as you may have found out, metta for oneself is not always the easiest to do. Sometimes the feelings are just not as strong toward oneself as toward a benefactor or friend. That's quite natural.

And then also as we do the metta for ourself, we may come up against obstacles that tell us, "Oh, you're not really worthy of being loved. You're not really worthy of being cared for." And sometimes memories will come up of things that we've done that were unskillful or ways that we've been hurt or harmed. And it's almost like the metta intention starts to show us ways that we can't really be loved or loving.

Sometimes when that happens, we might think, "Oh, I'm doing it wrong," or "I can't do it, I'm not a good metta practitioner," but that's not the right understanding. These feelings that come up—whether they're guilt or remorse or self-judgment or blame or even self-hatred—may be in there already and the metta is bringing them to the surface. That's part of the power of it.

It's as though the metta intention is this very strong positive pole that we run up near our heart. And what it does, it's kind of like a magnet. It brings to the surface everything that has the opposite charge. So it can bring up anger, guilt, blame, resentment, and so forth, but that's part of its power. Because when those things come into awareness, then we can work with them. If they're just hidden and we don't feel them directly, we can't work with them. They can't be seen, they can't be understood, we can't become free from them. But when they're brought into the light of awareness, then they can be worked with and to some extent release our fixation on them.

So how to work when these qualities come up, as they are likely to in doing extended periods of loving kindness? The first thing is to recognize the hindrance that has appeared. This is a little bit like the practice of RAIN. We want to recognize what's present. So anger, resentment, hurt, blame, self-judgment—just know what's there.

If it's fairly light, keep repeating the metta phrases and keep saying the metta intention. Keep connecting with that intention of caring, maybe for yourself at that point. And let the hindrance be kind of in the background. And what's interesting about that is that the hindrance sort of gets enfolded into the metta energy. As you continue to incline the mind to caring, the hindrance—even if it's self-related, even if it's self-judgment—starts to be touched by the intention of caring. And that makes it much more bearable.

So we start to see that metta actually has different levels of intensity. The first level of intensity, I would say, is the quality of patience. And here, the Pali word is kanti. It's one of the paramis. And it doesn't quite mean what patience means in English, which is just waiting until the bad stuff's over.

You're waiting in line at a supermarket—when will it be my turn? Patience, as khanti, has more the sense of how can we stay in a balanced and open frame of mind when circumstances aren't really to our liking? Or even more, as it develops, how do you maintain a sweetness of mind in the face of unfavorable

circumstances? This is really what the term khanti means and why it's one of the paramis.

So when a hindrance comes, the first sign of the metta being active is that we can simply be patient and endure the hindrance without being too upset by its presence. The metta is active if there's an attitude of patience with the hindrance.

The next level of development in the metta is a real spirit of acceptance. This is the A that we've talked about in RAIN—true acceptance and allowing of the presence of that difficulty. So it might be self-judgment, it might be guilt, it might be remorse, but we simply allow it to be there in all its fullness. We don't fight it. We don't resist it, we don't judge it, we don't say it ought to go away. When we can bring that spirit, the metta has grown up yet another level.

As we've talked about with difficult emotions, this movement into a real allowing—meaning non-resisting of the difficult emotion or the hindrance—is a really important step in finding freedom with it. It's the full acceptance of these difficult states that undercuts their conditioned power. So the move to acceptance is part of loving kindness.

Then the next level, and this is where people usually start looking for metta, there's a feeling of affection. You'll feel this most readily with people you're close to—friend, benefactor, and so forth. Or if you pick a neutral person, you can really fall in love with your neutral person. It's quite a delight. We haven't gotten to the neutral person yet in the instructions, but see what happens if you pick a neutral person who's on the retreat and practice for them steadily.

So this feeling of affection—that's the first sign that most people would recognize: oh, this is loving kindness. This is visible. This is felt here and now. And then the feeling of affection can become stronger. It can grow into a deep sense of love for the person or for yourself. And then even stronger into a quality of devotion that's almost like a passion as love is magnified—such a strong connection.

So these can all come out of allowing the hindrance to be in the background, and qualities of affection can develop even toward the hindrance. They become like an old friend.

If you can leave the hindrance in the background and still connect with the caring intention, that's the first suggestion. But sometimes the hindrance becomes so strong we can't really connect with that caring. If that happens, then you have two choices.

One is—and this is probably recommended because it stays within the Brahmavihara family—switch to compassion. And you say something like, "May I hold this difficulty with compassion?" So you drop the metta phrase and move to a compassion phrase. The classical compassion phrase is, "May I be free from this suffering?" You could try that one, that's fine. The one I use these days is, "May I hold this pain with compassion?" And try just saying it repetitively, just like you were doing a metta practice—fifteen minutes, twenty minutes—and see if it doesn't shift your relationship to that hindrance. Compassion is a very powerful way to hold a difficulty.

If it feels like compassion isn't quite fitting for you, doesn't feel quite appropriate, then switch to vipassana. And as you switch to vipassana, just let yourself open to the hindrance with mindfulness. Think about the sequence of RAIN—recognition, allowing, investigation, non-identification. And often just that gesture of openness, willingness to meet, application of mindfulness will let the hindrance just open a little bit and sometimes wash through. In which case, if it gets weaker, kind of passes through, you can just return to the metta phrases again.

So these are the three levels: hindrance in the background, continue with metta; switch to compassion; or move to vipassana and just relate mindfully with the hindrance that's there. One of these will usually bring some degree of greater ease with the hindrance that has appeared.

One other thing you can do is move to a person who's easier for you. If you've been doing metta for yourself, move to a benefactor or friend—take an easier person.

And then what this does, when we can even surround our hindrances with this loving-kindness energy, is it puts us together. You may have noticed that vipassana in looking at the six sense objects and the five aggregates is kind of taking us apart. We might say that it deconstructs the idea we have of what a self is. And in doing that, it takes us apart into these momentary arisings and passings that make up our sense-based experience.

What metta does is it introduces this unifying energy. Love unites.

And so metta introduces this unifying energy that holds all the different pieces together and sees them all as part of ourselves—acceptable parts of ourselves. It tends to end the psychological fragmentation and brings the being back together.

Another aspect of purification can come up when we work with the difficult person, which we'll get to in another week. I was doing one long period of metta practice here—a six-week metta retreat. Interestingly, my difficult person from the year before was also on that retreat.

So I was settled in and the metta was going well. I was feeling a lot of openness and joy and connection. Then I'd cross paths in the dining room with my difficult person. All of a sudden, all that love and connection would just be out the window. I'd start thinking about the way they treated me during this past year. How could they have done that? How could they have said that? And I'd start getting into angry complaining about the difficult person. I could spin out on that for like half an hour, thinking about the past and what had been difficult in this past year.

I thought, "How am I going to work with this?" I tried a lot of different things. Finally, somebody suggested I should send metta to the difficult person, but I didn't want to do it. I thought, "If I send metta to the difficult person, that's going to mean I have to like them. I don't really want to like them. I certainly don't want to love them." But I was desperate, so I tried it.

I would run into the difficult person, start complaining, the anger would start growing, and I would immediately turn to start doing the loving-kindness phrases for my difficult person. What was interesting is that when I did that, the anger went away. Then the thoughts calmed down and I could just get back into the rhythm of my loving-kindness practice. So basically it worked—much to my chagrin.

But what was most interesting was what I learned from that. I saw that the way my anger was forming—and I think this happens a lot with anger—there was an element in it of ill will. Ill will means we want the other person to suffer. Metta, which is goodwill, means we want the other person to be happy. So I saw that in my anger there was an element of wanting the other person to suffer.

When I could replace the ill will with goodwill, there was no grounds for the anger. All I had to do—I didn't have to like the person, I didn't have to love them, I didn't have to excuse their actions—all I had to do was wish that they'd be happy. If I could sincerely wish for their happiness, the ill will couldn't coexist with that. So it was a really interesting learning.

As I started to examine this ill will, something struck me about it. I acknowledged that I was wanting the other person to suffer, and that came as kind of a shock to me—to see that this was an integral piece of my anger. Wanting somebody else to suffer. Because that is very close to cruelty. Cruelty is enjoying someone else's suffering. Ill will is wanting someone else to suffer. And they're very close.

I could sort of be okay being angry at somebody, but when I looked closer, I could not accept that I could enjoy being cruel or accept being cruel to someone. And because ill will and cruelty are actually so closely related, I didn't feel good about generating ill will anymore.

So this was a real wake-up call for me to look more closely at my anger to see if there was within it the seed of wanting someone else to suffer.

The Buddha talked a lot about how to relate with people who have harmed us and for whom we might get angry quite easily or quite naturally. And he gave this piece of advice: "When someone speaks harshly to you, train like this. Train in this way. Our minds will remain unaffected and we will utter no evil words. We shall abide compassionate for their welfare with a mind of loving kindness without inner hate."

This is not so easy. But I think about some beautiful examples in the larger world who have struggled with big burdens. Nelson Mandela was imprisoned for twenty-seven years by various white regimes in South Africa. Finally, in 1990, the government began to realize that they might have a real problem on their hands if they continued to keep him in jail. So de Klerk, the president at that time, brought Mandela out of prison to meet with him and a few senior cabinet ministers to explore the possibility of releasing him.

But the main fear of the white government was that if they released Mandela and he became a popular leader in the country, he could incite so much anger in the black population—who had been oppressed and violated and harmed for so many years—that the whites were really afraid of the retribution.

So de Klerk and the ministers sat down with Mandela and basically put it to him: "If we let you out of prison, would you want to incite the population to violence against whites?"

Mandela was very clear in his answer. He said no. He said, "I would not at all try to do that. We have been observing you and we have seen in you what brutality and fear look like and what it does to you as people. And we do not want to live like that. So we are not going to engender that in the population if you release us."

And he didn't. It was one of the most beautiful demonstrations of the capacity for forgiveness that we've seen in our lifetimes. And that came out of a deep spiritual place. That was not just a political move.

Aung San Suu Kyi said something similar. She was released from house arrest after about seventeen years. It's interesting—she was under house arrest and she used the time to do a lot of meditation practice. We've heard stories because we had connections to some of the noted Burmese Sayadaws who went in to visit her and taught her while she was under house arrest for those seventeen years. She was doing serious practice during that time. And one important component was this practice of loving kindness.

So at the end of her years of imprisonment, she said, "When I compared notes with my colleagues in the democracy movement in Burma who have suffered long terms of imprisonment, we found that an enhanced appreciation of metta was a common experience. We had known and felt both the effects of loving kindness and the unwholesomeness of natures lacking in loving kindness." And she too has emerged from those years of imprisonment and mistreatment with a very generous attitude of healing the divisions within the country.

The third area of power of loving kindness is the realm of concentration. Bonnie talked about this factor the other night when she talked about the seven factors of awakening. It's a really important part of the Eightfold Path built on developments of mindfulness.

One way to understand concentration is that it's about the unification of mind. One of the synonyms for it, ekaggata, really means unification of mind. So in concentration, the mind comes together into the present moment. And when the mind becomes unified in the present moment, it acquires a strength and stability that it doesn't have when it's chasing after past and future. This unification of mind is a very powerful factor.

So we will use the loving-kindness practice as one way of teaching concentration. Often in a retreat like this, there will be several people who are doing exclusively loving kindness practice, partly as a way to develop the heart and partly as a way to develop concentration. We will teach it in long retreats as a way to develop concentration to the level of jhana. So loving kindness has that potential.

And when you think about it, it makes sense because there's a clear object that we keep coming back to, which is the phrase or phrases. We keep repeating them, and in that repetition the attention has a very clear point to collect around.

So in the beginning we see that the phrases are the primary object and the mind collects around that. As the mind gets more settled and the loving-kindness develops, we start to see there are actually up to three other objects that are going on in the metta practice.

One of them is the connection to the other person or yourself—the connection piece. And often we suggest that people bring up an image of the person you're directing the metta to, and the image becomes another focus for concentration.

We also want to tune into what's the mood or emotion that's coming as a result of the metta practice. And it can be a form of metta—patience, acceptance, affection, love, etc.—or it can be one of the hindrances that the metta practice is drawing out in its work of purification. So we look at the feeling that comes through as well.

And then I like to encourage people to have the metta be a really embodied experience. So to come back into the heart center regularly and feel whatever sensations are there at the center of the chest.

As the metta develops, we can have these four separate objects of concentration. And if you say a phrase and go through contact with all four of these objects, it gives a very clear path for concentration to develop.

What's so interesting about this is that love unifies the mind and concentration unifies the mind. So when we bring them both together, we get very strong forces of unity.

This was described in a really interesting way by a Russian Orthodox Saint who lived in the 19th century. His name was Theophan the Recluse. As far as I know, he didn't have contact with Buddhism or the practice of metta. He was a Christian contemplative. And yet, listen to how similar this is:

"For so 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. The concentration is reflected in the heart by a special sensation that is the beginning of warmth. This sensation grows gradually stronger, firmer, and deeper.

"And so it comes about that whereas in the initial stages, the attention is kept in the heart by an effort of will, in due course, this attention by its own strength gives birth to warmth in the heart. This warmth then holds the attention without special effort. From this, the two go on supporting one another and must remain inseparable because dispersion of attention cools the warmth and diminishing warmth weakens attention."

Isn't that beautiful? The way the love and the concentration support one another in this meditation.

Sometimes you meet meditators, masters, who have an incredible power of manifesting this loving kindness. Dipa Ma is one of the most inspiring women teachers in our lineage. She had this capability. She had this kind of force of transmission. If you haven't read her biography, which I think is just titled "Dipa

Ma," I really recommend it to you, especially to women practitioners, because I think for the women in our lineage, she is one of the strongest figures that you can relate to.

She came here in the late seventies, early eighties and taught some different courses. She was someone whom everyone felt when they were in her presence they had a very strong feeling of her love. Joseph and Sharon used to visit her at her small apartment in Calcutta and they would describe walking in there and just feeling that the whole space of her home was filled with the energy of love.

One time—I love this question—one time she was teaching at IMS and one of the meditators asked her, because she was an amazing being, the meditator asked her, "What's in your mind?"

And she said, "I only have three things in my mind: peace, concentration, and metta."

That's a beautiful mind.

Then connection. The practice of loving kindness opens our connection out to embrace all living beings, everything that lives. When we get to the loving kindness for all beings, this comes through really strongly because we find that whomever we direct the loving kindness toward, we discover they're a lot like us.

Every being that we bring to mind wants to be happy and doesn't want to suffer. You see this so clearly in all of us. You see it in the chipmunks who are running across the road and don't want to be struck by you or a car or anything. You see it in the birds who look for food as the days grow shorter. Every living being has the same most fundamental wish as we do: a wish to be happy and not to suffer.

And as you tune into beings, you can feel their vulnerability. You can feel how all of us are exposed to this changing set of circumstances that can be helpful or dangerous for us. So we start to feel like every being has got some piece of our heart alive in them. This heart that is looking for happiness, this heart that shrinks from pain and suffering—it's our connection to every being that lives.

What thought does is thought and concepts grow on distinctions. So we make a lot of distinctions, and they're valid ones, but we make a lot of distinctions based on gender, gender identification, age, race, ethnicity, class, ability or lack of ability, culture, sexual orientation. These are real distinctions. And each one of them shapes our life in a certain way. And people with one set of these qualities will go through life with one set of experiences and people with another will go through life with a different set of experiences.

But sometimes because these distinctions come so easily to the conceptual mind, we lose sight of the fact that there's an underlying unity that is just as important. We're so used to dividing that we sometimes forget how strongly we're united underneath all that. And when we start to look at this human heart that we all share, we all have the same package of emotions and we're all vulnerable in very much the same ways.

And I start to feel that it's really—there's only one human heart. And it's been poured into all our different

bodies and then goes through life subject to different conditions and experiences and gets shaped in different ways. But it's still the one human heart that is there in all of us. Metta brings this out as we hold people with this sense of care.

We see this deep sense of connection to everything that lives. Rumi had a teacher whose name was Shams, and he came from a town called Tabriz in that part of the world. Rumi wrote a lot of poetry. Shams did not leave much behind. But of the one poem that I've heard from Shams, it's quite beautiful, and I wanted to share it. This is from Shams of Tabriz:

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

There is a way of seeing that is deeper than all the distinctions that we can draw with our concepts. But it needs the spiritual eye to be open to see that underlying unity. And this is one of the things that metta reveals to us.

And finally, happiness. Metta leads to a lot of happiness. One of the things it does is overcome our sense of separation and isolation through this connection. Separation and isolation are very difficult for us to bear. They're a source of some deep unhappiness.

When I was doing a long period of meditation on my benefactor, and I'd picked someone who was wise and happy, I really felt that in that meditation, I was just soaking up their energy, their mind, their heart, day after day, hour after hour, by holding them in my loving kindness. So I really recommend picking a benefactor who has these qualities. It could be someone you've met, it could be a teacher you've known from a distance, like the Dalai Lama or Thich Nhat Hanh or Deepa Ma, someone you really feel inspired by. But the joy can really come as a transmission through them.

One teacher who came to Spirit Rock over a number of years was a Thai teacher named Ajahn Jumnian. Ajahn Jumnian had done a lot of loving-kindness practice and also a lot of vipassana practice. So what we say is vipassana reveals emptiness and loving-kindness fills it with warmth. You can feel this in your practice. The space grows from the vipassana and the metta can fill that space with warmth so that we bring this warm attention into our mindfulness with every object or person that we meet. This is the merging of mindfulness and loving-kindness.

Ajahn Jumnian didn't know a lot of words of English. He spoke Thai through a translator. But he knew a couple. And when people would ask him to sum up some of his teaching, he would go, "Empty, empty, happy, happy." That's the fusion of vipassana and metta. The emptiness of vipassana, the warmth of metta.

As those two start to come together and we feel it pervading our meditation, we feel it pervading our heart and mind, it provides a home that we can start to trust in and rest in. This gives the sense of relaxation and ease that we're looking for. We don't have to strain for something other because the peace and the warmth are right there together. And there's just a sense that if we just let go and feel what's in the heart,

we're already home. We're already home and it will grow from there. So this is a way into our own trust in our own basic goodness. And it brings a lot of satisfaction, a lot of happiness.

Oprah had one more question for the Dalai Lama. And in his reply, I just want to remind us again that compassion and metta are more or less the same. It's different flavors, same thing. Her last question for the Dalai Lama was, "In my magazine, I do a column called What I Know for Sure. What do you know for sure, the one thing on which you have no doubt?"

The Dalai Lama did not hesitate. "Compassion is the best source of happiness. For happy life and happy world, there is no doubt."

Metta also.

Let's just sit for a minute. Compassion is the best source of happiness for happy life and happy world.

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