The Power of Loving-kindness

Guy Armstrong · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Guy Armstrong · 1:01:24

The subject of the talk this evening is the power of loving-kindness. We shifted this morning into instructions for the metta meditation, meditation on loving-kindness. So in the next few evening talks we want to touch on the themes of metta and the other Brahma Viharas. Tonight I'd like to talk specifically about loving-kindness or metta.

Rumi said, "Someone who does not run toward the allure of love walks a road where nothing lives." This really connected with me because in my early twenties, I was opening to love in many different ways—with people, with nature, with music, with art. The experiences were very strong and very fulfilling and quite inspiring for me at the time, but they were very unsteady. They came and went seemingly beyond my control or influence. And yet they became somewhat of an inspiration for my Dharma practice because I wanted to live there more of the time in my life.

Over the years I came to realize that they could not be steady unless they were joined by the wisdom of non-clinging, or you could say the wisdom of emptiness. And that's what makes these experiences more stable. Since that time, since my entry into Vipassana practice, I got very interested in the heart practices of the Brahmaviharas and really very moved by their power to bring in qualities that Vipassana alone was not bringing in for me.

Tonight I want to talk about what I see as five major benefits of the practice of loving-kindness. First, it makes the heart more responsive, or you could say tender. Second, it purifies the heart—it cleans it up. Third, it develops the factor of concentration strongly. Fourth, it connects us to all of life, meaning an inclusive openness to life. And fifth, it brings a lot of happiness. These are the five areas that I want to explore this evening.

This quality of tenderness—you could say that loving-kindness and the Brahma Viharas sort of wake the heart up. It makes us more in tune with the heart qualities of what is going on around us. That means what's going on in other people, in the creatures, and in ourselves. We let that land in our own hearts more clearly and more deeply.

The phrases lead us in this direction. All four phrases for metta that we introduced this morning are leading in the direction of "I'm checking in on you and I hope you're doing well." That's the flavor of the metta phrases—"I hope you're doing well." And that means that we care. We care about how we're doing ourselves. We care about how others are doing. And we're checking in to feel how that's going for you.

We say that Vipassana is our wisdom practice, and it is to see things the way they are. Not everyone who

does Vipassana will choose to incorporate metta into their practice, and that's okay. You don't have to. If you don't want to run to the allure of love, that's your business. But Vipassana is really our foundation. We say we do metta in the context of Vipassana. That is, in liberating the mind and bringing these beautiful qualities into our life, metta and the Brahmaviharas are some of the most important ones that we want to bring along and to develop.

My observation is that for some personalities, the quality of metta unfolds naturally from Vipassana. As we see more clearly and the hindrances lift, wholesome qualities come in, and for some personalities, those qualities will include metta. Deepamma was like this. She did Vipassana, and in the beginning, a lot of her beautiful heart qualities just naturally shone through. She had that kind of temperament.

But I've known other people who develop quite a lot of Vipassana insight where the heart qualities were not so apparent. And so it's kind of based on what temperament one comes into practice with. In general, I'd say the more emotional temperaments tend to develop the more emotional qualities of the Brahmaviharas. And the less emotional temperaments tend not to develop them so readily, and so they are helped by being supported by specific practices.

For me personally, I had done close to twenty years of Vipassana practice when I happened upon the intensive practice of loving-kindness. And it became very important to me. I did a six-week retreat at the retreat center one year. For the next year, I didn't do any Vipassana practice. Everything I did in my daily sitting—

I came back the next year and did another Brahmavihara retreat. So for almost a year and a half, I put Vipassana aside and did nothing but Brahmavihara practice, and I have kept it up to some extent ever since. It has been a wonderful addition to my meditation and to my life. I really feel it has had a big impact on the way I see the world and the way I feel about the world today.

One of my teachers was a young Lama named Sogyal Rinpoche—well, at the time he was young; he's gotten a little older now, as all of us have. At the end of Tibetan retreats, they tend to give heart advice to their students. The retreat has ended and they're sending people out into the world. They want to offer some parting words of wisdom, pith instructions for the journey ahead.

Rinpoche's pith instructions at this retreat were simple but profound. First, he said, "When you go back into the world, be natural." Don't puff yourself up as some kind of great spiritual person. Just be natural and easy, simple. The second thing he said was, "Be wise. Go home and take care of your life, take care of your family, take care of your friends. Don't mess up." And the third thing he said was, "When you go back, be juicy."

Now, "juice" is a technical Buddhist term that stands for qualities like love and joy and compassion and reverence and devotion and wonder and awe and humility. All these things are what emerge as our hearts grow and grow. These are the qualities, I think, that get communicated to the people in our lives.

You know, you go home, and the people in your life are not going to be interested in hearing about your anatta insight—you probably already know that. But they are really going to respond to these qualities of juiciness that you bring home. And then they're going to think, "Maybe there's something to that meditation you've been doing." These qualities make our experience of life much sweeter and much richer.

Alice Walker, the author of *The Color Purple*, was quoted by Sharon Salzberg in one of her books as saying, "As I get older, I realize the thing that I value the most is good-heartedness." This is what communicates when we go back. Our good-heartedness is what touches people.

The beautiful thing is the Buddha didn't just say this is a good idea. He told us how to develop good-heartedness and gave very clear instructions on this. Within our tradition, loving-kindness is our primary practice to develop these qualities of heart—the primary one in the tradition of early Buddhism. Essentially what we learn, through what the phrases are pointing to, is that we care for the well-being of others and we care for the well-being of ourselves through this wish which we generate again and again and again.

Once we have established this basic relationship of care for ourselves and for others, the other three Brahmaviharas follow along naturally based on that. When this open heart connects with someone who's suffering, what comes through naturally is the quality of compassion. Compassion is the response to suffering. When this open heart connects with someone who is in a state of well-being and happiness, then what comes through is what's called sympathetic joy. Our heart resonates with the joy that they're experiencing. This is not something we have to force—it happens naturally.

And when we're not particularly confronted with anyone's situation, the open heart can rest in a way that holds all the joys and all the sorrows of life, and this is the quality of equanimity, the Brahmavihara of equanimity.

If you look at teachings from Tibetan Buddhism or Zen Buddhism, you'll probably find that their primary heart quality is compassion. I think this comes out of their emphasis on the bodhisattva path, working to end the suffering of all beings. So compassion as a response to suffering gets elevated in those traditions to the primary place.

But don't imagine that it's that different from metta. The Dalai Lama said that compassion is basic human warmth, and that's what metta is too. It's just a slight shift in flavor—whether it's looking on suffering or more general in the case of metta. The other traditions also have the other Brahmaviharas, so it's not that compassion stands alone as a Brahmavihara in the Mahayana; it's joined with the other three Brahmaviharas as well.

Sometimes as people get into metta practice, they have a kind of philosophical doubt about it. It seems a little phony or seems like a Hallmark greeting card, or something that's too idealistic. Or they feel like, "I

don't want to fake it if I'm not feeling it." This is where our good friend Carol Wilson has a nice piece of advice. She says, "Fake metta is better than real aversion."

So we trust in that. Because really the generation of these beautiful states is all part of the Buddha's teaching on right effort. Right effort is to maintain and develop wholesome states of mind, and the brahmaviharas are some of the most wholesome states that we can develop.

As Sally has been saying, don't hold metta so differently from, say, the steadiness of the breath. What we want to do is combine mindfulness and metta together in a moment of experience that you could think of as a warm attention. We want to meet our experience with a quality of warmth or friendliness. So if we can befriend all our experiences with this warm kind of mindfulness, that's actually the way the practice will deepen the best.

And then other people say that metta is really deluded. It says "may I be happy," but there is no I. It says "may you be happy," but happiness is impermanent. You know, "I'm too wise to practice metta. It's not really aligned with the Buddhist teachings."

So we have a phrase for you, if you are that kind of skeptic. If you like, you can say the metta phrase like this: "In this ever-changing stream of physical and mental phenomena, conventionally designated as Sally, may the mental state of happiness arise ever more frequently."

So if you like, you can say that. Or you can just say, "May Sally be happy." The choice is yours. The truth is, I just say "may Sally be happy," but I understand it in the longer form. So as old vipassana practitioners, you may also come to understand it that way and you just say it really simply: "May Sally be happy."

It is extraordinary when we meet someone who has developed the heart so strongly. And one of the people I think of in this regard is the Dalai Lama—such an amazing individual. I think we're so fortunate to be alive in a time when someone like him is still living on this earth.

When I want to think about, sort of realistically, how might a really awakened human being respond to a life situation, I don't imagine it in my mind or go back to stories of the Buddha. I think about the Dalai Lama. How does the Dalai Lama respond to life situations? He laughs a lot, and he also cries. He meets the refugees who are coming out of Tibet who may have been in prison for years. He hears their stories, and he'll cry at those stories. So we don't imagine that someone who's awakened has a cold or unfeeling heart or approach to life.

He has said very publicly, when people would ask him in these interfaith conferences, "What's your religion?"—like, they hadn't been reading?—"What's your religion?" And he would answer, "My religion is kindness." And I think he really means that. Most fundamentally, that's what he is about.

One time a few years ago, he was interviewed by Oprah Winfrey for her magazine. I really appreciate that Oprah is someone who gets these wonderful spiritual teachings and puts them out to a really wide

audience. There aren't many people in the world today who do that, and Oprah is very good at that.

Oprah started interviewing the Dalai Lama and began by asking, "Have you ever had to forgive yourself for anything?"

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

"Killing an insect," Oprah said.

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

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

"Small mistakes every day, maybe," the Dalai Lama said evenly, "but major mistakes, it seems, no."

"No major mistakes," Oprah repeated, 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 your 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 wonderful mind. I'd suggest that his meditation skills are tied to his kindness—that his heart qualities support that deepening of his meditation practice.

So people like the Dalai Lama and Dipa Ma remind us of things that are part of our own nature, that are intrinsic to us also. My grandmother was born around 1890 in North Carolina, never had any formal Buddhist training. But she was one of the most loving people that I've ever met. It just came naturally to her.

So in our practice, we develop this quality of responsiveness, tenderness, awakefulness of the heart by inclining our mind in that direction moment after moment, much the way we develop in vipassana meditation by developing mindfulness moment after moment after moment.

The second powerful effect of the loving-kindness meditation is that it purifies our heart very strongly. This is from that very simple intention of connecting with someone in our meditation and wishing them well, connecting with oneself and wishing ourselves well, that we repeat again and again and again.

Now whether they get happy or not is not up to you, right? The outcome or the result isn't in our control. So we don't base the meditation, the worth of the meditation, on whether it works to make them happy or not. We base it on whether it purifies our own heart, our own mind. We can't control what happens in their life. But as we incline our mind to wish for their welfare, this wish can be connected with again and again and again. And it's that which purifies our own heart.

When we wish something, there's a kind of intention behind it. Our intention is for the person's well-being. This factor of intention is pointed to in a quotation on page four under the brahmaviharas, under the name of volition. The Pali word is cetana. Sometimes we'll translate it as intention, sometimes we'll translate it as volition. But there's a will in it.

In quotation fifteen, the Buddha says, "It is volition or intention that I call kamma. For having willed, one acts by body, speech, and mind."

So what we're doing as we generate this intention or volition toward others' welfare is we're making a karmic imprint in our own heart and mind through this mental action of intent, and that's what transforms us. Moment by moment, these intentions cause our own mind-stream to go in a slightly different direction. And that's a direction of care and of loving-kindness.

This is really the engine of the metta practice—connecting with this wish. That's what does the work. So when you say the phrases, it's not enough just to repeat them like a mantra. The power of the practice really comes from the intention that you give to the wish you're making. Simpler way to say it is: say the phrase as though you actually mean it. Try to put as much real meaning as you can into the phrase.

Sometimes it will be hard to summon that up and you'll just say the phrase and you'll stay in the present moment, and then a little later the meaning will come back to you and you'll be able to give it that sense. But it's really your heart's meaning of the caring that is the power of the metta practice.

You might say that what we're doing with each repetition of a phrase is we're just planting a seed. We're planting a seed of that intent. And as you know with mindfulness, meditative seeds can take a long time to bear fruit. Mindfulness was probably not an explosive experience for you when you started. Little by little you feel the momentum, tremendous momentum that it has. And so these metta intentions are the same way.

So say it with some degree of meaning and trust in the fact you're planting that seed. Don't worry if it feels like nothing's happening. This is something that every metta meditator has to deal with: "I'm saying the phrase, I'm being diligent. My heart still feels dry. What am I doing wrong?" Nothing. It's just sometimes one has to be patient. It takes time for the change to develop.

But a week of metta practice will do something for you. I don't have any doubt about that. It will do its work over the course of a week. So just be willing to plant the seeds, water them.

It's not our job to tell it when it's going to flower or when it's going to bear fruit. That's nature's job. If you went out and planted a tomato plant in the soil out here, your job is to plant it and get the soil right and water it. But it's not your job to say when the tomato should come up. If every day you want to go dig it a little bit and pull a little harder, it's going to stifle it. But you plant the seeds, you water them, and then you trust the Dharma. You just surrender.

This is from 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." Little by little. The jar fills up one drop after another of this intent, this karmic action of intention.

So we begin with loving kindness for ourselves. As Sally mentioned, sometimes this can seem difficult. It's presented as the easiest person, but it's not necessarily. However, it is the person we care the most about. So in that sense, it's easy. We do care for ourselves more than for anyone else, and that's the starting point.

But as we turn metta to ourselves, often it brings up the ways that we don't feel so great about ourselves. We may find that it brings up feelings of self-judgment or "I'm not worthy of love," or it brings up some self-hatred or feelings of guilt. We remember all the times we didn't act with loving kindness and then we feel really bad about that.

This doesn't mean that we're doing it wrong. Actually, that can be a sign that it's working—that we're doing it right. Because metta purifies. As we incline the mind to loving kindness, anything that's not aligned with that is going to come to the surface. It's kind of like metta is this powerful magnet with a positive pole, and we run it up the center of our being, and it attracts all the things that are negatively charged to it. It draws them out of the mind, it draws them out of the body.

Then, when they're drawn up into awareness, we have the possibility of knowing them, understanding them, and releasing them through caring attention, through a combination of mindfulness and loving kindness. So hindrances—the activation of hindrances—are part of the process of the loving kindness practice. It's not all light and flowers in our metta practice. So just be prepared for that. It doesn't mean it's going wrong; it means that it's actually doing the work of purification.

People who have done quite a lot of metta practice find they become really sensitive to anything that's arising in their thoughts or emotions that's not aligned with metta. And it starts to feel really uncomfortable to have those kinds of thoughts and feelings. And then, therefore, we want to let them move through us as soon as possible, without judgment, but with clear seeing: "Oh, this is not aligned with metta. Let's let this move through."

So as the hindrances come up through the metta practice, how do we work with them? The first suggestion—much as Sally discussed with the hindrances in concentration practice—is to leave the hindrance in the background. So it could be anger, could be fear, could be anxiety, could be desire. Any of the normal hindrances, just let it go on kind of in the background and keep turning the attention to the

wish for caring.

If the hindrance is weak enough that you can still develop the intention of caring, continue to do that. Then eventually the caring and the metta will sort of embrace the hindrance. It's like wrapping an arm around it and saying, "Come on in, you don't have to be so upset." It'll take care of the hindrance by itself and then you don't have to do very much.

If the hindrance is stronger and it blocks the intention to caring, then try moving from metta to compassion. You're in a position of some suffering—the hindrance is strong enough that you're not able to develop the genuine wish for caring anymore. That's kind of painful. So we turn to compassion and I'd suggest doing a formal compassion practice at that point. Also on page four of the study guide are some possible phrases for compassion, and you can use any of these that you like. The classic one would be to turn your attention to yourself and say, "May I be free from this suffering."

So you recognize the suffering is here through the hindrance, but you care about it. You care about your experience of suffering. You say, "May I be free from this suffering?" This is the most classical way.

Another approach—I find that "may I be free from" has a little bit of an aversive, pushing-away tone. So the phrase I use personally is "May I hold this pain with compassion." This kind of wraps the arms around the whole experience. "May I hold this with compassion." Or you can say something like "I care about this pain" or "I care about this sorrow." It creates a new relationship with the hindrance that shines the caring on the hindrance itself.

If that doesn't feel fitting, then you can switch to vipassana. Just move into your normal mindfulness practice. Feel the hindrance as its emotion manifests. Feel it in the body. Listen to its thoughts. Stay with it with mindfulness until it passes through. So mindfulness is still useful even in the metta practice. Once the hindrance has washed through, you can go back to the formal practice of metta.

One thing you'll notice in being with a hindrance with metta is that it may not be a very joyful kind of metta. You start to learn that the presence of loving-kindness has a range of flavors. It goes from subtle to strong.

Here are some of the manifestations of the quality of metta. The first is patience. Something unpleasant is going on—like a hindrance—but you're basically okay with being with it. You're kind of okay that it's there. You're not thrilled, but you're not really struggling or getting judgmental about it. So there's this element of patience, which is allowing without pressure to get rid of it. There's still a kind of "don't like it," but you're bearing with it, you're forbearing.

One step up from there, you move to the hindrance with real acceptance—a real quality of "It's totally fine with me that this fear is here, or this desire is here, or this anxiety, or whatever it is." It's really totally fine. I don't care if it goes or stays. I accept it as part of my experience. No resistance.

Then, as metta continues to warm up—maybe with or without a hindrance—it moves into a quality of real friendliness, an affection for your experience. There's a kind of warmth that comes, radiating and directed to anything that comes within your field of experience.

One step up from that is love. You might feel this when you're walking out in nature here, walking in the forest on a beautiful sunny day when the flowers are out—it's rhododendron season—and your heart just goes, "Wow, this is love." This is the quality of deep, deep affection for things.

Then it can grow to devotion. Devotion can be directed toward a person, a spiritual teacher, or toward the dharma itself. You just feel that this is the greatest gift in life—the dharma, the teachings, the beings who manifest the dharma. This is what I want to lay my heart upon. So this devotional quality comes through as the metta practice develops.

As we're directing metta to ourselves, we can feel at times there's an inward friendliness developing that lets us open up to more and more of ourselves. This is pointed to in this poem by Galway Kinnell called "St. Francis and the Sow." I'm just going to read a little bit of the poem.

He starts off talking about a flower bud, which is nice at this time of year. A lot of the rhododendrons are still in the budding stage—some plants. Some of them are already really flowering. You'll see other flower buds around here.

"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 re-teach a thing its loveliness, to put a hand on its brow and retell it in words and in touch..."

It is lovely until it flowers again from within of self blessing.

This is part of what metaphor offers us. It lets us discover our beauty, the treasures of our heart and mind.

Now, the metta practice in its purification work brings up any hindrance, but specifically there are two kinds of hindrances that we discuss in relation to the Brahmaviharas. One is called the near enemy and one is called the far enemy. Each of the Brahmaviharas has one of each. You can see a list of those on page 4, quotation 13.

So for each divine abode, it lists its near enemy and its far enemy. The near enemy—somebody called it the near miss, which I thought was rather cute—because it's close to the Brahmavihara, but it's not quite on target, and it misses in a way that's somewhat unwholesome. The far enemy is the opposite, so it's definitely not a wholesome state of mind.

With loving kindness, the near enemy is said to be affection with attachment. That is, you have a feeling of friendliness towards someone, but you want something back from them or you want them to be a certain way. The metta only continues if you get what you want or they manifest the way you want them to manifest.

So in relationships, for example, there's often a kind of contract: I'll be friendly to you if you're nice to me or if you give me what I want. Or sometimes there's the expectation, I'll be nice to you if you act the way I want. This can lead into a kind of conditional acceptance of someone, and that can lead to fixing.

I was teaching a metta weekend once in Canada—a whole weekend just on metta practice—and I'd used the phrase "may you live with the ease of well-being" as the fourth phrase. I encouraged people to find someone really close to them in the friend category and practice: "May you live with the ease of well-being."

Partway through that session, someone raised their hand and said, "Well, I have a son in college, and I say this phrase to him: 'May you live with the ease of well-being.' But I think to myself, no, he's living with way too much well-being and ease. I'm taking care of him, I'm cooking his meals, I'm doing his laundry, and he's not even doing that well in his classes. May you start doing well in your classes!"

That was mother's metta. And I said, "No, no, no, no, no. That's fixing. You really want to feel the friendship and acceptance for the way your son is." So allowing each person to be the way they are and still having that care for them.

The far enemy is the opposite of metta. So instead of caring about somebody's happiness, we are happy when they're not doing so well. This is called ill will—the opposite of goodwill.

At my first metta retreat at the retreat center, my difficult person happened to be on the retreat with me. I would be doing my metta, getting into it: "May all beings be happy. May they be safe. May they be at ease." And my difficult person would walk by. I'd start remembering all the things that had happened in the past year: "Oh, no. I can't believe she did that. When I said that and she did... I can't believe it was like that." So I'd start spinning on all the events of the past.

This would go on for a while. It was very painful—not only the upset, but the loss of the metta was really painful when being around this difficult person.

I hadn't done a lot of metta practice at that time. I'd heard that you could do metta for your difficult person, but I thought, "I don't want to do that. They're going to make me pretend I like them. I don't want to do that." So I resisted for a while, but then I got desperate. I said, "Okay, I'll start doing metta for this person."

I just went through the phrases—five minutes, ten minutes, fifteen minutes, twenty minutes—and all of a sudden I found I wasn't angry at them.

I could actually start to wish for their welfare. And what I realized was that within my anger—and I think within a lot of our anger—there's an element that's actually ill will. This person has hurt me, and I want them to suffer. That's what ill will is: I want them to suffer.

When I realized I was wanting somebody else to suffer, that was very close to cruelty. Cruelty is when we

enjoy somebody else's suffering—it's the opposite of compassion. So here I was wanting someone else to suffer. It was so close to cruelty I couldn't accept it. When I saw what it was, I couldn't accept it. I thought, I don't want to live like that.

And so I discovered that this conscientious application of metta, even for my difficult person, would undermine the ill will. As long as I could generate a thought of good will for them and really hope that they become happy, the ill will couldn't coexist. Ill will can't coexist with good will. As soon as I could find the good will, the ill will wasn't there anymore and the anger wasn't there anymore. I found this really does work, even for the difficult person. That was one of my most difficult people in my life, and it really made a difference.

Some people who have been in prison—Buddhist practitioners in Burma who have been imprisoned—have commented that when they came out of prison, they really appreciated the value of loving kindness so much more because they saw what it was like to live with people who were influenced by the opposite of loving kindness: their prison guards and captors. They came out of prison and appreciated even more the value of loving kindness.

Nelson Mandela said something similar. This is from that movie based on his life called Long Walk to Freedom, which is based on his autobiography. There was this amazing episode where he was negotiating his release from prison with de Klerk and members of the white government. The main reason they didn't want to release Mandela, according to the movie, is that they were afraid that he would incite the black people of South Africa to violent revenge upon the whites who had mistreated them so badly for so many years.

In this face-to-face meeting with Mandela, they asked him that directly: Are you going to go out and incite the black population to take revenge? And he said, "No, we will not do that. I've seen what fear has done to your people. You have always been afraid of us, and it has made you an unjust and brutal people. We do not want to live like that."

He did this amazing thing of coming out and developing the truth and reconciliation movement that tried to unify all South Africans. It was an amazingly spiritual step to take.

So this is the element of purification. The hindrances come. We hold them with metta. They have the possibility of moving through us. And some of them are purified—I'm reluctant to say it, but it's true—forever. As some of these old habits of mind are seen and moved through us, that particular pattern may truly be gone forever. Forever.

The third of the great benefits of loving kindness is that it is a concentration practice and brings about this quality that we've been talking about so much on this retreat: the unification of mind. We've talked about mindfulness as bringing the mind together in the present moment in a unified way, but we also know that love unifies the mind. Love is a tremendously unifying force. It brings people together—couples together,

friends together, families, communities, nations, eventually, maybe, someday, the globe. It has that potential.

So we join the unification of love with the unification of concentration. In loving kindness, the concentration is primarily, as Sally mentioned this morning, the phrases. By continuing to say the phrases, the mind is collecting around that meditation focus. But there are three other focuses that we've mentioned or will draw out more clearly: the image of the person that you may want to work with, the metta feeling that may come, and feeling the effects of the metta in the body.

And here we incline you to look at the heart center. We actually have four objects for concentration: the phrase, the image, the metta feeling, and the heart center. We'll explain how to work together with these as we go. Therefore, having even more objects can make the concentration stronger. A juggler who's got four balls up in the air has to be pretty with it to keep those four balls going. This is our concentration practice with metta. So love brings the mind together, concentration brings the mind together, and the two together are really powerful.

I want to read this paragraph from a Christian saint—his name is Theophan the Recluse, and he lived in Russia in the 19th century. He was a Russian Orthodox saint. It sounds like it could have been written by a Buddhist practitioner. I don't know if he had the influence or what, but it's so like our practice:

"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 on life is immediately reflected in the heart by a special sensation that is the beginning of warmth. This sensation grows gradually stronger, firmer, deeper. 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 remain inseparable, because dispersion of attention cools the warmth and diminishing warmth weakens attention."

Isn't that lovely? The warmth and the attention coming together in the heart, concentrating and reinforcing one another. That's also this practice.

The fourth great benefit is that it really opens our practice out to all of life. Vipassana practice can become quite individualistic sometimes, can become self-centered and in a way sort of narrow—about my happiness, my suffering, my release. But metta practice eventually opens out beyond our limited experience. It opens out to other individuals from the beginning, eventually opens to all beings.

This is from Shantideva, an 8th century practitioner and writer from India who practiced and taught at Nalanda University, a great center of Buddhism in medieval India. His most famous work is *A Guide to the Bodhisattva's Way of Life*, a foundational text in the Mahayana. This is from Shantideva:

"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."

With metta, we really awaken this wish for everyone in the world—all beings, all humans, all creatures—to be happy. And that connects us. I think one of the deepest sadnesses in the West in the last century has been the growing sense of isolation. As communities have been undermined, as children have moved away from parents and their homes, the risk is of individuals getting very alone and disconnected, even from other friends, in a very solitary kind of lifestyle. Researchers who have investigated say that this is a source of deep unhappiness for our world today.

Metta undoes that. Metta connects us. As we tune into the welfare of other beings, we find out we all have the same wishes. Everybody wants to be safe and happy and healthy and live at ease. And so do all the creatures. We all want the same basic things.

In our social discourse these days, we make all kinds of distinctions. There's a lot of thought and writing about distinctions of race and ethnicity and class and age and sexual orientation and gender identification, language, culture, political views. All those things—they're real. Those are real distinctions. We don't want to write them off. But sometimes we forget that they're not the whole story. Those distinctions don't tell the whole story about us. And what the distinctions don't tell is our sameness. We all share the same humanness.

And we know that, but in the realm of social discourse, it doesn't get pointed to very often. It's like, oh, that's a spiritual thing. That's not the place for newspapers to talk about. But it's a place for us to talk about.

We have basically the same body with minor variations. We have the same heart because we share all the emotions together. We have the same mind. We can think the same thoughts and have the same human consciousness at work. And we realize basically we're one organism. All of it. One species. One organism.

The same human heart has been poured into all these different vessels. And then it undergoes different conditions and different experiences. And therefore it gets shaped. But the heart is the same. Everywhere. And we forget that. We forget how deeply alike we are. And that's ultimately what connects us. We're the same being.

So metta really reminds us of that. Across all the distinctions that we can make, which are valid distinctions and important distinctions on the social level, on a deeper level, it's different.

You know, Rumi left a lot of poems, and he credited one person with being his teacher, who was Shams of Tabriz. Shams of Tabriz left very little in the way of poetry, but here's the one poem that we know that he did leave: "I, you, he, she, we. In the garden of mystic lovers, these are not true distinctions."

You could also say in the clear seeing of Vipassana, these are not true distinctions. And metta sees through them to this connectedness. It does not ignore the distinctions, but it sees that they are not the final or only

word about our truth.

And finally, the fifth benefit that comes from the practice of metta: it brings a lot of happiness. And I really hope you all get to experience this during this week to come. Metta brings a tremendous amount of delight and happiness.

One of the people I think of in this regard is the Thai teacher I talked about the other day, Ajahn Jumdean. He was one of the most accomplished practitioners that I've met. He was proficient in Vipassana practice, and he'd done a lot of loving-kindness practice, and he radiated that as well. And every time I saw him, he seemed happy. He had a smile on his face. He was laughing. He was playful. He was joyful. I never saw him in any other mood than that.

At one point, we were talking to him about his practice and his development. He said, "I haven't had anger in 25 years." That's a happy mind.

So we'd bring him to Spirit Rock and offer that people could come if they wanted and hear teachings, but he was there to hang out. And some days people would ask him, or Jack would ask him, "What would you like to do today, Ajahn? We could drive you around Marin and take you up to the top of Mount Tam and you could have a view, or we could go out for lunch at a restaurant."

And he'd say, "Oh, I'm happy with anything, I don't mind, but are there people who want to hear the Dharma? If there are people who want to hear the Dharma, then I'll talk to them about the Dharma. But if nobody comes and nobody wants to hear the Dharma, then I can just sit here and I'll be happy."

But he really seemed happiest when people wanted to hear the Dharma. And he was one of those teachers, sort of the river-of-Dharma teacher, where you turn the switch and it just goes on and on and on until lunchtime, maybe. He had a lot of Dharma energy to transmit.

And one of his key teachings that I still remember—he didn't speak much English, but he learned at least two words. And he was transmitting the essence of what he understood from Vipassana and metta. And he would touch the space and he would say, "Empty, empty." And then with his other hand he would go, "Happy, happy."

And that's what he was like. He was so empty and he was so happy.

So when we discover this happiness of the Brahma Viharas and happiness of metta, it's a little bit like the sukha that we were talking about the other day. It is so satisfying. It is so much what we are looking for that we feel we can just settle into it, just rest and experience that quality of happy comfort and the joy of loving kindness. It feels like we're home. It feels like a deliverance.

And in fact, the Buddha talked about the liberation by loving kindness as one particular form of liberation. So we say that in our practice of Vipassana, it reveals this inner emptiness or this openness or this spaciousness, but then metta fills it with warmth. And that's what's so lovely. So when we come to

rest, this is not like a cold, empty void that we find ourselves in because the metta is pervading it with warmth. And so it's rich, it's touching, it's moving, it's satisfying.

And out of this we find—and it's not just metta, but so many treasures of the heart and mind come from that place when we can rest, when we're supported by the Brahma Viharas, by emptiness and by wisdom. The treasures of the mind really come out. So we can trust in that. We can surrender to it. We can stop doing. We can stop running. We don't need anything else. And we feel as we rest, oh, our basic nature is good. Self-doubts really dissolve in that kind of experience. Our basic nature is good. And there's a really okay feeling about who we are and what we are.

And then when we can trust in our own goodness, we find it's a pleasure to share that with others, as many of you are already doing in your lives, sharing this blessing of the Dharma with others.

This is also from Shantideva. This is a particular passage that the Dalai Lama has a very strong resonance with, and I think encapsulates his attitude:

"For as long as space endures and as long as sentient beings remain, may I too abide to dispel the misery of this world."

This is really the Bodhisattva's aspiration. For as long as sentient beings remain, may I too abide to dispel the misery of this world.

And then I want to close with another quotation with Oprah and the Dalai Lama. And in this quotation, I want to again remind us that metta and compassion are not very different. They're different flavors of the same ice cream, you could say.

So Oprah finished the interview and said to the Dalai Lama, "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."

And so is metta.

Let's just sit for a minute and let the words settle. What do you know for sure? Metta is the best source of happiness for happy life and happy world. There is no doubt.

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