Mettā & Concentration

Guy Armstrong · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Guy Armstrong · 1:00:10

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I'd like to talk about the quality of mettā itself, and then discuss some of the mechanics of the mettā practice—how it ties in with the factor of concentration, and how the technique works in combination with vipassana to provide the unfolding of this path.

I was teaching a mettā retreat fairly recently, and I'd been talking for about a day and a half. During an interview group, somebody asked me, "What is it we're doing here? Could you put it in a few words?" The way I summed it up, and the way I often think about this practice, is that it's really a practice of bringing forth the friendly mind or the friendly heart that's already within us.

We already have these qualities of friendliness, of mettā, within us. All we need to do in the practice is uncover it and bring it out in each moment. The more moments that we bring this friendly mind out, the more moments it will arise spontaneously in the future. It's just like mindfulness in our vipassana practice. Each moment of mindfulness sets the condition for the arising of another moment of mindfulness. So we're strengthening that quality in the mind and in the heart simply by practicing it, by bringing forth this friendly mind more and more frequently.

We can sometimes think of mettā in very exalted terms. Certainly if you read the teachings of the Buddha, his words about mettā are very exalted. We can get the idea that if we're not feeling boundless and unconditional love, we're not experiencing mettā. This is one extreme of the development of mettā, and I think it helps if we lower our expectations a little bit for what mettā is.

Mettā has a very wide range of feeling, and it just starts with this little flicker of human warmth and connectedness. Just this friendly spirit that sees another person and says, "Oh, I want you to be happy. May you be healthy." Just that little flicker of connection and caring that can come so easily in a moment is really the heart of mettā. Our practice is to acknowledge that moment after moment. Out of that little beginning, that humble beginning, all the power and depth of our practice grows.

Mettā is said to be a happy practice, but in the first few days of retreat, you might not all agree with that. It's also a lot of work. Especially in the beginning, it can feel like you're really cranking with the phrases. The first time I did a mettā retreat, I thought, "This is supposed to be happy?" Those first ten days were more work than I'd ever done in vipassana. But it does get easier.

This reminds me of when I was a Boy Scout and had to earn a merit badge by building a fire without matches. I'm amazed that the human race has gotten to where we are now, when for millions of years we

didn't have matches. To earn the merit badge, I got a flat piece of wood and made a little round hole in the center, then shaved some very dry wood shavings into that hole. I took a round stick, put it in the hole, and could either twirl it really fast with my hands or use a little bow with string wrapped around it to turn the stick back and forth.

My hands would get raw and chapped, the stick felt rough, and I didn't believe there was ever going to be a fire that way. Despite the fact that humans still walk the earth, I didn't believe it was going to work for me. Then, sure enough, a little bit of smoke curled up from those wood shavings. I kept twirling and the smoke turned into just a little tiny flame. I could put a little tiny twig into that flame and it would burn a little bigger, then a bigger stick to burn brighter, until I could light the bonfire we'd made.

Our mettā practice is just like this. The phrases are twirling the stick. In the beginning, it feels mechanical and rote. You may think nothing's ever going to happen and your hands may feel chapped. But sooner or later, this little tendril of smoke curls up—that's this first feeling of connecting with another and wishing them well. That's the first tendril of mettā. As you keep twirling, it can build into this huge blazing bonfire that the Buddha described as an immeasurable deliverance of mind.

There is tremendous potential in this practice, even though it starts from very humble beginnings. One aspect that's really inspiring to me is that all the people I've talked to experience it from these humble beginnings and then describe its transformative power. Three of us in a group this morning who have been practicing mettā for a few years all voiced very strongly how much they felt this practice had transformed their whole lives within just a few years. There is incredible power and potential here—really transformative power.

Part of the beauty of this metta practice, part of what I love about it, is that it cuts through our habitual emphasis on self, on ourselves. An Indian teacher named Shantideva, who wrote the definitive manual for bodhisattvas, put it this way: "All happiness comes from thinking of others. All unhappiness comes from only thinking of myself." So in this practice we learn how much happiness there is in thinking of others and including ourselves in that as well. In our practice we add just a subtle little touch of self.

The practice starts from just causing to arise again and again this intention, this subtle intention of happiness for others and ourselves. And after that we can surrender. We just generate this little bit of connection and then we can surrender. We start with beings where it's easier to feel the connection and then work up, as you'll see over the course of the retreat. The general rule is that we pick the subject where the metta flows most easily. We spend our time with those beings who evoke that friendly mind in us.

So the practice is not particularly about clarifying all the relationships in our life or making sure that everyone in our life gets a healthy dose of our metta during these seven days. We have plenty of time for that later. It's rather to see if we can learn how to contact this heart of friendliness and bring it out and begin to let it flow.

There's a poem from Rilke that expresses a little bit of this feeling. This is from Rilke's Book of Hours, subtitled Love Poems to God. He wrote these poems beginning when he was twenty-three, particularly moved by the traditional religion he found in Germany. Every poem has this spiritual strain to it. This translation is done by Joanna Macy and Anita Barrows, both Buddhists, who bring that background into their translation, which I think is lovely.

Rilke writes: "I believe in all that has never yet been spoken. I want to free what waits within me so that what no one has dared to wish for may for once spring clear without my contriving. If this is arrogant, God, forgive me, but this is what I need to say. May what I do flow from me like a river, no forcing and no holding back, the way it is with children."

That sense with our metta practice of no forcing and no holding back really describes the feeling when that friendly heart starts to come out, starts to be available. And we may need to stay with one particular subject for quite a while if that's where the metta is flowing. You may need to stay with yourself, your benefactor, a good friend, a pet, a child, or an animal. I heard of one meditator who actually stayed with themselves for three years of practice and was unable to generate loving kindness for anyone else. For three years they practiced metta for themselves, and then at some point the door opened and other people could begin to be included. So it's a really individual practice—find where that friendly heart comes out for you.

But in its development, the feeling of metta can be boundless. The Buddha often talked about it as a boundless practice, and it's boundless in two ways. One is the extent or the range of beings to whom we can direct our loving-kindness. As you've gotten a little feeling for today as we've moved beyond just one friend, many friends are out there accessible to us through our loving kindness. As you've done the walking practice, probably you've directed it to birds or the frogs that you hear croaking toward nighttime or just the different people who are walking by during the retreat.

The Metta Sutta from the words of the Buddha expresses this kind of range really clearly. He says of one who is practicing loving kindness: "Let them think, may all beings be happy and secure. May their hearts be wholesome. Whatever living beings there may be—weak or strong, tall or middling, short or large, without exception, seen or unseen, dwelling far or near, already born, or yet to be born—may all beings be happy. Just as a mother would protect her only child at the risk of her own life, even so, let the wise cultivate a boundless heart towards all beings. Let their thoughts of boundless love pervade the whole world, above, below, and across, without obstruction, without hatred, without enmity."

Metta can really be felt and directed in a very universal way. Sometimes we forget this. The Buddha reminded us that it is hard to find a being who has not been your mother or father in some past life. This is an extraordinary reflection. Imagine if you looked around the room and could really realize that every person here has parented you in another life, has cared for you when you were unable to stand or walk or feed yourself. This is what the Buddha said the case actually is. Imagine if we loved every being that we

met. What would that feel like? It would be like living in a heaven realm. Often in Buddhist traditions they talk about the pure land, and sometimes it's seen as a place that one aspires to for rebirth.

But the pure land is the place where we can love every being that we meet, and it's available here in this life on this earth.

The second way that metta is boundless is that there's really no limit to its development within us. The Buddha called it an immeasurable deliverance of mind and refers to it in the terms that he uses for liberation. In metta there are the depths of freedom.

It's extraordinary to meet beings who have developed this beyond what we might think is possible. There's this wonderful Thai monk who comes to Spirit Rock every year named Ajahn Jumnian. I know some of you have met him. Usually you just mention his name and a few people in the room start smiling. He is a master of metta practice. He's about sixty years old and has taught metta for many years and has practiced a lot of metta himself. You just feel the joy in his being. He's such a delight to have there.

He's very low-key and an easy teacher to have. We ask him what he wants to do on any day and his first response is, "Is there anybody who wants to listen to the Dharma?" And if there's anybody who wants to listen to the dharma, we take him down and set him up front in the meditation hall. He's sort of the dharma fountain style of teacher. You set him in the front of the meditation hall and he can talk dharma all day long. As long as there are people to listen, Ajahn Jumnian loves to talk dharma.

We'll ask him things like, "Well, do you want to go see San Francisco or the Golden Gate Bridge?" He'll say, "Hmm, is there anybody who wants to listen to dharma? If there's anybody who wants to listen to Dharma, I'd rather talk Dharma. If there's no one, I could sit here. I'm very happy sitting here. But if you'd like to take me to San Francisco, I'd be happy with that too." Whatever he does, he's happy. It's unconditional. It really is.

When I was in Thailand waiting to be ordained as a monk, a friend who spoke good Thai took me across the river north of Bangkok and we walked through the jungle for a ways and visited this Thai monk named Ajahn Sanong. He's not very well known and he doesn't speak English, so he's not someone I ever practiced with, but he was a fantastic person to meet.

The story was that he had done a lot of practice in cemeteries. This is a traditional Buddhist practice to conquer our fear. We live right in the middle of the dead, and it really makes us confront our own fear of death. So he'd done a lot of cemetery practice, and he was very fearless. He'd also done a tremendous amount of metta practice. You could just feel that radiating from him.

I was actually embarrassed to be in his presence. His eyes had sort of this laser beam of love just staring out and it would zap you when he looked at you. I kind of felt like he had x-ray vision and all my impurities were just shining out to him. And so I was a little shy around him. But what an extraordinary quality of mind through the development of the metta practice.

Metta, when it's developed, brings a really deep sense of contentment. When the metta is present—I'm sure you've already experienced this to some extent—we can really rest. We can really stop searching, stop looking for anything else. Because as the Buddha said, this is one of the most sublime states that there is. Why would we want to look any further? It is so sweet.

One of my Tibetan teachers is a lama named Sokyni Rinpoche. He's considered to be the third in his line of reincarnate lamas. You probably know how the Tibetan teaching system works—they replace themselves after they die. He's considered to be the third in his line. The first Sokyni Rinpoche was a practitioner who put in a lot of effort in East Tibet. And this is Sokyni Rinpoche III. There was a poem by Sokyni Rinpoche I that had a line I really like. It said: "There is nothing else to search for. Rest in your natural face."

When we contact that feeling of metta, we have the feeling of coming home. We know we're there and we can rest in that. That is our natural face.

That is our own home. And it's utterly wholesome. There is nothing to doubt or mistrust or be worried about in the feeling of metta. You can completely trust in that feeling. Because it's so wholesome, it utterly blocks the arising of the unwholesome. The difficult states of mind that we encounter simply cannot arise when metta is strongly present.

Vipassana is supposed to be the insight meditation, but there's actually quite a lot of insight in the metta practice too. When we start feeling this kind of love for ourselves, for others, it affects the whole way we see the world. It changes our perception.

A friend of mine was recently talking with a teacher and describing some experiences. The teacher said, "Well, you know, experiences in meditation are of two kinds. There's one kind that has to do with different mental states, and there's another kind of perception." The experiences that come from a shift of perception are actually the more transformative.

The metta practice causes a shift in our perception of the world. We actually see things differently. We feel things differently in our body when metta is present for us. It's extraordinary because we can have this feeling of metta for one person—ourselves, a benefactor, or a dear friend—and when that feeling fills our heart, the whole world looks different. This is the magic of the practice. We generate that flame, we find those sparks around one person, but it changes our relationship to the whole world.

In other traditions, there's a lot of emphasis placed on the element of devotion. The Christian path, if taken up as a path of contemplation, is basically a devotional path, often toward Jesus, toward Mary, or toward the saints. In the Hindu tradition, there's a long-standing tradition of bhakti yoga, a devotional path within Hinduism. In some of the Buddhist traditions, there are also strong devotional elements. One of the foundation practices in some schools of Buddhism is called union with the teacher. One visualizes either the Buddha or one's teacher or teachers. In that visualization, one comes to hang out with them so closely, so intimately, that one begins to feel their qualities as one's own qualities. There's a union. You might

almost say there's a kind of Vulcan mind meld that takes place.

You may have experienced this because our benefactor practice is a little like this. When I first did the metta practice, I did it in a six-week retreat, and I spent the first three weeks with my benefactor. At the end of the three weeks, I was told to move on to a good friend, and I was actually a little reluctant to go because I had chosen one of my Dharma teachers, and it was like having darshan every day. It was just hanging out with this loving, wise, free being day after day for every waking hour. It was terrific.

At times, I had a real sense of merging with that person. Someone in the group reported this today also—that one of the persons they'd chosen for their metta practice, they had a sense the person was no longer out there, but had come right inside them. That was my experience also, strongly with the benefactor. In feeling their good qualities, I realized that I couldn't feel those qualities unless they were also in me. Being with the benefactor, we as it were absorb their love, their wisdom, their kindness, their freedom just through that intimacy of contact.

More and more we find as this friendly heart emerges that this warm and close and intimate feeling develops with the rest of the world, sometimes in ways we don't quite expect. I'd been doing the metta practice for a while at my first retreat, and I was standing outside doing walking meditation, as many of you were today, and directing it to people who came by. Out on the street, there was a guy driving a garbage truck. It was somebody who in my normal life I wouldn't have come in contact with. Most garbage truck drivers don't come on retreats like this. But I looked at that guy and I just wished him happiness and I felt so much love for him. I felt like he could have been my brother. There was no division between us.

These kinds of strange connections pop up with the metta practice. Part of what's happening is that there's a unification going on. With devotional practices and with metta practice, the quality of love begins to unite the mind. It leads to oneness. It leads to merging.

There's this lovely quote from Nisargadatta Maharaj that some of you heard in the last retreat where he says, "Wisdom tells me that I am nothing. Love tells me I am everything, and between the two, my life flows." That's sort of our vipassana practice—wisdom tells me that I am nothing. Love tells me I am everything.

Within our tradition, Vipassana tells us we're nothing, and metta tells us we're everything. It unites us with the whole world. It melts the barriers that we've constructed through making distinctions. At times when I was practicing metta, I couldn't tell the difference between my mind and my body. I sometimes wasn't quite clear about what was inside me and outside me. And there was a way in which it became very clear that even though we're separated, our bodies are separated by physical space, we're actually both here now. For me, you are here now. And there's a way in which for you, I am here now. And that sense of space as a separator goes away and space becomes more an area in which we can feel our connection, through which we can relate.

We have a deep longing for this kind of relationship with the world, for this experience of oneness and connectedness with the world. It's as though in the metta practice we're unfolding some deep parts of our nature that we've forgotten about. We knew this way of being as children, if not since, and we long to find it again, to touch it again.

Another poem from Rilke expresses some of this: "I'm too alone in the world yet not alone enough to make each hour holy. I'm too small in the world yet not small enough to be simply in your presence like a thing just as it is. I want, in the hushed moments when the nameless draws near, to be among the wise ones or alone. I want to unfold. Let no place in me hold itself closed, for where I am closed, I am false. I want to stay clear in your sight."

Staying clear in the sight of God is a good description for our metta practice. This kind of unfolding brings a real sense of wholeness to our being. It brings a huge degree of integration because in the light of love, the parts that we had found unacceptable now become acceptable. The parts of ourselves like fear, anger, grief, shame, or guilt that we have pushed aside or pushed down can be accepted, can be owned, can be integrated in the light of love. So there's a tremendous amount of healing through the metta practice.

You might say that the early stages of Vipassana practice dissolve us. We see the constituent parts. As the Buddha talked about, we see the five aggregates. We break ourselves down into body, feelings, perceptions, mental formations, consciousness. We see that there's no solid core or solid center holding it all together. But the metta practice puts us back together. The metta practice integrates all the pieces through the influence of this love or friendliness.

So metta is said to be cohesive like the element of water. You know how when you spill water on the ground, it puddles together, it coheres. If you drop a glass and break it, it shatters apart. So like water, metta brings things together. And also like water, metta is sweet and wet and juicy. It's kind of the juice of our practice. And sometimes Vipassana—a number of people have said in interviews and groups—the Vipassana practice can sometimes feel a little dry, a little like our heart isn't fully engaged. Metta is the complement that brings out that heart warmth.

Another way to say it is that the Vipassana practice reveals emptiness and metta fills it with warmth. Another of my teachers said, "Compassion is the juice of emptiness," or "Metta is the juice of emptiness."

Some people say that metta develops naturally with Vipassana and I think there's truth in that. I think that it does to some extent. One of my teachers said early when I asked him about that, "Love is the child of freedom," saying that the path to love is to discover freedom, and then love unfolds. I think there's truth to that, but my personal point of view is that for different people, the love dimension unfolds in different ways. And for myself, I felt that I needed kind of a booster shot, which is what the metta practice has been for me, to really open the heart side of myself. And that although the heart side was opening to some degree, with the metta practice it has opened a lot, lot more. It's been a really powerful adjunct to Vipassana. So everyone can decide for himself or herself. But this heart quality of the metta is a really

sweet quality in the spiritual life. And when it's missing, when it's not there, somehow we don't have the ability to touch others as deeply.

The unification of the metta practice is one of its strongest features. And what's particularly powerful about the way that we practice here is that the unification of the metta is supported by the unification of the concentration. So I want to talk a little bit about the concentration aspect of our practice.

Basically, the concentration means to gather in the attention that we're normally dispersing. Throughout a normal day, we have lots of thoughts, lots of feelings, hopes and fears and likes and dislikes sort of constantly running through. And all of those sort of random, chaotic thoughts and feelings really disperse our energy. They take the energy and feed it in a lot of different directions. With our practice either of Vipassana or of metta, we start to gather that energy back and direct it toward an object.

In vipassana to the breath, in metta to the phrases. There's tremendous power when we collect this kind of energy. When you hear stories of yogis who have developed amazing powers of mind, it's through this gathering of energy.

There's one teacher that I think about named Ajahn Mun. Ajahn Mun was a Thai master in the early part of this century, and he was Ajahn Chah's teacher. He was a very, very strict forest monk in Thailand. A lot of you, I know, have been suffering with colds and coughs this week. At Ajahn Mun's monastery, even if you had malaria, you were expected to do a full schedule. So I don't know if you've had malaria or known anyone who has—it's a terrible disease. You're wracked with fever. You get chills and shaking. And Ajahn Mun expected his students just to keep sitting the full schedule. So he was very, very fierce.

One of his favorite practices for students was to send them out in the forest where the tigers roared. At that time in Thailand, there were still lots of tigers around, and he felt that was really good for working with fear. Very good practice.

Well, Ajahn Mun had developed some of these powers of mind that come with strong concentration, and it was said that he could read people's minds. It's one of the powers that's said to come with concentration. So he'd be with his assemblage of monks, giving instructions, giving a meditation talk, and all of a sudden he would stop and he would say, "Someone's having lustful thoughts." And he would sort of sweep the audience with his gaze. I mean, in any assemblage of celibate people, chances are someone is going to be having those kinds of thoughts, so he could have been right anyway. But you can imagine how you would feel if you were such a person. I thought about doing that tonight, but I didn't want to embarrass anybody, so I didn't.

So that's one of the powers of mind that comes from the development of concentration. Another yogi who had great abilities in this direction was Dipa Ma, who I'm sure you've heard Sharon talk about. One of Sharon and Joseph's early teachers, someone who I had a chance to spend a little bit of time with. Seemingly a very simple and humble woman, but incredible powers of mind.

Someone asked Dipa Ma once what was in her mind and she said just three things: concentration, peace, and metta. Wouldn't it be nice to inhabit a mind like that? Goodness.

Dipa Ma had developed some of these powers that come through concentration and she was said to be able to recollect her past lives. In Buddhism, that's one of the things in Asia that's quite taken for granted, that we have had past lives. And Dipa Ma was said to be able to recollect them to the extent that she could travel back in the sequence through her past lives, remember the life when she lived in the time of the Buddha, and listen to the Buddha give discourses. So if you keep practicing your metta, see, they say these things happen.

So for us, maybe we won't recollect a past life in the time of the Buddha, but we can still benefit from this concentration. We're building the concentration every time we return to the phrases or to the image of the metta practice. This is the focus for us. This is our chosen object. In coming back again and again and again, we're developing that quality of concentration.

What happens as the concentration develops is that our attention becomes steady and stable. Instead of flitting off here and there, to the past and the future, all over the map, we find the ability to stay with our chosen object for longer and longer periods of time.

In vipassana practice, we use this stability primarily for insight. It's not considered that crucial an end in itself. We use it toward the end of understanding, of seeing things as they are. And it's like if you were on a carousel and you're going round and round and round and a friend came up and held out a newspaper for you to read. They came up to the edge of the carousel and they held out a newspaper for you to read. Could you read it while you were going around on the carousel? Not very well. And that's what our normal life is like. We're stuck on this carousel. Sometimes it feels more like a hamster cage of thoughts and hopes and fears and likes and dislikes. And we're trying to read the news. But we're going around too fast and we can't quite read the news.

When the carousel slows down and we come to a stop in front of the newspaper, ah, then we can read it. And what does the news say? The news says things are changing. Nothing is permanent. Nothing is stable. That's the news we need to read.

And we're trying to read the news. But we're going around too fast and we can't quite read the news. When the carousel slows down and we come to a stop in front of the newspaper, ah, then we can read it. And what does the news say? The news says things are changing. Nothing is permanent. Nothing is stable. That's the news we need to read.

So curiously enough, in our vipassana practice, the real purpose of stability is to see change, is to see impermanence. But in the metta practice, we see stability as an end in itself. You could say in a way it's one of our goals in the metta practice to develop that steady attention that is known as concentration because that also unifies the mind. That also brings the mind together and collects it. So the unification of

concentration strongly supports the unification that comes from the metta. They both support one another. And that's why this is such a powerful integrative practice. Both practices together are working to bring the mind to a point, to make it one.

Of course, the stability is also impermanent. There will be times when you're really focused on the phrases, on the image, when everything seems steady and you can sustain the attention all the way through a sitting or a walking, and then the next sitting it may all dissolve, and more thoughts and energy and feelings are just flooding through you. That's okay. Metta practice, like vipassana practice, has these cycles of stillness and activity, stillness and activity.

We could say that in our vipassana practice there is no goal, in the near term at least. There's this goal of full enlightenment, but that might not happen this week for all of us. So the rest of us have to think about a more immediate situation. And this fact really came home to me during the three-month course I was just sitting, which Sharon and Carol were both teaching. And Sharon said something a couple of times in the hall in the morning that really stuck with me. I'd heard it before, and I probably said it before, but there was something about the way she said it and the timing that went very deep for me.

And what she said was, people were asking questions about difficulties, and she said, "It doesn't matter what you're experiencing. What matters is whether you're aware of it." And this is in the context of vipassana practice, of teaching vipassana. It doesn't matter what you're experiencing. And I reflected on that during the day, and I thought, that is really radical. I mean, I spend most of my life trying to make myself feel certain ways and not feel other things. And here's Sharon telling me, all that doesn't matter. What really matters is whether I'm aware of it or not.

It was a beautiful pointing to the direction of freedom because the liberating factor in vipassana practice is awareness. Awareness, you might say, points to the unchanging in the middle of all the sea of change. Because vipassana is the foundation of our metta practice, we do this metta practice in the context of our vipassana practice, we can also say that that's true here. In a very bottom line way, a very fundamental way, it really doesn't matter what we experience here either. All the difficulties that come, all the ways that the mind gets distracted, the struggles with the mind states and moods and emotions of fear or anger or self-doubt or critical judgment—those are actually all fine because we hold that within the overall context of our whole journey. Whatever arises is okay. It's acceptable.

At the same time we are practicing metta and we are practicing concentration, so you could say when we look at the metta practice alone, we could say within that we have some goals—the goal of bringing forth this friendly heart, the goal of unifying the mind. And because we have these goals or sub-goals, you might say, we can get ourselves into some trouble. It can be a little tricky to work with goals.

First, because both these goals are impermanent. Whatever is of the nature to arise is of the nature to pass away, as the Buddha said. So we find the heart doesn't always stay open. Sometimes it's open and sometimes it closes. Concentration can be there in one sitting and gone in the next. And we start to realize

that these are somewhat impersonal factors that are really beyond our control. We can set the conditions, we can lay the groundwork for the metta and the concentration arising, but we can't actually make them happen. They have their own natures and our body and mind has its own nature. Sometimes they come together, sometimes they don't.

So we really need to have that understanding of change and impermanence in relation to both these sub-goals that we work with. And we have to learn how to make a full effort and not be so concerned about the immediate result. This is really a trick. This really takes some craft and some skill.

I'm going to steal a story that may have been told in the last retreat because not many of you were there. And that is about a young karate student in Japan who wanted to learn to be really good in the art of karate. And so he journeyed to find the greatest teacher in the country. And he went up to the teacher and he said, "I want to be the greatest karate student in all of Japan. How long will it take me?" And the teacher said, "Ten years." The student said, "Ten years? I'll work twice as hard as all your other students. Then how long will it take me?" The teacher said, "Oh, in that case, twenty years." And the student said, "Twenty years? No, no, no, you don't understand."

I'll work night and day. I'll train at every available waking moment. Then how long will it take me?

And the teacher said, "Oh, in that case, 30 years."

The student said, "Well, how can you say that? I'm willing to do anything."

And the teacher said, "One who has one eye on the destination only has one eye left to see the way."

This is really true for our metta practice. If we have one eye on the destination, whether it's metta or concentration, we really only have one eye left to see the way, and we need two eyes to see the way.

This came home to me very strongly on my first metta retreat. I had been practicing for a few days, and I was getting quite concentrated, and it felt wonderful. I've never had a lot of concentration in my practice, so this was like going from broccoli to ice cream for me. And then something happened externally, and the concentration fell apart. Concentration has this slightly impermanent quality, unfortunately.

When it fell apart, I was bound and determined to get it back. I reached for those metaphors with all my energy and really tried hard, but nothing was happening. I was getting tighter and tighter.

I went to see my teacher, who at that time was Joseph, and I told him what was going on. Joseph just looked at me and said, "We're not doing this practice for ourselves. It's for the others."

All of a sudden, the light went on. Oh, right. I had been doing the practice just to get back my own happiness. I had been forgetting that the practice is about wishing others happiness as well.

As soon as he said that, I thought, "Okay." I went back out, let go of my disappointment, let go of that goal, and just reconnected with that simple wish: "Oh, may you be happy." The practice started to settle back

down, the calmness came, and the concentration settled back in. It was a very interesting lesson.

It's like when you feel like being generous in order to get the fruits of generosity. I don't think that works either. We really need to learn how to be generous in order to be generous. And we need to learn how to do the metta practice in order to feel metta for other people and for ourselves.

But that little urge of happiness toward ourselves or others is the purity of intention that we have to keep coming back to. If we have that, everything else unfolds from there. If we lose that and just strive for the pleasant feeling or the concentration, we'll wrap ourselves up in knots. We'll just get ourselves more and more deeply bound.

When we really start to trust in that purity of intention and the practice flows, it can be beautiful.

Often we feel victimized by our own thoughts and feelings. If you look at what really causes us the most difficulty in our practice, sure, bodily pain is one thing, but honestly it's our own mental states and reactions and thoughts and hopes and fears that truly torment us. We could say that we're really victimized by our own mind stream—this flow of thoughts and images and emotions that makes up the content of our mind.

In the vipassana practice, we learn to relate to our mind stream in a very non-interfering way. That's the essence of the practice: to be with things as they are without disturbing them.

But when you think about what we're doing with the metta practice, it's actually quite audacious because we're starting to directly influence that mind stream. First of all, we're controlling the thoughts that go on by repeating the same phrases again and again. We're taking control of the thoughts in our mind stream. By holding the image of a friend or a benefactor, we're starting to take control of the image part of the mind stream. And when the metta starts to flow, we find that we're also able to influence the feeling or the emotional tone of the mind stream.

When all three of these pieces come together—the thoughts or the phrases, the image, and the feeling of metta—we have more or less composed that mind stream in a very wholesome way. This is a huge undertaking. It's revolutionary to think that we have a direct influence over our own mind stream, to which so often we are just the victim.

Because it's such a huge undertaking, you really need to be patient with its development. Sometimes only one piece will come together—only the phrases will be there, the image is weak, there's no feeling. Sometimes maybe two things will come together: the feeling and the phrases, or the image and the phrases. Sometimes maybe none of them will come together. So you really need to be patient.

If you can even sustain a thought for a short period of time, that's a huge stride over what we do in our daily life, where the mind is just buffeted from one random thought to the next, from one feeling to the next. So this is a great undertaking—be patient as you take these steps.

Once you start to get the flavor of the phrases, the image, and the feeling all coming together, it's enormously empowering. We learn in a limited way how to fashion our own mind stream, how to fashion it in a very wholesome way. And when it's in that wholesome state, it actually, again as love does, suppresses the unwholesome aspects of mind—what Sharon described last night as the hindrances of sense desire, of aversion, of dullness, of restlessness, and of doubt. Those qualities simply cannot arise when the mind stream is shaped in this particular way by the practice.

I want to talk a little bit, before I finish, about some of the factors that develop as concentration deepens. In the tradition, these are referred to as the jhanic factors. Jhanas are described in the Buddha's suttas as deep states of concentration where the mind is, as it were, absorbed within itself. There are certain qualities of mind that, when developed and maintained, lead to these absorptions called jhanas. I want to mention them tonight because some people have already reported in the interviews today experiencing some of these things. So I just want to let you know that you can start to tune into these as signs of developing concentration.

The first of the five factors is called vitaka in Pali, the old language of the Buddhist texts. It's usually translated as aiming or connecting, and it means that sense of connecting our attention to the object—in this case, primarily the phrases.

The second factor is called vichara, usually translated as sustaining. Where vitaka is that initial movement of mind that connects firmly with the phrase, vichara is that quality of mind that can sustain the attention on the phrase for some period of time.

The third factor is called piti, usually translated as rapture, also translated as delight or rapt attention. It's the joy that we find in our practice when we really feel wholeheartedly connected and we're enjoying doing this metta practice. There's a sense of rapture that comes with that. This is a mental quality, but sometimes it expresses itself through the body, through sensations. There may be a release of energy throughout the body. There may be a sense of a chill or a shiver—different ways that it can manifest.

The fourth factor is called sukha, usually translated as happiness. This is one of the qualities that develops with metta. Someone mentioned in an interview the other day that they like to practice with a smile on their face. Other people said that sometimes, just in the development of the metta, the smile came out naturally. That expression of the smile is that quality of sukha coming through. There's a happiness when we can feel in touch with the metta and feel in touch with our friends and benefactors.

The final factor is called ekaggata, translated as one-pointedness. It really means that collectedness of mind where we can bring all our attention to bear to be with the phrases, the image, and the feeling of the metta practice.

You might start to notice if these factors are present in your practice: the sense of connecting with the phrases, directing the attention and connecting; the sense of sustaining that attention; the delight or

rapture in the connection with the practice; the happiness that comes; and the unified mind or one-pointedness that comes with the practice.

All these qualities come out of the sense of right effort. This right effort is, again, just very simply getting in touch with that purity of intention and expressing it through the phrases. That's really all we need to do. If we try to force the metta or force the concentration, that's when we tie ourselves in knots. It's really not possible. It's not workable. It doesn't happen like that.

One of the things that took me a long time to see—I came into the metta practice from doing a lot of vipassana and I thought, "Oh, this is a really active practice. I guess I have to stay busy all the time." You may have felt that. It is an active practice. It's a practice where we're making effort moment after moment after moment. Because I thought it was just an active practice, I bore down a little too hard. I put a little too much pressure into the phrases, into the image.

What I learned after a while is that there is an active side to metta, but there's also a side that's like prayer. In a lot of ways, these phrases are like prayers. And what do you do after you make a prayer? You surrender. You go into an utterly receptive frame of mind. So that's the other side of our metta practice—to feel this high degree of receptivity that acknowledges, "Yes, I have this purity of intention, I wish well for others or for myself," and then we really surrender because we don't know what will come from that. The surrendering part is just as important as the active part.

So there's a high degree of openness in our metta practice as well—finding that balance between the active part of our practice and the truly receptive part where we simply open to what is. And again, from these humble beginnings comes what the Buddha described as this immeasurable deliverance of mind.

I'd like to share his description of metta along these lines. The Buddha spoke of how a practitioner abides pervading one quarter of the world with a mind imbued with loving-kindness. Likewise the second quarter, likewise the third, likewise the fourth. So above, below, around, and everywhere, one abides—and to all as to oneself—pervading the all-encompassing world with a mind imbued with loving-kindness, abundant, exalted, immeasurable, without hostility and without ill will. This is called the immeasurable deliverance of mind.

This immeasurable deliverance of mind begins very simply with this quality of friendliness. Friendliness is the alchemy of the path. What a moment of friendliness does when it contacts suffering is transform that moment of suffering into a moment of goodness.

So we can begin to ask ourselves as we bring forth this friendly mind more and more: What in our life can we not open to with this friendly mind? What experiences do we encounter—like the hindrances—where that friendly mind goes away and instead we're stuck in resistance, in aversion? At that point what we need to do is find that fire of metta, steal that fire of metta, and open to that experience too.

Because in the Buddha's understanding, there's nothing in the world, no experience possible that blocks

that mind of friendliness. And when we find that same degree of openness, then we too have become like the Buddha. We've become imperturbable. But it's an imperturbability that's not closed or shut off—it's very open and deeply connected.

I want to finish with a poem from Rumi. To understand this poem, you just need to know that the word Shams refers to his teacher, Shams of Tabriz, who was the first person to unlock for Rumi the door of the divine. He often uses the word Shams as synonymous with the divine.

Don't unstring the bow. I am your four feathered arrow that has not been used yet. I am sunlight slicing the dark. What is hidden in our chests? Laughter. What else? Compassion. What is love? Gratitude. Someone asks, how does love have hands and feet? Love is the sprouting bed for hands and feet. Your father and mother were playing love games. They came together and you appeared. Don't ask what love can make or do. Look at the colors of the world. The river water moving in all rivers at once. The truth that shines in the face of Shams.

Let's sit for just a minute in silence, holding these words: To all as to oneself, one abides pervading the all-encompassing world with a mind imbued with loving-kindness, abundant, exalted, immeasurable, without hostility and without ill will. This is called the immeasurable deliverance of mind.

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