The Practice of Loving Kindness

Guy Armstrong · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Guy Armstrong · 1:00:33

The Practice of Loving Kindness

Tonight I'd like to talk about the practice of loving-kindness. I know John spoke about this some last night as well, and I think it's a great theme for the midpoint of the retreat. Your qualities of loving-kindness and compassion get a lot of testing in these days, so hopefully this offers a little more support.

It's said in the Buddhist tradition that just as a bird really needs two wings to fly, our practice needs two wings in order to soar, in order to come to its full ripening and maturity. These are said to be the wings of wisdom and, in one tradition, compassion. In our tradition, we could say love or loving-kindness.

The wing of wisdom is that which sees the way to freedom, what sees the Four Noble Truths. It's what sees how we get caught and how we find freedom in every moment. Only wisdom has this capacity. Wisdom is really the heart of our path. Vipassana is our primary practice because it is the wisdom practice in our tradition, and its essence is the unfolding of this truth of freedom, of liberation.

But just as important is the side of heartfulness of the human being—you could call it love, you could call it compassion. Where this isn't developed, there's not a sweetness, there's not a beauty, there's not a delight in life. That kind of delight, I feel, is what really has the potential to reach out and transform others, to inspire them, to encourage them, to make them feel safe and comforted and reassured in whatever line of work we find ourselves. Where that heart quality is there, it's such a great gift to the whole world, such a beautiful thing to share.

To some extent, the Vipassana practice by itself encourages this opening of heart. It really asks for this opening of heart. In every moment, the practice challenges us to open with real acceptance and non-conflict to our present moment experience—not to hang on when it's pleasant and not to resist when it's unpleasant. That takes a great deal of heartfulness, a great deal of giving of ourselves moment after moment.

For some people, that opening may be enough. My personal observation is that some people walking the path of Vipassana practice find that their hearts naturally and spontaneously open to a great degree, to a lovely degree, just through this one central practice. But also in my observation, there are people for whom that doesn't happen so easily or so spontaneously, and I count myself in the second group.

Where people's nature tends to be quite emotional, I think the opening of the heart proceeds rather spontaneously with the wisdom practice. But in my case, I felt that my opening of the heart, because I tend to be fairly cerebral, was really accelerated and really supported by the undertaking of specific heart

practices, the metta practice being the primary one.

So I'd really like to encourage all of you to explore the metta practice to as great a degree as you feel drawn to it, both in the context of this Vipassana retreat and also to consider specific intensive metta retreats. I think it's a beautiful way to open.

In our tradition, which comes out of the Theravadan Buddhism of Thailand, Burma, and Sri Lanka, metta is considered the primary of the noble emotions. In other Buddhist traditions, it's probably compassion. But for us, it's considered to be this quality of loving-kindness, of friendliness, of warmth.

It's so extraordinary when we meet someone who has touched that in a really deep way. Some teachers have that deep heart quality and transmit that force of inspiration. I love to tell stories about the Dalai Lama, partly because I just like to hear them again, but also because he always manifests that in his being, in his presence.

He was at a peace conference in San Francisco a couple of summers ago. You know how in Asia, when people greet one another, they put their hands at their chest, and in the West, when we greet one another, we tend to put our hand out to shake the other person's hand. So the Dalai Lama, because he's such a beautiful bridge between cultures, was going through the whole conference representing both worlds in this kind of way—one hand at the chest, one hand extended and shaking, always out to greet people.

There was a lot of security at the conference, so there were guards at every door because he's a head of state as well as head of religion. Every time he went in and out through the doors to the outside, he would stop and acknowledge the security guards. He'd say a few words and he'd thank them for their work. Somebody said that at the end of the conference, the security guards were all in love with him. You could just imagine how many celebrities have gone in and out of those doors and never acknowledged that there was a person there. The Dalai Lama just took the time to make that personal connection, to feel their heart, to touch them.

The noble qualities of mind are talked about in this list called the Brahma-Viharas.

Brahma is heavenly. Vihara is abode or home. You can think of these as the divine abidings. I like to think of them as where consciousness hangs out when it's in a really heavenly state. They're the qualities of metta or loving-kindness, compassion or karuna, of joy or mudita, and equanimity or upekkha.

You're probably very familiar with them from watching the signs on the buildings every day. We thought it was a nice way to name the buildings so you could be staying in a state of joy or equanimity without having to sound schmaltzy about it. We also thought the Four Noble Truths might be kind of good, but we didn't want you staying in suffering, craving, cessation and path, so the Brahma-viharas were a little more appealing.

In our tradition, we really hold loving-kindness as the foundation of all the Brahma-viharas. It's the heart

quality that develops an openness and a receptivity and a friendliness to everything we encounter. When that openness has been generated, has been established, the other qualities come about spontaneously.

When that open heart looks upon a state of suffering, whether it's in ourselves or in someone else, the natural response of that heart is compassion. Compassion is said to be the quivering of the open heart in response to suffering.

When that open heart meets happiness, ours or another's, the natural response is to resonate with that happiness with a sympathetic kind of joy, a resonant joy or an appreciative joy. This is the joy of mudita, of being able to take delight in others' happiness.

And when that open heart simply rests in its own experience, it can hold all the joys and sorrows of life in this beautiful balance that is equanimity. So the state of equanimity is not about having feelings go away, but it's rather about a balance and a spaciousness of mind that can hold them all—the times of suffering and difficulty, the times of joy and delight—and not be so deeply swayed by either side of our experience. This is the power of equanimity.

This quality of love, of course, is something we've all known very deeply, certainly as children and many times in our adult life. And I feel that for a lot of us, the whole pull of spiritual life is to uncover this quality that we know is within us, that we know is intrinsic, and be able to abide there.

This really was, when I look back, my main motivation in coming into Dharma practice. I had, as I mentioned before, come out of the 60s with a lot of confusion and a state of unhappiness and a lot of fear, and I just wasn't willing to live a life where love wasn't accessible, where it wasn't available to me day by day. For myself, I think it was the main reason that I took up practice. This call has always been so strong.

Rumi put it this way. He uses the word "you" to mean the beloved, the quality of the divine that evokes this feeling of love in us. He said, "I have three things to say. First, when I was apart from you, this world did not exist, nor any other. Second, whatever I was looking for was always you. Third, why did I ever learn to count to three?" This is the heart of the spiritual path.

In doing our metta practice, sometimes it might feel like we're contriving something. People come into interviews and they say, "Well, I like the idea of the metta, but these phrases just seem so phony, seem so contrived. Can't I just kind of hang out with that feeling of love in my heart?" And of course you can, if it's always there. More happiness to you.

The phrases are beautiful because they have a way of actually developing that quality of love. To me, it's an amazing gift that such a practice exists on this earth, a practice to evoke the quality of love from our hearts. But ultimately, it's not something we have to fabricate. It's part of our own nature.

I'm reminded of that because one of the most loving people I've ever met in my life was my grandmother. She was born in the countryside in North Carolina around 1890, was poor all her life, lived with one of the

most cantankerous and ornery men that I've ever known, who was my grandfather. And through it all maintained this really sweet, unfailingly sweet disposition. She gave so much love to all of us as kids when we would come to visit them.

My most striking memory of her is every time we'd come into her house for a visit, she would give us a big hug and she would put her lips in the hollow of our neck and sort of grope around and sort of nuzzle us down there and say that she was trying to steal our sugar. She said, "I know it's here somewhere. I'm going to steal your sugar." That was just what she did to every kid who came in her house.

And she hadn't done any Buddhist practice at all. She hadn't even been in psychotherapy. So it's not that we actually have to drum up something that's not there. It's more a question of taking away the obscurations, taking away what's concealing or hiding the love.

The Buddha said, "This mind is naturally radiant and brightly shining, but it's colored by visiting impurities." So we need to be reminded from time to time that that's at our center, that love is really at our heart. Again, it's something that the Dalai Lama is so good at reminding us of.

He was at a conference last fall in Charlottesville, Virginia. It was a conference for Nobel Peace Prize winners.

So there were a lot of heavyweights there—the Dalai Lama, Bishop Desmond Tutu, and the other living Nobel Peace Prize laureates. It was a very august and solemn gathering, and they were going outside to have their pictures taken all together.

Desmond Tutu was standing in front of the Dalai Lama, and as they were posing for the camera, the Dalai Lama reached down and playfully ripped off Desmond Tutu's hat. The Bishop grabbed it back onto his head, and there's actually a photograph that recorded the incident—I'll put it on the bulletin board so you can see. The Dalai Lama is just breaking up in one of his big belly laughs after pulling this good joke on old Desmond Tutu. Such beautiful spontaneity.

One of the benefits of metta practice I feel most strongly is that it brings us happiness. It's kind of a paradox because we start off doing the practice thinking a lot about other people—wishing for their happiness, safety, and wellbeing. Maybe it helps them, and I hope it does. Actually, I believe that it does.

You've probably heard about the study done on patients in a hospital in San Francisco, where people recovering from operations and illness had their names divided into two groups. Half the names were sent to a Christian prayer group, and prayers were said for them. The other half was a control group with nothing done for them. The study showed that the fifty percent who were prayed for had statistically significant higher rates of recovery than those who weren't prayed for.

I believe in this kind of power of metta, although I can't prove it. We may never know whether our loving kindness for someone else helps them or not, but what we can definitely know is that it really affects us. It

really helps us, really touches us.

Sylvia talked a few nights ago about the eleven benefits of loving kindness: you sleep easily, you wake easily, and you have pleasant dreams. People love you, devas love you, animals love you, and devas protect you. The mind is joyful, the face is serene, and you die peacefully. Sounds pretty good.

One of the people who comes to Spirit Rock every year is a Thai teacher named Ajahn Jomnian. He's one of the happiest people I've ever met. He sits up on the stage, and while his verbal teaching goes through spells of being really interesting and spells of being a little dry—he can talk for eight hours a day and never exhaust his lore of stories and dharma teachings—what I can always tune into is just his happiness level. He sits at the front of the room radiating these waves of wellbeing and joy.

Sometimes Jack or someone will ask him, "What would you like to do today?" and he'll say, "Well, are there people who want to hear the dharma? I'd like to go talk dharma to them." Usually there are, so we take him to the hall and he speaks dharma.

Other days we'll say, "Ajahn Jomnian, what would you like to do today? Would you like to see the Golden Gate Bridge? Go into San Francisco? Go out to Point Reyes?"

"Are there people who'd like to hear the dharma?" he asks. "But anything you want to do will make me happy. If you want to take me to San Francisco, I'd be happy with that. If you want to take me out in nature, I'll be happy with that. And if there are people who'd like to hear dharma, I'm happy there too."

He's always happy. He actually said on one of his visits that he hasn't had any anger for twenty-five years, and I believed it from his energy, from his vibration of joy.

One of the ways I feel that loving-kindness practice brings happiness is that it opens our practice to all of life.

It connects us with all living things in a really natural way, in a way that becomes an integral part of our dharma practice.

With vipassana practice, we can do it in a way that gets a little self-centered. It's not meant to be that way—that's not the way it's supposed to happen—but we can take it that way so that our vipassana practice becomes revolving around my pain, my difficulties, my neuroses, my progress, my happiness, my path, my liberation. It can become a little self-enclosed.

But with the loving-kindness practice, we stay with ourselves some, and then it opens us up to our benefactors, our friends, people we don't know very well, people we have difficulty with, and then all beings everywhere.

Shantideva, who was the ninth century Indian sage, put it this way: "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." This is a really beautiful expression.

Part of what happens as we engage the practice of loving-kindness is that we break down some of the barriers that we hold between ourselves and the rest of the world. And it can remove the sense of loneliness that our own concepts have created—the self-created isolation of the view of an individual self.

This is from Sharon Salzberg's book, *Loving Kindness*: "The concepts of separateness that have dominated our lives have produced tremendous suffering. What we have taken to be real is in fact a hallucination. The division between self and other is the degradation of our highest human potential, the liberation of the mind that is love. The critical moment of the path which breaks open the loving heart is the realization that we have never existed as separate, isolated beings. When wisdom recognizes our oneness and sees the interconnectedness of all beings, it fills us with a degree of happiness that transforms our lives."

This practice was originally taught by the Buddha as a way to be protected from fear. He had instructed a group of monks to go off and meditate in the woods at night. They went out and sat down in a grove in the dark, and they came running back in a few minutes and said, "We can't meditate there. That place is full of spirits. We sat down and they started making sounds in all the trees and they were casting lights on us and they made these terrible smells. We can't stay in that grove. It's haunted."

The Buddha said, "Well, I'll give you the only protection you'll need." He taught them the metta practice and sent them back into the grove. They came back the next day and he asked them how it was. They said, "It changed everything. We started sending out thoughts of loving-kindness and well-wishing to all the spirits around us and they turned completely friendly. They said that they wanted to take care of us." So it transformed the world around and it transformed them.

Someone mentioned in an interview the other day that they had had to go out in the world in the middle of the retreat. They had decided to take up the loving-kindness practice while they were in the middle of a big public place. Making a quick transition from this environment to a crowd out there can be a little challenging. So they were feeling a little shaky, a little nervous in that setting. They started doing the metta practice and it immediately filled them with that sense of connectedness and took away the sense of fear and unease. It's really a great practice to do out in the world.

For a lot of years while I was commuting to work at Microsoft, I tried to do mindfulness while I was driving. It's difficult because the mind gets pulled out so often. So I switched to loving-kindness practice after a while. It was great because there was always somebody nearby. You notice that on Bay Area freeways? There's always somebody nearby. So there was always somebody to direct loving-kindness to. Even the people who cut in front of us really quickly. Oh, may you be happy too.

It's also a great antidote for aversion and ill will. It's said that anger really can't stick in a mind that's loving, in a mind that's friendly, because the mind has become so spacious and so open, the anger just can't find a foothold. The analogy is that it's like throwing paint through space and it can't adhere to the

space because there's nothing there to stick on.

As you do the practice of metta, you don't need to have too grandiose an idea about what you're supposed to be feeling. Sometimes we talk about metta as boundless, unconditional love, and it seems really remote. Maybe the Buddha could touch it or Jesus, but for us, it doesn't seem very approachable.

Think about metta just as friendliness, just as a spark of connectedness. It has qualities like acceptance of ourselves and others. It has the quality of patience, the quality just of friendship, the quality of connection. Really the gist of it is to see another, see ourself, and just have the sincere thought, "Oh, I hope you're well." To look in the eyes of another human being or to hold them in our mind's eye and just to feel, "I hope things are good for you. I hope life is going well." That intent, that feeling is really the gist of the metta practice.

If you want to experiment with doing this practice as a real art, then before each phrase, have that feeling of connection and well-wishing in your heart, and then say the phrase so that the words flow naturally out of this feeling. "Oh, I hope you're well." That's really the heart of it. That's the seed. And if that feeling is there, the phrases will start to do their magic. They will start to unfold the love that's in us.

So you really don't need to force any particular feeling as you do the metta practice. You don't even have to try to feel any particular way as you say the phrases. Just let yourself feel that connection, the intention of wishing well, and then trust that the phrases will evoke that feeling in a stronger and stronger way. And don't worry if it feels dry or mechanical or rote, or that nothing's happening. Just trust that what you're doing is planting seeds—the seed of your good intention—and then watering it with the phrases. After that, you don't have to do anything else. Nature will take care of the rest. Nature will take care of bringing all those feelings forward.

It's a little bit like starting a fire by rubbing two sticks together. It really takes a lot of effort at first. You rub and rub and you get blisters on your fingers and you think nothing's ever going to happen. And then finally, after rubbing for a long time, this little wisp of smoke comes up. And then that wisp turns into a little flame. You give it some more shavings. It turns into a bigger flame and a bigger flame and so on. So there's this little bit of contriving at first in the metta practice. The rubbing of the stick is the saying of the phrases. But then once it gets going, it takes on its own life. It takes on its own warmth and heat. You can just trust in that.

I want to talk a little about how to integrate the metta practice with vipassana. So far, we've been giving some guided loving kindness once a day for about fifteen minutes, and you can also bring it into the start or the end of each sitting for five or ten minutes if you'd like to do that, if you connect with it, if you find it helpful.

You can also use the metta practice when you feel like you've gotten into a difficult place in the vipassana practice. If some particular mood or state of mind is coming up strongly—could be anger or fear or

sadness—and you start to feel kind of overwhelmed by it, you can switch to doing the metta practice for a little while and see if that brings in a little different flavor. See if it brings in a little different quality in the mind, a little more softness, a little more acceptance that can just soften the mind around the difficulty. So you can use it if you feel overwhelmed.

You can use it if you feel a little stuck, like you've been relating to a difficult experience for some time and the mind is getting stuck in that groove. Bring in a little metta practice to just see if it'll transform the moment. Or if you just find yourself getting contracted and tense and a little hard in the vipassana practice, you can use the metta just to soften a bit.

Sometimes if we're connecting with really difficult experiences of fear or anger or sadness, it can seem like this wish for happiness is too theoretical. "Me? Happy? No way. Not possible." If it feels like the metta just is too idealistic or too remote, you can also try at that point the compassion practice.

Compassion is like loving kindness, but there's only one phrase. It's something like, "May I be free from this pain and sorrow?" And you can adjust the wording to more directly touch what you're actually experiencing. "May I be free from this fear" or "May I be free from this grief?" So you're relating directly with the feeling, but it starts to bring out a different quality of the heart.

There was a workshop today down in the lower meditation hall. I don't know if you had any sort of strays wandering up here. It's actually a benefit for Spirit Rock, put on by a fellow named Byron Brown, who's a teacher in the Diamond Heart approach. He's written a book called *Soul Without Shame* that teaches all about how to deal with the inner critic or the judging part of our nature—the same thing that Eugene explored through the image of Mara. In his benefit today, the workshop was along the same theme. He said that the single most useful thing in working with the judging mind is to bring compassion to ourselves.

So also anytime you feel that there's too much criticism, not enough self-acceptance, you can use the compassion phrase: "May I be free from this pain and sorrow."

You might also sort of keep in mind the metta and the compassion for the people who are arriving tomorrow evening as a way to make space, as a way to accept. And also, you know, they're going to be going through all the adjustments of the start of a retreat. You remember how that felt?

Not easy.

I want to talk a little about the different beings that the practice opens us up to. The image from the text is that metta is like a river that runs downhill in a stream and fills a pool that it runs into. And then as it fills that pool, that pool overflows and runs down the hill into the next pool. And then that pool gets filled and it overflows and runs down the hill into the next pool.

This is the image of developing the loving-kindness first with the people who are easy for us—with

ourselves, with a benefactor, or with a friend. The idea is that when the metta for each of those people is overflowing, we let it run down the hill to the next person. Then let that build up and overflow. And then it runs down the hill to someone we don't know very well, a neutral person. Then it fills up and runs down the hill to someone that we may have difficulty with. And then it fills up and overflows to all beings everywhere.

There's a story about why we start with ourselves. It's said that at the time of the Buddha, one of his supporters was the king of Kosala named Pasenadi, who had a wife named Mallika and many consorts. One day the king asked Mallika, who was his queen, "Who do you love the most?" Being the king, he thought he knew what the answer should be to that question. She was also a follower of the Buddhist teachings, and she immediately said back to him, "Why, myself, of course."

He was shocked and took umbrage, and said, "Well, what do you mean?" She said, "Well, yes, I do. I look, and honestly, I love myself the most." So they thought they'd better go straighten this out. They went to the best marriage counselor that they knew, who was the Buddha, explained the situation to him and asked who was right.

And the Buddha said, "Why, the queen is right, of course." Then he said, "When I was still an unenlightened bodhisattva, I visited all the quarters of the universe with my mind and found no one dearer to me than myself. So likewise does every person hold himself or herself most dear. And who loves oneself can never harm another."

This is why we start with ourselves as really the foundation of the loving-kindness practice.

So as we develop the phrases as they relate to ourselves, let them be universal also. Let them be phrases that can apply to anyone, so that when you take up all the other people, the same phrases more or less can work. You can let them evolve, but you don't want to get too specific with anyone.

There was a woman at a metta retreat in Vancouver, and she was using the phrase, "May I live with ease." Then she was doing her son as a friend, and her son was about twenty years old and in college. She said, "When I got to this phrase, 'May you live with ease,' my mind rebelled. I thought he's living with too much ease already. He's staying at home and lying around in bed all day and I'm paying his bills and his tuition and his books. I don't want him to live with any more ease."

The phrase she wanted to use was "May you develop some backbone." And I said, "Well, I'm not sure that's really metta. It sounds like you're trying to fix him."

So with the metta phrases, we want to have the quality of acceptance—acceptance of people as they are—and not a phrase that tries to fix somebody.

As you play with the phrases, hopefully you'll find a good rhythm with them. Once the phrases become rhythmic for you, then one leads to the next, to the next, to the next. I started off working with long

phrases, and over time they've evolved to be quite short. And now the short ones have that same rhythm.

But when I was working with the long phrases and getting them into a rhythm, they actually transmuted at one point into a country and western song, which I won't inflict on you because it might stay around for a while. But Sylvia actually said—and she said it publicly so I'm sure she won't mind my sharing it—that she often, in fact most of the time, sings her metta phrases. And that's a way to really keep them rhythmic, and that rhythmicness keeps them present, keeps them going.

So then working with a benefactor or a friend—this is lovely because in the metta practice, the practice really is to gladden the mind. That's the whole point of it, to make the mind joyful. So we get to hang out with these people that we love, like our benefactors and our friends.

The idea in the metta practice is that you go where the metta is easiest. Isn't this a great invitation? Go where it's easiest. If it's easiest with your benefactor, go there. If it's easiest with yourself, spend most of your time there. If it's easiest with a friend, go there.

It's really different for different people. One meditator said that they had to be with themselves for three years before they could open up to somebody else, before they could include anybody else in their loving kindness. Other people have to be with a benefactor or a friend for a long time before they can bring any of that love home for themselves. One meditator said the only being that she could feel any sort of loving kindness for, for months and months, was a stuffed animal. So that's fine too.

Really, whatever works—whether it's a child or a pet or a friend—wherever the metta flows, that's the place to start. And then trust that it can just flow down in those cascading pools to all the other beings that you want to turn to, so that eventually it becomes boundless. As it says in the Metta Sutta, "Even as a mother protects with her life, her child, her only child, so with a boundless heart should one cherish all living beings, radiating kindness over the entire world." This is said to be the supreme abiding.

I think that's probably a good place to stop for now with the talk. I'll just read one more quotation about the benefits of loving kindness, where the Buddha said, "Friends, whatever kinds of worldly merit there are from qualities like generosity and giving and sila—whatever kinds of worldly merit there are—all are not worth one sixteenth part of the heart deliverance of loving kindness in its shining and beaming and radiance. The heart deliverance of loving kindness far excels them all. Just as whatever light there is of stars, all is not worth one sixteenth part of the radiance of the moon."

So we have some time left, so we can open up for comments about your metta practice, if there's anything you'd like to share, if you have questions about metta practice.

[Question from practitioner about confusion between Vipassana instruction to see things as they are versus metta practice feeling like trying to change something]

It's a good question. This aspect of Vipassana practice—that it is only to see things exactly as they are and

not to transform them—has a beautiful elegance to it. There's a simplicity and a cleanness. It's easy to get behind a practice like that. And it can also become a ground for a little bit of intellectual favoritism, you might say. Some people actually look down on the metta practice because it's not intellectually as clean or elegant as Vipassana or mindfulness practice.

But actually, mindfulness practice is also primarily a skillful means. We use mindfulness practice in order to purify the heart of greed, aversion, and delusion. It's a factor of the path. And when it has done its work of purification of greed, aversion and delusion, it's not needed anymore. As the Buddha said, when you reach the other shore, you can toss the raft away. So mindfulness, similarly, although it has this beautiful elegance and cleanliness about it, is just another skillful means that's really designed for purification.

So I would look on the metta practice also in the light of skillful means. If it can be brought to bear on a moment where there's suffering and it can transform that moment of suffering into a moment of ease or happiness or relaxation, that's a great path factor also. Basically, the way the Buddha defined right effort was that it's to develop wholesome states of mind and abandon unwholesome states of mind. So whatever tools we can find that are consistent with our practice to do that, I think are really wonderful.

And the metta practice isn't really about making ourselves happy by our will in that moment. The only effort of will in the metta practice is this sort of wishing ourselves well. It's just looking on ourselves and saying, "I hope you're happy." That's the right amount of effort. That's the right effort in metta. It's not to try and put ourselves in a happy place or make ourselves happy, but just connecting with that sincere wish. "Oh, I really hope for my own happiness, or I really hope for your happiness." That's all.

[Another practitioner shares about being recommended metta when wanting to do Vipassana, becoming angry about being recommended loving kindness practice, then becoming disappointed in themselves for the whole cycle]

There must be a poetic justice in there somewhere.

There must be some poetic justice in there somewhere, indeed. I guess it builds humility, if nothing else.

Someone shared a profound observation about the convergence of metta and wisdom—how these two paths ultimately meet at the same destination. This mirrors what we find in Hindu traditions as well, where both the bhakti path of devotion and the jnana path of knowledge lead to the same realization.

She described working with a deep, tender wound—something so raw that any direct approach felt too aggressive. The only way forward was to surround it with compassion, returning again and again to gentleness when everything else proved too much. In that space of infinite tenderness, a phrase arose: "I'm not there." And in that recognition came the wisdom that it's the "I" that creates the suffering.

This beautifully illustrates how wisdom and love are inseparably joined in our deepest nature. We might say that our most fundamental essence is emptiness, but as soon as something appears in that vastness,

love is there—love and wisdom together. They're the most essential aspects of who we are.

Developing wisdom naturally supports love; developing love naturally supports wisdom. It's actually quite difficult to remain truly loving without wisdom guiding us. And here we discover one of the great mysteries: when we can simply be with suffering without adding anything to it, the suffering transforms itself. When we step out of the way of our own knots, they unravel on their own.

In working with both vipassana and metta practice around emotional difficulties, I've found that the traditional compassion phrase "May I be free from this pain and sorrow" can sometimes feel too intrusive—almost aversive in its undertone of wanting the pain to leave. I've softened this for myself, often using the phrase "I care about this pain" or "I care about this sorrow." This gentler approach allows for a less active way of being present with difficulty.

Someone asked about practicing metta aloud. While I haven't explored this extensively myself, I've heard others do it beautifully. There's wisdom in this approach—speech actions are said to be more karmically potent than mental actions, so speaking metta might indeed be more powerful. Speaking aloud also helps prevent the mind from wandering, making it harder to drift into other thoughts while actively voicing the practice.

A question arose about the relationship between metta and bodhicitta in the Tibetan tradition, where it's taught that full Buddhahood cannot be achieved without bodhicitta because it takes us beyond ourselves. While we don't make that exact claim in this tradition, there's profound wisdom in the bodhicitta teachings.

Bodhicitta—literally meaning "awakened mind" but perhaps better translated as "awakening heart"—recognizes that our inner transformation naturally changes our impact on the world. This understanding can become a source of motivation: we practice not only for our own liberation but because we see how deepening our understanding benefits others.

This might seem like a stretch early in practice, but the more we meditate, the more clearly we see the ripples extending outward. In a gathering like this, I imagine many of you have already witnessed how your meditation practice has transformed your work life—whether you're teaching, doing social work, parenting, or perhaps bringing mindfulness into stress reduction programs. The degree to which you've transformed yourself is already impacting the world around you.

Bodhicitta invites us to take this reflection and weave it back into our motivation, saying: "Yes, this is why I want to practice."

I want to practice in order that I can be of most help in the world. Because if I don't purify within, there's a limit to how useful I can be in helping others to come out of suffering.

So there's a very deep connection between bodhicitta and metta, or between bodhicitta and compassion.

It's really taking that caring for other people and bringing it back into the very motivation that sustains our practice. I think they're very closely linked and they really support each other. I'll probably talk a little more about bodhicitta in a few nights.

A student asked about metta in daily life, wondering when to choose different focuses for loving-kindness practice. She also shared how she turns to metta when feeling sorrow for loved ones going through difficult times - aging parents and a friend facing cancer for the third time. She questioned whether using metta to quiet her mind in these situations might be avoidance.

Let me address the second question first because it's simpler. If the situation externally is such that you really can't do anything to benefit them, then metta can be a way of yourself coming to more peace with that reality. In that case, I think it's skillful. If there is in fact something you could be doing, but you might use metta in order not to feel the pain of wanting to act, that could be avoidance. But if there's really nothing you can do, then the most important thing is to be at peace within yourself about that reality. Whether it's sending metta to yourself or to them, that may be the most skillful thing you can do in that setting. So I don't think it's avoidance.

In terms of metta in daily life, it's really up to you who you feel drawn to use as your focus for loving-kindness. It's absolutely fine to take yourself for long periods of time. What I usually do in my daily metta practice is focus on myself a little bit and either a benefactor or a friend for a little bit - a little of me and a little of somebody else. But there are times when I might really feel like doing all beings for a long time, or focusing on a particular friend. The nice thing about going through all the categories is that you learn metta can work with anybody. That's the core teaching. It can work with people we like, with people we dislike, with people we don't know. Once you understand that, then you can start to activate metta in any relationship in your life.

Let me share something from my own experience this past year. I had a difficult relationship with someone, and it was coming into my metta practice a lot. I'd be doing metta, trying to generate these caring thoughts, and then I'd find this situation arising and I'd start getting really angry about it.

I started to look at the anger more closely because in most Buddhist texts, the word used for the second hindrance - in the list of the five hindrances - is not anger. The word most often used is "ill will," a translation of the Pali vyāpāda. I started to let that resonate in my mind, and it really changed my understanding of what metta is.

I saw that what was happening when I was angry at someone is that I wanted them to feel bad. In anger, as it says in the texts, it's like picking up a hot coal and getting ready to throw it at somebody else. But before it can reach them, it burns me. The other analogy used is that it's like picking up excrement and wanting to soil somebody else. But before it soils them, it soils me.

I started to realize that I was really wishing this other person to feel bad. That was really what was going

on in my anger. And that's really what ill will is - we want someone else to feel bad. I thought, I don't need to do that. So I started doing metta for them, and it was just a little shift to see, "Oh, I actually can wish that they feel okay." I could sincerely wish that they feel okay. Even though I was upset with them, that was not a very big step. It didn't make me like them any better, but I no longer wished them ill. And I found it very easy after that.

Anytime the anger would start to come up, I'd just make that little step from ill will to good will, and I'd start practicing metta for them. And it was very accessible. It didn't mean that I fell in love with them. It just meant I stopped wishing them bad. So I found it very, very helpful with people outside.

Okay, one more question. Chris.

You used as an example that story about the control group and the people who were praying, being prayed for, and the people who weren't. And I'm wondering if you think it would be fair to say that metta is supposed to include a form of prayer.

I think of it that way myself. I do think of it as the form of prayer in our practice. And you know, there are two ways to look at prayer. One is we pray in order to get the results, but honestly, that's just attachment. The other way to look at it is that we pray because it purifies our heart.

And I think that's the truth of the benefit of prayer. When we pray, we open our heart to all the possibilities of the universe. We state our wish, which is, I really wish that all beings are happy and healthy and safe. We state it even as we know that's not always true. So we kind of let go of the result even as we say the wish. But the wish can really be true. The wish is really wholesome. And that opens us up in that really receptive way that kind of takes the individual will out of the situation. So I think it's a lot like prayer in that way.

Thank you.

Okay, let's close here. It's just about 8:15 and in a minute it will be time for walking. But before we close and before you leave, this is Marie's last night up on the podium with us. And she wanted to say a farewell.

Thank you for listening. To learn how you can support the teachers and Dharma Seed, please visit dharmaseed.org.

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