Mettā: Effort and Fruits

Guy Armstrong · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Guy Armstrong · 1:01:21

It's always interesting to come into the hall after being in here for sittings. You come in for a talk and it's like a bomb has dropped in the middle of the room or a big boulder, and everybody has splashed out to the sides. I hope it hasn't been too much of an explosion.

I wanted to talk tonight about right effort and the fruits of our practice of loving-kindness. I thought I'd take up a little bit where Sally left off last night in her talk on the hindrances, particularly in relation to the last hindrance of doubt.

What I've heard often over these days of interviews and the questions in the hall is that for people who have done even a lot of vipassana practice in the past—and maybe especially for people who have done a lot of vipassana practice—when you come into mettā practice, a lot of doubt tends to come up about what this practice is for and why we're doing it this way and why all this emphasis on the phrases. It sounds so busy and forceful.

It was actually just the same for me when I took up the mettā practice. I'd been doing vipassana practice for probably eighteen years. I did my first intensive mettā retreat and felt like a complete beginner. It reminded me of how I'd felt when I started vipassana. I came in not really knowing the techniques and practices. I didn't know where it would lead. I didn't know how to work with my wandering mind and the different hindrances that came up. I felt really adrift. It threw me back into beginner's mind in a way that really shook me up. It didn't feel comfortable at all. I didn't know what to do in my practice. I didn't know if it would work for me. That was my particular form of doubt—I didn't know if I could do it or if it would happen for me.

All these questions that come in the early days of a mettā retreat I can really relate to personally. This factor of doubt, as Sally said, is such an important one because if we stop there, it keeps us from making the effort that deepens our practice.

A couple of weeks ago, I was sitting a retreat in Santa Rosa with a young Tibetan Lama teacher who has been one of my primary teachers for the last seven years, a teacher named Sogyal Rinpoche. Some of you have met him. Toward the end of the retreat, we were having a discussion on doubt, this quality of the doubting mind, and one of the students told a story that I thought was quite revealing.

He said he was a high school math teacher offering a number of courses one semester. A student came up to him at the start of the semester and said, "Well, I'm thinking about signing up for your course on calculus, but I don't know if it will really help me. I don't know if it will do what I want it to do."

He got all enthused. Here's a bright young mind—I can turn her on to math! There aren't so many bright young minds into math these days, probably. So he gave her this glowing pitch. He said, "Look, I've got seven kinds of problems right here in my mind that calculus can solve that nothing else can. Let me tell you about one of them." He went into detail. "This is a really helpful problem for aerodynamic engineers and for people who are designing bridges. There's no way you can solve it except through calculus."

She said, "Well, that's very nice, but how can I know that if I take this course, I'll learn how to solve that problem?"

He was stumped. He'd never heard a question like that before. He said, "Well, you have to trust me."

She said, "But before I can take the course, I have to know that for myself. I can't just take your word for it."

They discussed back and forth a little bit, and she dropped the course. She couldn't be convinced. She couldn't get past that initial doubt to give it a try.

The Tibetan teacher's comment on this exchange was, "That's a good story, but it's a bad ending. It's kind of like a European movie." He's getting pretty tuned into Western culture, as you can tell. So hopefully in this movie, because it's in California, close enough to Hollywood, the ending is going to be different. We'll give it a try.

What I'd like to talk about tonight is how this practice works—something about the mechanics of the practice, what we're doing with all these phrases and all this activity and where it leads.

One way of talking about why we do this practice is to bring into our spiritual life what my Tibetan teacher and I would call the juice in our practice. There are all these wonderful, sweet, juicy qualities of the heart within us—qualities like love and compassion and devotion and warmth and dedication and sincerity and friendliness, humor and kindness. These qualities are latent within every one of us. They're all part of our human nature.

The question is: in our spiritual life, how do we activate them? How do we bring them so that they're a living force in our lives? Because if we don't, if we ignore that side of our being, the spiritual path can become quite dry.

quite arid, quite intellectually satisfying, but rather sterile and without that real heart quality of openness and connection, love.

So I would say that we do the metta practice because in our tradition, it's the way to the juice in our life. It's the way to juice up our spiritual practice. It is the avenue for all those sweet qualities, like devotion and compassion and love and warmth. This is the doorway in.

For some people, as I've observed, just doing the Vipassana practice can be enough. People who come

from a very emotional temperament—maybe those who were in Italy in their last lifetime or Tibet—seem to open up in that way just through the Vipassana practice alone, and that sweetness and the juice start to come through.

But for myself, I came from a background where my major in college was physics and my minor was math, where my head had been trained much more thoroughly than my heart ever had. When I came into meditation practice, that emphasis or imbalance in me sort of continued. For me, the metta practice has been a really important part of my whole unfolding.

Just to authenticate this, several people who are teachers here have actually told me they think I've softened over the years since I've been doing metta practice. So I figure that's a pretty good sign, because I can be pretty feisty in meetings, and they've seen that.

In our tradition, the Theravada tradition, we talk about two kinds of practitioners of Vipassana. We talk about the wet and the dry practitioners. The dry practitioners are people who have completed their training in Vipassana without undertaking the concentration practices, of which metta, as you know, is one. The wets in this lingo are those who have done Vipassana in complement with a concentration practice, because traditionally the concentration practices have been the ones that have unlocked in the early deepening of concentration such qualities as happiness and rapture and bliss. So concentration has always been a path within our tradition for touching off some of those sweet qualities.

This Tibetan teacher, Sogyal Rinpoche, was giving us heart advice at the end—the advice that a teacher gives before they send you off in the world, knowing that they won't see you for another year or so. His parting words went something like this: He always tells us, "Please be normal. Don't let your meditation practice make you more strange, because then if you go out in the world and you're really strange and people ask you what you're involved with and you say Buddhist meditation, they're going to think, 'Oh, I'm going to stay away from that stuff.' So please be normal." His final words were: "Be a normal, wise, juicy person."

I think this is beautiful advice. I'm sort of working on it myself. The wisdom part you could say is our Vipassana practice—just seeing things as they are, seeing the impermanent, empty nature of things. The juicy part is our metta practice, that unfolding of the heart. The normality I think might be our psychological training.

There was a conference here about a month ago of the three main traditions of Buddhism in the West. The Theravada tradition, Zen, and Vajrayana was held in this room. There were 220 teachers here for about five days. I was really touched by many of the people in the conference—they were very strong, dedicated practitioners from all three traditions. But what I came to feel about the Vipassana group in general is that we have a beautiful normality. We're kind of very down-to-earth and practical, and I really appreciate that in our tradition. We're also not afraid of hard work.

If you really want to see the effect of this juiciness of heart, I'd encourage you to hang out with some people who've done it for a long time. Every May, this Thai teacher comes to Spirit Rock named Ajahn Jumnian. Ajahn Jumnian started doing the metta practice when he was quite young and became a master of it, teaching it all through his life. He's now in his mid-sixties, and he is one of the happiest people I have ever seen.

We bring him into the meditation hall, and whether there are ten people there or one hundred people there, he's just happy to talk Dharma all day long with whoever shows up. The only way we get him out of the hall is to serve him lunch, and then he goes in the meadow. He's got so much energy and so much joy. I've never seen anything like it.

We'll sometimes say, "Well, Ajahn Jumnian, would you like to go out today? Would you like to see the Golden Gate Bridge or the ocean or Point Reyes?" And he'll say, "Are there people who'd like to hear the Dharma?" His face kind of lights up. "Then I'll talk to them about the Dharma." He said, "If there's no one who wants to hear the Dharma, I'm happy to just sit there. But if you want to take me somewhere, that's okay too."

I'll be happy whatever you want me to do." And he really shows it. He just beams. He actually said that he hasn't had any anger in twenty-five years, and I tend to believe it. He has that kind of nature, that kind of vibe.

So the juice is what we're all aiming for in the long term, and probably why we were drawn to metta practice in the first place. But when we come to a retreat like this, that juice isn't so apparent upfront. It just seems like a lot of hard slogging, tough work—saying the phrases again and again, bringing up the benefactor, the friend, the neutral person.

It reminded me of when I was in Boy Scouts and had to earn a merit badge in camping and outdoor life. One of the requirements was to start a fire without matches. I thought, well, I know people used to be able to do that, but didn't that die off with the Native Americans? I didn't think European Americans knew how to do that anymore.

But I read the book and my father helped me. You take a dry piece of wood and make a little hole in it, just about the roundness of a finger. Then you take a slim stick—you can use a dry tree branch—and cut off all the knots. If you can, file it down at one end so the inner wood is exposed, underneath the bark. Then you cut some wood shavings and put them in that little round hole you've made in the dry wood. You set the stick into the wood shavings and twirl it back and forth quickly.

What happens is that the heat from the friction of the stick against those wood shavings eventually makes a little puff of smoke. Then you get really excited because you didn't think it was going to happen. Your hands were getting sore, you didn't think anything would happen. But you keep twirling faster and faster, and then you see a tiny flame pop up. A little faster, and the flame spreads around. When all the wood

shavings are on fire, you can add more wood shavings or little twigs, then bigger twigs. And then you have a fire.

I was delighted to discover that this skill hadn't been lost from our civilization—it really restored my faith. But it took a while. While I was rubbing the stick, my hands were getting sore. I thought my hands were going to catch on fire before the wood did. My hands were sore, it wasn't feeling very good, it was a lot of work, and I wasn't sure anything would happen. But in time, that curl of smoke came up and the fire started.

This is very much like our metta practice. We just keep going and going and going. The phrases are like twirling the stick, and it doesn't seem like anything's happening. A few people have mentioned this in interviews—"I'm really diligent with the phrases, but nothing's happening." It may not seem like anything's happening for a while, but it took that early twirling to make enough heat for the fire to start. The same with our metta practice. Eventually that flame, that warmth starts, and then it can sustain itself. The practice generates its own momentum.

Although it's very hard in the beginning and starts with a lot of hard work, some people have said that the phrases actually seem to get in the way of the loving kindness. A number of people have come and said, "I can really call forth that feeling of metta, but when I put the phrases in, it seems to obstruct it. It gets too involved with thinking and I lose touch with the feeling."

So I want to talk about how to work with the phrases in a way that supports the feeling, so you don't feel like you're dampening that initial warmth.

One way is to get in touch with the silence before you say the phrase. Be aware that the phrase is coming out of a deep silence that holds your feeling of loving kindness. This silence is actually an aspect of emptiness—the emptiness at the ear door. If you're in touch with that emptiness, then the words are just a tiny drop of thinking in the vastness of that silence. They don't occupy the whole stage. This has been helpful for me.

There's another way I'd like to describe that I consider a really artful way to do the practice. I talked about this a little in the interview groups today.

I think it's a beautiful way to do the practice and it requires a certain steadiness of attention. So I'll just describe it and then you can see if it fits for you.

When I'm able to, what I will do at the start of a set of phrases is rest the attention in the center of my chest, in the heart center, and get in touch with that physical sensation. Then that will be the doorway where I'll feel any emotions like metta or anything else that comes through. I'll let myself feel them in the heart center. So that's the first focus.

Then I bring up an image of the subject—could be myself or another person—and I see that image as

clearly as I can. If I can, I'll make it so it's like the person is in front of me. Now I didn't start off being able to visualize. I was weak in that field. So it took me a while. It was hard work to bring up these images. But I found when I could bring the image there, it really made the person much more alive for me. More alive than saying their name and far more alive than just saying the phrases without the image. So I would have an image of the person just in front of me.

And then this is kind of the key moment. I would let myself feel that I cared about them and that caring took some kind of intention—just as simple as "I hope you're happy. I hope you're well. I hope life is really going good for you." But it wasn't verbal. It was just a momentary feeling of caring about their welfare. Just a flicker of that intention. That little flicker where the mind is just leaning toward and interested in their wellbeing—that actually is metta.

It may not feel like very much. It can just start off as a little spark. It's kind of like that little curl of smoke from the wood shavings, but that actually is loving kindness. So if that flicker of caring is there, that's really what we're offering to the person in our metta practice. And that little flicker of caring is the germ or the seed that the whole practice then grows around. So you don't need to try to force anything more than that. You don't need to try and be deeply in love with them.

Actually, you don't even need to like the person. This came as a revelation to me when I was doing the difficult person one year. You don't actually even have to like the person. All you have to have is enough interest to care about their welfare. The whole practice will grow from that. Upandita Sayadaw used to say something like, "Just incline the mind to metta. Don't try to force anything. Just let the mind incline in that direction and that will be enough."

Then once you can touch just that little flicker, let the phrase carry the intention. So the phrase actually comes out of the intention of metta toward them. It comes out of your caring. So you're not trying to put the phrase on top of the metta, but you're letting the metta kind of give birth to the phrase. And then you offer the phrase to the other person like a gift. It's a real gift to care about somebody and to express it with those words. So with each phrase, you can feel that it's just riding on your intention so that the phrase and the metta feeling go together toward the person.

If you don't actually get in touch with that intention, that's okay too. Just let the phrase go and also you can trust that in time the phrases will evoke the feeling. These phrases have been tested for 2,500 years and they are really appropriate for this particular brahmavihara. As you'll see when we move to compassion and sympathetic joy and equanimity, the different phrases will evoke those feelings. These phrases evoke the metta feeling.

So it's almost like I'm just going to pretend. Even though I don't feel it exactly, I'll just pretend and I'll say the phrase. And this reminds me of an old saying from the Tibetans. The Kadampa masters, who were an ancient lineage in Tibet, had this saying that if you don't have teeth, just chew with your gums. I think about this often when I'm sort of fabricating the phrases and I can't marry them with the metta intention.

I don't have teeth at that point, but I can still chew with my gums.

Then after you've offered this phrase as a gift to the other person, take a moment and let yourself feel its resonance. Again, if you rest your attention in the heart center, you can let the phrase reverberate for just a couple of seconds in your heart and feel how that feels—the safety, the happiness, the health, the ease of life. It feels good.

Let that bell ring for a moment.

If your mind is steady enough—if your attention is steady enough to try it this way—I'd encourage you to practice with this approach and see if it's supportive for you.

You'll notice there are actually four places your attention goes in this style of practice. The first is resting the attention in the heart center. The second is the image of the subject. The third is the metta intention or flavor. And the fourth is the phrase.

This is a lot of balls to keep in the air. If you're doing that, you're a juggler who's got four balls up at once. This takes considerable concentration, but because it's a stretch, it builds concentration. So the more of these elements you can actually include, the more it shows that you're developing concentration and strengthening that quality. It's like working out at the gym and upping the weight from ten pounds to twenty pounds on the pull-down machine. You'll build your concentration in that way.

But don't expect that you'll always be able to keep all four balls going. When you're first learning to juggle, two is a lot. If you can add a third, you're well along the way. And if you can do four, that's really excellent juggling.

The same applies here. If you just connect with one of those elements, that's great—you're into the practice. If you can do two or three or four, all the better. But realize that this condition of being able to keep all four balls connected is something like a peak experience in meditation. It won't always be there. So just let the concentration come and go. See where you are at any given time. Any combination is fine.

The first fruit of the practice is the feeling or deepening of loving-kindness, of metta. It develops in a gradual way. It's hard to see any shift over one or two or three days. Someone in a discussion group this morning shared that she'd done a month-long period of loving-kindness practice, and it had made a big and lasting shift in her life and her practice.

This is something that builds gradually, but you all know that's also how mindfulness develops in vipassana. The first few times you meditate, it doesn't feel like anything's happening. Remember that feeling? "Why should I be with the breath? Nothing's coming." But little by little, that builds.

As the Buddha said in the Dhammapada: "Don't disregard the accumulation of wholesomeness, saying this will come to nothing. By the gradual falling of raindrops, the jar is filled."

Just as mindfulness works in vipassana practice, metta works in this practice. It's a beautiful quality that develops little by little by little. Eventually we want to be able to access that feeling of metta wherever we are and whatever our experience is. Just as in mindfulness, we want to be able to be with whatever's happening for us.

Essentially we want to be able to find this heart of metta, of loving-kindness, independent of the circumstances of our life. This is a powerful quality if we can cultivate it. One of the things it suggests to me is that the Buddha encouraged us to rest our hearts in loving-kindness, regardless of the outside situation.

This means if somebody is being friendly to us, we can respond from loving-kindness. If somebody's being indifferent, we can respond from loving-kindness. If somebody's being aggressive, we can respond from loving-kindness. We're not just driven by the external situation, but we find an inner freedom and an inner friendliness that's independent of circumstances.

When we start our vipassana practice, we begin with the breath in our teaching tradition. We open to sounds and body and emotions and thoughts and all our experience—the vast spaciousness of consciousness. We develop the practice based on the subjects we find most useful. Most of us spend considerable time with breath and body and space.

At first we think these choices we're making are really important ones, that they're the key to the practice. When I was a beginner, I thought vipassana meditation was about being with the breath. I thought that defined it—that's what it was. It took me a while before I realized that the thing we're with isn't so important. What's important is the mindfulness.

And we just pick these different focuses as skillful means to develop the quality of mindfulness, because it's the mindfulness that frees us. It's mindfulness that liberates—not the breath, not sounds, not the body.

Similarly with our metta practice, we work with different individuals to generate the metta. In the beginning it seems like the people are really important, and they certainly have their own role to play. Each one brings a different flavor. But the key again is the quality of metta more than the specific individual.

What we're really looking to do is to stabilize our heart in the experience of loving kindness so that becomes the place we live from more and more of the time. As we do that, we find the heart becoming more responsive, more sensitive, more open, more juicy.

Then we can start to see where the tracks of vipassana and metta come together. They seem like different tracks right now. The practices are really different and sometimes appear to be going in dissimilar directions. But over time, we want to converge the two practices so that from vipassana, we bring this full presence in each moment that's in touch with our experience. From the metta side, we bring this openness of heart, this friendly relation to life.

You could say they come together in this quality of warm attention—a mindfulness that is colored or flavored with the quality of loving kindness or friendliness.

Different individuals do have distinct roles to play in the opening, and it's important to understand that too. For example, the relationship to the benefactor can be enormously inspiring. When I was doing my benefactor practice the first time I did metta practice, I stayed with the benefactor for three weeks. It became very powerful for me. I felt that I was doing a kind of—you ever watch Star Trek? Remember how Spock could do this Vulcan mind meld with people where he would just put his head next to theirs and their minds would mingle? I felt that was happening with my benefactor. As I carried the person in my heart over those three weeks, I really felt like all their good qualities were starting to come out of my heart. I felt like I had united with my benefactor in that relationship.

This seems a little alien to our tradition, but actually in the Pali texts, you can find talk of this kind of relationship. The Buddha himself said that those who have sufficient faith in and love for the Tathagata—which is another name for himself—are liberated by faith. Those who have sufficient faith in and love for the Tathagata are liberated by faith. So this devotional quality goes back a long way in our tradition.

My teacher, Sogyal Rinpoche, was a student of a real master of the Tibetan practices named Nyoshul Khen Rinpoche, who died just last summer. The last time my teacher was seeing Khenpo, the older teacher gave him some tender advice as he was leaving. It was very simple and very direct advice. He said to him, "Love me." Those were his parting words: "Love me."

That was a really beautiful statement to me of the kind of quality that can be there in the teacher-student relationship. Love me—not because he needed any kind of adulation, because he wasn't interested in that at all, but because it was a way for my teacher to continue opening his heart and developing the juice in his own practice.

There's this beautiful book I just read this past week called *Sorrow Mountain*, written by a Sangha member named Dede Donnelly, who lives in the East Bay. She met a Tibetan nun named Anipachen, who's now sixty-seven years old, living in Dharamsala. Anipachen grew up as the daughter of a warrior chieftain living in the rugged country of eastern Tibet, living out in Kham. Her father was a very fierce man and the chief of a large group, but also a devoted practitioner. So she grew up with great devotion to the Buddha Dharma.

When the Chinese invaded Tibet in 1949, after a few years they came and took over her region of the country. She and a few other people escaped to the hills and undertook guerrilla warfare against the Chinese for a number of years. They were actually aided by the CIA. They were getting food drops and drops of guns and ammunition for some time. But eventually the Chinese covered the whole territory, even those remote wilds, and she was captured. Because she was known to have been the daughter of a chieftain and to be leading the forces, she was imprisoned and tortured quite routinely on the pretext of

trying to get information about the guerrilla war. She spent years in prison undergoing steady beatings and torture.

For one nine-month period, because she had been flippant in her response to a guard, she was thrown into solitary confinement in a room that no light entered. For nine months, she was in this completely dark enclosure. She did not see another person except the guard's hand slipping watery gruel to her a couple of times a day, and didn't see any light for nine months.

Her devotion to the Dharma was unwavering through that time. While she was in her cell for nine months, she decided she would take that time to undertake her hundred thousand prostrations, which is one of the preliminary practices in Tibetan Buddhism. She actually, at the end, started to pray that she wouldn't be released from that confinement until she completed her prostrations.

After twenty-one years in prison, she was released and started to demonstrate against the Chinese authorities in Lhasa. But as you may recall, in the late eighties, there was quite a crackdown on the demonstrators. Monks were killed and beaten. As one of the leaders, she was being pursued by the authorities, so she escaped to India.

When she finally arrived in India, she got to meet His Holiness the Dalai Lama. In their meeting, she shared her entire story with him—the flight from her village, the guerrilla war, her capture, the beatings and torture, and her years in prison. She said that as she recounted these experiences, both she and the Dalai Lama would often break down in tears. Yet all her trials had only seemed to strengthen her devotion and commitment to the Dharma.

Years later, someone asked her what had kept her alive, what had sustained her through all those difficult years. She replied, "I wanted to live to be able to see His Holiness in person." The figure of the Dalai Lama had been that meaningful for her. And she finally did.

Let me share another story from this Teacher's Conference. As many of you know, the Dalai Lama was here about a month ago, sitting in this very room speaking to the Teacher's Conference. He was seated right up there in the center. For me, it was truly the high point of our time together—such a privilege to be able to spend time with him and simply experience his being.

I want to relate one conversation that emerged, just to give you a flavor of his character. The conference was organized around different topics, with various teachers presenting their perspective from a Western viewpoint, after which the Dalai Lama would sometimes respond—or if he had nothing to add, he would remain silent.

Lama Surya Das, a Westerner teaching in the Tibetan lineage, was speaking to the group and to His Holiness about how Buddhism is entering the mainstream in the West. He discussed how it's becoming widespread enough that it's even getting somewhat fashionable—Hollywood is starting to embrace Buddhism, and when that happens, we should all take notice.

Surya Das explained that there are dangers in becoming too popular, as the teachings might get misrepresented or lose their depth. He then turned to the Dalai Lama and said, "Your Holiness, you're the biggest popularizer of them all. What advice do you have for us in the West?"

The Dalai Lama thought for a moment and replied, "People call me many different things. Some people say I'm a living Buddha." He laughed gently. "No, I'm not. I'm not. Some people call me God King. No, I'm not that either. I'm just a simple Buddhist monk—a simple Buddhist monk."

He continued, "Other people see me very differently. They call me a counter-revolutionary. They call me a wolf in monk's clothing. So you see, I have to check back to my own intention. What is my own intention? If my intention is to help beings come out of suffering, then that's what is important to me. How others see me is up to them, and I don't care. I don't care." He said this very strongly. "I just don't care."

For me, this was a profoundly powerful moment. I could feel both sides of his experience—being called a living Buddha or being labeled a counter-revolutionary. I sensed the enormous responsibility he carries as ambassador for the Tibetan people, as perhaps the only person who can make a long-term difference in their situation. I felt the burden of that responsibility on his shoulders and the maturing effect it has had on him. And then, to be able to emerge from all that weight of responsibility and say, "But inwardly, I don't care. I'm free." I experienced both simultaneously—the tremendous burden he bears and the vast inner freedom from which he operates. It was a very moving moment.

One of the most perceptive comments about him came from Caroline Kornfield, Jack's daughter. She was in the room helping to video the conference as an assistant. At fifteen years old, she has grown up around the Dharma—practically nurtured on Yucca Valley retreats. About the Dalai Lama, she observed, "He's born anew in every moment." I found this to be a remarkably insightful and beautiful comment.

The benefactor can reveal much to us about our own depth, because all the qualities present in the Dalai Lama, all the qualities in your teachers and our teachers, exist within each one of us as well. It's simply a matter of bringing them forth, allowing them to manifest.

And then also with the other individuals, we learn about different aspects of our mind. From our friends, we might learn about the inclination to hold on, to grasp or to attach—the near enemy of loving kindness. This is really a pointer to the force in our minds of grasping or greed, of clinging. From the neutral person, which we practiced with today, we might learn about the force of ignorance. Because mostly what we do in our life, if somebody doesn't hold a charge for us one way or another, we don't take them very seriously. We don't think they're important. "Oh, that's somebody I don't have to bother with. I can ignore them." When we meditate on the neutral person, we can find that those people actually are full human beings in their own right. Every being is full in his or her own right and they're worthy of our attention too. So it cuts through the tendency to ignorance in us.

And the difficult person who we'll begin to work with tomorrow can help us to find a caring even in the

midst of aversion. Even if we don't particularly like someone, we find that we can get in touch with that metta anyway. So all these qualities—the desire, the ignorance, and the aversion—these are the three root kilesas, what the Buddha called defilements or distortions in our mind. And the loving kindness practice helps us to purify all three of them through these different individuals.

The other key fruit of the practice is the quality of concentration, which is the translation of the Pali word samadhi. Samadhi refers to a state of mind that has become whole, that has become unified or collected, that's been gathered together. A state of mind like that becomes strong, becomes firm, becomes less wavery, more unshakable. And we develop it by bringing our whole attention to whatever we do. This sense, as well as metta, bring with them a great sense of well-being and contentment. With the feeling of metta, there's a richness, there's a sweetness, and with the quality of samadhi, there's a steadiness, an unshakability.

And with these two together, there's a sense of really it being enough. There's a sense of deep satisfaction. My Tibetan teacher happens to be Sogyal Rinpoche III, which meant that he had two previous incarnations. The first incarnation, who is known for his great effort, had a poem that had a line I particularly liked. It said, "There is nothing else to search for, rest in your natural face." This is somewhat the flavor when the loving kindness and the samadhi come together. There's a feeling that we're just held by that combination, that that is enough.

When both of those factors are strong, the hindrances that Sally talked about last night get suspended. They can't arise in a mind that is held in that container of sufficient samadhi, especially with the metta. And then when the hindrances aren't disturbing our minds, we can see things more clearly. We can see the vastness of the love. These are really special moments in the practice when it comes together in this way, when you can connect with a few of these qualities at the same time and the mind isn't so disturbed.

It's rare. And sometimes we think, "Oh, this isn't that important because it's just a passing meditation state." But actually what these moments are revealing to us are the depth of our true nature. This is the feeling, it's kind of a preview of the deepening of our spiritual life. These kinds of feelings, these experiences come more and more. They become more our resting place, more our home in practice. So not to take them lightly. They may be rare. They are usually rare in retreat, but they're very important. They're real pointers on the path.

Metta and samadhi support one another. Metta through the force of love tends to bring the mind together. Love brings about a union. The samadhi brings about a steadiness. So the metta encourages the samadhi and the samadhi intensifies the metta. When the mind becomes concentrated, the feelings go deeper. The experiences are more deeply felt. So these two really help each other. And that's why this practice is such a potent way to develop a practice of samatha, of tranquility.

So the metta practice can bring us these beautiful fruits of both loving kindness and concentration, but one key is our motivation, what the spirit is that we approach the practice with. I was practicing at IMS in

my first extended period of loving kindness, and in the first ten days of the retreat, the practice was going fairly well, and I thought, "Wow, this is just gonna keep getting better and better. I'm glad I signed up for this because all my friends had told me about, you know, it's really different from vipassana practice. It can get really sweet."

When I approached my teacher Joseph Goldstein with my frustration, I explained how well the practice had been going just days before and how desperately I wanted to reclaim that state. Joseph, having undoubtedly navigated similar waters in his own metta practice, cut straight to the heart of the matter with profound simplicity. "Guy," he said, "we don't do this practice for ourselves—it's for the other." That single insight unlocked my mind.

I suddenly saw with stark clarity that I had been doing loving kindness practice essentially to make myself feel good inside. In this self-centered approach, I had completely lost touch with the other person. I had stopped caring about what was happening for them because what truly mattered to me was what was occurring within my own mind and body. I had lost the entire spirit of what the practice is about.

This awakening transformed everything. I returned to my cushion, loosened my grip, and began thinking about the other person for a change instead of focusing solely on myself. Within half a day, the practice began to settle back down. This became a powerful teaching for me about the quality of right effort.

This experience brought me deeply into connection with a stanza I cherish from Shantideva, a Buddhist practitioner in ninth-century India who wrote *The Guide to the Bodhisattva's Way of Life*:

"Whatever joy there is in this world, all comes from wanting others to be happy. And whatever sorrow there is in this world, all comes from wanting only myself to be happy."

This verse pointed directly to a profound truth—the same truth embedded in the teachings on generosity and sila. When we open and genuinely care about another, beautiful things arise within our own hearts and minds. But if we give only to receive that blessing, it doesn't work. If we practice metta for another only to achieve calm, it doesn't unfold that way. We must sincerely want to give to the other. We must sincerely want the other to be happy.

The practice truly requires this approach of non-clinging. This is partly why teachers emphasize that metta is not merely a samatha practice—profound wisdom emerges through it as well. Deep understanding flows through this practice: understanding about the nature of the open heart, about what creates harmony between beings, about the profound level on which we are connected, and about the fundamental level on which we are essentially the same being.

Whatever our outward appearance—our gender, race, color, social class, age, background, or education—underneath all these surface differences, these qualities of heart and mind are identical in all of us. Our bodies are simply minor variations on the same theme. Fundamentally, we are the same organism. The metta practice provides a direct path to perceive this unity.

As we offer the phrases "May you be happy, may you be safe, may you be healthy," we must extend them to the person without grasping or control.

In a way we offer it and then we surrender because it's out of our hands. It's like making a gift. We make the gift and then we don't know how it will be received. We don't know how the other person will take it. When we say the phrases, we don't know if the other person will be affected or not. We don't know if it will bring health or happiness or safety, but what we do know is that if our wish is sincere, if our intention is sincere, and if it is rooted in that caring for the other, then the practice will truly unfold in us.

This is what I love—it's the paradox of spiritual life, whether in vipassana or metta: we have to make this very full effort, give it everything we've got, put all our heart and soul and mind and body into it, and we don't know that we're going to get anything back. And in metta it goes one step further. We put everything into it and then we give a little more away without expecting anything back.

But that is exactly the place from which all the beautiful qualities, all the juicy qualities start to come through our hearts. It's in that total giving and the total surrender that the heart can really start to open because it's no longer under pressure. It's no longer being squeezed by the force of grasping and self-interest.

This is from Rumi: "The way of love is not a subtle argument. The door there is devastation. Birds make great sky circles of their freedom. How do they learn it? They fall. And falling, they're given great wings."

This is like our vipassana practice and our metta practice both. We have to open in that very surrendering kind of way. Open ourselves to the fall and then see what comes. And the beauty of our innate nature, our basic goodness, is that those are the conditions for it to flower and to manifest—to respond with these beautiful qualities of loving-kindness, of compassion, of devotion, of faith and friendliness and humor.

This is from Rilke, Rainer Maria Rilke: "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."

This is the flavor of surrender in our metta practice. It's an active practice, but there's also a very receptive side to it where we just open ourselves and wait to see what comes. That openness is really, really important.

At the same time, the active side of it is doing something very powerful. I don't know if you've reflected on this yet, but when you do the loving-kindness practice with the image, as I described earlier, you're creating an image in the mind. You're bringing forth the flavor of the emotion of metta. And the thoughts in your mind are wholesome phrases: may you be safe, may you be happy, may you be healthy, may you live with ease.

So at the time when the metta practice has come together in that way, you have planted in the mind the image, the metta quality, and the thought phrase. I don't know if it's struck you what an incredible accomplishment that is, but basically at that time you have shaped the mind stream. Our mind stream is made up of images, thoughts, and emotions. And when the practice is flowing, you have filled all three of those areas with the wholesome qualities of loving-kindness.

That kind of mind is removed from suffering. It's removed from disturbance. It's removed from wavering. That kind of mind is very beautifully protected and secluded.

So this is a big deal. Don't be disappointed if it takes a while for all these pieces to come into place, because it's actually a really audacious thing that we're doing. Who would have thought that we could find a way to fashion our whole mind stream toward a wholesome end? This is a very big deal. So be patient with yourself if it doesn't all come together at once. It can take a while.

This is very empowering and it gives a real sense of freedom when you start to tune into this quality of heart and mind. And this is why the Buddha called loving-kindness an immeasurable deliverance of mind, an immeasurable deliverance of heart. And he said of it that this deliverance of heart is more than sixteen times greater than any worldly blessings—blessings related to worldly activities such as generosity.

The heart's deliverance of loving kindness is more than sixteen times greater than these worldly activities. As these beautiful, juicy qualities of the heart unfold, they actually can become a path of their own.

And the Buddha pointed to this also, faith being a primary one among them—faith being this willingness to surrender and to open through that trust in our basic goodness, in the beautiful qualities of our true nature.

The Buddha spoke to a monk named Pingya. "Pingya," he said, "other people have freed themselves by the power of faith. Vakali, Bhadravuda, and Alavi have all done this. You too should let that strength release you. You too will go to the further shore beyond the draw of death."

And this is just one of the promises that's opened by the development of the heart through our metta practice. This is a channel that opens to touch our basic goodness and release these liberating qualities that are there within us.

So let's just sit for a minute, please.

Other people have freed themselves by the power of faith. You too should let that strength release you. You too will go to the furthest shore beyond the draw of death.

So we have about thirty minutes now for walking meditation. Then we'll have the last sitting of the day with the chanting.

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