Since Feeling Is First: The Role of the Brahmavihāras

Guy Armstrong · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Guy Armstrong · 58:38

The subject of tonight's talk is "Since Feeling Is First: The Role of the Brahmavihāras." The title comes from a poem by E.E. Cummings called "Since Feeling Is First," and I'd like to read a portion of it:

Since feeling is first, who pays any attention to the syntax of things will never wholly kiss you. Wholly to be a fool while spring is in the world, my heart approves. Don't cry. The best gesture of my brain is less than your eyelids flutter, which says, we are for each other. Then laugh, leaning back in my arms, for life's not a paragraph, and death, I think, is no parenthesis.

I appreciate this emphasis: "since feeling is first." I think this is true in a very deep way. When you examine the first noble truth, it's really about feeling the truth of suffering. The noble truths are fundamentally about our feelings of sadness, sorrow, pain, and distress. The entire path is a statement that there is a way for the heart to find its way out of misery—a misery that's basically brought about because of our ability to feel, to feel deeply.

This brings us to a second question: Is insight enough? Since feeling is first, is insight sufficient to find our way through suffering? Certainly we place the most emphasis on our insight practice. Vipassana is really the practice of wisdom in our tradition—the practice of seeing things as they are. It's said that when we see things as they really are, we are freed.

So what role does the heart play in this? I once asked one of my early teachers this very question: "Do you think that the wisdom practice is enough?" He replied, "Yes. Love is the child of freedom." We can touch this in our practice. When we feel in a space of being free and the heart being unburdened, it's easy to feel love, to feel metta, to feel connected. For some people, this may be enough—opening to freedom also opens the door of the heart.

But for other people, I don't think it's enough. In my case, it wasn't enough.

I was on staff at IMS in the late 1970s when we had a visit from a very renowned Asian monk. He was well-known, had established many centers in Asia, and trained many teachers. We'd been looking forward to his visit for a long time—it was one of the first major Asian teachings we had hosted at IMS.

Being on staff, I went to the airport to meet the monks as they flew in, since he came with a small retinue. We waited at the gate where he was supposed to arrive. The plane from Burma landed, and all the passengers poured off. No monks. We thought, could we have missed them? I didn't think so. In those days

especially, there weren't many men with shaved heads wearing orange robes.

We stood and waited a little longer. Finally, after everybody had filed off the plane, very slowly and mindfully walking out of the gateway were five monks, each carrying a fan made for this occasion. The fans bore the name of the head monk and read "World Tour 1979." It was rather like greeting a rock band arriving in a foreign country.

They walked very mindfully down to the luggage area, we shepherded them to our cars, and drove them back to the center. They stayed for about two weeks and led a ten-day meditation retreat in the style we've just completed.

Being on staff, I got to spend time both "backstage" with this monk and practicing in the hall, both of which were very revealing. As I observed him in his informal moments, I was surprised by one thing: in all the time I watched him, I never saw him smile or laugh or show any signs of joy.

I truly believe that he was very well developed spiritually. He had done extensive practice, reached deep insight, and as far as I could tell, there wasn't any more suffering going on in him. But I didn't feel any spark of joy from him. As a result, speaking personally, I wasn't very inspired to seek him out for future practice.

One of my friends who was also on staff at the time and had the opportunity to serve him said that for her, it was like his metta was there, but it was like distant starlight.

It wasn't the kind of warmth that you can feel from some teachers where it's like a blast of the sun. It's like distant starlight. It's present but a little bit faint.

So the way that his personality was expressing didn't touch me particularly and didn't inspire my practice.

On the other hand, I practiced in recent years with another teacher who I feel has a lot of heart quality. At the end of one retreat recently, he was giving kind of pith instructions to his students. And he said, "When you leave the retreat, I want you to go out in the world and I want you to be normal. Don't go around being weird. People think Buddhism is weird enough already. So just be normal. Be wise. Don't go around messing up. Be kind to other people. Be kind to yourself. Manifest wisdom in the world." And the last thing he said was, "Be juicy."

Be juicy. I think this is the quality of heart that touches other people when we manifest our own juice. Then people really see, oh, that practice has something that can touch me. That practice has a heart quality that I can really resonate with and enjoy.

So maybe this quality of juice in our practice, the kind of sweetness of heart, maybe it's not even so much for ourselves. As I said, this monk was very, very cooled out, very peaceful, and not in a place of suffering. I really think he had completed his practice in a certain way. But maybe the quality of juice is for those who are interested in taking their practice really into the world and in small or large ways transforming

the world through their work. Then developing these qualities of heart are the most straightforward ways to spread the qualities of kindness and love and wisdom, the most direct route.

So maybe if you consider your path to be the bodhisattva path of taking the great heart back into the world and changing the world, then maybe these heart qualities are a really integral part of what needs to be developed.

So I'm very grateful that there are in our tradition specific practices that open the heart, that bring about this quality of juiciness and sweetness. We've talked, I think, a lot over the retreat of the kinds of qualities that can come out of faith, devotion, surrender, loving-kindness, compassion, joy, happiness, contentment. All these qualities, fortunately, are also amenable to development. They are part of our heritage. They're part of our nature that unfolds as we unfold the whole path. But we can accelerate their growth, accelerate their relationship.

In our tradition, the fundamental practice is loving-kindness, metta. That's our primary heart practice and the one we spend the most time on. In Tibetan and Zen traditions, they emphasize more the Brahmavihara, the divine abode of compassion. But you shouldn't get too sectarian about this. I hope this doesn't become a dividing line—well, we're the metta team, and you're the compassion team, so we have to fight you.

Because actually, these two are the same flavor of heart. Somebody asked the Dalai Lama about this: What does this mean? Is compassion a really kind of gloomy quality? You're always harping about suffering. Is compassion a really gloomy quality? He says, "No, no, no. It's just a basic movement of caring in the heart. Basic human warmth." That's what we mean by compassion.

So this is really the same sense as our loving-kindness. When loving-kindness looks on suffering, it comes forth as compassion. But in their heart, they're the same.

This development of the heart is sometimes a hard sell to vipassana meditators. A lot of vipassana meditators are very skeptical about this stuff. You know, it's a little too touchy-feely, or they have real philosophical reservations about it. One way somebody expressed it in an interview, they said, "Well, it seems contradictory to me. Vipassana is letting go of everything. And with metta, you're trying to bring something in. Isn't that a contradiction?"

And I don't think it is. I think it's a complementary relationship.

The way I understand it is that our Vipassana practice opens up emptiness through the letting go, again and again and again. It opens up this great expanse of spaciousness or openness or emptiness. But for some of us, if we just left it there, it could be a kind of cold emptiness—a vacant, isolating, stark or bleak kind of emptiness.

So the role of metta is to come in and fill that empty space with warmth. When we open up to

spaciousness, it's not a cold or dark experience. It's a spaciousness that's filled with the warmth of the heart. I think where our practice of loving kindness and our practice of mindfulness come together is in this quality of a warm attention that can hold all the arisings, including our other beloved sisters and brothers, in the space of friendliness—all arisings within the space of friendliness.

Another criticism that people sometimes make from a wisdom point of view is this: they say, "I think these phrases of metta practice are really deluded. May I be happy? May you be happy? There is no I. There is no you. What do you mean? This doesn't even make sense from a Vipassana point of view. They're just empty phenomena rolling on. You can't be happy. I can't be happy. There's no I there."

So I have an alternate phrase for you who have this philosophical reservation. You may do your metta practice using the following phrase. If I were doing it for Sally, for instance, I could say, "May this ever-changing stream of physical and mental phenomena known as Sally experience the factor of happiness on an ever more frequent basis."

It's a little bit more long-winded, but it has the advantage of being philosophically impeccable. That might be important for some of you. So I want to really justify it on a philosophical level. But of course, that isn't really what's important.

The important thing is what you feel when you meet somebody who's really developed this heart quality. I love to reflect on the Dalai Lama in this regard. He was in this very hall—I'm sure a lot of you know this. He was sitting here in the hall for a couple of days last year. We had a teacher's conference of about 220 Buddhist teachers from Asia and from the West, and the Dalai Lama joined us for about two days of that.

He was sitting here giving teachings and engaging in discussion, and it was just wonderful to be with him. He said something at the time that I really think is true. He said, "I'm not interested in propagating Buddhism," which kind of surprised me because he's the best Buddhist ambassador that we have today. He said, "I'm interested in propagating human values." What he really wants to propagate is the heart qualities of kindness and care and compassion. And he touches people so directly.

Because he was here as a head of state, we had to have fairly tight security. At one point, the Secret Service was talking about putting riflemen up on the ridges and on horseback. There were bomb-sniffing dogs on the property. All of us had to come through a metal detector to come in to the property every day. It was staffed by State Department, United States government, State Department security guards. These are not the people who inspect bags at the airport. These are heavy-duty professionals, and they are no-nonsense people. They have also provided security for people like Yasser Arafat. They know what they're doing.

So they manned the metal detectors with a pistol on one hip and a nightstick on the other. You did not mess with these people. You didn't joke with them. They were not there to joke. But after they got to know us, they did talk to us a little bit, telling us some of the other jobs that they'd done and how intense it can be.

But I thought what was most interesting is when the two days of teachings were over and the Dalai Lama was going to depart that day, all the State Department security guards asked to have their photograph taken with him. Because even just in their casual contact with him, they had felt something of his love. And they were touched by it.

So they took a photograph of the Dalai Lama with all the security guards with their guns and sticks. They all got to take that home with them.

So this is the domain of the Brahma-viharas, the qualities of loving-kindness, of compassion, of joy and equanimity. We really understand metta as the foundation for the other three—by developing metta we naturally sensitize the heart. The heart becomes responsive to the world, to the circumstances in the world. Then we don't have to specially sensitize it again for compassion. When the sensitive heart looks on suffering, compassion comes out. When it looks on happiness, sympathetic joy comes out. When it just rests in its own nature, then it holds the world in a balance of equanimity.

This really is part of our true nature, but because it's gotten covered over, it takes some encouragement for it to come out. It takes some development, which is why we do the practice. And it can feel fabricated at first. Some people feel it's a little bit phony, like we're trying to push something. Some people have a resistance to the phrases and the images and the formal practice, but they like the feeling of just touching in to the quality of loving-kindness and abiding with that.

What I'd say is that this really is the essence of the practice. That's the direction we're aiming in. But I've found, and a lot of people have found, that the phrases become a stable and dependable way in to that feeling. So as you practice with the formal practice of metta—working with the phrases over time and working with the images—then you can turn your attention to the phrases and to the image, and in a very short period of time, the feeling of loving kindness will start to come through in one of its flavors.

It's not always overwhelming. It's not always a grandiose thing of unbounded, unconditional love. Sometimes it's just friendliness. Sometimes it's patience. Sometimes it's acceptance. Sometimes it's trust. All of these are different flavors of metta. So the phrases provide a way to elicit that feeling in a reliable kind of way, just as the breath provides the channel to bring out the mindfulness quality in vipassana practice. But ultimately, love is not a fabricated thing. It becomes more spontaneous.

I remember that one of the most loving people in my life was my grandmother. She was born in the countryside in North Carolina around 1890 and lived a hard life. She married my grandfather, for one thing, and he was one of the orneriest men that I've ever known. He was very prickly, not somebody you could get close to, strong aversive type. But despite that, she just manifested this sweetness her whole life, all the time I knew her.

We would go to my grandparents to visit in the summer. As soon as the three of us kids would come in, she'd immediately lean down and give us a hug. She'd put her lips right in this hollow of our neck by our

shoulder and kind of nuzzle around in there, and she'd say, "I'm going to steal your sugar. I'm looking for your sugar." That's my feeling memory of my grandmother—she was looking for our sugar. She hadn't done any Buddhist training whatsoever. She hadn't even done psychotherapy. And yet there she was with this very great loving heart and quality of patience in the midst of a difficult life.

So we say that the love is intrinsic, but it needs to be uncovered. It needs to be encouraged out, a little bit like a shy animal, like the chipmunks or squirrels that run when a person gets too close.

We do the practice of loving-kindness, directing our thoughts toward others as well as to ourselves. Sometimes we wonder, am I really changing the other person? As I send my wishes, is the other person being affected? Can they feel it? Will it help them in their life? The classical texts say that it can. But of course, that depends on the purity of the transmitter and the purity of the receiver for those channels to be open. They say that it certainly can happen that way.

What we do know for sure—because we may never know the answer to that question—what we do know for sure is that it affects us and changes us. This is really the primary reason that we do the metta practice. It's really to open our own hearts. We come to see through doing the loving-kindness that the real source of happiness is in a purified heart.

It's not in external conditions. It's not in being adored by others or admired, or by being famous or wealthy. Happiness comes when the heart is pure. You can experience this through loving-kindness. You can experience it through the freedom of vipassana practice. When the heart is free of self-centeredness, there's a natural quality of contentment and happiness. This is a great blessing of the loving-kindness practice.

The Buddha said that the result of wholesome actions in the world—like generosity and service and morality—are not one-sixteenth the power of the blessing of metta. Not one-sixteenth the power of metta.

Someone else who really communicates this quality for me is Ajahn Jamnian. I imagine a number of you have met him. He comes here every year in May. He's a Thai monk, about sixty-six now. When he was young, he was very handsome, and people from all around would come to practice with him because they'd basically fallen in love with him. Not only did he have a really pleasing face, but he also had this great heart. Today, as he's aged and put on a little bit of weight, you can still see the handsomeness in him. But the heart has gotten even bigger.

He has such amazing energy. He always seems to be happy. I've never seen him unhappy for a second in all the time that he's been here. He also has incredible energy.

Ajahn Jamnian did a lot of loving-kindness practice when he was young. He was sort of a meditation prodigy. He fell into a trance when he was about three or four years old, and his parents couldn't communicate with him for about twenty-four hours. He just sat down and went inside and was gone for about a day. But then he came out. He was fine. His parents said, "This guy has some talent." So they took

him to the village shaman and he was trained in shamanic powers. They took him to the village monk and he was trained in meditation from an early age. He did a lot of loving-kindness practice, and now he just radiates that kind of happiness and joy.

What we'll do often is have him down in the lower meditation hall for about five days, and he'll just give teachings from about nine in the morning till about five in the afternoon. If we didn't interrupt him for lunch, I think those would be continuous teachings. He can talk from all that energy.

We'll say to him, "Ajahn Jamnian, would you like to see San Francisco today? Would you like to go on a drive and see some of the nature around here?" And he says, "Well, I'm happy whatever you'd like me to do. If you'd like to take me on a drive, I'm happy to do that. If you'd like me to teach, I'm happy to do that. Are there people who'd like to hear the Dharma? If there are people who'd like to hear the Dharma, I'd really like to talk the Dharma to them. But I'm happy whatever you'd like me to do." And he really is like that. He's always happy.

He doesn't know a lot of English, but his favorite kind of instruction combines vipassana and metta. He goes, "Happy, happy. Empty, empty. Happy, happy." That's his transmission, his heart transmission.

One of the things I really appreciate about the practice of the brahmaviharas is that it opens our practice up to all of life. We can take our vipassana practice and use it in a self-centered way. It's not meant to go that way, but it can. We can focus on my pain, my problems, my neurosis, my healing, my progress, my liberation.

But with a metta practice, you can't stay self-centered. It takes you out to connect with all of life, all beings. This is from Shantideva, a ninth-century Indian teacher, who said, "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."

So when we open out in this way of caring for others, we actually find, as James alluded last night in that Tagore quote on service, that this is the path to happiness—the path to happiness is in caring for other people as well as ourselves.

In doing the metta practice, the core of it is the simple intention with which we send the wish to someone. These phrases—it's not like a mantric practice where you just have to say the words over and over and over again and it creates some kind of sense that does the work. With the metta practice, the meaning needs to be there so that the words are somehow coming out of your heart, coming out of your caring.

So as you connect with the person that you're about to send to, if you can just feel for a moment that little bit of caring—just something like, "I hope you're happy." You don't have to say it like that. But as you connect with the person, just have that feeling: "Oh, I hope things are good for you. I hope you're well. I hope you're happy." Then let the phrase carry that intention. That's what gives the metta its power. That's what does the work.

So as you do the practice, see if you can connect with that little bit of intention each time you send a phrase. And if you do, that's what creates the juice. That's what makes it unfold. And it will all unfold from there. There's not a lot else you need to do.

So that's planting the seeds. It may take a while for the seeds to sprout. We can't control that. But our work is just to plant those seeds, which are the intentions of caring. And we plant them over and over and over again. And sooner or later, the metta grows up.

And when the metta comes, it brings with it some really lovely qualities. One is a sense of contentment. When we're in that place of friendliness, feeling that we're in a friendly relationship with the world, we can kind of stop struggling so much. In a way you could say there's no better place to be than that. So in a way it feels like we've come home when we come into that field of metta. And then we can really rest. There's nothing more beautiful to look for. There's a Tibetan phrase that says, "There is nothing else to search for. Rest in your natural face." This is the feeling of resting in loving kindness. The search can come to an end.

Metta is also a concentration practice. Because you're coming back to the phrases again and again, it brings the mind together around that object. So it unifies the mind, as any concentration practice does. But what's so powerful about metta as a concentration practice is that love is also a very unifying force in the mind. Love binds things together. Love binds us together.

So under the integrating power of love as it gets developed, the different fragments of our personality that we may have pushed aside as too painful or too unbeautiful to own start to come back together again. And in that, we find our wholeness through this quality of acceptance and friendliness to ourselves. This unification of mind is really healing. And love has that healing property. It holds every part of ourselves in a large and wholesome container. It's not that it makes the difficulties go away, but it simply finds a big container, a big heart to hold them in. And they also get viewed with that kind of friendliness.

There's a really lovely poem that expresses this by an American poet named Galway Kinnell. It's called "St. Francis and the Sow." The bud stands for all things, even for those things that don't flower. For everything flowers from within of self-blessing. Though sometimes it is necessary to reteach a thing its loveliness.

To put a hand on the brow of the flower and retell it in words and in touch, it is lovely, until it flowers again from within of self-blessing. As St. Francis put his hand on the creased forehead of the sow and told her in words and in touch, blessings of earth on the sow, and the sow began remembering all down her thick length, from the earthen snout all the way through the fodder and slops to the spiritual curl of the tail, from the hard spininess spiked out from the spine down through the great broken heart to the sheer blue milk and dreaminess spurting and shuddering from the fourteen teats into the fourteen mouths, sucking and blowing beneath them—the long, perfect loveliness of sow.

So that's the first of the brahmaviharas, the foundation of loving-kindness, the appreciation of ourselves

and others. And that opens the door to the flowering of compassion.

This is such a big question. When we look out and start to explore the noble truths, when we look out with the eyes of the noble truths, we see how much suffering there is in the world. And it's really immense. Even the suffering in one human life is hard to conceive of. I don't really think it's conceivable to hold it in our minds at one time. Then how do we relate to suffering in a wise way?

There are so many ways that we relate unwisely. When I started to think about it, I thought of so many ways that I haven't been skillful in relating to suffering. I've often tried to avoid it or deny it, say it wasn't there, or turn away. Or I'd try to fix it to make it go away. Or I'd judge it and say it shouldn't be happening. I'd judge myself and say I'm wrong for having it happen to me. Or I'd try to find something pleasurable to take its place in my experience. Or I'd try to rationalize it—try to figure out where it came from, if it was something karmic that I'd done three lifetimes ago.

This response of compassion is maybe an unusual one in the world. But compassion really has the quality to just open to suffering and again hold it in this large space of acceptance. As we get more capacity to do that, what happens is that our hearts get bigger and bigger to be able to accommodate the suffering. And I'm not sure there's anything but suffering that can really enlarge the heart, that can stretch it in that way.

So by opening to our own suffering, we find we grow our ability to be with other people's suffering. And that's a really beautiful and rare gift in the world. How rare it is to have a friend or an acquaintance who you can go to in the hardest of situations and know that they'll just have you as you are and not try to fix you, not look down on you, not judge you, but just open their heart to what you're going through too. It's a really beautiful thing to bring into the world.

The near enemy of compassion has a couple of forms. One of the main forms, the classical expression, is pity. The near enemy of compassion is said to be pity. And what that means is that we look down on someone who's suffering. We feel sorry for them. But it kind of comes from a place where we're up higher and they're down below. There's a kind of condescension in the sense of pity.

But the state of compassion, on the other hand, knows that we're in the same boat together, that they're not weird for having suffering, because we know our own suffering. And we know how it really joins us with the world.

This is a poem from Palestinian-American poet Naomi Shihab Nye called "Kindness":

Before you know what kindness really is, you must lose things, feel the future dissolve in a moment like salt in a weakened broth. What you held in your hand, what you counted and carefully saved, all this must go, so you know how desolate the landscape can be between the regions of kindness. How you ride and ride thinking the bus will never stop, the passengers eating maize and chicken will stare out the window forever.

Before you learn the tender gravity of kindness, you must travel where the Indian in a white poncho lies dead by the side of the road. You must see how this could be you, how he too was someone who journeyed through the night with plans and the simple breath that kept him alive.

Before you know kindness as the deepest thing inside, you must know sorrow as the other deepest thing. You must wake up with sorrow. You must speak to it till your voice catches the thread of all sorrows and you can see the size of the cloth.

Then it is only kindness that makes sense anymore, only kindness that ties your shoes and sends you out into the day to mail letters and purchase bread, only kindness that raises its head from the crowd of the world to say, it is I you have been looking for, and then goes with you everywhere like a shadow or a friend.

So this quality of kindness really connects us to all of life because we acknowledge we all share in this suffering of being alive. That's the size of the cloth. The size of the cloth is everywhere. We're all in this together.

When we can hold that understanding with equanimity, then compassion isn't a state of suffering. The Buddha described it as a really beautiful state. There is a sweetness in it. But because it's contacting sorrow, there can also be a sad quality.

There often is a sad quality in compassion. One of my Tibetan teachers said that the quality of compassion is like the quality at sunset. You're sitting up on a mountainside, and you're watching the sun go down. There's a real beauty to the colors, the softness of the light. But there's also a kind of sadness about the ending of the day. He said that mixture of sweetness and sadness is the flavor of compassion.

Sometimes when we're reflecting on all the suffering in the world, it can seem overwhelming. The heart can actually get shut down because too much suffering is in mind. At that time, it's more skillful not to call all that suffering up, because the important thing is to keep the heart open and keep it light.

The other near enemy of compassion is grief. That's when the heart really gets weighed down with the sense of suffering. When compassion is sliding into its near enemy of grief, it's best to let go of some of the reflections on the suffering in the world, to narrow the lens down a little until you just take in enough suffering that you can accommodate with equanimity. Or drop the reflection on suffering at that point and turn to something wholesome and uplifting—a benefactor in loving kindness, a child, a pet, nature, something beautiful. Give the heart a little bit of uplift. Then if you like, you can come back to the compassion a little later.

Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche had a really lovely description of compassion. He called it our sore spot. He said, "It's as if we had a pimple on our body that was very sore, so sore that we do not want to rub it or scratch it. During our shower, we do not want to rub too much soap over it because it hurts." That sore spot on our body is an analogy for compassion. Why? That open wound is usually very inconvenient and

problematic. We would like to be tough. We would like to come on strong. But there will always be a sore spot. Our heart is tender. At least we are accessible somewhere. So we are not completely covered with a suit of armor all the time. What a relief.

Then he goes on to say that there's also an inner wound called Buddha nature. This is like a heart that has been sliced and bruised with wisdom and compassion. When the external wound—that is, this sore spot or tender feeling about the world—and the internal wound of Buddha nature begin to meet and communicate, then we begin to realize that our whole being is made out of one complete sore spot altogether. This is called bodhisattva fever.

That vulnerability is compassion. We really have no way to defend ourselves anymore. This bodhisattva fever is when the heart is really open to all the changing circumstances of the world, of others' lives and our lives. Again we really feel that feeling is first. It all comes down to the feeling of suffering or release, suffering or happiness.

The third of the Brahmaviharas is sympathetic joy or mudita. Again, this is just the result when the sensitive heart looks on happiness. As a practice, it's a very upbeat practice. It's a very happy practice because it's like we get two doses of happiness as we're doing it. We focus on someone's happiness, and then we can feel happy in response to that. We get the hit of their happiness, and we get the hit of our happiness.

I called up a friend who I hadn't talked to for quite some time. I said, "How are you doing? How are you? We haven't talked so long. I've really been curious. How are you doing?" She said, really enthusiastically, "I'm wonderful." As soon as she said that, my heart just lit up. Immediately I said back, "You know, I'm wonderful too." It was just such a delight to be able to exchange that. But it was actually a thrill for me to hear the kind of enthusiasm with which she said, "I'm wonderful." I don't hear that every day.

The Dalai Lama said, "If you can be happy out of other people's happiness, then your odds for happiness go up by six billion to one."

This is indeed a gamble worth taking.

In one tradition, they recommend that we don't practice sympathetic joy for ourselves—they say it's only supposed to be about resonating with others. But I actually don't see it that way. I think it can be very skillful to practice sympathetic joy for ourselves. And what comes through when I do that, for me, is a feeling of gratitude. Sympathetic joy for oneself actually makes us aware of all the beautiful things that are in our life, all the things that we're happy for in our life.

If I could change one thing in the Buddha's teachings, it would be to add gratitude as the fifth brahmavihara, because I think it's a beautiful state of mind that is right up there with the other four. When you think about it, when you're in a state of gratitude, you've cut through both greed and aversion. You've cut through greed because you're so happy about what you have. And you've cut through aversion

because you're focusing on the blessings and not the shortcomings in your life.

A friend of mine who's a dharma teacher and a grandmother was talking to one of her granddaughters on Christmas Day, speaking by telephone. The little girl was telling her grandmother about all the great presents that she'd gotten at Christmas. She was really happy about the presents she'd received. And her grandmother said, "Well, when you get lots of presents, does that make you feel thankful for what you have, or do you want more?"

And the little girl said, "Oh, Nana, I'd like to have more."

Her grandmother said, "Oh, that's too bad."

The little girl said, "Well, what do you mean? Why is that too bad?"

Her grandmother explained, "Well, haven't you noticed that when you're thankful for what you have, you feel good inside? And when you're wanting more, you don't feel so good inside?"

And the little girl said, "Oh, Nana, that's right. That's right."

So she got that lesson about gratitude.

I have another friend—I talked to her at the beginning of the year. I hadn't seen her for a while, and I said, "How are you doing this year?" She's in the financial business, so you can imagine how her year has been with the decline of the stock market. It's been a rotten year in her business. She said, "You know, it's been a really difficult year in some ways. It's the first year I felt like a failure in my business. I couldn't do anything right this year business-wise." But she said, "It's also one of the happiest years of my life."

I said, "Why is that?"

She said, "Because I decided to practice gratitude this year. I've made a conscious practice of gratitude all year. And I just feel so happy about all the things that I have in my life that are going well."

I think this is a great practice. I did this during one retreat. I started on a long retreat, a six-week retreat, and I noticed my mind was getting a little depressed about the winter setting in and the long days of practice ahead. So I wrote down all the things in my life that I was really appreciative of, put them on one piece of paper. Then every morning when I'd get up, the first thing I'd do was read that piece of paper. It really put me in a great frame of mind for the rest of the day. It started that day off on a really terrific note. So I encourage you, if that appeals to you, to take up this practice of gratitude.

One of the other things that the mudita practice really brings out, I think, is the importance of joy. We spend a lot of time talking about dukkha—you may have noticed. But joy is a really essential part of the path, too. In fact, there's one teaching of the Buddha where he expresses the path to liberation in positive terms of joy, rapture, tranquility, happiness, concentration, and on to liberation. So it's a really important part of the path. And doing the mudita practice tunes us into the joyful elements in life and gives us that

uplift.

I'm not going to go much into equanimity tonight. We've talked about it in the guided meditations. It's not as directly tied to the feeling component as the other three, so I'll leave that for another night. But I'll just say that it's a critical component of all the other three.

It keeps the others in balance and keeps them from sliding into their near or far enemies.

The Brahmaviharas have truly become for us a map to wise response to life. The changing conditions of existence are always presenting us with pleasant circumstances and unpleasant circumstances—the potential for going up, the potential for going down. If we're not attentive, we slide into these near and far enemies rather quickly.

When something good happens in our life, we often get elated or over-exuberant about it. We think about it a lot. It's really the thinking that corrupts the happiness, and that's the near enemy of mudita. Or when something unfortunate happens to us, we easily get depressed. We dwell on it again with thoughts, and we sink into a negative space. That's the near enemy of compassion—grief.

But if we keep touching base with the Brahmaviharas, they can guide us back to center. Supported by equanimity, we can open to difficulties with compassion, not with grief. We can open to positive things that happen with a spirit of mudita and not overexuberance.

We start to realize that all circumstances of life can become grounds for deepening our practice. Everything that happens, positive or negative, can be fuel for growth in the Brahmaviharas, therefore growth in our understanding. Then we begin to see that this intention toward the Brahmaviharas is actually an important karmic factor on the path. As we activate this wise intention, it helps propel us on the journey to liberation.

I want to close with two pieces. One is sharing the Tibetan phrases for the Brahmaviharas that bring out the karmic aspect of the path. Then I want to close with a listening reflection that expresses all the Brahmaviharas together.

The Tibetan tradition calls them the four immeasurables, or boundless states of mind. There are four different phrases for metta, compassion, joy, and equanimity:

May all beings have happiness and the cause of happiness, which is virtue.

May all beings be free from sorrow and the cause of sorrow, which is non-virtue.

May all beings remain unseparated from the sacred happiness, which is free from sorrow.

May all beings come to rest in the great equanimity beyond attachment to those near and far.

Let's sit together in silence for a moment, holding these intentions in our hearts.

May all beings have happiness and the cause of happiness, which is virtue. May all beings be free from sorrow and the cause of sorrow, which is non-virtue.

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