The Power of Mettā

Guy Armstrong · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Guy Armstrong · 58:37

The talk tonight is called The Power of Metta, or Is Insight Enough?

I wanted to start with the opening of a poem by one of my favorite romantic poets of the last century, E.E. Cummings. This is a poem called "Since Feeling is First":

Since feeling is first, who pays any attention to the syntax of things will never wholly kiss you.

The poem goes on, but I think that's enough. Since feeling is first—feeling is first in a really important way in the Dharma. The Dharma is not about an intellectual understanding, a conceptual take or philosophy. The Dharma is really about the truth of suffering and the truth of freedom. These are feeling elements. This is the way we feel about life. Practice is to bring us out, as the Buddha said in the Satipatthana Sutta, to bring us out of feelings of sorrow, grief, lamentation, and distress.

I feel that the Brahma-vihāra practices are an incredible jewel within our Theravadan tradition. The scope of the four Brahmavihāras, their completeness in describing the life of the heart, is not found anywhere else in any other religious tradition that I'm aware of—not even in other Buddhist traditions. So I want to talk tonight about the first, the foundation, which is the practice of loving-kindness, and what a contribution it can make, especially in the feeling realm, as we deepen our practice on the way to liberation.

I want particularly to talk about five ways in which we feel the benefits of the practice of loving-kindness, and by extension, the other Brahma-vihāras as well.

The first thing that we see in mettā practice is that it makes the heart softer—you could say more tender. In that tenderizing, it makes the heart more responsive to life. The second thing it does is that it purifies the heart, taking the goop of the hindrances and the defilements and finding a way to bring more purity into that area. The third thing it does is that it develops concentration, which as we've talked about is a strongly wholesome quality in itself. The fourth is that it connects us to all of life, to all living beings. And the fifth is that it can bring an incredible amount of happiness into our lives and into our practice.

So I want to talk about all five of these aspects of the mettā practice. First I'll talk about the softening or tenderizing of the heart and whether mettā practice is actually necessary for this.

In our tradition, vipassanā is the wisdom practice. It's through vipassanā that we see things the way they are. And the Buddha said it's seeing things the way they are that frees the mind. So this is our foundation for the whole journey. We say in our tradition that we do loving-kindness practice in the context of

vipassanā practice. We acknowledge that vipassanā practice is foremost because it has the ability to completely liberate. Mettā is seen as a supportive practice in this context.

So the question arises: is vipassanā practice sufficient in itself? Will it be the case necessarily that as we journey through insight to the final goal, the heart will open all by itself of loving-kindness, compassion, joy, and equanimity?

One of my teachers felt that this was true, and he summarized it by saying that love is the child of freedom. Love is the child of freedom. It's a beautiful image because as the heart gets unburdened, it's more easily able to move into love or compassion. So I believe that for some people, that may be enough. Simply the journey to freedom will unlock the doors of love and compassion.

But I believe that it depends a bit on personality temperament. For myself, who am inclined to the cerebral, I found that vipassanā practice alone wasn't doing everything that I had come into spiritual life looking for. So for me, the adjunct of the Brahma-vihāras, and especially mettā, was very helpful to bring out the direct development of the heart qualities. I'll talk a little more about that as we go along.

Also over the years I've observed the unfolding of practice for people that I've worked with. I've also looked closely at people who are very well established in practice—teachers, renowned teachers of vipassanā. What I see from my observation is that there are people who journey quite far along the track of insight and yet don't have a corresponding opening of the heart or development of loving-kindness. I've met teachers who seem to have that particular mixture of qualities in their being.

I don't believe that they're suffering particularly. So for them, that combination of vipassanā alone may have been just fine. But it wasn't everything that I was looking for in Dharma practice. In a way, I could say that their teaching didn't touch me so deeply because I was looking for that other side. I was looking for that heart side to be an equally important and integral part of my Dharma practice.

But this is a very personal thing. It did not seem like the teachers were suffering. From their side, that was probably a complete practice for them. A friend of mine commented about one of these teachers. The comment was that the teacher's mettā was like distant starlight. It was palpable, but it was a bit faint.

I'll talk about some other teachers as we go whose mettā was stronger than that.

I've been practicing for the last several years also with a Tibetan teacher, a young Tibetan teacher named Sogyal Rinpoche, who's from the Nyingma school and teaches Dzogchen practice. At the end of Tibetan retreats, because they emphasize the heart qualities very strongly, they like to give heart advice to the students as they're departing—sort of a pithy statement that you can take with you, carry back into your daily life.

At the end of the retreat with Sogyal Rinpoche one time, he gave us a piece of parting heart advice. He said, "When you go back into your daily life, I want you to remember three things. First, be normal." He

said, "Don't go back and be really weird and flaky because there are already too many strange people in spiritual life. And if you go back and act like that, people are going to think that that's what Buddhism is about. And they're not going to be interested. It's going to turn them off." So he said, "Be normal."

"And be wise. Don't mess up your life. Take care with yourself. Make good choices. Be kind to people. Don't mess up. Live wisely."

And the third thing he said: "When you go back, be juicy. Be juicy. That's the way that people can really tell that something's happened in your Dharma practice. When you go back and there's brightness in your eyes, there's moisture in your eyes, and there's warmth in your heart, then people will really know that something has happened for you."

So juice, which is an old technical Buddhist term, is kind of a summary for all these qualities of heart—such as happiness, contentment, joy, devotion, compassion, faith, trust, kindness, humor. All these things are summarized by the quality of juice. The ten kinds of juice—you've heard that list, haven't you?

One of the features of these qualities is that they really make life sweeter. These are the things that bring into life our experience of the richness and the delight in being alive, in appreciating this precious human birth that we've attained, in appreciating the path, in appreciating the Dharma, in appreciating the Sangha. Not only do they make our life sweeter, they open us up to be touched by life so that we have an immediate heart openness or heart receptivity to receive all that life brings us. And finally, they let us touch other beings in life.

And I think it's this third piece that I particularly want to focus on when we talk about the role of metta.

If your practice includes this aspiration of bodhicitta, which I think Joseph has talked about during this retreat—that we practice in order to help others come out of their suffering, we deepen our own understanding as the best way of helping other beings to come through their suffering—then I believe these heart qualities are one of the best ways of transmitting or carrying out that work. This is really the way that the Dharma can express itself and bring others into the path.

So I believe that if your aspiration inclines to the bodhisattva aspiration, that you're clearly practicing not for yourself alone, but you're on the big boat that wants to gather a lot of beings to the path, these heart qualities make a huge contribution.

I'm very grateful that in our tradition we have specific practices that further the development of the heart, that open up these juicy qualities for us. In our tradition, loving-kindness is the primary practice. It's the foundation. In Mahayana Buddhism, as is found in Tibet, China, Japan, compassion has become the primary heart practice. But I feel that this is just a slight variation in emphasis. So I hope you don't feel that you need to go out from this retreat and argue with the Mahayana practitioners about which is more important. They're so close to identical. They are both just the spirit of caring.

The Dalai Lama said, "Compassion is just basic human warmth." That's all he means by it—basic human warmth. That's also what loving-kindness is. So I don't see a conflict here. They're so close together.

These seeds of caring are there in everyone, absolutely everyone. Trungpa Rinpoche wrote about this in a book called Training the Mind. I want to read a little bit. This is a bit of an extended passage, so please settle back:

"It is 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?"

Because even in the midst of aggression, insensitivity, or laziness in our life, we always have a soft spot, some point we can cultivate.

A more vivid analogy might be of an open wound, which is always there. That open wound is usually very inconvenient and problematic. We would really like to be tough. We would like to come on strong, but there will always be a sore spot. At least we are accessible somewhere, so we are not completely covered with a suit of armor all the time. Such a relief.

So this sore spot is an opening to caring. It's the point at which we are able to let the world touch us. It's there no matter how much armoring has grown up. For everyone, there is this place of accessibility where we're not always strong and tough, but there's a sensitivity that can be developed.

Then Trungpa Rinpoche goes on: "There is also an inner wound called Tathagata Garbha or Buddha nature. This is like a heart that has been sliced and bruised with wisdom and compassion. When the external wound and the internal wound begin to meet and to 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."

So these beautiful qualities really are the opening into bodhisattva fever—this extending of the caring from our open heart to the world's open heart.

There are many beautiful aspects of the loving-kindness practice, but I have to be honest and say that often Vipassana practitioners have some skepticism about metta practice. People who have gotten used to Vipassana practice sometimes have such an appreciation for its purity that metta starts to seem a little bit contrived.

You know, Vipassana is so elegant. It's so clean. It's so unimpeachable. It's impeccable. Just aware of what is. Nothing extra. Wow, it's so elegant. And then along comes this metta practice where we make these kind of hokey, prayer-sounding affirmation things. This doesn't seem elegant at all. Did this come out of the New Age? I can't believe the Buddha actually taught this.

As someone said in an interview, "Vipassana is letting go of everything. Metta is bringing something in.

Isn't this contradictory?"

Actually, it's not. The very way that the Buddha defined right effort was in terms of abandoning the unwholesome and developing the wholesome. So there's a clear indication that the cultivation and development and growth of wholesome states of mind are exactly in line with right effort. That's what we're doing with the loving-kindness practice.

But they are different practices, as I'm sure you've experienced over these weeks and months. They are different practices. Hopefully, in our maturation of Dharma practice, they come back and converge. And where they can converge is in a warm attention—that the mindfulness of Vipassana becomes not cold and detached and scientific, but permeated with this care and warmth and connectedness of the loving-kindness practice so that the two blend together as we develop them both.

Sometimes people complain that metta is diluted: "This is really a fuzzy practice. You say, 'may I be happy?' But there is no I. What are you talking about?"

So for Vipassana purists, I want to offer a way to say the metta phrases that is really in line with the Abhidhamma. Here's the metta phrase. If you like, you can say it this way: "In this ever-changing stream... In this ever-changing stream of physical and mental phenomena conventionally designated as Paul... May the state of happiness arise ever more frequently."

This works just fine.

If you like this phrase, feel free to use it in your meditation. If you simply prefer the phrase, "may Paul be happy," stick with that. It's a lot simpler.

It's extraordinary when we meet somebody who's really developed these heart qualities. The person alive today who really comes to mind for me again and again is His Holiness, the Dalai Lama. He consciously has developed these practices. It didn't just happen by accident that his heart is the way it is.

Someone came up to him at a conference—it was a pan-religious conference—and asked him, "What is your religion?" I don't think they'd been paying very close attention to the program. The Dalai Lama said, "My religion is kindness."

He said this again when we had a meeting with him a couple of years ago at Spirit Rock, a meeting with His Holiness and about 225 Buddhist teachers, both Western and Asian. We got to spend a couple of days with him. In the course of it, he said to us, who were all card-carrying Buddhists, "I'm not interested in propagating Buddhism. I'm interested in propagating human values." That's really what touches him—the welfare of people, creatures, the environment. That's what moves him.

People feel this when they come in contact with him. As a visiting head of state, he was on Spirit Rock land for a couple of days. The State Department had to provide security for his visit because he is the head of the government in exile. Before he came, someone from the State Department called my wife, Sally, who's

a horse person, and asked, "Do you know where we can rent some horses while the Dalai Lama is visiting? Because we want to put sharpshooters with rifles up on top of the Spirit Rock Hills. We'll send them up there on horseback."

This was the level of security that they intended to provide. Fortunately, they couldn't find any horses, so that didn't happen. But they did, every day, make all of us—all 225 of us—pass through metal detectors before we could go up and meet with His Holiness. Even the people who had been staying in the residence halls had to vacate their rooms at 7 in the morning. The State Department security agents went through with bomb-sniffing dogs to see if there were any explosives tucked away under our zafus.

Then we all had to walk through these metal detectors, which were staffed by the State Department security people. These were heavy-duty security people. They were not the bouncers you see at concerts. They were very, very professional people. They carried a gun on one hip, a nightstick on the other, and a walkie-talkie clipped to their back. You did not want to joke with them. They were heavier duty than the airport guys.

I had to wait one morning while we were getting in and just chatted with them. They had been under some very serious assignments in the past. They had guarded people like Yasser Arafat when he came to this country, the Israeli prime minister, other heads of state. They were not to be messed with. They were real professionals.

At the end of the conference, all these security people got together and asked if they could have their photograph taken with His Holiness. Because they felt something from him. They were also touched by him. And of course he obliged.

He has this beautiful childlike heart that can just make contact on that basic level of caring about someone else. He once was musing about his own fame. He said, "I don't know why people like me so much. I don't think I'm anything special. The only thing that I try to practice is when I meet someone, I try to consider them as more important than myself. I think that's why people love me."

Amazing attitude.

Of course, this quality of love is part of our nature. We've all known love, certainly in our childhood, and mostly at different times in our life.

For me, a lot of the appeal of spiritual life and spiritual practice has been to access the state of love more regularly and to be able to live in that place more of the time. That's really what motivated me in spiritual life. In a way, I feel that pull—it's sort of like the heart is pulling us home. The heart wants to find its resting place, its place of openness and fullness.

From this point of view of how natural love is, the metta practice can seem kind of contrived. And it is a lot of work at first for something that's so natural. Ultimately, it's not something we have to fabricate. But

because it's become obscured, we do have to fabricate it a little bit at first. That's what the phrases do—they tend to evoke this quality. But it's clearly part of our deepest nature.

One of the most loving people I've ever known was my grandmother. She was born in the countryside in North Carolina around 1890. She was not highly educated. She was married to my grandfather, who was one of the most aversive personalities that I've ever met, and she maintained this sweetness of temperament all through her life, right to the end.

I remember when we would go visit them—I was a kid—we'd walk into her kitchen, she'd greet us and give us a big hug, and then she would put her lips down in the hollow of our necks and kind of nuzzle around in there and tell us that she was stealing our sugar. She said, "You kids are so sweet, I'm going to steal your sugar." And she'd just kiss us. She had had no Buddhist training and had not even done psychotherapy. So this love really is intrinsic. You can trust in it.

But because it's gotten obscured, we need to make a little bit of effort and incline the mind in that direction. The effort lifts some of the obscurations and then lets it shine through again. So this is the area of tenderizing or softening the heart.

The second area I wanted to talk about is the work of purification that metta accomplishes. The first area we look at is how it changes our intention in a given moment. The practice of loving kindness, as you've been doing it, the other brahmaviharas, is a simple practice of seeing another person and wishing them well. Seeing yourself and wishing yourself well. That's basically it. That's all that's there.

Whether the other person gets happy or well or not isn't in your control. So in our practice we don't worry too much about the result. It's not focused on whether the person actually gets happy. We can't control that. The focus is on our intention in doing the practice.

So you connect with someone, you have the wish, "I hope you're happy." That's the important piece. That sincere wish. Sometimes people say, "Well, I can wish them happiness, but I know they won't always be happy, so this flies in the face of impermanence." Yeah, that's true, but your wish is sincere. Your wish for them to be always happy is sincere. Whether it can be accomplished or not depends on them, but the sincerity of the wish can be true. So that's where we focus on this intention. This is the core of the practice.

As you do the metta practice, a skillful way to do it is to call up the person and let yourself just feel for a moment a nonverbal sense of caring. This is the heart of it. This is what will drive the engine of the metta practice. If you say the phrase and there's really no caring from your side, the practice doesn't go very far. But if you feel this little spark of caring—it's like looking in their eyes and just whispering, "I hope you're well"—and then you say the phrase that expresses that, that's what will make the practice grow. That's really the seed of it.

It seems like such a little thing, but this is the seed that everything else comes from. All the warmth and fire and deepening that can come from loving kindness all comes from this little seed. Because it's a seed,

your only job really is planting that seed moment after moment. You can't control when the plant grows up. It's just like if you want to grow tomatoes in the summer.

You put the seed in the ground at a certain depth, prepare the soil in a particular way, and then water it faithfully. You cannot make that tomato plant grow. When it pokes up out of the ground, it looks so tiny and fragile. If you try to take hold of it and force its growth, you'll only rip it up. Only nature can make that plant flourish. Your job as the gardener is simply to plant the seed and tend it with care.

It's the same way in metta practice. Your job is only to plant the seeds of these moments of caring. Then you must trust the dharma, trust nature itself to grow that tender beginning into the full flowering of loving kindness. And it will do exactly that—such is the nature of things.

As the Buddha said, "Do not disregard the accumulation of wholesomeness, saying this will come to nothing. By the gradual falling of raindrops, a jar is filled." I mentioned this quote earlier in a talk about mindfulness. In vipassana practice, it's the moments of mindfulness that fill the jar. In metta practice, it's the moments of sincere caring that gradually accumulate. These seemingly small moments can grow into a very strong state of mind.

We usually begin by directing loving kindness toward ourselves. Traditionally, this is done because the self is supposed to be the easiest person to love. You've all felt that, right? Not always. Often for us, the self proves to be the most difficult target of our loving intentions.

The self becomes most difficult because turning loving thoughts inward brings up all the ways we don't feel so great about ourselves. Sometimes when we direct metta toward ourselves, we remember all the unskillful things we've done, all the ways we haven't been loving, all the ways we wish we had been kinder. Sometimes it feels like we're doing something wrong. "I'm inclining my mind toward metta and I'm getting all this self-judgment and remorse and guilt. Something's gone off here."

But that's not true. It's actually the case that metta is doing the work of purification by bringing to light all that accumulated residue that has been hidden—all the difficult material we've been carrying but that hasn't fully entered consciousness. The only way to purify these patterns is to bring them into the light of awareness and learn to relate to them differently. This is one of metta practice's most powerful effects.

Metta practice aims straight for the heart. It goes right in and pulls out whatever's there. If there's pain stored there, that's what it draws forth. If there's joy, it brings that out too. I think of it like a magnet—metta is like a magnet with a really strong positive pole. As we begin saying the phrases, it's like running that magnet up the center of our being. Everything of the opposite charge gets drawn out toward it.

So metta will pull this material up into consciousness. That's why metta practice is not always bliss and light and love and peace. You can hit some very bumpy terrain in metta because of this purification force. But the good thing is that these feelings then become available to be experienced consciously, and we

learn a new relationship to them.

It's not that they simply disappear through metta practice. Rather, it's as though we begin to hold them—the shame and guilt and fear, the anxiety, the cravings, the self-judgment—within the greater space of loving kindness. It's this holding them with loving kindness that accomplishes the purification, not their immediate disappearance. They don't vanish instantly, but we create an entirely different relationship to them. The purification happens through changing our fundamental orientation from one of aversion to one of acceptance, or even at times friendliness, toward these difficult states of mind.

The feeling of this process is somewhat different, for me anyway, than the way vipassana works with these same challenging states. My main hindrance over many years of practice has been fear—that's been my predominant difficult tendency of mind. Vipassana practice made a huge difference in how I experienced fear. Over the years, fear kept getting smaller and smaller through vipassana practice, through the growth of qualities like non-identification, spaciousness, equanimity, and the direct seeing of impermanence. All these insights took tremendous power away from fear.

But when my mind would tip in a certain direction, it would still tip toward fear. The same basic conditioning, the same fundamental patterning remained there.

I noticed that after doing a lot of metta practice—I did a few six-week retreats of Brahma Viharas here—that started to change. Often when my mind would tip, it would tip into metta instead of fear. It's as though the loving kindness actually replaced the fear conditioning. It gave a different destination for the mind to go to.

The difficult person is also a great source of learning in purification. I did one metta retreat where there was someone else on the retreat with whom I had had a hard time the year before. We'd had some interpersonal conflict. I was doing metta practice, I started to get quite sensitive, quite still, and then every time that person would go by, I'd start reviewing all the things that had happened that year, and my mind would get really churned up. I'd get really angry again.

So here I am, deep into loving-kindness practice, and I'm spinning out in these fits of anger for thirty minutes, forty-five minutes. I just couldn't bring it back. I was obsessing about this relationship. So I thought, "Well, I have heard of doing metta for the difficult person." Somebody suggested that. But no, that's too hokey. I don't want to have to pretend I like this person. But I was running out of options. Nothing else was working, so I thought, "Okay, I'll try it."

So I started to send loving kindness to them, and I found I actually could wish them well. I could sincerely hold them and think, "I hope you're happy." That wasn't too hard a stretch.

Then something began to dawn on me. The way that anger is usually referred to in the old texts, it's more accurately translated as ill will. This is more accurate translation from the suttas of the mind state they're talking about. And I started to tune into this quality of ill will and realized that when I was angry at the

person, I was feeling ill will.

When you think about ill will, what it really means is "I want them to hurt." It's the opposite of goodwill, which is "I want them to be happy." If you look closely at anger, the common garden variety of anger, you'll find within it this piece of ill will. We want someone else to hurt. This is just a step away from cruelty. Cruelty is the enjoyment of somebody else's hurting.

As a good meditator and a good Buddhist, I couldn't be comfortable with the idea of myself as a cruel person. When I looked at anger, I saw I was actually just one step away from cruelty in wanting someone else to suffer. That didn't sit so well with me. It's easy from a Western psychological viewpoint to kind of justify why we should be angry at somebody. But when we actually look at the property of ill will, from a Buddhist point of view, that's pretty hard to justify.

So I became motivated to transform that ill will into goodwill. And that's exactly what the metta practice does. It converts ill will to goodwill. And that's as far as you have to go. And I started to notice that when goodwill was present, the ill will could not arise. The anger could not arise.

I also saw that I still didn't have to like the person. That actually didn't change. But I no longer wished them to suffer, and I could easily turn to goodwill for them. Once I found that out, then every time the anger started to come up, I would turn to metta, and it would just dissolve it. It became a really great refuge for me.

So we see that as this quality of metta grows in us—the quality of friendliness, of affection, of liking—it has a tremendous unifying force in the mind. Aversion pushes people apart. It breaks us apart. When we're averse to our own being, we become fragmented. Love is what unifies. Affection is what pulls together. It's the gravitational pull in the emotional life.

So as the quality of loving kindness develops and all these impure things are brought into the light of day, we start seeing we don't have to feel so badly about our difficult areas—these qualities of fear or anxiety or shame or craving or aversion or self-judgment or sadness. They're held in the light of that friendly eye. They become much, much more acceptable. And we don't have to make them go away.

We just hold them in a different relationship. This is really healing. This is what lets us integrate those fragments that we've cast off, that we've disowned.

I want to read a poem which I know a lot of you already know, but it says it so well that I want to share it again. It's called "St. Francis and the Sow" by Galway Kinnell:

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, 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 spikiness spiked out from the spine, down through the great broken heart, to the sheer blue milken dreaminess, spurting and shuddering from the fourteen teats into the fourteen mouths, sucking and blowing beneath them, the long, perfect loveliness of sow.

Loving kindness can bring in this sense of self-appreciation, of self-acceptance, of seeing ourself in the context of nature, beautiful creation within nature.

The third of the aspects of metta practice I wanted to mention is concentration. We've talked a lot about concentration on this retreat. This is actually not a bad time in the retreat to remember about concentration. Anybody notice the effect of the last couple of days on your concentration? Thanksgiving is usually deadly to concentration. In the interviews today, a number of people reported, "Wow, that was really a bump. Great food, but it was really a bump in my practice."

So at this point, now that Thanksgiving is over, it's actually a good time to renew our vigor for concentration, to renew that kind of determination to really hold the retreat container very well. There's a temptation as the energy rises to perhaps talk to one another, to be a little more relaxed in one's mindfulness. We still have quite a long time in the retreat to go, and there will be integration time at the end. You don't need to do the integration now. So a really good time, the day after Thanksgiving, to rededicate to this focus of attention and the noble silence, to really hold the container of the retreat well until integration begins.

Metta practice is a very powerful concentration practice. The phrases serve as the object around which the mind collects. We often use it to teach concentration to the level, as I mentioned, of jhanas. Concentration unifies the mind. Metta unifies the mind. That's why these two together are a really powerful combination. The loving-kindness brings the mind together so it doesn't want to stray. As the concentration makes the mind more powerful, the phrases have more impact and the feelings of love come out more strongly. So both of these really reinforce each other.

There's this amazing writing from a Russian Orthodox saint from the 19th century whose name was Theophan the Recluse. Theophan means "face of God" – it's kind of a nice name. And I want to read this. It could have been written by someone who was doing metta as a concentration practice:

For so long as the mind remains in the head, where thoughts jostle one another, it has no time to concentrate on one thing. But when attention descends into the heart, it attracts all the powers of the soul and body into one point there. This concentration of all human life in one place is immediately reflected in the heart by a special sensation that is the beginning of future warmth. This sensation grows into warm feeling and concentrates the attention upon itself. And so it comes about that whereas in the initial stages the attention is kept in the heart by an effort of will, in due course, this attention, by its own vigor, gives birth to warmth in the heart. This warmth then holds the attention without special effort. From this, the two go on supporting

one another and must remain inseparable, because dispersion of attention cools the warmth, and diminishing warmth weakens attention.

This beautiful union of concentration and loving kindness, felt in the heart center, felt in a bodily way, could be a description of our practice.

The fourth aspect of loving kindness is that it opens our practice out to all of life. We can use our Vipassana practice in a way that is quite self-centered. It's not meant that way, but it can happen that way. We start from my pain, my problems, my neuroses, and then we move on to my path, my progress, my freedom, my liberation. It can all be done in quite a self-centered way.

This is from Shantideva, a 9th century Indian teacher: "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. It is amazing when we can open up to letting our happiness be defined by the happiness of others. The Dalai Lama says this is really a good bet because your odds of success go up by six billion to one. This is the direction of the loving-kindness practice.

The neutral person is really our turning point. The neutral person stands for all the countless beings that we don't know. It's said that metta is like a gentle rain that falls everywhere without discriminating. It has this universal quality. This is one aspect of its boundlessness—that it doesn't pick and choose who it cares for, but it cares for all beings.

Sometimes it's hard to connect with that sense of universality because we have prejudices. We have people we like and people we don't. But the Buddha said a very interesting thing in the Samyutta Nikaya. He said, given that samsara has no discoverable beginning—that this round of births that we've all been on has no apparent beginning—think if that was true. Just as your eyes scan around the hall this evening, think if everyone here had been at some time in the past your mother or father or sister or brother or son or daughter. How would that affect your level of concern for them?

Well, it might depend on your family of origin. I don't want to go too far with this one. But it may be that we're closer than we imagine ourselves to be.

The neutral person actually for some people becomes a kind of secret love. I was teaching a daylong in California on metta, and somebody came up to me and said, "You know, I was practicing with my neutral person being the cashier at the supermarket where I go, and I developed this real love for the person. I went to check out and I got really nervous—it's my neutral person!" It's amazing how strongly we can care for people that we really haven't met or don't know. It's quite mind-boggling.

One of the breakthroughs of insight with the neutral person is we start to see that whoever it is, we all have the same deep wishes. Our deepest aspirations are really all the same. We all want to be safe. We

want to be happy. We want to be healthy. We want to live easily and take care of ourselves in the world. As you feel into the depth of this connection, you start to realize that we're basically the same organism. We have the same body shape, the same package of emotions, the same kinds of thoughts. There are distinctions, but I wonder how real they are.

I'm sure you all know Rumi, the medieval poet. His teacher was a fellow named Shams. Shams did not leave behind many poems, but this is one poem that is said to have been written by Shams, the teacher of Rumi:

I, you, he, she, we.
In the garden of mystic lovers, these are not true distinctions.

What Shams is pointing to is that insight that sees our unity behind all the apparent differences. There are many apparent differences. We have differences in personality, in age, in gender, in race, in class, in fortune, and so forth. But when one from a spiritual level sees through all those distinctions, there's this underlying unity where we are basically the same being. That's what the metta practice can open us up to see—this universal connection with all life.

Finally, metta can lead to a great deal of happiness. I like to think about Ajahn Jumnian as an exemplar of this approach. He said he hasn't had anger in twenty-five years, and I have to say, every time I've seen him, he seems happy. He'll come to Spirit Rock to teach. He's there for about a week, and we often offer to take him out other places. We say, "Would you like to go into San Francisco today or see the Golden Gate Bridge, do some touring?"

And he says, "If you'd like to take me to San Francisco, that's okay. I'd be happy doing that. But is there anybody who'd like to hear the Dharma? If there are people who'd like to hear the Dharma, I'm happy to teach the Dharma. If nobody comes who wants to hear the Dharma, I'm happy to just sit there in the meditation hall. I'll be happy whatever you want me to do."

And he's really like that. He has this really joyful energy. He's done a lot of metta practice and taught a lot of metta practice.

He doesn't know much English, but he has one phrase that he conveys in English. It's the union of vipassana and metta, the essence of his teaching. He'll touch space and say, "Empty, empty." This is the wisdom of vipassana. "Empty, empty." And then he'll say, "Happy, happy. Empty, empty, happy, happy." That's his Dharma transmission.

You can get a sense of some of this happiness from the meditation on the benefactor. If you pick a benefactor who's wise and free and joyful, you'll find that as you connect with them, you start to soak up those qualities. You start to feel their being osmosing into yours. This is why we recommend picking someone for the benefactor who is a strong figure.

In one tradition within Buddhism, there's a practice called union with the teacher. The effect is similar—by hanging out in a meditative way with the teacher, one starts to realize that the teacher's mind and one's own mind, the student's mind, are really essentially one and the same nature. This same understanding can come from our meditation on the benefactor. If we choose someone who embodies those qualities of wisdom and compassion, we start to feel it resonating in our heart. And we couldn't feel that resonance if we didn't already have wisdom and compassion within us.

As the happiness of loving-kindness grows, it brings with it a real sense of contentment. And of course that also helps the settling of concentration, because when loving-kindness is present in a strong way, we just have the sense we can rest in it. There's no more sublime state of being. So we can rest. There's a sense of having come home.

One Tibetan poem says, "There is nothing else to search for. Rest in your natural face." This is the feeling of coming home to loving-kindness. The Buddha talked about it as a deliverance of mind, a liberation of mind.

And we start to see the union of vipassana and metta. Vipassana reveals this great, vast emptiness, the insubstantiality of all things extending infinitely. When we first hear about it, it can sound like a cold and lonely kind of void to hang out in. It's not very appealing.

But as metta practice develops, that whole space opened up by vipassana can get pervaded with the warmth of loving-kindness. And then all of a sudden, this vast space of awareness becomes a really inviting place to open to, a really inviting place to hang out in, something that we can trust in and surrender to because it has the emptiness of the Dharma and the warmth of loving-kindness.

As we start to get the intuition of that union, we really see that this is our true nature—this empty space that has the quality of awareness and also the warmth of loving-kindness. When we start to see that that's the way things basically are, we start to see our own nature is basically good, is really good. That's really what offsets the sense of insufficiency or self-judgment. We trust more and more in our own basic goodness.

I want to close this evening with a prayer of Mother Teresa's. It's a little bit off the point, but it is in the metta family, and I really like it. Do you know that part of the metta phrase that says, "May I be free from inner and outer harm"? The outer harm is pretty clear—we don't want to be assaulted or have an accident happen to us, be injured. The inner harm is sometimes not so clear. So this is Mother Teresa's expression, as I read it, of a metta aspiration of being free from inner harm:

"Deliver me, O Jesus, from the desire to be loved, from the desire to be extolled, from the desire to be honored, from the desire to be praised, from the desire to be preferred, from the desire to be consulted, from the desire to be approved, from the desire to be popular. Deliver me from the fear of being humiliated, from the fear of being despised, from the fear of suffering rebukes, from the fear of being

slandered, from the fear of being forgotten, from the fear of being wronged, from the fear of being ridiculed, from the fear of being suspected."

Let's just sit for a minute together.

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