Mettā: Purity And Purification

Guy Armstrong · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Guy Armstrong · 1:01:59

After the round of interviews today, when we went down to lunch, teachers were talking about how the retreat was going. What we all observed today is that you are really cooking—an old Buddhist technical term. At this point in the retreat, the momentum of your practice is really clear, because almost everyone who came in to see me today had something interesting going on, sometimes many interesting things. This was a sign that the practice had become deeply engaged, quite a shift from a few days ago.

At the start of the retreat—I don't know what each of your individual experiences was—but there was a lot of doubt among the people I talked to. What is this practice? Where is it going? Why am I saying these phrases? What's going to happen? At this early stage of the retreat, one really wonders if the practice is going to lift off, achieve that critical mass for takeoff.

This reminded me of a story from a teacher who brought it up on a retreat because we were talking about the subject of faith. He was a calculus teacher in college and had offered a course in beginning calculus. One woman student came up to him on the first day and said, "I'm thinking about taking your class, but I don't know if it will help me or not."

He asked, "What do you want to do?"

She replied, "I'm studying civil engineering and I need some tools that will solve this kind of problem."

He said, "Oh, well, this course will do it for you."

"How do I know that?" she asked.

"I'm telling you, if you take the course, you'll learn the tools to solve that kind of problem."

"But I don't know that for myself," she said. "Therefore, I'm not going to take the course." And she dropped it.

If all of you had said that on the first day, the room would be empty. But I'm glad that you had enough faith to continue.

This was at a retreat actually taught by a Tibetan Lama. When he heard this story, he said, "Good story, but bad ending. Like European movie." So here you all are in an American movie—good story, good ending. It's happening for you all, and I really appreciate that.

I work out at the gym when I'm home, two or three times a week if I can. When I first started going to this

gym, there are some pretty hardcore bodybuilders who go there, and I feel quite dwarfed in comparison. I go really just to keep healthy and maintain some muscle tone, but there are some guys there who've been developing their muscles for years. When I first went, I was really impressed by them. I thought, "Wow, that's really something. I don't know if I want to look like that, but I'm impressed that they do."

As time went on, I started to realize that the amount of muscle one had wasn't really the important thing. Because what happens when you build a certain amount of muscle at the gym? You add another weight, and then it gets hard again. Have you noticed that? Just when you get good at one level, you add another weight, and it gets hard again. So in a real sense, you never make any progress.

It's like koan practice, if you've ever encountered that in the Zen tradition. I did a little bit of koan practice with a really great Zen master named Sasaki Roshi. As soon as I solved one koan, he just gave me another one, and then I was back in confusion again. So I never had a sense of making any progress.

What I came to appreciate at the gym is not how many weights somebody can do, but the sincerity of their effort. People come into the gym who are a little out of shape and not very strong, and they don't do many weights, but if they're really putting their hearts into it, then they really work out their whole system. The important thing is not how many weights you can lift, but the quality of your effort. And that really comes from your heart.

That's what I've been appreciating in the interviews today—the fruits of people's effort are really coming through. All the groundwork that you've done in these first four days of practice, I really see paying off.

In our approach to loving-kindness practice, I hope you know that there are two different kinds of good results that happen. One kind of good result that happens from this practice is the presence of mettā.

The other kind of good result that happens is the absence of metta—or you might say, the obstacles to metta. Generally, as you continue in a sincere way, you will get one of these two results. You will either get the blossoming of loving-kindness, or you'll directly encounter those states of mind and heart that are obstructing the development of metta.

Whichever one happens—and actually for most people it's both, an alternation—both of these aspects are really important for our practice and our growth. They work hand in hand together. I think a way to think about them helpfully is that they are the cycles in our practice of purity on the one hand and purification on the other.

As we deepen and contact these pure states of mind—love, compassion and joy—this gives us the faith and confidence that we have these beautiful qualities within ourselves. Not only that we have them, but we're starting to manifest them. We're starting to feel them come alive in our lives. And there's a great source of confidence that we can do this work.

Then the second part of the cycle is purification, when we encounter the difficult aspects of our hearts and

minds. These are the states like sadness or longing or fear or resentment. These are so important to find because by and large in our daily life they've been buried. They've been operating, but they've been operating at a repressed level. And because we haven't been able to touch them directly, we haven't been able to release them or free ourselves from their underlying activity.

So as long as we're not able to contact these difficult forces of the mind, they govern our lives. They've been driving us in different ways as long as they've been unconscious. Now that they're in the light of awareness and the light of metta, there's a possibility of transforming them. So these are actually the seeds of our greatest freedom. These are the things whose appearance is really going to transform our life and our practice as we learn to relate with them.

Because metta practice goes right for the heart, the feeling level, the feeling nature of our emotional life comes center stage and is even intensified with the turning of the mind to metta. And because we have on the one hand the purity of love and compassion and joy, and on the other the difficult states of sadness and fear and so on, it's almost like in metta retreat, sometimes we don't find very much equilibrium. Sometimes we're in heaven and sometimes we're in hell.

So the metta retreat often has much more of this alternation of heavenly states and hellish states than a vipassana retreat, where you might find more of an equanimity and kind of a cruising level. So don't be surprised by those strong fluctuations in emotion that can come from the metta practice. It's just part and parcel of this approach. It doesn't mean anything is going wrong. It means that the work is happening. You are happening.

This work of purification has a specific meaning in Buddhism. It means to free the mind from the forces of greed, aversion, and confusion—the three roots of the unwholesome in our experience and in our actions. It is the work of Dharma practice to reduce and eventually eliminate these three forces from our hearts and minds. And that's part of the work that we're involved in here.

Earlier this year, I was preparing a talk on this theme of purification. I was at another center in Massachusetts, sitting at the kitchen table in the apartment where I was staying and looking out the window into the woods that surrounded it. As I was looking out there, a hawk swooped down in this wooded area. It was late winter, so there were no leaves on the trees. Everything was bare. So I could see the hawk flying through the trees and then making a plunge into the leaves on the ground, picking up a snake in its claws.

Then the hawk took the snake and settled on a fallen tree that was resting at an angle, up about seven or eight feet. Sitting in my house, I could almost watch him at eye level. The hawk pinned the snake to the fallen tree and with his beak reached down and tore off pieces of flesh. As I was watching and thinking about the topic of purification, the hawk was ripping the snake apart and eating it bite by bite.

This is life for many creatures on the planet. The snake didn't want to die. The snake's deepest wish was

for its own safety and happiness and health and ease. It was tremendously afraid, I imagine, of its death. But the hawk didn't want to die either. The hawk had a strong craving for continued existence, fueled by this fear of perishing and a quest for survival. And the collision of those two was not a totally happy picture.

We also have these deeply conditioned habits because our past is from that realm of animal life. So we have this deeply conditioned quest for survival, this deep fear of elimination and of physical pain.

This is the kind of conditioning that exists in our minds, and the depth of it is what makes it so challenging to purify. These are essentially the sources of craving and fear in our hearts and minds. You can sense, I hope, how deeply they penetrate from that image. This is very difficult work—the overall work of purification. It's absolutely no wonder that we still have these forces of desire and fear very much alive in us.

Tonight, I want to talk first about the purification aspect of our practice, and then spend more time toward the end on the aspect of purity. As I discuss purification, I'll focus on one particular factor: aversion. Among the three primary forces—greed, aversion, and delusion—aversion comes up very often in the retreat situation and is central for many people's practice.

Aversion is a term that encompasses a wide range of mental states. It is the basic experience of negativity or disliking, but manifests through states like anger, resentment, irritation, impatience, and frustration. It also includes fear, anxiety, nervousness, despair, depression, sorrow, and grief. All of these are different aspects of aversion or negativity.

In the texts, metta is presented by the Buddha as the antidote to aversion. So if you can connect to any of these states of mind—any hits out there? There are a few in here—then metta is the medicine for that state of mind. It is the antidote for all these different forms of aversion because it is essentially the opposite of negativity. It's the friendly, warm, welcoming attitude of mind.

One form of negativity that often arises in retreat is self-judgment. As we're alone and lack the company of friends and the reinforcement that social contact brings, we often find ourselves getting in touch with fears about our own being. We encounter a sense of inadequacy—that somehow we're not quite good enough. And because of that not being good enough, we're not really lovable. No one will love us because we're not worthy of being loved. We're not quite good enough to merit being loved.

This was brought up when the Dalai Lama visited the Insight Meditation Society in Massachusetts. It was in the late seventies; the center was just a couple of years old—I think it was three years old at that point. We hadn't really straightened out our relationships with the townspeople very well at all. There were rumors going around that at IMS we held orgies at midnight where we danced around a fire naked. The townies, the boys, would love to drive up the driveway with their horns blaring and shout curses at us in the middle of the night.

But the Dalai Lama came to visit us in 1979. He wasn't as famous then as he is now—he wasn't quite the international figure that he was—but he was still a fairly big deal. The State Department was not providing security for him at that time, so the local chief of police got to provide security for him. This established us in the eyes of the local chief of police. Wow, a foreign dignitary is coming to my town, and I get to run the siren while I drive him up to the center. All of a sudden, we were in with at least part of the townspeople.

The Dalai Lama visited the three-month course toward its end. After he talked, he took questions from the meditators. One young man who was on the retreat raised his hand and said, "I don't feel good about myself. I just have this underlying feeling that I'm not worthy. Can you speak to that? Can you tell me how to work with it?"

The Dalai Lama came back with a very strong answer. He said, "You are wrong." I mean, he's the Bodhisattva of compassion. Most of the time he strokes people. But he said, "You are wrong. That is just not right. Every being that is born is a beautiful addition of creation, a beautiful expression of nature—even animals. Look around here: the deer, the birds, the turkeys, the worms on the pavement. They're all these beautiful expressions of the life of nature. How much more so a human being who has the capacity that you have for kindness and wisdom?"

Each one of you is a very beautiful and precious being. To think that you are unworthy is absolutely wrong and unfounded. And yet we often have this feeling, don't we? We often feel we're not quite good enough.

The metta practice is such a great antidote to this because as we start to connect with that sense of liking and friendliness in our heart, that sense of warmth, we really start to verify our own goodness. It may not be there all the time. It may just be flickering on some of the time. But when we feel it, we know what a beautiful thing it is and what a gift it is to the world.

The world really needs this quality of friendliness. And as it comes alive in our heart, we start to realize this is an important contribution. This is something worthwhile in me that maybe I can learn to bring out into life and into the world. And we start to get a conviction there's something good that's happening inside. And that's a strong antidote to this feeling of not being good enough.

One of the other ways that we can work with the practice to reinforce this lovability—because love really is in the eye of the beholder—is to work with the sending of metta to yourself. Now, I don't know if you've thought about this, but when you send metta to yourself, you're actually playing two roles in that drama. You're the sender and you're the receiver at the same time.

Most of us, I think, find it a lot easier to be the sender. I don't know if you've noticed that. It's kind of easy to give, isn't it? It's often difficult to receive because receiving can trigger that feeling, "I'm not worthy of receiving this gift."

So in the sending of metta to yourself, see if you can feel into being the receiver of the metta—not just being the sender, but what it feels like to receive. One of the ways that you can accentuate this, and something we recommend that you play with: imagine as you're receiving the metta phrases that your dearest friends and family members are seated in a half circle in front of you. All the people you'd really like to hang out with—only people that you want to be there get in that circle. And they're sending the metta phrases to you. The metta phrases are coming out of their hearts to you, and you can be purely in receiving mode and feel what it feels like to receive their love from the people you know do care about you.

Another way that it's fun to play with the metta with this self-judging is to start to listen to the comments of the judge: "You always mess up. You never get it right. Nobody's ever going to really be crazy about you." And you start to notice that this judge kind of has a personality. Not a very warm and fuzzy personality either, but a definite personality.

So you don't have to do a lot of looking through the past to see, "Is this my second-grade teacher? Is this my mother? Is it my father?" You don't have to do that. But what if you were to give a personality to that judge? What if you were to kind of make a funny character out of the judge and give it a name and give it a face and sort of make a person out of it? Who does that judge seem like they are? If they were a cartoon character, who would they be?

One person that I made this suggestion to decided that his judge was Darth Vader. And then every time the judging comment would come in, he'd say, "Hi, Darth. Thanks very much for the suggestion," and go back to the metta practice. But another thing that's very effective to do is send metta to Darth because Darth really needs it. As you tune in, you probably recognize Darth is not a very happy character. Darth could use some metta. So if you make a character out of that judge, direct the metta and see what happens. See what happens to the tone of those judging comments.

Two other things that are helpful in the metta practice in working with this tendency to judge. One is feeling the goodness in ourselves, and you can also reflect on the qualities that you like in yourself or reflect on good things that you've done in the past just to get in touch with the intention, the wholesome motivation behind those actions. So you'll know that kindness is something that you do from time to time from that good intention. You'll feel that goodness in yourself.

And one final thing that can be really helpful is to send metta to yourself as a child. Imagine yourself at a time in your life when you can get in touch with your innocence. It might be four or five, eight or ten, teenage years when you felt that vulnerability and awkwardness. And even have a sense that you can hold that child and be the adult maybe that that child didn't have. And you can give that child the love and caring and affirmation and visibility. You can see what that child had that perhaps no one else at that time was able to see and reflect to you. This can be really healing, and it can really open up the channel of caring for yourself.

Another form of aversion that often arises strongly during metta practice is anger. This might seem contradictory, but sometimes that's precisely what gets evoked.

This came home to me powerfully during a long metta retreat I attended a few years ago. I had been navigating a difficult relationship that year, and as the retreat progressed, I found myself becoming quite quiet and concentrated, feeling genuine metta arising. But then thoughts of this challenging relationship would surface, and I'd begin what Sylvia aptly called "the road to indignation"—traveling down that familiar path, reliving all the reasons my anger seemed justified.

I would spiral into this anger for thirty minutes at a time, and of course it was extremely painful. As we become more sensitive through loving-kindness practice and through stillness, when these difficult emotions arise, they hit much harder. I was truly suffering from this anger, and I think it was only this suffering that finally motivated me to let go. This is why experiencing anger directly during a metta retreat isn't necessarily problematic—it allows us to feel its full impact. We may wish for the other person to suffer, but in that very moment, we ourselves are the ones truly suffering.

I wasn't able to release this anger easily, but I had heard that one could try sending metta to the difficult person. My initial reaction was skeptical—this seemed somewhat contrived. I thought I would have to pretend to like them, and I didn't want to engage in that kind of pretense. But I was desperate, so I decided to try.

I began to reflect on the Pali term vyāpāda, which is sometimes translated simply as "anger." However, the most accurate translation is "ill-will"—the direct opposite of goodwill, which is synonymous with metta. Goodwill means "I want you to do well," while ill-will means "I don't want you to do well. I want you to do badly. I actually want you to hurt."

When I examined my anger closely, I could see this component of ill-will clearly present. From a Western psychological perspective, I could somewhat rationalize being angry at someone. But when I faced the fact that I actually wanted them to suffer, I realized this was dangerously close to cruelty. Cruelty means we take pleasure in someone else's suffering, but wanting someone to suffer is merely one step away from that cruelty.

I couldn't live with seeing myself as a cruel person. I had been able to accept the idea of myself as an angry person, but I couldn't accept the idea of myself as cruel. This recognition powerfully motivated me to examine this aspect of ill-will and to transform it. I simply didn't want to continue down this path.

So I began sending the same metta phrases to this difficult person. After some time, I discovered I could reluctantly wish them well. It didn't come easily or immediately, but with practice, I found I could genuinely wish for their wellbeing. It didn't require that they suffer.

When I was able to feel even a small amount of genuine well-wishing, the ill-will completely disappeared. It was blocked entirely, because we cannot simultaneously wish someone well and wish them ill. The

moment I could send even a little metta to this difficult person and feel some goodwill, it stopped the ill-will completely. The anger simply ran out of fuel—it calmed down and essentially ended.

It would resurface again, perhaps the next day or two days later, and I would return to the phrases. I'd cultivate some goodwill, and the ill-will would dissipate once more. This was a profound lesson for me, and I offer it as one skillful approach for working with anger when it arises.

I encourage you to examine your own suffering when anger is present. Look deeply into this element of ill-will, and explore whether there's a possibility of wishing well instead, observing what effect this might have.

It was during this same period of practice that something else occurred that truly awakened me and touched me deeply. Sylvia had spoken about "the road to indignation," and I began to understand where this road ultimately leads.

I was starting to get angry again with my difficult person when suddenly an image arose spontaneously in my mind. I didn't ask for it. I hadn't been trying to create anything. It simply appeared and materialized like an image in a dream.

The vision showed a dark road crossing a barren plain at night, with a tree growing by the roadside. The tree had lost all its leaves, and the wind was howling through its bare branches. If you think of the Legend of Sleepy Hollow and the Headless Horseman, you'll understand the atmosphere of this image. It was cold, barren, dark, desolate, and scary—a very lonely place.

Somehow I intuited that this was the road of anger, the picture representing the road of indignation. Then, without intending it, on the other side of my visual field, I began to notice a yellow light. As I turned my attention to it, it became a sun—a bright sun in the sky. Below it appeared a green earth, and on this earth were seated monks and nuns in meditation posture. One figure was central and seemed like a Buddha image. Flying through the air were beings that looked like Thai art depictions of devas—seated figures traveling through space. The whole scene was bathed in warm yellow sunlight.

The intuition came clearly: this was the destination of metta. The contrast could not have been more vivid—the destination of anger dark, lonely, desolate, barren, and scary; the destination of metta filled with good spiritual friends, warmth, wisdom, and light.

It frightened me. This was such a strong message from my own unconscious about the choices I make. Until that point, I'd had an attitude that I could indulge my anger without consequence. I thought it was okay to be angry, that it wouldn't hurt anyone if I just let my mind run wild for a while. But then I saw there are consequences—consequences for my own heart. Running toward anger leads to one destination; following the path of loving kindness leads to another.

This vision deeply motivated me to make my most sincere effort in the direction of loving kindness.

Authentic spiritual traditions also understand the fruits of anger. The Dalai Lama tells a story of meeting a Tibetan monk in India who had managed to escape from Tibet. The Dalai Lama had known this monk only briefly before 1959, the year he himself escaped Tibet after ten years of Chinese occupation. The monk had then been imprisoned—probably during the Cultural Revolution—for twenty years. His crime was being a monk.

When he finally escaped to India and met with the Dalai Lama, His Holiness asked how his time had been. The monk replied that he had been in danger while in prison. The Dalai Lama said he understood completely—the monk had been tortured and could have been killed at any time.

"Yes, that's true," the monk replied, "but that's not really what I meant. I was in danger of feeling angry at my prison guards."

The Dalai Lama said that after hearing this, his estimation of this monk rose considerably. This is amazing practice—to be concerned about harboring anger toward one's guards and tormentors. This exemplifies the possibility inherent in developing the heart of loving kindness. It's graduate-level work, but it represents what's truly possible for us.

The last form of aversion I want to explore is fear.

Sylvia, I think, mentioned that this practice of loving kindness was originally taught as a protection practice. The story in the commentaries tells of the Buddha instructing a group of monks to sit in a forest grove at night for their meditation. Obediently, they went out together, took their seats among the trees, and began to practice. But they quickly became frightened and ran back to the Buddha, saying, "We can't meditate there. It's too scary. It's dark, and the tree spirits were coming out, making terrible sounds—and worse than that, making really awful smells."

The Buddha responded, "I'm going to give you a protection that you can take back into the forest, and it's the only protection you'll need. I want you to do the practice of loving kindness. Direct loving thoughts all around you to all beings that are anywhere near."

The monks returned to the same grove and began directing thoughts of loving kindness. When they reported back to the Buddha a few days later, everything had changed. "The tree spirits got really friendly to us," they said. "They started doing everything they could to support our practice, and it became a wonderful place to meditate."

What I find fascinating in this story is its kernel of truth: when we change the orientation of the heart to loving kindness, the whole world around us takes on a warmer feeling. It may not have changed externally, but it feels so different to us.

I was teaching a month-long retreat here a couple of years ago, and one participant had to leave halfway through to travel across the country for a family funeral. She was already quite sensitive after two weeks

of practice and nervous about this abrupt transition back into the world with no integration time. I suggested that whenever she was around groups of people—in airport lines, waiting lounges, on the plane itself—she practice the loving-kindness phrases continuously.

When she returned three days later, she reported it had been a fantastic practice. She had started to feel nervous, alien, alone, and isolated. But as soon as she began the loving kindness practice, she felt connected to all the people around her, recognizing that their wishes too were for safety, happiness, and health. "It made the whole trip easy," she said.

Fear has been one of my greatest hindrances—probably my greatest single hindrance through years of dharma practice. I spent countless hours on the cushion with vipassana practice, learning to relate to fear, and gained tremendously from that work. I learned to be with fear with some equanimity, to let it arise without being afraid of the fear itself. The whole experience of fear became increasingly workable. I developed qualities of acceptance, spaciousness, and non-identification with it. But in my personality and character, when my mind would go out of balance, it would still tip toward fear.

Then, after many years of this practice, I did a long metta retreat and noticed something remarkable. Although vipassana practice had steadily weakened my fear over the years—making it smaller and smaller—the basic conditioning was still there, the fundamental tendency of mind unchanged. But after some time with metta practice, a new conditioning could step in. When my mind would tend in some direction, it would often move toward metta instead of fear. It gave my mind another place to go.

I found that metta could actually establish new conditioning to replace the conditioning of fear. Vipassana practice tends to reduce our conditioning by helping us step back from it with spaciousness, but it doesn't necessarily put different conditioning in its place. The Brahma Viharas, however, can actually transform the heart so it moves strongly into love, compassion, and joy. This is a great gift.

So loving-kindness practice serves as a terrific antidote for fear—a profound contribution to working with this obstacle. With all these hindrances, it's helpful to understand that we don't have to attack the obstacle directly. We don't need to push anything out. That would be the very antithesis of metta.

Metta is a welcoming, friendly, accepting kind of energy toward whatever is there. So as you're doing the metaphors and connecting with that sense of caring, if one of these obstacles comes up—judgment, anger, fear, sadness, longing, any of these things—recognize that it's there. This is part of touching into the heart center after each phrase. See what emotion is present. Sometimes it will be metta, sometimes it won't. Sometimes it will be one of the obstacles.

Notice if that's there, but continue to connect with the caring and the person and the phrases. Then what happens is these obstacles start to get held in the space of metta. You don't have to make them go away. You don't even have to change them very much. But as they get held in your growing feeling of friendliness and warmth and acceptance, they get included in that.

It's kind of like Sylvia was talking about last night—how your neighbor's habits that irritated you in the beginning of the retreat start to seem cute by the third day. You know, the way somebody clatters their silverware when they're eating in the dining hall. The same thing happens with these difficult states of mind. They start to seem like old friends, a little bit more like old friends.

You just have the sense that you're including this part of yourself. It's not an easy part. It's not the most fun part, but it's a real part. You're including that difficult part of yourself within the metta, and it all just becomes more and more okay. It's okay that those visitors are there. You don't have to make them go away. The more we open to them and accept like that, the more the steam goes out of their sails. They thrive on resistance. The more we open to them, the more they can just relax also. As we relax, they relax. This is really the transformation of those difficult states—through openness, through acceptance, and through non-resistance. That allows them also to relax.

So I wanted to talk also about the growing purity in the practice. Sally said this morning that we're really developing two qualities here strongly. One is metta, the other is concentration. We've talked a lot about the metta, so I don't want to focus on that for the rest of this talk. I want to talk about the other property, which is that of concentration. Sylvia started to talk about it last night when she talked about the influence of this quality of rapture—a kind of joyful interest that comes in practice and how it offsets the tendency of aversion. So I want to talk more about the factor of concentration in practice and the benefits that it brings.

What is it? What is concentration? It took me a long time to figure this out in my practice. I heard the word talked about, but I didn't have a sense of what it meant. This factor is kind of in our consciousness, but it's not very much in our culture. It's an archetypal thing. All these images in the West of yogis on mountaintops in Asia pop up in cartoons all the time. The fact that they pop up in cartoons means that they're deep within our psyche somewhere because they're such a recurrent image.

Some of the cartoons emphasize the wisdom aspect of these gurus on the mountaintops, and I'm going to steal some of Sylvia's material to tell you about one of these cartoons, which she has authorized me to share. We're always trying to borrow, beg, or steal each other's material, so it's a great gift.

There's a cartoon with a guru up on the mountaintop. It's a man with a long beard, just wrapped in a loincloth, sitting at the entrance to a cave with big Himalayan peaks behind him. In front of him is seated this Western person, looks like a Western person dressed in conventional street clothes, sitting cross-legged in front of the guru. The caption is the guru speaking. This is the wisdom transmission. The guru is saying, "If I knew the wisdom of life, do you think I'd be sitting in my underpants in this cave?" That's the wisdom tradition.

So the other cartoons that you see are the concentration tradition. In those, the image is the guru wrapped up in a shawl with the eyes closed and the body perfectly still. You get the sense that the consciousness is very withdrawn into his or her being. This is a strong archetypal image too.

And this image shows basically the manifestation of concentration, or the Pali term is samadhi.

There are three essential qualities we notice in this image. First is its inward nature. The shawl represents that being wrapped up and drawn within, that cocooning. Second is the stillness of the body. Something ceases moving in concentration. Third is the blissful nature. There's a sense that this yogi has found a source of peace and contentment that comes from their own mind. The phrase "happiness comes from within" is really validated in this image of samadhi or concentration.

Samadhi is the state when the mind has come together and become collected. It's this unification that gives it its blissful nature. It also gives it its strength, and that's what develops the stillness. Most of the time, we're giving away this innate strength and contentment by shooting the mind out to the past and future, looking at things with longing or regret, going over and over our worries, our fears, and our hopes. We give away this innate purity.

Much of the purpose of a meditation object is to give a new focus to the mind so that the attention can collect around that object in the present moment and stop this futile wandering into past and future, into hope and fear. This is exactly what the metaphors do. They give an object that hopefully is fairly interesting and has some intrinsic appeal that the mind can collect around. As it does, you start to feel the calming that comes from the diminishing of hope and fear.

The more you collect around those phrases and the person, the more you come into the present moment. The more you come fully into the present moment, the more your whole being gets united, back the way it was when we were kids. Children live so fully in the present, and that's why they're so whole. That's why they're so well integrated. With that kind of integration, they have a trust in themselves where they can flow through strong emotions without getting so concerned about it. You don't see children worrying when they go from laughter to tears. They just pass through the tears and then they're back into laughter again a little bit later. That's the wholeness of heart that comes from the unified mind.

As the attention collects around the object, it's as though there's a merging of our consciousness with the object. This merging is very close to the feeling of metta. You know how love is a kind of merging energy. We want to be united with the love object. Concentration has that same effect. There's a merging of the attention with the object when it is of interest.

In that merging, there's a little bit of a death. There's a death of this person and personality that are based in past and future. So sometimes there's a little bit of fear in concentration. It's like, if I really give myself to the phrases and the person and the feeling of metta, what's going to be left of me? What's going to be left of my personal history, my past, and my future plans? So there can be a little bit of resistance to this concentration even though it's a very wholesome state and very deeply satisfying when we give ourselves to it.

Rumi had a poem that expresses this beautifully. He said, "The way of love is not some subtle argument.

The way there is devastation. Birds make great sky circles of their freedom. How do they learn it? They fall. And falling, they're given wings."

In our meditation practice, we are encouraged to fall into our object. Let go of past and future. Let go of personality worries and let your attention fall completely into the person, the phrases and the feeling in the heart. Falling, you're going to be given wings. You're going to discover that concentration and the metta that comes with it will hold you up, that it's really all you need.

Many people come into metta practice with the intention of opening the heart, and that's really all that people are interested in. I'll often be teaching a vipassana retreat and talking about some of the Buddha's teachings on impermanence and selflessness. People will tell me in an interview or sometimes in a question, "I'm not interested in your philosophy. I'm just here to open my heart. Come on, just keep it simple."

The problem is—and this is what I discovered in my life as a young adult—I could contact love quite easily when I was in my late teens and early twenties, but I couldn't stabilize there. I could touch it, but it wasn't repeatable or predictable or sustainable.

So I would fall into these states of love—and I don't just mean romantic love, but really love of nature and life, the cosmos. I would fall into them, and I'd also fall out of them every time. I didn't know how to get it back or how to sustain it.

Through doing Dharma practice, what I've come to believe is that it's very hard to stabilize love without two other factors. The first and really most important is wisdom. We have to have the understanding primarily of non-clinging. That's the only way the heart can stay unburdened—by learning not to cling to the past. When the heart is unburdened, it's more able to love.

But the second factor that really strongly supports that stabilization is samadhi. Because when concentration is firm and the mind isn't wavering, we're not pulled by hope and fear and all the obstacles. When we're really fully in the moment, we rediscover that native capacity, that childlike capacity for opening. There's nothing else we really have to add but the intention for it and the stabilization.

So all the rest of Dharma practice—the wisdom practices of Vipassana, the concentration factor—strongly support this opening into metta.

Start to get familiar in your practice with how concentration feels. The sign of it is that you're able to sustain the phrases and close connection with the phrases for a little bit of time. In the beginning, it might just be thirty seconds. You might just have this feeling: "I really connected with phrase after phrase with no gaps for thirty seconds." And that had a certain feeling. And then as it goes on, it'll be a minute and five minutes. I was talking with someone today who said that in a good sitting today, they'd been able to sustain the phrases for an hour. That's fantastic.

Start to notice when this comes in what your experience is like. What does it feel like when the mind is in that concentrated place where you're able to stay connected to the present moment? Is it painful? Generally not. Generally, it's a really sweet place. Because there's a steadiness of mind, and because of the steady mind, it's not being pulled through hope and fear, there's a sense that we can relax. There's a sense of being able to feel the body relax in those moments.

Tune into that and notice that. As the body relaxes, the mind can have the sense of relaxing into the body, of actually dropping into the body. It's as though one of the dualities that we've kept—of mind as something separate from body, trying to control, manipulate, change—that duality starts to fade and the mind and body come together. Again, a deepening of the unification.

There was one image that came to me as I was doing a period of concentration practice and feeling this settling—and it'll give away my age, but I want to share it because some of you may have seen it too. It's a television commercial from the 1950s. Do you all remember the commercials for Prell shampoo? Some of you? Okay, this is black and white television in my day, but you knew that Prell was a certain color. Prell was green. So there'd be the bottle of the shampoo on the commercial, and then they'd drop something in at the top. Anybody remember what they dropped? Yeah, they'd drop a pearl. A lot of my generation here.

And that pearl would ever so slowly travel down the length of the bottle of Prell and then get to the bottom. And the slowness of its voyage was proof that Prell shampoo was thick and lustrous and good for your hair. You could just feel the viscosity of the shampoo by how slowly the pearl was dropping down.

That is an image for the mind settling into the body in the relaxation of concentration. So you can remember this as the Prell Sutra. This sense of the mind settling easily into the body, the body in a state of deep relaxation, brings a lot of contentment with it. It's a very satisfying experience.

To whatever degree you experience it, start to tune into that contentment. There's a peacefulness when the concentration is present. There's an ease. There's a lack of problem in that.

And then start to notice what happens when you're not so connected with the phrases. What happens when the mind starts getting distracted again to past and future, to things we like and things we don't like? What does that feel like? It's not so peaceful. It's kind of stirred up and jangly and has sharp edges.

These are the hindrances that Sally talked about a couple of nights ago—the forces of desire, aversion, dullness, restlessness, and doubt. Concentration, as it strengthens and deepens, has the power to block off the hindrances. It stops the operations of the hindrances.

For a meditator, you can feel that the hindrances are the things that disturb our peace of mind moment after moment. In fact, in every moment when we're not fully in the present, take a look and see if this isn't so. Unless we're unified in the present moment with our experience, the hindrances are operating in that kind of jangly way. Concentration lets us out of that bondage to the hindrances.

The Buddha compared this process of coming out of the hindrances to five different experiences. When these five hindrances have been abandoned in oneself, one sees that as freedom from debt, health after a long illness, released from prison, freedom from slavery, and a land of safety. That's how important the absence of the hindrances is—like getting out of prison, like being freed from slavery, like being returned to health.

This is a beautiful quality in and of itself, but that's not the end of the benefit of concentration. The most important reason that we develop concentration in Dharma practice is to steady the mind so that we can see into the nature of things more and more clearly. It's seeing into the nature of things with clarity that the Buddha said brings liberation, brings the insight that finally frees the heart.

Concentration in itself is a beautiful place, but it's impermanent. It can decay just as it was built up by factors and circumstances. It will decay in the absence of those factors and circumstances. A lasting peace and a lasting freedom is only possible through deep insight into the nature of things and the nature of the unconditioned.

So concentration, although it can be developed to these depths of absorption called jhanas—providing seclusion from the hindrances and a great sense of well-being and contentment—is not the final step on the journey. The final step is to take that base of steadiness of mind and direct it toward understanding of the nature of life and existence. From that, the freedom, the lasting freedom, can spring.

When these two go together—the stability of concentration, the flowering of metta, supported by insight—then we get a sense of this beautiful abiding that the Buddha talked about in the Metta Sutta. I'll close with a short quote from that:

"So with a boundless heart, one should cherish all living beings, radiating kindness over the entire world, spreading upward to the skies and downward to the depths, outward and unbounded, freed from hatred and ill will. Whether standing or walking, seated or lying down, one should sustain this recollection. This is said to be the sublime abiding."

Let's just sit together for a minute, please.

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