Mettā: Its Near & Far Enemies

Guy Armstrong · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Guy Armstrong · 56:42

The subject of tonight's talk is metta and its near and far enemies.

I grew up in the center of the country, in a little town called Webster Groves, Missouri, which is a suburb of St. Louis. It's so middle America that the year after I graduated from high school, NBC came into town and made a documentary called "16 in Webster Groves" to show what was happening in middle America. That's how quintessentially suburban it was.

But curiously enough, at the age of 16, in Webster Groves, I bought my first book on Buddhism. This was 1964, not a time when there were many books on Buddhism available. I have no idea why I bought it. Looking back, I have no idea why. But going through my bookshelf tonight, I found it, and it brought back some memories. It's called *The Way of Zen* by Alan Watts, with a printing date of 1962, though I bought it in 1964. It's been with me all these years.

This was the first book that awakened me to a different possibility of looking at life than the Christian mythology I'd been brought up with, which didn't settle very well with me. I actually became an agnostic also at age 16, reading Mark Twain's *Letters from the Earth*. So this was quite a revelation to me.

Thinking back about my interest in Buddhism, I got into extensive reading in college. I wasn't majoring in religious studies at all, but I became interested and read the books I could find, which then were largely about Zen—Watts and D.T. Suzuki. I was really inspired by the descriptions of the Buddha's peace and that unshakable calm, and especially how he had gone beyond the fear of dying. I thought it was so amazing that it was possible for a human being not to be afraid of death, because it seemed so scary to me at the time. So I was very inspired by all that.

But when I actually think about the fuel for my spiritual journey, it came from a somewhat different direction. In my late teens and early twenties, I started to open up to some very strong experiences of love. They came into my consciousness with a mystical flavor because there was a strong feeling of oneness connected with them. This could happen through interacting with people, through being in nature, or through exposure to art or music. But this whole new way of relating to the world started to dawn on me about that time.

The thing that was difficult was that those experiences weren't at all stable for me. I would sometimes enter them and they'd be wonderful, then I'd come out and have no idea why they'd happened or how to make them happen again or why they went away. When they were there, they were so fulfilling that the rest of my life seemed shallow by comparison. Then they started to come less and less frequently, and it

produced a lot of despair in me because I'd seen what I really wanted in life—what was really satisfying—and it was slipping away.

So I really think, as I look back on my motivation for this path, it was to rediscover that access to love. That's what's been guiding me all along. Rumi puts it this way: "Someone who does not run toward the allure of love walks a road where nothing lives." I didn't want to walk a road where nothing lived. I really wanted that to be alive for me.

But what I didn't understand is that openness to love and the heart space couldn't survive without the support of wisdom. In the Buddhist tradition, this wisdom is particularly about non-identification with self and non-clinging—not holding onto anything. When the mind is in a state of not holding to anything in the world, then it has the steadiness and the openness to touch that which is greater than our individual personality. This took me a long time to understand: that love had to be supported with wisdom or it couldn't be stable.

One of my favorite dharma writers—really speakers, but I know him through transcriptions of his talks—is a Vedanta teacher named Nisargadatta Maharaj who wrote a book called *I Am That*, which I highly recommend if you haven't encountered it. Ajahn Sumedho, who was just here, was also really influenced by that book and says he considers Advaita another branch of Buddhism. I kind of like that thought too.

Maharaj put it this way: "Love tells me I am everything. Wisdom tells me I am nothing. Between these two poles, my life flows." There we have that fullness in the union of love, and we have the emptiness of non-attachment, of not-self. The two of them together make up the fullness of spiritual life.

In our tradition, vipassana is the doorway to that non-clinging, the non-attachment, the doorway to emptiness, releasing the mind from all its holding, all its burdens, all its clinging. But the counterpart for us is that metta practice is our avenue to that openness of heart and the doorway to love and feelings of union.

Now, I find it quite interesting that the Buddha talked about it as a feeling between beings. Metta or loving-kindness is always described as our approach to other people or other beings. The deer, the lizards, the bluebirds are also included in that feeling of metta.

So I think this is a very interesting skillful means. Why? Because people are always available. We are social beings. We all know people. We all have experienced love with people. So that channel is there for everyone. Not everyone lives close to nature. Not everyone is in touch with beautiful art, transformative art or music. But everyone is in touch with the love of human beings.

So I believe the Buddha chose this path as a way to open the heart. But as it gets open through this human dimension, it also is transformed and opens in that way to the whole world. So I feel that this quality of loving-kindness toward others is just a pathway to this general state of love, this deep part of our nature.

It's extraordinary when you meet somebody who's developed that quality so highly. And for me, the Dalai Lama always exemplifies that capability. He was here in this room, I think it was three years ago. We had a meeting with about 200 Buddhist teachers, mostly Western, but also Asian teachers who are teaching in the West today. And he spent a couple of days with us and engaged in dialogue and was just his natural, amazing self.

One of the things he said at that meeting is, "I'm not interested in propagating Buddhism. I'm interested in propagating human values." And this is really the way I think he approaches everyone he meets. He believes regardless of religion, the human values of care and kindness can transform the world and take away the suffering that we cause one another.

So it was interesting to see his effect on the security guards who were here. Because he's a head of state in exile, the U.S. State Department has to provide security for him when he travels in this country. Every morning, the buildings, the residence halls, had to be vacated. Teachers were staying in them. They had to go out and come back in through metal detectors. Because, you know, we are dangerous people. We often pack guns and explosives.

So they had to check us out, and we all walked through these metal detectors that were staffed by the State Department security guards. These people are another level up from the Transportation Security Administration, whoever it is that you run into at airports. These were heavy-duty guys. They'd have a nightstick on one hip and a pistol on the other and a walkie-talkie radio on their back, and you didn't mess with them. They'd been providing security for Yasser Arafat and Golda Meir and people like that. So you didn't mess with these guys.

But at the end of the two days of the conference, they all asked if they could have their picture taken with the Dalai Lama. And of course he obliged. So somewhere there's this photo of the Dalai Lama and these about eight security guards in their white tops and their nightsticks and pistols. It's quite beautiful how he just reaches out and touches, makes that human connection with people.

So overall, the four Brahmaviharas really give us a complete way to address one another, address the situation in our own life from the heart's point of view, and the good and bad fortune that we meet in life. In our tradition, we use metta as the foundation. Metta is that general openness of the heart that just looks at another and wants for their well-being. It's just sort of looking in another's eyes and going, "I hope you're happy. I hope you're well." So recognizing there's a consciousness in there that feels pleasure and feels pain and sort of going, "I hope things are going well in there for you." That's the foundation.

Now in the Tibetan tradition, you'll hear compassion talked about as the foundation, but don't think that these two are too far apart. I hope you got that sense today as James led the meditation in compassion. The Dalai Lama says compassion is just basic human warmth. That's the same thing we could say about metta, basic human warmth.

So when this basic human warmth turns to somebody who's in suffering, the flavor that comes through is compassion. And when it just rests with a general condition, not knowing if you're happy or unhappy, the flavor is metta. If it finds there's unhappiness, it gets just transformed. It just changes flavor into compassion. So that's the open heart that touches suffering. On the other hand, if someone is happy, then the open heart responds with its own happiness. There's a joy when somebody else is also happy.

Somebody else's happiness, if our heart is open, lights us up too. We just resonate. That's why it's sometimes called sympathetic joy.

And then the fourth of the Brahma Viharas is equanimity. That's what gives the mind the steadiness not to be so moved by the changing conditions of life. We'll talk a little more about this later. But if we fixate on the result of the phrase—we say "may you be happy" to the benefactor, but the benefactor isn't happy—we could feel like, oh, it's not working or I failed. The equanimity lets us support the loving kindness by saying, "that's okay. Everything changes. People go through ups and downs. My mind can still be balanced even if there's unhappiness there."

So these four together give us a way to meet the joys and sorrows of our life and of the lives of other people.

So what supports the development of this open heart? What leads us into this quality of love that's an integral part of our human nature?

It's funny how many analogies there are in spiritual life to gardening. I bet a lot of you have reflected on this. When Sally and I first got together—it was twenty years ago, a little over twenty years ago in England—we were living in this Dharma community which we had started up at the invitation of this very rich philanthropist who was living in Devon. He offered us the top floor of his house, which was this incredible Georgian mansion that was perched up on a hill that overlooked agricultural land—just open rolling green hills around a broad U-bend of the River Dart, about five miles above Dartmouth where it flowed into the English Channel. It was just an incredible spot.

But we'd both been Dharma bums for a few years at that time, and we had no money. We weren't going to get rich living there because to support ourselves in this community, we worked as this philanthropist's gardeners. And he paid us the princely sum of one pound eighty an hour to grow his vegetables and tend the other gardens. So there we were making about twenty-five pounds a week. What's that? Probably about forty dollars a week. That was our wage and we got free rent.

But we were in this Dharma community and we were doing a lot of gardening, and I just kept thinking all the time: this is just like Dharma practice. You cultivate the good soil, you put good compost in, you make it rich with these beautiful qualities, you pull out the weeds, you uproot what's unwholesome, you tend it every day, you take care of it with love, you're very attentive.

So our metta practice is also like a gardening exercise. What we're doing in saying these phrases is really

planting seeds in every moment. And the seed that we're planting is a wholesome intention. We can't change the heart overnight, but we can change it one moment at a time by planting these little seeds again and again in it.

Really, the essence of the practice that we're doing is the sincerity that you bring to that wish. Every time you wish "may you be safe, may you be happy, may you be healthy, may you be at ease," the sincerity that you put in that wish is the seed of that wholesome intention. It's your ability to care just in that moment that starts to change the heart.

This is interesting. I think it's a very modest approach. We start with what's real, what's accessible, what we can actually influence just in one moment. And just in that moment, we turn the heart to caring. That's the essence of metta—the spirit of caring. And when we do that over and over and over, little by little we change the direction of the heart.

Somebody mentioned today that when they came and sat down, they started to see how the mind was filled with critical thoughts. And it would run in those tracks. They said, "Oh, that's a habitual tendency of mine to run in critical thinking." But every period that went by, they saw how the metta was starting to just turn that a little bit in a different direction. And that's what these little seeds of intention do. They're not dramatic, but they start to make a shift in the stream of our conditioning.

We can't determine when these little seeds are going to sprout into a big plant—the big plant of strong love or sense of union or anything like that. But we know that that's the direction that they're heading in. And just like if you are planting tomatoes for your summer garden, you put the seed in the right kind of soil at the right kind of depth, and you give it the right kind of sunlight and the right kind of watering—that's all you can do. You can't tell that tomato plant when to come up from the earth.

In fact, if you try to pull it, you break it. And so just like with metta, if you try to force any feeling to be strong, you'll break it. Too much pressure. The heart doesn't respond very well to being squeezed.

But if you just trust it, because this process is just as natural as the sunlight and the rain falling on the seed that's in the right kind of soil, the heart will start to open from these seeds because these are good seeds. You just don't get bad plants from good seeds if the conditions are there. So we learn to trust.

We just have this faith that by coming back to this caring—I hope you're well, I hope you're happy—again and again, the seeds are being planted and they will grow up in time. Nature will determine when. But that's all we have to do. As gardeners, all we have to do is plant the seeds. The Dharma takes care of the rest.

So don't worry if it's not there immediately. Don't worry if it feels like nothing's happening for a while. Just keep trusting in nature and know that the seeds are ripe.

The essence of metta is meaning it—meaning that I hope you're well, meaning that I hope you're healthy

and are at ease. If we say the phrase like a mantra, just letting the words go by, it doesn't do it. It's not just the words, it's our giving the words that meaning that makes the practice work.

In a way, if you take a look at what's really happening in a moment where you say the phrase and you mean it, you are being metta in that moment. And you've kind of pulled that, just a little bit of metta, out of nowhere. How did you know how to do that? There's no technique that can make you sincere. But if you find in yourself that sincerity, that's how you strengthen that quality.

This is a general principle in Buddhist practice. If you want to develop any quality of heart and mind in the teachings of the Buddha, you do it not by starting out over here somewhere else. You do it by just putting yourself in that mind state. So if you want to develop the quality of metta, you locate that within yourself. Oh, all I have to do is care. Then I've got the feeling of metta here and now. If you want to develop the quality of compassion, you look on suffering and you just care.

I don't know where that comes from. I mean, I could tell you a word. It comes from your Buddha nature. But that doesn't necessarily mean anything. I could just say it comes from fairyland or neverland. Doesn't really matter. But what's important is that you know that it's there and you start to get better and better at calling it out when you want to.

In vipassana, the equivalent to this is our mindfulness practice. We develop this faculty of learning to pay attention and see clearly in each new moment. And as we do that, it gets easier and easier to see clearly in each new moment.

The practice, as it's said in the tradition, these practices are onward leading. It's not just that there's something beautiful happening in the moment, though there is. That sincere caring is really a beautiful quality. That clear attention is a beautiful quality. But it's also an onward leading quality, which means that as we give ourselves to it again and again, it builds a momentum in us. And at some point, the Buddha said that momentum is unstoppable. It's irreversible. It carries us to awakening. It carries us to liberation.

So really our work as practitioners is just to keep putting ourselves in those little slices of awakened mind and heart over and over and over. And that builds the momentum that takes us all the way to liberation.

The Buddha said, "Don't disregard the accumulation of wholesomeness, saying, 'This will come to nothing.' By the gradual falling of raindrops, a jar is filled." So little by little, you're just putting those raindrops in the jar. And little by little, the jar fills up.

I want to talk a bit about how to use the technique of the metta practice to kind of draw out the spirit of caring. So I want to get a little bit technical about the instructions.

It's sort of a refinement of the instruction that I encourage you to play with if it appeals to you. It's not something anybody has to do—it's something I found helpful, and maybe you will too.

When I do the metta phrases in my own practice, I go through four steps with them. The first step is that I

connect with the person I'm sending to. Let's say the benefactor. So I'll get a real sense of the benefactor. For me, it works well to do it with an image, so I'll see the image of the benefactor before I say a word. For you, the image may not work so well. So it could be saying the name or just remembering your time with them—whatever works to kind of bring the person alive.

Because there's a real difference between saying a phrase like "May you live with ease" just sort of into the ether as a general kind of wish of goodwill, and saying it really directly to somebody. Like I'm looking at Shelly and I think, "Shelly, I want you to be well." That's a really different flavor. So as you say your phrase to the benefactor, let the benefactor be there so you know it's really for them. So that's the first thing—connect with the person.

The second thing then is to take a moment in the silence to feel whatever you feel for them. And hopefully you care for them. You have affection for them. You like them. There's something sweet there about looking on them. So wordlessly, you just let yourself feel whatever you feel—affection, love, care, interest, concern, whatever it is—just feel that. That's the second step.

The third step then is to let the phrase go out to them carrying that thing that you feel, this expression of affection or care. So you have the sense that the phrase is emanating from you, going toward the person, and it's carrying that feeling that you felt the moment before. "May you be safe from harm."

Fourth step: come back and connect to the heart center. This is not an esoteric, mystical experience. This is just whatever you feel in the center of your chest. The area behind the breastbone. There is supposed to be a chakra there. Don't worry about the chakra—whether it's there or open or closed or filled with light or you're breathing through it. We're just talking about this area behind the breastbone in the center of the chest that we often call the heart center. Come back and rest there.

Feel the physical sensation and also feel whatever emotion you're feeling right then. Could be a feeling of metta. Could be a feeling of affection. Could be a feeling of frustration. Could be a feeling of resentment—you remembered something that the benefactor said that wasn't so helpful. Could be not very much feeling at all. There's no particular feeling there right now. That's fine too.

So we're touching into the feeling level, and the value of that is as the metta feelings grow, that's where you'll connect with them. And so you want to make the metta feeling, whether it's present or absent, not something you care too much about. But when it's present, that's where you want to feel it.

Also, you can take some time there to kind of rest. Sometimes people say, "Oh, this practice is too heady. There are too many words. My brain's getting clogged up. I want to just take a vipassana break." Anybody take a vipassana break today? You probably never wanted to practice vipassana so dearly as when the brain's clogged up with metta phrases.

So here's a way to take a few seconds of vipassana break. You come into the center of the chest, you feel the sensation, you feel the emotion, and you can just rest there for a second, two seconds, and in that,

reconnect with the silence. This whole process of the four steps is held in this vast silence. And that's a way that the brain doesn't have to feel clogged up with all the words.

It's really a way to bring in some relief.

So just to review the four steps, if you want to play with it: connect with your person, feel that moment of whatever you feel for them, let the phrase go out to them expressing that feeling, and then come into the heart center and rest and feel whatever the echo of that phrase is, the effect is. This is the way we're actually shaping the heart.

Nisargadatta Maharaj had something to say about this too. He says, "Your own will is the backbone of your destiny." Will is a synonym for intention. It might even be the same word in Sanskrit. And the person he's in dialogue with, the questioner says, "Oh, surely karma has interfered with that." And Maharaj said, "Karma shapes the circumstances, but the attitudes are your own. Ultimately, your character shapes your life, and you alone can shape your character."

This is quite a revelation. We actually have the ability to shape our character. And the Brahmaviharas, as well as mindfulness, are a very strong way to do that.

So what obstructs the metta? Why is it with all our good intention—and I know all of you have had hundreds of these moments of good intention over the last couple of days—that our patterns are so difficult to dislodge? They're so tenacious. What are the patterns that block the unfolding of that caring heart?

With every Brahmavihara, James may have talked about this this afternoon, there are two qualities that are associated called the near and far enemy. The near enemy is the quality that looks like it, feels like it, smells like it, but isn't, and is actually kind of an unwholesome imposter masquerading as the true Brahmavihara. The far enemy is the opposite.

So with loving kindness, the opposite of love is hatred. So the far enemy is aversion. The near enemy is said to be affection that has attachment with it. So we see something beautiful. There's this quality like metta, which is kind of a union. There's a warm feeling of union with a person or a thing that's beautiful. But if there's clinging in the air, the clinging actually blocks the metta.

How can you tell which is there? This is an interesting thing to investigate. One of the ways we see this affection with attachment come in is in conditional love. And this may be in friendships, it may be in intimate relationships, but it's the attitude that wants something back from the person. There's an "I'll love you if you'll love me" condition on it.

With a benefactor, we might see this in relating to the benefactor if we feel, "Oh, I have a good connection with a benefactor, but somebody else is actually closer to them." If it's a teacher, you think, "Well, they've got a student they like better than they like me." Or if it's a parent, you think, "Yeah, but I wasn't the

favorite daughter in the family." And any kind of that comparing nature will take away some of the openness that we come to the person with.

There's this tendency you hear again and again in pop music where this attached love comes through. The archetypal song in pop music love would go something like, "I want you, I need you, I love you, and I'll kill you if I can't have you." This killing part is not quite metta.

And it's also the reason that we often don't use the word love so often when we talk about metta, because in our culture it's gotten mixed up with this romantic love or this attached love.

So how do we tell the difference? When the attachment is there, one thing that happens is the metta isn't universal, but it's just extended to a few people. There are a few people who get within our circle of caring, and basically everybody else can drop dead because who cares? But metta has a universal flavor that it extends to all beings, to everyone.

The other piece is that if you look at this attached love closely and you see what's really going on, it's not so much concerned about the other's welfare, which really is what metta is about. It's more concerned about my welfare. So we often say in romantic love there's a strong element of narcissism in it, especially in the whole falling in love thing. What really is happening in falling in love is we love the feeling of love and the other person engenders that for us. But generally that's not an altruistic love. That's not a selfless kind of love. We're not in that intimate relationship to be a bodhisattva to our partner generally. We're in it because we're getting high from the experience, the initial experience in that rush of romantic love.

So I believe there is a lot of metta in romantic relationships, but just start to tune into the parts, the moments that come when the mind is not in a metta frame, but is more in a needing frame, a desiring frame.

The far enemy of loving kindness is aversion or disliking or negativity. This comes up a lot in doing metta practice.

If you've been noticing it over these couple of days, you might think something's gone wrong. You know, I came here to feel metta and all of a sudden I'm feeling sad or I'm feeling jealous or I'm feeling angry with people. "Wow, I've really missed the boat." Not at all.

It's as though when we turn our intention to caring and to love, then that brings out all the things that don't align with it. Someone said this in an interview yesterday or today, that just as I turn my wish to happiness for myself, what comes to my mind are all the ways I'm not happy. This is a natural part of the process, and it's actually a valuable part of the process. It is a difficult part, but it's really natural.

We begin the process with ourselves because in some way the self has to be the foundation for love for others. Again, this is from Nisargadatta Maharaj: "Of all the affections, the love of oneself comes first. Your love of the world is the reflection of your love of yourself. A yogi is a person whose goodwill is aligned

with wisdom."

So we develop this love for ourselves first, but it doesn't necessarily flow that easily. And in fact, for most Westerners, I think it's the most difficult because it does bring up the ways that we don't feel quite happy or loving toward ourselves. It can bring up self-judgment, self-doubt, self-dislike, can bring up all the recollections of things we've done wrong.

The first time I did a long retreat, I was plagued by these memories of all the worst things that I'd done in my life. These visions just kept coming again and again. And I finally had to write them down to get them a little bit out of my head. And I made a list of the ten worst things I ever did.

One of them that really stuck—I can still feel it—was going on a trip with my father. My father was a great hunter and fisherman. He grew up in the outdoors from the time he was a kid and loved hunting and fishing. I think one of his great disappointments in me as a son is that I didn't connect to that. But I tried.

So I remember one winter morning, we were living in St. Louis, and we got up about 3:30 in the morning. We drove for about an hour to the banks of the Missouri River. It was dead of winter, so it was freezing cold. It was dark. And he had a little rowboat there with an outboard engine on it, and we motored over to this island in the middle of the Missouri. It was freezing cold. We had hand warmers and we were all bundled up. And then we walked for about forty-five minutes to his duck blind, which was on a little pond in the middle of this island. And we just waited there for dawn to come up because you can't start shooting until dawn.

As dawn was approaching and we could start to see some light, there was a songbird singing on a branch not very far away. And my father said, "Why don't you take some target practice?" I was about fifteen years old at the time, and I didn't really listen to myself. I didn't know how to listen to myself. I said, "Oh, dad thinks that's a good thing to do." So I took my shotgun and I pointed at this songbird and I pulled the trigger. And that bird was just gone. A shotgun blast at close range with a songbird doesn't leave very much.

And so that memory came back when I started to meditate. I hadn't thought of it for years. And then living with the precepts, the vow not to kill living beings, this came up for me. And I felt terrible about it. And there wasn't anything I could do about it. There was no way I could get any of that out. But I just had to live with that.

So it played out really strongly in my mind for quite a few days on the retreat, and I just had to keep opening and feeling bad about it. It was also a really instructive learning because I started to see the difference between feeling guilty and feeling remorseful. When things come to mind that we wish we hadn't done, it's actually wholesome to feel remorse about that. If we don't feel remorse, our heart's dead, or our moral sense is gone, one or the other. So feeling remorse is a sign that we're still healthy, and we need to feel that remorse and the grief and the sadness. And then if we can repair it, we should. But

sometimes it's beyond repair.

But that's different than guilt because guilt takes that feeling of remorse and lays self-judgment on top of it. And we can just beat ourselves with self-judgment for a long time, and it doesn't help. Self-judgment does not help the heart to open. It doesn't help the heart to feel compassion and it doesn't help the heart to care. Remorse does.

Remorse can put us more deeply in touch with how fragile life is, how sensitive every being around us is, and how much care we need to go through this life and not cause more suffering than is already here. That's a really arduous thing to do—to go through life without adding to the suffering that's already on the planet. Remorse is a good guide in that teaching. Guilt is not so helpful.

So tomorrow we'll do a couple of things related to forgiveness because forgiveness is really helpful to deal with a sense of remorse. We'll do a guided meditation on forgiveness tomorrow afternoon, and James will give a talk tomorrow evening. It's a really important piece. Forgiveness is so essential to be able to open the heart where there's been either guilt or resentment—asking for forgiveness and extending forgiveness. So we'll focus on that quite a bit tomorrow.

Sometimes we don't know exactly what we've done or why we feel judgmental of ourselves, but we can just feel a strong self-critical nature. This culture is expert at that. I don't know how we got into that, but American culture is very good at generating this critical mind.

Sogyal Rinpoche, who I think Sally mentioned the other night—a young Tibetan teacher who is good at working with Westerners—spent the last year in the States to get his green card and had a lot of contact with Westerners. And toward the end of that year, he said, "Oh, I realized something. Westerners have a hurt that Tibetan people don't." And he called it wounded love.

He said, "We have a lot of faults in Tibetan people, Tibetan culture. We have pride, we have envy, we have jealousy, we have anger—we have all those things. But we don't have this wounded love that comes out of a self-critical nature." And so he said that he felt that the practice of loving-kindness was really important for Westerners as a way to heal this self-judgmental attitude.

When I had first ordained in Thailand, I was traveling to practice in a monastery up north near Chiang Mai. And my preceptor, an older Thai monk, asked me to stay at one of his branch monasteries in Chiang Mai for a few days to break up my journey. So I did. I got to Chiang Mai and was well-received at the monastery.

And there was another Western monk practicing there who I hung out with and found him to be a really great guy. He would meditate during the morning. He'd been in robes for a long time, probably twelve, thirteen years at that point. He'd meditate in the morning, and then he'd receive visitors in the afternoon. And Thai people would come to see him. It was mostly Thai people. They'd talk to him about their meditation practice. They'd talk to him about their family problems, about what their children were

doing, about their work situation. He spoke fluent Thai. And they'd just talk about their life with him. And he had a lot of metta. Just greeted people with a lot of warmth and acceptance. I really liked him a lot.

We went on alms round the next morning. And we went out—he was a senior monk, I was behind him, and then there were these two samaneras, young novice monks, trailing us. And I thought, why are they coming? They don't usually go on alms round. But I just went along for the ride.

So we go down his usual route. People are just lining up to put things in his bowl. And he had a very big bowl—not quite this big, but kind of close. And the bowl kind of matched his girth. He was also very well fed by the Thai people. So we get out on his alms route, and they're just putting lots of great plastic bags in his bowl. And I can tell people really love him. And so his bowl fills up, my bowl fills up, and then we duck into an alley.

And they go, "What's going on? We need to keep going or go back to the monastery."

In the alley, the samaneras open their robes, and they've got big plastic bags hanging off their left shoulder. So we take all the food out of our bowls, put them in their plastic bags. They cover up. Our bowls are empty. We go down the street, and we fill up again. And we did that another time.

So then we go back to the monastery with these huge plastic bags and two bowls full of food. We take what we want and feed a lot of other people—the samaneras, the nuns, and finally the dogs. Everybody got fed from the love that this Western monk engendered from the Thai people that he was close to. So much metta, and he was well-loved in return.

But as we got to talking, he told me something that I found really striking. He said it wasn't always like this. "Actually, I spent the first nine years that I was in robes working through my self-hatred. Nine years." And yet the change was so apparent. His metta was so strong. He had really done that transformative work of the heart, both through mindfulness and loving-kindness practice.

These are really the first two hindrances that you'll encounter as you do the metta practice. The quality of attachment to your people, especially as we move on to the friend, which we'll do shortly, possibly with the benefactor also. Start to notice when that comes in—the quality of desiring in relationship, wanting something back.

The second one: all these different flavors of negativity or aversion. Anger is another one that can come up strongly. As you hang out with a friend or a benefactor, you may remember something they did that wasn't so helpful, that was hurtful. And these old feelings of resentment can easily surface. Anger can be very strong.

Or you may be with someone who has actually scared you, and fear will come up. You're afraid you're going to be hurt again by this person. So all these different forms of negativity will come into your metta practice.

How to work with them? If they're not too strong, the suggestion is just continue with your metta phrases and the intention. If you can still feel the intention to care, keep doing that. Recognize this other feeling. "Oh, there's fear there. There's anger. There's self-judgment." Just let it be there in the background.

What happens then is it kind of gets brought into the metta as well. As you fill up with metta, these feelings start to get included in the metta, and then they're not so humiliating. When they first come, they're really kind of embarrassing. "I'm doing metta, but I'm feeling angry? This doesn't feel right. I must be doing something wrong." You know, I'm embarrassed about this.

But as you keep doing them, you just see they're a natural part of our human makeup, and the metta flavor just starts to include them as something okay. They're all acceptable. They're all part of every one of us, so no big deal. Metta brings in that accepting quality.

If the feeling's a little stronger, you won't be able to turn to the intention of caring. Strong fear, strong anger, strong self-judgment will actually block any arising of metta or caring. So there's no point then in doing the phrases. If there's no caring, no point.

To stay within the Brahma-vihara family, what can be really skillful then is to turn to compassion. As James directed this afternoon, this is a way to hold the difficult state very directly, touch it with your intention and your meditation, and use one of the phrases that you worked with this afternoon: "May I be free from this suffering. May I be free from this anger."

May I be free from this fear. Or another phrase I find helpful is: may I hold this aversion with compassion. May I hold this negativity with compassion. Whatever phrase resonates with you for compassion practice—keep working with that and notice if the compassion brings a different quality into your relationship with these difficult states.

What compassion generally brings is a way to hold these experiences. It's not about making them disappear. The purpose of metta or compassion is never to eliminate these states, but to discover a new way of relating to them that can include them, because they are part of us. You don't want to reject anything that's a natural part of your human experience.

Both metta and compassion offer skillful ways to hold these difficult energies in a transformed relationship.

The third approach, if compassion doesn't feel quite right or isn't working for you, is to turn to mindfulness practice—provided that's part of your meditation background. Some of you may not have experience with mindfulness of emotions and mind states, and that's perfectly fine. In that case, work with metta and compassion, which are excellent tools.

If you do have vipassana training, then open with mindfulness to what you're feeling. Remember what this means: feel it directly in the body. Don't judge it, don't evaluate it, don't try to make it disappear.

Simply pay mindful attention. Open up and surrender to the experience. Let it be felt fully in the body and as a mental state, as a mood.

When you open to difficult emotions this way for some time, you'll generally find that the feeling begins to wash through. You're releasing the clamps, essentially saying, "Okay, go ahead and manifest. Let me feel you completely." The emotion rises, and to some extent, with time, it naturally releases. It weakens.

When it weakens, check if the intention for metta can return, then go back to the metta phrases and the intention of caring. This is the general guideline for working with these difficult energies, whether desire or aversion.

Three other hindrances arise frequently in retreat. Most of you know how to work with these, so I'll mention them briefly.

The first is sleepiness. This comes on very strongly on days one and two. Two people told me they had the sleepiest day of their lives yesterday—and probably more than two felt that way.

With sleepiness, the antidote is energy. Do anything to increase your physical energy: sit up straighter, open your eyes, take several deep breaths. During the next walking period, walk briskly. If you're feeling very sleepy in the meditation hall, stand up. I love seeing people standing during meditation—it shows they're working skillfully with sleepiness.

If you've arrived sleep-deprived, catch up with a nap. Take a walking period and rest. I didn't really say that—consider it a secret oral transmission.

The next hindrance is sleepiness's opposite: restlessness. Sleepiness reflects insufficient energy; restlessness means too much energy. Often the early days of retreat become a pendulum swing between sleepiness and restlessness, never pausing in that middle ground of calm alertness.

With restless energy—racing thoughts, physical agitation, a mind spinning at a hundred miles per hour where you can't even reach one phrase, or if you do, you can't get to the second because there's too much else happening—the antidote is calm.

Focus on the sense of relaxation when possible.

Make the mind really spacious and wide, and maybe have a sense that as you say the phrase, you're going to relax on an exhalation. "May you be safe from harm." And just let it settle all the way through the body.

As you go for a walk, maybe have a sense of relaxing and being really easy in your walking. Don't let yourself feel caged up or bound up with that restless energy.

The last hindrance is doubt. Doubt is a lack of trust in the practice, a lack of trust in yourself, a lack of trust in the teachings, a lack of trust in the teachers. Any of these things can manifest as doubt. It kind of crystallizes in the phrase, "What am I doing here?" which is very frequent also in the first days of retreat. I

have it almost every retreat. At least now I recognize it. When it's there, I know that's just the sign of doubt. It doesn't mean anything real. It just means you're tripping out a little bit with skepticism.

One effective response to doubt is to reflect on all the value you've gotten from your dharma practice. Any meditation practice that you've done—reflect on the changes it's brought to your life. That's the real source of faith, which is the antidote to doubt. Reflect on why you came to this retreat, that there's a really noble value that you're following in this opening of the heart and the opening to wisdom. This is actually probably more important than most of the worldly activities that we get enmeshed in—the emails and the work assignments and so forth.

Please also talk to your teacher. If doubts are arising about whether this is of value or how to work with it, please talk to one of us, and we'll provide reflections based on our faith, which tends to be fairly strong at this point. That can be helpful.

Most important thing is to recognize if any of these hindrances are present, to know that they're there.

As we open more and more to the qualities of loving kindness, compassion, joy, and equanimity, we find that we start to get connected to life in a really broad way. The mindfulness practice can be a little bit self-centered, but the brahmaviharas open us out in a really boundless way to the extent of life. We can't stay alone.

Then we start to resonate with this phrase of Shantideva, an eighth-century teacher in India: "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."

Opening up to this beauty of altruistic caring.

The Dalai Lama was interviewed once by Oprah Winfrey for her magazine. The interview came out in August of 2001. In the course of the interview, she asked His Holiness—this is a question I like to ask all my guests—"What do you know for sure from your own experience?" And the Dalai Lama replied, "One thing I know for sure is that compassion and caring are the best way to be happy. It genuinely works."

Let's just sit for a minute, please.

"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."

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