The Benefits of Mettā

Guy Armstrong · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Guy Armstrong · 53:41

We come to the end of the first day of the metta retreat together, and I'm happy to see—really happy—that most of you are still here, because beginnings of retreats are always difficult, and metta retreats even more so. This really came out in the interview groups this afternoon. This is hard work. You know, you have to keep cranking out those phrases. It's kind of like trying to get an old Model T to start, and you just have to keep cranking and cranking. At first, it doesn't catch automatically, and it really takes a lot of work.

A number of people in the groups were talking about how tiring it was. Somebody said that she was suffering from "phrases fatigue," and she said, "All I want to do is sit quietly." You may have felt that today. Some people ask, "Can I take a vipassana break, please?" I think vipassana never looks so inviting as in the middle of an early day of a metta retreat.

If you need to take a vipassana break and sit quietly to regain your energy, it's fine to do that on the early days. But it is amazing that people are already really starting to engage with the practice. Despite all the difficulties and the mind swinging between extreme sleepiness and extreme restlessness in the early days, people are working and already connecting well with the practice. Anushka was sitting in on one of the groups this afternoon, and she just said, "It's amazing how sincerely people are doing this practice without a lot of reward as yet." The reward will come later, but I want to appreciate the sincerity of your work today.

Just in case there are any doubts about whether this really works or how it works, in tonight's talk I want to discuss what the metta practice does for us and how it does it—the mechanics of how repeating these phrases over and over again can actually transform our hearts and minds.

Rumi, the great poet from Persia, said, "One who does not run toward the allure of love walks a road where nothing lives." I'm really happy that we all are running toward the allure of love, because for me it has always been one of the most motivating aspects of the spiritual path.

When I was in my early twenties, I developed a lot of access to love, but I didn't know how to stabilize it. It came and went seemingly at random, and it was tremendously satisfying—some of the most satisfying experiences I'd had in my life—but I didn't know how to access it with any regularity. For me, a lot of the pull of the whole spiritual path was trying to find out how to make that access to love more enduring and more ongoing. In our tradition, the metta practice is one of the key ways to do that, one of the most central ways.

I want to talk tonight about five benefits of the metta practice, how it affects us and shapes us. The first is that it makes the heart more responsive, or you could say more tender. We allow life to touch us more, and then we're also more able to touch life. It purifies the heart—that is, it cleans it, scrubs it, brightens it up and makes it shine. It develops this quality of concentration, which I think we've mentioned once or twice today. It connects us to the whole breadth of life and really all living things in a very unique way. And it has the possibility of bringing a lot of happiness. These are the five developments that I want to cover this evening.

First, let me talk about the way it makes the heart more responsive, makes it more alive to life.

The main practice that we do here at Spirit Rock is called Insight Meditation or vipassana. It uses the tool of mindfulness primarily in a clear relationship with what's happening in the present moment. We think of vipassana as our wisdom practice. Wisdom is ultimately what liberates the heart and mind. So for us, we do the loving-kindness practice in the context of the wisdom practice of vipassana. Nonetheless, metta has some really unique qualities to add to our spiritual development.

I was sitting a retreat with a Tibetan teacher. At the end of retreats, often in Tibetan practice, when the student is about to go away, the teacher gives a few words of heart advice—pith instructions that the student is meant to take away and live by. At the end of our retreat, the teacher offered us these words of heart advice.

He said, "When you go back into the world, remember three things. First, I want you to be natural. Just be a good-natured, down-to-earth, easy-going person. Don't go back and act like you're on some weird spiritual trip, because if you do that, you'll go into the world, people will think that's what Buddhism is about, and they won't want to take part. So be natural."

The second thing he said is be wise. He said, take care of yourself, take care of the people around you, make good choices in your life.

And the third thing he said is, when you go back, be juicy. And he used that when he would talk about the eyes welling up with moisture when they were touched by beauty or compassion. When you go back to your life, be juicy.

This is an ancient Buddhist technical term. I want you to understand this term, juice. It refers to a whole range of feelings that are sometimes called the devotional end of practice. So it's qualities like love, reverence, joy, devotion, compassion, humor, faith, trust, kindness, humility, awe—this range of our possible emotions is what we call technically juice.

The metta practice in our tradition is the direct avenue to cultivating this juicy quality in life. Because if you think about it, these are the range of qualities that make life sweet, that make life really enjoyable. They're also the qualities I think that touch other people and perhaps awaken in them an interest in spiritual life.

When you think about the teachers who have touched you over the course of your spiritual path, take a look and see if some of these qualities of love and compassion and joy and humor aren't the ones that sort of caught your interest and made you want to have a little bit of what that person had. So these are the qualities by which we can touch the world also.

Alice Walker, the noted author and novelist who wrote The Color Purple, said, "As I get older, I realize the thing that I value the most is good-heartedness." The metta practice is the direct way in our tradition that we bring this about. And to me, it's amazing and beautiful that there are specific practices that lead in this direction. When I was young, I had no idea that there were practices that I could do that could cultivate my openness to love. I thought it was just random. And in the technology of the Buddhist teachings, there are definitely these qualities and they work.

To put it in its context, metta is one of four qualities that are called the Brahma-viharas. Brahma means divine or heavenly. Vihara means home or resting place. So these qualities are called the divine abodes. And the four are metta, or loving-kindness; compassion, or karuna; joy, or mudita; and equanimity, or upekkha.

You'll notice these are the names that we gave to the four residence buildings when we built the retreat center. We thought about calling them the Four Noble Truths, but we didn't think you'd want to stay in suffering and craving, so we decided this is a little more appealing than that.

The four of these really work together with metta as the foundation. Metta is the quality that opens our heart in a very general kind of way. We use these four phrases because they lead us into a very interesting reflection, investigation, and then ultimately analysis of what makes for human happiness.

When you contemplate, as you will do over the next five days, what's involved in an authentic sense of well-being, of welfare for yourself and all those that you bring in to the metta, I think you'll see that every living being wants to be safe. We look at the situation in Iraq now and imagine what it would be like to try to live a daily life where you and your family had no guarantee of surviving from the morning until the evening every day of your life. It's really not possible to feel a sense of secure happiness in an environment where we're not at least physically safe.

Then mental happiness—you know, we know what it's like when mental happiness isn't there, when we're plunged into anger or depression, despair, anxiety, and we lose touch with that ability to touch the feeling of uplift of mental happiness. And we know what happens when our health isn't available, when the body energy is low, when there's a lot of pain in the body. It really saps our ability to have the energy to be uplifted, to be happy.

The fourth of the phrases is sometimes a little bit cryptic, this living with ease. What does it mean to live with ease? Really the sense here in the traditional phrase you'll see in the translation this evening is to take care of yourself happily. It means that you can provide for yourself, your family, your responsibilities

through your work in the external world. So it means that your livelihood and your relationships go well and smoothly. That's the intent of the fourth and final phrase.

And you see that when all of these come together in a human life, this is what really makes for a sense of happiness, a sense of peace, contentment, and settledness. It's when these four are available. Now obviously there are ways to practice to do without one or another of them, but when the four come together, we're lucky, we're fortunate.

Reflecting on this for ourselves and then for other people who we'll bring in trains us to see the world through the eyes of caring. It's like with each being that we bring to mind, we go, how is it for you? How is your safety, your happiness, and your health, and your ease? How's it going? It trains us to see the world through the eyes of others, and that's a big part of what awakens this tender heart.

We're always thinking about—I know what my life's like now. What is it for you? Because we recognize in each being there's another whole universe of feeling and joys and sorrows. And we want that to go well as we start to tune in to the possibility.

The way this transforms people was brought home to me recently in a really kind of sweet story.

Someone who practices here frequently and has joined us for the month-long retreats in February was recently attending a retreat on the East Coast. You know how at meal cleanup you scrape your leftovers into the compost bin by the dishwashing station? This retreat center had a similar setup, but there was a sign that read: "Please don't put any staples from tea bags in the compost because the compost is going to feed pigs."

When my friend saw this sign, he wondered where those pigs were ultimately going. He happens to be a committed vegan, motivated by deep concern for the welfare of animals—creatures who have no voice of their own, cannot speak for themselves, and enjoy almost no rights in our culture.

So he approached the cooks and asked, "The compost goes to the pigs, but what happens to the pigs afterward?" He explained that if they were being raised for slaughter, he didn't want the retreat center to be part of that chain. It didn't feel congruent with Buddhist values to participate in that process.

The cook admitted she didn't know what happened to the pigs but promised to find out. She called the neighbor who regularly collected the compost and asked about the pigs' fate.

The neighbor replied with quite an interesting story. He explained that the pigs had indeed been destined for slaughter. Last December, they had taken them to the slaughterhouse, expecting they would be processed within a day or two. But the day after they dropped off the pigs, the slaughterhouse burned to the ground.

Is that karmic or what?

The neighbor continued: his daughters had been distraught because they had spent so much time with these pigs since they were young, and the thought of them dying painfully in the fire was devastating. Assuming the worst had happened, he checked with the farmer.

To his surprise, the farmer revealed that the pigs had actually escaped the slaughterhouse and were running wild in the surrounding woods. Initially, they feared the pigs were lost—surviving a Massachusetts winter is no easy feat for creatures unaccustomed to such conditions.

So the neighbor took his daughters in the truck and drove to the site of the burned slaughterhouse. They searched the woods and found both pigs alive. They brought them home, and now they're being raised as beloved pets—his daughters are completely smitten with them. The compost scraps from the retreat center now nourish these pet pigs, whose names, incidentally, are Thelma and Louise.

What a beautiful story emerging from someone whose heart had been awakened partly through loving-kindness practice to care deeply about animal welfare. Who knows what karmic forces that compost set in motion to liberate those two pigs.

The other three brahmaviharas naturally grow from this foundation of an open heart. As we attune to the lived experience of beings—ourselves and others—we begin recognizing different primary experiences.

When life becomes difficult and we encounter suffering, the open heart looking upon that suffering transforms metta into compassion. That's the essence of compassion—the open heart witnessing suffering, whether our own or another's.

Metta and compassion are intimately connected. Don't be misled by the different terminology. Some Buddhist schools, including Tibetan and Zen traditions, emphasize compassion as primary. In our tradition, we prioritize metta, but they're very closely related. The Dalai Lama describes compassion as basic human warmth, which is precisely what we're cultivating here.

When the open heart observes a being experiencing happiness and joy, the response is what we call appreciative joy or sympathetic joy—we feel happy witnessing their happiness. This constitutes the third brahmavihara.

When the open heart can simply rest, it abides in equanimity—that balance of mind not easily disturbed by life's changing faces of pleasure and pain. Equanimity supports the other three practices, as we'll explore further.

As we delve into metta practice, some people from a vipassana background sometimes have philosophical concerns. Vipassana is so elegant, so impeccable—just aware of what is. It's absolutely clean. Metta can seem a bit too New Age, perhaps like Hallmark greeting cards or affirmations. What is this about?

I wanted to address this perspective. One of the Buddha's primary instructions regarding right effort is to cultivate wholesome qualities of mind. In metta practice, and all the brahmaviharas, we're directly

cultivating very wholesome mental qualities. This perfectly aligns with what the Buddha described as right effort.

Some people find metta practice sounds deluded: "May I be happy?" But you told me on the last retreat there was no self. You also said happiness was impermanent, yet now I'm constantly wishing for it. Isn't this contradictory?

For the vipassana purists in the audience, I have a phrase you might prefer as your metta. You can use this if you like: "In this ever-changing stream of mental and physical phenomena, conventionally designated as James, may the mind-state of happiness arise on an ever more frequent basis."

If you prefer that formulation, feel free to use it. Or if you simply want to say, "May you be happy, James," that works perfectly well too.

They mean the same thing.

But it is extraordinary when we meet somebody who has developed their heart in this way. Mostly, I think, growing up in this culture, I didn't have any idea of what kind of development was possible for the human heart. And then when we meet people who have done this work for many years or possibly lifetimes, it's mind-blowing.

The person I always reflect on when I think about this possibility is the Dalai Lama. As James said, he often says that his religion is kindness, and he really practices it. I think he's practiced it for a long time. Oprah Winfrey did an interview with the Dalai Lama for her magazine O, and I really appreciate Oprah for bringing a wide range of beautiful teachings into a mainstream audience. That's something she's done really brilliantly. She uses a lot of the teachers from our community—Sharon Salzberg has been in O, Jack, Joseph Goldstein. A lot of our teachers appear there.

So she was interviewing the Dalai Lama for an article. The interview began when Oprah asked the Dalai Lama, "Have you ever had to forgive yourself for anything?"

The Dalai Lama replied, "Small incidents, like accidentally killing an insect."

"Killing an insect?" Oprah said. "An insect? Hmm, okay."

The Dalai Lama continued, "My attitude toward mosquitoes is not very favorable. Not very peaceful. Bedbugs also."

And that's it. Oprah couldn't quite believe what she was hearing. "In your lifetime, that's what you have to forgive yourself for?"

"Small mistakes every day, maybe," the Dalai Lama said evenly. "But major mistakes, it seems, no."

"No major mistakes," Oprah repeated, looking out the window. She fell silent. There was awe in her voice

when she finally continued, "You have nothing in life that you have regrets about. That's a good life. That's a great life—to have no regrets."

"Regarding service to Tibet," the Dalai Lama said, "service to Buddhism, service to humanity, I have done as much as I can. Regarding my own spiritual practice, when I share my experiences with more advanced meditators, even those who have spent years in the mountains practicing single-pointedness of mind, I don't lag too far behind."

That's an amazing heart. And of course, all that separates us from that is about seventeen lifetimes of practice. We're on our way.

Of course, the only reason that the loving-kindness practice works for us is that this quality of metta is part of our nature. It's an intrinsic part of us. It's not something we have to fabricate—it's already there in each of us, and it's just a matter of inclining our mind and bringing it forward.

One of the most loving people in my life was my grandmother. She was born in the countryside in North Carolina around 1890, and there was not a strong Buddhist presence in North Carolina in 1890. She grew up without the benefit of these teachings or psychotherapy, and yet she managed to have one of the most loving hearts that I've ever known, even though she was married to my grandfather, who was a particularly ornery character. So this is a natural quality in us, and we're trying to remind ourselves of it and incline our mind in that direction.

What you'll see as the practice goes on is that the phrase is just a skillful means to help us incline the mind that way. The way Buddhist practices all work is if you want to develop quality X, you put yourself in quality X. There's no quality Y that's needed to get to quality X. You put yourself in quality X. So if you want to be mindful and in the present, you come into the present. If you want to develop the quality of loving-kindness, you put yourself in loving-kindness as best you can in this moment. And the phrases are there, the image is there, the person is there to help evoke that feeling as far as possible.

This putting ourselves there over and over is really what carries out the second benefit of loving-kindness, which is the quality of purification or cleaning the heart. Sharda alluded to this last night. Instead of being lost in some mind states of ill will, judgment, or criticism, or craving, we substitute the metta phrases and the metta inclination for those. And so moment by moment, the mind is brought out of its habitual patterns of negativity, which bring suffering to us, and those patterns are replaced by the inclination of loving-kindness. So in a way, it's really simple.

The heart of the practice is profoundly simple: can you see yourself and sincerely wish yourself well? Can you see another and sincerely wish that other person well? There's no way to manufacture the sincere part of this. Simply saying the phrase alone doesn't accomplish it. What transforms the heart is saying the phrase and meaning it—bringing as much real caring to that moment as you can.

The metta phrases aren't used like a mantra practice. Mantra practices are wonderful; they have a

beautifully calming effect on the mind and body, quieting the mind and leading us into stillness and relaxation. The metta phrases aren't meant to be used in that way. It's not just the repetition of the phrase that accomplishes the work—it's the sincere caring that we bring to the phrase that is the real engine of this practice.

When we can bring up a person or ourselves and really care, even if it's just a little bit of caring, that's what begins to transform the heart. What we're taking hold of—and Sharda mentioned this in her opening—is the factor of intention. We are inclining our minds in that direction of caring, and intention is the powerful transforming element of dharma practice. Whether it's intending to be in the present moment through mindfulness or intending to be caring through the practice of loving-kindness, intention is the lever that begins to shift our life.

The very simple way of thinking of each phrase is that it's like saying to yourself or somebody else, "I hope you're happy." That's all it is—"I hope you're happy." Try to say it with some meaning, and everything flows from that. It's this simple intention that generates the power of loving-kindness. When we offer it moment after moment after moment, hour after hour and day after day, that power begins to build.

Those of you who have sat vipassana retreats will recognize this pattern from the cultivation of mindfulness. We pay attention to the present moment, moment after moment, and it develops incredible momentum as we sustain it. Here, that momentum is generated simply by the intention of caring or well-wishing. That takes the place of the intention of mindfulness in vipassana practice.

You can think of every one of these phrases as like planting a seed—a seed of intention. Our job is that we are the farmers. We plant the seeds and we take care of them with continuity, with patience, with diligence. But we're not the ones who can make the seeds sprout, and we're not the ones who can make the seeds grow into flourishing plants. That's nature. So our job is only to plant the seed of this simple caring. When it grows up and flowers into loving-kindness, that's the work of nature—or you could say the dharma.

As you plant the seeds, let the planting be enough. Plant with all your wholehearted intention, but you don't have to try to manufacture the plant. Take what comes in its own time. Different feelings of metta will arise over these days for you. Trust in that—trust that the planting is enough, that you don't need to make the plant emerge from the soil. The dharma will take care of that. When metta arises is not up to us exactly. We plant the seeds, and then the strengthening of it is accomplished by the dharma.

So what should we look for? What are the signs of this flowering of metta? We've used the word love often as we've been discussing this. In some ways that may be a little too exalted for us—the word love aims really high. There's a transcendent, selfless, merging quality in it. Sometimes metta will manifest in that flavor, but that's a peak experience. It's not the way it's going to appear most of the time.

A step down from that is the way I mostly think of metta—similar to what James shared last night:

friendship. Simply having a friendly attitude toward what meets us. That's metta. That's enough. That attitude is more accessible moment by moment, and that attitude can carry us through much of life.

I invite you to think back over all the moments of today. Were there any moments that weren't met with friendliness? When the body ached, when there was noise in the building, when someone wasn't moving through the line properly, when your cushion disappeared after you'd left the hall...

These kind actions reflect something in our heart that we want to love and nourish. When we connect with these moments of goodness, the phrase "may I be happy" begins to feel appropriate and natural. We recognize that this good heart deserves happiness.

Another approach is to reflect on your own deep intentions. Even when we make mistakes, even when we fall short of our ideals, most of us carry fundamental intentions to be helpful, to be kind, to not cause harm. These intentions themselves are beautiful and worthy of love. When we touch this place of good intention within ourselves, metta arises naturally.

Sometimes I suggest people think of themselves as a small child. Can you remember being five or six years old? That innocent, open, curious being—that's still part of who you are. When we see ourselves with this tenderness, the way we might look at any small child, loving kindness flows easily.

The Tibetans have a beautiful practice where they imagine that they have been the beloved child of countless mothers throughout countless lifetimes. They reflect on all the care and tenderness they've received. This creates a sense of being fundamentally loveable, worthy of kindness and care.

You might also reflect on your own struggles and difficulties with compassion. We've all experienced loss, disappointment, physical pain, emotional confusion. When we see our own suffering clearly, often a natural response of tenderness arises. We wouldn't wish this pain on anyone, including ourselves.

However you connect with your own basic goodness, spend some time there. Let it become real. Let yourself feel worthy of love and care. This isn't about inflating the ego or becoming self-absorbed. This is about recognizing the truth of your own good heart and allowing that recognition to flower into genuine self-love.

From this foundation of self-love, everything else becomes possible. We can't give what we don't have. If we're harsh and critical with ourselves, if we're constantly judging our own thoughts and actions, then that's what we'll offer to others. But when we establish a baseline of kindness toward ourselves, we create the conditions for that kindness to radiate outward naturally.

You think about those and you reflect on what was my intention in doing that? And in coming to the intention, you get in touch with that quality of caring. You were caring about somebody. And that's the seed of metta.

So in touch with your own goodness, then directing the phrases to yourself. But even so, loving kindness

for ourselves can bring up a lot of different memories and a lot of different feelings. Someone was commenting in a group today that it brought up memories of times when they themselves had acted in ways that weren't so kind. That's one of the common things that happens.

It's like as we turn to kindness and recognize it as a value, then what comes from the other side is, oh, but what about this? And a voice of memory that brings up all the times we weren't so kind. Or we think about safety, and we remember times in our life that we didn't feel safe, that people hurt us or harmed us.

So these feelings will come. In doing metta practice, it's almost like we do a life review. We're kind of looking at our life now through new lenses. It's kind of like somebody puts on these metta glasses and says, who are you now? As you see the world through the eyes of loving kindness, what do you see? And part of it is we look at our own life through the eyes of loving kindness and we see times it wasn't there in our life—maybe from outside or maybe from inside. So there's a kind of reevaluation that takes place because of this practice. This is an integral part of what metta does.

When these memories come, don't think you've gone off the track. It's part of what happens. But also you don't have to make a project out of fixing them. Because what's beautiful is that as the metta grows, it holds the memories in its own friendliness. And that provides all the transformation or you could say the healing that's needed. So don't think you have to go out and fix them. Though we will in a couple of days talk about a practice of forgiveness that can help with this process. But basically trust in the metta to hold these memories and change them.

As we get in touch with our own difficulties, this then becomes a doorway to the further development of love and compassion. It's kind of interesting how that happens. You know, sometimes if life is too easy, we don't develop very much. And it's when we run into a little bit of obstacle that we sort of wake up and grow.

I'm sure you know of the Burmese democracy leader Aung San Suu Kyi who's been under house arrest for most of the last fourteen years. The Burmese military dictatorship let her out for part of a year at one point, but she was generating too much interest among the people of Burma. And so they put her back under house arrest and basically she can't go out and no one can see her. She's a very committed Buddhist practitioner because Burma is a very strong Buddhist country. And in fact, she's had practice interviews with some of the teachers that some of us have practiced with.

It's a very interesting situation for them because they can't directly talk about politics with her, because the house is probably bugged, and anything that they say could get them in as much trouble as she is in, so they have to talk in very careful ways. But she's gotten detailed instructions on the practice of loving-kindness, as we're doing it here, because she's been taught by some of the teachers that we learned this practice from.

And here's what she said about loving-kindness: "When I compared notes with my colleagues in the

democracy movement in Burma who have suffered long terms of imprisonment, we found that an enhanced appreciation of metta was a common experience. We had known and felt both the effects of loving kindness and the unwholesomeness of nature's lacking in loving kindness." The loving kindness has become a really integral part of her practice and she extends that practice to the military leadership.

So as the metta develops, one of the things we notice about love is that it has this tremendous integrating energy. Love unifies. It pulls people together. It pulls couples together. It pulls nations together, could pull a whole planet together. And it pulls our psyche together. When love comes into being in our psyche, parts of ourselves that we pushed away and rejected become able to be held, embraced, and accepted. So love has this wonderful quality of putting us back together.

I don't know if you've experienced this in your Vipassana practice, but it has the effect of taking us apart. That's very interesting. You know, we look at the six sense bases or the five aggregates and it takes us into our constituent elements. And then love kind of puts all that back together.

And that's a way we can appreciate this famous quote again from Nisargadatta Maharaj, who said that love tells me I'm everything and wisdom tells me I'm nothing. Between these two poles, my life flows. This is the flow of our metta and vipassana practice. Vipassana shows us that we're nothing. Loving kindness shows us that we hold everything. And this is very healing. This really does put our hearts back together.

There's this beautiful poem from Galway Kinnell called "St. Francis and the Sow." He says, "Sometimes it is necessary to re-teach a thing its loveliness, to put a hand on the brow of the flower and retell it in words and in touch, it is lovely, until it flowers again from within, of self-blessing." This is what the loving kindness practice is doing for us. It's re-teaching us our own loveliness because we discover that quality, the beautiful quality of metta within our own hearts.

The third of the powers of loving kindness is the development of concentration. This practice develops two qualities primarily: one is loving kindness and the other is concentration. By coming back to the phrases again and again, we're providing a single focus for the attention, and that unifies the mind. It collects the mind around the phrases. So start to investigate in your practice: what does it feel like when the mind collects around the phrases? What does it feel like when the phrases can go for a few repetitions and they're uninterrupted by other distracting thoughts? This is the factor of concentration coming into play. Begin to investigate what it feels like in your body, what it feels like in your mind when that happens. We'll talk about this more as the retreat goes on, but you can start to explore this already.

The fourth development through loving kindness is connection. Loving kindness practice connects us to all of life. With our vipassana practice, it can open this way—it ought to open this way—but sometimes it can become a little self-enclosed where we focus on my pain, my suffering, my mindfulness, my awakening, my liberation. But metta practice can't let us stay in that narrow view. It has to open us out to the rest of life.

This is from Shantideva, an eighth-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." So loving kindness is where we practice this wanting others to be happy, and we find out there's a tremendous joy in that connection to life.

One of the insights we come to—I think Sharda might have mentioned this too—is we find that we're all very much the same organism. We have all these distinctions that society is based around: gender, age, race, language, culture, religion. But if you look at it, we're all basically a human being with two eyes, a nose, a mouth, two arms, and two legs. We have the same package of emotions. We have the same vulnerability to the sufferings of life. We are basically the same being that's been poured into different vessels. All the distinctions are real because each of them conditions us in a different way—it's not to deny the reality—but when you look more deeply, they're superficial and they don't change that underlying sameness that we all share, the brightness of the light that shines out through each pair of eyes.

So metta reconnects us to that truth. I'd say this is maybe the deepest insight from the brahmavihara practices. They make us realize that very deeply we're more than just connected—we share the same heart.

Both James and Sharda, I think it was in the late 80s or early 90s, traveled to India and had a number of wonderful meetings with an Indian teacher named Poonjaji, sometimes called Papaji, who a number of the teachers in our circle also went to visit and learned a lot from. And this is a beautiful quote from Poonjaji about this underlying unity. He was asked one time about bringing peace into the world and he says, "As long as there are two, there will be war." And what he meant was as long as there are two in our minds, there will be war. And so the real way through conflict is seeing our deep connection, our deep unity.

Finally, I'd just like to talk a little bit about the happiness that comes from loving kindness practice. One of the happiest people I know is a Thai teacher named Ajahn Jimnien who usually comes to Spirit Rock every spring. Unfortunately, this year he had some intestinal difficulty. He had to have surgery and he wasn't able to make the trip. But he is a joyful presence. He's about sixty-five or so years old and has done meditation from the time he was four. He was kind of a prodigy. He was trained in both vipassana and loving kindness practice, and he has the energy and the joy and the friendliness that comes from deep, deep cultivation of loving kindness.

One of the transmissions he offers in his limited English captures the beautiful union of his vipassana and metta understanding. He touches the space around him and says simply, "Empty, empty." Then he touches it again and declares, "Happy, happy, empty, empty, happy, happy." This is his transmission—the profound recognition that emptiness and happiness are not separate, but intimately connected.

When he teaches at Spirit Rock in either the lower or upper hall, someone might ask him what he'd like to do that day. "Would you like to go to San Francisco or visit the ocean?" His response is always the same:

"Are there people who'd like to hear the Dharma? If there are people who'd like to hear the Dharma, I'd really be happy to share the Dharma. But if there's nobody who wants to hear the Dharma, I'm happy to go to San Francisco or the ocean. Whatever you would like, I'm always happy."

He tells us that he hasn't experienced anger in twenty-five years. When you meet him, this extraordinary claim becomes completely believable. His very presence radiates the truth of this statement.

As loving-kindness begins to open in our hearts and we feel it as an integral part of ourselves, we recognize it as our own true nature. This recognition brings a deeply reassuring sense that fundamentally, perhaps we're okay after all. Perhaps all the self-judgment we've piled upon ourselves was simply mistaken.

When we can touch this loving heart, we know that goodness is alive within us. This knowledge completely undercuts any sense of inadequacy, failure, or self-criticism. This is one of the great benefits of loving-kindness practice—it brings a sense of inner completeness that we can settle into with confidence.

We no longer need to search for satisfaction outside ourselves. Instead, we feel this loving-kindness as a refuge within us, a place where the mind can drop and rest. Over time, this becomes more and more the natural place where we abide. This is why these qualities are called the *brahmavihara*—the divine abidings or divine abodes.

As one teacher beautifully expressed it: "There is nothing else to search for. Rest in your natural face." This is the feeling of loving-kindness.

Oprah concluded her interview with the Dalai Lama by posing this question from her magazine column: "In *O*, I do a feature called 'What I Know for Sure.' So I'd like to ask you—what do you know for sure? The one thing on which you have no doubt."

The Dalai Lama did not hesitate in his response: "Compassion is the best source of happiness. For a happy life and a happy world, there is no doubt."

Let's sit together for a moment in silence, holding these words: Compassion or metta is the best source of happiness—for a happy life and a happy world.

Thank you for your attention and for your practice.

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