Loving-Kindness and Gratitude

Guy Armstrong · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Three-Month Retreat (IMS 2007) · 1:01:04

One of the qualities we discover on a long retreat is what sensitive creatures we are. Being in the present moment, we find that we're subjected to this constantly varying stream of pleasant experience and painful experience. That alternation never seems to end.

It's said that because of this, the human realm is considered to be the best realm to wake up from. Things are difficult enough that we have a motivation to look and become free, but they're pleasurable enough that we have enough hope and confidence that we can become free. So I hope you are counting your blessings at having this mix of pleasure and pain. It may not be the best for enjoyment, but it's the best for enlightenment.

We recognize as we're practicing that really anything can happen at any moment in life. That's part of what makes it uncertain, and out of the uncertainty, somewhat intense.

Just a story to illustrate this: a friend of ours a few years ago was practicing Qigong on a beach in southern India. The date happened to be December 26, 2004. As he was out on the beach taking in the morning sun, this big wave started to roll in and knocked him over, flattened him. There he was, knocked on the sand. He said he stood up and looked back at the ocean to see what was going on, and he saw this very strange characteristic of an emptiness where the wave had been and where the ocean should be. It was the emptiness that freaked him out, so he ran and got his partner. The two of them came outside and climbed up on top of this concrete wall, and he held on very tight to a palm tree that was right beside the wall.

Just then, the second wave came. That's the wave that, as you probably remember, was the tsunami of 2004 that took many people out in its wake. But because he'd had the foresight to climb on the concrete wall, which was about three feet tall, and hang on to a palm tree, they were able to stay upright during the impact of that second big wave.

Anything can happen. This was a case where the practice of non-clinging was not advisable. He was fortunate enough to realize that.

So given this alternation in our practice, in our immediate experience, as well as in our outside life, how do we respond to all the changes that life brings? How do we respond to this changing mix of joy and sorrow that really is the situation for all humans that are alive?

If we look at the state of the world today, it's quite easy to get depressed. If you read the news pages, it's mostly bad news. You notice they never report on a monk in Thailand getting enlightened today. That never makes the front page. Mostly what makes the front page is not good news. It's also easy to get kind

of depressed about the state of our mind as we follow it moment by moment here. Sometimes the enlightenment story doesn't show up here so clearly either.

But fortunately we have these tools that give us other ways to relate. Among the tools that show us another possibility are the Brahma Viharas. Tonight I want to talk about the Brahma Viharas, particularly the two that we haven't talked about much in this six-week period: loving-kindness and appreciative joy, metta and mudita.

To back up a minute and look at the structure of these four qualities of mind called the divine abidings—the place where we can find a heavenly state of mind within ourselves. In our tradition, we consider that metta is the foundation for all the Brahma Viharas. In the practice of metta, which you all did in the first six weeks if you were here, we consistently turn our mind to the well-being of individuals, of ourselves and other individuals, with the wish: may you be well and happy and peaceful and healthy.

This consistent turning of the mind to welfare, eventually of all beings, starts to train the heart to be open—or you could say tender—around the subject of people's happiness or unhappiness. That's one of the great movements that happens in the practice of loving-kindness. We start, as a matter of habit or practice, to tune in every time we meet a being: How are you doing? How is your health? How is your state of mind? Are you feeling safe? These issues start to matter to us, for ourselves and for others. This is how the heart starts to open.

Then this open heart becomes the platform for the next two—really, you could say the next three. When that open heart looks on someone who's having a difficult time, the natural flavor that comes out is compassion. It's not that compassion is such a radically different state than loving-kindness; it's just a transmutation of it when loving-kindness looks on suffering.

On the other hand, when that open heart of loving-kindness looks on somebody who's going through happiness and uplift in their life, then the flavor that evokes is mudita, or appreciative joy. We resonate in sympathy with people's suffering or happiness.

So there's this beautiful symmetry. Loving-kindness is the foundation. Compassion is the natural response to difficulty. And appreciative joy is the natural response to well-being or happiness.

Then the fourth factor—equanimity—balances and holds all three, basically so that they don't fall into their near and far enemies. Equanimity is the quality of mind that provides the strength so that we can stay in the divine abidings rather than their opposites or their near enemies. So they all work together to support one another. They're all needed to complete the picture.

We have this beautiful gift from the tradition from nearly 2,500 years ago. It's not recorded in the suttas that the Buddha taught these practices exactly the way that we do them, but it's taught in a commentary that came into existence perhaps 200 years after the Buddha. So these practices, in the way we do them, go back about 2,300 years for sure. They have been tested once or twice. They have been found to work.

The beautiful thing is that as we develop them, they really do have the power to evoke these qualities of our being, and in doing that, they sweeten our lives. They bring our emotional life up into a realm that is very worthwhile, very beneficial for ourselves and others. They strengthen the emotional life, they bring it into more realization, and they do it in this very wholesome way.

Some people don't particularly feel drawn to practice the Brahma Viharas, and that's fine. If you have tried the Brahma Viharas and don't connect, you can stay with Vipassana, and over time, all these qualities are also unfolded from Vipassana. I tend to think that they unfold more strongly with the support of the Brahma Viharas, but they also will unfold from Vipassana.

This is from Rumi: "Someone who does not run toward the allure of love walks a road where nothing lives." But you don't have to practice loving kindness. It's your choice.

So we begin with the foundation of loving kindness, and we start practicing metta usually for ourselves because it's said to be the easiest—when in fact it often turns out for many of us to be one of the most difficult. But we start with metta for self, and it's actually designed to evoke the areas where it's difficult. As we aim our orientation toward appreciation and well-wishing, we find all the attitudes of mind that collide with that, that don't support it. For many of us, turning the attitude toward well-wishing brings up its opposite, which are ways that we don't feel so great about ourselves. As we turn toward metta, we often find that we encounter a lot of self-judgment, a lot of criticism, a lot of ill will directed toward ourselves.

And we have the opportunity then to get really familiar with this judging mind, which we've talked about a lot on this retreat. Very helpful to get well acquainted, because the judge is kind of a difficult customer, as I know you've seen. The judge tends to be a very tough, stern, critical, demanding taskmaster within us. Elements of perhaps the least attractive parts of our parents' personalities often seem to get directly channeled into that figure.

So how can we meet the judge in a way that's helpful? The best way to meet that hardness is with softness. If we can soften when that hard voice is coming in, then we don't have to be so caught in its hard nature. The turning of the mind to either metta or compassion is the way to evoke an attitude of softness to meet this hard-edged quality coming from the judge. When we can stay with some kind of softness for a while, then it starts to touch other things. When we're feeling soft inside—or merciful, you might say—it's not extended just to ourselves; it's extended outward as well. And that's what brings some kind of change.

This is from Trungpa Rinpoche, a Tibetan teacher: "It is as if we had a pimple on our body that was very sore, so sore that we do not want to rub it or scratch it. During our shower, we do not want to rub too much soap over it because it hurts. The sore spot on our body is an analogy for tenderness. Why? Because even in the midst of aggression, insensitivity, or laziness in our life, we always have a soft spot, some point we can cultivate. A more vivid analogy might be of an open wound, which is always there. That open wound is usually very inconvenient and problematic. We would like to be tough. We would like to come on strong. But there will always be a sore spot. At least we are accessible somewhere. So we are not

completely covered with a suit of armor all the time. What a relief."

So this soft spot, even though it exposes our vulnerability, turns out to be the avenue to opening ourselves and allowing that open quality to touch us, to change us, and eventually to touch the world. As we start to trust in that softness, that tenderness, that very movement starts to weaken the influence of the judge. It can't maintain that hard-edged attack in the face of our softness. But we have to be patient with this process. It can take time to transform the judge's attitude. The judge has a lot of momentum, a lot of habit patterns.

When I was ordained as a monk in Thailand quite a while ago, in the 80s, my preceptor was a really wonderful monk who had a monastery outside of Thailand. He just died a couple of months ago this year. He was in his 90s when he died.

His name was Ajahn Panyananda. There's a wonderful book that recounts part of his life as a young monk called *Sons of the Buddha*. At any rate, he was very kind and helpful to me, ordained me, and then allowed me to go to another monastery in the forest to practice.

But he said, "While you're on your way to this other monastery"—which was up north near Chiang Mai—"stop in at one of my branch monasteries." It was actually a place where he had gotten quite established as a young monk, a monastery in the town of Chiang Mai. I said that sounds great, I can break my journey up and it will be interesting to stay there.

So I got to this wat in Chiang Mai and there was another Western monk there who took me around, showed me the ropes, took me on alms round. We had some really lovely conversations. The first day I was there we went on alms round together, and he went in front because he was a senior monk. He'd been in robes for fifteen years at that point. I'd been in robes for about two weeks, so I was definitely a junior. And then, oddly enough, behind me there were two novice monks, which doesn't usually happen—the novice monks don't usually go out on alms round. I wasn't sure what was up, but I was just following him.

He walked down this street in Chiang Mai, and there were all these people lined up waiting to give him alms because they had known him for a long time. They knew his route, they knew what time he came, and they were waiting. They put lots of food in his bowl. I followed behind. They put lots of food in my bowl. He and I both filled our bowls. My bowl was sort of ordinary looking, but his bowl was the biggest bowl I've ever seen. And it was appropriate because he had a girth to match the size of his bowl. He was obviously well-fed, which not all monks in Asia are, but he was well taken care of.

I came to understand that it was because of his generous spirit—he really exhibited a lot of loving-kindness. His practice was that he would sit at his kuti in the morning at a nice little place by a pond. He would meditate there in the morning, and in the afternoon he would receive visitors. He spoke fluent Thai at this point, so many local people would come and talk to him about their meditation practice.

They would ask his advice about their family and raising their children, and he would just give selflessly of his time to these people. That was why, I think, his alms round was so well supported. And that's the exchange that is meant to happen between the monks and nuns and the lay people in Buddhist countries.

So we had both filled up our bowls, and for some reason then—I didn't know why—we ducked into an alley. He led and I followed. The novices followed us in. Then they opened up their robes, and each one had hanging off their left shoulder a big plastic bag. We took all the food offerings, which were in little plastic bags, out of our bowls and put them in the novices' plastic bags. The novices closed up their robes. We put the lids on our bowls, went out on the street again and filled up again. I think we did this once more.

When we got back to the monastery, the novices' bags were jammed with food offerings. Our bowls were still full. We had more than enough for ourselves. We shared with other people who hadn't gone out on alms round. We shared with all the lay people who were staying at the monastery, and then we shared with the dogs. There was enough to feed everyone based on this monk's generosity and loving-kindness. That's why we were so well supported on that walk.

I was very touched and inspired by his being. He had this really lovely, outgoing nature. So I got to talking to him about his practice, and as we chatted over the next couple of days, I was really surprised when he told me that it wasn't always like that for him. He said, "I spent the first nine years that I was in robes working through my self-hatred."

Nine years. But the transformation in him was so full, so complete, so apparent. He had developed, through a combination of mindfulness and loving-kindness, this great open heart of metta.

So we begin with ourselves, then move on to a benefactor or friend. This is a really important person in our metta family because this tends to be the person who can pick our heart up. If in retreat we're feeling a little down, if our spirits are low, it's wonderful to have a benefactor or friend.

whom we connect with with a lot of affection, because that can elevate our mood, inspire us, and keep us going. Then we can bring that kind of uplifted mind back into doing the metta practice for ourselves. So having the alternation between self and benefactor or friend is extremely useful in metta.

Then we come to the neutral person, who is conceptually maybe the most interesting person in the metta practice, from the point of view of what you could call Dharma theory. This is such an interesting point, because we find that we can care a lot about someone that we don't really know. This really opens the doors of possibility much wider than we would normally think from our upbringing, because really the neutral person is like a representative of all the other people on the planet that we don't know. There are six billion people out there that we haven't met yet. Therefore, we don't have a reason to dislike them yet. And the neutral person is the representative of those people. When we find we can open to them, the possibility is there to open to anyone else that we meet.

This is where the concept of the brahmaviharas being boundless practices comes in. They are boundless in the range of beings to whom they can be extended. It's said that loving-kindness is like a gentle rain that falls everywhere without distinction, because of this boundless quality. They're also boundless in another way: the mind that can open to loving-kindness for all beings itself becomes immeasurable. It becomes limitless. So both the range of beings to whom we can extend it and the breadth or expansiveness of the mind of loving-kindness are both boundless or immeasurable.

The Buddha pointed to this universal quality of loving-kindness in a quote that kind of blows my mind, if it's true. I'll just read it and you can contemplate. The Buddha said that given all the rounds of birth and death and rebirth that all of us have gone through, it is not easy to find a single being in this world who has not at some time or other been your mother or your father or your sister or your brother or your daughter or your son.

What if that was true? I'll just invite you, as your eyes are open and you're looking around the room, to imagine if that was true for us—if we had all had that intimate a connection at some time in the past. How would that feel? It might depend how you feel about your family of origin. Nonetheless, we may all be a lot more closely connected than we sometimes think we are. This kind of reflection really can open our hearts to the wideness of life.

The Buddha said this also in the Karaniyametta Sutta: "Just as a mother protects with her life her child, her only child, so with a boundless heart should one cherish all living beings."

I heard a really nice story about this over the summer. It is easy to look around the world, focus on all the things that are going wrong, and lose track of the fact that there are a lot of things going right. For me, one of the most heartening things in our world today is the young people. I meet people in their teens and twenties who are so cool—so grown up and mature and poised and self-confident in a way that I never was at that age. I think it comes from having had some good parenting along the way, as well as innate good qualities. And young people coming into the Dharma world with that kind of background really have the opportunity to do a great deal of good service in this world. A lot of the younger generation are very turned on to environmental concerns, very committed to positive change in the world, and doing it all with a kind of spiritual bent. So I feel very happy about the state of the young generation right now.

One of the people who has made me appreciate this is the daughter of Jack Kornfield, another Vipassana teacher in our circle who lives in California. Her name is Caroline. She had just graduated from UC Berkeley and was applying to law schools, thinking that she wanted to do human rights activism work. Caroline was driving back from Berkeley into Marin with a friend of hers, a girlfriend about her age. They were driving down this six-lane road that leads by the ferry in Larkspur, if you happen to know that area, on their way out to Woodacre, where Spirit Rock is. They noticed that traffic was slowing down—and there's usually not a jam there at that time of day. So they just inched along, got up to the place where the traffic was stopped, and then they saw what the problem was.

There was a mother duck who was trying to cross the three lanes of their road to get to the bay on the other side. And behind this mother duck were about eight little ducklings. The mother had gotten across the lanes of traffic and hopped up on the median, but the little ducks were having a hard time getting across because the traffic kept holding them up, and having a hard time hopping up onto the median because it was tall for their little bodies.

Caroline and her friend got there. She stopped the car in the middle of three lanes of traffic. Her friend got out and held the other lanes back so that the ducks could cross. And the ones who couldn't get up on the median—Caroline and her friend went and helped them up. They got all the ducks, the mother and the six little ones, onto the median, and then the mother hopped down on the other side because the bay was in that direction. So they had to go over to the other side and stop those cars there.

So the mother and the ducklings could cross, and then they helped the ducklings up onto the curb on the other side. Meanwhile, the traffic was backing up because it had now come to a complete standstill. People in the back were honking—you know, "Why did you stop? Get going, get going!" Obviously some aversion going on there. But the people who drove up and saw what they were doing got out of their cars and started applauding and cheering for them. They got all the ducks over to the other side, started off again, and everybody left happily.

This is how, with a boundless heart, we cherish all living beings. That was a nice story.

As we start to open with the eyes of loving-kindness to other beings, we become really aware that the same phrases work for everybody. When you hit upon a set of phrases about safety and happiness and health and ease—what beings don't want those qualities? We really see how much alike we are. We see how connected we are. In some ways, we all have the same heart. We have different permutations of patterns, different combinations of emotions, but basically we all have the same range of feelings and we all have the same deep wish, the same deep aspirations—to be safe and happy and healthy and to live with ease.

The Brahma Viharas are a really direct way to connect ourselves with all of life. In this way, they provide a means for moving out of a place of isolation or loneliness that a very individualistic culture tends to engender in us. And this also forms the basis for our practice of sīla, as Sally talked about—this practice of conduct that seeks not to harm others.

I sometimes wonder how far this practice of non-harming can be extended. I was very interested to read an interview that the Dalai Lama had with Oprah Winfrey, published in her magazine *O* a couple of years ago. I really appreciate that Oprah has this rare talent of bringing teachings about well-being and health and spirituality to such a wide audience. It's hard to introduce wide audiences to this material, but she's somebody who has that talent and capability.

This is a report from somebody who was at the interview she held with the Dalai Lama. The first question

Oprah asked was, "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, mulling over the idea. She fell silent and looked out the window. 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."

I think that kind of blameless life really helps to support that kind of meditative depth. Just seeing the degree of refinement that is possible for us, I find really inspiring.

This quality of care for other beings that is touched through the practice of the Brahma Viharas—particularly through mettā and compassion—can then come back into our practice as a motivation for why we're doing what we're doing. This is the quality we've talked about a number of times called bodhicitta: the aspiration that we may develop our practice to the fullest extent possible so that we can help others come to the end of suffering as a way to benefit them. This quality is sometimes translated as the awakening mind.

The Dalai Lama said that he used to be very impressed by the concept of emptiness. I'll read you the quotation: "Twenty years ago, I used to contemplate emptiness. I was very impressed by the theory of emptiness, and it really inspired me to seek the cessation of suffering."

So notice the connection here between basically emptiness and the Third Noble Truth. They have a very close relationship.

The Dalai Lama continued: "But compared to emptiness, nowadays I'm even more impressed and moved by my understanding of the awakening mind—by the compassion and tolerance that come with the awakening mind. The union of compassion and emptiness is something quite unique, but you can bring about an inner experience of it if you make the effort."

Here he's pointing to the concept that the root of bodhicitta, sometimes called absolute bodhicitta, is the direct experience of this union of compassion and emptiness. Once we see it in ourselves, we can see that nature in everyone.

This is again from Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche: "There is also an inner wound called Tathagatagarbha or Buddha nature. This is like a heart that has been sliced and bruised with wisdom and compassion. When the external wound and the internal wound begin to meet and communicate, then we begin to realize that our whole being is made out of one complete sore spot altogether. This is called Bodhisattva fever. That vulnerability is compassion. We really have no way to defend ourselves anymore."

This is the kind of opening that comes from the neutral person and the way that the neutral person connects us to all sentient beings, to all of life.

The next person in the progression is the difficult person. The difficult person often brings for us strong reactions, typically of fear or anger. This is very common.

I was doing a six-week period of metta retreat here at IMS one year, and my difficult person happened to be on the retreat also. So I would be saying my phrases—may all beings be safe, may they be happy—feeling the stirrings of metta, and then my difficult person would walk by. I'd start running over all the events of the past year that had caused the difficulties between us. Then I'd start spinning out: How could they have done that? Why didn't they do this? My anger level would just start rising and rising. I couldn't gather it in. I was spinning out for half an hour. I had been fairly concentrated up to that point, but eventually it would wear itself out, and I'd come back to the metta phrases. Then a few hours later, they'd walk by again, and the whole thing would happen again.

So I thought, I need to do something different here. I'd heard about this concept of doing metta for the difficult person, but frankly, I thought it was a little hokey. I don't want to have to pretend I like this person, I thought. It seemed like it was going against the grain. But I was really running out of options, so in my desperation, I decided to try it.

I found something really interesting. The quality that we often talk of as anger—the Pali or Sanskrit term—is usually better translated by the words "ill will." And what this means, of course, is the opposite of goodwill. In metta, we're sending out goodwill, which is a wish: may you be happy. With ill will, when we look at it, our wish is: may you be unhappy. That's what ill will means.

So I looked at this quality of ill will, and I saw that within my anger was this wish that the other person suffer. Now, ill will is the far enemy of loving-kindness. The far enemy of compassion is cruelty. The difference between ill will and cruelty is that with ill will, we would like the other person to suffer, and with cruelty, we enjoy it when the other person is suffering.

I could sort of hang with the idea of being an angry person, but I could not hang with the idea of being a cruel person. When I thought of myself potentially being cruel and enjoying someone else's suffering,

something brought me up short. I couldn't live with that. And I saw how close ill will was to cruelty.

That's really what gave me the inspiration to see if I could generate some goodwill for my difficult person. I made a sincere effort, and I found I could bring a wish that that person be happy. When I could wish my difficult person happiness, it ended the ill will. Goodwill and ill will can't coexist. In ending the ill will, the anger went away.

It was interesting. I didn't have to like that person. I didn't have to want to spend time with them.

I didn't have to condone the things they'd done. All I had to do was shift my ill will to goodwill, and it took the anger out. It was very interesting learning for me.

The second of the Brahmaviharas is compassion. We talked quite a lot about this through the guided meditations, and Sharda did a whole talk on it, so I'm not going to go further into compassion tonight. I'll skip to the third Brahmavihara of appreciative joy, or mudita.

Metta has a lot of potential for happiness—for bringing happiness into our own hearts and then sharing it. Mudita, I feel, has even more potential for happiness. It is a practice that is founded on the quality of happiness, so it's very upbeat. The meaning is that we respond with joy to someone else's joy.

Just as a simple example, I got a phone call a while ago from a friend I hadn't heard from for a while. I picked up the phone, said hello—I was happy to hear from this person—and I said to her, "How are you?" And very enthusiastically came this response: "I'm wonderful." Just hearing her say that without any hesitation, so directly, touched something in me, and without even thinking, I said, "I am too." Her energy just brought out that same kind of energy from me. And that's the immediate response of mudita.

So it's like this double hit of happiness. There's the other person's and then there's yours—like the double latte. It's just twice as good.

As Sally talked about in her talk on transcendent dependent arising, this quality of joy is really an integral part of the path. Not only does the Buddha say it, but I found a very intriguing comment from a Theravadan monk who lives in Sri Lanka and is becoming a very skilled translator and commentator on the Buddha's teachings. His name is Venerable Analayo. He's written a very impressive commentary—a book-length commentary on the Satipatthana Sutta called *Satipatthana*, highly recommended. In that book, Venerable Analayo says this: "The entire scheme of the gradual training can be envisaged as a progressive refinement of joy." This is really what Sharda was pointing to last night in the development of sukha, the ripening of sukha—whether it begins from dukkha or from sukha, it ripens in that direction of inner pleasure and happiness.

This term mudita is sometimes translated as sympathetic joy. I want to point this out because there's a little bit of a split in our tradition on the appropriate translation. Sympathetic joy means that in order for me to feel it, I have to resonate with you. In some texts, the message is put out that we can only feel this

quality of mudita for other people—we can't feel it for ourselves because there has to be joy out there that I resonate with in sympathy. That lineage within our tradition tends to call it sympathetic joy, and it's said that you can't practice mudita for yourself. I think because they believe it's too self-centered.

But the Buddha never said that we should exclude ourselves from the immeasurable quality of mudita. He never said it was for all beings but you. He said it was for all beings, just like the other Brahmaviharas. I interpret it in that way, and I feel it's very helpful to include oneself in the practice of mudita. And so I like to translate it, as someone else suggested, as appreciative joy. We appreciate the joy that we find in others. We appreciate the joy that we find in ourselves.

As we practice the quality of mudita toward ourselves, the flavor that it evokes, for me, is that of gratitude. When we appreciate our own blessings, that flavor is gratitude.

I want to talk a little bit about this state of mind. It's really a beautiful state because when we appreciate what we have, it cuts through greed for more. We don't feel we need more because we appreciate where we are. It also cuts through aversion, because we're looking at what's wholesome in our life—we're not so aware of what's lacking or what's difficult. So when gratitude is present, greed and aversion are both prevented from arising.

A number of scientific studies recently have focused on this quality. I think in Western terms, it's one of the Brahmavihara faculties that Westerners can relate to. There could be great studies on metta, on compassion, on other forms of appreciative joy, but gratitude is a little more in our culture, so I think it's been a natural one to study. These studies have shown that gratitude, when practiced regularly, leads to feelings of greater joy, optimism, happiness, a sense of well-being that includes the body as well as the mind. People report fewer physical complaints when they've been practicing gratitude.

But even gratitude, though it's recognized in our culture once a year on Thanksgiving, doesn't come that easily.

It's not that deeply embedded for us as a practice, as a heart practice.

If we want to get a sense of our culture's attitude on this, we turn to The Simpsons. They're really a great bellwether of American values. For those of you who have the good fortune to be from Europe or New Zealand or Australia, The Simpsons is this rather cynical cartoon show that has taken the country by storm. It's very, very popular, reflecting something of the malaise of modern life.

Bart Simpson, the mischievous young kid, was asked to say grace at his dinner table one night, and this was his grace: "Dear God, we paid for all this stuff ourselves, so thanks for nothing." This reflects something of the attitude toward gratitude in this culture.

So it's sometimes helpful to step outside the culture and see how gratitude is practiced in other places. Many people have talked about being touched by the gratitude they encounter in Asia. I experienced this

when I went to Burma a couple of years ago. One of my students loves to practice generosity—she's very keen on supporting serious practitioners—so she gave me a few hundred dollars to offer to the monastery where I would be living for six weeks.

When I arrived at the monastery, I thought I would like to use the money to sponsor some lunches for everyone living there. This was an intensive practice monastery with 750 people in residence at that time: about 450 monks, 150 nuns, and other laypeople living and practicing.

I went to the steward, the layperson who manages the monastery's finances, and said, "Someone gave me a gift I'd like to make to the monastery. I'd like to sponsor some lunches, if possible." I told him I had a few hundred dollars.

He said, "Oh, I'm very sorry, but all the lunches are spoken for for the next three months."

Feeding 750 people—all those meals were already sponsored for the next ninety days. Burma is one of the poorest countries in Asia. It used to be one of the wealthiest; unfortunately, today it's one of the poorest. And yet people there, almost entirely local people, had already sponsored lunches for the next ninety days.

Every day I would go down to lunch, and there would be a whiteboard with the name of the donor and a message. It was that kind of practice that inspired our meal dana here and the beautiful messages of support that we read every day. There, this process of giving is so integral a part of the culture. People bring a lot of joy to it, and it's simply a natural, ongoing part of their lives.

When we turn our minds to gratitude, all of us here have so many things to be grateful for. Largely, it's just a matter of remembering that this is the case.

A friend of ours had been a monk in Thailand for a number of years, and when he came out of the robes into lay life, he didn't feel in any hurry to leave the country. He found a job in a refugee camp on the border with Cambodia—an administrative job running part of a training program. Cambodian people who had been persecuted under the Khmer Rouge were leaving that country and finding safe haven in Thailand. There they went through a program that would educate them and prepare them for being relocated to the West.

Many of these people were from the hill tribes of Cambodia and had lived very, very simple lives. They were being prepared to move to California—Fresno, California—where they had to learn to use things like toasters and washing machines, read bus timetables, and handle coins, none of which had been part of their lives.

As part of the training, my friend asked his class, "What are the most important things in a human life?" This is a great reflection. I love to ask myself that question from time to time.

One teenage girl from the hill tribe replied, "The most important things in a human life are fire, rice, and

water."

When you think about this answer, those would be the most important things in our lives too—if we didn't have them and take them for granted.

I like to reflect on this. Tonight we're inside on this really cold and windy evening, and we're warm. We're dry. We've been well-fed. These are some of the advantages we enjoy that not all beings in this world enjoy, not all human beings enjoy. Even just thinking outside these four walls—what are the birds doing tonight? And the chipmunks? And the deer, who may be quite aware that it's hunting season. What are they doing tonight?

We're really quite lucky in so many ways.

Moreover, we have another truly remarkable advantage that Tibetans call a precious human birth. In addition to having the requisites of life—which in the Buddhist system are considered to be food, clothing, shelter, and medicine—I think we all have some reasonable access to health care. And we all have an opportunity to make this life truly meaningful.

We have been born as human beings with our minds and bodies working reasonably well. We are alive at a time when a Buddha has appeared in our historical era. We're living in a place and a time where the Dharma is flourishing to a certain extent, where there are practitioners who are following the teachings, where we ourselves have the time and the interest to pursue the teachings, where we've heard and understood the Dharma, and we have the requisites of life to pursue them.

How many people on this earth have all those combinations of qualities in their life right now? Not so many.

The ability to have recognized an authentic path to liberation and to have the opportunity to walk it—it really is a tremendous blessing.

One of the things that arises when I reflect on gratitude is that I'm most grateful for the existence of the path. Because I reflect back to my life before I knew there was such a thing as a path, and I think about the level of what I can only describe as darkness and confusion in my mind. Happiness seemed random. Suffering seemed random. I didn't know any way to stabilize my mind in peace or contentment.

How would we face death without this practice? How would we face aging? Just to know that you are not the body is amazing. How few people in the world have a sense of that? And so how scary it must be to meet death when we don't have a sense of anything else.

On one retreat, in order to practice gratitude, I made a list of all the things in my life I felt grateful for. At the start of every day, I would read that list. I found it just set my mind in a really positive direction. Whatever happened in the rest of the day, I had made that beginning with a truly optimistic attitude.

The last of the brahmavihāras is the quality of equanimity, which Sarada also spoke about. I don't want to say a lot about it. I just want to make one small pointing.

I've often wondered how the Buddha stayed equanimous in the face of all the suffering that he saw. Conditions were very brutal in ways in India in his day. There was a lot of war between neighboring kingdoms, and as you probably know, combat at that time was hand-to-hand—pretty direct and pretty bloody. There are accounts of monks walking across battlefields strewn with dead and bloodied bodies. The Buddha would have been exposed to all of that and seen all of that. How did he manage to stay equanimous in the middle of that kind of brutality?

Or how does the Dalai Lama stay balanced when he's responsible for Tibetan culture, when he may be all that stands between the present moment and the genocide, the termination of Tibetan culture?

I think it's because enlightened beings know a secret that we haven't fully integrated, even if we've realized it. They know that within this mind and body process, there is no abiding center to whom all of this is happening. When we see clearly, there are only sights, sounds, smells, tastes, touches, thoughts, and emotions. There is nothing else. There's no core that's experiencing the impact of all this.

In the Visuddhimagga, there's a beautiful line that expresses this. It says: "There is suffering, but there is no one who suffers. Empty phenomena roll on. This view alone is right and true."

Summed up another way: Jack Kornfield was visiting Sri Lanka when he was a monk. There was a very well-practiced patriarch in the country whom he went to visit. He asked the patriarch the reason for his happiness—a very jolly, smiling and laughing man. And this patriarch replied, "No self, no problem."

It's the same pointing. This really is the union of wisdom and loving-kindness. The union of emptiness and caring. And this is essentially what solves the problem of existence for us as we get grounded in that way of looking.

I'll close with the end of Oprah's interview with the Dalai Lama. Oprah said to him, "In my magazine, I do a column called 'What I Know For Sure.' What do you know for sure? The one thing about which you have no doubt."

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

Let's just sit for a moment together.

This is the formulation of the brahmavihāras in the Tibetan tradition—four wishes that are called the Four Immeasurables:

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

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

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

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

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

Thank you.

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