Living in Beauty

Buddhist Loving Kindness Practice

by Jason Espada

Living in Beauty – A Preface

with quiet astonishment, and gratitude…

Most of the following essays were written while on retreat, in 2012 and 2013. I have my host, Roger, to thank for providing me with such a peaceful place in Washington State, far away from city living.

When I set out to go on retreat, I hadn't intended to write as much as I did, but in the Fall of 2012, I started to wonder how I'd handle being apart from others for a year. Even though I'd brought plenty to study, with Winter coming, I was a little concerned I'd get a version of 'cabin fever', and so I started to augment my meditation with metta, or loving kindness practice. I did this at first just to keep a clear feeling of being connected to all those I care for. I'm happy to report it did this for me, and more.

I soon found that metta is also a great support for quiet, and insight meditation. Just like the traditional teachings say, it brightens and energizes the mind, and it brings with it joy and ease. I re-read many of my favorite books on metta, and I also had the good fortune of listening to talks by teachers in the Spirit Rock Tradition, such as James Baraz, Donald Rothberg, Sylvia Boorstein, Sharon Salzberg, Joseph Goldstein, and others.

As the months rolled by, I noticed two things: the first was that the different aspects of metta gradually opened up for me. This is what I've written about in some detail in the pages that follow. And second, I began to see how I could relate all I was concerned with to this one practice. From the different aspects of Traditions and personal development, to the arts and social activism, all seem to fit harmoniously now into this one way of life and practice.

Over the last few years I have written on what I call A Life Giving Vision, that is so needed in these times, and I thought I might add to that set of writings while away. Instead, I found these earlier ideas fitting well into the overall view and teachings on metta.

In the past, I learned to see all aspects of Buddhist practice as having a healing function: from precepts to quiet meditation, insight practice, as well as its prayer, mantra and ritual. Now I've come to think of metta as encompassing all aspects of Buddhism, psychology, contemplative

disciplines, progressive values, activism, and life in the world. It gathers all disparate parts together, and makes me feel whole to read and meditate in this way.

The original subtitle ‘essays on metta for our times’ was meant to highlight that, precious as the traditional teachings are and always will be, we need to bring them into our lives as they are now. This is how we’ll get the most from them.

It is my hope that good teachings on metta be read and heard by as many people as possible, now, and in future generations, and this collection of essays is my small contribution. It’s the kind of book I wish I had at beginning of my retreat. It’s also a statement about an outlook and way of life that I feel affirms the best in us. This is also something I wish I had years ago. It turns out that what I have here, and what I can offer now, is one of my favorite books, on my favorite subject, that of love. How wonderful. Looking over these pages today, I am amazed, and simply grateful with all my heart to my teachers.

A note on a couple of ways this book can be read: though some people may like to go through a collection of essays such as this from beginning to end, it works at least as well to just read whatever fits the need of the moment. This is how I’ve been using this material this last year or so, to pick myself up, and to strengthen and clarify whatever understanding I may have. Of course, if the traditional metta teachings are new to you, you may like to read the opening sections early on, since metta is the heart of it all.

May all people benefit from the teachings on metta; May they have all good conditions for practice, and may all generations together celebrate the beauty and richness of this path of love.

Jason Espada
San Francisco,
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Living in Beauty - A Collection of Essays on Metta for Our Times

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Part I - Introductory Essays, and metta for the different categories of people

A letter introducing metta

Hi Sarita,

I'm so glad to be able to share these writings on metta with you, as this practice has meant a lot to me over the years, and especially this last year on retreat. As I mentioned when we were chatting, this has really helped me to have the feeling of being connected to others while I've been here, which is something I wasn't sure about how I would handle. It's been surprisingly effective for this, actually.

These methods have always worked somewhat for me, from when I first came across them, but now I can see how we really have to focus for a time on any meditation practice we want to do to get its benefit.

I was trying to think of anything I didn't say in the writings that I'm attaching, and what came to mind first is this phrase I heard, quoting the Buddha, in a talk:'That joy connected with the wholesome, I call an equipment of the mind to ward off all aversion and hostility.'

I liked this when I heard it because I could see how it can be true sometimes – when we're feeling well and have some joy in our life, it's like we immune to things that might otherwise bother us.

It's said that one of the traditional benefits of metta – loving kindness practice is that 'one is not harmed by fire, poisons, or weapons'. This is a way of talking about the delusions – of anger, desire, fear, sadness, and all those states of suffering. We're neither harmed from within, or from without, when others have these states of mind.

Maybe you've had this experience too, that sometimes we're immune to those negative states – it's like when our mind is filled with wonderful things – there's much less room for other emotions. Or, if we have some time when we get down or upset for one reason or another, we recover more quickly. All that's because we have something positive going on in our life.

Enter metta. There's a lot of talk in religions and spiritual paths about love, but I don't often see it laid out, step by step, how a person could go about cultivating love, in a way that makes sense, and that accounts for our ups and downs, and unique personalities. The way the metta teachings are set out though, it's pretty clear to me that we can always move towards having more gentleness, patience, joy, strength, and meaning in our life. What good news! What a great thing this is!

I'm thinking more and more that a practice like this is what is most needed these days in the West. The simple reason is that we need something we can do in our everyday lives, and this certainly fits the bill. It doesn't take long, and the positive effects can be felt by most people almost right away.

Another reason I'm thinking we need metta or some loving kindness practice, is that we, as Westerners, so often have a hard time being kind to ourselves. This is especially true of people in the USA – you'll have to tell me if it's the same there in Australia. I'm convinced that this is something we all need, whoever we are, for any kind of meditation, just to be comfortable enough with ourselves to sit, or walk, and get to know ourselves more deeply.

Of course, this method or approach may not be for everyone – in fact there are a lot of funny stories of people being put off by it, only to return to it later and see its value. Often it turns out they become the people teaching the practice. Ha!

As more than one person has said, this is a very personal matter – what will work for us. Fortunately, there's a lot of room for creativity in how we go about any meditation practice, including metta.

A couple of things I don't say in the essays, that I'm sure you'd find your way to, but I just thought to mention, are that we can use lists, of people we regard as friends, or who we have a good feeling about when we think of them Hint: you and Giny are on one of my lists – I always feel happy when I think of our time together in India!. I also have some photos from my travels that I look at from time to time.

Sometimes I like to think of a number of people one at a time in the 'friends' category, and send them good wishes, and then at other times just one individual, or a few. At some point, I was feeling like maybe I was

neglecting the others, but then I remembered what a Lama in San Francisco taught – and that is, that we can use one person, or a few people, to represent all the others. You can do what you like, whatever works best for you.

There's also this element of metta being a concentration practice, that isn't talked about that often. It is that as well, and so if our mind is moving around too much, we need to settle down and focus a bit more, for example, by using fewer people, or phrases. Fortunately, it helps that metta is an enjoyable practice. This in itself helps to calm, collect, and clarify the mind. It's said that when one practices this 'the mind concentrates easily'.

Another list I keep with me, and sometimes set in front of me is a list of the phrases I use to cultivate loving kindness. Most teachers I've heard say we should just have a few, like three or four phrases, but it seems to work for me sometimes to have a longer list of 'metta wishes' to look at. When my mind wanders, then I can look again at the list, and continue.

I go by how I feel, in terms of whether to use words at all, or an image, or just a phrase or two to guide the mind, or four or more phrases. Once you have a feel for how you want to go with the practice, I'm sure you can make it your own.

I also like to alternate metta with calm meditation, either watching my breath, or doing walking meditation. This seems to be a way to really get the full benefit of the practice, on all levels, mental, emotional, and physical.

Perhaps you already have a method or two that works for you, and so I won't go into details here, but let me know if you'd like some basic meditation instructions, and I'll be happy to send them along to you as well. No problem.

One more point: I mentioned while we were chatting that you don't need to be Buddhist to do these practices. In that way they are truly universal – accessible to all. In another sense though, there is an advantage, without a doubt, if a person has an affinity with Buddhist teachings, and is able to see the metta teachings in the context of the whole range, and the aim of Buddhist practice, which as I understand it, is both liberation from suffering, and enlightened activity.

As the Thai meditation teacher Ajaan Maha Boowa said, ‘For an enlightened being, there is no other response to the human condition, than compassion.’

Everyone is so different, in our needs and interests, but it makes sense to me at least, to try to understand what is meant by happiness, in the Buddhist sense of it – the path and the fruition of a right practice.

May this bring you benefit!

Metta as the most useful method of meditation for people in the West today

Most people these days don't have a lot of time for meditation. The week is divided between work, caring for their family, and relationships. From what I have seen, all methods of meditation can be helpful to us. There are a few ways, however, that metta, or Buddhist loving kindness meditation *especially* matches our needs here and now.

The first is that it helps us to be on better terms with ourselves. A lot of people have the problem of not liking or respecting themselves, and metta includes methods of developing kindness towards ourselves. Since we're always with ourselves, any amount of a greater acceptance, or goodwill we can generate will improve the quality of our life *right there*.

Not content with only proposing an ideal, such as 'just be kind to yourself', metta is creative in its approach to developing a sense of kindness for oneself. Although it's traditionally the first category used for cultivating metta, teachers in the West have been adapting this to meet our needs. We're encouraged to start with whoever is *easiest*, and *least complicated* to have feelings of kindness and well wishing for. Once we've developed some experience of directing thoughts of goodwill to them, we can return to ourself. Slowly, we can begin to offer ourselves the same quality of kindness that we direct to our most loved ones. One dear friend said that being kind to herself is like medicine. We all need and deserve this.

It's said that one of the traditional benefits of metta is that it helps us to settle comfortably, with a clear mind in meditation, and with a fundamental goodwill towards ourselves. This is an important point, and one that is often overlooked in how meditation is taught and practiced in the West these days. Have you noticed?

If we are not on good terms with ourselves, we won't be able to go very deep in meditation. We may escape into fantasies to avoid what is difficult to be with, or we may develop a spiritual ego that is not very stable. There's no way around this. We need kindness towards ourselves to do the sometimes difficult work of deepening our self understanding, healing and transformation.

Another reason metta practice is especially needed by us today is that it helps us to know our connection to others. It's in our makeup that we need

the support and love that comes from being connected to friends, family, teachers, and all others. In our modern society, people have become more and more isolated, and metta counters that.

We can re-awaken our connection to friends and family, and learn to have more warmth, attentiveness, goodwill and concern for all others we meet. This is pretty radical stuff because it goes directly to the quality of all our relationships.

We are so diverse here in America. It's a point of pride for us, in fact, something we identify as a real strength. The shadow side of it, however, is that we may have trouble finding common ground.

Which brings me to the third reason why I'm thinking that metta is the most useful method to know about, and practice, and share with other these days. Metta is universal. It can be taken up and understood by people everywhere. You don't need to be Buddhist to practice metta meditation. Of course, people are free to explore the tradition this method comes from, but that's a personal matter. We should do whatever works for us, and follow the path that will lead to the fulfillment of our deepest aspirations.

I have one more reason why I'm looking at metta as having the greatest value for us today, and that is that it's the teaching and practice of what has true human value. This is the complete opposite of the materialism and self centered indulgence, narcissism, pettiness, avarice and aggression that are so common these days.

Metta is just the method we need when we meet fear and mistrust, self-denigration, and the denial of the worth and rights of others. Metta can actually heal us, and our world, and for this reason, in times of despair, it offers hope.

I know a lot of people will appreciate how quickly we can see results from loving kindness practice. After just a week or two of regular practice, each day, in any circumstances, to and from work on the train, for example, if we are attentive, we can see an improvement in our temperament, and relationships. We may notice, for example, that we are a little more patient when standing in line at the bank, or at the post office, which is surely a gift of kindness to ourselves and others.

Metta is inherently enjoyable, and, together with this cycle of positive reinforcement, the practice naturally develops. For people with an affinity with metta, it's natural that they'll want to make it a part of their whole life. As with other methods of meditation, the more we practice, the more we'll see the results.

As the Buddha taught in the Kalama Sutta, also known as the Buddhist Charter of Free Inquiry,

Don't believe something because it sounds good,
or because it is part of a tradition;
or because a famous person said it,
or because it agrees with your opinions,
but try it out and see –
if it works to bring you greater satisfaction in your life,
greater peace, well being, and happiness,
then accept it,
cultivate that practice,
and share the benefit of it with others

My friends, this is what I've found to be most useful for us as lay practitioners, in these times in the West. I've seen the good that can come from it, and so I'm glad to be able to share this.

May all people everywhere find methods of practice, and ways to live in this world that bring them peace, health and well being, and happiness for all their days.

The origin of the metta teachings

The teachings on metta, or loving kindness in Buddhism go back to the Historical Buddha. The story of how they began goes like this:

Once there were some monks who had found a suitable place to retreat and practice meditation for a season. It was quiet, had fresh water, and some sheltered areas. As they settled in to their individual practice, the local spirits were glad they were there. In the beginning, they were happy to have the company. After a while though, the local spirits started to wonder how long the monks would stay. They started to worry the monks would take over, and so they began more and more to harass the monks. They manifested horrible smells, frightful sounds and visions. The monks did the best they could to tolerate it, but after a while they said, We can't take this any longer! In despair over losing a good place to practice they went to the Buddha to ask his advice.

The Buddha listened, thought carefully, and gave them the teaching that has been handed down to us as the Metta Sutta, that can be found on page 27. It begins,

"This is what should be done by those who are skilled in goodness..."

The essence of this short teaching is contained in the line,

"Even as a mother protects and loves her child,
her only child,
just so should we cultivate boundless love to offer to all beings in the entire cosmos..."

He went on to assure them that for one who practices in this way

"their love will know no obstacles"

In later generations, the teachings on metta that the Buddha gave that day were set to music, to be chanted, and I understand that it is considered one of the most beautiful chants in the Tradition stemming all the way from those times.

The monks took the Buddha's admonition to heart, and went back to the forest to practice, this time with the metta teaching as their companion, guide, and protection. It's said that, at first, the local spirits were again hostile, manifesting the terrible smells and sounds and appearances as before, but that after a while, they gradually began to calm down. They noticed something different about the monks this time. They could sense that the monks weren't afraid, or repulsed, or aggressive back. Instead, they were wishing them to be well and happy, safe, and at ease. They were actually praying for the happiness of all the spirits' ancestors and descendants, and for each one of them to have health and provision, comfort and joy. The feeling was so pleasant, the spirits decided to support and protect the monks in turn. They made sure that while they were there they had a comfortable and quiet place, with harmonious conditions.

When the rainy season ended, the monks thought it was time to return to the larger community where the Buddha lived and taught. As soon as they began to think of this, it's said that they heard unusual sounds – it was the sound of the local spirits crying. The spirits had come to love and respect the monks so much, that they didn't want them to leave. The monks assured them that they would return, and, what's more, that they would continue to offer prayers and the energy of their metta practice for their safety, health and happiness.

It was just as the Buddha had said it would be. Metta, or pure loving kindness, cultivated and extended throughout a difficult situation has the power to transform and overcome the problem. This is true whether it is a difficult emotion in ourselves, or in a place, in a relationship, or social condition.

Over the centuries, the Buddhist teachings have been arranged in many different ways, all with the intention of making the practice of them more accessible, and more effective for people, and this is true also of the teachings on metta, or the development of loving kindness. By the time five hundred years had passed after the Buddha, the commentarial tradition in India and Sri Lanka had formulated a path of practice to cultivate metta step by step to its universal level. One begins with oneself, or whoever is easiest to have uncomplicated feelings of love for. Then one adds to that the cultivation of loving kindness and well wishing for, progressively, family and friends, those we don't know personally, those we have difficulty with, and finally all beings.

Along the way in the practice we meet everything that blocks our having such an unconditional, all embracing love: our attachments and possessiveness; anger, impatience, pride, neglect of others, laziness, and so on - but if we stay with the practice, these are gradually purified, so that our love can really manifest as needed with all people, and in all situations. May it be this way for all of us!

The Benefits of Metta Practice

It's said in one of the teachings that before we start a practice of meditation, we should know its benefits. This is what inspires us to take up, and to continue with the practice. In what follows, first, I'll give the Traditional eleven benefits that are associated with the cultivation of metta – loving kindness, and then I'll give my own list of some of the advantages I've found, with a short description of each.

The traditional benefits for one who practices metta are listed as

1. a person sleeps well

2. he or she wakes easily

3. he has good dreams

4. people love him

5. the devas (angels) love him

6. the devas protect him

7. his mind is calm

8. the expression on his face is serene, and beautiful

9. poison, fire, and weapons do not harm him

10. he dies unconfused

and,

11. he is reborn in a heavenly realm

Some of these are readily apparent, even when a person first starts to practice. Two that I'd like to say a little about are number 7, and 9.

‘His mind is calm’, or, sometimes, ‘His mind is easily concentrated’ comes from the fact that metta produces in us a feeling of ease and well being. We feel comfortable, and have a light to the mind. This makes it easy to direct the mind to whatever subject we take up.

The phrase ‘poison, fire, and weapons do not harm him’ needs a little bit more explanation: practically speaking, it’s referring to the inner poisons, of greed, anger and delusion, which can be expanded to include such things as jealousy, pride, impatience, sadness, and any other difficult emotion we might experience.

It may sound hard to believe that one practice can transform, or render us immune from such a range of negative emotions, but, think about it- imagine one by one what love does to anger…. attachment… pride… and so on…

That we are not yet free of these states of mind just means we haven’t cultivated the methods that put an end to them. In terms of the positive emotions we know, love is supreme.

Here is my own list of the benefits of metta practice, with a few words about each one.

1. metta brings health

2. metta brings strength

3. it brings optimism

4. there is joy

5. metta brings an appreciation of beauty

6. with metta, we are at ease with ourselves

7. metta brings peace

8. metta brings patience

9. there is forgiveness

10. in metta there is understanding

and,

11. through metta practice, we know our connection with others

metta brings health

I think for anyone who spends time regularly reflecting, and getting in touch with how they are feeling, knows there is a connection between the body and the mind. When we are feeling well mentally and emotionally, we are resistant not only to bad states of mind, but also to physical imbalance. This is something anyone can prove for themselves – we don't need a pile of studies to tell us it is so. It's obvious. Metta is a healing energy. It's a cool balm to ease the sufferings and pains of living.

When a mother reaches out to her child with pure love; when a friend comforts a friend; and when we are able to offer ourselves gentleness and care, these are metta. This is something we can all know for ourselves.

metta brings strength

When we talk about strength, we know there is physical strength, and there is inner strength. Metta brings both. The mind is brightened and uplifted by this practice, and that translates to having more energy.

it brings optimism

This is a practice that introduces us to our own depth, our own capacity, our resources of intelligence and creativity. When we are doubtful, it's because somehow we've gotten out of touch with these elements in ourselves. Metta brings with it a fresh sense of possibilities.

there is joy

Think about all that's there in a state of love: there is gratitude, generosity, gentleness, a sense of humor, a sense of the preciousness of life, and a bright and clear mind that is naturally celebratory. All of these have an element of joy to them. Metta means more happiness.

When we think of a loving person, often the image we have is of someone smiling – there is a real happiness being shared, and this is something we can know, this is something we can become.

metta brings an appreciation of beauty

This kind of sensibility sees the beauty in others, all around us in the natural world, and in ourselves. That a greater awareness of beauty can and should be developed is almost never taught in our culture, in these times. But here is the fact: that we will see more of the blessings of life when we cultivate love for one another, and for this world we live in. See for yourself. It really is so.

with metta, we are at ease with ourselves

This is one I know a lot of Westerners need. A lot of people here have a hard time being kind to themselves, or accepting themselves. Many people feel that, whatever they do, it's not good enough, or that *they* are not good enough. Metta changes all that. We can know our own worth when we practice metta meditation.

Think of the qualities you admire in others, known personally, or from a distance, like someone who is a hero or heroine to you… where do their excellent qualities, of generosity, or courage, consideration, integrity or loyalty come from? They all come from something fine within them, and that same source of all good qualities is in all of us. We may not express it the same way, but our own inner richness is something we can know, and share with others, just the same. No question, metta helps us to do this.

metta brings peace

If we're cultivating an attitude of tolerance for what's not easy, in ourselves, or in others, right there, there is more peace, a little more space and light; if we are developing gentleness, right there, there is a little more ease than before. This is so practical, so immediately useful to us, and the peace that metta brings to us personally, and in our relationships with others only increases the more we develop it.

metta brings patience

Think of how many times you have gotten upset with something not going the way you wanted, or not moving along as quickly as you would have liked. Impatience is never comfortable, or enjoyable. Now imagine if you were relaxed instead, or even half way to relaxed, half of the times you had to wait on line somewhere, or contend with someone you didn't have time for just then.

A regular meditation practice of any kind will teach a person a lot about patience, but this is especially true of metta meditation. Just cultivating *the intention* to wish ourselves and others well plants the seed for us to be more tolerant, easy going, and supportive. And, as time goes on, we can be comfortable in all kinds of situations – in line at the bank, in traffic, and with difficult people as well.

there is forgiveness

Imagine how much lighter people would be if they were able to let go of how they were wronged in the past. Where there has been injury, metta naturally becomes compassion, and gentleness. We all make mistakes, and in the mind of metta, loving kindness, there is room to hold and to forgive self and others.

in metta there is understanding

Thich Nhat Hanh said that to love someone properly, you have to understand them. We cultivate this ability when we do metta loving kindness meditation. Whether it's for ourselves, or for another, we're not pushing away whatever feeling is there. Naturally, there is the wish to understand ourselves or another more fully, and gradually this caring becomes informed with heart knowledge.

through metta practice, we know our connection with others

In these times, of virtual lives and an atomized society, there is nothing more meaningful than our real connection with one another. Whether we are by ourselves on retreat somewhere in the mountains, or with others on a train on the way to work, metta helps us to know our relationship to our friends, family and to all others.

Metta can bring us to that place that is simply more fundamental, more real than all the artificial distinctions people have thought up, and that divide us. We can know our own original ground, of universal love and belonging. This reunites us with our greater family.

All this, and more, is possible through the cultivation of metta - loving kindness. I'm sure that anyone who takes up the practice, will be able to make their own list of benefits, just from looking at the effect it has on their own lives.

It is a joy to share this. If you're reading this, wherever you are, my best wishes to you in your practice. May you be well and at your ease.

Metta - The method of loving kindness practice

Introduction

There is a light in the mind when we love selflessly, no doubt about it. Love is what lets us see beauty. Delighting in others is a kind of enlightenment, we could say, and that light is sustenance; it brings happiness and well being to the heart and mind.

If you are interested in this as a formal Buddhist practice, one of my favorite books on the subject is still Lovingkindness, by Sharon Salzberg. I'm also very glad to be able to recommend the website called dharmaseed, which is a great treasure trove of audio talks on many aspects of Dharma practice.

What a time to be alive!

On the next pages you will find two versions of the Metta Sutta, the teaching on Loving Kindness taught by the Buddha, followed by two traditional methods for cultivating Metta, the second with some personal variations added, of course. They are essentially the same meditation.

The first method offered here I received in 1998, at a monastery in Thailand called Wat Asokaram, from a Western monk there named Phra Ingo. It uses a simple visualization.

The second method uses phrases to generate loving kindness, to guide the mind and keep it on track. These can be combined, of course, whatever works best.

Sometimes I feel like, 'enough with words!' At these times, just bringing an image to mind is enough to enjoy this meditation.

When we practice metta, we're dong something very simple. We're getting in touch with and awakening the heart's innate capacity for love. So there's no need to make it complicated, or to have any doubt that this is something we can all do.

Then, when it comes to using metta phrases for the cultivation of loving kindness, some teachers say that the fewer phrases the better, but this is

something we can experiment with for ourselves, and see what works best for us.

Whatever method we use, I think Ajaan Pasanno explained the aim of metta practice very well when he said: 'In reality, the cultivation of loving kindness is not the actual repeating of the words – I mean, you use those words and phrases, but it's about the feeling, that feeling of loving kindness, the feeling of warmth, the feeling of acceptance, the feeling of openness, the feeling of the heart, including and concerned for the happiness of oneself or others, and that's about generating the feeling.

'In terms of meditation, it's that – directing attention to the feeling, or emotion, that sense of kindness, *well-wishing*, and then finding ways to support that, and to shore that up, and allow that to become stable, and then to start to suffuse one's own being, and then allowing that to spread out… and that requires mindfulness, and attention…"[1]

However we approach it, this is such a worthwhile practice. Don't you agree?

The Buddha taught that, 'Having seen that all beings, like ourselves, have a desire for happiness, one methodically develops loving kindness for all beings.'

This Buddhist loving kindness practice naturally leads us to what are called The Four Brahma Viharas, or Divine Abidings, of Universal Love, Compassion, Delight in the good, and Peace and balance of mind born of the strength of dedication, also called Equanimity, so I've also included a few verses that express this.

Enjoy! May all beings benefit!

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[1] From the recording of the 2008 Metta Retreat, available from Abhayagiri Monastery

The Metta Sutta

This is what should be done
By those who are skilled in goodness,
And who know the path of peace:

Let them be able and upright,
Straightforward and gentle in speech,
Humble and not conceited,
Contented and easily satisfied,
Unburdened with duties and frugal in their ways,
Peaceful and calm, and wise and skillful,
Not proud and demanding in nature.
Let them not do the slightest thing
That the wise would later reprove.

Wishing: in gladness and in safety,
May all beings be at ease.

Whatever living beings there may be;
Whether they are weak or strong, omitting none,
The great or the mighty, medium, short or small,
The seen and the unseen,
Those living near and far away,
Those born and to-be-born—
May all beings be at ease!

Let none deceive another,
Or despise any being in any state.
Let none through anger or ill-will
Wish harm upon another.

Even as a mother protects with her life
Her child, her only child,
So with a boundless heart
Should one cherish all living beings;
Radiating kindness over the entire world,
Spreading upward to the skies,

And downward to the depths;
Outward and unbounded,
Freed from hatred and ill-will.

Whether standing or walking, seated or lying down,
Free from drowsiness,
One should sustain this recollection.
This is said to be the sublime abiding.

By not holding to fixed views,
The pure-hearted one, having clarity of vision,
Being freed from all sense desires,
Is not born again into this world.

The Discourse On Love {Thich Nhat Hanh translation}

He or she who wants to attain peace should practice being upright, humble, and capable of using loving speech. He or she will know how to live simply and happily, with senses calmed, without being covetous and carried away by the emotions of the majority. Let him or her not do anything that will be disapproved of by the wise ones.

(And this is what he or she contemplates:)

May everyone be happy and safe, and may their hearts be filled with joy. May all living beings live in security and in Peace - beings who are frail or strong, tall or short, big or small, visible or not visible, near or far away, already born or yet to be born. May all of them dwell in perfect tranquility. Let no one do harm to anyone. Let no one put the life of anyone in danger. Let no one, out of anger or ill will, wish anyone any harm.

Just as a mother loves and protects her only child at the risk of her own life, we should cultivate Boundless Love to offer to all living beings in the entire cosmos. We should let our boundless love pervade the whole universe, above, below and across. Our love will know no obstacles, our heart will be absolutely free from hatred and enmity. Whether standing or walking, sitting or lying down, as long as we are awake, we should maintain this mindfulness of love in our own heart. This is the noblest way of living.

Free from wrong views, greed and sensual desires, living in beauty and realizing perfect understanding, those who practice Boundless Love will certainly transcend Birth and Death.

Metta Bhavana - Loving Kindness Meditation

To begin with, I sit upright, and relax. I close my eyes and allow myself to settle, becoming more calm, relaxed and harmonious.

I let go of thoughts, feelings, and sensations.

I observe how the breath is flowing in smoothly, and flowing out easily; free and harmonious.

Now I see a wonderful sun over my head, shining with warm, golden light.

This bright light of loving-kindness is streaming throughout my entire being. I can feel it; I feel well, and I am happy.

I. First person: Now I imagine one person who I love the most.

I see the warm, golden light of loving-kindness streaming to that person.

This wonderful bright light is flowing through this person. This beloved person is surrounded by this light of higher love and kindness.

I can see the smile on their face. This beloved person feels well, and is very happy.

II. Second person: Next, I imagine one person who I like and respect.
… (as above)

III. Third person: Next I can see one person toward whom I have a neutral relationship. … (as above)

IV. Fourth person: The last person I think of is one whom I have had difficulties, or someone who I dislike. … (as above)

Now I see all four persons together, with the sun above them, and I see them all receiving the same amount of this warm golden light of loving-kindness.

They all feel well; they are all smiling, and they are all shining, and happy.

Then I let them go I peace and happiness.

Now, once more I see the warm sun above my head, and once again I am filled with feelings of happiness and well-being.

(optional:)

If necessary, at this point, I practice equanimity meditation:

Now, I allow myself to feel calm, and peaceful.

To conclude, I take a deep breath, and exhale slowly. I come back to the here and the now, and slowly open my eyes.

May all beings be happy.

Metta - loving kindness practice

Traditionally, metta practice is first done toward oneself. Then one cultivates metta for one's parents, family, friends and benefactors, including teachers, to neutral ones, or those we don't know, seen and unseen by us, to those we've had some difficulty with, and then to all beings. The general principle is that we start with what is easy, and go from there, and that we go patiently, and gradually.

In general, fewer words are better, but we should have a clear idea of what the words we use mean to us. For different people or groups, different lines may seem more appropriate to reflect on. You're welcome to select from these, to use lines from other sources, or to write your own metta phrases. Sometimes one or two lines are enough. Here is a model. Use your intelligence and skill to adapt meditation, as you see fit. The feeling is the important thing, and the clear intention.

Phrases for metta loving kindness practice

Here are two versions of the traditional phrases that are used:

May they be happy
May they be healthy
May they be peaceful
May they live with ease

...

May they be safe
May they be healthy
May they be happy
May they know they are loved

….

Ani Tenzin Palmo offers this way of expressing metta that has a very nice rhythm to it:

May they be well and happy,
peaceful, and at their ease.

The following was offered by Ajaan Pasanno. Beginning with oneself, it can be adapted to the different categories of people.

May I (they) be well, happy, peaceful, and prosperous.

May no harm come to me (them, etc…)
May no difficulties come to me.
May no problems come to me.

May I always meet with spiritual success.

May I also have the patience, courage, understanding, and determination to meet and overcome inevitable difficulties, problems, and failures in life.
May I have the qualities that will allow me to see those through.

…

And here are my own phrases:

May they be entirely well and at their ease.
May they have every happiness.
May they always be safe and protected
May they always know themselves to be greatly loved and cared for

May their heart be open to all the beauty and wonder of life.
May they have all they need and wish for
May they have every blessing
May they have all of the good things that this life has to offer,
every success and all joys.

May they have happiness
May they be healthy
May they have peace,
happiness and harmony in all their relationships

May they know freedom,
the highest happiness, and fulfillment.

As I mentioned earlier, you can also write your own metta phrases – and I encourage you to do so. Make the practice your own. These are just offered as an example. You are welcomed to use whatever works best for you.

Two more traditional methods

There are many ways to develop loving kindness. Two more ways that have come down to us are the spatial extension of metta, and developing metta for different categories of people. In each case, we are aiming to gradually become more inclusive in our love.

In the spatial extension of metta, we begin with where we are physically, and extend goodwill in front of us, to the left and right, in all directions, step by step, further and further, as much as we like and feel comfortable doing. We can begin where we are sitting and extend the light of metta to those in our own room, household, building, block, neighborhood, city, state, country, continent, hemisphere, world, universe, and beyond....

Another, simple application of the spatial extension of metta can be when we look from our window, we can extend well-wishing to the people we see pass by in the street. When we go out, we can offer metta to those on public transportation, or in line at the grocery store, or to a room of people, such as at work, at the bank, at the doctor's, or at a bar, genuinely wishing them all well.

In developing metta for different categories of people, we have a model in the suttas, and we are encouraged to be creative with it as well. We can develop kindness and well wishing for the young and old, for the rich and poor, for those near and far away; for the happy and the troubled in spirit; for those living in ease, comfort and safety, and those in difficult circumstances, and so on. We can develop this quality of care and support for people of different political views, and for those of different races, for different species and stages of development, and those who live in other worlds. Truly, there is no limit to its application.

The Four Brahma Viharas

Metta practice is done step by step, through the different categories, understanding their purpose, and then all together, as taught, until one reaches the Four 'Brahma Viharas' – the 'Divine Abodes', also called the Four Limitless States. These are Universal Love, Compassion, Joy, and Equanimity, which in this context is the strength and balance of mind that comes from love.

The Four Brahma Viharas can be expressed, and reflected on in a number of ways, including this four line prayer, adapted from the Tibetan Tradition:

May all beings have happiness and the causes of happiness…

May all beings be free of suffering and the causes of suffering…

I rejoice in all that is beautiful and right in the world,
in all virtue and positive action,
and in all happiness and good fortune...

and abide in stable, impartial love...

{My own versions of the traditional teachings, "The Cultivation of Loving Kindness', and 'The Suffusion with the Divine Abidings' can be found starting on page 127.}

Raising up, and evening out our responses to life through loving kindness practice

Always start where you are

I.

The basic idea of the cultivation of loving kindness, or metta practice is that we start with what is easy for us, and go from there. This is something we can all grasp right away, and yet it has a range of applications that are truly marvelous.

First, when we're told to begin with whoever is easiest for us to feel kindness towards, what we're doing is identifying some feeling we've had that is more gentle, more joyful, warm, appreciative, and noble than our usual attitude. We're lifting our heart and mind to a higher level, for even those few brief moments, when we lovingly bring to mind a child, a family member, or dear friend. That the feeling fades is a natural part of training, and so we lift up our mind again, and, with words and images, we cultivate this sense that we already naturally have, of wishing them well.

Loving kindness is interesting in this way. It can be there before any words about it, and then when we think of its meaning, and put it into words, the feeling itself can become more clear. It can shine more brightly within us.

We lift up our mind, and produce a genuine, natural feeling of well wishing, supporting that with phrases from the heart, such as, 'May I be well and at my ease…', or, 'May you be well, and at your ease, 'May you have every happiness;' May you be happy, healthy, and peaceful'. Sometimes I add their name, or say, *'Dear one…'*

II.

The teachings say we should do this first towards ourselves, a benefactor, a family member, or whoever is easiest for us, and only then, over time, to proceed to neutral and difficult people.

If it's not easy in the beginning to direct thoughts of good will to ourselves, we can choose another person, understanding that returning to ourselves is an essential part of loving kindness practice. Here's why: it's from our own response to kindness that we know how natural it is to want happiness. Based on that, we can develop these same wishes for all others.

The Thai teacher, Ajaan Lee, had a colloquial way of describing how we can train the mind and heart. He said that when we're learning from a teacher, it's like we're watching and listening to them describe how to make a basket. We then try ourselves, and after some attempts, we have a reasonable enough basket that we ourselves have made. This then becomes our standard. We try again to replicate that, or to do even better. Then when we do exceed our earlier attempts, we can set aside that first model basket, and have a new, and better standard.

It's the same way with training the mind and heart. We have some good and some awkward first attempts, but then, gradually, we have an idea of what we can do, the feelings we can cultivate, and we then bring that to mind when we meditate.

This is the first instance I can see of lifting up the mind. We have some standard, or some idea of how we can be towards ourselves and another, and, even if we are not able to reach that same degree of kindness, we know it's possible, and, gently, patiently, we just aim to go in that direction.

Some days this will be easier than others, and sometimes one person will be easier than another. That doesn't matter. We start wherever we are now, and we just keep intending to go in the direction of our best efforts, of what produced the best results in the past.

The genius of the Buddha's teaching is really evident here. To start with what is easiest, such as was taught in the Metta Sutta,

'just as a mother cherishes her child, her only child, so one should cultivate loving kindness..'

- what could be more natural than that?

I'm sure even mothers have times when it's easier than other times to feel love for their child, but what the Buddha was pointing out was that best

quality, the unconditional, freely flowing, abundant heart quality that we all have felt sometimes, of loving at its best. If we can again find this quality in ourself, we already have the standard. Bringing it to mind, we lift up our heart.

III.

Mindfulness and clear comprehension are a part of every Buddhist meditation. How these work in metta practice is in holding the object in mind, and then in watching how our heart and mind are responding.

Just within a few minutes we can notice some fluctuations in our feeling of loving kindness – sometimes it will be there, for ourself or for another, clear and strong, and other times, less so.

Since our aim is to lift up our mind, and to keep and improve this quality, we can then be skillful, using whatever phrases or images work for us. Sometimes, for example, I find the image of a beautiful, brightly shining sun to be very helpful.

At times it's skillful, if we're cultivating the feelings of kindness towards our family or friends, to go back to ourselves. Or, if having kindness for ourself is not easy, we can begin or go back to those for whom it is easier, such as children, kind friends we are grateful for, our beloved teachers, or even pets.

When we're practicing, the working idea is not only that we start with what is easy and go from there, but that we keep returning to what feels natural and comfortable for us, and, using that as a basis, we continually move towards more evenness in our responses to the different categories, and we go in the direction of greater and greater inclusiveness.

IV.

We can see next, when contemplating the category of our friends, that some are easier to send metta to than others. The idea is that we even out this response, until we're able to have the same quality and depth of feelings of genuine well wishing for them all. With practice, we're able to slowly wear away our resistance to doing this.

One method is to start with whoever is easiest, and then to bring others to mind. Someone mentioned the idea of seeing them together in a 'group photo'. Sometimes I imagine a party, where family and friends and loved ones have been invited, and I'm greeting them, and talking with them, and wishing them well, guiding the feelings with words such as

May you be entirely well and at your ease, my friend!
May you have every happiness…

One of the interesting things about cultivating such qualities, aiming to even them out towards ourselves, benefactors, family and friends, difficult people, and eventually towards all beings, is that we can actually see it work. We can feel when there's some shift, and it gets easier to wish another well unconditionally, with more of the same quality we have towards our most loved ones.

V.

The category of what they call 'neutral people' has always been an interesting one to me. When I first heard about it, I thought it was fascinating that there were some I didn't feel much about, one way or another – neither attraction or aversion. When I went out looking to see who I was neutral towards, it was surprising to see that most people I had some feeling about, one way or another, but there *were* some I didn't notice at all.

Recognizing these people, as people, is a first step, and maybe the hardest one. That some people are invisible to us tells us something. We've not yet opened our eyes and heart to them. Once we see them, or are able to bring them to mind in our meditation, it gets easier from there. All we need to do then is to reflect on their fundamental humanity- how they are just like ourselves, and our loved ones, in that they want to be happy and not suffer. They too have dreams, difficulties, talents, needs and wishes, just like all of us. We can lift them up in our thoughts, hold them also in our heart, and sincerely wish them well, the highest good.

Indifference is an absence of seeing what is actually there. We have the saying 'to know them is to love them'. If we were to actually see the unique human being that is there, naturally we'd wish them every happiness in the

world. This range of cultivation of friendliness is evening out our responses to those we may have seen, but don't personally know.

I divide the neutral category into two: those I see somewhere, or remember – I call them 'the known, but unfamiliar', and those I don't know at all – 'those unknown to me'. Evening out the feelings of love for them then involves first thinking of how these that I do see around have the same needs and wishes as I and my family and friends, truly wishing them well, and then extending that same feeling also to those I don't know.

This can feel like leaving a small pool of water, and entering a great ocean. After all, we only see and know a relatively very few people. When we open our heart to this category of people, that of those we don't know, it's a great expansion of the field of our practice.

We can test how we're doing with this cultivation of loving kindness in our responses, when reading the news, for example, about someone in our town, or in the next town or county over. We can see if the feeling of wishing them well, the highest good is there, or if it fluctuates. Right there is the place of continued practice.

Did you lose the thread? Aah, no matter. Just begin again, and continue.

VI.

The last category we're taught to consider in the Traditional metta instructions is that of the difficult person. The literal translation of the Pali term is 'the enemy', but some people prefer to soften the sense of who we're dealing with here.

To include our own participation, sometimes it's useful just to call it the person we've had some difficulty with. Again, this can be an interesting category, in that there are degrees of difficult person, or situation. And, as before, we're encouraged to start with what is easiest, and go from there. So, instead of starting with the most difficult person, the one who we feel has caused us the most harm or problems, we can start with someone who's been less of a problem.

I would take it even further, as a practical means, and say that, if we can identify, and then cultivate kindness towards those very mild irritations we have for people, circumstances, and ourselves, it greatly eases the way to transforming our relationship to those progressively harder cases.

Many people want to start with what is most difficult, but this is only because those people or situations have caused us so much suffering, and we naturally want to be rid of that, but being really skillful here means that we just do what is most effective.

I heard one teacher suggest thinking about difficult people on a scale of one to ten, with ten being the most difficult. Then he said, instead of choosing the people or situations in the nine to ten range, we can more productively work first with those who are maybe around five or six on the scale.

One morning after hearing this, when I got to considering the category of difficult person, I looked, and thought to myself, 'Well, I don't really have anyone I'm feeling in conflict with right now…' '… not even in the middle range of the scale…' Then I heard myself ask, 'What about the lower range?, like about two or three?', and I found there were a couple people I could think of, where I could clearly identify some resistance to offering them the same kindness.

This illustrated for me an important point, and that is not to get complacent, but to keep making progress whenever we can, towards gradually offering all others the same quality of metta. Certainly awareness, gentleness for oneself, and self honesty are essential here.

In working with the category of the person we've had some difficulty with, sometimes it can be useful to go back to directing thoughts of loving kindness towards ourselves, our friends, the categories of what were formerly neutral people, and then to those we've only had some slight problem with. This lets us gather some momentum. Over and over, we can go in this direction, of cultivating the wish for all to be well, happy and at their ease.

Another way to approach the truly most difficult people or situations is to go on to the next step, and then come back to this category. We can cultivate the aim for all beings everywhere to have happiness, health, peace and joy,

always. Then, when we come back to these, sometimes confused, conflicted people, it can be easier to wish them well, the same happiness, in fact.

One teacher, Kamala Masters, pointed out that the cultivation of kindness towards for those with whom we've had some difficulty often turns into compassion, either for ourself, or for the other person, or both. Developing greater understanding and forgiveness enters into it here too.

No one intends to cause harm to themselves or others who is right in themselves. The aggression, greed, arrogance, or indifference are just the afflictive emotions of people who are not yet liberated. If they were simply afflicted, and by themselves, or engaging others, should that make them any more or less worthy of our compassion?

If their problem were physical, rather than psychological, would we react to them with any amount of aversion at all?, or any lack of kindness? What difference should it make? A suffering person is just that, no matter what level it's on, and when they reach a certain point, their problems are bound to carry over and cause problems for others. That's just the way it is. How can we respond to them? What is the best we can offer?

How would we like to be treated if we were in their situation? Or, if it were a loved one of ours who was lost and confused, how would we want them to be treated? With kindness, of course. We know this is what we should extend to difficult people. It may not be easy, but that's exactly why we need to practice, because it's not easy.

Our reflections may stir very mixed feelings, some kindness, then anger, disappointment, then compassion, which is a part of the process. Acting skillfully here means keeping the aim in mind, of eventually being able to include all beings in our love and care, no matter who, or what, or where. We then cultivate this whole field of practice, as needed to fulfill that aim.

VII.

There's a sub-category here that could be called 'the impersonal difficult person, or situation'. This is something that, while not directed specifically at us, is hard to bear. It is in the range of the unpleasant, irritating, or, for some reason, difficult to hold in awareness.

For example, it can be how a person treats someone else, or how a public figure acts. It can be what we see or know about those who cause harm because of their lack of ethics. Or, it can refer to how advertising effects us, even though it's not directed just at us . Any of these can be unpleasant, hard to experience without at least some aversion, and so they fit in this category.

All that went before applies here too. In this case though, it seems we're combining something of both the neutral and difficult category. As with the neutral person, we can reflect on the people behind these actions as human beings, and cultivate goodwill for them like we did before. Then, like the rest of the difficult person category, there are degrees of how these things effect us, and so, again, we can start with the people or situations that are easier to have feelings of loving kindness towards, and go from there. The aim is to be at peace with them, and eventually, to really wish them all well. This is possible.

VIII.

An interesting take that I heard on the categories of people is to look at all these as describing aspects of ourself. So again, we have 'the most lovable', 'the liked', 'the neutral', or 'that ones we don't see or are indifferent towards', and 'the ones we have degrees of difficulty with'. This is useful because we're always with ourself, and we can always simply incline the mind towards kindness. We can just aim to go in the direction of having more appreciation and unconditional love. Whether or not we feel any change right away doesn't matter that much, what matters is the intention we hold. In time, this is what gradually brings results.

Again, as before, we can see the different degrees of these responses we're having, and, working from what is easiest, we go step by step, gradually becoming more inclusive of all our states. If we want to be free from major annoyances, the way to do that is shown right there – we start with what is easy, with what we feel are only very minor problems, and go step by step. Eventually we can handle even the bigger challenges.

IX.

The basic idea for how to cultivate metta is simple and straightforward enough for anyone to take hold of, at any place, at any time, and, simple though it is, it can have far reaching effects, both personally, and for our world. Some people like just having ideals, while others can't be bothered with them, and just want to stay with what seems immediate and practical. Metta brings together these two – we have an ideal to move towards, and of necessity, we can only take the step that is right in front of us.

It can be very encouraging to see that change is possible, even in very small ways. Maybe we can become *just a little more patient and kind* towards ourselves, or *just a little more friendly* to our neighbor, or family. Such progress should be celebrated. Then, if we can bring more calm and composure to some small area of life, we know we can also do it in other ways. We can sense that, step by step, it's possible to transform the mind, and our responses to life, gradually becoming more kind, and inclusive. From wherever we are now, this is a great gift we can all offer, to ourselves, and to our world.

Metta for oneself:

The Practice of Smiling to Oneself

One of the ways our goodwill is communicated is by smiling. We usually think of this as a social act, but in fact we can also smile warmly to ourselves.

I first heard about what the Taoists call the inner smile from Thich Nhat Hanh in the late 1980's. At that time he combined meditation on the breath with smiling to oneself, with an appreciation for each part of our body. So, for example, he taught that we can think: 'breathing in and out, I am aware of the hair on my head… breathing in and out, I smile to my hair… breathing in and out, I am aware of my eyes… breathing in and out, I smile and am thankful to my eyes…' This can be done a few times. Going through the body from head to toe, when we find a part of the body or ourselves that needs extra kindness and attention, we can stay there for a while, with love and care.

The effect of such a practice can be felt right away. Kindness is like a balm for whatever is struggling or suffering. A smile communicates encouragement, patience, acceptance, warmth, understanding and compassion, gentleness, respect, and a shared joy. That we can give this gift to ourselves at any time is really something remarkable, and it's something we should all learn to do.

Especially when thing are not going well in some areas of our life, this basic attitude of acceptance, encouragement and unconditional love and support becomes even more important. I remember Thich Nhat Hanh being asked, But what if I don't feel like smiling? (this was from a woman who was pregnant at that time) and Thay said, You should smile anyway. If you can smile now, your baby will receive that nourishment from you. He also said that 'sometimes your happiness is the cause of your smile, and sometimes your smile can be the cause of your happiness'. He called this, only half-kiddingly, 'mouth yoga'.

Think of the warm smile of a wise elder, or of a teacher that you know. What is communicated with that expression is their experience, patience, and natural, effortless generosity. Often being with someone who is older

and wiser than ourselves resets our system. Our restlessness and anxiety melt away in their kind presence, which feels like a gift to our whole person.

We can also access the wisdom-self we have within, and that we know in our better times, when we take up this practice of smiling to ourselves. When we do this, it gets easier to access this source of joy and healing energy we all have within, and to share it with others as well.

Smiling and being kind to ourselves may not always be the very first step in developing on the path of love, but at some point it becomes essential. We do need to be comfortable being close to ourselves to really understand what we carry with us, what we still struggle with, what it feels like to hope and to dream and to be a human being. This gradually becomes easier when we develop genuine kindness, and heartfelt well-wishing for ourself.

We all know that some people go through their entire lives avoiding what is difficult to hold. They are divided in themselves, diminished, out of touch with their own pain and tender selves, and, more often than not, they are lacking empathy, compassion and forgiveness for others. All this stems from their not having received enough loving care from others, and never having fully learned to unconditionally love themselves. It is a great work, and something that's truly essential for us to live whole, integrated, fulfilled lives. One way or another, how we are with ourselves over time becomes the basis for the quality of all our relationships.

Smiling is a simple practice, but it has such far reaching effects, that I'd like to recommend it to all my friends. It graces our days and nights, and helps us create beauty in our lives, and in the lives of all those we love.

Mindful Breathing as a Loving Kindness Practice

Breath meditation and loving kindness practice are usually taught separately. however it can be greatly healing to combine these two practices. In the Buddha's teachings, when we practice breath meditation, after finding the in and out breath, the next step is to become aware of our whole body, while breathing in and out, and to calm this body of ours. Often in commentaries this is gone through briefly, on the way to other meditations.

When *Metta* or loving kindness practice is taught by itself, we can get a good sense of what pure kindness feels like. There is an acceptance, gentleness and encouragement that we can know from the inside. To begin with, we're told to bring to mind whoever is easiest to generate feelings of warmth and love for. When we think of children, for example, the feeling is uncomplicated and unconditional love, clear and bright. We would do anything for them, naturally. We wish them every conceivable happiness. We then take this same feeling and do our best to direct it towards other people, including ourselves.

In his book The Path of Emancipation, Thich Nhat Hanh explains how we can join breath meditation with an awareness of the body with having love and compassion for ourselves, and why this is necessary. Here are a few notes. He says that, *Sometimes we believe our body is a stranger to us, we are alienated from our own body, and that is why we have to go home to our body and reconcile ourselves with it.*

For many reasons, it can be painful to inhabit the body. The physical carries the memory of the wounds we have suffered, as well as those of our ancestors. Often we have judged ourselves and found ourselves wanting. Thay says that when we practice breathing in and out with an awareness of our body *we go home to our body and embrace it. We reconcile ourselves with our body. It is very important to go back to our body and show our concern, attention, and love. Our body might be suffering. It might have been abandoned for a long time. That is why we generate the energy of mindfulness and go back to embrace our body. This is the beginning of the practice of love.*

In the past, we've may have taken to food, drugs, sex, and endless distractions to avoid feeling. Even meditation can be an escape into some ideal of what it means to be 'a meditator'. We were divided. Now we can try something different. We can begin to awaken more kindness and compassion for ourselves. He continues: *We embrace our body tenderly during our in-breath and out-breath, with the intention to reconcile ourselves with it, to take care of it, and to show our concern and loving kindness.You may want to modify the language a little, but the content of the practice is the same: "Breathing in, I am aware of my body. Breathing out, I smile to my body." This is a smile of awareness, a smile that shows your concern and loving kindness.*

Smiling, directing the sunlight of warmth, acceptance and care to the our body is healing, and unifying. It can slowly reestablish our connection with our physical self. An inner smile communicates love. With it, we uphold what is good in us. It is also a way to be with what is difficult, without turning away. Just as a mother would embrace her child, we can tenderly hold whatever we feel is broken, or flawed, or is in any way lacking in ourselves. We can gently embrace ourselves, breath by breath, and step by step. Thay continues *When you go back to your body, first you may want to embrace your body as a whole, in its entirety. Afterwards, you can pay attention to the different parts of your body. Each part should be embraced by our mindfulness, and we should smile to it. This is the practice of compassion, of love, directed to your body.*

We can practice like this, with or without the words: Breathing in, I am aware of my right shoulder, breathing out, I smile to my right shoulder; Breathing in, I am aware of my left shoulder, breathing out, I smile to my shoulder… We go through our whole body this way, from top to bottom, front and back, right and left, our face, throat, chest, arms, abdomen, groin, legs… Where there is some discomfort or tension, we can stay in that place longer, breathing in and out, and directing our attention and care to that part of ourselves. When we practice in this way, some parts of ourselves, such as our heart, may respond immediately, with a feeling of great relief and gratitude. It's been waiting such a long time to be comforted! Clearly, the experience of this body of ours contains our feelings and our mind. They 'inter-are'.

Where there is suffering, either in ourselves or in our world, it is because there has been a lack of attention, love, and understanding. Now, each

breath, each look, each thought we direct towards ourselves can be brimming with love, Each step, and every attentive moment can be like a gentle caress. It can be like nectar, true medicine, and a firm embrace. After a time, having loving kindness towards ourselves allows us to settle peacefully, with a calm and clear mind that is then a basis for further insight. Compared to simple awareness of the breath and movement, this is bringing more of our beautiful inner qualities to bear on our practice. We can use all of our inner resources. When we learn to be with that is difficult, with an open heart, gradually it can help to awaken our humanity. We can learn to calm our discomfort, our fears, and insecurities, and see deeply into them. As people who practice meditation for any length of time can tell you, this can have far reaching effects.

No matter what our temperament, I think that each one of us needs to have kindness for ourselves. We need patience, gentleness, and warmth to heal, to become whole, and to travel a path of greater self understanding and inner freedom. This is so important for all of our sake, so experiment and see what methods work best for you. If you like, you can try practicing metta and breath meditation separately, and then combining them and see what effect it has. We are all called to a great work. However we approach it, understanding ourselves and others and this world, and having something to offer starts here, with taking care of ourselves well. It begins with us.

A few thoughts on having kindness towards ourselves – from a letter to a friend

When I think about it, what I want to encourage most of all, is for you to keep going with the aim to be kind to yourself. The reason I say this is that, over the years, it's become more and more clear to me just how necessary this is.

As you said, it's not easy, which tells us something. I think it's because we're closest to our own suffering, and we've heard it all before so many times, and because of that we're not as patient with ourselves as we are with others. But I wonder how far we can take a quality such as this, moving towards having a more unconditional kindness and compassion for ourselves.

I recently heard one teacher saying that, any kind of meditation, or reflection we do will result in our having more kindness and compassion for others. He said the reason for this was that we'd be closer to our own suffering and difficulty, and so naturally be able to relate more to what others go through.

I'd heard this before, and I've watched this too in my own experience, and, from what I can tell, it's true. The extent to which it works though, depends at least in part in how we are towards ourselves. Have you ever heard the saying 'a pot drips what's in it'? The Bible says it as 'out of the treasure of the heart the mouth speaks'

How I relate to these sayings here, is that there's something really valuable in listening to the thoughts we have about ourselves – we may be unaware, and surprised when we hear the tone of them.

I like the thought-experiment of imagining a person you feel close to, with nothing but kind feelings for, and the intention to help them, and thinking of what you'd say to them, or how you'd want to support them if they were struggling. This is one way to identify the capacity you see in yourself of unconditional love and compassion. This is what we need for ourselves too.

I don't know if you saw it, in one of those essays I sent you, I think it was the one on anger, Ani Tenzin Palmo said, 'Treat yourself as you would treat your dearest friend. Speak to yourself words you would speak to someone

you really care for.' That this is difficult to do shows us just how much we need to cultivate this quality, of love for ourselves.

I know you have much of the experience with your children, of patience, and encouragement, gentleness and sympathy for them when they struggle or are uncertain about something. How wonderful when we can have these same qualities for ourself.

I've had this image for a while, of what it's like to either be kind towards ourself, or to be aggressive, impatient and rough: It's like someone is behind a door, and if we're aggressively shouting at them to come out - they're likely to barricade the door. But if we speak gently to them, encouragingly, expressing sympathy and unconditional support, from the sound of our voice they can feel that, and eventually they'll open up the door and come out.

It's more subtle though, for us, when it comes to how we talk to ourselves. If we're not kind to ourselves, there are levels to the mind we get used to not looking at, out of long habit. We can become divided against ourselves. This comes to mind for me now because I know we all have old wounds to be cared for. In our own way, in this life, we're all on the path of healing, of making our way to health and wholeness.

Most people don't get to address the deeper causes of suffering in their lives, and for them, there is only endless covering over, or running away, or numbing out, and that never entirely works.

Love can be like a medicine, just the right medicine. It can be like nectar. And this is what we all need in our lives. We need this from others, but most of all, this is something we need to give to ourselves. I wonder what you think of all this.

Please be supremely kind, gentle, patient and forgiving to yourself. Please be greatly compassionate (not just compassionate, but *greatly* compassionate), and encouraging, as you would to your children, or your dearest friends. Just as you would be to them, let your love be a gift to yourself, for your whole life.

There's a saying, 'Life is so hard – how can we be anything *but* kind?' I know it's not easy, which is all the more reason to do it – *because it's not easy*… Understanding this, we can smile to ourselves with real sympathy.

We don’t talk about much about these things, but I think it should be said. This opens the way to so much that would otherwise not get attended to, and so much then would not be born in our lives.

I’m nowhere near perfect at this, I have my good days and bad days, good hours and bad hours, but I am sure of the importance of this – kindness and compassion for myself, and so I aim to keep trying. Maybe you will find these thoughts useful to you in your life, I don’t know, but I do hope so.

Here is a part of a poem by Galway Kinnel, called ‘St. Francis and the Sow’ that so beautifully expresses the necessity of love

The bud
stands for all things,
even those things that don't flower,

for everything flowers, from within,
of self-blessing;

though sometimes it is necessary
to reteach a thing its loveliness,
to put a hand on its brow
and retell it in words and in touch
it is lovely
until it flowers again from within,
of self-blessing…

May it be this way for all of us!

My own personal Babemba tribe

I've been wondering why I've felt so well these last few months on retreat. The conditions here in the mountains of Washington are excellent – all a person could wish for, really, and my days are spent in study and meditation, but, I thought, there's more to it than that. Then I heard someone mention the story of the Babemba tribe, and I thought, yes, that's it, this is why I've been feeling so uplifted.

In case you haven't heard this story, it goes as follows:

In the Babemba tribe of South Africa, if someone has started acting in a way that threatens the community, everyone will stop what they are doing, gather around that person, and, one at a time, they will recount to him or her all of the good things they have done in their life, and all their good qualities. This can go on for days, and when it's over, they have a party and welcome that person back into their community.

Now, I've not been living with a large group. In fact, here at the hermitage, it's been pretty much just myself and the caretaker. I have been practicing metta meditation though, building it up step by step with a good foundation of cultivating goodwill towards myself, my family, and friends. Often, the way I'll do this is to imagine a party where I'm the host. My guests are arriving, and I'm there to greet them one at time. I imagine we're happy to see each other, and that perhaps I take their hands in my own, say their name, and say *I'm so glad to see you, Thank you for coming*, and then I'll reflect on my metta phrases for them, beginning with , *'May you be well and at your ease…'*

I know a lot of people have difficulty sending metta to themselves in the beginning, but this doesn't seem to have been much of a problem for me. Continuing with it, of course, is a challenge and an exploration.

So, after sending metta to myself, I've focused as much or more on cultivating this feeling towards those people I've had the joy of being friends with over the years. I feel so much gratitude for them.

When I think of my friends during the practice, I always see them as smiling and happy. Just as when we were physically together, I feel like we are

delighting in each other's company again. I see the good in them, which they say is the immediate cause for love to arise in us. Clearly, cultivating metta for those we care for wakes up our mind and heart, and blesses us.

And here is where I discovered something else uplifting, and unexpected*: I know they've seen the good in me as well, and this brings me a deep sense of happiness and well being. Though I didn't set out to cultivate metta for myself when focusing on friends, it has had this result.* Remembering their kindness, and how they've seen me, has had a wonderful effect.

It's like the group of twenty or thirty people I've remembered and cultivated metta for have been my best support while here on retreat. I jokingly say they've been 'my own personal Babemba tribe' – not that I needed to be reconciled with them because of some mistakes, but because, seeing myself through their eyes, and calling to mind who I am when I'm with them, they've reminded me of who I am, at my best.

If the immediate cause for metta loving kindness to arise is seeing the good in another, or in ourself, then I'm sure that the giving and receiving the love of friends and family is something essential for our own flourishing.

In Christian terms, one verse from the Bible says, 'We love, because we were loved first.' Matthew Fox calls this 'original blessing'. For those who find it more helpful to think in non-theistic terms, we can see that love is our original nature. Somehow, we need to know this, or to have it re-awakened in us.

Looking into the eyes of those who are dear to me, I can see that I'm worthy. Friends are quick to forgive, and encourage. They remind me there is something fine in me, that brings them happiness. *Ah!, what a surprise!* This is what friends are for. They are people we can give our heart to, yes, and they also reflect what is good in us, awakening joy.

{A confession: when I first heard the story of the Babemba tribe, and they got to the part where they gather around the person, I thought they were going to start accusing them of everything they had done wrong. Such is our conditioning here, no? our dysfunctional way of handling problems…. We have a lot to learn from these people. I'm sure someone could do a study on the relationship between crime and the number of good friends a person has…}

Any time a person treats us with kindness, it's because they see something that is right and good in us. Even if we don't see it in our selves at that time, family, friends, and kind strangers can remind us of what is true and beautiful about ourselves.

It's funny what we really remember over the years. Some people I only knew for a short time. With others, maybe we shared only one conversation, or even just a glance. I don't remember birthday or Christmas presents, or even that much of what was said by friends. What I do remember is that these people loved and cared for me, and that I loved them back. I think we remember these people most of all because this love is what sustains us. It is the greatest gift we can offer each other.

Metta for the Dear Person:

Getting started in metta meditation – the dear person category

When we first hear the instructions on metta practice, telling us we should begin with someone we naturally feel love for, it's easy for the mind to go to those we feel closest to, such as our family, or best friends. The teachings go further though, and add that it should be an easy, uncomplicated relationship. There's a good reason for this, as we'll see.

Our closest relationships are usually complicated. And while there is metta, or pure love in these relationships, it's often mixed with conditional love, and subject to change. Isn't it so?

It's suggested that we try out different people for this first category, the most dear person, and see the differences for ourselves. What we're looking for is the feeling of spontaneous joy, warmth and well wishing when we think of that person. Some teachers talk about using a pet, or some lovely animal they see. Others speak of having a public figure, such as a teacher, that inspires us as the dear one.

When we try out different people, we can tell that some are easier than others to have metta for. Some evoke abundant feelings of love. I had the great pleasure a number of years back in Taiwan, of tutoring three children, two brothers, Willie and Mickey, and their sister, Emily. I went to their home once a week for five years, and got to see them grow up. Having never raised children, teaching them, and caring for them and the other children I taught, gave me some sense of what parents and grandparents feel. I think of Maggie, Demi, and Alice…and others…I think of the children of my long time friends… When I bring them to mind, naturally, my wishes are for their whole lives.

'Dear ones,
May you always be well, and at your ease…
May you have every happiness…'

There is this process that extends throughout the entire practice of cultivating metta, that involves 'borrowing' from what we develop in one category or towards one person, and then seeing if we can direct or cultivate

that same feeling towards others. This is something in fact that we are encouraged to do right from the beginning of the practice.

The idea of trying out, or 'auditioning' different people for the start of cultivating metta may go against our conditioning, but when we see the point of it, I think we'll gladly do it. The idea is that we take the path of least resistance.

After we've found who we feel natural, spontaneous, abundant unconditional love for, when we then turn to those we would have chosen before to come first, we can notice something interesting. We do have metta, pure love for these people also, but often, not only is it mixed with attachment, but it can be difficult to tell the difference between the two. Starting with the easiest and the least complicated, we can clearly see what is metta, the well wishing for another person's whole life, that doesn't change with conditions. This way of practicing first with what is easiest actually increases the pure love we can offer to those closest to us.

That same joy we find here can also accompany us on our journey of cultivating loving kindness for ourselves, our close friends and family, those we don't know personally, the ones we have difficulty with, and finally all beings.

The Discourse on Love by the Buddha teaches that

Just as a mother loves her child,
we should cultivate love to offer to all…

May everyone be happy and safe, and may their hearts be filled with joy.

The first step here is something we can experiment with, and see what works best for us.

I offer this with the wish that all of our metta practice will go smoothly and easily, and that we will all be able to share the best kind of love with one another.

Metta for the Neutral Person

The Great Bridge to Universal Love

Of the categories in metta, or Buddhist loving kindness practice, of self, friends and those closest to us, neutral people, those we have difficulty with, and all beings, the one that gets talked about the least is clearly the neutral person. This is understandable, after all. The dear person category is easy, and enjoyable, and everyone who takes up metta practice wants to at least lessen their aversion to the enemy category. 'All beings', also, feels good even just to think about. But where does that leave the group of those people we don't know personally? As we'll see, all the categories in metta practice are important, and have an essential role to play.

When we think about it, this category of metta for neutral people forms the bridge between those we know and care about, and those we do not, and almost certainly will never know personally. This expands the field of our metta practice immeasurably.

Of the three obstacles to metta, those of attachment, aversion and ignorance, attachment is purified, or removed by having pure metta towards dear ones; aversion is removed by cultivating metta for those we have problems with, and ignorance, manifesting here in this category as indifference and neglect, is removed by developing metta for the so-called 'neutral person'.

I've thought of this last group more as – those we don't know personally that we see, or who are known to us, and then, those who are unknown to us. This brings it closer to home. As with the other categories of metta, there is a step-wise progression we can follow to develop well wishing and care for this entire group.

We start with those we see, and reflect on how they are like ourselves, and our family and friends too, in that they want only happiness, and not even the slightest suffering for themselves, and their friends and family. If we can meet another in this way, then they are not a stranger to us. We can treat the clerk at the convenience store as a human being, as we would want ourselves, and our loved ones to be treated.

We can tell if this practice is working, or not, by how we then respond to those we don't know that we see, for example, on public transportation. If it

is working, we should be able to notice some difference in how we spontaneously feel towards them. When we find we are warming up to these people, then we can take the next step in the practice.

From there, it's much easier to begin to extend care also *to those we don't know personally, and who we don't meet directly,* which is by far the larger part of this category. We reflect that those people too have wants and needs, and like ourselves, friends and family, and just like those we don't know that we *do* meet, they also deserve our respect and care.

There are many ways we can extend love towards this larger group. Thinking of others can start out as a concept, but it's important that it doesn't remain there. So that it doesn't become a vague abstraction, we can always aim to learn about and become more familiar with how others are living. Organizations like Kiva can be a big help here. They facilitate micro-loans, via the internet, to people in Third World countries. There are short biographies, and pictures to help us get a more grounded sense of who's out there;

Or we could take up the cause of animal rights, basing the extension of our care on what we feel for the lives of the animals we do know and see.

We may say that the lives of those without health care in our country are not our business, *but we can make it our business;* or that the way people live in the slums of Rio, or in Kenya, or in America is none of our business, *but we can make it our business;*

We may think it's beyond us to be concerned with the availability of basic medicines in the Third World, *but we can, in fact, choose to make it our business;* we might think that Monsanto introducing untested, genetically modified food into the market, without letting people know is not our business, *but we can make it our business;*

We may not pay attention to the economies and environment in China, India, and Latin America, and how the people's lives in those places are effected, *but we can make it our business* to know and find ways to respond to it…

I know some people are bound to object here and say it's all too much, and that there are too many needs in our world to give time and attention to them all, and they do have a point. What we can do though is to take care of

ourselves well, and then to identify a few causes where we feel we can make a difference, and do what we can right there. It's important though that we don't shut out the rest of it from the overall way we see our lives. We should learn as much as we can about this whole world of living beings that we share, and then try to be responsible human beings.

One of the precepts of Thich Nhat Hanh's Order of Interbeing says, 'do not close your eyes before suffering', and *of course, this isn't comfortable*, but our humanity calls us to it. If we can live with this awareness, although we won't be able to solve every problem right away, in time we might be able to find a way to make a difference. Now isn't that something?

These are all ways we can extend metta in the category of those we don't personally know. I'm sure we can all think of other ways, if we spend some time with it. In each case, we can ask, What would love have me do here? or, How would I respond if this were happening to those I know and care about? This is what actually makes the bridge, to all-inclusive love.

I think part of why we may not give much attention to this group is because of how it's been named. I mean, 'neutral person'? – not too spicy, eh? So, I would like to kick-start the campaign to increase interest in this category, and propose 'The Great Bridge to Universal Love', or something like that. Really, I'm only half kidding here, because it *is* this, after all.

We *can* make others' concerns our own, and their joys and sorrows something we register, and respond to, and when we do this we find that our metta has grown by that much.

To aim to go in the direction of really having love for all is truly a most noble aspiration, and the great advantage of the method of metta practice is that it shows how we can actually accomplish this. Now, how amazing is that? Once we know the metta teachings, the way is open for those of us who want to take it.

May all beings,
known and unknown,
seen and unseen,
be entirely well and at their ease,
and may they have every happiness.

Metta for difficult people, situations, and states of mind

The Range of Forgiveness

How can we hold the past in a way that makes *greater life* possible?

Many of us have elements from our past that we feel hold us back now in some way. These could derive from our family history, from our relationships, from the history of our group, or how we have been with ourselves. So often I hear blame, accusing others or social conditions, saying I am not what I can be because I have been neglected or mistreated. In each case there is bitterness, anger towards the other or towards ourselves, together with deeply held views that resist change and perpetuate endless conflict.

When we speak about a wrong doing of some kind, and our moving forward unburdened by the past, there are three general areas that we need to account for, and these are: the inter-personal level, self-blame, and, historical injustice.

Covering all of these, generally in Buddhism it's understood that the cause of wrong actions is ignorance. For this reason, we don't view ourselves or a person or a group as evil, or irredeemable. There is no eternal damnation in Buddhism. It is ignorance that needs to be remedied, and in this view there is no room for anger.

We oppress ourselves at times as well, believing that because of our past actions we don't deserve happiness. We may use a soft euphemism such as 'low self esteem' to describe it, but this actually covers what is happening in people. When we don't know our own worth, it's on account of a greatly diminished self view. People don't see their own beauty, and instead see themselves as ugly, and their actions as shameful. Holding such a distorted image of themselves, they feel unworthy of love and respect, and they punish themselves.

We live also with the legacies of historical injustice, of one nation, race or class dominating others. Forgiveness is sometimes talked about as a two way street – that the other needs to recognize that they were wrong before we accept their apology. But if we wait for others to catch up with what we understand, we may be waiting a very long time, and what is certain is that

we are putting off our own peace of mind. It's enough if we understand the causes of what we experienced, and hold our memory with this knowledge in our heart. Then we as individuals are free, and all of our creative energy that would have gone into aggression and holding a partial view of the other can be used more productively in a thousand ways. We can say then that the kind of forgiveness that comes from understanding is one action with many interrelated effects.

Forgiveness is not excusing wrong actions, on individual and group levels, as there is still healing and restorative justice work to be done based on the knowledge of the full extent of the mistake, root and branch.

A line that's helped:

'Buddhas do not blame sentient beings who are flawed,
but with great compassion,
they help free them from the round of suffering'

Forgiveness based on insight holds the key to that greater freedom we all seek for ourselves, and for others. We can look to our wise elders and to the great teachers of the world to see what a fully mature wisdom and love would be. What we see in them is a depth of understanding and a perspective that holds much more of time than we see. Much like a grandparent would, they can see where we've been, and how far we still have to go. Such acceptance and encouragement can only come from seeing the greater arc of our lives. They have a greater vision of what's possible for us, and this is something we all need to develop in ourselves.

Being looked at by a sage, or by our own wisdom-mind, we can learn how to view ourselves, and others, and our world, including the past. From the personal and interpersonal, familial and historical, all of our relationships are transformed by our insight and compassion.

In the Presence of Mine Enemies

I've been thinking recently in Buddhist terms about one section of the 23rd Psalm. The King James Version translates the psalm this way:

The Lord is my shepherd
I shall not want.

He maketh me to lie down in green pastures
He leadeth me beside the still waters.
He restoreth my soul

He leadeth me in the paths of righteousness for his name's sake.

Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death,
I will fear no evil, for thou art with me;

Thy rod and thy staff they comfort me.

Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of mine enemies
Thou anointest my head with oil,
My cup runneth over.

Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life,
and I will dwell in the house of the Lord for ever.

There is remarkable consistency in most of this praise poem, except for one part, which to me stands out for this very reason. The line *'Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of mine enemies'* is an inviting to think about in terms of the practice of loving kindness, which in Buddhism should be developed to the furthest extent. Ultimately our love should include those who we have struggled with in this lifetime. These are not 'enemies' in the traditional sense, but this is poetry after all, and contemplation, and prayer, and so the meaning of this term, and the overall context needs to be unpacked.

First, this line among all the others stands out by contrast. All the others are lines of comfort and confidence:

The Lord is my Shepherd
I shall not want…

is an affirmation of being cared for,
by a higher order of being.

He maketh me to lie down in green pastures
He leadeth me beside the still waters.
He restoreth my soul

and

Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death,
I will fear no evil,
for thou art with me;

speak of a deep relationship with a Guardian, Protector, Healer we find in our lives; it speaks of confidence above all else, of moving through the journey of life and death without fear.

When we come to the line

'Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of mine enemies'

however, we come across an altogether different sort of image, one that is unexpected in this context. Why would our Lord, the one who guides us and keeps us safe, place us before those who have scorned us, vilified us, neglected or abused us or our loved ones in some way? And not only that, but *Prepared a table before me*?

What is the deep significance of such an image appearing here, in the middle of a praise poem on comfort, protection, provision and safety? Why would our all-knowing and caring Lord do such a thing?

It could be here that we are asked to forgive, and more, *to love* those who have harmed us, those we have fallen into disharmony with through some fault of our own perhaps, or through misunderstanding, or miscommunication.

From a Buddhist point of view, when practicing metta, loving kindness, this can be wonderful image, and the reading of this bible verse can deepen.

In the early stages of metta practice, we learn to be kind to ourselves, and forgiving, and encouraging. Then we extend pure kindness and well wishing to those we naturally have affection for, such as children, our parents, family, and friends. From there, we go on to other traditional categories of people we can cultivate love for. We generate metta for people in what are called the neutral person category, by seeing how they too have the same wishes for happiness, and how they too deserve our care.

We then come to the last, and most difficult category, that of the difficult person or 'the enemy'. This can be anyone from the most mildly irritating person, and go all the way to those who our interacting with has caused us the most suffering in this lifetime: ex girlfriends, estranged family members, broken relationships, people who have betrayed our trust, or let us down and hurt us deeply for whatever reason.
If we continue with the practice of metta, at some point, we quite naturally want to begin to include more of this category of person into our thoughts and prayers and the cultivation of loving kindness.

How does this come about? It comes from seeing.

We can carry with us all the memory of how hard it has been to be a human being, and how easy it is to have mistaken views about ourselves and others. So much of our discord with others has been because we don't really know them, or are not known by them. The absence of sympathy and support from our side or theirs has been the result of one or both of us missing some vital understanding.

Whether or not they agree to 'meeting', from our side at least, we can let go of resentment, and have a mind and a heart filled with understanding of how hard it is to be a good human being all the time, not neglecting others in the least. We can let go of imagining they hold distain or aggression. We can offer them the best we have in us to give. This is pure metta once again.

I cultivate a white rose in July
the same as in January
for the true friend who offers me his hand in friendship

and for the cruel one who tears out
the heart by which I live
I cultivate neither thorns nor bitter leaves
I cultivate a white rose

- José Martí

In the beginning of a job or friendship or relationship, no one intends for there to be mistrust or bitterness and antagonism. Once we cared for each other enough to open the door to friendship of a type, and when we can recall that pure good intention that was there in the beginning, we can see a potential we carry with us now as well.

We need not carry resentment, or wait for others to apologize, or explain why they turned and give us the chance to ourselves apologize. It's enough if I can see that I never intended any harm, and that although I am sometimes weak, or slow, I have always wanted peace and harmony. I would have acted differently if I could have to keep a friendship. My heart was always basically good, and yours was too, even if the outcome wasn't what either of us wanted.

I see all of you, brother, one time lover, former closest friend, ex boss, ones I placed my hopes in. You were not perfect in your knowing me, or in your kindness. Alright. I have also made mistakes, surely out of my limitations, and these perhaps were accommodated only up to a point by you, so forgive me and let's move on.

Here is a version of a forgiveness prayer that has been shared widely these last few years. It begins with our attitudes and actions towards ourself, then seeing how we may have been in the wrong, it includes contrition, and then extending forgiveness to others.

For all the ways I may have been unkind to myself, have harmed or neglected myself, I forgive myself;

For all the ways I may have been unkind to others, have harmed or neglected them, I ask forgiveness;

and for all the ways others may have been unkind to me, have harmed or neglected me, I forgive them *completely*.

I love the image in the psalm of a table being prepared, as it is such a visceral image. To feed another is a primal joy we have all known many times in our lives. It was there in our family growing up, and in the meals we cooked or was served when with friends. Even when traveling, and not having a common language, being fed by a family is a universally understood gesture of love and care.

Now when I bring to mind *this* table, *Prepared in the presence of mine enemies*, I'm thinking of how a wise elder, or parent or peacemaker could arrange for brothers, or cousins, or neighbors to sit down and have us eat together. Surely the love and wisdom that is in us can lead us to this place, of intending to reestablish harmony, from our side at the very least.

I can imagine my heart opening, fearful, and still with mistrust, remembering past hurt, but at least this willing to sit down and extend a gesture of peace and reconciliation, a gesture of pure love that can heal.

The divine food that is given then is creatively brought forth:

fresh salad, fragrant cucumber and tomato,
beets and mint,
the best soup, lentil, or miso, or Columbian chicken soup,
with corn and avocado;
all favorites;
vanilla pudding, still warm;
almond torte, from Dianda's in the Mission,
a traditional peace offering in my history;
and more,

Mozart playing in the background, one of the piano concertos;

sitting outside in the garden on a clear Spring day, the air fragrant with jasmine and rose;

with a feast, delicious food and drinks, and music, this is an atmosphere of peace and enjoyment. We begin again here.

What does this image, the metaphor, the gesture of giving out of love say without words? It says, *'I rejoice in the thought of your freedom from*

suffering. May this ease your sorrows. I rejoice in the thought of your happiness. May your happiness increase. May your happiness flourish without end…'

Let the past drop away, brother, let me wish you every happiness from this time forward, dear one, and friend;

Let me wish you every success.

We may not meet again in this lifetime, aah, this is true, but for today at least, let us resolve on peace, and renew the sense of timeless goodwill between us.

This gesture may not be received by the other, it's true. We have no idea. But from our side, we can let go of resentment, and restore ourselves in love. In Christian terms, we can say this is what our Lord, our life and love intends.

We feel the obscurity of an order, a whole,
A knowledge, that which arranged the rendezvous (Wallace Stevens)

If the occasion arises to meet and reestablish a relationship, of course, we have laid the groundwork. The essential point however is our own change of heart.

The past is in the past now, and it's time to move forward unencumbered by any resentment or by any one of us feeling we are somehow owned anything at all. We can settle this in our feelings toward one another now. It is a kind of wisdom that leads us here, surely, whether it is theistically or non theistically named. Let us follow this path of inner reconciliation to its end, and to new joys.

(2017)

What we call ‘the enemy’

One of the great things about a cultivated metta practice is that it brings us face to face with how we respond to people, and to life in general. To my mind, one of the beauties of training in metta is that it offers us a way to improve the quality of that response, across the board.

It’s a mixed bag: we can get attached, or be averse, or we may pass over others entirely, on our way to something we think is more important. We may also incline the mind in the direction of treating others with kindness and respect.

We can see how attachment, possessiveness, or wanting something from another person limits what we can offer to another, of unconditional love.

Almost nothing is immediate in the development of the inner life. Although change can happen quickly sometimes, usually it a long process of watching, and learning, and continuing on.

The so-called ‘neutral person’ category is also a challenge, in that it takes some energy, and a certain turn of mind to work with. This is because these are the people that are more or less invisible to us, or else we only ‘see’ them when they serve some purpose in our lives. A clerk at the dry cleaners, or someone in front of us in line at the supermarket: with a slight pause, and change of preoccupation, we can learn to see them, and respond to them as human beings, like ourselves, and to treat them with respect and genuine well wishing.

Then there’s the category called ‘enemy’, or the difficult person. This has a lot of appeal for many people, and it’s easy to see why. These are the people or situations that really cause us to suffer, and so it’s natural that this is what we most want to change, through metta practice, and to be rid of forever from our lives.

Here the teachings are very clearly laid out. They say to go gradually, slowly building up the strength of loving kindness before going on to the category of difficult person, or enemy. And even then, tempting though it may be to start with the hardest person, the teaching says to begin with what is easiest in this category, and to progress slowly from there to the harder cases.

The logic here is spot on – one only needs to try both approaches to see if it is so: try going straight for the most difficult person or situation, and you may have some success developing love, compassion, understanding and forgiveness. But then try the step by step method, and see if this isn't easier, and actually a faster and more effective way to resolve the suffering caused by all those we call 'the enemy'.

There's a teaching from the Tibetan Tradition on learning to see others as equal that says,

'Friends become enemies, enemies become friends; strangers we take a liking to, and start to get along with, and then these friends again become strangers'

There's usually the tag line:

'Why make such superficial distinctions?'

This may not be obvious, and so we cherish our friends, and are surprised and distressed if our relationship with them changes. Less often will a so-called enemy become a friend, but it does happen.

What we can see though, on a much more day to day basis, is that, if we're basing our kindness towards others on how they are towards us, we'll always be going up and down.

It's natural at some point to look for a more solid foundation for our feelings of good will.

The Tibetan and Metta Traditions both point to people's basic wish for happiness, and to avoid suffering as the firm ground for treating them well. Just as we wish for these things, so do all others.

As a side note here:

The commentaries say that if we don't feel aversion to anyone, then we don't have to practice this category. I think this is an important point, and one that's often overlooked when instructions are being given on the group that is called the enemy, or difficult person.

If we're not feeling bitterness or if the feeling of having been wronged is fading away, or isn't there in us at all, there's no sense in dredging it up, just so we can have someone to practice with here. Better if we learn to let go. This makes for more space in our lives to cultivate positive states.

If we don't have any person or group or situation we're having difficulty with, then in metta practice we have the categories of self, friends and family, neutral people, and all beings.

Many people, however, do have someone they are having a hard time with, people or situations that have hurt them, and that don't go away by just trying not to think about it. For those people, developing metta practice toward the difficult person or situation can bring great benefits over time.

What then of the enemy, or those we have some problem with? As with the other categories in the metta teachings, we look into this group of people, or emotions, or situations, to understand our relationship to them.

We can start by asking:

What is it about this category that is different? There is a range to it. We call a person an enemy or a situation difficult when something goes against our wishes; when things don't go as quickly as we would like, or meet our expectations.

It's easier to see clearly, and to start to work with the milder forms of what bothers us. Even though it's tempting to want to start with what causes us the most suffering, as a skillful device, we hold off from this for now.

So we can look at our responses to a long line at the bank, a loud, obnoxious person, or someone not attentive to what we need from them. These may stir some irritation and aversion in us, and the skill to develop here is to see and work with these lighter feelings that arise.

Surprisingly, as with the other categories, taking the step of identifying and offering metta, or goodwill to these easier people or situations offers us the key to working with progressively harder cases. It's possible after some time to respond to even the really difficult relationships with metta. So we don't need to carry the past with us, as bitterness, resentment, or anger. We

can even begin to extend goodwill towards those who have harmed us in some way. Even this is possible in the long run.

We are closest to ourselves, and from one perspective, this is where we should start with the category of difficult person, or situation. There are times when our body doesn't work as well as we'd like it to. Maybe we don't have as much energy as we need, or maybe some difficult emotions arise in our mind. How do we hold it?

Can we look to accommodate these feelings, and to offer ourselves a more unconditional kindness, gentleness, and care? When we can do this, we can slowly feel the mood respond. We find that we can heal whatever painful emotions we hold, no matter what they are.

From there, it's easier to meet others with similar characteristics – irritable, or depressed, truculent, self-obsessed, and so on, because we have known and cared for all these in ourselves.

This seems a necessary step, although some may need to take another route to the same end of having kindness towards difficult people and emotions, including those in our own mind.

Ok then, what about the really difficult people or situations or feelings? If we've gone step by step, we see there is no difference at all between the very mildly difficult, the medium, and then even the very difficult people and emotions.

Just as when we're a little upset, or irritable, we know that somehow we're not right in ourselves. When we're not enjoying our lives as we could, there's ignorance of the root of our difficulties. We don't see what's really going on. Metta would have us look into and care for these feelings right down to their root cause.

When we find that ignorance is responsible for people's anger or jealousy, or pettiness, or greed, we can't get upset with them. Of course, we get out of their way, if at all possible, but inside, we can't be angry with them. What's more, we can start to wish ourselves and others well on a deeper, more causative level.

They are a suffering sentient being – in that way they need to be treated with even more kindness and care.

Even with the most extreme cases we can think of, such as racists, or those who go to war, we can see that, one, these people are moved by the same forces of ignorance, and that, two, people can and do change.

If we add to this the understanding that people everywhere actually do have a nature that is essentially pure, this is the real foundation on which a response of non-anger, and even goodwill can be based. Otherwise, what we are left with is just endless reactivity, the holding on to and fostering of grudges, the perpetuation of suffering in ourselves, and in response to others.

In the Dhammapada, the Buddha taught

How will hate leave him
if a man forever thinks,
'He abused me, he hit me,
he defeated me, he robbed me?'

But will hate ever touch him
if he does *not* think,
'He abused me, he hit me,
he defeated me, he robbed me?'

Hatred never ceases by hatred,
by love alone
is hatred brought to an end.
This is an eternal law.

Anger towards groups of people, long held feelings of bitterness, right down to our own most recent petty irritations all cloud the mind. They take up 'psychic real estate', as one person put it, and as we become free of these, we open up more to the gifts this life has to offer. Tragically, many people don't know this, and as the years go on, their energy is taken up with the cumulative experiences they hold on to. The mind is veiled by degrees, until very little can get in. At that point, it's not enough to say to such a person, 'Let it go!' – the long held habits are so entrenched.

Beauty offers its prize, but if we are distracted, or enmeshed in delusion, how can we receive these gifts?

'Let no thought of ill will go unnoticed, or unchecked;
make every effort to cultivate positive states of mind'

In Buddhism, they speak of the Four Right Efforts, which are to remove unwholesome states that have arisen; to keep negative states from arising again; to produce those wholesome states that have not yet been produced, and to maintain and increase those positive states we have developed in ourselves.

Metta works to accomplish these Right Efforts with every category (of self, family and friends, those we don't know, and the difficult person), but the first two Right Efforts – those of removing the negative states and keeping them from arising again - it does only in the difficult person category. How wonderful.

As they say, especially in the Tibetan teachings, when we meet with difficult circumstances, we should be grateful, because this gives us a chance for real growth in the spiritual life. Ani Tenzin Palmo said if we want to get strong, it's no use just picking up a tissue and putting it down again. We need to use weights to build up our strength. Whatever may be difficult gives us just this chance to increase qualities such as patience, compassion, kindness, humility, dedication, and even a sense of humor.

Like a lot of other people, I resist using the term 'the enemy' because with it, our mind somehow fixes on the quality, more so than calling it a difficult person or situation. It also puts it 'out there' – as something to contend with as best we can, instead of seeing our relationship to it. When we change our own mind in relation to whatever we meet, our experience changes. For a person who loves, there are no enemies – no hostility is generated in response to whatever we meet.

This is one of the joys of metta practice, that we can start to learn how we can influence our responses to what happens. It's empowering to know we can control our own response. No one can force us to become upset.

By practicing metta loving kindness, we can have the feeling of there being a buffer between ourselves, and the reactivity of emotions. This puts us in a

position of responsibility, no doubt – we can't blame others any more, but it is inspiring as well. There is real freedom to be found here.

Unconditional love has an infinite array of options for responding to a situation. We may need to be fierce, or to turn away from a situation, but, in our hearts, we are guided by love, by wishing others well, the highest good.

This is a gift to ourselves as well. Wherever we are in our lives, it brings with it a feeling of dignity, that we are light in the world.

Loving your enemies – returning good for harm

for Dom Laurence Freedman

The idea of responding to being insulted or abused with non-reactivity, and then even with love doesn't come along in Buddhism until what they would call an advanced stage of practice. By contrast, it's right there, plainly spoken of in the Christian teachings, as loving one's enemies.

To me, there's something beautiful about this, in that the goal, of having a universal kindness and goodwill, is taught by Jesus right from the beginning in Christianity. At the same time, there's a great benefit to having a step by step method to work with to cultivate such love, that would otherwise seem unapproachable. It's like having a map through the terrain to where we would go. We hear the ideal in the Scriptures,

Love your enemies,
bless those who curse you,
do good to those who hate you,
and pray for those who spitefully use
and abuse you
only then can you be called children of your heavenly Father…

and

For he makes the sun to rise on the good and evil alike,
and sends rain on both the innocent and the wicked.
If you love only those who love you,
what reward can you expect?
Even the tax collectors do as much as that.
and if you greet only your brothers,
what is so special about that?
Even the heathens do as much.

There must be no limit to your goodness,
as your heavenly Father's goodness knows no bounds.

This ideal can be inspiring to think about, but sometimes, and for many, it can seem impossible. *How does one actually go about getting to that state?*

How does a person develop to the point where they can love all equally, even those who cause harm to them or to their loves ones?

I think that Buddhism has something truly significant to offer here, as it has teachings that lay out the stages of development of such an all embracing love. It's as if the two Traditions are mighty rivers, joining together to point to the goal, and the method of arriving there. Magnificent!

The metta teachings lay out five categories for the gradual cultivation of loving kindness. They begin with oneself, and then those friendly towards us, including family, benefactors and teachers. The third and fourth categories are those of the neutral persons, or those not known to us personally, and those who are hostile to us, sometimes called the category of the difficult person.

Taking a step by step approach, we start the intentional cultivation of the quality of loving kindness with whoever is easiest for us, and go from there. In metta practice, it's only after a person has developed some of that pure quality of care and genuine well wishing for these four different categories of people that they arrive at the fifth, which is the cultivation of loving kindness towards all beings, a true universal love. Before that, it's taught, there's still bias, indifference, or even aversion to be overcome.

Each of these different groups is a rich field of inquiry and investigation. Each one has a place, it would seem, in the progress towards universal concern and active care.

In the West, especially today, it's so clear that many people need to develop more kindness and compassion for themselves. Surprisingly, some of the nicest people we know judge and treat themselves quite harshly. There are many reasons we should be good to ourselves, but here, in the context of developing metta, I'll just mention a few.

When we say, 'do to others as you would have them do to you' – how would we know the wish that others have for themselves, for happiness, safety, and peace, unless we were in touch with that in ourselves? And this is not a one time thing to be glimpsed, or just understood intellectually. We can see how it is, that, when we are in touch with our own tender selves, through a practice of meditation, or some other way to be closely aware of how we are feeling inside, then naturally we are more considerate of others we're in

contact with. We know what it is to be a human being, and we can't help but meet them also as fellow travelers here.

A second reason for developing greater kindness towards ourselves is that it allows us to settle down easily in our meditation. When we're comfortable with ourselves, which is one of the results of this meditation, we can be at ease physically, and in our mind and heart. Metta also brings joy, and clarity and brightness to the mind. Any further study or development we then undertake goes smoothly.

Just to mention one more reason for developing our capacity for kindness towards ourselves relates to the theme of this paper, that of extending love even to those who are hostile towards us. With any type of consistent meditation practice we do, there are going to be ups and downs – good days and days when nothing seems to work. That's when we need for love to come up in us as compassion, gentleness, and even an greater care than before.

Life can be hard, so, what to do? When we really do see our confusion, our impatience, our mistakes and shortcomings, how can we hold all this? This is the real test and measure of our gradual progress. Here, as with the other categories, as we go, naturally we'll find our limitations, and, right there is where we can take the next step, and the next. Right there is where we can work. All this takes patience, and persistence, but it is entirely worthwhile.

The 'friend' category too adds something unique to the progress of developing love. We start with those closest to us, although sometimes it's recommended that we choose a person with whom we have an uncomplicated relationship. There's a good reason for this, in that with them we can feel our simple, heart-felt love for another. It is pure.

There's something to be said though as well here for working with those closest to us in the first place, even if the relationship is more complex. We learn love in this matrix of family. The unconditional love of a mother or father, sibling or other close relative has a reliable, enduring quality to it that we may not find so readily in our friendships.

This is the ideal, of course, and there's a lot of variety in how people's family relationships have turned out. The method is clear about this – we

can experiment and choose whoever is easiest to feel gratitude towards, and are happy to hold in our mind with thoughts of good will.

Sometimes we can then go back and forth, creatively using the method of cultivating metta, as it is suggested we do. It's interesting to experiment here as well. The idea is to find that feeling of easy, genuine good will, and then to direct it to ourselves, family and friends, benefactors and teachers, and then perhaps back to ourselves again.

When we have developed the sense of good will towards a few of our close friends, we extend that also to those we are less close to, and then to those we don't know. The saying of Jesus spells it out clearly for us:

If you love only those who love you,
what reward can you expect?
Even the tax collectors do as much as that.
and if you greet only your brothers,
what is so special about that?
Even the heathens do as much.

In the Buddhist approach, there's the use of reasoning in times of reflection, which I think is implied in the above passage. When we turn to our less-close friends, and then to those we don't know, sometimes called the 'neutral person' category, we reflect on how they are like ourselves, and like our close friends and family members, in that they too want only happiness, and not the slightest suffering. Just like ourselves, they too want to be appreciated, and to feel that they belong. They suffer, even as we do, from having bodies that are sometimes not too reliable, from moods that can overtake them, from loneliness, fears, and so on. They too appreciate it when someone is kind to them, and when they meet with success in their lives.

We can see how this builds. From ourselves, or someone it's easy to feel loving kindness towards, to those we are close to, and then gradually to those we don't know as well. They suggest we choose specific people to represent this category, of someone we don't know personally, and cultivate good will towards them. It's only slightly a problem that, after a while, we will feel genuine, spontaneous kindness well up when we think of them. It just means we have to look for someone else we may have overlooked in the past, or not taken into consideration. Likely, there will be plenty to discover.

Only after cultivating in this way is the general category of enemy, or difficult person introduced, and even then, within this group, we are advised to go step by step. We can, and often do want to start with the difficult category – and even the most difficult person – the one who has caused us, or someone close to us the most suffering. Though we can try to go directly for developing kindness for that person, it's not recommended, because it's not usually effective. In fact, this is where we meet that 'no, it is impossible' feeling. It means that, though we have a good aim in mind, we're going about it in the wrong way – too directly, instead of step by step.
This is like trying to go up a mountain without using the path. We might just look up and say, 'no way'.

There is something organic about the development of love. Some people have a lot of it already, and so, even when they meet with some difficult person, or situation, they can respond from their abundant inner resources of generosity, patience, and kindness. Most of us though, will have to find our way there gradually. Within the category of difficult person, again, there are degrees we can work with, like with lifting weights, or developing a skill, such as playing music.

I learned some things in classical music study that apply here. In classical training, they say that 'slow is fast', meaning that careful, attentive practice will get us to our goal in the most effective way. There is also the tradition, in music pedagogy, of training progressively with studies, so that the more difficult techniques can be gradually mastered. With this under their belt, a person can then play pretty much anything they want.

It's much the same way in cultivating metta for the difficult person, or situation. Standing in line at the bank, or in traffic, are the usual ones I can point to, that has no one to blame, in particular, but that gives us some opportunity to develop even a bit more patience, respect for others, and goodwill as we're standing, or idling there.

There are times also when we may feel like our friends or family are not there for us, or have been unkind in some way. Forgiving and letting go of any feelings of recrimination is maybe easiest with this group, because after all, they have done so much for us. Again, we start with those with whom it's easiest for us to let go of past perceived wrongs, and renew the relationship. Then we can gradually extend that skill we've developed.

It's useful, maybe even essential, to include ourselves in the so called difficult person category. There will definitely be times when being with ourself is not easy – for whatever reason. It could be an uncomfortable feeling in the body, or some difficult feeling, such as anger or irritation that has arisen. Taking it further, when we look into our lives, we can see how much we need acceptance, kindness, tolerance and forgiveness. That is the basis for extending it to others.

'Let he who is without sin cast the first stone', and so on.

Grace and barbarity

I've been thinking lately of some of the Christian terms, such as sin and salvation, and especially of grace. It seems we don't have an equivalent for grace in Buddhism, although I do sense it there as well.

We can talk about karma, and look at it as a kind of cosmic justice – in that wrong actions bring suffering with it, but when it comes to the love we receive, and share with others, it seems to me that this is something we can't begin to measure out, or say is deserved, or not deserved.

Love seems to me to be a gift, the supreme gift, that trumps even cruelty, barbarity, and injustice. It 'keeps no account of wrongdoing', and it has the capacity to wipe the slate clean, so we can begin again. How can we even start to measure something like this? It is truly radical, and of another order altogether from what's bargained back and forth in our so-common, selfish relationships. The love that is cultivated step by step, following it's organic development, can reach the stage where even those who are inimical towards us are treated with kindness in return.

The term 'enemies', as in 'love your enemies', I think of these days as some pretty clever marketing, designed to get our attention. After all, if someone is our enemy, by definition, they are someone we don't love, and probably even someone we hate back in return. Isn't that the way it is? It's clear, after some reflection, that this is saying, from our side, not to have enemies. It's about how we hold this person who is threatening, or abusing us, or someone we feel close to. Do we see them as evil? As irredeemable? Maybe we do if we have the notion of 'unpardonable sin', or 'original sin' or 'eternal damnation'. In Buddhism though, the whole group of those who cause harm

is viewed differently, and in a way that can be worked with much more effectively, for all our sake.

First, we don't assert original sin, but rather original goodness, or purity, called in the teachings our Buddha Nature, or Divine Nature, that is the basis for the potential for change. If we don't see this, or at least acknowledge it as a possibility, then those who are doing wrong will be seen as always being the way they are, with no chance of change. Then of course, what choice would we have other than to set ourselves in opposition to them forever? But seeing the potential for change, we're not so set in our attitude towards those who are doing harm. We're more optimistic, based on what's taught, and also something that we can know in ourselves.

Secondly, when dealing with the difficult person, the greed and anger people show comes from ignorance. They may be powerful, or in a position of authority, but they are no less playing out the very same dynamic we find in ourselves, and in those who give us a hard time in our every day lives. This doesn't mean we don't get out of their way, or defend ourselves or our loved ones, not by any means, but the whole context of what we are doing changes when we see these two points – that the harm people would cause comes from their ignorance, and, that this can change. Now we are ready, I think, for loving even our enemies, or those who are hostile towards us.

The following comes up so often as an example of how it is surely impossible to return good for harm, that it can illustrate the principles at work. In the mid twentieth century, the National Socialists in Germany set themselves against the entire Jewish people. The idea of these groups seem so set in our minds. The moral lessons that seem so clear cut to many often include the implied idea that it is impossible to love some individuals, or groups of people, and, in fact, it would be foolish to do so, and cruel to ask another to, as well.

These days, we can probably substitute the Jewish people and the Palestinians, or Klan members and blacks in the South in the 60's, or the Japanese in China in the Second World War; the Tutsis and the Hutus in Rwanda, or the US military and the Native population here.

Looking back we can ask, in every case, have there been former Nazis or Klan members, or others who have changed their views, or regretted their actions? Haven't some racists overcome their prejudice?, We all know that

some have, and, if this is so, then what does that tell us about all those who committed such crimes? Two things: *that they were deeply ignorant, and, that they had the potential for change.*

Ultimately not taking sides, there is hope for the future. How do you not take sides when good and evil are so obvious? You do it by regarding humanity as one; one in noble birth and heritage; one in our sacred destiny, or divine potential. The mind that sees this is far from the mind of racism, or class superiority, or exploitation, or seeking retribution, and this is exactly what is needed. It is true medicine, and sustenance for all our days.

In the end, looking back, what I can say is that 'these are things that were done to the people of my own human family', and 'these are things that were done *by* the people of my same human family - ' May everyone here awaken from such ignorance, and may I be a cause of that!

To dial it back some, because we can probably continue to judge the wrongdoers in history without an end to it, we can look at whatever instances of wrong have been done by our own country, by ourselves, or to ourselves.

Where does forgiveness in each case come from? It comes from understanding, and from the intention to move forward, knowing how much better we can be, and how much more we can do for one another, when our lives are based on what has true, eternal value, based, namely, on love.

In the book, Mount Analogue, the narrator says we should keep in mind the summit, the goal of our journey, while watching the step that is right in front of us, and that while keeping to the path, we shouldn't lose sight of the goal.

The immediate principle in metta practice is that we start with whatever is easiest for us, and go on from there. There is another key piece to this, however, and that is, that we always start wherever we are just now. This gives us plenty of room for our difficulties, and is the most encouraging aspect of it for me.

Such a high aim as universal love and compassion is achievable, and this should inspire us. On some days though, may we look up, or look at our own mind, or at the world we live in, and get discouraged at how far we are from any kind of ideal at all. This essential principle, of always starting from

wherever we are now keeps us on course. We don't get carried away if we seem to be making progress on some days, or dejected if we slow down, or stop or even seem to go off course for a while. I heard this phrase, that, when walking someplace, resting does not mean turning back.

I like very much that Jesus spoke of going beyond our own family, or clan, when developing our love. This is surely something that is possible, if we set ourselves to go in that direction. Step by step we can get there.

I feel a great enthusiasm when I so much as get a glimpse of this possibility. I try not to get too carried away with it, after all, since there is still so much to be done here. Still, once in a while, to go to the mountain top, to take in the great vista, and fill our lungs with clean air, this is something we will surely carry with us everywhere we go.

Deconstructing fear

I heard an interesting point made about fear, from the teacher Donald Rothberg, that released something, and set me thinking about fear, and other emotions, and how we can skillfully work with them. He said that part of having fear is intelligence, but it's a misuse of intelligence. He pointed out that there's clearly something right about being on guard when there's danger, but we need to distinguish the helpful type of intelligence and what doesn't serve our interest.

What this teaching pointed out again for me, first of all, is the compounded nature of fear – that's it's not some monolithic entity we have to somehow deal with. This makes it seem a little more workable right away. If it is made up of parts, then we can look into it, take it apart, and see which element we can change. This is very good news.

The same applies to other difficult emotions, such as anger, sadness, craving, and so on, but to illustrate how this can work, we can just stay with what we know as quote 'fear' unquote.

Sometimes when the mind slows down, or has space to look into things, they appear very differently than when we were in a hurry, or agitated, or when we didn't have much room to see what was actually going on. Such has been the case here.

I caught a thread of this sequence of events unfolding in my own mind this morning, and watched it. What I saw was the conditionality of what we come to term fear. Certain elements definitely have to come together for us to experience it.

I can see that at least three, or four factors always have to be present for fear to arise. I invite you to look into this also, and see if it's true for you as well.

One, we can only have fear, and feel oppressed by it, when we are lacking in self confidence. At those times when we're feeling really capable, even though the future is uncertain, we feel like we're up to whatever will come. In fact, we can sometimes feel an eagerness to look ahead and see what's on

the horizon for us, and what challenge lies ahead. This is when we're feeling confident in our self.

A second condition that needs to be there for that experience of fear to manifest is a lack of faith. Even if we're not brimming with self confidence, if we have faith that things will work out, it settles us. We can feel safe and secure, and fear will not arise.

Faith is such a personal matter that it's not an easy subject to talk about. Faith reaches down to our deepest feelings of trust, and the spiritual support that we have. Without these, sometimes, we feel very much on our own, left to fend for ourselves in a hard world. But it need not be that way. We all have sources of support and strength we can rely on, whatever our tradition or belief system.

I recall writing a letter to someone I am close to, and wanting to point out how, sometimes, fear is related to love – because we love something or someone, we want to protect him or her, or that situation, and that can bring anxiety. Having faith though, I went on to say, is a feeling of trusting that things will work out. If we have this, we stay in the present with whatever is going on, and can be more comfortable there.

So, confidence, and faith both remove feelings of fear. If they are lacking though, it's possible to become apprehensive when there's no need for it.

Which brings me to a third condition that, from what I can tell, is always present when fear arises, and that is what we can call a misuse of the imagination. In his talk, Donald Rothberg mentioned 'nightmare scenarios' being invented by the mind.

With a lack of confidence, and an absence of faith that things will work out, if we add to that our own creative imagination, we can produce some hellish experiences for ourselves. This is a misuse of the potential we have to think creatively, solve our problems, and invent new and better ways to live together.

The creative imagination is one of our great gifts as human beings. If we misuse it though, instead of helping us, we can instead create horrors, both inside ourselves, and in the world.

When it comes to fear, if any of these factors are missing, from what I can tell, fear cannot possibly arise. It's like a three legged table – remove any one leg, and the table falls over.

If I were to add one more leg, or factor, it would really only be to expand on what was said about the last, that of a misuse of the imagination. I would say that uncontrolled, obsessive thinking is also always present in the experience of fear.

Perhaps talking in these terms makes it a little more accessible than referring to imagination. Some people don't really think of themselves as being creative, or don't really see when they're using their imagination, which we are in fact always doing, but pointing out our uncontrolled, obsessive thinking is more of something everyone can relate to doing at one time or another.

Without runaway thinking, what we call fear has no chance to gather momentum. The problem is, most people aren't aware of what's going on in their own minds until it gets really heavy and difficult for them. What's more, most people have never learned to quiet their own mind, which is one of the basic life skills every person should have. This is not really so difficult, as people tend to think, we just need to learn how to do it.

The result of not being settled, of not being able to quiet our mind, is that we then accept whatever goes on in our experience, and feel like we have no choice, and no control. It certainly need not be that way. Added to this lack of awareness and control is the fact that obsessive thought is tiring, extremely fatiguing, and so the mind becomes more dull, more opaque, and less able to see clearly into what is going on, and deal with it skillfully. Things can get really distorted for a person, and, for a time, they can get stuck in suffering, maybe for a long time. What to do?

I find this way of approaching not only fear, but the other difficult emotions extremely useful. We sometimes get caught in calling something 'a fear' or, 'anger', or 'sadness' when they are really composite. We may see these things as an immutable, inexorable whole, when that's not the case. Take an emotion apart, where possible, and it becomes much easier to work with.

Obviously, the skills needed to do this consistently, like self awareness, the powers of introspection, and analysis, self-regard, self control, faith and confidence, are things that we come by only over time, by developing them in ourselves. But we need not suffer unnecessarily. That's all I really want to say here.

We all have the potential to undo a lot of what we suffer though, and have much more peace and joy in our lives as a result.

May it be this way for all of us!

Metta and Courage - Unfolding the Qualities of Love

Whenever we have a challenge, we need to bring out what's contained in that one word, 'love'. We have all these treasures within that we can draw from, qualities we need when things are uncertain or difficult.

Last year I wrote about de-constructing fear, and it occurred to me today that when we have a feeling of fearlessness, that it's also composite. I can see it in myself when it arises, and so I thought it may be useful to write out a few things on what goes to make up fearlessness, or courage, so I and others can take it up again when we need to.

The factors that go to make up courage, I would say, have a common root in love. Let's look at this together.

In love, there is naturally patience, gentleness and strength, and mindfulness;

there is an appreciation for our circumstances, with what is right about it – gratitude for our friends and family, our education, and this extraordinary world…

When we pause and take this in, we can say it is a pure moment of love, simple, profound, and nourishing.

Yet this love has even more to it.

I thought before of how fear is the feeling that we're not up to something, together with imagining some bad outcomes. The opposite of this is feeling capable. I don't have any doubt now that metta practice can open us to our innate resourcefulness.

There is a light of creative intelligence and joy in all of us, that often gets covered over and forgotten, and that's where we can get stuck. When we don't know our inner richness, we worry, and get agitated and aggressive, which just veils the mind more. We do things to numb out, and move still further from what we really need, which is a greater sense of our own capacity. Metta practice changes the course of all that.

At first, we may have only brief glimpses of our potential, but gradually these get longer, and at some point, we can feel enthusiasm welling up again from within.

What is it that has real meaning, and the most value in a life, if not meeting challenges? Accomplishments and enjoyments are all well and good, but going out to meet the needs of ourselves and others, now that's where real, deeper human satisfaction is found.

Suppose you were going on a long journey – what would you need? Besides knowing where you wanted to go, you'd need provisions along the way. What we call love is also something that enables us to sustain ourselves, day by day, as we go.

To look at our lives, our heritage, and this beautiful world of ours with a heart of love is, in a very real sense, to be fed by it. Compared to when we don't have this quality awake in us, we can receive so much more. We can become spiritually well nourished. It's true.

On our journey, we'll also need a creative, adaptive intelligence, that is not just set on going one way, but that's able to adjust along the way. Love empowers us to do this. We can feel it. When it rises up in us, we know, without any doubt, that we will find our way.

One more quality we'll need, for sure, is confidence. Now confidence is a tricky one, because we can have some experience of it, and that can take us some distance, but if our confidence is just based on a memory, we may falter.

One of the great things about metta, loving kindness, is that it is a fresh stream of inspiration. When this quality is awakened and active in us, we know it by the joy we feel throughout each day, and by a quiet assuredness. In this way, metta brings peace as well. We know we will meet what life brings with the best we have in us.

They talk in Buddhism of the gift of fearlessness that we can offer ourselves and others. This is related to wisdom, or insight into the truth of our living. I'd say one aspect of this is pointing out the innate richness we all have to meet challenges.

When we know this for ourselves, they say it's like when a person puts their hand in their pocket and knows there's a gem – we know we can make our way. We can also afford to be generous as we go. This is what we draw from.

One of the results, in time, of metta practice is that it brings a certain steadfastness of character, which I'm thinking of now as the quality of the Fourth Brahma Vihara, or Divine Abode. Where does this come from? I can see how it comes from a commitment to our ideals, and a long familiarity and deep knowledge of our capacity to meet and transform challenging situations. If not for those two – having clear aims, and knowing absolutely that we can effect change, our heroes would have given up long ago…

As heroes here, those who didn't give up, and who are shining examples of strength of character, I think of Aung San Sui Kyi, Martin Luther King, Nelson Mandela, The Dalai Lama, Thich Nhat Hanh, and, in the political sphere, Cesar Chavez, Howard Zinn and Noam Chomsky. They all demonstrate a calm, deep steadfastness of moral character, based on love and wisdom.

In each case, it's true. Think about it. And it can be true for us as well, on our own personal scale.

When we are uncertain, what can we rely on?

In fact, we do have support from the spiritual dimension, and this is something I rely on. We also have the support of family and friends. Most of all though, we need to find those reasons for self confidence in ourselves, and assuredly, this is something we can do through love.

In all that needs to be responded to in my life, in the lives of my loved ones, and in this world, I'll take my stand here.

Part II - The Four Brahma Viharas

On love:

Universal love, the ground and culmination of our practice

When we first hear the ideal of universal love for all beings, our reaction might be one of disbelief, or doubt that we could ever approach such a state. We have a hard enough time even liking, let alone loving ourselves, and getting along with just our friends, family and co-workers is a challenge too. Universal love? Come on! We could also have the response of holding this as an ideal and then going no further with it. It can stay just as a concept, and become an ego trip.

In the Metta Sutta, the Buddha taught

'just as a mother loves and cherishes her child, her only child,
just so we should cultivate boundless love to offer to all…

and,

'our love will know no obstacles…

All religions teach this in some form, and what the Buddhist tradition contributes is the method to gradually develop such love. This is something that doesn't happen by itself, or by just wishing it to be so, or without a cause, and that cause is the meditation that brings real love more and more into our relationships.

Surprisingly, there is something of universal love in us right from the beginning of practice. This is the ground of our common humanity, our divine nature, also called our Buddha Nature. We may not believe in it, and may doubt that we can love even ourselves, let alone another person, or all, but that potential exists in all of us, waiting to be known and revealed.

Right from the beginning, it's this potential we tap into when we start anywhere to have metta for self and others. As metta increases in our lives, directing pure well wishing to family, friends, and the strangers we see, it gets easier in all ways. This is because this love is one.

Love reveals our true identity, and our real family. As we practice this kind of meditation more and more, our sense of identity shifts from the surface, history, form, and culture, to the more universal ground, to what is fundamental to us all. We find we share a common heritage with those in this, and in other places and times.

I remember one teaching where Thich Nhat Hanh was saying how a Frenchman, standing on French soil, could also see himself as standing on the continent of Europe, or on the one earth we all share, and if he was able to do so, his feeling of who he was would grow by that much. So it is with metta. We don't suddenly lose our relative identity, but we can find that it is held within a greater truth, and that is what we more truly are. This is the source we draw from all along the way in our practice.

How can we tell if we're really progressing towards an all-embracing, universal love? I think the signs are that we gradually become more respectful, patient, encouraging, and supportive of ourselves and others. We can sense a greater consistency in our responses to our own problems, and to what we meet in other people. We're not as up and down, sometimes accepting and at other times negligent or aversive.

What's more, we can see the quality of how we are with our own inner state and with others improve gradually. There's more joy, and forgiveness, and generosity flows more readily, and in greater abundance. This is bound to be inspiring to see and think about. It leads us to wonder what more we are capable of. The ideal of universal love, at last, can start to seem conceivable.

Love would have us go carefully, not hurry, and not leave out any steps. Though the ideal is so appealing, and so much what we need in our lives and in the world, there's the danger that we may gloss over the inner work that needs to be done to arrive at a real love for all.

The line, *'our love will know no obstacles'* is significant here because it points to something we have all had experience with, of becoming more able to love, and it is onward leading. Where there was once some holding back, a change took place, even slightly, and we were able to take the next step, and the next in loving. If we go gradually, and continue in the practice, like a river, metta will find its way to the ocean. We will arrive at all embracing, universal love.

That universal love is both the ground and the goal of spiritual practice for us all is really something to honor and celebrate.

Hafiz says:

a divine seed,
the crown of destiny,
is hidden and sown
on an ancient fertile plain
you hold the title to…

and Rumi adds:

you are the secret treasure bearer,
and always have been…

If you knew yourself for even one moment,
if you could just glimpse
your most beautiful face,
maybe you wouldn't slumber so deeply
in that house of clay.

Why not move
into your house of joy…

Culture, religion, class, gender, age, history, political party, accepting this, rejecting that – so many ways we build walls. Metta instead builds bridges, until we arrive at the joy of knowing how we are made for each other.

May we all realize this love as our true home

May we awaken and learn to be practical and inclusive, so that, in the words of the Metta Sutta,

Whatever living beings there may be;

Whether they are weak or strong, omitting none,

The great or the mighty, medium, short or small,

The seen and the unseen,

Those living near and far away,

Those born and to-be-born—

May all beings be at their ease!

Unconditional love and radical inclusiveness

When live our days with acceptance of ourselves and others, and love, we open. We find that what we need, *what we all need*, is not some partial, conditional love – the love that bargains, but an unconditional love. This is kind of love that says, "No matter where you are, or what you're going through, I'm here for you". This is what we need to truly open to ourselves, and to each other, and to see our depths; to support and encourage ourselves and others, and to heal and to be whole.

We need the kind of love that is *a radical inclusiveness*. It is radical in the sense that it is a sharp turn from the partial, the measured, the conditional. Depending on where we are, radical inclusiveness is going to mean different things: for some it will mean learning to embrace old or new hurt, missed opportunities, or grief; for others, it will be expanding to include more of our family, or republicans, militarists, the addict, the disengaged... and on and on...

This same kind of love is what we then bring out into the world, with all its divisions, strife, hunger, despair, and immaturity; with all its beauty and potential. With the radical inclusiveness of love at its best, we feel there is no obstacle that can't be overcome, no state we have to recoil from. Even those challenges that have not yet risen are included.

This great love goes out to meet the world as it is, knowing without the slightest doubt how beautiful it can be, and knowing this basic nature we have to work with that is everywhere. This love is unyielding, irresistible, inspiring self and others. It is in our eyes and in our hearts, and in our hands, working to set our world right.

Unconditional love has the advantage over other kinds of love in that it can remove fear of 'the others', and any doubt in our capacity to respond. However we name it, the Divine, our Buddha Nature, our own depths, it opens us up to a resource that is limitless, creative, and skillful.

If we leave anything out, any person or group or state of being, we've somehow fallen short of what love can be. To take up *all of our life here*, *all our relations*, is to see their worth, and to bring out the best we have in us and in this world. Is there any other way forward to positive, lasting

change? Is there anything more grounded and optimistic than starting where we are, with a vision of truth and beauty?

May we all find and make manifest
such love and inclusiveness,
and teach our children,
all their days,
to do the same

On Compassion

Why compassion is the most important thing in the world

I think most people could tell you, after having lived some years on this earth that what really lasts in memory is not so much what people do, but the goodwill they share with us. When we're treated with kindness, it stays with us. It can nurture and strengthen us for a long time. Deprived of love, we wither, or become twisted. Cared for, we are healthy and we thrive. After a while we know that love is essential for living.

The last few weeks I've been thinking that compassion is the most important thing in the world. I'd like to propose, for your consideration, that it has the greatest natural, intrinsic worth. Here's what I've thought:

First of all, how do we measure importance? Clearly, there's a huge range of what people believe to be important - baseball, money, prestige, family, food, study, travel, pets, very clean dishes… make your own list…

I think we'd all agree that even our own ideas about what's important changes from year to year or even from day to day, and hour to hour… I had to ask, then, what is it we are all trying to define here, when we say something is important, that it is worth pursuing, or avoiding, being careful about, or holding on to? I think it has to do with happiness and unhappiness.

When we call something important, it means we believe, rightly or wrongly, that it has the potential to give us happiness (or it could be important to us also because of its potential to cause us unhappiness).

Think of a person's attitude towards a tossed away gum wrapper, not of much value, unimportant - and then think of a mother seeing her child walking toward some traffic, and reacting to that as something important, as something with the potential to cause a lot of unhappiness.

So, as a working idea, I've thought that what we are calling importance is our idea of the potential something has for it to bring us happiness or to avoid unhappiness. Right ideas, in this regard, are more valuable, naturally, than wrong ideas, just like an accurate map is more valuable than one with wrong information… By nature, good advice, is of more value to us than wrong, or misleading ideas.

From here, at least, I can see why, in the scheme of things, I give compassion the highest importance. Why do people study, or seek knowledge?, Or build schools, or hospitals, or water treatment facilities? It's at least in part because these are seen, rightly, as things that can bring happiness to others, and prevent harm.

Compassion is a motivating force for good. It gives birth to seeking wisdom, and to wisdom, understanding something rightly, and to works… As the attitude responding to suffering, and the actions that follow, compassion opens the way for every enjoyment. All the enjoyments of the world are blocked for a time when a person suffers in some way. Removing that suffering makes available all the treasures this life has to offer. For this reason it naturally has the greatest worth.

One way I illustrate this to my own mind is that I imagine a party – a group of loving friends, where everyone is having a good time, eating, drinking, dancing, telling stories, the usual thing, when it happens that, in a moment, there is some danger to one of them – one of them has a problem. Maybe they have fallen into a pool and can't swim, or they need a doctor… Right away, the attention of everyone there would shift to that person. This is a group, mind you, where everyone is capable of seeing and hearing, not themselves bound up, drunk, or distracted. Naturally, the needs of that one person in trouble become the most important thing. This just the common wisdom we all recognize.

Compassion is instinctively praised, respected, and honored everywhere and in all times. Instead of being swept along with so many others valuing meaningless things, I'd like to propose, here is a true scale of values. See for yourself.

In my opinion, nothing else compares - not generosity, or ability, or wealth, companionship, longevity, pleasures, all of these we can give, but without kindness, understanding and loving compassion, they are at best temporary. Even a poor person, without resources to speak of, without much strength or wit or charm, can still, in his room one night, have compassionate thoughts for the pain someone experiences, or could experience. And that person, despite their limitations, can still get up the next morning and change the world for the better. Even if it's just one person's life, it's can still be a very great thing.

Anyone who has been in need, and received someone's kindness knows how important this is, that someone reached out to us, or gave us their support. Nothing else compares in life. Everything else, compared to having that need met, moves far to the background, leaving only this shining truth, and gratitude.

No condemnation - 'Saving All Beings…'

From what I can tell, there is no condemnation in Buddhism, no 'un-pardonable sin', especially in Mahayana Buddhism. As I understand it, there is no fixed good and evil. In this paradigm, instead, human problems are talked about in terms of ignorance and wisdom - the cause of the sufferings of the world being ignorance, and their solution being the development of wisdom. This is a much more workable way to think about things. Here, there is no enemy that cannot be transformed. In addition, whatever good a person reaches has to maintained.

In the Lotus Sutra, there is a figure called 'Bodhisattva Never-Disparaging', whose main characteristic is that he never puts anyone down. In fact, he always refers to other people as Buddhas, because he sees their potential.

In Buddhism, it's recognized that all have this Buddha nature, which is the potential to be free, and healthy, and naturally helpful. Not only should we be free from suffering and confusion, but in this way of thinking, happiness and intrinsic wealth is all of our birthright. Without exception this is true. Seeing Buddha Nature - our own, and that it exists everywhere, in everyone - this is the understanding that's the basis for working without anger, certainly, and without getting discouraged. I find even the idea of this to be most helpful when things are really difficult, maybe even looking impossible for a time.

I remember a quote that's stayed with me over the years, that goes something like this: "Buddhas do not blame living beings who are flawed, but, with compassion for all sentient beings, lead them from the ocean of samsara" (the cycle of repeated dissatisfaction and suffering)

We Westerners need a lot of compassion for ourselves, to ease the way in our own life, and to know our own worth. This then becomes the basis for

seeing just how much others also need acceptance, and support and encouragement to blossom.

Helping others is truly worthwhile, not only because freedom from suffering is intrinsically worthwhile, but also because of the natural wealth of happiness, and peace, that is in fact attainable by everyone. Of course, it's not easy, or a one-shot deal. There will be very difficult situations, but those should make us only more determined. Getting a sense of how hard it can be, and how long it can take for a person, ourself or another, to get out of suffering - that's when we really see the need for, and value of compassion. Because it is of the greatest value, wherever we may find ourselves, and however much we are able to do, just living a compassionate life is the way of fulfillment.

The Empowerment of Compassion

It takes strength to be aware of suffering and not be overwhelmed by it. Driving past the tent city on Division street, some people will look at the homeless for just a moment, and quickly turn their attention to something else. For some, the sight of those who own nothing more than they can carry makes a deeper impression, and it can be depressing to think about any long term problem where there is no easy solution.

As it is with the racism in this country, and its inequality, its endless wars, neglect of the poor and our home, none of these can be addressed in shorthand. As much as we may have advanced, we have not yet given enough of our time, energy and intelligence to solving these problems. Instead, in 2016, we are a largely distracted, immature, and self-absorbed consumer culture. Worst of all, too often, those free and educated enough to effect change look away to the next party, the next game, the next escape.

I take solace here in the fact that there are many conscientious people, who work each day to make a difference, but it is not easy. When we meet what seems like an insurmountable challenge, it's tempting to give in to despair, both for this generation, and for our future. Fortunately for us, there are inner resources we can tap into to help us respond more effectively. Compassion is that unique human quality that expresses our kinship, and that gives us strength and hope.

Compassion is not despair

On the surface, compassion may look like despair. In both cases the initial feeling is one of sadness. But where in despair we are overwhelmed, and made weak as a child, with compassion there comes the energy to work. There are times when some indomitable force rises up in us. Just look at those workers, mothers and fathers and friends and strangers who go out each day to do what's needed, and when there is some crisis, new strength enters their limbs.

When I think of those activists who marched, and who wrote, and who spoke out over the years, I know they did it both for themselves, and for the coming generations. That strength they had to begin, and to keep going was

the perennial strength of compassion, and this is something we can all use now.

Where despair feels like surrender, compassion has no quit in it. The doubting mind is also closely tied to fear, and it is a small and contracted state, but the mind of compassion is broad and clear and fearless. It imagines great things, such as clean water, and people being fed and housed, and gets to work to get them done.

When we are in a state of doubt and despair and distraction, we are shut down. We are confused and only using a small part of our inherent wealth. By contrast, compassion helps us to know just what is essential about our being here: to care for one another as best we can. A light wakes up in us. It is great love and compassion that begins in response to the great and small needs; it is compassion that has us continue; and it is this same power in us that goes on for as long as it takes to complete the works of justice, healing and peace.

I praise the dawning of compassion in each and every one of us today, and all of its works. May it flourish in us all.

On Joy – From *Where Joy Can Be Found*

Cultivating Joy

Cultivating joy has a reputation in Buddhism for being an easy practice, one that anybody can do, and that really takes just a few moments. Just sit back and think about some of the great things that people have done, and are doing now, or the beauty that is in this world…

To take delight in the wonderful things people do is so easy, it's amazing. It comes naturally to the heart. Anytime we think to ourselves, 'wow – that's great!' – that's celebrating. We can celebrate the 'small', everyday things we see, such as a mother picking up her child because the child is tired – child reaches up his arms, and without hesitating, the mother picks up her child. Or a child gets a good grade, or even just *tries* on a test, or makes a lovely painting in school… these may seem 'small', or common, but in their own way they are extraordinary, and something we can delight in.

"There is great joy and happiness in using one's life to bring joy and happiness to others." – Ani Tenzin Palmo

We can and should acknowledge and rejoice in our own good actions, and intentions. For some reason in the West many people have a hard time with this, myself included sometimes. But we should be able to appreciate our own positive actions, just as if someone else were doing them. This is not for pride's sake, but for our own well founded self-esteem. All that's good in us should be celebrated.

Then we can celebrate and praise the great works that people have done, and the victories they have achieved. I think of Martin Luther King, Nelson Mandela, Ang San Suu Kyi, and others, including my father.

I have a folder I keep and add to, called 'The Power of Joy' that I started after having the thought that, anytime we celebrate something, we claim it as part of our spiritual heritage.

People throughout time have known this, and that's what communal celebrations are for. They're not just to remember, but they are so we can continue to be enriched and guided by those gifts we're received. And part

of the wisdom of these regular celebrations is that it keeps us from forgetting.

So in the folder on joy I keep a list of my heroes, friends and benefactors, and of the gifts we've received, to remind myself, for example, of the gift of Rumi, the legacy of the civil rights moment, the Buddha's teaching, the works of my compassionate friends, and our ancestors who have left us knowledge of healing methods. These are just a few examples. Make your own list.

Then, if we set our mind on something wonderful for a while, we can have the experience of 'breaking through the veil' of our mundane view.

For example, if I think of the lives of my teachers, such as the Dalai Lama, or Martin Luther King, and I think about what they've been through, and how much inspiration and strength, and joy and freedom they brought to others, something in me changes. This mind of appreciation and delight is different from the mind I may have had only a few moments before.

The feeling fades, and so I need to practice regularly, so that my knowing these good and great things can be like a fresh stream in my life – nourishing and sustaining.

Have you ever noticed how the happiest people seem to be those who are really appreciative of others, wherever they go? I'm thinking here of Matthieu Ricard and Thich Nhat Hanh, but you can probably think of your own examples. Their gratitude and their joy in others is very present everywhere they go.

I remember being in Paris in 1990, and noticing something I had not seen very much of, if at all in the United States. In the subway stations, families were traveling together, and one of the things I noticed in these European families was a sense of dignity, of knowing who they are, and having a sense of immutable worth in that.

People may have it here, but it's something I seldom see. I thought about why this could be, and I thought perhaps that it had to do with European cultures being older and more established, whereas this is a relatively new culture, and so our identity is less established. We do have a history here that has many things to take pride in. And, in these times, we are all more of

a member of one world than ever before, such that we can celebrate the successes and achievements of people in other countries as though they were of our own family.

Sometimes I think of people, and of young people especially, not knowing our history as being impoverished – it's so sad. They don't know themselves to be rich, and so they suffer and treat others as they do. They feel disconnected, and no relationship to or responsibility to the past, or to others.

But the good news here, the saving grace, as it were, is that whenever we're without jealousy or pride, pettiness or ego centeredness, any time we step out of those, then, almost right away the world opens up to us, and shows us the beauty and richness that is here.

When we know our history, and what's going on around us, we also feel responsibility, which brings us right up to the kind of mature joy so needed in the world today. This is not something frivolous, like some enjoyments can be. It has another quality to it. And far from being a burden, it is a delight, a privilege to continue the work of our teachers; to live in this world with wisdom and compassion and generosity.

I think they say rejoicing is such an easy method because it puts us in touch with wonderful qualities, and helps those same qualities to wake up in us, without our having to do that work ourselves.

Rumi said:

We get to pick up the jewels,
while the real work is being done outside,
by someone digging in the ground…

The Bible expresses the same idea, when speaking of the grace that is freely offered:

I called you to the harvest,
others have tended the field,
now receive the fruits of that labor…

These are my own phrasing of them, but I think the meaning is there.

Rejoicing is only half-kiddingly called ‘a method for lazy people’, or for people without a lot of time for that reason.

They say celebration also has the effect of planting seeds in us, to do a similar action ourselves. They warn against ‘negative rejoicing for this same reason – we shouldn’t celebrate any harm or injury, or any offence.

While it’s true that rejoicing is easy to do, and that there are many opportunities for it, and that delighting in something special only takes a few moments, we shouldn’t underestimate its great value.

Personally, I know I need a lot of this kind of practice, to keep from getting too one sided – too serious and ponderous…. it works, most of the time, I’m happy to report!

When we’re really aware of what we’ve received from our teachers and ancestors, from friends and noble people, and from this whole magnificent world, and touch that truth, that stream can become a mighty river in us.

Joy can then be a strength that we cultivate in our lives, such that it can have far reaching benefits, supporting us in all the good things we would do.

Joy in Buddhist Practice

What I'm realizing the more I look into it, and work with it, is that joy, happiness and well being are potentials that can be developed far more than I knew, and far more than we are ever taught.

The place of joy in the full development of a person

Reading, and listening to talks, and doing my best to practice the teachings called The Four Immeasurables, of Love, Compassion, Sympathetic Joy and Impartiality, or, Equality of View, I found myself again looking at the subject of compassion, with a willingness to practice it, but what felt like a lack of ability.

To me, this is such a crucial point. We all know of good hearted people that reach their limit. But why is this? and more importantly, what, if anything can be done about it? *I think now that the difference between someone who is able do more and someone who, with all their good intentions, can't accomplish as much is just this one factor, of how much they've been able to receive and be strengthened and nourished by joy.*

I found this limit in myself to cultivating compassion, just because I often didn't feel capable. The capacity to respond to suffering is described as something we work with, as with loving kindness, to increase, and extend, more and more, until it is all inclusive. But what is the path to being able to do this*?*

I'd say that one part of it is developing the ability to be nourished, inspired, and sustained by what is beautiful in life, by the best things that this life has to offer. If we don't do this, I'd say we're not taking advantage of all that's here, of all that is around us, in fact. When they talk about 'the ten-thousand joys, and the ten-thousand sorrows' in Buddhism, practically speaking, the ten- thousand joys have to come first, or we may not get to the rest of it.

Although 'Mudita', or Sympathetic Joy, is often overlooked in the teachings on the Four Immeasurables, it is, in truth, one of the factors we need to develop the other states, of Great Love, Compassion, and Impartiality. So I wrote out these five questions to live with, to look into, and use as reminders to open up to the joy that is available here. They are:

1. How much beauty is there in the world?...,

2. How many things are there that can make us feel wonder?...,

3. How deep can gratitude go?...,

4. How much strength can a person get from loving?...,

and,

5. How much happiness is there in friendship?...

These kinds of reflections keep me on course, developing the strength of the emotional body, and benefiting from extending that positive energy throughout body, mind, and spirit.

When we feel well and happy, the mind becomes bright and clear, and it settles down comfortably more easily. It is able to remain calmly settled. 'In the mind of happiness, attention finds a true foundation.' This naturally supports the development of liberating insight, and, together with love and compassion, this is one of the central aims in Buddhism.

If, however, we are without the degree of strength we are truly capable of when we are spiritually well nourished in the realm of feeling, then the only or best option will seem to be just struggling to get by, or to get out of what's difficult as best we can.

It's being sustained and strengthened by the beauty of life that allows us to progress on the path of becoming a whole, healthy, capable and responsive human being.

Pleasure, joy, and bliss

There are different kinds of joy to be found in this life, and this is something I hope we can all know about. I compare the pleasures we are all familiar with, such as those of eating a fine meal, and more subtle joys, to what children do, and those kinds of happiness only young adults, and mature people can know. For example, the joys of learning, or of giving, fully conscious of the value of sharing what we have with another, these are some

things a younger, or a less mature person will have to wait, or develop, to know about.

We are more than just flesh-bodies, although this is the level that is given by far the most attention in America, or in Western culture. The problem with this is that, with physical over indulgence, we can get jaded, and progressively made insensate to anything deeper or more enriching than this.

The gross level sometimes is in harmony with the rest of our life, and sometimes it opposes the subtle part – like the good that needs to be set aside so we can have something better. Often, the materialistic, so-called 'epicureans' indulge and actually mute their higher senses; and spoiled children, and adults, though they think their dissatisfaction will bring them greater happiness, are actually, more and more, narrowing down their chances to feel pleasure. They actually cultivate dissatisfaction, and make themselves miserable.

There's a word I heard referenced in a documentary on meth addiction – 'an-hedonia', which was defined as an inability to feel pleasure. How tragic. I remember I instantly understood what they were talking about, and felt the sorrow of it, knowing some of that from my own life, and from witnessing it more extensively in the lives of addicts I'd seen.

Somehow or other, people are able, at times, to get out of this kind of degradation. There must be grace in this world, that, and the power of the human spirit is beyond reckoning. There are others too, we know, who don't make it out of this trap.

With drugs, of course, this is a very extreme example, the loss of the ability to feel being the effect of physical damage, but it is also something people experience in less gross ways. In every case though, man, what a loss! There's no way to even start to measure it.

Many religious traditions try to avoid this - diminishment of the senses - by reducing or removing as much as possible the physical enjoyments most people live for. We can say that, without doubt, even if it works for some of them some of the time, this is also an extreme. It can, in its own way, also be a loss. What then to do?

I think what's needed is more knowledge of our choices. We need to know what we're capable of, and then love life wisely. That's when we'll choose the best, and nourish ourselves with it. For a mature person, for example, the joy of helping others is something that naturally eclipses other interests and motivations. We can even say there's *something blissful* about it.

When talking about different kinds of happiness we can experience, starting with the pleasures of a good night sleep and having good health, and going through joys, appreciating the good things in life, to more even subtle enjoyments, we can notice something interesting. The effects of the more subtle experiences, such as those found through feeling love, or through meditation, even if they only last for a short time, can be like eating the best quality food. They last longer, and are more healing, enlivening, and strengthening.

Here it should be known also that, when we talk about 'subtle enjoyments' what we're really referring to is the mind that is experiencing these pleasures. We can all develop this ability to feel bliss, and to be well nourished.

Mature Joy

In Mahayana Buddhism, the Bodhisattva is someone who vows to help all beings to enlightenment. He or she is a person not only with this great motivation, but with the capacity as well to achieve their aims, and one part of that person's practice is inspired, joyful effort. This is a mature joy, it's taught, such that even going to a difficult realm if need be, literally or metaphorically, is experienced for that person as happiness itself.

To me, this ideal is where we can find real courage, skill, and wisdom to live in this world, aware of it's sufferings, and keeping hold of our hope for the future, for our children and our planet.

The Bodhisattvas are called 'sons and daughters of a good family', and are those who take care of themselves and live by their aspiration to help others. I think in these times, more and more, we need the highest ideals we can bring to mind, if for no other reason than for the strength they can give us individually, reminding us that there are many others, living and working now in the world, who also care deeply about the dreams we hold in common.

Taking advantage of what is offered

I think if we begin to realize the vital importance of experiencing joy, we'll start to find more ways to cultivate this necessary part of life, for all our sake. Sometimes, it's just a matter of the focus, of a slight attentional shift. For example, we can do all the necessary actions and practices we already are doing, such as making breakfast, and driving the kids to school, taking a parent shopping, mindful breathing, loving kindness meditation, the practice, when needed, of patience, or diligence, but now with an awareness of the joy of them.

If we key in on the joyful aspect of any of these, or other positive, healthy practices or ways of living, that happiness will increase. It will heal, energize, and nourish us more and more, and the benefit will definitely be known in some way or another, in all the lives we are connected to, our whole family.

To celebrate, and live fully in this world

We all have old wounds in the emotional body to heal, just because we've experienced so many things, and we weren't perfect before in our responses, or completely skillful in the past. We all need to have much compassion for ourselves too, as well as this knowledge of the means available to us to heal. The result of taking good care of ourselves is then that we become more and more capable of being with others, of supporting and caring for them well.

I pray that we will all be aware of and celebrate the beauty and richness that is here, all around us, and that we will thereby all become fully capable of living in this world in the best of ways, loving, and sharing with all, wherever we are.

{With special thanks to Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart, for his Piano Trios this last hour, so full of light and joy, and for the Beaux Arts Trio for their beautiful recording.}

{And now to Mozart again, for his Quintets, and the Arthur Grumiaux Quintet, for their recording of the same.}

On nourishing ourselves with joy

We are made for joy. If we're without it for long, we feel out of sorts, because it's not natural to be that way. We can see the relationship between our mind and body so easily when we cultivate joy. Having our lives nourished and sustained by joy is how we have a healthy immune system, physically and spiritually. It helps us now, and in our whole life.

A method - extended

In his instructions on breath meditation, the Thai teacher, Ajaan Lee said we should regard those places in the body that ache or are uncomfortable as being like hoodlums or fools. Our task is to find some place in the body that is comfortable and to focus on that.

In his method, Ajaan Lee taught that we should then let this comfortable sensation spread throughout our entire body, to increase our sense of well being and stability. He says this is like hanging out with good people – eventually they'll drive off the hoodlums and fools.

The same principle can be used when it comes to negative emotions or states of mind – regard them too as hoodlums and fools. We can then choose to focus on something positive and uplifting, and drive off the discomfort and suffering.

Many people do something like this already. On a mantle at home, or at the office, we have photographs of our children, teachers, or pets, or of a sunset. Looking at this brings us some uplift, but maybe the experience is not as full as it could be. Perhaps looking at the pictures, people will just sort of zone out… like….'aaahhhh…'

To get the most out of any meditation, we have to enter into it consciously, and remain aware. Just as with the breathing meditation, when looking at a picture, or, bringing some positive memory to mind, or listening to music, we can identify the positive, uplifting energy, and, immersing ourselves in it for a time, we can allow this beautiful energy to saturate our body and mind, through and through. We can enjoy the feeling, and remain awake with it.

In contrast to our usual way of looking at a picture, or memory, or listening, this method takes intention, gentle concentration, to the exclusion of

everything else for a while, and remaining conscious throughout. We can then permeate our body and mind with healthy feelings. This is one way to ward off the hoodlums and fools of our negative mental – emotional states.

It's my hope that we all *regularly* put our mind on things that are uplifting. It's not enough to just do this once in a while, or when we're having some problem. Of course, it works somewhat then too, but it's better to build up the strength of this practice when things are going well, and in ordinary times. That way, we gradually build up a shelter, a refuge for ourselves, and it will be there when we really need it. This is just a forward thinking, common sense way to take care of ourselves.

A strong psychological immune system…

After we are out of a suffering state, even temporarily, then nourishing ourselves spiritually takes on another role. This is the way we gradually develop a strong, robust psychological immune system. We can actually experience ourselves becoming resistant to negative thoughts and emotions, less reactive, and with a higher level of overall happiness and well being.

Something like this happens, for example, when we are just back from a vacation, but here we are producing this effect consciously, and regularly, as a way of taking care of ourselves.

Mind effects body, body effects mind

Certainly, neurological and chemical changes take place in us because of our thoughts and feelings. Positive states are healthy and strengthening to our body, and this in turn can support our cultivation of the life we want for ourselves.

On the even strength born of dedication

A complementary perspective on the Four Immeasurables practice called ‘Equanimity’

When Equanimity is taught in Theravada Buddhism as part of the Four Brahma Viharas, or Divine Abidings, of Love, Compassion, Sympathetic Joy and Equanimity, it is explained as an evenness of mind.

This worthy quality can be the character of equanimity in any context. It is steady, balanced, peaceful, adaptable, and always useful.

Before having the good fortune to receive teachings on the Four Immeasurables as presented in the Great Theravada Tradition of study, practice and attainment, I had heard of the Four Immeasurables as they are taught in Tibetan Buddhism.

There, the formula, in four lines for the Four Immeasurables is

May all beings have happiness and its causes (Loving kindness, Metta)

May all beings be free of suffering and its causes (Compassion, Karuna)

May all beings never be separated from sorrowless bliss (Sympathetic Joy, or empathy, Mudita)

and

May all beings abide in equanimity, free of bias, attachment, and anger

Another translation of this Fourth Immeasurable says:

‘May they enjoy the great equanimity that is free from passion, aggression, and prejudice’

In the Tibetan Tradition, one form of equanimity meditation comes from what’s called ‘equalizing self and others, and exchanging self and others’.

Here, one reflects on the essential sameness of oneself as a sentient being who wants happiness and doesn't want even the smallest amount of suffering. This is equalizing.

Then to take away the arbitrary distinctions we make, often for the most superficial reasons, we reflect on how our so-called enemy can become a friend, and a kind friend can change toward us and become something else again.

The Venerable Sangye Khadro said,

"Equanimity as an attitude involves having equal regard and concern for every being, regardless of where they stand in relation to us."

There is clearly no equanimity, in the commonly used sense of the word, no steadiness or stability if our wishing others well is based on how they are towards us.

Of course, we like it when people are kind and helpful, but, in metta practice, that's not the reason we wish them well.

To bring to Equanimity the meaning of a lack of bias, would mean that metta now applies equally to different categories of people, regardless of how, personally, we're getting along with them.

This is a kind of love that is more balanced. Equanimity here can be called an Equality of View towards others, or a Great Impartiality. Thich Nhat Hanh calls it non-discrimination, and inclusiveness. It starts to feel like it could be called Unconditional Loving Kindness.

In 'The Door to Inconceivable Wisdom and Compassion', Khenpo Palden Sherab Rinpoche says, "Equanimity means an attitude of impartiality. If you practice loving-kindness and compassion, you will easily have a joyful attitude, which will help you develop natural balance, or equanimity.

You will not make arbitrary discriminations between people, or groups of people, or any sentient being. Every single living being is part of our family and one of our best friends. So we don't make discriminations like, 'I want happiness for myself or a certain group of people, but I really don't care

about what those other people have to suffer.' Don't discriminate at all in this regard.

Your practice of love and compassion, as well as your joyful attitude is to be shared equally for all sentient beings, like sunlight radiating in all directions. This is equanimity."

This is love for all, and it has a quality towards one of being even. People who have an unconditional love for us can be counted on; they are steady and reliable. In all situations, and at all times, their wish for us is, May you be well and at your ease…

This is what Shakespeare wrote of

"Love is not love
which alters when it alteration finds,
or bends not with the remover to remove

It is an ever fixed mark
that looks on tempest and is never shaken

It is a star to every wandering bark…"

This impartiality, this accepting, unconditional love is a very flexible, and adaptive kind of love.

I think that this is the meaning of Equanimity in the context of the Four Brahma Viharas – equality of view, impartiality, an unconditional love.

Think of how much time teachers from the Theravada could save if they adopted this interpretation! Once they get to Equanimity it seems they always have to qualify it and assure people that they are not referring to indifference, or a cold, aloof, or in any way uncaring attitude.

This problem is solved if Equanimity is defined as the unconditional quality of love, always available, adaptive, steady and reliable.

So, from this perspective, instead of:

All beings are the owners of their karma

Their happiness and unhappiness
depends on their actions
and not upon my wishes for them

as it is often taught, it is, rather:

May I see that,
in all situations, and at all times,
all are equal in deserving our love and our care…

This is eternal, universal, unconditional love for all.

In all situations and at all times,
May all beings have happiness…

Here there are the same qualities of balance, imperturbability, steadiness, and reliability as before, but here it is enriched by a more manifest presence of love, as adaptability. It could never be mistaken for indifference, as the only thing that has been removed is the 'conditionality' of our loving mind and heart. It is only when we set conditions that we limit ourselves and our capacity to love.

'May all beings be at their ease,
young or old,
rich or poor,
strong or weak…'

With the Metta Sutta, the Buddha gave suggestions for categories of people for us to regard with love. I think he intended for us to continue along these lines, and to see Loving Kindness through to its natural conclusion, which is all-embracing, Universal Love, impartial, and all inclusive.

In terms of the Four Immeasurables, this is the way of thinking of Equanimity, or Equality of View that has been most helpful for me. It points the way to the fulfillment of this practice.

‘Come hell or high water’ – a Mahayana take on the Fourth Immeasurable

There are a number of ways the fourth of the Brahma Viharas, or divine abodes, can be interpreted. These Four Immeasurables are Universal Love, Compassion, Joy, and Equanimity.

The first three, in all interpretations, are clear expressions of love, as love, compassion, and altruistic joy, but when we get to the fourth, some interpretations lean in a way that then has to be explained as not implying indifference.

When Equanimity is heard that way, as ‘beings are owners of their karma, heirs to their karma’, it can seem aloof, disengaged, and maybe even concerned only up to a point, and then others are more or less on their own.

Another interpretation, found mostly in the Tibetan reading of the Four Immeasurables, has what’s called Equanimity translated as ‘Impartiality’ – meaning that we don’t favor one person or group over another, but that we see them all as equally deserving our consideration, and care.

This leads me to think of calling this Immeasurable, ‘Equality of View’, as in, ‘In all situations, and at all times, all are equal in deserving our love…’ This brings with it a kind of equanimity, steadying the mind and heart in our appreciation of others. This is because it is not dependent of how someone is towards us, or who someone is – the reference point is within us as our own consistent motivation.

Leading on from this, lately I’ve been thinking of this fourth Immeasurable as the strength of our vow to help others. In that consistency, in that reliability, we can find a strength that, when it is present, brings calm and clarity to our mind, and also to others.

I imagine that when a person who is deeply committed to a cause shows up, it can settle and encourage other people as well. People like this are trustworthy. They carry with them a peace, born of their deep determination.

In Chinese Mahayana Buddhism, they speak of ‘Vow Power’. This is quite different than having just the occasional upwelling of some feeling of

dedication – vow becomes the ground of all we think and do in this world. As such, it has all the attributes previously referred to as equanimity: it is stable, reliable, steady, and loyal; it is immutable; it is empowering, encouraging, unwavering in its determination, and readiness to work. This is Equanimity born of our strength of purpose.

I woke up today with the song from the Civil Right era, 'We shall not be moved' in my mind.

We… shall… not… be…
we shall not be moved
We… shall… not… be…
we shall not be moved
Just like a tree, standing by the water,
we shall not be moved!

This is a song of steadfast courage, and it's what I'm thinking of here as this Immeasurable, Upekkha, this Divine Quality, the strength and peace that comes from dedication.

Earlier, when going through the different facets of metta, this fundamental wish for others' welfare, I saw that when it met with suffering, it turned into compassion. When it saw others success, it was delighted, and manifested as joy. Now, when deep love is called on to show itself, when it is challenged, I can see that it reveals the qualities of steadiness, or imperturbability; it doesn't draw back; it doesn't waver.

When determination is solid, it has a characteristic that is bold, and fearless. Witness the examples of Martin Luther King, Nelson Mandela, Aung San Sui Kyi, and the Dalai Lama. It is exactly their strength of commitment that imparts strength and confidence and peace to others.

Taken together, Love, Compassion, Joy, and an Equanimity born of the dedication to others, can be understood all as truly divine states, committed to positive action in the world.

Balancing the qualities of love

'It is the firm and balanced character of a person that knits isolated virtues into an organic and harmonious whole, within which the single qualities exhibit their best manifestations and avoid the pitfalls of their respective weaknesses.' – Nyanaponika Thera

If we are to make progress in cultivating metta, or loving kindness, it's important that we go about it in a balanced way. What does this mean? The result of the full development of metta, it's taught, is an all-inclusive love and care. Eventually the practice can reach what are called the Four Immeasurable States, of Universal Love, Compassion, Joy, and Strength and Balance of mind and heart. Before that time, it helps bring these qualities into our practice. When we do that, we find these are actually all aspects of our love that need each other.

I'm writing this as someone who has seen a lot of suffering, living in the city, thought about it, and been concerned with alleviating it as much as I can. My family is part of a tradition in this way, through activism, and a commitment to social justice.

A very common experience for people in the helping professions is what they call 'compassion fatigue', where despite their best intentions, people burn themselves out, or limit what they can do. Recognizing that I have this tendency in myself, I know I need to be careful not to go too long, or focus too much on suffering, without renewing myself.

Everyone is different, and will need to bring up different qualities to find balance, but I thought it might be useful to highlight some of the traditional teachings on the balanced cultivation of metta. We can start anywhere with this.

In his essay on the Four Sublime States, Nyanaponika Thera says that

'Sympathetic joy holds compassion back from becoming overwhelmed by the sight of the world's suffering, from being absorbed by it to the exclusion of everything else.

Sympathetic joy relieves the tension of mind, soothes the painful burning of the compassionate heart. It keeps compassion away from melancholic

brooding without purpose, from a futile sentimentality that merely weakens and consumes the strength of mind and heart.'

In the metta teachings, what is cultivated as sympathetic joy is a delight in the happiness and good fortune of others, which is a wonderful liberation of the mind and heart.

I'm taking joy though to include all the beautiful things we can know and take delight in. The view from the mountain, and the fields I walk through at dusk, the memory of the exuberant children I had the joy of teaching years back… all these and more are nourishing… I know we can all make our own list of those things that lift us up and strengthen us to think about.

Love is that fundamental wish for our own and others happiness. It is a natural appreciation for what's good about where we are. By itself, I'd say, when love is present in a person, they will mature.

And this is where compassion comes in. Quoting Nyanaponika Thera again:

Compassion does not allow that love and sympathetic joy shut themselves up against the wide world by confining themselves to a narrow sector of it.

Compassion prevents love and sympathetic joy from turning into states of self-satisfied complacency within a jealously-guarded petty happiness. Compassion stirs and urges love to widen its sphere…

I'd say also that compassion brings with it a fulfillment that is not reached by tending to our own happiness alone. This is where our life finds real meaning.

Sometimes it's helpful to imagine looking back from the end of our present life, and asking what would be the most satisfying life we could have thought of for ourselves. Would it be enough, or fully rewarding to look back and say, 'I found happiness for myself'?, or do you think it would it bring greater satisfaction to look back and to think, 'with this lifetime, I was able, to some extent, to ease the suffering of others, and bring them happiness.'? As for myself, as much as I can, this is the direction I want to go.

They have an expression that repeats in the Prajna Paramita, or Perfection of Wisdom Literature, that says a person can be 'taken hold of by wisdom and

skill in means'. I like that – not only the seized - 'taken hold of' part, but that there is skill involved too. It's saying that we need to use our creative intelligence to accomplish our aims.

Sometimes compassion can inspire us, and bring up energy, and love and joy can bring enthusiasm, but we also a need calm balance of mind to stay on course.

The Fourth Immeasurable, most often called Equanimity, is the one I've enjoyed exploring the most the last year. For a while I had another definition with me than that used in the classical Theravada teachings. In the Mahayana, this Sublime State is more usually referred to as Impartiality.

From there, I went towards thinking of it as an equality of view, or an evenness of appreciation, love and care for others. But even this didn't entirely do it for me.

I could see what they were getting at, could feel this special quality in myself at times, and could see it in the steadfastness of character of my teachers. After some time, I began to think of it as the strength and balance of mind that comes from dedication. I can see this in Aung San Sui Kyi, Nelson Mandela, The Dalai Lama, Martin Luther King, and Thich Nhat Hanh. There is something very stable and serene about them all, and I think it's this very quality of love in them, manifesting as a clear sense of purpose, and peace that pervades all they do.

At this point, I can go back to the traditional teachings, such as those offered by Nyanaponka Thera, and they make more sense to me.

He says,

'Equanimity, which means "even-mindedness," gives to love an even, unchanging firmness and loyalty. It endows it with the great virtue of patience. Equanimity furnishes compassion with an even, unwavering courage and fearlessness…

To the active side of compassion, equanimity is the calm and firm hand led by wisdom - indispensable to those who want to practice the difficult art of helping others. And here again equanimity means patience, the patient devotion to the work of compassion.

Its unshakable nature is the manifestation of the highest strength.

In these and other ways equanimity may be said to be the crown and culmination of the other three sublime states.

Balance by its nature is a dynamic state. In a way, it's something we always have to tend to, day by day, or hour by hour. We can also gain a lot from really knowing our own disposition, which is the history of our tendencies of mind and heart. Looking back at how things have effected us in the past, and what we needed more of when dealing with sorrow, for example, can help us to correct imbalances, and better equip ourselves for life ahead.

For myself, I know now that in the past I needed more of the qualities of delight, to keep from getting out of balance. We can find both unlimited suffering and unlimited wonder and happiness in this world. The question is, what will serve our purposes to focus on, and to nourish ourselves with?

So many people just go along with their tendencies, not attentive to the results of their choices, and then they wonder why they are overwhelmed or depressed. We need to nourish ourselves well, actually a lot more than activists and thinkers usually imagine, and there are more than enough resources available. The surprising thing is, when we do this we become much more capable of doing the work our conscience calls us to do. It's exactly this balance that skill in means, our own purposeful intelligence, would have us gain.

On the Near Enemies of the Four Immeasurables

May all beings be entirely well and at their ease

May they all be free from suffering and its causes

May we together rejoice in all good fortune that people enjoy

and

May we see that, in all situations, and at all times,
all are equal in deserving our love and our care…

When cultivating the four qualities of loving kindness, compassion, joy and impartiality, we meet with what obviously opposes them, and also with factors that limit their development that are harder to recognize.

What are called the far opposites of these four are pretty easy to spot: the opposite of kindness is wishing to harm; of compassion, indifference; the opposite of rejoicing in the good fortune of others is jealousy, and the far opposite of impartial love is being biased.

What are described as 'near enemies' are not as easy to see, but they are just as necessary to explore if we're to make progress. They are 'near enemies' in the sense that they can be quite close to where we are without our being aware of it, and when we don't see them, they can cause harm, or hold us back.

The near enemy of loving kindness, as I'm understanding it, is what I'd call 'conditionality' – as in - we will wish another well as long as certain conditions are met.

Perhaps someone brings us coffee every day, and we're glad about that, and wish them well, every happiness when we see them and think about them. If one day they don't bring us what we want, we can see if our wishing them well was connected to what they gave us. This is a simplified example, of course, but you can see where it leads.

I've heard the teaching on what are called The Eight Worldly Dharmas mostly from the Tibetan Tradition, and it seems they fit in here. They are:

material gain and loss,
physical pleasure and pain,
praise and criticism, and
having a good reputation or bad reputation, (i.e., being concerned with what others think about us)

If we're attached to any of these, they can limit what we offer to others in terms of good will, responsiveness to their needs, and joy when they meet with favorable conditions.

One difference between the far and near enemies that I can see is that, while the far enemy, of hatred, for example, needs a revolution to become kindness, the near enemy, in this case a love that depends on others being a certain way can be thought of as a 'younger version' of the mature love we're aiming to develop.

We all start out with conditions on our affection towards those we're closest with, beginning with our family. That's where we first learn what it is to love and be loved. Through those close feelings we can then learn that what is really needed is a kind of love that doesn't change depending on how others are towards us. We can grow out of relying on people to be a certain way before we can offer them our best wishes and intentions.

It's this way also with the other 'near enemies' of what can grow into the Four Immeasureables. As we'll see, they can be taken as a starting point for further development. Maybe we could say that the near enemies, at their best, are immature forms of the qualities we wish to develop in loving kindness practice.

Sometimes the near enemy of loving kindness is described as attachment, but I think there is clearly something of an attachment to results in wishing another well, as opposed to harm, or to not fully enjoying their life!

Traditionally they say we shouldn't offer metta-loving kindness as a meditation practice to those we have strong physical attraction towards, and they have a point. It's almost certain to be mixed in with attachment to our own pleasure.

But, better than calling the near enemy just attachment, I'd say putting conditions on what we're offering to others covers all the bases. At least, it works for me to think this way.

When our love is without conditions being put on it, it's free to give to others regardless of how they are towards us. It releases more kindness, of a purer nature from us.

Next, the far enemy of compassion sometimes is given as cruelty, but since that's covered as the opposite of love, here I would point to indifference – seeing and knowing about someone's suffering and then not doing anything about it, not responding to it. That could be considered cruel, but it's more an absence of feeling, which is very much the opposite of compassion, which is a surging of the feeling of wanting to help when meeting with suffering.

The near enemy, as before, is more subtle, and harder to recognize. As with all the near enemies, it can masquerade as the real thing, and deceive us, and hold us back. We may think we're being loving when we're only attached to getting something, for example.

When it comes to compassion, the near enemy is pity, a feeling of sadness and revulsion when meeting with or thinking about suffering. We may actually feel good when we have pity, as if this shows we're a noble, kind person, but there's aversion there that keeps us at a distance from what's difficult to look at, difficult to bear.

Again, as before, this pity can lead onwards to genuine compassion, but it has to be seen through. We have to see how our response could be improved, and then slowly and gradually cultivate real compassion.

We might do this by thinking of how we'd feel if someone were to just shake their head and say 'oh, that's too bad… too bad…. you poor thing… tsk… tsk… tsk…', and keep on walking…

Better if someone said, hey I see you need a hand, can I help? or, were just willing to be present through a hard time.

If pity were to stop in its tracks and turn around to help, we could mature the feeling right there. Instead, because of its sneaky quality, of pretending to be compassion, we might not see it until later, if at all. This near enemy business needs some attention and honest investigation into our responses to life, if we're to get anywhere.

Then, the far enemy of rejoicing in the good fortune of others is easy to see as jealousy. The near enemy, of frivolity, or a superficial joy, is again harder to see. Whereas rejoicing is a deep practice, and upholds and supports the best in ourselves and in others, the same can't be said for mere superficial excitement. There's nothing lasting there. It fizzles out as soon as the least of the conditions change.

A superficial joy could never reach to those qualities in ourselves or another that rejoicing can celebrate, such as a person's kindness, or patience, gentleness, or peacefulness.

Rejoicing in the good of others is a whole life enhancing practice, for ourselves, in cultivating such a celebratory attitude, and for others. We can affirm the best things in a person's life, both materially and spiritually, when we rejoice with them.

The light-hearted happiness we share with others can be a basis for drawing closer, and really supporting them, but these two shouldn't be mistaken, one for the other. If we're attached to just having a good time, we may stay on the surface of things. By contrast, rejoicing is a quieter, deeper, more life affirming practice, for both ourselves and for others.

In the last of the four, as the name would imply, the far enemy of impartial love is partiality, or a bias towards those we're close to, whether it be our own family, or group, nation, race or religion. This, again, if we're intent on looking, is easy to find in ourselves when it's there, and worked with.

The near enemy, as before, pretends to be what it is not. In this case, the near enemy of impartial love is just holding a concept of universal, all inclusive kindness. This is the kind of attitude that would say, unfortunately only half kiddingly, 'I love everybody, it's people I can't stand'.

If a person doesn't investigate, or is not called on his or her inconsistencies, they may actually think they've arrived at one of the Sublime Abidings,

when all they've done is hem themselves into a mere idea of impartial, unbiased kindness, a mere idea of universal love.

With any noble state we hear or read about, we have to be careful because the ego can hijack it, claim it for its own and then go around as if it's really attained something, when some investigation or questioning would reveal a different story.

A weak ego, of someone who doesn't feel good about themselves is especially susceptible to fooling itself, and wearing a mask of ideal states. We need a lot of patience, humility, gentleness for ourselves, and confidence that we can develop to keep from the trap of the ego. In this case, it's with impartial love, but the same goes for other worthwhile qualities we would cultivate in ourselves.

The concept of universal love is a good place to start, but we shouldn't stop there. For some people it might be easy to go from the idea of impartiality, to actually having that kind of love for all others, but for most of us, it's a process that needs our involvement.

We can look to see where we are partial, and have biases towards our own group, or race, or social class. These false discriminations have to be seen for what they are before we can go past them. They're actually not based on anything that holds up to analysis, on nothing real. When we really look, we discover that the fact is, all *are* equal in needing and deserving our love and our care. From there, it can still take a lot of work on our part, to iron out the inconsistencies in how we think about and treat others, but right there is the path, for those who want to take it.

Exploring those subtle near enemies to love, compassion, sympathetic joy and impartiality is what lets us go further with their development. We have to see what holds us back, both in the obvious and in the more hidden ways. Moreover, we have to be especially aware of these states where we can get caught, deceived and so stuck for an indefinite period of time. Removing these barriers, love flows abundantly; it's a cool, pure stream, nourishing all of life.

With words, by their gestures, and presence, a loving person brings out the best in others. When I think of my teachers, I can see that they have become a refuge, a safe haven. They live from that place of fulfillment, uplifting

others wherever they go. And they tell us this is something we can all accomplish.

May it be so!

The Cultivation of Loving Kindness

Having seen that like oneself
all beings seek for happiness,
one patiently then cultivates love for all beings

May I be happy, healthy, and peaceful
May I be free from suffering

May my family, friends, co-workers,
neutral ones, and those who are difficult
have every happiness
May they be free from all suffering
May they be free from all danger, and all difficulty

Within the boundaries of this town,
may all beings have happiness
Likewise those in other places,
in other cities, and countries,
in all places,
may they all have happiness, health and peace

All creatures and all breathing things,
all persons and all entities…
men, women and children,
the Noble Ones, the unawake,
Devas, and unhappy ones
who in the ten directions dwell -

May all beings be happy and at peace,
and may their hearts be filled with joy!

Suffusion with the Divine Abidings

{I. Loving Kindness}

I will abide
pervading the world
with loving-kindness,
all around and everywhere,
and to all as to myself

I will abide
pervading this all encompassing world
with loving-kindness,
abundant, exalted, immeasurable,

with unconditional love,
warmth, gentleness,
gratitude,
appreciation and respect,
supreme well-wishing,
and encouragement for all

May all beings be happy,
May they be healthy,
May they dwell in safety, comfort and peace,
May they all know they are loved

I will abide
pervading the world
with loving-kindness -

May all beings be entirely well
and at their ease!

From the insects on the ground,
to the birds in the trees and in the sky,
the fish in the waters,
animals,
and people everywhere,

young and old,
rich and poor,
weak and strong,
male and female,
realized and ordinary people,
near and far away,
already born and yet to be born –
May they all be entirely well
and at their ease!

All around and everywhere,
and to all as to myself –
May all have supreme happiness,
health, and peace!
May they all know they are loved

I will abide
pervading this all encompassing world
with loving-kindness,
abundant, exalted, immeasurable,

with unconditional good-will,
warmth, gentleness,
gratitude,
appreciation and respect,
supreme well-wishing,
and encouragement for all

{II. Compassion}

I will abide
pervading the world
with compassion,
all around and everywhere,
and to all as to myself

I will abide
pervading this all encompassing world
with compassion,

abundant, exalted, immeasurable,

with a heart of complete solidarity with all those who suffer in any way,
and with engagement with them

young and old,
rich and poor,
weak and strong,
male and female,
realized and ordinary people,
near and far away,
already born and yet to be born –
May they all be free from all their suffering,
and the causes of suffering
May they all be healed
May they all be completely safe and protected

I will abide with compassion,
courage, joy,
and real strength

{III. Joy}

I will abide
pervading the world
with a heart that rejoices in the good,
everywhere it is found,
in the arts,
in the natural world,
in children,
in myself and in others,
in teachers, and in healers,
in kind and caring people,
in cherished elders, ancestors,
family and friends

I will abide
pervading this all encompassing world
with joy and celebration

abundant, exalted, immeasurable

{IV. The Strength and Peace of love, born of dedication, also known as its Equanimity}

I will abide
pervading the world
with stable, impartial love,
all around and everywhere,
and to all as to myself

With all people
and in every circumstance,
steadfast, loyal,
courageous, and reliable,
with love's own equanimity,
peace and strength

I will abide
pervading the all encompassing world
with this stable, impartial love,
abundant, exalted, immeasurable,

at all times with a heart,
that is steady, and joyful,
even, and serene

The Four Brahma Viharas and Bodhicitta – The Thought of Enlightenment

Metta practice is done step by step, through the different categories, understanding their purpose, and then all together, as taught, until one reaches the Four 'Brahma Viharas' – the 'Divine Abodes', also called the Four Limitless States. These are Universal Love, Compassion, Joy, and Equanimity, which in this context is the strength and balance of mind that comes from love.

The Four Brahma Viharas can be expressed, and reflected on in a number of ways, including this four line prayer, adapted from the Tibetan Tradition:

May all beings have happiness and the causes of happiness…

May all beings be free of suffering and the causes of suffering…

I rejoice in all that is beautiful and right in the world,
in all virtue and positive action,
and in all success, happiness, and good fortune...

and abide in stable, impartial love...

Next, with an understanding of the Four Noble Truths, and the possibility of liberation, love naturally becomes bodhicitta, which is the dedication to helping others through ones practice and accomplishment of the path.

This transition, which is implied before, involves realizing the equality of oneself and all others, and the exchange of oneself for others, however one arrives there.

This is altruism – putting others before oneself, thinking:

May I always cherish all my loved ones
with the determination to accomplish for them the highest good
that is more precious than a wish-fulfilling jewel

(Verse one of the Eight Verses for Training the Mind)

This is like eating, so that one can feed others; like stepping onto the shore of freedom, in order to help others to safety; taking medicine, and *becoming medicine* so that one can heal others. This is done with the aim to provide for them all that they need and wish for. May this motivation, uncontrived, unfabricated, arise in my being.

May the supreme jewel, bodhicitta,
arise where it has not yet arisen,
Where it has arisen, may it not diminish,
May it ever grow and flourish

Verses for Refuge and generating bodhicitta

For the sake of all who are struggling and suffering,
those who have not yet attained the highest state of freedom and peace,
to relieve their suffering and bring them happiness,

I take refuge in the Buddha,
the Great Compassionate Teacher,
I take refuge in the Dharma,
in all the Liberating Teachings,
and I take refuge in the Sangha,
the Spiritual Community

By this practice,

just as my teachers before me have done,
with Wisdom,
May I realize the state of Peace,
Perfect Freedom, happiness,
and Great Love, ~ the Mind of Enlightenment,
and share that with all
May all benefit

{The concerns of all others are my concerns,
is that not so?

For their sake, then}

May I accomplish this Path,

and,

May all temporal and ultimate aims be fulfilled

or, more briefly:

For the sake of all beings,
I take refuge in the Three Jewels

By this practice, may I realize perfect freedom and happiness

and share that with all
May all beings benefit

May I accomplish this path
and
May all temporal and ultimate aims be fulfilled

The Traditional Verse for Taking Refuge and generating bodhicitta is

I take refuge,
until I attain enlightenment,
in the Buddha,
the Dharma, and the Supreme Assembly
By the merit I have accumulated
through Generosity and other Virtues, may I accomplish Buddhahood
for the sake of all beings

The Bodhisattva Vow

There is a way of orienting ourselves to the world that many people over time have found to be greatly life-affirming. Based on universal love and compassion, and understanding the source of problems and their resolution, it is the intention to help others as much as possible. Included in that intention is freeing ourselves from whatever would keep us from offering such service. In traditional Buddhist language, the dedication to help others with both wisdom and compassion is called 'the Bodhisattva Vow'. Bodhisattva means, literally 'an awakening being'.

There are ceremonies for taking the Bodhisattva vow, but the true vow comes from our own heart. When we have this motivation, it is a breakthrough, no matter how many times it happens. It's the dawning of a new awareness. Finding the Bodhisattva vow in ourselves, re-affirming and strengthening that can give a person much courage and energy for their whole life. It clarifies everything, and helps us to have a feeling for our place in this world.

When we hear the cries of the world, we must be engaged -
Mahayana Buddhism

The term 'Maha-yana' in Mahayana Buddhism means 'Great Vehicle', and this refers to the aim to work for the benefit of all. Being Buddhist in origin, the Bodhisattva vow includes the thought of enlightenment. In this and other religious traditions, the cause of our many problems is seen as ignorance, and the remedy is wisdom, or insight, which taken to its furthest point, is enlightenment. The vow is then taken to cultivate the highest wisdom, and to lead each and every one to that same state. Quite the expression of love, compassion and understanding of what we all need!

Two Traditional Verses

In the Zen Tradition, the Mahayana motivation takes the form of the Four Great Vows:

Beings are numberless, I vow to save them;
Delusions are inexhaustible, I vow to end them;
Dharma gates are limitless, I vow to enter them
The Buddha's way is unsurpassable, I vow to become it

In the Tibetan Tradition, a verse for taking refuge and generating the highest motivation, bodhicitta, the mind of enlightenment, is recited before many of their diverse practices:

I take refuge, until I attain enlightenment,
in the Buddha, the Dharma, and the Supreme Assembly
By the merit I have accumulated by practicing Generosity and other Virtues,
may I attain Buddhahood for the sake of all sentient beings.

Here, the phrase, Generosity and other Virtues, refers to what are called the Six Perfections. These are the path of the Bodhisattva, as described in Tradition. They are Generosity, Ethics, Patience, Effort, Meditation, and Wisdom.

This Vow is the vibrant central principle of the Mahayana Path.

Yes, but how much can one person really do for another?

It has been asked many times – how much can one person do for another? What is this about someone vowing to do something so significant for another, such as 'carrying a person to the other shore', and freeing them from suffering? While it is true that ultimately every person has to understand and to actualize the causes of health and happiness for himself or herself, there is so much that can be done for another. I only have to think of what others have given me for this thought to become real.

We all need support and encouragement; freedom from fear and hunger; we all need to have medicine available, and enough warm clothes. Most of all, we need respect, love and clear teachings, in the form of good human examples, and in some language we can relate to. These are very great things, and the Bodhisattva vow is the intention to give all these things, all needful things, to all beings, our family.

Skillful Means

Once we arrive at the Great Way – the Mahayana , with its strong central motivation to serve all beings, and to liberate all living beings, we will utilize every resource, we will do anything to communicate the Dharma, take any form to meet people's needs, to benefit them, to speak in a way they can

understand, and lead them step by step to freedom. Because of the great sufferings and needs that are here, we *must* search until we find the methods that work for us, and that are effective in helping others.

In Buddhism, over generations, a diversity of forms have developed from this very motivation to benefit self and others. These are called Upaya, or Skillful Means. Out of compassion, teachers and translators are not attached to any one way of doing things, or saying things. Although the forms may change, as long as we keep to essential principles of wisdom and compassion, then it is Buddhist Dharma. Skillful means are just what are necessary to help and to reach people.

When I think of loneliness, death, suffering, and all that is unpredictable and tragic in this world; the inevitable separation from friends and loved ones, the cruelty and madness, all the absurdity and waste – all of it – this one factor is the only thing I can think of that makes life livable. This one great vow reveals the capacity we have to help each other. It reminds me that there have been in the past, and that there are now, people who are working to help others, and aiming to do so, and that we can also take up this aim and this work. That, for me, is the glory of being alive. Now and forever, we can actually do something of real value with our lives.

This intention makes it possible to live with an awareness of all the amazing good and all the terrible things, and to live with resolve, commitment and joy. This is the only thing, really, that gives me the courage to face whatever life may bring. If fear is the feeling of not being capable, then right here is where resourcefulness, blazing true confidence, and solidity are found. This one aim, this one intention, tips the balance, in favor of life.

{think of the Great Aim: bodhicitta *is the aim to become a Buddha, in order to bring the greatest benefit to all sentient beings}*

Vow

From this point forward,
I dedicate myself to removing the suffering of all living beings,
and to bringing them happiness

I dedicate myself fully to their healing and awakening;
to their all having comfort,
strength of body, mind, and spirit,
most excellent nourishment, health, longevity
every level of protection,
shelter, food, clothing, medicine, education,
joy and wisdom

In order to accomplish the needs of living beings
in the most effective way,
I will develop my wisdom and compassion
just as my teachers have done
I aim to become free of all faults, and complete in all qualities
and, day by day, hour by hour, moment by moment,
to always offer as much help as I can

In this way, I will make a gift of my life
In this way, my own life will be fulfilled

I dedicate myself fully, leaving nothing out,
to the complete healing, fulfillment and enlightenment
of all living beings

No matter how long it takes
no matter how difficult it may be
no matter what it costs

With all my heart and with all my strength,
I vow to always serve all living beings

in every way that is necessary for them
and in every way that will bring each and every one of them
true and lasting health and happiness

Part III – Two Essays on Mind Training ~ *From A Practice that Thrives in Difficulty*

A Practice that Thrives in Difficulty

The following is based on a Traditional Tibetan Buddhist teaching for transforming suffering into the path to freedom and peace.

'When the world and its contents are filled with evil, transform this into the path of awakening' – from the Seven Points of Mind Training, by Geshe Chekawa - 12th Century, Tibet

'Lord, make me an instrument of your peace; where there is hatred, let me sow love…' - From the Prayer of Saint Francis

The idea throughout the Tibetan Thought Training teachings is that when things are difficult, these very conditions can motivate us to change things. They can be the fuel that drives us on, making those factors into a source of constructive action. The teachings call this 'transforming poison into medicine'. When I'm feeling overwhelmed by the news I find this idea to be especially helpful. Even just the thought that there is a way to be strengthened by the perception of suffering, instead of being stopped cold by it, is inspiring, and useful to think on.

There's no denying that these are needful times. For all our wealth and technology, education and diversity, there is still war, a tremendous amount of injustice, poverty, and violence in our world. We're often in a state of shock, and traumatized by events, but instead of just reacting, endlessly, at some point we are going to want to speak of healing, and of finding a deeper resolution to the continuing threats to both ourselves and our children.

Now, there are basically three ways people respond to suffering and what's tragic: one, they can be overwhelmed by it, or, two, they can turn away from it and ignore it, and third, they can use that experience to bring something positive out of it. Clearly, in these times, in this culture, most people choose one of the first two ways of dealing with what's difficult. When people are overwhelmed, they look for ways to numb out. They self-medicate, drink, use sex, shopping, tv, and other mindless entertainments. Or else they live in denial of what's too hard for them to hold. Isn't this so?

When I first learned about the Thought Training teachings in the early 1990's I thought it was *exactly* what I needed to hear. I was living at the time in San Francisco, and seeing so much that I felt I couldn't do anything about, such as homelessness. I felt I had to somehow include these things in my thoughts and meditations, and way of living.

One of the main texts in this tradition is called The Seven Points for Training the Mind, and what drew me most to this set of teachings is the idea that it says we can actually use that suffering we know to eventually bring some greater benefit to our lives, and into the lives of those we love. One of its key phrases is 'When the world and its contents are filled with evil, transform these conditions into the path of awakening'.

There are two practical methods offered in Thought Training. The first makes use of compassion, and the second Wisdom, as it's understood in Buddhism. As for compassion here, there is a practice called 'tonglen' or 'taking and giving' where a person relates whatever they are seeing or experiencing to others having the same or similar problems. They consider this one problem as representative of what others are going through, and then offer prayers, or a visualization that others be free of this pain or difficulty. So, for example, if a person is fatigued, or is lonely and afraid, they can think of others having this same experience now, and, breathing in and out, send forth the wish that all of us be free from this pain and sorrow.

I think something like tonglen happens when there is an event such as a shooting in the national attention for a time. Writers and public figures begin to think and speak of it as representative of all of our gun violence – and of the dangers that we live with in this country, where over 10,000 people a year are killed by deranged people with access to weapons.

Part of the reason we relate one single event to the larger issue is because we tap into a greater purpose, and we get more energy than if we were just dealing with one tragedy alone. Look, for example, at gun violence here. We call to mind again Columbine, the movie theatre in Aroura, and others, and now Sandy Hook elementary school. We ask, how much more do we need to suffer before we uproot the causes of gun violence? How many more grieving parents do there need to be?

We all dream of a just world, and when we can touch that greater motivation then this suffering comes to us as an empowerment to work. We can learn to direct our fully human responses of despair, and anger, and outrage, and compassion into useful channels. Of course, from this point forward, it's all a matter of skill.

We don't have to look far to see that we live in a superficial, materialistic culture. It is also hyper-violent, in its history, in the media, in its militarism, and in its neglect of the poor. How can we hold all this, if we are of a mind to, without being overwhelmed by it? If we just go along with how most people who watch the news absorb whatever is being served up, we won't get very far, and this is why I mention being skillful at this point.

It's not natural that we should be exposed to so much misery. A human being can accommodate only so much trauma, before needing to recover fully. The news, as it is, is out of balance, and this is where we need to exercise not only our best motivation but also our full intelligence to find a balance that works for us. Many people miss this step, but this is so important, for all our sakes.

Turn off the tv and the computer. Go for a walk. Take breaks and retreat time to restore yourself, and fill yourself with the needed strength. Learn to nourish yourself with the arts and with inspiring stories. Connect with the Traditions and teachers and healers of this planet. Then return to the difficult work that needs to be done.

When we use thought training wisely, the result is that we know the connection between what is healthy, uplifting, inspiring and nourishing, and all that needs our attention and care. We find with thought training that nothing we do is separate – and that the best way to be of service is to care for ourselves wisely and then act to bring help wherever it is needed. It should go without saying, but a lot of people get stuck here, and so I'll say it plainly: there is nothing selfish about caring for ourselves well. This is just doing what is needed to bring well being to others. Thought Training is then a whole person making art. It enables us to integrate all areas of living into a meaningful whole.

The urgent call to wisdom

After the empowerment of compassion, the second essential application of the Thought Training teachings is wisdom. In Buddhism and in other religions, compassion and emotion alone are not enough. We need wisdom to see into the root causes of suffering, and to bring relief. We can say then that developing wisdom to share with others is the ultimate expression of compassion.

Part of what I, and others like me are never satisfied with when it comes to how the media usually treats complex issues is that it's almost all emotion, with little or no deeper, dispassionate thought about causes, or possibilities for change. If the tragic tells us anything, it's that we urgently need greater understanding of ourselves and others, and that we need to pass along this knowledge to our children. For our grief to be fruitful, it's got to result in more than just our continued suffering. We have to make something positive come from all of this.

Where do we start? Do these perennial problems even have solutions? Yes, and they are perennial solutions that need to be actively applied. What is it that all religions and philosophies teach, if not this: that we are more than we know ourselves to be, and that others and this world are more than we know *them* to be. They tell us that freedom from suffering is possible, and they all teach us the preciousness of life. If our traditions are functional, they offer methods for awakening this knowledge, and grounding it in our lives.

In the Buddhist sense, wisdom means not grasping at concepts as being what's actually here. When we undertake the training in clear seeing, we become able to enter into the fullness of life, not bound by our ideas. When we are not caught in limited views of how things exist, a world of possibilities opens.

Albert Einstein said something very true that applies here. He said, 'We cannot solve our problems with the same thinking we used when we created them.' We need to see more in order to deal with things more deeply, and we need to have that sense of greater resources that letting up from contracted thinking and feeling allows. This is exactly what the practice of the Buddhist Wisdom teachings, and the Wisdom teachings of all Traditions are for.

All our Traditions insist that until we know ourselves and others in our true light, there's simply no end to our problems. But with this knowledge, the New Jerusalem, heaven on earth, is always within our reach.

Just look at what our lives together now are when greed, mistrust, fear and aggression are in full swing: it's an endless, oppressive cycle of exploitation and retribution. There's a powerful need for a fresh perspective, something other than what's taught in soulless materialist philosophy, or in business school, or upheld by the corporate propagandists in the media.

What will we do with all our culture's aggression, with its self-centeredness, indulgence and waste in our world full of human needs; with all the immaturity, corrupt values, vulgarity, cruelty and neglect? Will we be overwhelmed and turn away? Will we blow a fuse trying to hold it all? It should be writ large that these are not the only choices for well intended people. If we train ourselves, we can use these very conditions to make this world a more righteous place.

In these times especially, it's truly hard to accomplish any degree of wisdom, but that is only reason to have even more compassion, and even more dedication. It takes so many of the right conditions coming together; it takes integrity, and it takes a great deal of work. It's for this very this reason that we must help each other, to this end, to the end of suffering and the fulfillment of our lives here.

With the coming together of wisdom and compassion in this way, Thought Training becomes a complete practice. In fact, we can say it's *a practice that thrives in difficulty*. This is a path for the courageous, and dedicated, and skillful. Once we see the great need for this and future generations for a spiritual perspective, with its sense of the preciousness of all life, then our vows can only get stronger and more clear. There is no obstacle to such a practice. With commitment and with insight into the awakening of mind and heart that is needed in some form by everyone, and with the dynamic taught in Thought Training working, then whatever circumstances there are, easy or difficult, or even tragic, over time, there is only progress.

Whenever there's a terrible event, such as a school shooting, for a short time we see more clearly than ever the great need to think about, and talk about the present day threat to ourselves and to our children. We have an opportunity within reach for just this short time while the news is still vivid

in our mind, to gather increased energy and commitment to look more deeply and work to change our present day culture of violence. We can use this event to change our tremendous ignorance about and neglect of the mentally ill in America, so that, even with the presence of firearms, fewer and fewer would even think of using them. However hard it is to hold, we are empowered for as long as we have the fresh knowledge of what's at stake here. When this feeling begins to fade, we'll again be back in the mode of ignoring the threats to our families, such that future tragedies will be inevitable.

When the world and its contents are filled with evil, this is exactly the time to change these very conditions, into the path of awakening, and into a world we can all be safe in.

The Metta Sutta, the Buddha's teaching on Loving Kindness says:

Even as a mother loves
and protects with her life

Her child, her only child,

So with a boundless heart

Should one cherish all living beings…

From what I can tell, the religions of Buddhism, Christianity, Judaism, Islam, Hinduism, and others, all aim at helping us to awaken our conscience, and then to be as inclusive as we can in our thoughts and responsiveness to those around us. There's a deep logic at work there. Again and again we can see the consequence of selfishness, or, of what only seems, to misguided people, like the self interest of leaving anyone out, of cutting them off from our society, and our care.

We may feel that the scope of the work that is needed to change the culture of violence is beyond us, but what we can do, personally and in small and larger groups, is to aim, more and more, to go in that direction. The results of not doing so are too many, and are terrible to know. It becomes clear, at last, in caring for each other, and for even the least among us, that it is *our own life* and *our own children* we are protecting.

A deeper response

When you put together love with a particular kind of wisdom, the result is what I would call a deeper response to living in this world, with all its problems. A loving attitude and positive intentions by themselves are not enough; and even the passionate commitment to social justice, by itself, is also not enough.

So what do I mean here by wisdom? I mean a vision of what a human being can be when they are free from confusion, and have developed their innate capacities for health and happiness, learning, and joy. This is crucial. It's the foundation that's often missing in political activism.

It is exactly this vision that brings the desire to go with our whole lives in the direction of helping others to achieve this aim, on personal and collective levels. Problems move towards solutions when enough people get enlightened in this way.

You can set this kind of vision in any language you want, but without it we are not responding, but reacting from a superficial level, of anger, or fear. Even right motivations that don't address the deep causes in us of our collective greed, depression, and anger don't go far enough. We waste precious time and energy, caught in emotional reactivity, when what is needed is for the struggles and tragedies we encounter to rouse a deeper response from us.

Living in the city, we're going to see and hear about all sorts of tragic events. The question then is, *What will we do with them?, How will we respond?* and *What choices do we have?*

Take one event, such as a school shooting, or a bombing, or seeing homeless people, or addicts, or hearing more evidence of political corruption – any one of these can trigger a wide range of responses. We can be overwhelmed, and get depressed; we can move to numb out and ignore it, which is what most people do. It seems to them to be the best way to survive.

We can also set ourselves to change the injustice, and right here there is another fork in the road. There are more and less effective methods to deal with the personal and collective problems we face. The less effective methods come from a genuine, heartfelt reaction that *something should be done*, but where this approach fails again and again is that there hasn't been enough thought given to changing the causes in a way that could bring greater relief. There is some benefit to protesting, no doubt, but I don't see it going as far as it could go.

The other alternative is to respond in whatever way is necessary to bring more lasting change, and I do mean in whatever way – retreat, silence, activism, protest, organizing, writing, prayer – any and all of these.

If what all the world's main spiritual traditions teach is true, then essentially, when we're deluded, we're not who we think we are, and the world and other people are not who we think *they* are either, and that ignorance leads to self denigration, to the exploitation of others, and the desecration of this beautiful earth.

Starting from the wisdom that understands the preciousness of all life, not as a theory but as a lived experience, what we do and how we live and respond all follows from that. So wisdom is the starting place, and it's what we need to keep a living sense of, whatever we do.

There's a part of the Seven Point Mind Training teachings that says:

'There are three objects,
three poisons,
and three roots of virtue'

'The three objects' are: what has the potential to cause greed, anger, or ignorance to arise; 'the three poisons' are when these mental states have arisen in a person; and 'the three roots of virtue' are *instead*: the response of non-attachment, or generosity, kindness and compassion, and of wisdom. This teaching is saying that the way we experience something depends on how we meet it. I find this very liberating to think about. We have a choice in how we're going to respond.

If we have a vision of what a human being is, and what we are capable of, then what would otherwise cause despair can instead bring the deep response

of compassion, and *that's* where living fully in the world becomes empowering. We can let the suffering we meet and hear of bring out our deepest wisdom, love and skill. It can wake us up and strengthen our motivation to do whatever we need to do to help others more effectively.

Lama Yeshe said, 'Integrate all areas of living into a meaningful whole.'

Make no mistake, we all need to take care of ourselves, and to be well nourished spiritually. We also need to do this without becoming lost in it. Then, as mature, responsible human beings, we all know that we should be aware of what's needed in our communities and in our larger family, so we can act on it, and we have to do *this too* without getting lost in it .

I have such faith that we can solve our problems together and make this a just world because I've known this freedom, and how the heart and mind can open to beauty. I know that with love and insight and with lasting dedication, all our actions become meaningful, whichever way we turn. They can all serve a greater purpose, and then it is possible to hold the world and all those we meet with tenderness, patience, and care.

Part IV. Essays on Engaged Buddhism ~ From *A Buddhism for Radical Progressives*

The Glory of the Good Fight

To join in what my father's generation called "the good fight" was to enter into the timeless struggle for human rights everywhere, with like-minded, courageous souls. It meant to stand with them, to march with them, to raise your voice with them, to fight along side them, and perhaps most of all to be inspired by their dedication and action, and to give your encouragement at every turn.

It means even now to set yourself apart from those who would turn their backs on compelling causes, those who live only small lives of callous self interest, and with all our strength and to our last breath to work to see that no one is denied their rights or dignity, that no one is exploited or abused, excluded or forgotten.

In this time we need more and more dedicated souls willing to act on a vision of humans and life here that is noble, and that we have not yet realized. Isn't it clear with all the extraordinary waste and shallow, narcissistic self-indulgence in American culture, that to become a mature human being is just this – to take responsibility for each other, however far we can reach? In other times we may not get to see this value so keenly, but in these times especially, a compassionate life is like water in the desert or light when all else is an impenetrable pitch of night. Against this sad and confused backdrop, the tremendous value of such an aim couldn't be more clear.

We may not make a living as activists, or become famous, but we are all called to do our part here, and there is noble worth inherent in that, something no one can take from us. We're all seeking meaning with our lives, even if we don't put it in those words, and we won't feel fulfilled and satisfied until we find it.

The way is well marked for those who would take it. A few steps in, and we enter this mighty stream with our greater family in this land and generation, and in other places and times; we become larger, and we receive renewed strength and vision. We go from time to the timeless, from evanescence to what has eternal value.

For my brother, the poet Martin Espada, on his 57th birthday, and in memory of our father, the photographer, educator and human rights activist Frank Espada, August 7th, 2014.

To Embrace Collective Action

The willingness to engage in collective action arises in a person only when they see that individual efforts are not enough. Before that, they may labor under the illusion that our own personal recycling, or refusing to support Nike, Nestle, Arrowhead Water, McDonalds, Monsanto, Exxon or Shell Oil is sufficient, morally and practically, to change the course of malevolent corporate greed.

An analogy I can get my head around on my better days runs like this: we're all on a boat, and are each having some effect on the boat taking on water. I may stop my part of it, but if the people to my left and right all down the line continue to flood the boat, we're all going down together.

Seeing the need for collective action, my responsibility then becomes not only to stop my part in the destruction of the only vessel we have, and that we all depend on, but to convince enough of the others to do the same. I find right here the moral obligation to proselytize – not in the sense of narrow minded, dogmatic, religious types, but as a passionate activist would: to advocate, agitate, to motivate others, to seek light and share it widely, and to encourage others to do the same.

It may not be that everyone needs to be convinced to give up what is a callous, indifferent, or destructive lifestyle – destructive not only for them, but for us all – it would be enough to turn a critical mass to face these truths and to change their actions.

Global issues usually are too much to grasp as anything more than abstract ideas, but I saw a graph recently that really hit home. It charts the rate of humans' use of fossil fuels, and the unsustainable rise in CO_2 in a very short period of time. Looking forward, this kind of consumption is not viable for us as a species, for our children and grandchildren. Seeing that graphic, at least for a time, was enough to tip the balance for me to understand: changing my behavior alone would be nowhere near enough. Unless there is a collective awakening we are all going to suffer. Unless we change our thinking and actions as a group, we are headed for a cataclysmic self-extinction of our species, as well as the destruction of many other forms of life on this earth.

I bring this same feeling of personal responsibility with me to social causes: the systemic exploitation of the poor; the thriving of an upper class while millions don't have even the most basic necessities; the usurpation of political power here and abroad. In each case I can feel that my own view and relatively small action is next to nothing compared to the extent of the transformation that is needed in people's hearts and in their actions, and I feel the ethical obligation to provoke change in the greatest possible number of people. Anything less and I've not really accomplished anything other than my own gaining a small bit of clarity. Practically speaking, there will be little to no effect. I have a responsibility to you and to everyone, and you and each person also has a responsibility to everyone else. This is called doing one's part.

What is called "bodhicitta" in Buddhism is the intention to take care of oneself as well as we can so that we can best care for others. It is the expression of the sense of responsibility for all others. An essential feature in this bodhicitta is the idea that through training, or self cultivation, a human being can become free of the root causes of suffering for us personally and collectively - greed, aggression, fear and despair, and not just temporarily, but in such a way that these factors in the psyche are removed from within us, never to rise up again. For this reason, bodhicitta is sometimes referred to as "the thought of enlightenment".

This is the best gift one can offer to the world, the best way to integrate taking care of oneself, and contributing to others vision, strength, verified faith and courage. I lose the thread again and again, overwhelmed by the news of the world, and by my own faults, but I know enough by now to go looking for this key again.

They say that when something is true and you investigate it, it becomes a deeper realization. The more I think about the role of the individual and just how much one person can do, compared to the vast needs that exist, the more I'm convinced that waking up, freeing myself thoroughly, and enabling others to do the same is what's called for. Here is the noble, sustaining ideal. When such wisdom and compassion and understanding come together, more and more, this becomes the aim and the fulfillment of our being here.

Freedom of Mind – the Root of the Social Gospel

for Dr. David Hilfiker

‘We belong to each other’

I. The social gospel defined

The social gospel is the view that we are made to care for each other; that we are here to protect, support and encourage each other; to love, nurture and celebrate every one of our family, from birth, through all the stages of life, in struggle and difficulty, and in times of ease and success.

That this orientation to our whole life sometimes rises in a person, in different times and places and cultures, independent of religion, tells me that this capacity is something fundamental to us as human beings. There’s something in us that can be tapped into that precedes organized religion. Religions can foster a social gospel, or, remarkably, they can get in the way, but what’s happening when this ethic towards the whole of life arises in a person, whether it is facilitated by a Tradition or not, I would suggest, is the same.

II. Its cause

Everything we see people doing has roots in their inner life – whether there’s anger or gentleness, greed or generosity, distorted views or wisdom and respect – it’s always the case that what we see reveals what’s in a person, or group of people. This is true right up to what we call mass movements, such as militarism, or in economics.

The same holds true of the social gospel - it comes to be, and is sustained in people by causes, the chief of these being inner freedom. By this I mean something more exact than a pleasant feeling, or being able do to as one pleases. Inner freedom, as it’s understood by contemplatives everywhere, entails much more than that. It refers to a mind, or a spirit free of greed, of aggression, and of delusion regarding ourselves, those we share this life with, and our world. Such freedom, that has wisdom and virtue as its nature,

is always what has made it possible for a person to think of others and act to on their behalf.

III. What is then born

On a group level, when enough people together gain a clarity of vision and conscience, works are set in motion that make for real changes in society. It can start with one, or a few people, but eventually many are brought into the work. Witness the changes brought by the civil rights, labor, or women's movements. All these came about because there was an availability and an awakening in a number of people's hearts, and that they in their turn awakened and empowered others, lifting them to higher levels.

IV. Inclusive compassion

Some people wonder how Mahayana Buddhism came into being, historically, with its emphasis on all inclusive compassion. I can tell you that I think it happened because the methods taught by Shakyamuni worked to free enough people from their afflictions and self preoccupation that empathy and active compassion were naturally born in them.

The Thai teacher Ajaan Lee said, 'The mind at normalcy is the substance of virtue'. This has been talked about by others over time in different ways: as an Edenic state, as our own original nature revealed, full of grace.

Our humanity, when it is healthy, sane, and flourishing, is naturally inclusive. It reaches out. As long as one person is still confused, and doesn't know their own worth, they will create suffering for themselves and for others, and so we have to take care of each other, to the fullest extent, including everyone. As Dr. King expressed it, 'No one is free until every last one of us is free'. This is only common sense - drawing out the ethic of love to its logical conclusion.

At the most basic level, as Shantideva taught, we should remove suffering simply because it is suffering, and care for others just because it's the right thing to do. Seeing this, teachers in the past encouraged us to know the great value of freedom of mind in terms of the whole group, of every life.

V. To know that Freedom of mind is attainable

That we don't need to be caught in suffering and a narrow perspective is remarkable news. For someone who hasn't heard it before, it may be hard to believe, but right there is the proposition.

As for myself, my esteem for those who teach and vividly demonstrate that this is possible for us only increases as time goes on. Without them, we'd only have a story someone told once in a book, that we would then need to argue over. And so I pay homage to Thich Nhat Hanh, the Dalai Lama, Bokar Rinpoche, Lama Yeshe, Ajaan Lee and the Thai Forest teachers, Thomas Merton, Carl Jung, Joseph Campbell, Mother Teresa, and the sages who demonstrate by their good works in our world that they have found what has real meaning.

How do we know if the roots of a tree are in touch with living water? We can see it in the broad shade of its branches, and in its fruits – which are abundant, rich, and life sustaining to us all. And so it is with people in this world.

VI. What we all need

Whether or not we're part of a tradition, what we all need is the same, and that is to meet and engage this world in a way that is not confused or afflicted, and, with that as the ground, with a natural heart full of love, to help one another as much as we can.

We may think it's possible to engage the world and make a difference without much freedom of mind, but we can see where egotism and immaturity have gotten us, individually and collectively. Look at how indifference, neglect, indulgence, exploitation, consumerism, boredom and despair manifest - these show our values, and the state of our inner life. Clearly, something else entirely is needed.

Despite the fact that some measure of freedom of mind and humane values are within reach, what do we see when we look at how most people in this country spend their time and resources? So many Americans in the twenty-first century eat, and over eat, drink, consume, use entertainments to escape, and rely on anti-depressants like never before. So many of them are just focused and closed in on themselves. All these signs of narrow mindedness, to me, point to a widespread lack of inner freedom, and the acknowledgement and respect for others that it necessarily brings. As it is

now, a lot of how we live in this country, in terms of the impact we are having as a consumer society, what we do and leave undone, has to do with people's stresses, appetites, and attachments, but these can and do change.

What we need then for the social gospel to become a reality is more of a collective awakening, with more and more people becoming free of their lesser views and motivations. Is there any other way? We're all in this together, and so one or two or a few dozen, or a few groups of people getting there is not enough. The few more awakened and free people can be like leaven in bread, but it's clear that the whole lot of us is what we need to influence. We should aim to reach as many people as we can, for all our sake.

VII. Continuing the work

I look to anyone who is actively engaged in some form of peace, or social justice work, and I ask: what do they have that others don't? – and I see, they have a vision; and of those who continue the work, rather than fall away from it – what do they have? They have maintained a connection with the view and power they've found, whatever name they give it, either with the help of traditions, or individually. Activists very often will leave this step out - they do their work until they have no more to give. Their mistake is in not knowing how to replenish their own sources of inspiration.

Out of people's vision for what is possible here comes their action, and whenever there's a sustained, useful involvement with others, it means that a person has been able to keep a powerful sense of what motivates them. Whatever our methods, of prayer, or meditation, or solitude, then, we all need to foster that connection to our positive vision and source of strength. There's nothing selfish about this, in fact, this is for everyone's sake.

VIII. The Great Clear Mirror

With the coming of the internet, what is in us as human beings, in terms of our values, is now even more clear. I remember when computers first became a little more widely available. There was the expression 'garbage in, garbage out', to point up the fact that the tools we use are only as powerful as we make them, that they are only as great as our motivation, they go just as far as our vision. The internet then, is a great clear mirror to our inner life.

Now, more than ever, we can become aware of, and engage with this world of ours. It's remarkable, really, and will only continue to evolve in new ways. Whether this interaction is meaningful, however, or negligent, or exploitive, all depends on who we are inside, on what is in us as a motivating force. No one would argue - great things are possible like never before, and because of our increased interdependence, now, more than ever, we are in need of a social gospel, a life giving vision.

IX. Teaching the choices we have

What if, then, from grade school on, boys and girls, young men, women, and adults were taught that anger and greed were something that can and should be lessened, and removed entirely? This goes beyond what any one religion says – it's stating something basic about who we are as human beings, and what we're capable of, that we can choose this as a basis for our life here.

What if, more and more, people had living examples of freedom and virtue in their teachers, and were shown how becoming free of anger, greed, and egotism is possible by a person working with their own minds and hearts? We can imagine, it would have far reaching effects. It would birth a different world. And nothing less than this is what is needed now, more than in any other time that's come before. We are in need of a wide-scale work.

X. With a view to our future together

I find inspiration in the idea of a culture having, or moving toward an ethic – such as that of respect and care of their elders. This reaches beyond ethics – plural, to having a stable basis in a culture, that then expresses itself in a number of ways. I would say that what we need in America, and in the world now, most of all, is an ethic of compassion, even if it takes some generations to bring into being. This is different from advocating one or two, or a handful of causes, such as universal health care, affordable housing, and education. It is more the ground from which these are addressed. And that ethic, in turn, has its unmistaken cause. When enough of us are liberated, naturally, a compassionate society will follow. And this is where I find hope.

Part V - Various essays on metta

Metta and Ethics

It's taught that two of the ways we can bring the benefits of a retreat, or our spiritual practice into daily life are by focusing on Right Speech, and on the Precepts. This essay examines how The Five Mindfulness Trainings are the expression of metta.

When we have cultivated metta or loving kindness in our heart, we have an inner standard for how to act in the world. In a way, it's radical, because it makes us independent moral agents We have our own conscience as a reference point. We add to this the guidance and inspiration of our teachers, and traditions, as they tell us ways we can express values of love and compassion.

In 2009, Thich Nhat Hanh offered his version of the Five Precepts in a talk that was broadcast to the Parliament of World Religions, in Melbourne Australia. In his talk, titled, A Collective Awakening, Thay referred to these Five Mindfulness Trainings as representing 'the Buddhist vision for a global spirituality and ethic.'

{The complete text he presented and commented on will follow this paper.}

As in the earlier versions of the traditional precepts offered by him, this is an expansive, interpretive document, one that I don't believe is intended to merely become a formula that is recited. Instead, as I hear it, we're being encouraged to look at our own lives in the light of these principles.

Compared to the brief form of the precepts, of not to kill, steal, engage in sexual misconduct, lie, or take intoxicants, there are two features that are present in Thich Nhat Hahn's version of the precepts that I feel deserve special attention. One of these is that he explicitly states the positive aspect of each of the precepts. So, for example, in the first mindfulness training, that he calls, 'Reverence for life', we have,

'I am determined not to kill,

and also:

not to let others kill, and not to support any act of killing in the world, in my thinking, or in my way of life.'

This means, clearly, that we have to examine our lives. What is it that metta would have us do? What are the moral imperatives of love?

Vowing to protect life is implied in 'do not kill', but if we leave it only as a negative, as a prohibition, that part of it is not as strong as it could be. Phrasing it positively as he does - '*I will learn the ways to protect life'* - helps that part of it to wake up in us. If Thay's version of the precepts did nothing else, that alone would be a very great thing.

The second precept offered here begins,

Aware of the suffering caused by exploitation, social injustice, stealing, and oppression…

and this is goes much farther than 'I vow not to steal'. Again it is asking us to look at our own lives, at our economies and education, leisure and religion, in the context of this whole world. This pattern follows for the other precepts as well.

A traditional chant from the Pali says:

I will abide
pervading the world with loving kindness…

If we are looking for ways to connect our metta loving kindness with our greater family, and our social relationships, in concrete terms, Thay is telling us that this is exactly the domain of the mindfulness trainings.

One of the precepts of his Order of Interbeing says, *'Do not close your eyes before suffering…,* which can be heard also as '*Open your eyes'*. Look at the world and the how people live and treat each other here, and then see what you can do to relieve suffering and bring well being to others. Only when we do this can we be said to be living responsible lives with the metta we have.

Being essentially a religious document, Thay's version of the precepts is primarily a statement of principles we can use to accomplish our aims. As such, he doesn't directly mention any particular president, or government's abuses of power, or corporation's destructive effect on our lives, but they are implied. It's up to each of us to work out the details.

Read these precepts and then any newspaper or news website, and the corruption and dishonesty both here in this country and abroad stand out in bold relief. These ethical principles are meant to be handed from generation to generation, and acted on to bring social justice . We're called to have courage, because that is the moral imperative of love.

A second feature of Thay's version of the precepts that stands out to me is that it includes the contemplative dimension. So often when we hear commandments, or precepts, no mention is made of the deep causes we need to address to really remedy problems on a deep level. The result is that we may struggle just to uphold or enforce an ideal, without it having a well established roots in ourselves, or in society.

Long ago, Lao Tsu pointed out how such an approach is bound to fail:

When people lost sight of the way to live
Came codes of love and honesty…

The answer is to restore the roots of Right Action, and this can only come through each individual's insight. For that reason, it's wonderful that Thay explicitly adds to the traditional precepts lines such as:

I will practice looking deeply to see that the happiness and suffering of others are not separate from my own happiness and suffering…

When anger is manifesting in me, I am determined not to speak. I will practice mindful breathing and walking in order to recognize and look deeply into my anger…

and,

I will practice Right Diligence, to nourish my capacity for understanding, love, joy, and inclusiveness, and gradually transform anger, violence, and fear, that lie deep in my consciousness.

Introducing the contemplative dimension to a discussion of the mindfulness trainings as the method of bringing metta into all areas of our lives completes the circle of practice. We may have started with an insight into our real nature, and had the wish to live a righteous life according to what we have found within. We're then encouraged to look, and to learn as much as we can about what's going on in this world, and to respond from our own love, compassion, and intelligence.

Completing the circle, we're urged to understand and transform in ourselves these very same forces we see at work in the world. Then we'll really have something to offer that can bring long term benefit. We can help others to the way, leading from life to life.

The Buddha taught,

Do no harmful actions.
Accomplish as much good as you can.
Purify your own mind.

For metta to be complete in us, we need these three aspects of it.

Thay's teachings have always been a great gift for me personally, and I delight in knowing it's been this way for many others as well. One of the most extraordinary and inspiring things about him is that he keeps practicing, and deepening his understanding, and sharing what he's learned with others. You can hear it in how he'll change one word or a phrase in a teaching you've heard before over the years. More than anything else, his approach to living teaches by example. Like him, I hope to always be looking for ways to bring metta into this world, and finding practical ways for it to flourish.

The Five Mindfulness Trainings

The Five Mindfulness Trainings represent the Buddhist vision for a global spirituality and ethic. They are a concrete expression of the Buddha's teachings on the Four Noble Truths, and the Noble Eight-fold Path, the Path of Right Understanding and True Love, leading to healing, transformation, and happiness for ourselves and for the world.

To practice the Five Mindfulness Trainings is to cultivate the insight of interbeing, or Right View, which can remove all discrimination, intolerance, anger, fear, and despair. If we live according to the Five Mindfulness Trainings, we are already on the Path of a Bodhisattva. Knowing we are on that Path, we are not lost in confusion about our life in the present, or in fears about the future.

The First Mindfulness Training – Reverence for Life

Aware of the suffering caused by the destruction of life, I am committed to cultivating the insight of interbeing, and compassion, and learning ways to protect the lives of people, animals, plants, and minerals.

I am determined not to kill, not to let others kill, and not to support any act of killing in the world, in my thinking, or in my way of life.

Seeing that harmful actions arise from anger, fear, greed, and intolerance, which in turn come from dualistic and discriminative thinking, I will cultivate openness, non-discrimination, and non-attachment to views, in order to transform violence, fanaticism, and dogmatism in myself, and in the world.

The Second Mindfulness Training - True Happiness

Aware of the suffering caused by exploitation, social injustice, stealing, and oppression, I am committed to practicing generosity, in my thinking, speaking, and acting. I am determined not to steal, and not to possess anything that should belong to others, and I will share my time, energy, and material resources with those who are in need.

I will practice looking deeply to see that the happiness and suffering of others are not separate from my own happiness and suffering, that true happiness is not possible without understanding and compassion, and that running after wealth, fame, power, and sensual pleasures can bring much suffering and despair.

I am aware that happiness depends on my mental attitude, and not on external conditions, and that I can live happily in the present moment simply by remembering that I already have more than enough conditions to be happy.

I am committed to practicing Right Livelihood, so that I can help reduce the suffering of living beings on earth, and reverse the process of global warming.

The Third Mindfulness Training – True Love

Aware of the suffering caused by sexual misconduct, I am committed to cultivating responsibility, and learning ways to protect the safety and integrity of individuals, couples, families, and society.

Knowing that sexual desire is not love, and that sexual activity motivated by craving always harms myself as well as others, I am determined not to engage in sexual relations without love and a deep, long-term commitment, made known to my family and friends.

I will do everything in my power to protect children from sexual abuse, and to prevent couples and families from being broken by sexual misconduct.

Seeing that the body and mind are one, I am committed to learning appropriate ways to take care of my sexual energy, and cultivating loving kindness, compassion, joy, and inclusiveness, the four basic elements of true love, for my greater happiness, and the greater happiness of others.

Practicing true love, we know that we will continue beautifully into the future.

The Fourth Mindfulness Training – Loving Speech and Deep Listening

Aware of the suffering caused by unmindful speech, and the inability to listen to others, I am committed to cultivating loving speech, and compassionate listening, in order to relieve suffering, and to promote reconciliation and peace, in myself, and among other people, ethnic and religions groups, and nations.

Knowing that words can create happiness or suffering, I am committed to speaking truthfully, using words that inspire confidence, joy, and hope.

When anger is manifesting in me, I am determined not to speak. I will practice mindful breathing and walking in order to recognize and look deeply into my anger. I know that the roots of anger can be found in my wrong perceptions, and lack of understanding of the suffering in myself, and the other person.

I will speak and listen in a way that can help myself and the other person transform suffering, and see the way out of difficult situations.

I am determined not to spread news that I do not know to be certain, and not to utter words that can cause division or discord.

I will practice Right Diligence, to nourish my capacity for understanding, love, joy, and inclusiveness, and gradually transform anger, violence, and fear, that lie deep in my consciousness.

The Fifth Mindfulness Training – Nourishment and Healing

Aware of the suffering caused by unmindful consumption, I am committed to cultivating good health, both physical and mental, for myself, my family, and my society, by practicing mindful eating, drinking, and consuming.

I will practice looking deeply into how I consume the four kinds of nutriments – namely edible foods, sense impressions, volition, and consciousness.

I am determined not to gamble, or to use alcohol, drugs, or any other products that contain toxins, such as certain websites, electronic games, tv programs, films, magazines, books, and conversations.

I will practice coming back to the present moment, to be in touch with the refreshing, healing, and nourishing elements in me and around me, not letting regrets and sorrow drag me back into the past, nor letting anxieties, fear, or craving pull me out of the present moment.

I am determined not to try to cover up loneliness, anxiety, or other suffering by losing myself in consumption. I will contemplate interbeing, and consume in a way that preserves peace, joy, and well being in my body and consciousness, and in the collective body and consciousness of my family, my society, and the earth.

Metta as a support for meditation

When I first learned a simple method of loving kindness meditation in Thailand, from a monk named Phra Ingo, he suggested that I do a little of the practice before any calm or insight meditation. This has proven to be some of the best advice I've ever gotten. As we mature in metta practice of course we will have more to draw from, but right from the outset any amount of kindness we can generate towards ourselves will go a long way.

Start where you are

One of the basic principles of metta is that we start wherever we are this moment. On some days we're going to be more restless than usual, and this heart attitude of metta meets us wherever we are and whatever we're going through. When we start with generating some amount of goodwill for ourselves, it initially helps us to settle comfortably in our body, and to be present with ourselves, whatever our circumstances.

Further, when the we're feeling restless or excited, the quality of loving kindness can hold these feelings, and gradually help us to become more calm. It is an accommodating heart and mind. It is an embrace. If we are sleepy or dull, metta helps there too, as it naturally brightens and energizes the mind. Such are its characteristics.

There is a teaching from the Zen tradition that I like, that brings a similar quality to our practice. They say that when the mind is restless it can be compared to a cow or a horse in a field. If we give it a larger pasture, so to speak, all by itself this will bring calm. The larger pasture in metta is the gracious accommodating heart. Whatever is going on we can hold it gently, and this is calming and assuring.

Metta is also warmly encouraging

Whether it is directed towards our most loved one, or towards ourselves, metta is that quality that would have us begin, and that gently urges us on. It has us take the next step, the one that is right in front of us. In Buddhist language, they say that the teachings in general are 'onward leading' and this

is especially true of metta. It is the feeling of 'yes', that positive quality that says 'you can do this'. Since we need all the encouragement we can get, metta is not only good in the beginning, it also helps our practice every step of the way.

In metta there is karuna, in love there is compassion

Meditation brings out all our noble qualities. On the way, and almost as soon as we sit and begin to practice however, we will meet with whatever is difficult for us – our impatience, fears, dissatisfaction, discouragement, anger, sadness, and so on. If we want to be able to stay with these feelings, to understand them more deeply and to transform them, we will find that we need not just a small amount of kindness and compassion for ourselves, but actually great kindness and great compassion.

In that simple quality of goodwill is contained all we need to be with ourselves and others. In love there is joy and compassion that can manifest in whatever way and as much as is needed. This is heartening to know and to reflect on from time to time. And as we find just how much kindness and compassion is essential for our own happiness, it's natural then as well to begin to extend these same qualities to others. We can see they are as deserving, and that this is something we all need.

Metta brightens the mind

One of the qualities of metta that should be also highlighted when speaking about it as a support for meditation, is that it makes the mind clear and bright. This is important as we move past the initial stage of meditation. If we're not to slip almost right away into some form of dullness, we will need clarity and energy to work with, and the encouraging quality of metta and its inherent joy helps make this possible.

What's more, when it comes to insight practice as well, having strong metta is essential for seeing things fully as they are. Although insight practice mostly works with seeing through our concepts, and not being caught by them, for the qualitative aspect of our experience to register as something healthy and positive, we need love to be there in our mind and heart. Then this life can show itself as precious, and as worthy of all our devotion and care.

The whole arc of a contemplative life and meditation practice is in this way supported and guided by metta loving kindness. From sitting and walking meditation, to retreating, and re-engaging the world and all our loved ones, metta is the principle that would have each of our steps be true, with each phase valued, and taken up with joy and with ease.

Metta as a concentration practice

Sometimes we will hear that metta is a concentration practice, but seldom do we hear in detail what this means. So I thought to offer here a few notes on the nature of concentration practice, and how these qualities can be developed through loving kindness meditation.

First, a general definition of samadhi, or the mind that is developed in meditation, so that we know we're going in the right direction:

The Tibetan teacher, Gen Lamrimpa, said, 'In the cultivation of meditative concentration, two qualities must be cultivated. One of them is attentional stability, which is of a non-conceptual, or non-discursive nature (non differentiating, and non proliferating). And the second is attentional vividness.'

I've also heard samadhi defined as 'the unification of mind, heart, and body', and, as an integration, or synthesis of the factors of jhana, or meditation.

Just for completeness' sake, the factors of the first jhana are traditionally given as: directed thought, which is bringing the object to mind; then the continued application of mind; with joy, ease, and one pointedness.

It's important to understand what right concentration is, so that we know when we have it, and when we don't have it, and can work to develop these qualities.

Sometimes metta can work as a concentration practice, and sometimes it might be better to have another practice, such as the meditation on the breath, or walking meditation to bring up these factors. We should experiment and see what works best for us.

It's often said that for people with an affinity for metta, the practice is immediately enjoyable. Right away there is a natural interest and concentration that happens. In fact, we might not even think of it as concentration, if our associations with that word are of making an effort. Perhaps here a better definition might be a phrase I heard the Dalai Lama use, which is 'non-distraction'. This is enough to get a person started along the path of using metta to develop concentration as well.

Then, what do we find when we first begin to practice? For most people, the mind will wander, or we will drift into sleepiness, or dullness of mind. In the Tibetan teachings these are the two main obstacles to developing what they call 'calm abiding' – the varying degrees of dullness, and distraction. Depending on which of these happen we use a different method.

For the wandering mind, due to having too much restless energy, we need to settle ourselves down , and for the sleepy or dull mind, we need to arouse more energy and clarity.

We can use some of the traditional methods for adjusting the mind in meditation, for example:

for restlessness, or agitated energy, we can gently relax our body, or sit very still; we can also do breath meditation, or walking meditation;

for sleepiness, or dullness, we can put more energy into our posture; we can open the eyes, take a few deep breaths, or go and splash some water on our face, or wash our feet; we can also do walking meditation here.

These are the usual antidotes within a session of meditation. There are also contemplations we can use in separate sessions to settle the mind down, or to rouse energy. For too much distracted energy, due to the mind being attached to objects other than meditation, the teachings recommend reflecting on such things as impermanence, or the sufferings of samsara. These can curb that dispersed energy. They can bring the energy level down, sober the mind, and help to focus.

To uplift the mind, we can reflect on preciousness of our human life, and the opportunities it affords; we can think of our teachers, our great fortune at having met the Dharma, and the potential it holds to bring benefit to ourselves and others. We can rouse the motivation become more free beings, and to help others as much as we can through our practice. All of these bring up energy.

I've also found that we can adjust the mind in meditation by using the qualities that arise from metta practice itself. This is one of the places where the richness of loving kindness practice really shows itself.

Love has the capacity to either soothe the body and mind, or to energize and brighten it, depending on what we need.

I think of a mother holding her baby, who is crying, or upset in some way. The mother holds her child with such care and tenderness, and slowly the child settles down. When we can attend to ourselves and our restless energy in this same way, gently, patiently, with great loving care, we can feel ourselves gradually become quiet, and settled.

Loving kindness practice can also wake up the body, mind and heart. When I received a short practice of metta from a Western monk in Thailand, he suggested that I could use an image, such as that of a beautiful sun overhead. We can imagine this light of loving kindness filling our entire mind, heart, and body.

No doubt, having love in mind brings enthusiasm, and strength, and we can then apply these fresh, awakened qualities to the meditation practice itself.

On the concentration, or attentional stability side of it, the traditional teachings say that we can focus on one person, and go over in our mind, 1., his or her good qualities, and 2., the experiences we've had with that person, and after each of them, saying the metta phrases.

So, for example, when I think of my friend Andy, I think of how joyful he is (metta… metta…May you be well… May you be healthy… May you be happy…)… I recall how generous…. and how encouraging…

Then I could also think of the walks we've taken together… and of the time he visited me at work… and so on.

One of the things I enjoy about metta is that we are encouraged to make the practice our own. There are guidelines, and some things to be done, but there's a lot of room for creativity as well.

One of ways I differ in terms of what has worked for me, is that I have a longer list of metta phrases than is usually recommended. Most teachers suggest using only three or four phrases, but, in doing it that way too sometimes, for some reason this seems to produce a better result for me. Go figure.

Which brings me to another support for the continuity of attention, which is that we can have lists in front of us while we practice. I keep the list of phrases where I can see them. At times I go through all of the phrases, and then at other times I choose just a few to focus on, or just the feeling. Then, when the mind drifts, as it will in the beginning of a practice, I have something tangible to come back to.

We can also keep lists of the people we want to send metta to, to look at and to reflect on. Or course, if we have a long list, this could seem to be a problem, but, as one teacher in San Francisco, Lama Lodro, suggested, we can choose one person or a few people, and have them represent all the others.

If I'm imagining that we are all together, as in a party I'm hosting, then I focus on the person who is in front of me, keeping the others in the background. A restless, agitated mind will be bouncing around, no matter what our practice is, and so here we may find that we want to focus on one person, but that another suddenly appears in our mind. When this happens, we can gently place that other person in the background, and, if we decide to and have time, we can place them in front of us again some time later. It's important that we don't get sloppy with this practice, or just sentimental. Sometimes being firm and decisive with putting aside distraction is what is needed, and then at other times, a more gentle approach is required. Ask love.

Recognizing that it's better for everyone to have some order and discipline, and then practicing with understanding, is what keeps us on track.

They say in sitting and walking meditation instructions that if our mind is too wild and distracted, then we need fewer objects to focus on, or a simpler method, such as just counting the breaths up to four. On the other hand, if we are even slightly dull, then we need to wake the mind up, and energize it, and this we can do by bringing more discursive thought, or more objects, such as touch points in our mindfulness of sitting or walking.

The same principle can be applied to metta concentration: if we feel we are all over the place, we can use fewer people as our objects, and feel that we are applying the mind and intentionally, gently, 'holding' or 'squeezing' them somewhat with our attention. We can use fewer phrases here as well, or no phrases at all.

On the other hand, if our mind is feeling inert, or dull, we can energize and brighten it up by thinking of more people we naturally feel love for. This uplifts the mind quite effortlessly. We can also increase the number of metta phrases we pray or wish for them. We can even think of their specific circumstances and improvise in that session unique prayers for them that meet their needs at that time. This will keep our mind from falling into dullness.

I noticed that sometimes repeating phrases without mindfulness can result in an unaware, trance-like state, which is not at all what is aimed at in practice. The fine teacher, Ajaan Passano, of Abhayagiri monastery in Northern California, pointed this out in one of his retreat talks on metta,

'In reality, the cultivation of loving kindness is not the actual repeating of the words – I mean, you use those words and phrases, but it's about the feeling, that feeling of loving kindness, the feeling of warmth, the feeling of acceptance, the feeling of openness, the feeling of the heart, including and concerned for the happiness of oneself or others, and that's about generating the feeling…

'In terms of meditation, it's that – directing attention to the feeling, or emotion, that sense of kindness, *well-wishing*, and then finding ways to support that, and to shore that up, and allow that to become stable, and then to start to suffuse one's own being, and then allowing that to spread out…'

In metta concentration then, we need to bring three things together: the person, the phrases or the images we use, and the feeling of genuine warmth, or well wishing. The last of these is the most important, as I understand it, but, for practice to work as method for samadhi, we use these three.

Once metta gets flowing, its easy to see how it counters each of what are traditionally call the five hindrances: sensual desire, aversion or ill will, dullness, distraction and doubt.

Being a pleasing method, and bringing feelings of well being, can naturally subdue the attractions we might have for other objects, at least for a time. Anger and aversion for ourselves or for others are also directly countered by metta loving kindness, as we become more able to patiently sit with our own faults, and also get to know our own good, and loveable qualities, and those of others.

I already mentioned how distraction and dullness are each countered by metta, which leaves only doubt among the hindrances to say something about. The doubting mind is tricky, because it can stop practice altogether, when what we really need is more skill, or to just continue even when it isn't easy, or enjoyable.

As we practice metta, we find all the things we have in us that aren't metta loving kindness: our pride, pettiness, jealousy, competitiveness, aversion, laziness, and so on. As everyone knows, these aren't pleasant things to see in ourselves at all, but it is necessary to see them, and go through this, if we're to make progress in metta practice.

It's like the old joke, maybe even going back to ancient Greece, maybe you've heard it? - of 'how do you make a statue? – you just take away everything that isn't a statue. The point is, we should actually be happy when we find our limits to metta, because right there is where we can take the next step.

Of the basic principles in metta, the one I find most useful when it comes to keeping on going is that we can only take the step that is right in front of us, wherever we are right now. Being kind to ourselves in this way always feels like a gesture of pure metta.

Doubt is cleared up when we have confidence in our abilities, or in the path we are on. This happens through practice, and not through intellectualizing, which is where doubting can be a trap. There's a place for scrutiny, and analysis, of course, but when it comes to the kind of doubt that isn't open minded inquiry, but instead tells us ahead of time that something has no value, or isn't effective, it's better to resolve that through practice. Like a stream that becomes more clear by flowing on, by continuing to work at a method, our practice can show its true beauty and worth. It helps to be process oriented, in metta, and in all meditation practice.

Doubt in ourselves is also wonderfully cleared away by metta. We find we have this source of love, intelligence, creativity and strength in ourselves, and this brings the confidence that we can meet any and all circumstances, as they say, with bells on!

We can tell in a few ways if metta is working as a concentration practice for us.

(1) If we're correctly using metta to develop concentration, the factors of samadhi should gradually become easier to produce.

(2) Another of the ways is that there is a carry over effect of these qualities to our other meditation practices, whether it is breath meditation, walking, or mindful movement. The continuity and clarity of awareness should increase in all our meditations. It works this way with any concentration practice we do. The benefit we gain can be applied elsewhere.

and, (3) We should also be able to tell that there is more focus, and an easier continuity of attention in our every day life, apart from the formal sessions of meditation.

If none of these things are happening on account of the metta practice we do, we can try adjusting in some of the ways described above, or we may find it more fruitful to practice a simpler form of meditation, for the sake of developing this most necessary quality of attention. We can alternate metta with other forms of meditation, and these can compliment each other.

Sometimes the aim of samadhi in general is referred to as pliancy, or, a malleable mind – meaning we can use it whatever way we like, without resistance.

One morning I had an interesting experience of this vis-à-vis metta. I thought of this kind, accommodating quality of mind, at its best, as being supremely malleable. Loving kindness can be capable of adjusting itself to whatever circumstances we are in, and holding whatever comes up. For a while, I felt rather blissful about this, and then reverted back to my normal state of mind. But this is something I do try to remember, and bring up again – that there can be a place where the two, metta and the pliancy of mind meet.

When the great yogi, Dipa Ma was asked by someone whether they should practice mindfulness or metta, she said that, to her, they were the same. I think this is pointing in that direction, with just a slight change in emphasis, one way or the other.

They say we could study or meditate for aeons, but if we do it with a distracted mind, then we won't get the full results. Comparing the advantages of the clear mind that is able to stay with our theme with the scattered or veiled mind, there's no doubt we'll want to develop those qualities that help us in our practice, and in our life. However we get there, through using metta as a concentration practice, or by other methods, all we do will be enhanced by these factors, of a composed, easeful continuity, and a vividness of attention. Please think about this regularly, apply yourself, and see what I mean.

I offer this with all good wishes to people everywhere in their practice.

Combining metta and the reflection on impermanence

Taken separately, both metta, the step by step development of loving kindness, and regular reflections on impermanence have the potential to bring us a keen sense of the preciousness of life, a kind of fearlessness, and greater generosity. When they are combined though, their power is increased even more.

I've not heard this talked about elsewhere, although I'm sure people do it. Perhaps in the course of their lives people are reminded of the transience and uncertainty of our time here. Then, naturally, metta flows more abundantly. What I'd like to suggest here is that we don't wait until 'life happens to us', but that we consciously and regularly choose to combine these two meditations. If we do this, we can find an increased depth, clarity, and vigor to our practice.

I know people avoid the meditation on impermanence. It can elicit so much fear, and anticipated sadness, but this is just the initial response to these reflections, the 'first gate', if you will, and if we stop there, we'll never know the benefits of clearly seeing this truth.

Recognizing that our lives here, like this, is for this one time only, and that none of us knows now long we have here, this cuts so much pettiness, and hesitation; it has us completely give what we have, holding nothing back, and it has the potential to really awaken our gratitude and wonder at being alive.

When we bring metta together with the awareness this aspect of our being here, the pure feeling flows more easily, and abundantly. We recognize that we have no time to lose, to small mindedness, or to holding onto any unforgiveness. Recalling impermanence awakens generosity, such that metta really shines forth from us powerfully.

There's a passage in the book, 'A Monk in the World', by Wayne Teasdale, where he describes a home-sanctuary made by a married couple with children. He describe how one man's young son would often join him

during his hour of prayer and meditation, climb onto his lap, and sleep peacefully during that time.

I can only relate to this from remembering the young children I taught for a number of years in Taiwan. With this image of a young child resting on my lap during meditation, when I cultivate metta, I know something of what good parents and guardians all wish for their children. The feeling is very pure, abundant, and perfectly clear.

There's a fragility to being a parent or guardian. One never knows what kind of world a loved one will meet, or how long we will be able to be there for them. This is a model, then, for all our relationships. We never know how long we have.

As a thought experiment – if we think that this may be the last time we see or can pray for our friend or family member, that either we, or they may not be here tomorrow, or next week, or next month, it awakens our very best nature. We spontaneously offer the best kinds of prayers for their happiness. And if we should be so fortunate to see and talk with them again, this kind of pure motivation is sure to find expression in our speaking, and actions.

Just as they say with the Lam-Rim, or Stages of the Path teachings, we have to have some sense of the advantages of any practice before we whole-heartedly take it up. When it comes to the meditation on loving kindness, people usually don't need much convincing. Recalling impermanence, though, is another matter. It's usually avoided if at all possible. This is only because we haven't glimpsed the advantages of keeping this in view. Once we do, it's natural to make this a regular part of practice.

Love, naturally, without needing to be told, wants to reach perfection in us. That is what we would call it's fulfillment, and even though this ideal often seems so far from where we are, when I take up the practice with the awareness of my mortality, I begin to taste that very fulfillment of love.

We have to give ourselves completely. This is the only thing that makes sense to me now. This is what brings the greatest reward.

Metta as a purification practice

When people take to metta practice, it's usually because of its more pleasant aspects. It can be comfortable, enjoyable, and uplifting. It is nourishing, and it can bring the feeling of being connected to others. It can bring balance and strength. All good things. What's not immediately apparent though is how metta is also a purification practice. This aspect, we can say, sort of sneaks up on us, and we're doing it even before we fully know the effect it is having. Which is also a good thing.

Usually the very idea of a purification practice is ponderous, and maybe even a little off-putting – as in – 'I'm such an evil person, I need to purify!' but metta comes at purification from an altogether different angle. The main idea is that we start with the person who it is easiest for us to generate uncomplicated, pure good will towards, and then we go from there. So, at first, it's easy, and enjoyable, comfortable, and uplifting. But as we go on, step by step, we're sure to find that there's some people for whom it's not as easy to generate the same wish for their happiness. As some teachers put it, when we go to cultivate loving kindness, we find all that we have in us that is not loving – such as our impatience, pride, pettiness, jealousy, and so on.

We're also sure to find, with those for whom we have some attachment, that our motivation is often mixed. We wish them well, but it is conditional, that is, our thoughts and feelings towards them are subject to change, depending on how they are towards us, or how they respond. There's a clear distinction between metta and attachment – which is sometimes called the near enemy of metta, and this really becomes apparent when we practice. If it can change to anger or indifference, it's not metta; and if we want something in return from the person, again, that's attachment, and not pure metta. Of course, we may still go ahead with our schemes, or having a mixed motivation, but as we continue to cultivate metta, it gets more obvious what's going on.

We know from our own experience with the uncomplicated, pure metta we can send to some people whenever we are offering something less than this. So metta shows us whenever we may have subtle, hidden motivations. In a way, after a while, it gets easier to simply choose metta.

The effect of continuing metta practice on some of the other negative emotions are even easier to see. Anger, for example, with all its

manifestations, such as impatience, intolerance, a lack of acceptance of self and others, the critical, fault finding mind, a lack of forgiveness – as we continue to cultivate metta, we can see and feel these slowly fade away.

With metta, we also naturally become more careful in our interactions with others in our everyday life. It follows that we'll aim to be considerate, and keeping the five precepts, of not taking life, not stealing, not causing harm sexually, keeping from lying, and using intoxicants. Love keeps us on track in our relationships. It gives us a standard.

The traditional teachings talk about five main negative emotions- anger, craving, ignorance, jealousy, and pride. I add fear and sadness to this list, because they seem to me to be big problems for people in these times. Witness the widespread use of anti-depressants. I also know how I've had to face these down.

Fear lessens with the increase of courage, and the feeling of resourcefulness, and these definitely come from having more love. It may return – in fact, it's sure to, but knowing there's a solution to fear is itself a big relief. Sadness too can be greatly attenuated by the development of loving kindness. In fact, I've not found any negative emotion that can't be tamed and overcome by the development of love. Having once been much more prone to depression than I am now, I know that this one term we call sadness points to something that has a number of factors to it, that can be worked with.

Metta brings light to the mind, which helps us to see beauty, and increasingly to be nourished by it; it brings gratitude, and awakens wonder in us; it adds energy and enthusiasm to our life and work. All these serve to counter-balance those things that can regularly get a person down and despairing. As the overall orientation to living changes, through loving kindness, so do the tendencies of the mind.

The Suttas, which are the Pali record of the Historical Buddha's teachings, talk about 'the fading away' of harmful emotions. This is something that can be felt when we practice metta. Whereas before some emotion may have often arisen forcefully, through metta practice, that same emotion gradually weakens until it is just a small wave on the far horizon, and then, where there was some upset before, eventually, there is only peace.

All this, of course, is very inspiring to see, even in the beginning stages of practice, like within the first few months of daily practice. It gives us encouragement, that, yes, it really is possible to tame the mind and emotions. It really is possible to cultivate those precious heart qualities of love, compassion, joy and a steady equanimity of kindness. It's also a relief to find there's another way to transform the negative emotions and their roots, and to purify the mind and heart. This, in time, makes it easier to settle comfortably, with a real clarity of mind in meditation, and to develop liberating insight. So we can say the whole path, traditionally presented as being made up of ethics, meditation, and wisdom, is available to us through metta practice.

Metta and Wisdom

'Rally the concepts for the highest purpose of developing wisdom, whereby concepts themselves are transcended.'–

Venerable Nyananada

In Buddhism, the freedom from suffering, and the attainment of the highest happiness comes from the development of wisdom. So when we are practicing metta, loving kindness meditation, wishing ourselves or another well, it's only natural that we have in mind for them this freedom of mind. In that sense, a person practicing a spiritual path will have a different and more refined, idea of the enjoyments and peace they would share.

In Buddhism, Wisdom needs to be understood in two ways: there's the ordinary wisdom, that includes common sense, intelligence, memory and foresight. These are what we would call 'worldly wisdom'. Then there is what is known as Transcendent Wisdom, which means seeing through, or going beyond the mistaken ego-idea we hold of ourselves and others.

Why is this so important to know? All the afflictive emotions come from this ignorance: all the anger, fear, attachment, jealousy, pride, competitiveness, and so on.

Usually, when we're in the grip of a strong emotion, unless we're trained, or quick enough to catch what's going on, we don't see the ego-idea. Then, when things calm down a bit, we don't feel any urgency to look deeply into this. And so it goes, on and on. If we learn to look, however, we can see the presence of ego grasping, right in the middle of the arising of a delusion, such as anger, or attachment, pride, or low self esteem.

This idea of ourselves or another that we take hold of seems to be of a single nature, separate from others, and permanent. That is illusory, the source of our problems.

The way Lama Zopa Rinpoche expresses it, that I that appears to exist from its own side, not merely labeled by the mind, doesn't exist <u>at</u> <u>all</u>. See for yourself if this is so.

There's a Taoist story of a man in his small boat who sees another boat slowly coming towards him. He calls out, trying to warn the person in the other boat that he's headed right for his boat, but no one seems to hear. He shouts louder, and starts to cuss, and when the other small boat finally rams into his, he's outraged – ready to give the other boatman a piece of his mind… when… he sees there was no one in the other boat… and, just like that, his anger vanishes…

It's like this when we realize that the one we would get angry at is only our imagined idea of a person, or situation. So much of what we do with our mind, in relation to others, is our own invention. What can we do?

There's a line from the Seven Point Mind Training teaching that translates to, *'Wisdom is the greatest protection'.* Of course, we can separate from negative actions and states of mind by ethical restraint – which quite literally can feel like we're holding ourselves back from doing something we want to do, for example, like eating that cake, or speaking that harsh word; and we can learn to pacify negative emotions through calming the mind in meditation, but this is also temporary – like Chagdud Tulku said, like pressing 'pause' on the tape player; but it's only wisdom that ultimately uproots the cause of suffering.

The teachings say that this ego idea has been with us since beginningless time, but that it can be transcended, and suffering brought to an end, through the development of right understanding.

The Thai teacher, Ajaan Thate said, 'Mental phenomena will stop only when insight discerns its causal factors, and uproots their underlying causes.'

Now, this freedom from problems, and the attainment of the highest happiness is naturally what all wish for ourselves, and those we care for, and so, of course the question, or sticking point presents itself: how can we wish happiness for ourselves or another if they don't exist as we imagine?

When this question comes up, it's something of a landmark, I think. It means we're trying to integrate these two aspects of the path, of love and wisdom, and something doesn't seem to fit. But this only means that we haven't yet taken the wisdom side far enough.

I'm sure other students besides myself have been relieved to find there's a great body of teachings called The Perfection of Wisdom Sutras that are aimed at explaining this very point.

Being one of the earliest formulations of the Mahayana Teachings, they emphasize the ideal of compassion throughout this sacred literature, and, at the same time, they thoroughly explain the 'emptiness', or non-existence, of that imagined self that we reflexively produce, and project and hold onto as though it is what is actually there.

The Prajna Paramita Sutras help us to see through this notion, and learn to care for others in the best possible way.

Here are a few verses from the Perfection of Wisdom:

'If you see the signless nature of the sign, then you see the tathagata (that which is).'

'The skill in means of a Bodhisattva
consists in this,
that he cognizes a sign,
(or what seems to be a fixed characteristic,
that could be mistakenly equated with identity)
both its mark and cause,
and yet he surrenders himself completely
to the Signless realm of dharma,
in which no sign has ever arisen.'

and,

'one treats an actually non-existent objective support as a sign,
as an objective support.

The act of will (of a bodhisattva, in truth, actually)
arises only in reference to the conventional expressions
current in the world.'

In case this seems in the least bit abstract, there are the later teachings on wisdom in Buddhism, that can help to clarify the meaning.

What our senses and concepts present to us, and what we then fixate on, is not what is actually there. We can learn to see through our imaginings, and in fact, out of compassion, this is something we need to learn to do.

This same thread of an idea, of acting with both wisdom and compassion is presented by the Eighth century saint, Shantideva, in his Guide to the Bodhisattva's Way of Life, where he asks,

'If no beings exist [in ultimate reality],
toward whom should we have compassion?

and he answers:

'To attain the result [of buddhahood, which is to be achieved only through the awakening of great compassion], one should direct one's compassion toward whatever it is that unenlightened beings call 'beings'.

The modern day Tibetan teacher, Deshung Rinpoche, also taught on this same subject, when he said:

The bodhisattva realizes that, in ultimate reality, there are no beings who exist as unenlightened beings think, but he directs his mind toward those beings as they perceive themselves.

'On the ultimate level, he sees no beings, but he realizes that on the conventional level, beings think they exist and do experience suffering. Out of objectless compassion, therefore, he directs his mind toward them.'

Going back to the historical Buddha, in the last part of the Metta Sutta, there are the lines:

'having attained Right Understanding,
one is no longer born into states of suffering'

I take the inclusion of this idea at the end of his teaching on loving kindness to be an encouragement to us all, to get to the root causes of our dissatisfaction, and difficult emotions, and then to share this wisdom with all our loved ones, with all the world.

One more piece, for completeness' sake

Going beyond the ego idea we've held of ourselves doesn't lead to nothing, or non-existence, but to our true self, sometimes called our Buddha Nature, which is inherently perfect, and naturally rich with good qualities, such as love, intelligence, joy, and peace.

The Perfection of Wisdom Sutras say that all the Perfections are included in Wisdom, such as Generosity, and Ethics.

And later schools say that

the nature of mind is intrinsically pure,
and only temporarily veiled
by obscurations

when these are cleared away,
our original nature shines forth,
just as the sun,
that has been parted from the clouds

Metta leads to wisdom, wisdom leads to great love

One teacher, I've heard, referred to Maha Metta – or Great Love, and we can come to this in a number of ways. One is through the development of what are called The Four Immeasurables, of Universal Love, Compassion, Joy, and the Steady Impartiality of Love, or the Stable Equality of View.

Though the wisdom aspect is not explicitly brought out in the loving kindness teachings alone, I think it is implied, or can be intuited. As one teacher in San Francisco, Lama Lodro Rinpoche explained, having great love brings one right up to the view itself.

Another way to arrive at the unity of Great Love and Wisdom understanding selflessness, as explained, is through the cultivation of liberating insight. By this, we arrive at the natural state of freedom, peace, and Great Love for all.

Wherever we are in our study and practice of the path, whatever our afflictions and needs at this time, we do need both of these factors, to some extent at least, for any path to function.

We need kindness towards ourselves, manifesting as self respect, and the wish to live well, and as ethics, if we are pursuing a path that leads to greater peace and freedom. We also need insight into causality, if we are to practice well, and actualize our intention. Ideally, we'll bring each factor to its fullest development, and share the fruits of our practice with all the world.

I praise the Buddha, and all Enlightened Teachers, for their great liberating activity.

May we all receive
what the Buddhas and Noble Ones intend,

and,
May all be entirely well,
and at their ease

Metta and inner strength

When we bring to mind the character of love, many of our associations at first are with its gentleness, softness, and accommodating nature. These are certainly aspects of metta, or loving kindness, but there is a strong side to it that's not mentioned as often. This is unfortunate, because metta can also have the quality of power when needed.

One of the wonderful things about loving kindness is that it is rich, dynamic, and adaptable, and we should know its potential qualities. While the 'soft' or gentle side of metta can soothe problems or difficult feelings, at times the firm aspect of it may be more what's called for. This too can pacify suffering, or uncertainty, and it has a different quality to it.

It can be like a warrior, or a drill sergeant, saying, Get out of bed, now!; or a mother lion that is pure fearlessness in protecting her cubs;

it can be a fortress when we're up against it, or like a great wave of determination that rises up and sweeps away all doubt…

It can be taking a clear stand, and saying, 'enough!'

Knowing we have this capacity, even if it isn't being used, brings us peace. We know we won't tolerate either ourselves or others being mistreated. I'm thinking that when the feeling of the strength of love is present in us, then other emotions, such as fear, or self-denigration don't have the chance to arise. It's as if they need a vacancy first, and it's strong metta that keeps them back.

The power of love is also a stabilizing force in our character. It steadies us, and can be felt as a ready resourcefulness.

I know that many people draw back from the language of power, and from the experience of it as well, and that this is understandable, but only up to a point. Most associations having to do with power, after all, are with its mis-use. But listen to what Dr. King had to say about the relationship between love and power:

'One of the greatest problems of history is that the concepts of love and power are usually contrasted as polar opposites. Love is identified with a resignation of power and power with a denial of love.

What is needed is a realization that power without love is reckless and abusive and that love without power is sentimental and anemic. Power at its best is love implementing the demands of justice. Justice at its best is love correcting everything that stands against love.'

Such strength born of love brings a confidence that is not of the ego, and that doesn't put others down, but lifts them up. Think of how it is when a confident person enters a roomful of his friends. At once, they feel safe, and inspired.

With metta, there is a kind of self knowledge that's of the nature of quiet confidence, and this is very different from the proud posturing of insecure people. Strong metta has nothing to prove.

If we don't know we have this capacity, it's possible we may only use a part of the love we have, and this would be a loss to us all. To manifest strength when it's needed is an imperative of love.

Such metta is the ground of self confidence. We can find when we develop it, that it supports us in all the practice we do, and it is a quality that enhances all our work in this world.

The Precepts of Love

There is so much contained in love at it's best that I thought it would be worthwhile to write a few words about it this morning. I highlight love 'at its best' to distinguish it from the fleeting, partial, or limited kinds of affection we all know so well. The love I would like to talk about is the kind we look to when we want to remember who we truly are and who we can become.

We're living in a time when there is so much disconnect, hostility, fear and aggression. With our defenses raised, we are often but one step removed from striking out, in word or action. I was talking with a friend and coworker the the other day about how far this is from our natural state. We don't talk about love often enough, and so I told him what I feel needs to be said, that rather than training in and fostering anger, we should have zero aggression in us. Zero, and less than zero. I told him, this is more in line with our true nature which is naturally gentle. Our real nature is love, but how could we ever know this if we are just endlessly reactive, hitting back or preparing to do so? We have to start somewhere, and I suggested to him that it is right here, simply, that: *Love begins with non-harming.* This is how we can start to know our real selves.

We have it in us also to create peace though our bodily actions, words, and thoughts, and the root of these is love. If we begin with non-harming, which is essentially knowing how we would want to be treated, and then acting with a even a modicum of wisdom, we naturally become gentle, respectful, and conscientious.

Once we face in that direction, then no matter how wrong or careless or hurtful we might have once been, right away we experience a change of heart and mind. From our heart, our love goes out, and it extends peace everywhere.

To adopt an attitude of non-harming naturally creates the feeling of safety and comfort. It removes fear, and it is soothing.

Love begins there, and yet it goes beyond such mere restraint. *In the very character of love that we all carry with us at all times there is the willingness to remove suffering, now and in the future.*

My friend asked me, oh, can we really do that? and I immediately said, Yes! We do it all the time - like when someone puts their hand on a friend's shoulder when they need it, or when someone just shows up, or says a kind word just at the right time. It's easier to see how we remove one another's suffering if we think of it happening by degrees instead of all at once. We do quite often care for and comfort each other, and this is one of the beautiful, precious qualities found in our inherent capacity for love.

If we go further with this, we see there is the movement to relieve suffering in the moment, and there is also what we do for one another to help prevent future suffering.

In Buddhism we have this prayer,

May all beings be free of suffering,
and the causes of suffering

and in this we see the wish to remove the hurt and needs of the moment, and then also to prevent future discomfort or unhappiness. Love contains all of this motivation and the spontaneous movement to see its aims fulfilled.

Starting with non harming and going on to removing suffering, we can tell that there is even more to love than this. *Love naturally brings joy to others, now and in the future.*

The prayer of loving kindness says

May all beings have happiness
and the causes of happiness

The first part of this expresses the natural quality inherent in love of bringing light, joy, inspiration, freshness and peace, everywhere it goes, and the second line refers to looking ahead with the union of love and far-seeing wisdom.

We plant trees that will flower and bear fruit in future times, long after we are gone, and we do this out of love and wisdom, looking ahead.

We seek a remedy, and give food today, and we also build a home for our family, for their future safety, comfort and happiness.

We need to look into causes, both of misery and health and happiness. Then we can sow the causes for the life we most naturally want for ourselves and our loved ones. We can see far into the future and then act out of love.

Love naturally expands. It wakes us up, and it reaches out in this way, more and more. Such is its nature.

This one quality we call love at its best has such richness to it. Don't you agree? We can certainly speak of it as inherently not wishing ourselves or others any harm at all, and we can then mention its function of removing suffering and bringing happiness to ourselves and others more and more, now, and with wisdom, into the future. But there is one more more facet that deserves to be mentioned when speaking of the naturally occurring qualities of love. It should be said here that *when someone is causing suffering, love would have us respond to them with even greater love and compassion and wisdom.*

Thich Nhat Hanh said, When someone is suffering enough, his or her suffering will spill over, and they will cause others also to suffer. Responding to them with *even more kindness and compassion* is the only thing that will eventually remedy the situation, but how far that is from how most people, groups and governments respond to violence, aggression, and acts of provocation. The usual response is one of retaliation, but its clear that this only furthers the cycle of violence. We lock people up, declare war, reject ourselves and others and start battles that go on for generations without end.

We use a cliche like 'their act was a cry for help' to describe some errant, hurtful action, but it is more than this - it is a call for deeper attention, for more energy, wisdom and love. If we don't heed these messages, then we turn away from giving help where it is most needed.

A doctor runs *towards* the sounds of suffering, not away; he or she does not neglect the least sign that something is wrong. If we are to heal self, our relationships, family, community, and especially those who are lost and causing harm to themselves and others, we do so need this precept. It is the highest expression of love, at its most caring and far seeing.

These are the precepts of love, ever available for those who would pick up on them and bring greater light, peace, health, harmony and joy to our lives together, and to this whole ten direction world.

Epilogue

Love is the heart, freely given

There can never be any coercion in love - these two are in eternal opposition. This is why the 'oughts' and 'shoulds' people try to impose will always fail. Love is the heart, freely given. It's this way in relationships, in art, and also in our life in the world.

We have to see the joy and the reason for doing something before we will act, and when we do, *'we run, and do not faint; we soar on wings like eagles'*, as the bible says.

As Rumi says,

Love makes two oceans wide the size of a blanket,
and seven-hundred years,
the time it takes to walk
to someone you love…

With love, however things are going, it's never felt to be a burden, but is delight itself. Realizing this, art, social action, retreat time, caring for ourselves and others all find their fulfillment.

May it be this way for all of us.

Dedication

By the merit of having set forth these words of truth,
words of power because they speak of the highest of virtues,
May all beings benefit
May all have happiness,
and all the fully actualized causes of health and happiness,
well-being and peace,
comfort, and ease

About the Author

Jason Espada is a writer and classical musician living in San Francisco. He is a steward of his father's photography, and the founder of abuddhistlibrary.com. Over the years, he's made a number of recordings of Buddhist teachings, and these days his focus is on the connection between spirituality and social action. His new website is jasonespada.com.

Also by Jason Espada

A Buddhism for Racial Progressives - Inspiration for Activists is a handbook on Buddhism and social justice. It presents a compassionate world view, and methods that can help us to achieve our aims. Using traditional teachings, we have greater resources to bring to the work that we do.

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A Practice that Thrives in Difficulty - Essays and Poetry on Thought Training describes methods for turning adverse circumstances into causes of healing and awakening. Instead of being oppressed by conditions, we can be empowered by them. Especially now, when there are so many things going wrong in our world, we need to apply teachings like this. The Thought Training teachings show us how we can use everything we meet to benefit both ourselves and society.

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