

Brahma Viharas V : Lovingkindness  
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Good evening, everyone.

When I was here last I was talking about the Brahma Viharas, the Heavenly Abodes, which in traditional Buddhism are the states of heart-mind we are invited to cultivate, on the grounds that they are more heavenly and less hellish than other states of mind that we might spend out time cultivating. We'll finish that series tonight by talking about the last of the Heavenly Abodes, lovingkindness. Here's the *Metta Sutta*, which is a teaching on lovingkindness that the Buddha gave. This is the clearest exposition of what the ideal of lovingkindness is in traditional Buddhism.

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 upwards to the skies,  
And downwards to the depths;  
Outwards 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.<sup>1</sup>

That's obviously a pretty strong, pure ideal. I want to mention a couple of things : You'll notice the seed of koan Zen in there in the line "by not holding to fixed views." We could say that if we just did that, the rest would unfold on its own. The other thing is the turn it makes from speaking so directly and specifically about our relationships, not only with other human beings, but with all beings of all kinds. And then at the end it says, "being freed from all sense desires, is not born again into this world." When I first heard this I thought, hold on, didn't we just describe a way of having heaven on earth? Then why do we want to cut out early, why do we want to leave?

With this quite beautiful ideal in mind I want to talk about what it might be like *not* to take the first exit out, but to make a strong commitment to bringing lovingkindness into the world, and for that to be enough. We don't do that so we don't come back; we do that because it supports the best of what's possible on this planet.

I've gone back and forth about using the word lovingkindness to translate what is *metta* in Pali and *maitri* in Sanskrit — to use lovingkindness instead of just love. Sometimes love seems more straightforward to me. Why not just call it what it is? Why modify it in some way? But what's occurring to me is that love as we use it is a broad word that covers a lot of territory; we can mean a lot of different things by love. Maybe by translating *metta* as lovingkindness

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<sup>1</sup> Translated from the Pali by The Amaravati Sangha

we're saying it's not that whole big, messy, extensive range of feeling that love encompasses; lovingkindness is a particular kind of love. I would describe that at the moment as a caring for another, or caring for others, or caring for a situation that is, to the extent possible, free of self-interest or ulterior motive. So when I say lovingkindness, that's the love I'm speaking about, a love that is free from self-interest or ulterior motive.

In these conversations we've brought up the difference between detachment and non-attachment. Maybe this is a way to help make that distinction : non-attachment is the same kind of freedom from self-interest or ulterior motive. It's an open and spacious place, not a cold or removed place.

In the traditional Theravadan teachings, the oldest level of Buddhist teachings, every virtue like lovingkindness has a far enemy and a near enemy. The far enemy is the thing that the virtue antidotes. Lovingkindness antidotes hatred and antipathy, which makes sense. The near enemy is trickier because it can be quite like the virtue, and it can be difficult to distinguish between the virtue and the near enemy, so that's a place we can often get caught. The near enemy of lovingkindness is desire. In this formulation, we're not talking about every meaning of desire, which is also a word that covers a lot of territory and can mean a lot different things. My understanding of this use is that desire is what happens when self-interest and ulterior motive come in. Then you've moved off of lovingkindness to its near enemy, desire. That's a discrimination we need to keep making over and over again, because that line can get blurred. Desire has all these immediately reinforcing effects, if our desires are satisfied, which can make it seem quite attractive.

Then the kindness comes in with the root meaning of metta, which is from a word that means friend. Metta is the activity of the friend. That's where the kindness is important because it reminds us of what it means to love as a friend. When we read the Buddhist teachings about friendship, one of the cardinal virtues in friendship is constancy. As opposed to desire, which waxes and wanes depending on other circumstances, there's a sense that friendship should be constant through thick and thin, through difficulty and joy. That's what we can give each other as friends, and that's what lovingkindness is about as well.

I'm sure that some of you have practiced metta or lovingkindness meditation, which is a common Theravadan meditation that's used in a lot of other schools as well. Essentially, to

really shorten it down, it's a practice where you do a guided visualization where you visualize a benefactor, someone who's given you something important; and someone you love; and someone you feel neutral about. (That's an interesting exercise, because sometimes you can discover that you don't really feel neutral about anyone; that can point out how much judgment we have about everybody all the time.) Then you visualize an enemy, and you also direct lovingkindness toward yourself. The classical formulation of what you say to these various figures and to yourself is, "May you be free from danger, may you have mental happiness, may you have physical happiness (which you can interpret as health), and may you have ease of wellbeing." That last one is a great clunky formulation that I think speaks about a kind of peace in your life, and a sense of wellbeing. Some people like Thich Nhat Hanh simplify that down even further to an inhale / exhale : "May you be peaceful; may you be happy. May I be peaceful; may I be happy."

This is my understanding of the theory behind that meditation, which is quite different from what we do in koan Zen but has an important complementarity with what we're doing in koan practice. The idea with something like metta meditation is that if you're all worked up by anger, say, you can substitute compassion for anger, and you can be all worked up about compassion. If you've got a feeling going, you can just switch. You can use all that energy in a different direction if you consciously make that kind of switch. So when you're feeling hatred or aversion or antipathy, you can take all that energy and put it at the service of lovingkindness. When you do that, the positive emotion antidotes the negative one — which is to say that really what's happening is that it's suppressing it for the moment by replacing it with something else.

This feels quite different from what koan practice is about, which is never about suppressing something. So why is that helpful? One of the foundations of koan practice is that when we're caught in negative states, when we're caught in anger, hatred, depression, or defensiveness, we're caught in a less realistic view of the way things are. Because we're stuck in something inside ourselves that's partial; something's taken over and is filling up all the space. But the view we have when we're angry or depressed is not a realistic view because it's so narrow; it's not including the whole bandwidth of everything that's true. So you bring in something else. If you're feeling hatred you bring in lovingkindness because it widens out the bandwidth. It allows for a more whole and realistic picture of the way things actually are.

Sometimes when we're doing Zen and koan practice, having that simple, clear, specific thing to do can be helpful when we're in the throes of something and feeling possessed by a negative emotion. Just bring in a positive one and see what happens; see if you can feel that suddenly you've moved from a less realistic to a more realistic sense of reality. That's important because of what a rigorous practice lovingkindness is. It's not about being nice. It's hard and demanding and really a commitment if we take it up. One way to think about it is that it's not about making us nicer, it's about making us more realistic about life.

The practice of lovingkindness always has to begin (and this feels very Zen) with a process of cleaning out the gunk, the stuff that gets in the way of a more realistic view and a more open heart. Metta meditation was first taught by the Buddha to a group of monks whom he sent out to go deep into the forest to meditate. When they got there and started to meditate there were some tree spirits who were not happy about having these human intruders in their part of the forest. So they harassed the monks, making it difficult and actually terrifying them. They came back to the Buddha, saying, "We're really terrified. Could you send us somewhere else?" The Buddha taught them metta meditation as an antidote to fear. That seems important. It wasn't about going out and being nice, doing good things for people; it was about dealing with fear. That feels like the first step : Is there an obstacle to lovingkindness? Of course, in all of us there is. How do you work with that?

So they went back into the forest and sat down, and instead of doing a silent meditation, they did lovingkindness meditation. Something happened, and the situation changed. The tree spirits decided they liked this energy being brought into their part of the forest and ended up sitting with them. They all did lovingkindness meditation together. It's a fable, but it's important for that sense of dealing with your fear or hatred or defensiveness first. Whatever it is, that's where you start; you release whatever it is that's hindering lovingkindness.

That's an important theme in Zen. When we are cultivating something like lovingkindness, we're not bringing it to the situation like a commodity, like *Why don't you come over for dinner and I'll bring the wine and you bring the lovingkindness*. It's about understanding that lovingkindness is inherent in any situation, and in ourselves as well. Our job, in the words of Chan, Chinese Zen, is to liberate the lovingkindness that's inherent in any situation, rather than haul it in and pass it around.

I want to describe the sense of lovingkindness as a rigorous practice. When I was talking about compassion last month, one of the things we spoke about was how compassion has to be specific, particular. It has to be about what's happening right now. Compassion isn't general; it only ever arises out of the particulars of a given situation — the other person's situation, the circumstances around you, and you yourself. Lovingkindness is different. Lovingkindness, in my understanding, is by its nature universal and general. We are invited to bring out lovingkindness in every situation in exactly the same way.

Both of those things are important : to be able to look at the particular and have a compassionate response to that, and also to bring out lovingkindness, which *isn't* dependent on the circumstances or another's behavior. There's no self-interest, there's no ulterior motive, we don't offer lovingkindness only when someone is doing something we like, or when someone's doing something that we feel sorry for. The invitation is to bring lovingkindness all the time, no matter what. That's the rigor of the practice. That's *hard* to do. That's also what distinguishes lovingkindness, in this sense, from love. There is unconditional love, but a lot of love is dependent on circumstances, how people are behaving, and how we're feeling. This isn't that; this is something that's a constant attitude. So we come back to the sense of the word metta being rooted in 'friend' : We have a constant friendliness to whatever's going on. And that's rigorous.

We're doing a couple of things : one is committing to standing on the real ground as much as we can. What I mean by the real ground is the place where we know that we and everything else in the world are connected to each other. That is the ground we are invited to stand on through lovingkindness : it's all connected, it's all one thing. That's our standpoint to begin. The second thing is, we're going to assume that lovingkindness is always inherent, always potential in any situation. And we're going to commit to being the person, the community, however you want to see it, who blows on the embers of lovingkindness in any situation : No. Matter. What. No matter the particulars, we're the ones who will blow on the embers. We're the ones who will allow the fire of lovingkindness to blaze up.

Here's a down and dirty example of what I'm talking about. I went for the hardest thing I could think of at the time. This is something Elie Wiesel says in one of his books. He talks about being a teenager in a concentration camp. One of the German camp commandants was dying and called Wiesel to his bedside and said, "I've done horrible things. I'm a Nazi in a

concentration camp, and I need one Jew to forgive me before I die.” Wiesel reports that he stood up and walked out of the room. He couldn’t do it.

This story was sent to a whole bunch of Jewish and Christian theologians with the question, *Was he right to not forgive?* Universally, as a body, the Jewish theologians said, the only person who can forgive is the person who was wronged. And in this case, the people who were wronged are dead, so there is no possibility of forgiveness. Christian theologians wrote back, to a person, saying, “Christ commands us to turn the other cheek. It is our duty to forgive, even in a circumstance like that.” So here are these two diametrically opposed responses to this deep question. Then I began to muse about what the third thing might be. What’s the sideways move? Is there no reconciliation possible between those viewpoints, or is there something else that can happen?

The response came back to me from the most unlikely of sources. Someone said to me, “You’ve got to check out the last few minutes of the last episode in the last season of the television show *24*.” Talk about an unlikely place to find a resolution to this question! So I watched it, and it might be the most real thing I’ve ever seen on television, the thing I could most completely understand and relate to. In a nutshell, what happens is that Jack Bauer, the hero / antihero, who’s been a federal agent and has done a lot of really bad things in the name of protecting Americans from terrorists, is dying; he has just a few hours to live. He asks for someone to come to his bedside, and it’s this extremely unlikely person, the imam from the local mosque with whom he’s had a run-in earlier in the show and treated badly. That’s who he calls because he doesn’t know where else to turn. The imam comes and sits down next to him, and basically the same thing happens. Jack Bauer says, “I’ve done these horrible things in my life and now I’m dying. Can you forgive me?” The imam begins from the Jewish perspective, interestingly enough, but slightly different. He says, “I’m not in the position to forgive you. I’m not big enough or wise enough or good enough to offer you forgiveness. But what I can offer you is to sit with you as two men who have done horrible things in our lives for which we feel great remorse.” He took his hand, and the scene ends with the two of them sitting there like that.

To me, that was the third thing, the reconciliation of the opposites. And that’s lovingkindness. Lovingkindness is the willingness to let ourselves be cracked open so that the radiant world can come through us and meet the radiance that’s already in the world but often

hidden. To stand there for that. It seems to me that that's what the imam was doing. *This is what I can give. I can be completely with you here, and not make a separation between us.* That felt like a profound kind of lovingkindness.

The last thing I want to say is that every tradition has its shadows. One of the shadows in Zen is that we can make a big split, where we have these grand pronouncements of the radiant world and things are just as they are — which feels so distant and removed and so *yeah, but ...* And then we have this other side which is an overemphasis sometimes on what's wrong with us, the problems with the our psyches, the difficulties we have, and the things we need to work with. The split can feel so wide that it's hard to know how those two things relate to each other. There's the absolute radiant world being perfect just as it is, and then there's the psyches we live inside which can be problematic and difficult at times. It's important to say that those worlds are not so separate.

One of the things that makes the bridge between them is lovingkindness, taking up that rigorous, difficult, challenging, never-will-leave-us-alone practice of making ourselves available to be cracked open so that the radiant world pours into the everyday world. And we're willing to do the work to clear the difficult stuff out so that can happen. That's not being nice, that's something much bigger. It's probably something none of us will perfect in our lifetimes, but something we can move closer and closer to, the more we're willing to say, *I take up this practice of lovingkindness.*

Finally, this makes me think of something the Israeli politician, Shimon Peres, said once when someone was talking about the forty-nine-thousandth light at the end of the tunnel in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Peres said, "Hey, we've got the light, what we need is the tunnel." That's what lovingkindness is to me : making the tunnel. It's being willing to create the tunnel that makes the bridge; to form the connection from the world of the everyday to that world that's also the everyday world, but we forget. One of the ways we make the tunnel is with lovingkindness. It's one of the reasons it's a crucial practice, not just for ourselves, but for the world as well.

Q1 : When you talked about the distinctions between compassion and lovingkindness, I had an image of the depth of a well, the breadth of acequias. What I imagined was the koan



practice of going deeper into what is the particular, but then also, the breadth and width of lovingkindness you were describing, which is *not* particular.

JIS : Yes. I want to emphasize that for it to be not particular, for it to be general, we *have to* get the self-interest out of the picture. But when we do that, it just flows because it's not being shaped or coerced by that self-interest.

Q1 : You were describing that we substitute, bringing in one for another [like compassion for anger]. For me it couldn't necessarily stop there. Part of what makes it possible is the inquiry of looking at it and wanting to be real with what's happening, which is the koan way. That's the part of the practice that makes sense; that's the addition, not substituting something.

JIS : Yes. We realize *I'm being partial here because I'm really pissed off*. So we bring in this other thing which creates a balance, then there's a better ground to stand on to begin to do the work that you need to do to broaden the outlook.

Thank you.