**Day 1 Evening: Mettā—A Mature Emotion: Q & A**

Q. My activist neighbor is going to Nevada to register voters. It’s difficult to convince myself that I’m sitting in meditation for the benefit of all beings (not just giving myself a “gift”), let alone explain a week of sitting to her. Could you comment?

A. There are a couple of different layers there. The main one that leaps out is, I don’t think you need to explain yourself to everybody, especially in the light of loving-kindness. It is usually not an act of loving-kindness to try to compare and then explain yourself to others. That’s usually an exercise in judgment of yourself in which you, invariably, come up short. The very impulse to have to explain yourself to others is almost always generated from the sense, “I must be doing something wrong, and therefore, I have to explain myself.” You’re inevitably going to come up short.

A good question is: “Is this an act of kindness towards myself?” And then, “Is it a real act of kindness to explain yourself to other people? Do they actually need to know?” It’s something of an American compulsion to explain yourself to others.

I remember the very first year that I came to America to help found Abhayagiri. I was invited on almsround to Peter Mayland’s house, which is about seven miles from the monastery. You walk down Tomki Road and East Road on almsround to get to their house. It’s a long walk. A woman pulled over and asked, “Where are you going? Do you need a ride?” I had misjudged the time and we were running a bit late, so it was quite good to have a ride. There was still maybe a mile or a mile and a half left. It wasn’t that far, but in the distance of a mile or a mile and a half, I learned more about that woman’s life than I had wanted to know. I had never seen her before. There is a compulsion in the American psyche to try to explain everything to everybody. I don’t know how much of a kindness that is to other people.

So these are some basic thoughts in terms of the reflection around loving-kindness: “Is it a kindness to oneself? Is it a kindness to others?”

In the realm of meditation and activism, we can ask ourselves: “What is better? What should I be doing?” There’s a tendency in the mind to think in terms of either/or. Either I should be doing this, or I should be doing that. Either this is right and that’s wrong or that’s wrong and this is right.

That approach is very divisive and complicates things. Again, is it a kindness to think in that way? It’s a real questioning of the underlying ways that we relate to ourselves and the world around us: what is the effect of that framework of right and wrong, either/or? It’s important in terms of spiritual practice, particularly from this perspective of loving-kindness, to get some space around that way of dividing things up—separating them out and being in opposition to things.

I don’t think that is a helpful way to reflect on our experience because how the Buddha structured things was not so much as “right and wrong,” but more as “skillful and unskillful, wholesome and unwholesome.” We realize that an activist who is registering voters is doing something wholesome and skillful. That’s a good thing to do. “Is it what *I* need to be doing? Is it what I want to be doing right now? Do I feel drawn to that?” Maybe yes, maybe no. It’s also about being able to see somebody else’s skillfulness or wholesome activity and delight in that, being able to derive a sense of encouragement from others’ good actions without intimidating ourselves: “Other people can and are happy to do that. That’s great.

What I’d like to do for this week, at least, is to have a chance for a period of retreat—settling, creating an inner anchor for myself. That’s a wholesome, good, and skillful thing to do.” It doesn’t mean that because we have made the choice to be on retreat that we’re right and the rest of those schmucks out there really blew it. These are very separate realms.

We can encourage ourselves in the choices that we make without undermining ourselves. That’s an act of kindness. We can also see how other people choose to use their time and energy and encourage and support them or at least delight in the good that they are doing. That is an aspect of our own wholesomeness as well, and we benefit from that.

There is a word in Buddhist jargon: in Pāli, it is *puñña*, in the Thai language, *boon*. Inevitably, Thai people who have been to the West or have met a Westerner who is studying Buddhism ask, “How do you translate *boon*?” It’s one of those very difficult terms to render. But the Buddha himself said, “*Puñña* is another word for happiness.” It is the result of skillful action: good, wholesome actions or activities that result in happiness and well-being for you and for others.

Generosity and giving are puñña. Keeping precepts and virtue are puñña. Meditation is puñña. Listening to teachings is puñña. Teaching is puñña. Giving the opportunity for other people to access teachings is puñña. Helping others, acts of service, are puñña. Delighting in the good that other people do is puñña. Dedicating the blessings that come from your own good actions is puñña.

There are many levels, but these are avenues for creating happiness. We realize that we can tie them into the theme of loving-kindness. The recognition of that which is wholesome and skillful is an act of loving-kindness, as well as the commitment to doing that—also realizing that the thought, “If I’m not meditating, I’m wasting my time,” is not a fixed thing.

There are many avenues of wholesome and skillful action, and it’s important to be able to have a recognition of the spectrum, so that we can seize the opportunities, such as seeing somebody else doing something skillful and then delighting in that. It’s expressed in the Pāli word *anumodanā*, delighting in the good that is done. You don’t even have to do anything.

If you see somebody else doing something skillful, it doesn’t have to be intimidating: “I just don’t measure up.” Nor do you have to be jealous: “They’re not so good, really.” There is that sort of criticism, which is a way to pull people down and put them in their place. It’s very small-minded; it’s not kind to yourself and not kind to others.

Conversely, there is a spaciousness in the heart when you are neither intimidated by others nor torturing yourself because you are not doing quite the “right” thing in the “right” way. Feeling guilty about something that you didn’t do properly just goes on and on. None of that is a kindness to yourself or to others.

I remember one time traveling as a translator and attendant to a very senior, well-known, and highly respected Thai monk, Luang Por Paññananda. A few people in the room here have met him before. When I took a group to Thailand, we went to pay respects to him. Now, there is someone with serious puñña, a whole life of giving. When we went, he was sick and in the hospital, but it was a hospital that he had built. He was about ninety-six at the time, but very bright.

I traveled with him in the 1980s and one time, we were in New Zealand. It was the evening session: chanting, meditation, Dhamma talk, and questions afterwards. One of the questions that somebody asked fairly early on was: “How do we deal with that feeling of guilt?” Of course, I was familiar with that feeling, but the interesting thing was that when I tried to translate it, I realized that I don’t know what the word for guilt is in Thai. I had been translating for teachers and studying the language and the Dhamma for years, but my mind drew a blank, so I burst out laughing. I explained to him what the question was, why I was laughing, and how the concept was a bit distant in the Thai language and culture. I had to explain to him what Westerners do with their minds to make themselves feel guilty.

He listened and got this very concerned look on his face as I was explaining how guilt works. When I finished the explanation, he said, “Oh, that’s really suffering. Tell them not to do that.” It isn’t as if Thai people don’t have these emotions. There is a very healthy place for remorse, but not that complication of guilt, which is so easy to carry around because of the strong sense of self, “me,” and judgment. We judge, compare, and divide ourselves into “me” and this world that we are either trying to live up to or being intimidated by. These are very painful distinctions.

An act of loving-kindness comes with the attitude of “this is the way things are,” in the sense that there is a recognition: “Well, that’s just a feeling. I’m going to get some space around that, not contend with it, and not slip into those thoughts of comparison and suffering that accompany it.” That is an act of loving-kindness towards oneself. It’s a very useful skill to be able to see somebody who is doing something good and then be able not to make it a judgment about yourself, torturing yourself.

I think that sometimes, when we see loving-kindness as one of the *brahma vihara*s*,* a divine abiding, that puts it out *there* somewhere: “The divine, that’s way off somewhere else.” One of the monks in England has started translating brahma viharaas “mature emotion,” and that’s a skillful way of bringing attention to that aspect. It is a mature emotion to be able to turn attention to loving-kindness, compassion, sympathetic joy, and equanimity. The doorway into them all is the quality of loving-kindness. Bring attention to that, consciously, and then also bring attention to what obstructs it. We can start to pay attention to the immature emotions, which are fairly accessible, and recognize: “There’s that twinge of jealousy; there’s that twinge of comparing; there’s that irritation.” Rather than letting them gain momentum, you can ask: “How can I bring a mature emotion into this? How can I bring some space around this?”

The quality of loving-kindness creates space; it’s a very spacious emotion. As we create that spaciousness, it’s also very solid. It’s not a fleeting kind of pleasure, delight, or gratification. Irritation, jealousy, and aversion come up in the mind, but they don’t create a steadiness. They’re not stable feelings and emotions in the heart.

With that feeling of loving-kindness—as we tap into and direct attention to it—we realize there is a stability and groundedness that comes from it. We have a ground beneath that is not shaken by the vagaries of either the internal world of our emotions and reactions or the external world of change and praise and blame. When I think of people I’ve met who embodied loving-kindness, there was a tremendous steadiness or stability there.

Thinking of something being billed as a “Mettā Retreat,” what do we do? Do we come and ooze niceness? That turns my stomach, actually. Or do we put a lot of effort into trying to beam love everywhere? That can get pretty tiring. Again, the people I’ve met who embodied loving-kindness possessed tremendous stability.

I think of one particular circumstance in my life that was very helpful and illuminating for me. I had been the abbot of the International Forest Monastery in Thailand for a few years, not all that long, and I was finding it overwhelming. I had a chance to go to England. Ajahn Sumedho and many of the other senior western monks, old mates, were there. I was still stuck in Thailand looking after a monastery. I wasn’t sure whether I was capable of doing it, or if I even wanted to do it. There were conflicts with the monks and duties with the lay community. I was feeling overwhelmed.

Toward the end of my stay in England, which was just a few weeks, I was dreading getting on the plane. It was going to be a miserable plane ride because I was thinking: “Oh, I’ve got to go back to the monastery, and there’s this monk and that monk, and blah, blah, blah.” One of the senior monks in England, who had lived in Thailand for many years, had a little package. He said, “When you get to Bangkok, please take this and offer it to this particular monk.” This monk, Phra Payutto, had a good reputation, but I hadn’t met him yet. He was also not so well known at that time. Now, he is internationally renowned.

In those days he lived in a temple in Bangkok at the edge of Chinatown, in the old central part of the city. The area that he was in wasn’t particularly nice. Oftentimes in Bangkok, all of the monks’ shops are in one area and then there is another area that is the clothing section. The place where the temple was looked like they fixed the transmissions of car engines there. Oil, grease, and car parts were everywhere as you entered the temple. One of the things the temple also did was cremations for the poorest of the poor people. There was always something happening, and it was crowded.

I went to the back, where his dwelling place was. He radiated peace and kindness in the center of this business, dirtiness, pollution, and chaos. He was an anchor of peace, clarity, and kindness. Talking to him, he was extraordinarily kind, and he received me very well. He’s now very well-known and respected in Thailand. People come from all levels of society to pay respects to him. He’s one of the very few monks in Thailand to have completed all of his studies of the scriptures and Pāli when he was still a novice. When that happens, the King is traditionally the sponsor for the ordination. He has a brilliant mind. Sometimes, somebody with a brilliant mind is not necessarily attuned to other people, but he had a real completeness; everything was suffused with kindness.

It really struck me: “Okay, that’s a way that I can survive. If I could turn my attention to those qualities of kindness and mettā, that would hold me in good stead. Also, I’m going back to a quiet forest monastery in the northeast of Thailand, and if I can’t get some peace out of that, I’m doing something wrong with my holy life.” He was a wonderful example.

Some of the people here also met him when I took the group to Thailand. He received us so graciously. He is in constant pain; he has always been plagued by illness. But although he is in constant pain, the quality of kindness that radiates from him is very tangible.

You see, again, the sense of a mature emotion that is very steadying, stabilizing, and grounding. These are not qualities that people are born with. It’s not that they get it all; these are universal qualities that anybody can cultivate and tap into. I think it’s an important reflection to develop: “Oh, this is a mature emotion to direct attention to.” It gives us the opportunity, whether one is in a family or social situation, whether it’s dealing with Buddhists, people in society, or oneself, to be able to direct attention to this very important quality.