Day 3 Afternoon: The *Karaniya Mettā Sutta*

Yesterday, I introduced a method for the cultivation of loving-kindness using the phrases: “May I be well, happy, peaceful. May no harm come to me; may no difficulties come to me; may no problems come to me. May I always meet with spiritual success. May I have the patience, courage, understanding, and determination to meet and overcome inevitable difficulties, problems, and failures in life.”

Then we used those same phrases to generate the recollection of loving-kindness towards parents, teachers, family, friends, those who are unfriendly, and then all living beings. I think the use of phrases is a helpful reminder to try to direct attention to a particular feeling. The feeling of loving-kindness is the object of meditation in this practice: the actual feeling, an emotional tone within the heart. That is what we are trying to generate, support, and sustain. As we direct attention, it’s like trying to enter into and abide in that feeling, allowing it to establish itself.

I think it’s also quite important in terms of the cultivation of loving-kindness that we recall this *mettā nimitta*, the sign of loving-kindness. Find a place where that feeling of mettā begins to establish itself and then protect it. Then use the different phrases to try to support, nurture, and hold loving-kindness in a skillful way so that it can grow and expand.

Sometimes there is a problem with language: directing attention to parents and teachers isn’t like taking loving-kindness and beaming it off this way and that way, shooting it out and radiating it. It’s much more the sense of beginning with what might be a little spark and allowing the heart to be a vessel for loving-kindness. What we do is then expand that vessel, expand that sphere of loving-kindness, so that it includes parents, family, teachers, friends, and ultimately, all living beings.

Alternatively, it’s establishing that base of loving-kindness, that mettā nimitta, stabilizing it, nurturing it, and then inviting parents, teachers, and friends into it. Allow them to come into that sphere, include them so that the base of loving-kindness is right here, within this body and mind, in the present moment. This is where the base of loving-kindness is—then allow that to include other beings, inviting and expanding it so that it’s not excluding anything.

This is thus a different approach in terms of stabilizing the concentration and using it as a meditation that provides a solid anchor within the heart. It’s quite important, this shift of perspective to having a stable vessel of loving-kindness that then expands, allowing it to include all of these other beings we associate with. It’s never divorced or separated from the loving-kindness that is established toward yourself. That is the base that you are always returning to and depending on: “May I be well, happy, peaceful. May no harm come to me; may no difficulties come to me; may no problems come to me. May I always meet with spiritual success. May I have the patience, courage, understanding, and determination to meet and overcome inevitable difficulties, problems, and failures in life.”

It’s always grounded in respect, kindness, and well-wishing toward yourself. That’s not selfish. It’s the most practical reality, to be able to look after yourself so that you have the resources to be able to support others.

Over these days, I’ll introduce a few different methodologies, options, and kinds of phraseology. What rings true for you? What feels meaningful?

Today we will address the Buddha’s *Words on Loving-Kindness*, which is one of the chants that we do. It’s probably the most famous expression of loving-kindness that the Buddha taught. The formula of directing loving-kindness towards yourself, parents, teachers, and friends is probably the most common structure. However, this particular chant is the most well-known teaching on loving-kindness in the suttas.

I’ve heard a couple of different Pāli scholars who are fluent in Pāli, Bhikkhu Bodhi and Bhante Gunaratana, say this is the most beautiful discourse in terms of the scriptural Pāli language. There is not a spare word anywhere; it’s all perfect. Of course, in trying to get things into English, you try your best, and there are many different translations. The beauty of the Internet is that you can find a half-dozen different translations of the *Karaniya Mettā Sutta*.

One of the striking things, given that this is the Buddha’s best-known discourse on loving-kindness, is that it is about a third of the way into the sutta before the Buddha even mentions loving-kindness. I think this is great, in the sense that loving-kindness is to be cultivated but that there is also that which should be done to get to that point. We need to be skilled in goodness and know the path of peace. “Let them be able and upright, straightforward and gentle in speech.”

This is not just a mental phenomenon. We can’t just grab a feeling of loving-kindness out of the ether of our mental states and hold on to it. No. It arises out of our actions and speech. This is the ground that we need to be attending to: the sense of our actions being able and upright, our speech being straightforward and direct.

When we chant the recollection of the Sangha the same word occurs: *uju*, direct, straight, upright, practicing directly. Be straightforward in speech, direct, but also gentle. There is a vivid idiom in the scriptural language: “Attacking each other with verbal daggers.” Here’s another one: “Someone born with an axe in their mouth.” Speech can be just as harsh, cutting, and devastating as action, so it’s important to be gentle as well as straightforward in speech.

The quality of being “humble and not conceited”: there is a softness and a harmonious quality that arises in the human condition when somebody has humility and is not carrying around conceits of their importance and worth. “Contented and easily satisfied”: similarly, in terms of being able to harmonize with each other in the human community, the sense of contentment and being easily satisfied is one that allows us to blend with each other. If we’re discontented and difficult to satisfy, with constant demands, whether they are material or emotional, we’re always walking on eggshells. It’s difficult to get along. Again, there is an idiom from the scriptural language: “blending like milk and water.”

One discourse comes to mind immediately. The scenario is that the Buddha has left the community because he has become fed up. The monks were arguing and refusing to listen to his advice. He went to a forest where a few other monks were living. One was his cousin, Anuruddha. The Buddha arrives and asks them, “Are you living harmoniously? Are you living blending like milk and water?” That’s an image that is used to indicate that the sense of being contented and easily satisfied is a source of inner well-being as well as outer well-being.

“Unburdened with duties and frugal in their ways”: not having too many things on our plate, not taking on more than we can handle. Living in simple ways: these are ways that allow us to have ease within the heart that can then be translated into a cultivation of a mature emotion like loving-kindness. “Peaceful and calm, wise and skillful”: these are all qualities to be reminding ourselves of, in the sense of bringing them into our daily lives, qualities of calm and discernment. Making decisions, not according to our preferences or our ideals, but by asking: “What is truly skillful, wholesome, and beneficial? What is neither beneficial nor skillful, what is being driven either by your own biases or by the biases of the society around you?”

The Buddha defines that which is skillful as that which inherently leads to happiness, peace, and a freedom from the defilements and obscurations. What is unskillful, its opposite, is that which is associated with suffering, with *dukkha*. It’s agitated, turbulent, and associated with greed, hatred, and delusion.

Asking, “What is really beneficial and skillful?” is helpful in making decisions, rather than, “Do I like it? Do I not like it? What is that person going to think? What’s the popular notion within this particular group of people?” The Buddha has laid it out quite clearly. There is an intrinsic well-being that comes from aligning ourselves with the skillful.

“Not proud and demanding in nature. Let them not do the slightest thing that the wise would later reprove.” If we wish to take into account and worry about what somebody is going to think, let’s take the standards of somebody who is really wise and use that as a sounding board.

“Wishing: in gladness and in safety, may all beings be at ease.” The scriptural Pāli is, “*Sukhino vā khemino hontu, sabbe sattā bhavantu sukhitattā*.” “*Sukhino”* is happy, with gladness and well-being: may they be happy; may they experience well-being. “*Khemino”* is safety, security, stability, freedom from any kind of threat. “*Sabbe satta bhavantu sukhitatta*”: may all beings bring this quality of happiness and well-being into being; may they be at ease.

Establish that wish, that thought, that aspiration. The Buddha then encourages us to expand that. “Whatever living beings there may be; whether they are weak or strong, omitting none; the great or the mighty, medium, short, or small.” Weak or strong is not just a physical attribute. It could also be a social attribute, whether they are powerful or disadvantaged. It’s not just whether they are ninety-eight-pound weaklings or Mr. Universe. It’s much more regarding any physical, social, or emotional manifestation.

Whether weak or strong, every being is worthy of the wish, “May they be at ease,” because whether they’re weak or strong, they’re suffering. Ajahn Chah said, “Poor people suffer like poor people, rich people suffer like rich people; intelligent people suffer like intelligent people; and not-so-intelligent people suffer like not-so-intelligent people.” That’s the universal leveler: we all suffer.

I remember Ajahn Chah teasing us Westerners because we generally had far more education than most of the Thai monks who went to study, train, and ordain with him. As he became better-known, there were more Bangkok Thais coming who were well educated also. It was always a source of amusement to him. He would say, “You know, people go and study and they get bachelor’s degrees, but their defilements get bachelor’s degrees as well. Then they get master’s degrees, and their defilements also get master’s degrees. They say, well, this isn’t satisfying, so they decide to get doctorates, but then their defilements get Ph.D.’s as well.”

It’s the nature of beings immersed in greed, hatred, and delusion without liberating insight. We all suffer. Generating loving-kindness cuts across the board.

Another thing Ajahn Chah said—I can’t resist—teasing us as Westerners because we came from an affluent society and had education: “Yeah, well, you Westerners have affluence and education. Look at the vultures—they fly really high but look at what they come down to eat.” It was always a source of amusement to him.

The chant conveys the message of spreading loving-kindness to all living beings, “the seen and the unseen.” Again, we realize that even if we don’t see or know them on a personal level, we know that all beings are worthy and would respond to that wish to live in safety and happiness. “Living near or far away, those born and to be born.” In the Pāli, it’s *sambhavesī vā*, those beings that are seeking birth: they don’t know what they are in for. They think, “Boy, I can’t wait to get born.” They get bored of something, whatever realm they’re in, and they think, “I want to be born, I want to be reborn.” Of course, that’s the cycle—it goes around and around.

So, having that deep sense of kindness and compassion towards all beings— “May all beings be at ease.” “*Sabbe satta sukhita hontu*; *sabbe satta bhavante sukhitatta.” “*May all beings bring that happiness into being”—it then comes back to how we live with each other, living with loving-kindness.

“Let none deceive another”: the commitment to real honesty and straightforwardness in our dealings with each other and, again, recognizing that how beings can have a sense of safety and happiness is by having a sense of trust with each other. “Let none deceive another.” Be solidly committed to that which is true and try to be as upfront and clear with each other as possible.

It’s also good to qualify that, bringing it back to the sense of being gentle in speech as well, because sometimes we can take truth as an ideal and forget the effect it’s going to have on the ground. Skillfulness is very important in how we deal with each other.

“Or despise any being in any state”: there is a common human tendency to lift oneself up by putting somebody else down. “Despise” is a very strong word, but it has the sense of looking down on somebody, blowing them off, or disregarding them in some way. As human beings we easily do that because there is a sense that criticizing or being able to put others down lifts ourselves up a bit. It’s just not a very beautiful mental state.

When I went to Thailand, I had been traveling around the world for about a year and then was ordained as a Buddhist monk. After having been a monk for about sixteen years, I went back to Canada for the first time for a visit. After being in the rural culture of monasteries in the northeast of Thailand, which is quite a gentle culture, I found it quite painful to see how people spoke and talked, putting each other down. Being exposed to media and the sarcasm, critical put-downs, and snide comments: I found it very painful.

It’s ordinary. I don’t think my family was more egregious than anybody else. In fact, they were pretty good. It’s just a norm within the culture. I think it’s important to become very conscious of that, so that we aren’t drawn into putting anybody down in any way, making fun of others, criticizing, or being sarcastic.

“Let none, through anger or ill will, wish harm upon another”: this means protecting and sustaining your thoughts of loving-kindness and well-wishing, or at least neutrality. And then there is the phrase, “even as a mother protects with her life her child, her only child.” The Buddha very consciously uses the archetypal image of the mother who identifies with the child. It’s her only child and therefore, there is a ceaseless well-wishing on her part. Even if a mother is not right there with the child, her antennae are out. The slightest sound pulls the mother back to check and make sure that the child is okay, so the image is very apt.

Then the Buddha says, “With a boundless heart should one cherish all living beings.” The sense is that, in the way that the mother doesn’t think of herself and her first thought is for the child, we, too, have that boundless quality through which we’re not thinking of ourselves anymore, we’re setting ourselves aside. We establish the quality of cherishing all living beings and radiating kindness, allowing those thoughts and feelings of kindness, of mettā, to permeate: “spreading upwards to the skies and downward to the depths, outwards and unbounded, freed from hatred and ill will.”

There is a sense of unobstructed radiating and of not choosing. Not saying, “I’ll radiate upwards, downwards, out in all directions everywhere, except for that person.” We don’t have that limitation.

This emphasizes the quality of being freed from hatred and ill will and that the basis of loving-kindness is abiding in non-aversion. It’s not being trapped by negativity, aversion, ill will, or irritation. It’s important to recognize that though thoughts of irritation may come up in the mind, as long as we don’t feed, nurture, or support them, they’re just thoughts. Or if there is a memory or perception, as long as we don’t invest in, believe in, or support it, then it doesn’t have a landing place. It doesn’t have a place to establish itself. So as long as we don’t identify with it, it ceases.

The nature of the human mind is such that we have a whole bank of experiences, both internally, within ourselves, and externally, from society, that impinge on us. All of that can pop up in the mind as thoughts because that is what a mind is for, to provide thoughts. But as meditators, we have to use discernment. What are we going to invest in? What are we going to put my energy into?

That is where *kamma* is created, whether it be the mental *kamma* of investing in thoughts of ill will, aversion, and greed, or the mental *kamma* of investing in renunciation, loving-kindness, and compassion. We are making that choice. That’s the *kamma* that we’re creating.

Sometimes people think, perhaps if they’re upset or devastated, “I had this terrible thought of aversion. . .” Well, did you act on it? No? Well, don’t make a problem out of it.

Thoughts pop up in the same way that there are all kinds of things happening in the world around us. What do we pay attention to? Where do we allow our attention to rest and gather momentum? Abiding in loving-kindness is a conscious choice that we make, both for ourselves and on account of how it affects others.

“Whether standing or walking, seated or lying down.” These are the four postures. If we’re not doing one, we’re doing another, 24/7. This is our opportunity for practice: whether sitting, walking, lying down, or standing.

“Free from drowsiness”: of course, it helps not to let the mind get clouded. It isn’t just any sort of drowsiness or sleepiness, however, but the kind of drowsiness or dopiness that can come from going on automatic pilot. We can drowse through all sorts of interactions and activities.

“One should sustain this recollection.” The word that’s used in the sutta itself is *sati*: to sustain this mindfulness, this awareness, this recollection. “This is a sublime abiding.”

This is a chant that many of the people associated with monasteries know by heart. It’s helpful to have these chants available so that when you chant, you can pick out phrases that resonate. Things will resonate differently at different times. It’s good to have a phrase or a whole series of phrases that help remind you.

During the time that I was on sabbatical in Thailand, a couple of years ago now, I was living on my own, and I used those phrases that I introduced yesterday a lot. Something that also struck a chord with me is the phrase, “Wishing in gladness and in safety, may all beings be at ease,” in both English and Pāli. Because I chant it in Pāli all the time, the Pāli is meaningful for me as well. So I would alternate back and forth. I would walk almsround and that would be the mantra. Not just repeating it as quickly as I could, but planting that seed and carrying it through, planting that seed and carrying it through, generating loving-kindness. I found it very fruitful.

So take some of these phrases and recollections and experiment with them. Work with them and see what happens.