From Insight to Love
Lovingkindness and Compassion as a Path to Awakening
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So through this practice, in this retreat, a number of things are going on, hopefully. And one is the cultivation of the *mettā*. We could say the awakening of the heart, the awakening of a different way of being in the world. One could say that. And the development of the *mettā*, the deepening of the *mettā* as a gift, as a healing for ourselves and for the world. And all the benefits that that brings, and all the beauty that that brings. And we've talked also about the *samādhi*, and the development of that and the benefits of that. And in this retreat in particular, how love develops insight. How love itself and the development of love leads to insight. We'll be talking more about that. But in *this* talk, what I want to go into a little bit is how insights can lead to love, how the process of insight can feed and nourish the process of *mettā* and compassion. So nourishing love through insight.

It can seem at first that what we're doing in this practice is we're putting in lots of huff and puff, and building up some *mettā*, creating some *mettā*, creating love. And in a sense, that's true. *Mettā* is a fabrication, it's true. All things are fabrications, and *mettā* is a fabrication. But what can also seem to be the case – and it can move towards this becoming clearer – is that perhaps love, *mettā*, compassion, is the natural state, the natural expression when the mind, the consciousness is not clouded by clinging and ignorance. When the clinging is relaxed, the *mettā* is there, the compassion is there and the love is there. And as ignorance, as this misunderstanding of the nature of the self, the nature of the world, the nature of things, as that begins to dissolve a little bit, in the moments when that's not there so strong, then the love is there as a natural state and a natural expression.

When we talk about insight, oftentimes we use this word, and we say 'insight meditation,' and sometimes it's sort of, "I wonder what's actually meant there?" Insight, to me, is that which releases clinging. Okay? So there's clinging, there's constricting ourselves around something inner or outer, pushing it away, pulling it towards us, holding on to it, struggling with it. And clinging brings with it suffering. Insight is that which, either through intellectual understanding, through reflection, just an intuitive sense, some very organic sense, at any level at all (fairly easy or superficial, right down to the depths of understanding), releases that clinging and therefore releases suffering. So that's what insight is. The Buddha's enormously interested in this, and he's interested in ways of seeing, ways of seeing ourselves, our lives, the moment, ways of seeing and relating, that bring this release. And with the release, with the release from clinging, comes love. So ways of looking that bring a release of clinging and bring with that love.

And so what I want to go into a little bit is perhaps a possibility of incorporating some of that into the *mettā* practice and the practice of compassion. So we can see in our lives (and hopefully this should get more and more clear as our understanding deepens): when there is clinging or aversion, there's less love. So a very obvious one is fear. Fear is a kind of clinging, it's a kind of aversion, a kind of constriction. When that's around, it kind of blocks love. It blocks our capacity to love, our capacity of openness of heart, of connection. And we can actually see that love and fear have a kind of inversely proportional relationship, as the mathematicians say: more fear, kind of the less accessibility to love.

And love has a way of actually dissolving fear, can do. Conversely, we can see in ourselves, certainly, and in the world and in others, how much when there's a lot of fear, oftentimes there's a lot of anger right there, a lot of violence right there, and we just have to open a newspaper to see a lot of that.

A little over a couple of years ago, I had the good fortune to meet someone in India. Not a spiritual person at all. He didn't regard himself that way, very sort of humanist person. I and some friends, about ten or twelve of us, had gone out to work at a leprosy community in Maharashtra in India, and spent about a month there. And met the guy who started this community. His name is Baba Amte. His story is quite remarkable, and it kind of illustrates this relationship between fear and love.

He'd grown up very rich, one of these very wealthy Indian, almost aristocratic [families], and got a job as a lawyer at some point, and then met Gandhi when he was a young man. And somehow moved towards representing the disenfranchised in India. So he was, I think, living in Calcutta and representing the people, the workers who clean out the sewers in Calcutta. So you can kind of imagine what conditions they were living in, and was trying to represent them legally. And Gandhi said to him at one point, "If you want to understand someone, you have to step into their shoes for a while."

So he took that, he took Gandhi at his words, and he got a job down there cleaning the sewers in Calcutta. You can imagine. He decided to do that for a year. And one day, he was coming home at night in the dark from a day's working in the sewers, and he tripped over something in the road. He looked down, and he saw that it was a man lying in the road, abandoned and dying of leprosy in its final stages. He saw this man there and was so horrified that he ran home. Immediate kind of knee-jerk response, and he ran to his home. And when he arrived home, kind of out of breath, he got there and then he realized, "Oh, what have I done?" And he sort of gathered himself, went back, found the man, picked him up, took him home, and nursed him in the days until he died, and was with him in that period.

He had already seen this kind of relationship between fear and love, and the closing that can come with fear. But he said that was really a turning point for him. So he gave up his job as a lawyer, and he somehow bent the ear of the Maharashtran government to give him a piece of desert scrubland. He and his wife and two baby boys, I think four lepers and a lame cow [laughter], this ragtaggle mob, went to this scrub piece of desert, basically, in Maharashtra. They started, mostly him, started to build this community. And that was, I think, in the early fifties. I went there a few years ago. And amazing what's been built there. Five thousand people or something live there. They're completely self-subsistent in many things. Beautiful place, a lot of joy there. And remarkable to meet this man. I mean, this is kind of extraordinary, you know – most of us, we can only appreciate that. And to meet this man who consistently in his life had chosen love over fear, and that he was 92, and actually has not been able to walk or has not been able to stand up for, I don't know how many years, forty years or something. All he can do is walk a little and lie down. And just the presence that was there through a lifetime of keeping making the choice of love over fear, love over fear, love over fear. Really extraordinary.

So I want to just, in a way, actually, now that I mention it, take a little bit of a tangent. Because some people have been saying that fear has been coming up in the practice, and anyway there's this relationship between fear and love. So I just want to say a little bit about working with fear. As I mentioned, I think, in the talk on *samādhi*, sometimes the mind feels like it's deepening and opening into kind of new states, new senses of openness, or depths. And sometimes, with that, a fear will come

up. Some of the time, there are these two things kind of going on at once: there's a sense of the new space and the openness of that and maybe the loveliness of that, even, and the fear. And at the same time, they're there. If the fear isn't that strong – and sometimes there's no fear, but if the fear isn't that strong, it's possible not to ignore the fear, but also just to kind of tip the mind over a little bit, tip the awareness over a little bit to go into the loveliness. Just incline the mind to what's pleasant there, even if it's just very non-dramatically pleasant. Give the mind some sense of enjoyment, of something that it can trust there. Not pushing away the fear or ignoring it. It can be really skilful if that feels like it's going on in the practice. If it feels really strong, then it needs turning to and working with. And sometimes, of course, fear has nothing to do with the practice or whatever. So I just want to briefly go into working with fear a little bit.

So, often we run away from fear, we don't even stop to wait and investigate a little bit: what actually is this that I'm running away from? What actually is fear? If we go into it a little bit more clearly, can see: fear is, one way of breaking it down is, fear involves some unpleasant physical sensations – you know, the heart pounding, or the tummy butterflying or whatever – unpleasant physical sensations, and the reaction to them, their being unpleasant. Usually, not always, some thoughts, which are generally unpleasant, spinning around, and the reaction to them. Body sensations, unpleasant, and reaction; the thoughts, unpleasant, and the reaction. And then something a bit more subtle: a constriction of the mind, a constriction of consciousness. It feels like consciousness kind of shrinks down with fear and becomes very small. And we don't generally like having a small consciousness; we enjoy more a spacious kind of consciousness. And so that constricting of the consciousness is also experienced as unpleasant, and there will be a reaction to that, generally a reaction of aversion.

Not to be anal, but that kind of constellation is what makes up fear. And just to mention that, just to go into that in order to have ways in to work with fear, so that we can get hold of a piece and begin working with it, rather than just being overwhelmed by this mass of fear, which is often the case.

So what is fear? Beginning to get a handle on it. What is our relationship with fear? Generally, it's aversion, it's unpleasant and we flee it. We have fear of fear. Now, this is very common. There's fear around, and we're actually afraid of fear. It's so unpleasant that we're running away from it. In practice, we can begin working with fear in different ways so that we gradually learn to accommodate fear. And gradually, slowly, over time, learn to have a confidence with fear, with the presence of fear. This is one thing that's lacking. Fear comes up, and we're afraid of it, we don't feel confident with it. If it's possible to actually practise in a different way, even instead of trying to be so mindful of the fear, practising complete – if possible, as complete as possible – a total acceptance of the physical sensations of fear. So that consciousness or awareness feels like it's actually more spacious than the fear. The fear sensations can be there in a spacious awareness, and they're just allowed, they're just allowed. They're welcomed, even. So this really is a practice.

And over time one of the things that can develop is we really begin to feel like, it's just some unpleasant sensations. Awareness, "I can accommodate this. I can accommodate this." And it's possible for the unpleasant sensations to be there without any constriction of the mind or paralysis or freaking out or anything like that. It's really a practice, but it's a genuine possibility.

So usually the relationship, as I said, to fear, is aversion, and it's fleeing the unpleasant. That fleeing actually makes the fear increase. The aversion is not something neutral. This is really important. So our aversion to things is not a neutral element. When we flee fear, which is understandable, but when we flee it, when we're averse to it, it actually makes the fear increase. It makes it feel more difficult.

This fleeing, this aversion, is part of the constellation of fear. When we flee the physical sensations, where do we flee to? We don't like the physical sensations, where do we go? We go straight up into the mind, which is already spinning with thoughts. And that energy goes into the mind, into the thinking, and just adds to the kind of whirlwind up there. The thoughts spiral. They're generally not helpful anyway at that point, and we get an increase in fear.

This reaction to fear and anxiety, the reaction to anxiety is actually *part of* the anxiety itself. It's not that there's anxiety, and now I have whatever reaction to it. The fear of the fear, the fleeing of it, the aversion to it, is actually part of the fear itself. They're not two separate things. If I can learn through practice to really welcome the sensations of fear, I'm actually taking away that reaction of aversion, and I'll see, through practice, the fear cannot support itself. It cannot support itself without my reaction of aversion. It cannot. And not to take my word for it – to see in one's own practice: fear needs my fear of it. Fear needs my aversion to it. Otherwise it cannot support itself.

So, to see, when fear is around, because it's very normal, it's very human: am I putting a pressure on it? Am I pushing it away? A pressure for it to be different? Am I judging myself that it's around? "Boy, I'm really going backward now. I'm a crappy meditator, should probably just leave these good people to get on with it and go home." What am I telling myself? What am I concluding about the presence of fear? That judging of myself is putting a pressure on, and that pressure is another factor that will build the fear. It's another factor that adds fuel to the fire of fear. What am I thinking, what am I believing it says about me, that there's fear there?

So rather, can we actually shift and see the humanity of fear? That it's such a human thing to have fear, it's actually built into our – I don't know, genetic make-up or whatever. It's built into our biology. It's very human. It's true that a lot of it is unhelpful and irrelevant. But the actual mechanism of fear is very human. Can we actually just open to the fact of the humanity of it? And bring some kindness to ourselves, *mettā* to oneself. At that moment when I have fear, I'm giving *mettā* to myself, who is the self right now? Self is with fear. That's who I am. And so it's not the self when this fear goes. It's the self right now with the fear.

On a sort of larger scale, you know, we think about fear in our lives, and how much of it is actually unnecessary and irrelevant and really not helpful, really just getting in the way. And think how much fear is there because of future thinking, worrying about the future: will I be okay? Will this happen? Will that *not* happen? Whatever. A huge, really deep part of practice is actually asking ourselves, "I'm worried about the future. I notice fear of the future. Do I actually know, genuinely, how to take care of the future, what that really, really, really means, to take care of the future? What is it that leads to our well-being and happiness, really, *really*?"

To really understand what leads to happiness, what takes care of the future, to understand that deeply, not just intellectually, in the cells, in the bones, that's, to me, a sign of very mature practice. So, you know, we're inundated with all this advertising, or you need this, you need that. And just the basic things which most of us take for granted, or even want a nice house, or a nice relationship, a nice career

and this and that. And just to really understand, *really*, what is it that leads to happiness, what is it that leads to well-being? The Buddha puts enormous emphasis on this question, really understanding and really living this question: what is it that leads to well-being? So all the things that we can get off track with that – what other people think of me, or, you know, it's endless. What other people think of me does not lead to well-being, cannot lead to well-being. No way. It only leads to a repetition of anxiety and tightness.

So what *does* lead to happiness? How *do* we take care of the future? And the Buddha talks about this. It's through the cultivation of those beautiful qualities of mind and heart. They will be our treasure, our fruit, throughout our life and at our deathbed. So what we're doing here, building love and compassion as habits of the mind and the heart, this is the real treasure. And you know, all the other lists, mindfulness, equanimity, and joy, and this and that.

Cultivation will take care of the future, and also in relationship to the present. We worry about the future, but if the relationship to the present is okay, is open, interested, present, alive, caring, then the future tends to take care of itself. And as I say, I really do think it's a sign of real maturity in practice to really know that and live that. It's quite rare. There's so much else that can distract us and pull us into, "No, I need this. This is what I need. This is the security I need. This is what I need to take care of." So it's really, really some maturity in practice to be clear about this. And it can move to a place where there's just much much less worry about, "Will I be secure when I get old? Will there be enough money? Will I be alone? Will my partner leave? Will they die? Will this, that, that, that, that?"

Okay, anyway, as I said, that was a bit of a tangent! [laughter] But fear *is* important in relationship to love, and it's important anyway as human beings.

So what I want to look at is, as I said, how to incorporate insight into *mettā* practice. We can incorporate it and kind of use it as something that feeds and nourishes the *mettā* in a way as a sort of background to the *mettā* practice, can bring it in. So when we open up this door, how insight feeds *mettā* and compassion, it's actually huge. The possibilities are, don't know if they're endless, but there's a ton in there. So I just want to draw out maybe three possibilities, and talk a little bit about this *anattā*, what John talked about the other day and what we're mentioning quite a lot: this not-self, this emptiness of self, no-self.

Love, the development of *mettā* – some of you have already mentioned a little bit, but anyway, just as a long-term view – this practice of *mettā* can lead in the practice to a kind of dissolving of the boundaries between self and other. And there's a kind of, at times, and not to grasp at this, at times, through the practice, through the deepening of the practice, there's a kind of dissolution and a kind of oneness that comes in. And there's just a sense of oneness. Self and other, instead of that separation there's a oneness there. And this is hugely valuable to the practice. I mean, it's a really beautiful thing for the heart to be able to have a sense of and open to, at times. It's not that we will *live* in a state of oneness, because that's impermanent too.

But *anattā* is a little bit different. There's a little bit, slightly different emphasis in the understanding, and it can be tricky to understand it. The Buddha talks about something called the 'three characteristics,' which some of you may have heard of, and others maybe it might be new. Three characteristics of phenomena, three characteristics of experiences, of things. And they are: **(1)**

impermanence, change, **(2)** *dukkha* or unsatisfactoriness, **(3)** and *anattā* (not-self, not me, not mine). And I'll go into these a little bit. So impermanence, unsatisfactoriness (*dukkha*), and not-self (*anattā*).

It's interesting in the tradition, sometimes even in the commentaries, not in the Buddha's original teachings but in the commentaries, and even nowadays teaching, people have a view of the three characteristics as something that, it's almost like you begin to open to in practice, and in opening to them, the fact of death and impermanence and unsatisfactoriness, what descends is this kind of great existential anguish and torment and fear. The whole existence begins to quake, and there's the renting of garments and the gnashing of teeth, and all this stuff. [laughter]

I don't particularly buy that. I don't think it's really helpful for practice, okay? Sometimes, it's true, contemplating impermanence and things like that, there can be a kind of fear that comes in; sometimes with the not-self, a kind of fear coming. But that's not any end point, and it's not even that it has to be there in a dramatic way. Sometimes people begin contemplating impermanence, etc., and they start getting really frantic about things, and take that as a view that "Wow, my practice must really be going deep now." And actually it's just aversion and fear that's kicked in; it's not really that helpful.

Three characteristics are ways of looking, and I'll go into this. They're ways of looking, in the moment, at experience, that lead to freedom and, in our case, lead to love. They're ways of looking. They're kind of like looking at the world through particular kinds of lenses that lead to freedom. This is what the Buddha's interested in.

So I'll go through each, and there are also ways – perhaps for us the not-self one is particularly interesting. I'll go through each, and they all, in a way, can lead to the not-self one. I'll explain what I mean. I should actually say right now: I'm outlining some of the possibilities for practice. So if you're listening and you think, "*Pfff*," you know, that's completely fine. The basic practice, what we're doing, there are no problems with that. You don't have to go complicating it if it feels like this is a complication, or if you're feeling like "I'm not doing it right" or anything like that. What I'm really doing is just offering some possibilities. And in a way, for some people, they will be workable because of previous practice or whatever. For others, it will just be a sense of possibilities for the future; possibilities, maybe a sense of how deep this practice of *mettā* can actually go, the levels to which it can be taken. I feel like it's important to put out what the possibilities of practice are, even if they don't feel realizable and accessible for me right now, just so that we don't diminish what the possibilities of practice are. So if you're listening and it just feels like, "Interesting, but no, thank you. Forget it," that's completely fine. But also to feel free maybe sometimes to experiment with some of this.

(1) So, first one: **impermanence**. All of these, there are many ways to go about them. Impermanence. One level of meaning is contemplating, being aware of, remembering, death and the context of our life being so short in the context of the universe and the spans of the universe. So remembering death. Just an aside, but the Buddha was saying, "Monks, you should remember death" or whatever, and one monk said, "Every day I remember death," and he said, "Very good, but not good enough." [laughter] And then another monk said, I don't know, "Every morning and evening I remember death." He said, "Very good, but not good enough," and so it went on. And a monk said, I don't know, "Every time I walk somewhere I remember death." And another monk said, "Every time I exhale I remember death." "Good, very good, but not good enough." And then a monk said, "Every time I inhale and every time I exhale I remember death." And the Buddha said, "Very good." [laughter]

What it's pointing to is wearing some lenses that lead to freedom, through which we look at life. This is what is interesting. It's not just something that, "Oh, yeah, I remember this thing we're supposed to think about, impermanence and death, occasionally." It's actually looking at the current moment through the lens of impermanence. So one meaning of impermanence is death and what I might call vastnesses of time. I think the universe is 13.7 billion years old, which is, you know, just a really long time! [laughter] It's staggeringly vast. Our lives are incredibly short, you know, sixty years if we're lucky, eighty, a hundred if we're really lucky. It's tiny. Can we actually see this moment right now, right now, this moment, through the lens of our death? We don't know what came before. Theories and religious theories aside, we don't know what comes afterwards. This moment here – colour, light, sound – is in the context of death and that kind of vastness. Can you get a sense of the moment through that lens?

Now, this is a practice. This is one possibility of practice. Sometimes that will bring up fear, but sometimes there's a way of just being with it that actually it opens up into something else. And that's what we're interested in, this opening up into something else. We're not particularly interested in building fear, like I said.

Is it possible to be doing the *mettā* practice and have this awareness of death and vastness as a backdrop? So just a reminder. Our own and others. And what might happen if that's the case, if we're doing that, if we're practising that way, what might then happen to the heart and the heart's relationship with self, with other, with life? So these are possibilities to play with – if not on this retreat, then, you know, on your thirtieth *mettā* retreat. [laughs] It's just possibilities I'm pointing to.

What happens in the context of the *mettā* and compassion practice, when we reflect, giving *mettā* to the neutral person, the friend, the benefactor, the difficult person, "*They* are subject to death"? And having that running alongside or a backdrop to the *mettā* practice. What happens to the heart? What can happen to the *mettā*?

They are also subject not just to death but to the uncertainty and change that is, in a way, woven into the fabric of the moment of our lives. They don't know what the next moment will bring, what will happen to the mind, to the body. Can that consciousness, too – it's just a quiet reminder – can that be woven into the *mettā* practice? I'm talking about the possibility of taking the whole thing to a whole other level, really.

So there's death, there's the vastness, there's the contemplation of all of us being subject to uncertainty. When, if through our insight meditation practice or whatever, we're actually contemplating impermanence, we have a current of that contemplation going on, what we can notice is a very rapid kind of impermanence. And this is one of the doors, and for some it's the easiest door, actually, into *anattā*. When I look at myself, what I call my self and my life, my sense of it at first sight, the sense of the self is something fixed and something that's lasting. I'm the same self that I was yesterday, and that I was twenty years ago, and I will be the same in twenty years' time. But when I look more closely, more microscopically, I actually can't find anything there that stays the same, that doesn't change. Everything is changing. You can get a sense that this self, it's not what I think it is. There's nothing that I could find that's fixed in that way.

So again, if one's used to contemplating in this way particularly, sometimes in the course of the *mettā* practice you can just bring in that contemplation. So in a way, one's sitting or walking, doing the

mettā, and just a little bit more space to the awareness, including the change that's going on right then, the moment-to-moment change and the unfindability of self, the unfindability of a fixed self. In that space of what opens up, because the sense of solidity of self has given way a little bit, in that space, again, more *mettā* can come in. It's possible, a whole other level of *mettā* can come in. Possible to explore, possible to play with.

Another possibility. I'm just going through a lot of territory very quickly. Really, just to let go of what doesn't feel relevant, and maybe to take a few pieces or one piece or whatever. With impermanence, when I look again at my experience and what I call my self, all I actually see is a perception. A perception of a body sensation, a perception of a sight, a sound. I can't find anything else but perceptions of things. Or a thought or an emotion. All I see – there's nothing else. To have a perception requires some thing to perceive. And I see: I can't find a self, and all I find is these moments of perception. It's almost as if 'I,' the 'I' is nothing else but these moments of perception. Because perception takes a world to perceive, outer or inner, it means that this self, being only perception, is not separate from the world. This is not easy to understand, I know, but all I see is moments of perception. Those moments of perception are part of the world and part of me. I cannot separate. If I can open to that sense of non-separation, in the non-separation comes the love, a whole deeper sense of love, possibility, and of not-self. First characteristic: impermanence and change, death.

(2) Second one, ***dukkha***. So this means unsatisfactoriness or suffering in its very broad sense. One reflection is that, again, we're actually all in the same boat with this. We're all subject to *dukkha*, subject to the difficulties of life, to the struggles of life, to the problems and the sufferings of life. Sometimes just dropping that thought in – so this is much simpler now – you're doing the *mettā,* and you just drop in the thought of, "We share that. We are all in the same boat with *dukkha*. It's a factor of life. It's a fact of existence." And just dropping in this sense of, "We are all in the same boat." What does that do to the heart? What will that do to the *mettā*?

As I mentioned in one of the talks, can also begin to notice something with clinging. So 'clinging' meaning constricting ourselves around something, pushing something away because we don't like it, because it's unpleasant, pulling it towards us. 'Clinging' – that whole thing. Can notice: when the clinging is there, what happens to the heart? So just to notice this. It's like an experiment. When there's clinging, the heart closes, sometimes just a little bit. And you can actually feel that. Sometimes just to put the awareness in the centre of the chest area, just very lightly, and notice: when there's clinging there, there's a slight closing, or a large closing. When the clinging goes, the heart centre opens. Just to notice that.

So another possibility is to be doing the *mettā* practice or the compassion practice when we move to it, to be in the moment doing that, again, broaden the attention a little bit, and just be aware of if there is clinging to anything – to a body sensation, to a sound, pushing it away, struggling with something, to an emotion, whatever, to a train of thought. Is there clinging there? And if there is, is it possible to actually just relax and release that clinging? And in so doing, the heart opens. So to be doing the *mettā* practice with actually a slightly larger sense of awareness that's aware of whether there's clinging or not and just releasing. Just keep releasing the clinging as a way of opening the heart.

So that's, in itself, a practice to do that. The way in usually is to have, again, this sensitivity to the whole body, a subtle sense, a sensitivity to the subtle sort of sense of the whole body. That subtle sense

of the body will reflect when clinging is around. It will cramp up or constrict, sometimes in very subtle ways. Can pick up on that in the slightly broader awareness as one's doing the *mettā* and just relax it. In so doing, the clinging relaxes, the struggle relaxes, and the heart opens.

When there's a push and pull of clinging, we're pushing away what we don't like, what's unpleasant, or pulling towards ourselves what we want, what's pleasant, when that's going on there is suffering with what's pleasant or unpleasant. That's the insight of this characteristic. That's the insight of *dukkha*. The suffering depends not on the thing. It depends on the struggle, on the push or the pull. To feel this and to see it. When there's push and pull there, there's constriction, there's suffering. When we relax that, there is release, there's ease. And you can feel this. And there's also love. There's also love in the absence of clinging.

But as I mentioned the other day, the self, the self-sense, the ego-sense, is empty. It doesn't exist by itself, of its own steam, of its own support. It actually depends on struggling with something, on clinging, on pushing away or pulling. It needs that food. And we can see: as we're in this more open space with the *mettā*, let go of some clinging if you feel it, if it's possible. Just relax that, the body sense, relax the clinging. The actual sense of self quietens, and the quietening of the sense of self, the quietening of the sense of separation from other, because self and other go together. Less separation, more love. So that would be working on the *dukkha* angle to come into the *anattā*, seeing that the self is actually dependent on pushing and pulling. It's empty.

(3) And then we can go into the not-self in a more direct way, this ***anattā*** in a more direct way, the third characteristic in a more direct way. This is important to understand: we're not trying to destroy the self, like ego destruction, or get rid of the self, or dissolve it in some way, or even merge it into some cosmic sense of something. Sometimes, and in really deep practice, there *can* be a sense of just merging into a oneness or merging into a kind of infinite love. And at very deep levels, that's possible. That possibility is a treasure. It's something really to be valued and explored in very deep practice. But it's not quite the same as *anattā*, what we're aiming for, valuable as it is. Rather, we want to understand something. We want to understand something about this self, and understand it in a way that it brings freedom.

And it's difficult – it takes time to understand this concept of *anattā*. It's not something that comes easy or simple. Even if we can kind of get it intellectually, to really get it at a heart level where it's making a difference to our lives is something that takes time. Absolutely, it takes time. So not to worry that, "Oh, I'm not understanding this yet" or whatever. It really takes time, *anattā*. Or "What a terrible practice I have because I don't understand it yet."

There's a story from the Jewish tradition. It was Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement, which is the holiest day in the year, and when you sort of – what's the word? – open your heart and your wrongdoings, etc., to God, and the forgiveness of that. It's the holiest day of the year. And it was in the synagogue, and the rabbi's there, and everyone was praying. He suddenly sinks to the floor and starts beating his chest and saying, "I am nothing! I am nothing!" And then the cantor, the guy who leads the singing and the choir, then *he* sinks to the floor and starts beating his chest, "I am nothing! I am nothing!" And then the janitor, the guy who cleans the toilets and things, *he* sinks to the floor, "I am nothing! I am nothing!" And so the cantor turns to the rabbi and says, "Look who thinks he's nothing!" [laughter]

There's a way of all this not-self business where actually the self just grabs hold of it and makes a whole other, "I'm more selfless than you." Or "I understand" or whatever. Not to grasp too tightly. It really, really, really does take time to understand it. And there are all kinds of levels of understanding. We're just putting it out there, and whatever way that it can find its way in is fine.

So with the *anattā*, again, practising ways of looking that lead to freedom, that lead to release, and that lead to love. With *anattā*, working with it directly, it's a way of looking at experience. Usually we look at experience, a thought comes up, either we're completely identified with it and we say it's 'me' or it's 'mine.' Or a body sensation is there, it's 'me' or 'mine.' Or an emotion, 'me' or 'mine.' Sometimes we're actually conscious that we're doing that. We're conscious that we're saying, "Yeah, of course it's me and mine. Of course it's my knee. Who the hell else's knee is it?!" [laughter] Or, "Of course it's my thought." Sometimes it's very conscious. Most of the time, it goes on without us even being aware of it. We're just saying me-mine, me-mine, me-mine, me-mine – virtually uninterrupted throughout our life.

So what the Buddha is saying is not so much a sense of making a philosophical statement: "There is a self" or "There isn't a self." And actually, he tended to ignore that question, said it's not the appropriate question. He'd say, rather, can you practise in a certain way? And that way is, can you look at the present moment experience and actually just unhook the 'me' and 'mine'? So 'me' and 'mine' goes and puts its hook of identification into everything. And all the difficulty and all the problem that comes out of that. He says, can you just unhook and regard the moment's experience, the body sensation, the thought, the emotion, whatever it is, as not me, not mine? So he's not making any metaphysical statement about the nature of self or no self or whatever. He's pointing to a way of practising that leads to freedom. And it really is a practice. It takes some time.

So again, a number of people have mentioned, and it's very common because it's very human, a kind of judging mind come in. And often it's judging of ourselves. And the comparing mind comes into, in this case, the retreat situation. In a way, a retreat is just a mirror of what goes on in our lives; it's just we're seeing a bit more closely the kinds of thoughts that we have anyway, the comparing, the judging.

So we're sitting here, and we think, "God, I bet that everyone else is probably in the 134th *jhāna* by now." [laughter] "And I'm still struggling away with the hindrances" or whatever. Or, "Actually, they're probably all enlightened, and they could probably all go home. They're just staying so that I don't feel too bad." [laughter] Or whatever. This is very common, you know. And often it's us we put down, or it's others. You know, it's others, and we look at someone, and we say, "Call yourself a meditator?" or whatever. It comes in either way. It's the same deal. Comparing, measurement, judgment – this is part of what the self-sense is. It's like the other side of the coin of the self-sense. It's what self-sense does. In a way, it *has* to do it. Self, you could say self feeds on measurement. It gets its *oomph* and its energy from measuring, from comparing, from judging. That's how it actually creates a separation between this and that, "This is me, and that isn't." And it does it by comparing, by measuring. To establish a difference between self and other, I need to compare, I need to judge. So it's woven very tightly into the fabric of what self-sense is and what it is to be human, really. And woven into ignorance.

Not to underestimate the power of the *mettā* for working with this. So judgment thoughts, comparing thoughts, they're thoughts. And there's a certain groove that the mind gets into, comparing, judging. *Mettā* is another thought. And gradually, one way of looking at what we're doing is establishing another groove, a much more wholesome and helpful groove to the mind, that's actually about connection and acceptance and kindness, not judgment, not comparison. Slowly, over time, the groove of *mettā* will be more established than the groove of comparison and judgment and measurement. And that's a real possibility. In the moment when comparison is happening, to kick the *mettā* practice in, to inject a bit more energy into the *mettā* practice is also helpful, because it's like using the thinking that's already going on, and just saying, "I'll use the thinking energy because it's already going on, but I'll use it in a wholesome way. And I'll just plug away at that until the comparing and all that begins to lose energy." So really to trust the power of the *mettā* practice, and the compassion as we get on to it.

At a deeper level, though, the judgment thoughts, again, they're not me, not mine. It's like thoughts are just arising out of nowhere and disappearing back into nowhere. It's like having a radio on a very bad radio station, that's just putting out these thoughts. They're not me, not mine. The more, in time, we can practise seeing our thoughts that way, the more freeing. And we can really have a freedom from judgment in life, a freedom from believing or being involved in any of that stuff. Nothing that I'm talking about today is abstract. I'm talking about very real possibilities. It's completely possible for everyone in this room to be totally free of judgment, self-judgment, of the comparing mind, of the measuring mind. It's a very real possibility of practice.

So the 'not me, not mine' is looking at the moment's experience, and just quietly regarding it as 'not me, not mine,' whether it's a thought or a body sensation. So again, you're doing the *mettā*, you can just, if you have a little skill already in this area, or if it already seems to be happening, experiment. You're doing the *mettā*, you're doing the compassion. A bit more space. What else is happening? Body sensation, thought, whatever, just seeing it as 'not me, not mine.' Including the awareness, because we also will then have an identification with awareness, which is a more subtle identification. We can let go of that identification. And that emptiness that opens up will be imbued with love. If it's not imbued with love, something's a little bit off balance with the practice, a little bit barking up the wrong tree. So with these three characteristics, one of the indicators that they're working properly is that they bring freedom and love, and not a sense of coldness and disconnection or fear, as I said before.

And similarly, it's actually possible to direct the *mettā*, the compassion, towards other, another person, and actually regard *them* as, whatever is happening, their experience is 'not me, not mine' in their case. What we call their 'aggregates,' what the Buddha called 'aggregates,' what makes up their experience, is also not belonging to anyone. You would think, "Well, who is there to give love to?" But somehow, it's possible that that actually just opens up a whole other level of love.

Okay, I think I'm going to stop there. And like I said, please, please just take what was relevant from that, which may be zero. [laughs] And don't bring in the measurement. It may be a possibility that you may be able to work with some of that, a little piece, one or two pieces. Partly it's important, I feel, just for this stuff to be out there, just for people to have a sense of the possibilities of the depth of the practice and the breadth of the practice. And may be something that you want to revisit. Three weeks

may seem like a long time, but it's actually a very short amount of time in relation to *mettā* and compassion – and particularly *mettā* and compassion as a path to awakening.

Okay. As that was fairly complicated, I think it might be good to have some questions, if you like. Difficult stuff that I've been talking about; I'm aware of that. Not so easy to understand or even to work with. If there are any questions from that, or any other questions anyway about the practice or whatever.

Q1: contemplation of death

Yogi: Regarding impermanence and contemplating on death. Various readings and other things I've gotten in the past suggest sometimes to consider different circumstances of your death, to help remain [?] preciousness of the moment. Thinking about different ways of dying, I often ponder – some of the recreational habits I have put me at risk a lot. And I think about what would that be like, falling off a cliff or things like that. And I find it really centres me sometimes. Other times, it brings that fear up a lot again. I'm just curious of your thoughts about that.

Rob: You can talk about that kind of contemplation of death as a separate thing. So let's talk about that first. Sometimes in the contemplation of death – and I think it should be part of practice, so it's not something morbid. And people think, "Hmm, I don't want to do that. It's a bit depressing." Sometimes in doing that, it will bring a real centring, a real sense of the preciousness of life, the beauty of it, the wonder of it. Sometimes it will bring up fear.

I would say just in terms of that practice, to keep working with it until it brings almost a sense of freedom with it as well – preciousness and freedom. And the fear is just a stage that one works through. In the context of what I've been talking about today, bringing it into the *mettā* practice, if it brings up the fear, it's not the right thing to bring in at the moment. So you might bring it in and it actually brings a sense of preciousness, of the gift of life or whatever, and in that sense can deepen in love. But if you bring it in and actually it's just stirring up some fear and stuff, it's actually going to close the *mettā* down a little bit, and I would leave it for that time and go to something, either come back to a very basic *mettā* practice or find some other contemplation that will help. So again, to reiterate, just being with the basic practice, there's already plenty, so you don't necessarily have to start adding things. I'm just putting it out there.

Q2: three characteristics implying each other

Yogi: Does the understanding of one characteristic lead to helping the understanding of the other characteristics?

Rob: Yeah, absolutely. People generally tend to have a favourite – it's the one they can kind of understand the easiest, and also their particular one that leads to a sense of freedom for them. And I don't know if human beings are roughly divided into three. I have no idea. [laughter] But they probably aren't, is my guess. The *anattā* one directly is a bit more difficult to understand. So for example, as I

was saying, with impermanence, if we just take impermanence, which is probably the easiest one to understand for most people. Impermanence obviously is impermanence, so everyone understands that. If I see that things are impermanent, I begin to see that they cannot give me a reliable sense of satisfaction; they cannot fulfil me in any ultimate or lasting way. So I begin to get an insight into the *dukkha* characteristic, the unsatisfactoriness. If I'm contemplating impermanence, something comes up, some moment, experience, a thought or an emotion or a body sensation, and I can see: it's impermanent, therefore automatically it's unsatisfactory in that sense.

These contemplations are not big – at first they might be quite cumbersome, like, "This big contemplation. I'm going to plunk it down on my practice, and it's this big thing." It can get to the point that it's almost like wearing some glasses – you don't even realize you have them on. It's very light, very just in the moment [snaps fingers] that's how were seeing, and there's a freedom that comes with it. If I see impermanence and I have a sense of unsatisfactoriness, there's a letting go there. I let go, I let go. And again, it doesn't lead to any coldness or disconnection from life. There's actually a warmth that goes with that. And then impermanence might lead to a sense of, an understanding of *anattā*, because, like I said, I look and I can't find anything that's not changing. I absolutely cannot find anything that does not change. The sense of self is fixed, lasting, permanent, steady. And I look inside, and all I see is impermanence, so therefore no fixed self. It's not really real in the way that I thought it was. All I can say there *is* is a continuum of mind moments, a continuum of experiences through time. So impermanence can lead to the others like that.

Yogi: Okay, I understand all that. Let's say impermanence is what I understand. And maybe I'm just judging on some level – the other two characteristics, are they going to be at a lower level of understanding?

Rob: Than if you did them directly?

Yogi: Yeah, than if they came directly. Is that just a judging mind?

Rob: It might be. I don't know. You'd have to answer that. I feel that the understanding of *anattā* through impermanence is not quite at the same level of depth of understanding as understanding *anattā* directly. But it can be enough to free, and it's freedom we're interested in, rather than a certain badge of whatever. It may be enough. And if that's your one, and if that's what works for you for *anattā*, that can bring enough freedom. But there are ways of understanding *anattā* that go even beyond the notion of impermanence, a whole other depth. If that's accessible, then that's great; if it's not, it's fine. There's enough freedom. There's plenty of freedom in that.

Yogi: And can the second way of understanding *anattā* come through more practice? Or what brings this about?

Rob: Yeah, more practice, and certain kinds of orientation in the practice, asking certain questions, looking at certain relationships. Or, for instance, practising directly in this way of regarding things as

not me, not mine. Which you may be able to move towards through the impermanence, in the sense "I can't find anything, therefore it doesn't belong to any fixed sense of self, therefore it's not me, not mine." But working in that more direct way can bring a bit more depth. I don't know if everyone would agree with that, teachers and whatnot, but that's my view.

Q3: relaxing *dukkha* to open *mettā*

Yogi: If you're working with *dukkha* and clinging, and you're letting go of the clinging and sort of, like you said, sense sort of an open heart, sometimes it can be that you notice a deeper level of clinging, kind of deeper. When you're practising *mettā* and you want to bring that into your practice … I'm not sure what the question is, really, but …

Rob: Where would you stop?

Yogi: Yeah!

Rob: Just to amplify a little bit what Rachel said: in working with this characteristic of *dukkha* directly, there is an awareness of clinging in the sense of what's going on. There's a contraction, and one relaxes that. Then there can be a sense of release, relief. Then what might show itself is a kind of more subtle, deeper level of clinging. And then one could just go on in this way. And the mind, the awareness just deepens and deepens and deepens. That on its own is an absolutely fantastic way to practise. It's just a deepening and more and more release, more and more calming. It goes back and forth between opening and a sense of contraction, opening and a sense of contraction, at deeper and deeper levels.

So the question was: if it can go deeper and deeper levels, and you're in the context of *mettā* practice, how do you know when to kind of, you know, jump off the elevator, so to speak? [laughter] It doesn't really matter. I would probably say, if you're opening your practice out a bit, just whatever clinging you notice, see if you can let go in that. And then, rather, pick up on the love that's there and be in the love with a slightly more spacious awareness. Then you'll notice more clinging, perhaps, and you can let go of that. Or you may just want to do it a little bit just as a way of kind of kick-starting some *mettā*. The heart's opening because there's less clinging, because you've let go of it, and you're just accessing some *mettā,* and then you can leave it at that and just be in the *mettā*. And maybe revisit it occasionally. But I wouldn't worry too much about the levels. In this context, the *mettā* is the important thing. So you're just using it as a way of deepening the *mettā*. You understand? Does that answer? Okay, good.

Q4: fear increasing when hearing teachings about fear, decreasing with *mettā*

Yogi: It's not exactly a question. It's just a reflection, really. I haven't been feeling any fear or anxiety, but when you were talking about fear and anxiety, I was noticing [?]. It's quite interesting, and then when you stopped talking about it, it went away! [laughter] There's no object [?].

Rob: Hmm! [laughter] Yeah, could be that that could happen by the very mechanism that I was talking about. So that it's bringing it into mind – maybe there's a memory of it or an image of it as I'm talking about it. And then what's happening is a subtle aversion to it is kicking in, which is natural. And that's enough to start things spiralling. A lot of this stuff goes on below the radar of consciousness. So it's possible there was just the seed of it, and enough aversion kicked in, because that's what we do with fear, that it started something. Very possible.

Can I ask a question? [laughs] When I talk about *mettā,* does it go?

Yogi: Of course! [laughter]

Rob: Sometimes it does, you know.

Yogi 2: I feel a bit similar actually when you were talking about fear. [?] Because I hadn't been aware of fear either, and then when you mentioned fear, it turned it on. I realized, a bit like Martin … [?] Fear, sitting here doing the *mettā*, it's not been around.

Rob: And that's fine – you don't have to go looking for it now in the practice! [laughter] It's funny, as I was talking, I was aware of a strange feeling in the room as I was talking about it. Anyway. Yeah, it can, same thing. But how much of our fear is bound up with future? "What will happen? What will happen to me? Will it be okay? Will it not be?" To me, the Buddha talks about practice and awakening being the great security. Then there's the feeling, this is what we can really trust, this is where the security is. Over time, you know, all those other fears, they just … It's really a possibility. But, like I said, if there's no fear in practice, just steam right ahead. Don't worry about it. Okay.

Q5: fear as a habit

Yogi: I think the fear for me is very much, someone mentioned it, become a habit. That, you know, if in doubt, then to fear. [laughter] And I hadn't realized that's what I was doing, but that's what tended to happen. It wasn't going to anger; it would go to fear. And when someone mentioned that, and to almost say, "Look," when it came up, to kind of say, "No, I'm not going to go that way," and do *mettā*. Really helpful. The only thing, the question is, slightly, how do I know I'm not repressing some real fear?

Rob: *Real* fear? [laughter] Sorry, it's my job. I can't help it! [laughter]

Yogi: I find the whole thing with the habit thing really helpful. I find the amount of fear around has gone down.

Rob: Great, great.

Yogi: And that's really helped. But every now and again, I think perhaps I'm just kind of avoiding something else. But I think it would come back.

Rob: A couple of things. Fear can become a habit, absolutely. And I have, years ago, in my life, almost gone through a phase of years when it seemed like anxiety and fear became a habit of consciousness. Somehow something slipped into a kind of groove where that was – not a *default,* but so common. And often there was nothing to be afraid of. There was nothing even happening. It just slipped into that. Or there were things that I amplified through fear.

Mettā is a huge antidote for that, huge. The less *mettā* there is, the more chance of fear and anxiety kind of finding that groove and becoming a habit. The more *mettā,* the less soil fear has to establish itself as a habit. So real power in the *mettā* practice. And also in the realization this is a habit, like – no one's too young to understand this analogy – like a record. [laughter] When I was a music student, as a graduate music student, they had a music library – this is completely an aside – and the music library had records and CDs that you could play, and go listen to whatever piece the teacher told you to listen to. And they had CD players there. This was in the States. And an undergraduate came in and had been given a record of something to play, to listen to, and was trying to fit it in the CD player. [laughter] He had never, he was 18 and had never seen a record before. And then completely mind-boggled that it actually had things on both sides. That's completely irrelevant! [laughter]

The sense of things getting into a groove. And how much of what our life is is just grooves. The mind gets into habits. They can be wholesome, like *mettā.* You can get into a groove of *mettā,* a habit of *mettā,* a habit of mindfulness, a habit of calmness. And we can get into, of course, grooves of fear, of judgment, of irritability, etc. And we either feed or starve them – those are Buddha's words. We feed or starve. And just to see that is already a huge insight, just that much, that things, mental factors are habits or not, that we can feed and starve. And things have relationships. Like I was talking about, fear and love have a relationship. We feed fear, we starve love, inherently in feeding fear. We feed love and we starve fear. To begin seeing that relationship. And then the other thing I was going to say, what do you mean "real fear"? So that's a real question. Real fear to me is there's a rhinoceros charging at me. Do you want to say a little bit more?

Yogi: No, I'm just interested because you described one way of working with fear and feeling it. And sometimes there are things, there are things to fear. Tends to be future things.

Rob: Tends to be future. And as we go a bit more in the last week talking more about the emptiness of things, you actually see there really is nothing to fear. That is a very deep understanding. Genuinely, there is nothing to fear. There's no thing to fear, and right now, yeah, it's caught up with future thinking.

Yogi 2: Isn't it depending on clinging? If in the mind you have a certain standard, a certain idea of what you want the future to be, then the fear is coming from what you want. But if there's no idea, there's no conditioning about I want my future to be a certain way.

Rob: Totally. Can be fear of *not* having something or having something. And there's a clinging to an idea of something. Some of that is good. We can cling to the idea of I want to grow in *mettā,* I want to

grow in calmness. And if we hold it lightly enough, that's okay. It's an image of our future. Like I was saying, what do we need to cultivate, to build, to establish well-being, happiness, whatever word you want to use? To establish well-being. So some of that's okay and it's appropriate and it's wise and it's healthy.