Lovingkindness and Compassion as a Path to Awakening
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This series of talks and guided meditations explores the development of the practices of both Lovingkindness and Compassion, with particular emphasis on the radical possibilities of Awakening that they bring. Through these practices we come to develop deep and beautiful qualities of heart as a real resource both for ourselves and the world, and also open ourselves to the profound and liberating understandings that can emerge from this path of love.

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Samadhi in Metta Practice

So I'd like to talk a bit today about *samādhi*, which is a word some of you may be familiar with. It's a Pali and a Sanskrit word, *samādhi*. And go into the meaning of that and the development of that and some different aspects and implications of it. When we were thinking about this retreat, we thought, one of the primary questions was, "Well, is it going to be helpful to people? Is it going to be worthwhile for people?" And I reflected on it a little bit, and I thought, "Well, people will develop *mettā*, which is a lovely thing. They'll develop that quality of heart. And then, hopefully, there'll be the exposure, the chance to open to the kind of insights that come from *mettā* practice. And then also there'll be the opportunity to develop *samādhi*." So three possibilities, any of which, or any amount of which, are all completely worthwhile, would make this time here worthwhile to someone.

So this word *samādhi* in different traditions actually means different things. I'd just like to use it in quite a particular way. Traditionally – rather, in the Buddhist tradition – not maybe what the Buddha meant, but what has come out of that is actually that *mettā* practice is something that's pretty much only good for *samādhi*. I'll explain what that means. Also what's come to us through the tradition is that this word is usually translated as 'concentration,' and with a particular meaning to the word 'concentration,' meaning the way sort of laundry detergent is concentrated. [laughs] You know, it's like a lot of it in a very small space. [laughter] In other words, a very *narrow* focus of the mind, a kind of microscopic – looking at experience through a microscope. And that has come to be implied in the word *samādhi*.

Now, there is some benefit to being able to make the mind small and narrowly focused like that. There's a certain amount of power in it. But if one goes back to the Buddha, and looks through all the volumes of what he said, you can't actually find anything implying anything like that at all. For some reason, that's what's come to us. So rather, I would like to use *samādhi* in what I feel is more the Buddha's sense of the word, which is more something like 'collectedness': collectedness of mind, collectedness of mind and heart and body. Something maybe even better: 'unification.' Because there's a sense – as John was talking last night – you know, often we're kind of out of contact with the body, a little distant from the body, or the mind and the body feel like two very separate things, disjointed. Or the mind is just scattered here, memory, planning, worry, whatever it is, obsession. And so *samādhi* is this unification of the mind – unification of the mind, the body, and the heart.

One of my teachers uses the phrase, uses the translation, 'depth of meditation,' which I like very much. So *samādhi* is really pointing to a sense of the meditation process, the mind sinking in a very lovely way into its depths, in the way that the sea is calm in its depths. Now, we can talk about a range of states of *samādhi*, certainly. We can also talk about a continuum, a continuum of depth, a continuum of unification. And this is, *I* feel very much it's a lifelong exploration. So it's not just something that's a little bit, then we forget about. It's something that all of us as human beings have the potential to grow into and to explore, and usually it's a very gradual, very slow process of exploring.

So it's an investigation, a lifelong investigation, exploration of the depths of consciousness, of the depths available in consciousness. Also of the kind of expanded perceptions that come about when the consciousness deepens. And all of this, not to grasp too much at these words or the possibilities, but just to know that there are possibilities, and that we can move in a very lovely and gradual way to explore some of this.

And why? Well, because it *is* very lovely. It's really, really very lovely. Of the lovely things that are available to human beings, *samādhi* is really up there. But more than that – although that's already quite something – we *need* a sense of nourishment in life. We *need* a sense of loveliness, a deep loveliness, deep nourishment. A sense of beauty that comes with that, a sense of rest, and very *deep* rest that comes with that. This is something we really, really need as human beings. We're generally pretty frazzled, pretty scattered, pretty undernourished on a heart, on a being level. And often we don't even realize that.

So this rest then allows us to be actually more available to others, which of course is a big part of what *mettā* is about; more available to others, more available to ourselves, more available to life. And brings a freshness to life. It's almost like the quality of life actually can begin to feel like, or actually it *does* increase as the mind learns to settle down that way. Freshness to life, fresh discoveries in life come out of this settledness of mind, this unification. Fresh perceptions. And really a sense of receptivity in that, so that our typical way of being in the world, which is, "I'm here, you're there, we're separate, I'm trundling along in my life," all this, this is part of the human condition, that with *samādhi* we're actually maximizing the receptivity of the mind to other ways of seeing ourselves, seeing others, seeing life. And it's those other ways of seeing that are potentially liberating. So the significance of *samādhi* is actually huge. It's huge.

Usually when people talk about *samādhi*, they're talking about taking one object, like the breath – which we've now put aside, and working with the *mettā* – or the *mettā* is one object. So in the

instructions here, we're taking one object, which is the *mettā*, and just the mind staying with that as much as possible. And that's usually what's implied in *samādhi*, staying with one object. But actually, *samādhi* in itself, in the broad sense, is something bigger than that, and it can be that we actually have a very *open* awareness, and not necessarily staying with one object, but there's a sense of this unification happening because of the non-entanglement with things that come up. There's just a free, open, easy, and wise relationship with what's coming up. And that wise relationship brings the unification, brings the depth of mind. It doesn't have to be just with one object. And perhaps as the retreat – in fact, *definitely* as the retreat goes on, we'll be exploring what that means to open it up too.

Usually the mind moves – even if we're practising, you know, insight meditation, the mind is on this, and then it's on that, and then it's on this. So the mind is moving a lot. And oftentimes, even if we think we're being mindful, the relationship with what we're mindful of is actually not all that skilful. There is some degree of pushing away what we don't like, or trying to hang on or something. It's not that skilful, not that conducive to depth of calm.

We'll see as the retreat goes on that actually to have a relationship of *mettā*, of loving-kindness with what comes up, is actually – well, potentially – *the* most skilful kind of relationship to have with what's going on. And that skilful relationship brings with it this depth, this deepening, I should say.

So of all the things that it's possible for a human being to understand or master or have some skill in – you know, you can think, I don't know if you all know what the *Guinness Book of Records* is? It's this sort of big book of weird things that people … [laughter] And they get famous because they can do that more or better or faster than anyone else. And so things like, you can stack coins on your elbow and then do *that* [moves arm] and catch them all in one hand. And some people stack whatever, sixty coins and catch it. And some of it's pretty amazing, you know. [laughter] But if we really think … And actually, some things are very beautiful – the ballet or musical facility, or you see a great football player or basketball player, there's something, I feel, very deeply beautiful in that. But to really ask, actually: in this life, of all the things, the skills, the crafts that we could develop, what's really worth developing? And this *samādhi* is something that a human being, it's one of their best friends to have some facility in that.

And we often underestimate its importance, and its power, and its significance, but if you look at the Buddha's teachings, I mean, it's hard to just turn a few pages without him going on and on, it seems, just constantly repeating himself about the importance of *samādhi*. I feel that so far in the West – and the Dharma is very young in the West, but – it seems like we've kind of sidelined the importance of *samādhi* a little bit. So I'm pretty sure that will change just as the Dharma grows up in the West, but so far we've tended to sideline it.

Samādhi is important, as I said. It brings this well-being, this healing, on a physical level, on an emotional level, on a spiritual level. It also brings insights. Just by itself, it brings insights. And not only that, but it's like the perfect soil for insights to grow in. So when there's *samādhi* there, it's really the optimum conditions for insights to occur. When the mind is scattered and not unified, we can think we see something: "Ah yes, impermanence. I understand. Fantastic." Or something about the way – our particular patterns of contraction or difficulty, and we see, "Ah yeah, I see it!" If there isn't that *samādhi*, what tends to happen is we see it very clear, and then five minutes, five weeks, however long later, it doesn't seem to stick. Somehow it doesn't seem to stick. We've had the insight, but it didn't

seem to really make a difference to our life. One of the prime reasons for that is there isn't enough *samādhi*. The soil wasn't quite right; it wasn't quite rich in the nutrients enough, wasn't quite enough moisture in the soil.

Sometimes we have insights and they're just on the intellectual level: I see it with my mind. But there's something about *samādhi*, because it involves the whole body, the whole being, actually the insights really go deep, very deep down, and they stick, almost like they're in the cells or in the bones.

How do we develop *samādhi*? How does it come? We have, as I'm sure you're all aware in just being a day or two on retreat – if you've forgotten, it becomes quite obvious – again, we have lifelong habits, basically, of being scattered, of being entangled in things, of not being collected and calm and unified. And that's really a lifelong habit. And so, first of all, to have some compassion for that. This is – as I said, I think, in the opening talk – it's just part of the human condition.

On the most sort of basic level, though, just the steadiness of practice is really what begins to give life to the *samādhi*. So that means there's the schedule – just coming to every sitting, just doing every walking. Don't underestimate the power of something that seems so futile, and not to judge too quickly where it is that our mind seems to be. And this transfers, of course, to everyday life, to have an everyday practice that we do everyday. There's something about the steadiness of the form. So whatever I feel like – I feel great; I feel really inspired about meditation; I feel completely disinterested; I feel like crap – doesn't matter. That steadiness, just the *word* steadiness, the steadiness of the form, it finds its way inside. It finds its way inside, and slowly, slowly becomes a steadiness of mind, a steadiness of the heart.

And in that steadiness is the beginning of strength. And this strength is a factor that we really need in life. Sometimes we're just swamped and bowled over by what's happening. Or something happens, and we realize, "Gosh, I was so in it, and it seemed so huge." Why did it seem so huge, and later it doesn't seem so huge? It's because the strength wasn't there, and we're just swayed. *Samādhi* has this strength in it, but it's a very pliable strength. It's like there's a softness to *samādhi*. And these are indispensable factors of mind for the path, and something that we really need, probably more than we realize.

So the steadiness of form – the steadiness of the form of sitting and walking – and then the steadiness of just doing the practice. So returning, in our case now, to the phrases of *mettā* when the mind wanders. And then sometimes it feels like I'm really staying with either a feeling of *mettā*, and can really let the mind stay with that for a while, or staying with the phrases. The mind's quite steady for a few moments, or seconds, or even minutes. And so, just that, the simplicity of that – this is how *samādhi* begins. Not to underestimate the power of what seems like the most trivial, basic steps.

When the Buddha was asked what the most significant cause for *samādhi* was, he said something that might at first sound a bit surprising. He said, "Happiness." It's the thing that most leads to *samādhi*. A happy mind can settle itself, can become unified, can sink into the beautiful depths.

So happiness is actually a fruit of *samādhi*: when there's *samādhi*, the happiness comes in a very natural way, a very organic way, from that collectedness, from that unification. But the Buddha's saying it's also something that is a *cause* for *samādhi*. This is quite interesting. And in my experience, it's absolutely, definitely true. So that when people come on retreat, especially if it's for an extended period of time, just to make sure – you know, we usually make sure with them: "Is everything sorted out in

your life, as much as possible? Just have you tied up any loose ends and all that?" So this kind of simplicity of being actually lends itself to happiness.

Gratitude – these are the kind of qualities. We have to think about, "How can I feed happiness? What can I reflect on in a way that brings a sense of gratitude? How can I nourish that sense of gratitude so that a sense of happiness can flow out of it?"

Freedom from remorse. So that means taking care of our ethical behaviour, that we can feel actually happy and proud about how we are acting with each other. That's really, really important as a basis for practice.

Appreciation. Again, this is linked to gratitude, but maybe being at Gaia House, maybe being with a group of people so committed to the Dharma, so committed to loving-kindness, so committed to practice. Appreciation for the people here, the managers who are taking care of us. All this. How can we open the heart in a way that nourishes the happiness? This is something to actually reflect on and take steps towards. Really important as a foundation for *samādhi*.

Just one's own love of the Dharma. One's own love of practice, one's own love of exploration, one's own love of stillness, of quietness. To allow that in.

Nature. For myself, that's a huge part of – just the connection with nature. And we're in a very beautiful part of the country. Is that something that we're allowing in, to feed the practice, to feed a sense of happiness? So as I said, *samādhi* is not this sort of, "Okay I'm going to put blinkers on and do this microscope thing." It actually has a beauty, even in the beginnings of it. There's an openness to beauty. There's a width, a breadth to it.

As the mind begins to settle through taking care in the basic ways that I've said so far, what we begin to see is that it's a completely non-linear process. It's completely non-linear. And I've talked to monks who've spent decades living in caves and forests – basically decades of their life, devoted to this exploration of the depth of consciousness, of *samādhi*. And they say, "Yeah, you know, sometimes it's just really hard. The mind just doesn't settle down." It's always going to be like that, always. And not to expect it to be different. It's never a linear process. It's always got to have these waves to it.

One of the signs of maturing in practice is actually we've learnt, we're learning, to expect these waves. So the 'hindrances' – some of you are familiar with this word – the hindrances to meditation. To really expect them and accept them. We can learn to see them out, okay? We can also learn to work with them, and this is really important, because it's not going to be this lovely, smooth ascent into the heavens of bliss. It's going to be pretty much a rough ride. [laughter] And pretty much you can expect every time there's a deepening, somehow, for some reason that I don't think anyone's really figured out yet, there tends to be a backlash. So you feel like, "Wow, that's opened to a new level!", and then all hell breaks loose. Don't know why, but that's just the way the human mind unfolds into depth, for some reason.

When it's rough, what we can begin to realize is this is just the mind doing the mind's patterns. It's just the human mind doing the human mind's patterns. We don't have to be taken for a ride with it, by it. So for example, I think Catherine's going to talk about aversion tomorrow night. Aversion is one of the hindrances. When I sat down first to do *mettā*, my very first experience of *mettā* twenty years ago, "Great! Sounds like a great idea." Sat down, listened to the instructions, tried it. *Fuming* with rage! [laughter] Coming out of my ears, it was! What's going on? Aversion is what's going on, anger.

So to expect these things to be there. Now, sometimes they're very subtle, and sometimes they're quite strong. The difference, the important thing is, as we get maturity in the practice, we actually realize, "Oh, it's just aversion. It's not *actually* that the person sitting next to me deserves to be kicked out of retreat or die or something." We tend to think that it's the situation that's a problem. And the maturity is, "Oh, it's just the human mind with the seed of aversion," and that seed of aversion has come and made a little, usually ugly, plant of aversion. And that's just what it is. And to recognize it for what it is. We don't have to get so caught up in the content of what the aversion is saying, or what the greed is saying, or what the restlessness is saying, or whatever it is, or the doubt.

This is a real sign of maturity: "Oh, it's just that. I don't have to be pulled into the story of it." This comes with practice. It comes with a maturity, and it's just, "Oh, okay, just the hindrance. Strap in!", you know. It's okay. It's really okay. Don't have to be sucked into the story. Also with maturity, we don't have to take it so personally: "Oh, doubt again. Oh, sleepiness again. Oh, greed again. I'm such a lousy meditator. I'm such a greedy person, such an angry person. If I were *da-da-da-da*, then this wouldn't happen." It's the human mind. In the Buddha's words, it's *anattā*. It's not me, not mine, it's not-self. It's not who I am. It's just the mind has these seeds. Human minds have these seeds, from the day you're born till the day you die, unless you're completely and utterly enlightened. It has these seeds, and they're not-self; it doesn't imply anything about ourselves.

So can we actually begin to see (and this is part of maturing in *samādhi*; this is part of the insight of *samādhi)*, can we see it's just stuff? It's just human stuff. It doesn't say anything about me. I am a human. I have a mind. This is what it's going to do. And can we actually begin to look at it that way? It's not me, it's not mine. Don't have to take it personally. Can we have some kindness towards what's difficult in meditation? We'll be talking much more about this as the retreat goes on. Not getting so much into reaction because a certain difficulty is around.

In the instructions, we're taking one object, which is *mettā*, and we're returning to that. So *samādhi* in that sense, so far. In my experience, both for myself and teaching, it's very common for – quite soon, often – when people take an object, whether it's the breath or *mettā*, for a sense of tightness to come in. And then, usually, if you're sitting an Insight Meditation retreat, what happens is the instructions move quite quickly to opening out. And then there's a sense of, "Ahh," just being with everything, and not staying with an object like the breath. What happens for most people is that when they open out, the tightness that they felt in trying to stay with one object goes away. And it's like, "Ahh! Lovely!" So the answer is, ditch the trying to meditate on one object, and just kind of relax and open out. And that has a certain benefit to it. But is it possible, actually, that we can find a way of working that doesn't feel tight, or doesn't feel uncomfortable, limited that way?

Usually, it's my experience that people shy away from *samādhi* for a number of reasons. One is this tightness that comes in, very normal. One is the whole notion of seeming to be striving or orienting towards a goal. Very understandable, and I'll go into these in more detail. And one is a question of, "If I'm staying with one thing and getting nice and calm, am I suppressing something else that needs to come up? Am I suppressing some emotions that need to come up? Am I suppressing some part of my being that needs to come up?" That's a very intelligent and important question to ask, and it reflects a kind of integrity and honesty when people ask that question, that they really, you know, "Let's look at what's going on here. Am I hiding from something?"

So, to unpack these a little bit. How can we practise without this sense of tightness or work with this sense of tightness? *Samādhi* actually has a kind of softness to it. It's one of the characteristics, one of the qualities of this unification of mind, is actually there's a softening, a softening of the being, softening of the heart, softening of the sense of the body. How to move towards *that*, and not so much of this tightness?

One way, or one important factor, is actually that – well, we might say the mindfulness, the awareness, has a bit more breadth to it. So as I say, it's not this totally microscopic thing. A bit more breadth to the mindfulness, and an awareness of the body as a whole: how the body is feeling, the sense of the body at any time. And the sense of the emotions at any time. In other words, what's my emotional relationship with the practice right now? Is it tight? Is it disinterested? Is it grasping? Is it striving? And we can actually feel that emotion, and feel it in the body, because that will be reflected as a kind of contraction in the body if the mindfulness has a certain breadth to it and is aware of the body. This breadth is actually a very important factor. When we feel that tightness, can we actually just begin to relax it? So, awareness of the body, the whole body, just seeing if that tightness can be relaxed in the body. And sometimes it *can*, just by becoming aware of it.

Samādhi, or moving towards this unification, this deepening, it's not the case that you roll up your sleeves, and you clench your jaw, and you grit your teeth, and "Right, I'm going to go for it!" The whole question of effort is really, really crucial, actually. And it turns out that it's very subtle. It has a lot of subtlety, this question of effort. You can't be too clenched, and you can't just throw the whole baby out with the bathwater, as the phrase goes.

First thing: are we coming from a place of kindness to ourself? So we are aspiring to transformation; we are aspiring to opening. Can we just take care of where we're coming from, as much as possible? Coming from a place of kindness. And maybe periodically to check in with where we're coming from, as I said. If there *is* tightness, sometimes it can be relaxed. Sometimes we may just have to actually accept that that's what's there. Can we be okay with a sense of tightness? Can that sense of tightness be accommodated in a larger awareness? It's really okay. Sometimes it has to go through a sense of tightness.

I was speaking with someone about their meditation practice a little while ago, and they were struggling with this for a while. We had a conversation, and they went away. And they actually came back and figured out for themselves – I can't remember what *I* said, but it obviously wasn't very helpful! [laughter] – they came back and said it was just a matter of actually accepting that the tightness was there. And once they had just accepted that, that that's what the quality of the awareness was, there was just some tightness, it actually made a big difference.

As the retreat goes on, we'll be talking about even perhaps going a step further, and beginning to turn the *mettā* itself *on* the emotions, on, for instance, a sense of tightness. So we'll really go into that in more detail. But can there be kindness, even, to the sense of tightness?

There needs to be a growing, deepening sensitivity to the whole question of effort. It's really important for *samādhi.* It's also very important for insight. It's very important for love too. Sometimes there's more of a relaxed sense, more of a just – let me put it another way: that the awareness might be *receiving* the phrases, or *receiving* the breath, if we're working with the breath. And sometimes more of a *probing* sense. And this balance, it's very connected with effort. When it's more relaxed, there's a less

efforted space. Very important to play – important word: play – with this balance. This is something we need to explore for ourselves, and make it very personal, very alive, very meaningful for ourselves. We can actually do *this* and do *this*, and see, "Ah, what's needed now? How does it feel? What are the effects?"

In *mettā* practice, this actually has other implications. Already now, we're giving the *mettā* to ourselves. We're *giving* the *mettā* to ourselves, so we're giving, but we're also *receiving mettā*. So sometimes in doing the practice, you can tune into the sense of what it is to feel that flow of giving, and sometimes tune into the flow, "I'm *receiving mettā*. I'm *receiving* that goodwill." And what does it feel like to be in the receiving of it? Both are important. Some of us need practice, actually, at receiving love, not only giving it. Sometimes we, for all different kinds of reasons, we put up barriers and defences to actually receiving love. So sometimes it's good in the practice to really tune into that quality, and feel oneself receiving.

If there's too much tightness, it can actually cause the mind to spin off in thinking. It's like a banana that's peeled, and you're squeezing it, and it's like, it might shoot off out the end. Somehow, too much tightness in practice actually causes more thought – *can* do. Sometimes too much relaxation actually causes kind of sinking, which then just spins off into tiredness. So this is something that's very delicate; this whole question of effort is very delicate. And it's very connected with love at a very deep level, actually. When there's effort, there's a sense of "me being somewhere and trying to get somewhere else." Now, there may be some acceptance in that, but if we talk about a really boundless love, a boundless acceptance, there's a duality there: this and that. I am here, and I want to be there. That duality, that separation, at a very deep level, a very deep level of love, that's exactly what gets ended, that duality – in *all* things; not just between self and other, but between *things*. So this question of effort is connected, at a very deep level, with a sense of duality, and a sense of duality is very much connected with a sense of love.

As I said, it's very delicate. There's a lot to learn from playing with effort and really understanding it for oneself in a practical way. People also shy away from the development of *samādhi* because, as I said, because it seems like a goal-oriented practice. But we have all kinds of goals in life, and maybe we actually *need* goals in life. Some are very simple. You know, at 5:30 when the bell goes for tea, probably most of us, it will be our goal to go and have a drink and eat tea. Where's …? There's no problem in that. It's very simple. Goals don't have to be a problem.

And there also doesn't have to be that much attachment in the *samādhi*. In fact, *samādhi* doesn't really lead to a sense of attachment, contrary to what we might hear. This is something that we can really enjoy. When there's the mind calming down that way, we can really begin to tune into that sense of enjoyment. And that enjoyment, even if it's very quiet, just nothing to really write home about at this point, that is very beneficial and very much what helps the *samādhi* deepen. So when there is a sense of enjoyment, just letting the being open to that, letting the being be touched by that.

When the Buddha talked about love and compassion, loving-kindness and compassion, he called them *brahmavihāras*, which translates as 'divine abiding' or 'divine dwelling.' So this is actually something – to live in love is to live, is to dwell, in what is divine for a human being. *Samādhi* is also a kind of dwelling. Where is the mind dwelling? Is it dwelling in that depth, in that stillness, in that calmness? In the enjoyment of that? Or oftentimes, you know, as humans, it's not; it's dwelling in

what's really difficult. Actually, obsessing is a kind of dwelling. So some problem, some issue, something about ourselves that we don't like or are having trouble with, or in relationship, and the mind just goes round and round and round and round, and just sticks to that, and can't seem to disengage the mind from it. So we're exhausted by the end of the day, and you flop into bed, and you get what's called 'poor man's *samādhi'*! You spend the night, and hopefully some relief, and then you wake up, and it just starts all over again. [laughter] But this is where we dwell a lot of the time. And so to deepen in *samādhi* is to actually learn – the mind learns to find a home, the heart learns to find a home, a dwelling, in a more lovely space. Really, really crucial.

When we're doing the *mettā* practice, what we're actually doing is replacing all that mess of negative thought that's so often around, replacing that with actually thoughts that are skilful, that are helpful, that are calming and conducive to calm. It's actually difficult to have the *mettā* phrases going and be really, *really* involved in something else. I, some years ago, took on as a practice to do the *mettā* phrases all day, no matter what I was doing, as much as possible – not if I was talking to someone, but just going down the street, or in the shower, or whatever it was. I think it was a few months I did it for, and to really take it on. At first, I noticed there was, "Oh, well, I'd rather be thinking about (whatever it was)", and then I sort of began to give a closer look to what it was that my mind sort of spent its time thinking about. And generally, it wasn't particularly interesting. I don't know if your mind is anything like mine, but it was really not very interesting! [laughter] It was extremely uncreative. I can't even count how many times I had the same thoughts. Very unoriginal, not at all helpful generally. And so very shortly into this time of sort of ongoing *mettā* practice, I just thought, "Actually, to have the *mettā* phrases is just way nicer, way more helpful, just a much better thing to have, a much better inner environment."

Slowly, slowly and gradually, over time, we get less enticed by the compelling, the *seemingly* compelling nature of what goes through our minds – you know, all these issues and these things that we need to think about and figure out. They begin to lose their compellingness. It's usually a gradual process. And instead we begin to really acquire a taste for a mind that's, a heart that's, unified, that's calm, that's deep. And it really is for most people an acquired taste. It *sounds* great. I don't know, maybe you're listening and thinking it sounds really boring. [laughter] It can sound great, but it's actually for many of us an acquired taste. We're really not used to it. We're not used to it.

And so in the practice, we can see: we get off onto some train of thought. In the formal practice, [there's] really no need to finish that thought. It's not going to make much difference whether you get to the end of that thought or not. Am I going to be happier for finishing that thought? Probably not. Am I going to be more miserable? Maybe! [laughter]

Similarly, you can notice if you're doing walking meditation, you know, maybe you're in the walking room, and someone comes in: "Who is it?" The mind wants to go. It's a natural tendency of the mind. Or you're outside and a car goes by: "What? Who? Who? What?" Does it make much difference to my sense of well-being that I know it was a red Ford Escort that went by? Or whatever. Or it was so-and-so that came through. It really doesn't make any difference. And so we learn. The compulsion of things that we're so addicted to, it begins to just lose – in a very real way, a very in-the-moment way, not in an abstract way: not interested. And the mind becomes interested and loving this centredness, this collectedness.

Okay. As this collectedness begins to deepen in the being – probably not for everyone, but for some people at some time – there can arise what's called *pīti* in Pali. That's usually translated as 'rapture.' And this goes back to what I was talking about, if there's a feeling of enjoyment in the body, no matter how subtle or quiet it seems, how 'not so much of a big deal.' Sometimes this *pīti*, this feeling in the body, can be extremely strong, so strong that it's uncomfortably strong. The whole body starts shaking with it, and just really off-the-scale ecstasy. It's quite rare, but it certainly does happen. And there's a whole range.

So basically I'm just talking about – and again, not to grasp all this stuff, but just to introduce – there's a whole range of what's available in this word, *pīti*, from just a very quiet sense of pleasant feeling in the body (and that may be located in the body; it may be throughout the body), to really strong, overwhelming waves of ecstasy or bliss. And it's a whole range. It could be like a kind of tingling, or it could be a feeling of lightness, a very pleasant lightness, or expansion that feels very lovely, or warmth.

Not to grasp at this, but just to know that this, when it comes – and again, this is not permanent; it can't stay forever, but if it comes and when it comes, to open to that as much as possible. Even if it's very quiet. And usually it *is* very quiet. But just to really allow that in, and actually let the mind go there, and let the mind go into that. So in the *mettā* practice, it might be typical for a nice feeling to be in the heart area, centred around the heart area. And so, to really let that nice feeling be part of the practice. In a way, to centre the practice around that nice feeling, *in* that nice feeling, in that pleasantness, in that enjoyment. To centre it in it, and also to open the being to the enjoyment. Sometimes the enjoyable feeling, as I say, it may be in the heart area, or maybe the face, in the head. Maybe it fills the whole body, and we can sometimes *allow* it to fill the whole body.

Again, this is all part of the craft, the art, even, of *samādhi*. It's really an art, and it's a lifelong art. So please, not to grasp at any of this. It's part of the whole terrain, and sometimes it's a little strange to hear about things if we haven't experienced them, and we think, "Oh, I should have," or "When will I?" or "That's the only thing that's important" or something. But just to paint a bit more of a big picture. And to be okay with having a sense of where things may unfold. That's just the beginning, and really there are infinite depths of *samādhi.* It's really an infinite journey into depth, and a whole range of states and states of consciousness that can open up.

So what allows this *pīti*, this rapture? What allows that? What encourages that? One of the ways, and the sort of most traditional way, is that the mind is *with* its object – either the breath or the *mettā* or the phrases – and it's sort of, in one way of thinking about it, it's like rubbing, two sticks rubbing against. The mind is rubbing against the object, and the friction causes the sparks, and the sparks are the pleasant feeling. I think that's traditional – I hope I didn't make it up! [laughter] So that's the traditional way: the mind, instead of being scattered, it begins, because of the collectedness, to actually gather energy. When it's scattered, the energy is being pulled. *Pīti*, that pleasantness, that rapture, is actually a kind of energy. And so, with the collectedness there, the mind begins to gather energy in a very organic, natural way. And then that energy expresses itself as pleasantness.

Interest is very related to *pīti*. When we're really interested in the meditation, interested in the feeling, interested in the phrases, that interest lends itself to *pīti*. Sometimes the word *pīti* is translated as 'interest.' So they're very related. And we can notice this even outside of meditation: when we're

really into something, actually, if you check, there's a feeling of pleasantness. "Ahh," really interested. Usually it's very quiet outside of meditation, but there's that feeling of pleasantness. And so to tune into and allow and enjoy.

Openness of being. Openness of being is really very, very conducive to this rapture. So what does that mean? Finding what that means. Just that the energy is open, the life is open, the receptivity is open. This is why nature and everything that I talked about earlier is important. It brings an openness of being, as if the channels are then open, and those channels can allow this movement of *pīti*.

When we get down to it, it's actually a non-entanglement with things. That's the fundamental cause for arising of *pīti*. When the mind is not pushing, pulling, obsessing, grappling with things, then there can be that *pīti*. And again, that has very much something to do with *mettā,* because *mettā* is a non-struggle. *Mettā* towards experience is a non-struggle with experience. And as I said, we'll be going into that aspect of *mettā* as the weeks go by.

So this *pīti* when it's there, it's very much to be encouraged. Very much to be encouraged this openness, this interest, this everything that allows *pīti*. For some people, for *many* people, actually, when the mind begins to settle in *samādhi,* or even also this *pīti* when it comes, it can actually bring fear. It can be quite fearful. The Buddha, one of the five most prominent fears that the Buddha listed was fear of unusual mind states. [laughs] It *is* unusual. When the mind begins – we're just not used to it, the mind settling down. And so there can be some fear in there. And just to know that's really okay. And if there's a breadth of awareness, we can be, "Ah, the mind is settling," I'm aware of that, and I'm also aware, as I said, of my emotion about the practice. Maybe it's fear. Can I then, without pushing away the fear, just very gently incline the mind towards the pleasantness of the depth? Just very gently. We don't need to push anything away. And so the mind gets slowly, slowly used to the new terrain.

Everything I'm speaking about today, *samādhi*, it's really speaking about this whole retreat. So some of it may not seem relevant on the second full day of a retreat. That's fine. It's for the whole retreat, and actually the whole of our life. As I said, this is a lifelong exploration. So just to hold it as something for now and for always.

Samādhi, as I said, has this quality of softness to it. One of the things that begins to soften with *samādhi* is the sense of the body, the body softening. The boundaries of the body begin to soften, *can* begin to soften. What can also begin to soften is the sense of self. Usually we have a very fixed, rigid kind of sense: "I am *here*, I stop *here,* and you begin *there,* and this is *not* me." The whole sense of self, or self-image, is quite fixed, rigid, and set.

As the *samādhi* and also the *mettā* deepens – both, both together – the sense of self can begin to soften, can really begin to attenuate some more. There can be less of a sense of a 'doer,' a 'meditator.' And this, too, may bring up a lot of fear at times. It can be a fear, an existential fear of disappearing, similar to a fear of death. This is not at all uncommon. Some people don't get it at all, and then it's fine, not a problem. But some people do. But again, it's okay, and we can gradually work with this. It doesn't have to be a problem.

What we learn is that our fixed views of self begin to lose their fixity. Instead of just one view of self that we have and we're stuck there, and this is where it is and it's rigid, we begin to let go of that and open up to different ways of seeing the self. Who am I, if I'm not caught in some issue, caught in

some views or thinking? Who am I when the thinking – if it calms down, am I still me? Am I the same me that I thought I was?

So when the sense of self attenuates, this has a lot to do with the sense of love, because when there's too much of a separation between self and other, that's perhaps the primary block to love flowing. Love, in a way, is that coming together, communion. *Samādhi,* anyway, should, I very strongly feel, it should have love in it. Somehow when the mind collects, calms, deepens like that, there should be a quality of love in it: love for oneself, love for others, love for nature, love for all things.

There should also be this quality of receptivity that I was talking about, just an openness to some kind of wonder in being. Occasionally I've come across people where that isn't the case. Somehow the mind is really, really, really settling down, getting very focused, getting very still, very deep, and there aren't those qualities of love, of receptivity. A person is moving around, and there's no sense of openness to nature, a connection. There's no sense of connection with the people practising around one. And what I've seen is that that doesn't really bear the fruit. It doesn't really bear the fruit. And in one case, there was someone practising for a long time in this way, without that receptivity and love. And then a situation changed, and there were quite some difficult health issues, very difficult health issues, understandably challenging. But the whole practice went out the window, completely. Not only in terms of as a resource, but actually as a practice. It just stopped. And I feel that for *samādhi* to really go deep in a way that it's really making an impact deep in the being, there has to be that love and receptivity there.

So finally, I just want to touch on this question, the other reservation that sometimes people can have about *samādhi*. It's this question of "Am I suppressing? Am I suppressing emotion or some part of my being through collecting the mind that way?" So this is a very delicate question, actually. It's not to rush to too soon an answer, and assume that I *must* be suppressing.

I remember years ago, I had been in a certain kind of relationship with someone. It was actually a teaching relationship with someone, and they were *my* teacher. It's a long story, but there was a lot of anger there. I felt a lot of anger. The relationship had ended, and there was a lot of anger. And I went to practise one evening at a meditation centre, and got quite calm. There was some *samādhi* there, nothing particularly deep. The memory of this person came up, and the beginnings of anger. And instead of going off into the whole big production of anger and all the fullness of that, and all the story and everything, because of the *samādhi,* there was just a moment of anger – no sense of repression – and it didn't actually go into anything else. Because of the *samādhi,* there was a clarity, and I actually saw: "Ah! This is something very significant." It's *not* that – the assumption might be that "This is what's happening. We're angry, and the anger is kind of living in me, in my heart, in my psyche, waiting to come out. I *need* to express this." It was rather that, because of the *samādhi*, because of the settledness of mind, there weren't the conditions there for that anger to arise in the present – which is a very different understanding, and has huge implications about our emotional life as human beings. It has *huge* implications.

Similarly, there was a work retreatant here a while ago who was experiencing some calmness and also some periods of real struggle with issues. I can't remember what it was, but it was a whole very involved thing. So I suggested, when the calmness is there, why don't you see if you can just drop in the thought of the issue? Just drop it into the calmness like a drop in the still water. And just see what

happens. So she did that, went away and did that, and came back. Nothing happened. And she was so shocked almost by that. Why does nothing happen? Because the conditions aren't there. The anger, the issue that we think lives whole, ready inside of us, needing to come up, the conditions aren't there in the moment for it to be there.

It's a very different understanding, very significant. So what that means is the issues that we – we have to be delicate with this; you can't make it a black or white thing. I just want to introduce the question, because sometimes things *are* there, and they *do* need to come up. But oftentimes the issues that we think are so real, so compelling and so needing to come up – they don't come up, because the conditions aren't there. And we see this with *samādhi*. They're, we say in Dharma language, empty of inherent existence. They don't exist by themselves. We usually need to see this over and over. So probably, as I'm saying it, it doesn't sound that significant. But we see this over and over with *samādhi*, and actually it's something very, very deeply significant.

We tend to think of *samādhi* as we're *creating* something, we're *creating* this calmness, we're *creating* this nice state or whatever. Actually, when we really practise, and we really look at the question of *samādhi*, you understand it's the opposite: we spend our lives creating things. We spend our lives creating a lot of problems, often, and *samādhi*, we're beginning to *stop* creating things. We're creating less and less.

As we go deeply into the nature of love, too, we actually see we're creating less and less when we're doing *mettā*, and it's the things that we create that cause barriers. When we create less and less through the *mettā* practice, through the *samādhi*, we actually see: there's love there. It leads to love because we're creating less barriers.

So this question – I'm just touching on it briefly now – this question of the emptiness of things and seeing that through the *mettā* practice, seeing that through *samādhi*, it's hugely significant. I mean, it's probably *the* most significant thing in the Dharma, actually. When we talk about awakening, that's really what it is: it's awakening to emptiness, and what does that mean, and what's the effect on the being and the effect on the heart. So we'll be talking hopefully as the retreat goes on much more about this and the place of love in discovering the meaning of that.

But to understand – and it's usually a gradual, slow understanding – to understand this emptiness brings freedom gradually, slowly, and that's the freedom that the Buddha was pointing to. And it doesn't have to be this sudden, you know, lightening strike under the bodhi tree. It can be just a gradual or sudden movement into freedom that's actually very available, very accessible to all of us. It's really a potential for us as human beings in a very real way.

Can we just sit quietly for a few moments together?

May all beings live in peace. May all beings open to joy. May all beings live in freedom.

Expressions of Metta

Okay, what I want to talk about today is a little bit some of the different expressions of *mettā*, some of the different dimensions of loving-kindness. So first just to restate something I said in the instructions this morning, which is that *mettā* is not just one feeling. We have this word, *mettā*, and we go looking for *one* thing: "What is that *mettā*?" And try and see, "Have I got it? Have I not got it?" And

just to really be conscious that it's not one feeling. Could more accurately talk about perhaps a constellation of feelings, when it expresses itself as a feeling at all. There's a constellation of feelings, and I've said, sometimes it will take on, it will feel to be, to have, a slightly different colour, a slightly different flavour. Sometimes it's very calming, very soothing. Sometimes there's a quality of healing in it. Sometimes it's a very bright energy, a very sort of luminous energy. Sometimes bubbly. Sometimes there's a real warmth in it, or gentleness. So in the practice, however it seems to kind of come up and manifest, it's fine, and to really allow those differences, allow those differences of flavours, of colours. And just to notice and feel. It's all included in what we mean by *mettā*.

And sometimes, and you may have noticed this already, sometimes we're doing *mettā* practice and we're aware of our own or someone's suffering, and then the *mettā* meets that suffering and actually is then coloured – and perhaps quite strongly at that point – by compassion, by the kind of tenderness of compassion. And we'll go into quite a lot of detail, the difference between compassion and *mettā*. But really not to worry too much about that. In a way, it's just words, and not to strangle the thing too much with words and concepts. So very much to allow the different flavours.

And then we have these categories that we've been slowly going through. We started with the self, and the benefactor, and the friend, and it will go on. And to really see that this is just a tool. It's just a tool. The aspiration of *mettā* is for something that extends itself boundlessly, without limit. So usually our love is quite narrow in its scope. It's just towards ourselves, hopefully, and maybe a few people around us that we care about. And the aspiration of *mettā* is a really boundless love, completely without limit. And the categories are just a tool to help us move towards that boundlessness, that's all. So there's nothing fixed about them. A person can be our benefactor one day, and then they say the wrong thing, and they get a demotion. [laughter] And they find themselves in the difficult category. And then hopefully we work it out, and they get a rise, and they're back to benefactor or friend or whatever it is. But there's nothing fixed about this at all. And similarly, of course, the difficult person can rise through the ranks. Just to see: it's just a tool. It's just a tool.

And so the first one we start with, which we spent two days on, is the self. And the huge importance of giving love to ourselves, of really having a relationship with ourselves of *mettā*. It's really crucial. It's crucial for our lives. It's crucial also for our practice of *mettā*. And so it's interesting: sometimes, for some people, this is very difficult, for all kinds of reasons, to give *mettā* to oneself – for, you know, reasons in the family, upbringing, or the education; all kinds of reasons. It can be very challenging, actually, to give *mettā* to oneself. And some of the reasons sometimes are just cultural. We live in a culture that – it's a weird mixed message, I feel sometimes. It's a culture of individuality, of self, of *what I want* and going out to get that. And at the same time, the notion of loving oneself in a healthy way is often regarded as selfish. So we're getting this very mixed message. And I remember last year on this retreat being struck by, especially when we moved on to compassion, how many people found it difficult to stay with giving love to themselves.

So the culture might say it's selfish, and for whatever reasons or combination of reasons, that's there, or it may be there. And sometimes it just ends up that's a habit. It's a habit to not give love to ourselves, or to regard it as indulgent or selfish or whatever. And somehow, through practice, we have to weaken that habit. So every time we say, "May I be well, may I be happy, may I be peaceful," we're

actually weakening that habit. And not to underestimate the power of that. The analogy I gave this morning, the Buddha's actual words, "Drop by drop, the bucket is filled."

And the Buddha also, when he talked about this, giving love to ourselves, he said something very strong. He said, "You could search the entire universe for someone more deserving of love and compassion than yourself, and you won't find that person, you won't find that being." So there's something – to me, it's a very powerful statement. There's something he's pointing to. Whatever we think we've done or not done, or worth or not worth, or however we rate ourselves and measure ourselves and all that disease, really, the Buddha is saying you're worthy of love, you're worthy of giving love to yourself. This is an enormously powerful statement. And to see, as I said before, the necessity of this, that when we begin to love ourselves, we are that much more available to giving love to others. And in our love we are that much less needy in what we are going to get back, and the *mettā* can be more pure. Through loving ourselves, we're not only giving a gift to ourselves. We're actually giving a gift to others, to humanity.

So there's the self, and then there's the benefactor and the friend, which we've gone into. Sometimes when we talk about *mettā*, we talk about it being unattached, and it's said that the near enemy of *mettā* – that's a funny phrase; it means what kind of looks like *mettā* at first but actually isn't. So something that bears a lot of similarity but actually isn't. And the near enemy of *mettā* is what's called attached love. In other words, "I'll love you *if*," and then a whole list of whatever. So just to see in the practice when this comes up, when the *mettā* has more attachment in it or less attachment in it or whatever. It's fine. It's part of our humanity that this comes into the practice. Not to expect a pure *mettā* all the time that's completely free of attachment. We can see this in the practice.

Can we then include our humanity, our complexity, the messiness of – I was going to say *some*, but actually probably *most* of our relationships? This is just what it is to be in relationship, all kinds of relationships. There *will* be attachment coming in. In the *mettā* practice seeing that near enemy of attachment, you don't want to be, "Oh, no, attachment. I'm doing it wrong," or "Oh," pushing it away or whatever. Actually just to see it. Seeing it, being aware of it is part of the practice and part of the learning process. If we're not familiar with what attachment is, we're not going to learn about *it*, and we're also not going to learn about what *pure mettā* is. So not to be in too much of a hurry to judge or discard or whatever, and just to see.

And we have this category of the friend. And to ask: what is it to be a friend? What is it to be a good friend? And again, sometimes with the *mettā*, and sometimes for me (and I know I'm not the only one), reading the suttas, we can read about this stuff and it's almost inhuman, it sounds, almost something otherworldly or abstract. Reading the suttas is sometimes a bit like chewing cardboard. It's not that juicy. It doesn't seem to sometimes relate too much to our actual life. What is it to be a good friend? Some of that, to me, is really seeing another, really seeing a friend. We talk about *mettā* not being attached, but to me, being realistic, being human, to be in a friendship means I also want to be seen. So I see the other, but I am seen. And this is, you know, we can talk about idealized *mettā*, but in the reality, in the nitty-gritty of our life, we see, hopefully, the other. We give that fullness of seeing. And we want to be seen. Maybe we *need* to be seen. And we see ourselves as well. We see ourselves. And this is a huge part of what meditation practice is about, just seeing ourselves – whether it's

vipassanā or *mettā*. Seeing ourselves. And we appreciate the other. We appreciate their particular beauty, their particular uniqueness, their particular expression in the world.

And for many, to take in appreciation is also quite a big step. Are we open to actually hearing someone express appreciation of how we are, what we are, who we are, how we did something? This is a huge part of *mettā,* as well, receiving that love. And for many, this is not easy. Are we appreciating other, are we appreciating ourselves, and are we letting in the appreciation of others for ourself? So often, for many of us, these things – seeing, being seen, appreciating, being appreciated – were not actually there that healthily or that fully in the growing up, in the family environment, in the education, in the social environment, etc. And so to me, one way of looking at practice, a big part of it is actually re-parenting ourselves. We're giving to ourselves the kind of attentiveness, the kind of seeing, the kind of appreciation that maybe we didn't quite get as fully as possible when we were younger. Re-parenting, re-gifting ourselves with that. And that can be, you know, one way of looking at it is that can be a very important focus of practice for many years, many years.

As I said, we have this idea, or we hear about *mettā*, we read about it, maybe in the suttas or whatever, and we get this aspiration: it's boundless. It has no limits. No one, no being is excluded. And it's also unconditional – it does not depend on you saying that you like me or being nice to me or anything like that. It's unconditional. It doesn't even depend on you being that likeable or that nice. It's unconditioned and boundless. And sometimes, as I say, it can seem a bit unreal. We can also get the sense that we're sort of aiming to be these *mettā* machines, and everyone will, at the end of this three-week retreat, go through the grinder, and emerge as this sort of *mettā* machine, #1, #2, #3, and all look the same. That somehow in the *mettā*, in the high aspiration of it, it's going to preclude our personality and our personal, particular expression of *mettā*, our self-expression in that, our uniqueness. And to me, it doesn't mean that at all, absolutely doesn't. So not to make *mettā* something unreal in our life.

I think it was yesterday that John talked about *anattā*, not-self, and we'll be talking much more about that. And again, this is very important, to really be clear that *mettā* and certainly *anattā* are not closing the door on our individuality, on our uniqueness, on our particular self-expression. Actually, rather the opposite. It's more a question of, "Am I attached to my particular individuality, my particular self-expression in a way that's causing suffering for myself or other?" Usually, normal human beings, normal human consciousness, the answer is, "Yes, I am." I'm somehow regarding this particular individual as somehow separate, somehow fixed. A fixed self, a separate self, and an independent self. And if I view my individuality and the whole culture of individuality and what I need and what I want and what my rights are, if I view it from that vantage point of a separate, independent, and fixed self – bound to cause suffering for myself and for others. No question.

If I have another view, and I begin to see that this individuality, this uniqueness of self-expression is actually arising from an infinite web of conditions, absolutely unfathomably infinite, mind-blowingly infinite, unentangleable web of conditions. So just the physicality of who *I* am, in this case: there was the genetic make-up of both my parents, and where that came from, and the infinite regress of that, the sunlight, the food, where all that comes from. So just in the physical being, it's actually an infinite web that has given rise to this appearance, this form right now. And then psychically, psychologically, mentally, emotionally, everything that has influenced in the present or in the past, everything that I've read, everything that I've heard, all the music I've listened to, all the conversations I've had, all the

interactions, all the education. All of that. Everything, everything, everything. Every moment of my life has come together in some completely inextricable web to create this, and in some completely unrepeatable way, to create this particular form right now, and including this particular expression right now as I'm talking.

When we see that individuality in that context, then we're completely free to be as unique and individual and expressing ourself in any way, that we feel free to. But it's always embedded in the context of all of life, of the whole universe. It's never divorced from that. It's actually inextricable from that. We can hear that as an intellectual concept and think, "Ah, yeah, that's cute," you know. But it's a whole other thing to begin retraining the mind to see the self that way, to see what we do, what we say, how we interact, to see it in terms of a web of conditions. It takes time. When we begin to see in terms of this infinite web, then it releases the freedom, our freedom to be as individual as we feel, and releases also love because it's bound up with all other beings and everything else.

So humanity to come into the *mettā*, a realism to come into the *mettā*. You know, when we talk about friendship, are we actually really, truly willing to work with the messiness of our relationships, of our friendships, the difficulties there, the complexity there, the humanity, what I call the humanity there? Do we really have a full relationship with life, with friendship, with all of that? Or are we just trying to shave it down to some kind of spiritual ideal, or out of aversion or whatever it is? Is it really full?

Some of you will know this passage, a beautiful passage from Kahlil Gibran in *The Prophet*, and it's about friendship. I'll read it. It says:

> And the youth said, Speak to us of Friendship.
> And he answered, saying:
> Your friend is your needs answered.
> He is your field which you sow with love and reap with thanksgiving.
> And he is your board and your fireside.
> For you come to him with your hunger, and you seek him for peace.
>
> When your friend speaks his mind you fear not the "no" in your own mind,
> nor do you withhold the "yes."
> And when he is silent your heart ceases not to listen to his heart;
> For without words, in friendship, all thoughts, all desires, all expectations are born
> and shared, with joy that is unacclaimed.
> When you part from your friend, you grieve not;
>
> For that which you love most in him may be clearer in his absence, as the mountain
> to the climber is clearer from the plain.
> And let there be no purpose in friendship save the deepening of the spirit.
> For love that seeks aught but the disclosure of its own mystery is not love
> but a net cast forth: and only the unprofitable is caught.

And let your best be for your friend.
If he must know the ebb of your tide,
let him know its flood also.
For what is your friend that you should seek him with hours to kill?
Seek him always with hours to live.
For it is his to fill your need, but not your emptiness.
And in the sweetness of friendship let there be laughter,
and sharing of pleasures.
For in the dew of little things the heart finds its morning and is refreshed.[1]

So there's the friend and friendship and all that that means. And then we extend, and tomorrow we'll move on to the neutral, what's called the neutral category – which actually will be most of the six and a half billion people on the planet. They're actually neutral to us. And this is quite interesting; this is an interesting category. Sometimes, again, this can seem kind of abstract or removed, or we're not so involved. In the practice we can begin to lose interest. This is where we start kind of spacing out a little bit. To see: there's something very interesting going on here. What makes someone neutral? What makes someone just sort of fade into the greyness of the background?

Can we begin to see – and this is, in a way, a really crucial investigation in our life, and it takes some time to see it: when the self-sense is strong, when the self is strong and built up, clinging is strong, and we're clinging to something. And that clinging is actually building up the self, and the self is building up the clinging. Self and clinging build each other. They're co-dependent. They're mutually dependent. When self is strong, some other thing is strong – some *thing* that's happening, maybe some other person in our interaction with them, maybe something in our body, in our mind, something in the environment. Something is strong, and self is strong, and they go together, bound by the clinging. Clinging is strong, self is strong; self is strong, clinging is strong.

When that happens, we get a tunnel vision: just me and this other thing, whether it's in me or outside of me or another person. Everything else just fades. It's just other, grey other. The more self-sense there is, the more sense of neutrality of other people, irrelevancy of others. And to really begin to notice this, and to really look into this in our life. How is it that we exclude, that we put others in the background? Now, obviously some people are more in our everyday life. But something's going on here about clinging and self. And to really look at that and investigate it until it's very clear. It's also another way of looking at seeing what we call the emptiness of self. Self depends on our clinging to something, on our struggling with something inner or outer. The more we struggle, the more we cling, the more self is built up. Self by itself is empty. It needs that clinging, that struggle. This is something that, spiritually speaking, we really need to understand. We need to be completely in ourselves clear about this. And it takes time.

So there's the benefactor, and the friend, and the neutral. And sometimes, as I said, the friend or the benefactor, there can be some difficulty, and they find themselves in the difficult category. Well, they probably don't know it, but whatever. They're in the difficult category at times. So I also feel very strongly that an important part of what we might call the realistic expression of *mettā* is working with the difficult with love. In other words, actually expressing anger, expressing a "no" when we need to in

a situation: “No, actually that’s not okay. No, that was overstepping a boundary,” whatever it is. That kind of strength of “no,” in the context of love, in the context of *mettā*. So *mettā* is actually a strong thing, it’s not some namby-pamby Pollyannaish thing. It doesn’t mean being a doormat. It doesn’t mean that everyone’s then going to step over us, and we don’t care, and everyone just treats us like a doormat. Sometimes we end up acting that way, a bit like a doormat, because of fear, fear of actually expressing anger, fear of saying that “no,” inability of setting boundaries. This is really common.

I have a very good friend who’s suffered for many years, suffers from depression. And she’s beginning to realize in more recent years that, for her – this isn’t for everyone with depression, but for her there’s a real, first of all, inability to express anger and to even be with the anger inside herself when something happens. And she’s beginning to see what she does with it: she turns it inside and kind of attacks the anger, starts to attack herself, and it ends up in depression. She’s beginning to see that. And in so doing, it’s actually closing her love. The depression actually closes what, in her case, is quite an extraordinary capacity to love. It just closes that.

And I see this as being very, very common in sort of spiritual circles, or spiritual-type people. It’s extremely common. And I know it is certainly true for me in the past, a real shyness about expressing anger, about just feeling anger even. I feel that anger is something very complicated, and the expression of anger is something very difficult. It’s one of these areas that we tend to jump to a conclusion maybe too quickly. If we’re into meditation and all that: “It’s bad. No anger, no expression of it.” Or we may be into certain kinds of psychotherapy that are all about letting it out, and venting it, and expressing it, and the catharsis of that. But just not so quick to conclude. It’s, to me, a very tricky area. It’s definitely true to say that there’s too much anger in the world. There’s too much violence, hatred, ill-will, anger. We just have to open a newspaper to see that. Just have to go into a lot of high streets to see that. So anger is complicated, and it’s interesting.

Oftentimes anger is blind in a number of ways. It’s blind to its causes. So something happens, and we tend to think, we feel angry, we tend to think, “*You* did that wrong. *You* are making me angry,” or whatever. We don’t see the wider, again, the wider web of conditions. I needed to be seeing the situation in a certain way. I needed to be in a certain mood. I needed a whole host of inner and outer factors to be there for the anger to come. A lot of them are inner in the way we have been, in the moments preceding that, predisposed to seeing or assuming or perceiving or holding a situation. And all that, that crucible of conditions, are the causes of anger. But we tend to just isolate one thing: “No, *you*,” or sometimes “I,” or whatever.

So anger has this, I would say almost inherently in anger (very lightly saying that), almost inherently in anger is a blindness to its causes and the web of causes, and the greater picture of causes. But as I said, this is a very complex area. So anger can be blind to its causes, can be blind to its effects. Oftentimes when we have anger it’s kind of like a heat, a pressure inside that just wants to kind of burst out and burst forth, and we want to express it and get it out.

I remember, I don’t know when it was, twenty years ago or something, I had just started working in psychotherapy when I lived in America, quite an intensive psychotherapy process. And the therapist said, “You need to express some of this anger. You need to get it out.” And so she suggested I go to the gym and pummel a punch-bag. I was a very keen client [laughter], and so off I went to the gym, and this huge punch-bag. I was pummelling this thing. I connected with anger, pummelling this punch-bag,

and what I noticed was, I would do it and I would get more angry. And just start pummelling it more, and anger would build. Being a very keen client, I just kept going, and there was huge rage building up. And I did it – this was over weeks, actually – and it got to the point where my hands were blistering and bleeding.

At a certain point, some sense kicked in, and just realized: this is actually *building*. There's something going on here that's actually – what feels like it should be a letting out, an expression, a release, is actually building. There's something going on. It's building the anger. At first I thought, "Oh, now I'm connecting at deeper levels of it. Now it's really coming up." But after a while it was … [laughter] I was very young! After a while, it just became clear: no, this is building it. There's something going on here that's actually building it.

So anger can have this blindness to its effects – on ourselves, we think it's going to release, it's going to let something go, and also on others, on the effect it has on others. And anger can also be blind to itself. It tends to view itself as, when we're sitting with anger, "I see a completely clear vision of something. Here I am with Mañjuśrī's sword of wisdom, and I'm cutting through with my anger." And it's actually completely clouded with all kinds of things. But it has a *feeling* that it's clear.

I'm going to talk a bit more about anger, but it's very complicated, so I don't want to say one thing or the other. I just feel like, for me, it's an ongoing exploration with anger. I've seen there've been times when I've been in this camp, times when I've been in this view. And in a way, I feel maybe for me right now the wisest thing is not to settle so much on "This is how it is, and this is not how it is," and just to keep the creativity and the questioning open with that.

When we express or when anger is expressed very uncensoredly from one to another, I feel as human beings we are enormously sensitive and vulnerable; we are fragile creatures, our hearts are fragile, our very physicality is fragile, our energetics are fragile. When anger is thrown at us, it's extremely difficult not to just react to that anger, not to just automatically go into a reactive mode. Someone yells, and we just immediately go into that, and it just builds. To me, I think it takes quite an evolved being to hear, you know, have that torrent of anger come at them, not automatically go into reactive mode, be very spacious, distil the truth of what's being said, and respond appropriately. Would be a very evolved being working very hard, as far as I can tell. [laughter] So when we fling anger, that's part of what the blindness is to its effects: we expect, "Well, I just want this to change." We're adding a whole load of other stuff. It's very difficult to hear anger and stay open, and spacious, and responsive, and loving.

So sometimes it can feel easier to vent anger in the moment. It feels like there's pressure that wants to come out. It's just easier to vent it, easier to just *bleurgh.* But in the long run, what are we building there? What are we building? We're building the habit of that. We're building the habit of not caring how it lands, how it affects. We're building the pathways of anger, all of that. In the long run, it's not easier. In terms of our relationships, it's not easier.

So a real practice in life, I feel, is to – I'm not saying not to *feel* anger, because for most of us in this room that would be just a bit ridiculous, a step too far. What is it to feel anger and to say, "I feel angry"? Not to throw that, not to hurl it or dump it on another person. It's a whole different thing. I don't think that's easy at all, not at all. And it's a real practice. The Buddha talks about the communication of what is difficult. He talks about speaking what's true and what's helpful, in a helpful

way, at the right time. It's quite a lot there! [laughter] To reflect on, "Okay, I feel angry. Breathe. How am I going to …? What's the best way?" That can take time, just to let it calm down a little bit, and then assess: what's going to be best here? It's really a practice, not easy at all. And we learn this as a practice. We're going to make mistakes, absolutely. There's no question that we're going to make mistakes in this area. Absolutely no question.

For me, my history, my whatever reasons, upbringing or whatever, I had a very strong tendency to not express anger. Certainly not express that "no," not be able to express a "no." Oftentimes not even to be in contact with a feeling of anger when I felt it. So I'd be completely purple in the face or whatever, and "*No, everything's fine*!" [laughter] And that was my particular leaning. And then, through practice and therapy and all this, learnt how to say "no." And for the first period, which to be honest was actually a few years, I would basically bite people's heads off, completely nuke them. Went really to the other extreme in the way I said "no," and it caused a lot of fracturing in a lot of my friendships and relationships and family and stuff. Thankfully, you know, I healed it, but. I had a tendency to be a little extreme, anyway. The point is that we're going to make mistakes with this, and we're either going to go to one extreme or the other, and it's fine. It's really fine. If we *do* make mistakes, a "sorry" goes a long way, a long, long way, a genuine "sorry." And just to expect the mistakes and the moving back and forth as we learn. And I don't see any way other than that it takes years to learn this. And as I said, even then it's an evolving thing. There's no place we come to: "Right, that's it!"

A while ago, there was a situation that happened over a little bit of time, and I felt quite angry about a number of things with a person. And I sat with it for a while, and was with it, and met with this person. I remember saying right from the bat, right from the first thing, "I want to talk about something difficult. I'm upset." And I said, "Please, please know my intention is not to retaliate. I don't want to hurt. My intention is not to hurt. I'm still feeling a bit upset. I'm still feeling quite upset, and confused a little bit, not so clear. So maybe I won't express it so clearly, so perfectly, because of the agitation and the hurt." And I felt like that was very helpful. It kind of set something up in this interaction. First of all, it set up the humanity of it, and secondly it set up something about allowing me to then express what it was, what I was troubled by, in a non-perfect way; I didn't have to do it perfectly. And I hope that it also allowed the other person to then be not perfect. So we could be human together.

Now, of course, that intention not to retaliate, not to hurt has to be real. You can't go in there and say, "Yeah, I don't want to …" [laughter] And actually you've kind of got a gun there. So to take the time with this, to really calm, and find that place where genuinely we can say, "Okay, I'm still upset, I'm still hurt, I'm still confused, I'm still angry, but I really, really, really am clear in myself: I have no wish to hurt, no ill-will, no wish to be right, to retaliate, any of that."

So anger in the context of love, anger in the context of *mettā*. Sometimes we find ourselves with – someone we love is angry at us. And we find ourselves having to hear the anger. So again, this is quite interesting. I remember being in a meditation class in America when I lived there, and one of the teachers saying, "You know, we're not obliged to take in, to kind of bear anyone else's angry energy. There's no obligation to do that. And you can say to a person, 'I really want to hear what you're saying, but I'm not going to do that when you're in that much anger, when you're ranting and yelling or whatever it is. So if you want to go for a walk and calm down and whatever, and then I'll hear you.'" Of course, then they'll probably be [angry at that suggestion].

But there's something, when he said that, when I heard that … And this is, again, interesting about the types of people that are sort of very committed to spiritual practice – I had been so much in the mould of – I think because often people who find themselves in these kind of environments, very committed to personal growth, really want genuinely to admit their faults, to learn about themselves, to change, to grow, to look at their shadow side, their weak points, etc. And so, like I said, I had been very keen, and someone was angry, and I would just kind of open my heart to them, and "Yeah, give it to me." [laughter] And of course I was completely bowled over by this, I mean really, really bowled over. And it would take me, in some instances, days or weeks to recover energetically. And I think sometimes it just goes with a certain kind of earnestness, really, and sort of genuine openness of heart.

So when he, this teacher said that, I was completely like, "Wow, that's radical," just to say, "I'm not obliged to take in that energy. I'm not obliged to do that. But I want hear what you have to say. I want to hear your hurt." *That* piece is crucial, because often that's the piece that's missing, and that's the piece that allows anger to escalate – that people, we or another person feels unheard. That's where the anger comes in, or can escalate, at least. And you see this in individuals. You see this in groups of people, in terrorism and all that. In a way, terrorism, you know, you could say part of it is just this trying to break through with violence to try and be heard. A group of people or whatever – I mean, obviously it's much more complicated than that, but a group of people or whatever feels completely unseen in the whole progress of globalization or whatever, disenfranchised, etc., and "I will be heard." And you know, a bomb, what's louder than a bomb to be heard?

When we feel unheard, there's a kind of powerlessness. There's a frustration and a hurt there. And it's that hurt that's not being heard, and the frustration and the powerlessness, and a want to break through that. So a gift to another person is to really hear their hurt, to offer that. So for me, in relationships when there's been this kind of thing, what's been really healing is when I've been able to see that hurt in another, and actually just the heart then sees the hurt and connects with it, and there can be just the love there. The recognition, "Oh, I hurt you," and a genuine "It really pains me that I hurt you. I see your hurt. I see how I was a cause in that, and it really hurts me that I hurt you." And there's a genuine sorrow there. So someone, and you know we've all been in this, there are just two hardnesses, two angers bumping up against each other. Someone at some point has to soften, let go, be vulnerable. Otherwise it just keeps bumping. And we've all been there. Okay, anger. That was anger in the context of *mettā*.

Different expressions of *mettā*: in the body. So we put a lot of emphasis on the sensitivity to the body in the practice. Can it be that throughout our time here, throughout the day, that there's a kind of gentleness and care that comes to flow out of the body? So how we are walking, how we're opening and closing doors, how we're handling the dishes and the cutlery, how we're eating. The whole, all the outflows of the body are actually reflecting a gentleness and a care. So beginning to kind of incorporate that, a much wider expression during the day.

Touch. Of course with human beings we express love through the hands, through touch. Can we actually explore this while we're here in the context of a *mettā* retreat? What would it be to actually even touch ourselves, let the hand rest, the hand rest on the other hand? And feel, allow, a tenderness of touch to flow through, in this case from one hand to the other hand, one hand to the arm, whatever. And you know, you may be a little shy about this, or it's a bit weird or whatever, but if you want to

experiment with this, what is it to let the body and the hands really exude that and feel that? So if you want to, maybe in your room or whatever, just quietly. What is it to touch the body with tenderness and to feel that?

And this can go through the walking practice too. What is it to walk, a human being walking on the earth, and the feet touch the earth, and in that contact, the sensations between the foot and the earth, there's love there? There's somehow love in the contact, in the mystery of what it is to be a human being with the foot touching the earth, walking on the earth. Somehow there's love. And to explore. This is all really possible in the practice.

Love as expressed through the eyes as attentiveness. To really look. To really look at another, at something in nature, ourselves in the mirror. So oftentimes in relationship we express love as attentiveness. And what a person needs often is attentiveness, the kindness of our attention. That's what we can offer others. So attentiveness as *mettā*.

And a slowness. Not to hurry. At Gaia House, there's not really much to hurry for. [laughter] It's really sitting and then walking, sitting and walking. Then there's lunch, but …We can see this in our everyday life outside of retreat. I notice very clearly if I'm on the high street somewhere and I've got a list of errands. I need to go to the bank, I need to – I don't know, buy groceries – and I need to go to make an appointment at the doctor, whatever. I've just got this list, and I'm on the high street, in London or Boston where I lived, or Newton Abbot or wherever it is. There I am, and I'm on the high street with the agenda of *what I want*, basically, in the humble form of this list. But basically it's *what I want*. What happens? What happens then?

I'm going through, and all the other people on the street are kind of beings in the way, beings in the way of *what I want*. It's not even that dramatic. This is our normal mode of consciousness. We have *what I want.* We're moving towards something, and there's stuff in the way, and some of that stuff happens to be human beings! [laughter] We don't even realize that this is going on most of the time. What happens? The consciousness shrinks. What is it – and you can really experiment with this – what is it to be slow, not be in a hurry, be on the high street without the agenda of *what I want*? And this is very experienceable, a whole different sense.

We begin to notice the whole diverse, beautiful, wondrous expression of human life in all its diversity: the children with mothers, and interactions, and friends, and exchange of this and that. And it's all going on. There's a widening of the perception instead of that tunnel vision again. You can be on the high street, and this sense of boundless love and all that, it's not just going to be constricted to the retreat and the careful conditions of a retreat. When we drop *what I want*, the heart opens in a very different way, has a very different sense of life and the mystery of life. So when there's *what I want* and we're caught up in that, we close the doors to the mystery. And it's right there, believe it or not, in Newton Abbot, if any of you know Newton Abbot. [laughs] It's right there. Totnes, it's there all the time, but … [laughter]

When we slow down, slow the hurrying, drop a little bit *what I want (*and especially on retreat we can see this), there can come into the being a kind of stillness, a stilling of the being at a very deep level. Unforced stillness just organically comes into the being, this stillness. It can. In that, a sense of silence – and I talked a bit about this in the opening talk – a sense of silence can actually begin to stand out, to have a prominence. This sense of silence and all that that brings with it, the beauty of that.

I touched on this, again, in the opening talk, just briefly: one of the things [about] this sense of silence, as it begins to stand out, begins to emerge, is it allows what's really important to the heart, what's deeply important to rise to the surface. And all the kind of little really flotsam and jetsam, all the trivia that we're so preoccupied with, that can kind of just settle. And what we really, what the heart really cares about in this life can begin to come up and be clear. And our priorities are clear and in place and accessible. That's a huge gift of silence.

Related is something else, and especially silence, especially in the context of a *mettā* retreat: just automatically, memories come up of things that we did, that we wished that we didn't. Or something we said that we wished that we didn't, or didn't say that we wished that we had. So this is a very common possibility of the softening of the *mettā* and the silence. I view remorse as something very much a part of the *mettā* practice and the silence and the retreat. Just remembering and allowing that, remorse being different from what guilt is. I don't know if this is correct English, but guilt, I would say, is when the self has got wrapped around something: "I did that wrong. I am a terrible person. I'm unkind. I, I, I, I, I. You, you, you, you, you. I, I, I." Self has wrapped itself around. Remorse is something much more soft, much more open, much more creative: "Oh, that's what I did. That's what I neglected to do. I feel the pain of that. I feel the sadness of that," but it's open. Not so much self. It's just saying something not so much about *me*, but about *behaviour*. If that situation arises in the future, I'm very clear I want to do it differently now. And so the sadness is part of realigning the intentions of the being. So that kind of remorse, that kind of sadness, can be a really important part of, at times, of the *mettā* practice and the silence.

As, potentially, for some people, this silence can really begin to stand out and become prominent, and it becomes almost something all-pervasive and all-inclusive, there's almost a mystical sense of silence, something really palpable. There's a poem about this by Pablo Neruda. Again, some of you might know it. It's a very beautiful poem about this mystical quality of silence and its relationship to love. It's called "Keeping Quiet."[2]

[55:25 – 56:58, poem]

So it's possible, one of the possibilities is for this sense of silence to really become strong and really have a very deep effect. In the silence, what happens is the silence begins to embrace everything, be a backdrop for everything, hold everything. The silence begins to stand out, and we begin to let go of our preoccupation with things, with objects, which is the normal preoccupation of consciousness, with things and with objects. That begins to go a little bit into the background. We let go of that preoccupation, and it's almost like some other sense, this sense that Neruda is talking about, some other sense can begin to come to the fore, and make its impact on the heart.

That possibility also opens the door to a possibility of this sense of the *being* being in the space of silence, and in a way, receiving love. That space, that silence holds everything. Everything arises and passes in that silence, in that space. And we begin to get a whole other sense of love, a whole other sense, as love as a kind of holding, as a kind of receiving, that we ourselves are held and received. All things, all beings are held and received in that silence, in that love.

So on this retreat, we happen to be choosing the technique of the phrases, the systematic way of doing it that way. But actually there are tons of ways of doing *mettā*. So very fruitful for some people is having a figure like Jesus or Kuan Yin, the bodhisattva of compassion, Avalokiteśvara, some figure that completely embodies love, and one is just reminded of that and tuning into that energy, and allowing that to radiate and permeate from that being. Or there can be this sense of silence and letting go into the silence. It actually doesn't really matter too much. But the *mettā*, especially in these other ways, if you have a kind of bodhisattva figure or the silence or something like that, it begins to give a sense of the self not always *doing* the *mettā*, that the *mettā* is self-created, it's always self-created, coming from effort. There can be a sense that, in a way, something is unveiled, something that's woven into the fabric of the universe: love. In a way, some veil is lifted, and we begin to get a sense that somehow it's there all the time.

A little while ago, there was a work retreatant here, and we were working on *mettā* in different ways, so some slightly different ways than what we've yet been doing here. But she wrote me a note where she talks a bit about this, and I keep it because it's put so well, so beautifully. And English isn't her first language, but:

> Dear Rob,
>
> Practising after the meeting in the library an old, well-known, apparently insoluble pain arose very quickly. Already aware that there wasn't any wholehearted acceptance, yet an attempt to embrace the pain lovingly coming from a hidden agenda of wanting it to go away, to dissolve. Somehow it was clear that this unloving attitude was known by the pain, so it wouldn't pass, but intensify. What was needed was very clearly a pure embrace of loving-kindness, breathing to expand the capacity of accepting the unacceptable, and relax. Breathing to expand the capacity to love the unloved, and relax.
>
> And then a change. Deep, pitch-black darkness, familiar though, was around, and the thought was, "Even the unloved is surrounded by love all the time anyway." And it went on: "We *all* are surrounded, loved all the time, anyway. We may not know, we may not have experienced it yet, yet love is around all along, awaiting us to open up to it, to become sensitive to it, to receive it. With all our incompetence, imperfection, impurities, we are surrounded by love nonetheless."
>
> If that is so, doesn't it bring with it a kind of responsibility, as it were, to expand our capacity to love unconditionally? As human beings we are never able to embrace unconditional love; it always embraces us. Always has been and always will. Is that true? Question. How can love appear as dark black? Isn't it said and written umpteen times, it comes as light? Am I experiencing a hoax?

I assured her that she wasn't! [laughter] It's very beautifully put. And again, not to grasp at any of this stuff. I just say this or that; not to grasp it. But just to say that this actually isn't that uncommon. It's not

that uncommon. So some may relate to this. Some may relate to the idea of a bodhisattva, to the silence, to this kind of all-encompassing love, and some not. It doesn't matter. The important thing, I think, is that perceptions, through this practice somehow, perceptions are changing and opening. And that is really significant. Perceptions are changing and opening. And that's more crucial than it at first appears.

So we go back to the phrases for a second. Sometimes with the phrases, as I said, sometimes there's no feeling of *mettā* there, and we're just patiently, steadily working away, grinding away at the phrases. Sometimes there *is* a feeling of *mettā*. And then the feeling of *mettā*, whatever it is, warmth or pleasantness or openness, sometimes it's there and it's quite steady, and then you might want to experiment with letting the phrases go, or let them get very light, and maybe let them go, and just be with the steadiness of that feeling. Now we have the friend and the benefactor. Sometimes it's possible that we are giving *mettā* to the friend or the benefactor, to another, and there's the sense of them, and the *mettā* deepens, the *samādhi* deepens, and even the visual sense of them kind of fades a little bit, and there's just a sense of a heart radiating *mettā* to another heart. Just a heart to a heart.

Sometimes even *that* sense begins to fade a little bit, and it's just hearts merging, and just a sense of a kind of communion of hearts. And maybe the sense of the other person is gone a little bit, and there's just maybe light there, or just this sense of communion, warmth. Communion of hearts. In that, then there is a sense of oneness.

Now, oneness – I'll go into this in a bit more detail, too, in another talk, other *talks* – oneness is not quite the same as not-self, *anattā*, but it's hugely important. It's hugely important for a human being to open to that sense of oneness in their life. It's a sense that comes and goes, but it begins, potentially, to question the perception, our everyday, taken-for-granted perception of separation: "I'm here, you're there. I'm here, the world is out there." This is our everyday, normal consciousness perception. If – and I'm talking about a lot of practice with *mettā* – if there is this going in and out of the sense of oneness, a sense of just merging, a communion of hearts, it really does begin to question our taken-for-granted perception of separation. And a person can wonder over time: what actually is the truth? Separation? Oneness? What's the truth?

So I'll be picking up, we'll be picking up again on this, these questions of oneness and perception and truth and *anattā* and all of that, as the retreat goes on. But I think I'll stop there for today. Just to outline some of the range of possibilities of the kind of dimensions and expressions of *mettā*.

Shall we sit together for a minute?

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[1] Kahlil Gibran, *The Prophet* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1923).

[2] Pablo Neruda, *Extravagaria: A Bilingual Edition*, tr. Alastair Reid (London: Jonathan Cape, 1972), 27–9. Archived at https://web.archive.org/web/20201002145556/https://english.duke.edu/news/poem-day-keeping-quiet, accessed 1 Nov. 2020.

From Insight to Love

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.

The Practice of Compassion

Okay, so I want to talk in a bit more detail about this practice of compassion that we're doing. One possible definition for compassion might be something, *something*, like: the natural response of the heart to suffering when that heart, when the mind, when the consciousness, is not preoccupied with self, when it's not kind of contracted around self, *what I want*, including a negative self-view, "I'm terrible at all this" or whatever it is. So when that contraction around self isn't there, the natural response of the heart when it meets suffering will be this compassion. That's one possible definition.

So compassion differs from *mettā* in that it's specific to suffering. It's oriented towards suffering. It's a response towards suffering, towards *dukkha*. And compassion as an energy, it wants to alleviate the suffering. It wants to heal the suffering. It wants to go out and to soothe suffering. It wants to free, it wants to free suffering. We could say, when there's loving-kindness, when there's *mettā*, and that *mettā* meets suffering, it kind of transforms into compassion.

Again, all these – *mettā* and compassion and equanimity – they're all just words, but the words can be really helpful pointers of what to cultivate. But in a way, compassion is a kind of composite. It involves a lot of different qualities, a lot of different aspects to it. It certainly includes what we would call empathy, or what I'm calling empathy – meaning the kind of resonance of the heart with the suffering that it touches, or we see suffering, we witness suffering in ourselves and others, and there's a kind of trembling of the heart, I think is the Buddha's words. So we see sorrow in someone, and somehow we also feel sorrow. This is, to me, a miraculous quality of the human heart – maybe some animals' as well; I don't know. The heart has a capacity to resonate, in a very beautiful way, with the sorrow that it encounters in the world. So that's a huge part of compassion. Maybe half of compassion is empathy.

But compassion also has this very active aspect. It wants to give, as I say. It wants to heal and soothe. It wants to do something. So it involves giving. But it also involves, it needs to have equanimity in it. It needs to have wisdom in it. It has a basis of kindness. It has kindness in it. The *mettā* is in it. It needs to have acceptance in it. Compassion often has humour in it. You know, it's not this very heavy, dry thing. It has listening in it. Holding. It wants to hold suffering sometimes. There's a quality of opening in it. It also has a quality of joy. Joy is running through compassion. That's quite important too.

So compassion is all of that and probably more. And again, like *mettā*, it's not just a feeling. Certainly the feeling aspect of compassion is important, but it's a whole lot more. It's a whole lot more than that.

It's interesting, we all signed up for this retreat, loving-kindness and compassion, and yet I still feel that most human beings have a somewhat ambivalent relationship with compassion. Despite our – everyone *here*, certainly – the spiritual aspiration to cultivate compassion, to want to deepen the heart that way and open the heart that way, there's still maybe a part of us that kind of is a little bit wary and maybe a little bit scared of it. We can tend to think of it or feel it as a burden: "I've already got so much stuff going on here. Now they're asking me to open to the suffering in the world." Or, "I've got so much going on just trying to deal with my own stuff, and now I have to somehow feel burdened by the rest of humanity and beings." But I think as we grow on the spiritual path, we really see that it's not a

burden. We're not opening ourselves up to *more* suffering, actually. We're not *taking on* more suffering through compassion. Rather, if the heart closes or remains closed to compassion, that's a burden, that's suffering. That heart will be small and dry and preoccupied with self, and there's suffering in that. There will be a burden to that.

So there is, though – I mean, this is a human thing – we are ambivalent, often, about compassion. So we have this kind of unsureness about it, uncertainty about it, fear of it. And we also have this yearning for it. Very, very deep in the heart is a sense that this is something that really is profoundly fulfilling to the heart. The heart's moving out in compassion, opening to compassion, opening to the suffering of others is something almost without which a life cannot be fulfilled. And so deeply we yearn for it because of the connection that it sustains, that it opens with ourselves. Our own heart is deeply connected with its own depth. And the connection, of course, with others. And you may also be having a sense, you know, at times there's a real sweetness even in the compassion. It's a very sweet quality. It can be, it should be, an energizing quality, something of it that's actually sustaining, bright. It should also be – and this may or may not be the case, more or less, but – it should also be a pleasant quality. It's something that the heart can settle into, and actually enjoy compassion. Not a burden, not something to be scared of. The warmth of it, the beauty of it.

And again, going way back to, I think, something I said in the opening talk, that compassion is an ennobling quality. It really gives a kind of beautiful nobility to the heart. And this is something which we can be genuinely proud of, our aspiration towards compassion. Perhaps on another level, too, it dissolves the kind of prison of self-interest that is our typical dwelling place. And this, again, is something that we're ambivalent about. So again, oftentimes spiritual practitioners feel the constriction of the self, and that as a prison, and yearn to be free, and yet, "Whoa! Maybe not so fast." It can be a little bit disorienting, or we're actually not sure how much we want to let go of the self-interest.

But through the compassion practice, it's moving that way, through the insights that come from the compassion practice and the *mettā*, through the kind of sense of oneness that sometimes opens up there. And slowly, over time, I really think we begin to sense that we cannot be fulfilled, we cannot actually find a really deep happiness in life if we're self-centred. From the centre of self, to go out in the world searching for happiness, is doomed to failure, is doomed to limitation, is doomed to actually create suffering. And as these practices mature, I think, I would say there comes a point for people when one just says, "Actually, you know, I'm just not interested in living a life with self at the centre any more." It's just something has either gradually or suddenly just snapped. And that kind of life with self at the centre is no longer that interesting.

All this happens gradually, but there's a deeper and deeper commitment to love and to compassion. And as I think John said, maybe in the opening talk, you know, the Dalai Lama, someone with tremendous years of practice and commitment says, "My religion is kindness." It's just moved to that kind of place.

For the Buddha, one of the really important things in his own search, in his own practice, and also what he tried to encourage others, was asking the right questions of ourselves, of life, of practice. We may think, "Okay, compassion. All right. I see it's a good idea. How does it develop in my life?" So this asking the questions. How can I develop compassion? How does the heart open more in compassion? Asking these questions – really, really important in life.

There's a story about Gertrude Stein, the writer. I know very little about her, but she was on her deathbed, in and out of a coma, and surrounded by a sort of group of acolytes – is that the word? Devotees, almost. And she seemed to sort of be slipping into this coma and entering the other realms or whatever, and then sort of coming back to this realm a little bit, in and out like this over a few days. At one point, one of her little entourage, whose name, I think, was Nancy something, said, "Gertrude, Gertrude, what's the answer?" Because it seemed like she was going to some place. So when she sort of emerged from her coma-esque state, she said, "Nancy, what's the question?"[1] [laughter] Which I think – well, she was an odd fish anyway.

But in a way, there was some real wisdom in that, because sometimes we have the sense of wanting answers, wanting answers in life, and yet we're not asking very specific questions. If you look back on the Buddha's search, something he was extremely skilful at was asking really particular questions of himself and of others. And when he got asked questions, after his awakening, when he got asked questions that he felt actually weren't really leading anywhere, well, he wouldn't hesitate to tell the person! [laughter] If it wasn't the greatest question, maybe they should rethink their question, or sometimes he would just ignore it.

So questioning is very important in our practice. And of course, we're dealing very much with the techniques here. And mostly the technique that we're working with is the phrases, and that's fine. That's one option. But there are many techniques. You know, if we just talk in terms of techniques, there are many techniques for compassion. There's *tonglen*, some of you will be familiar with from the Tibetan tradition. There's the taking of a bodhisattva, so Avalokiteśvara, or Kuan Yin, Tārā, Jesus, whatever it is, and just opening to that energy, and channelling that energy. Beautiful way of practising. There is the use of insight, what I talked about a little bit the other day: using the insight to just, in all kinds of different ways, to open up the compassion. But the development of compassion in our life is, of course, not just a formal thing. And we have to ask: "Okay, I'm beginning to understand the techniques. This is working for me. What else in my life, so that it can really be a deep current in our lives?" A question: "What is it that nurtures compassion? What is it that allows it to grow in the heart?" A hugely important question for our life.

So we may look, and the first thing, the sort of basis, in a way, is just a willingness to open to and to touch suffering. It's that simple. If we're out of contact, if we're not looking, if we're disconnected from the suffering in the world, there's no way compassion is going to arise, either for ourselves or for others. So it has this willingness to come close, to be intimate, to witness, to see, to feel. And that much may be obvious to people who have been practising a while, but I don't think that if we walk down Newton Abbot high street and took a survey and asked people, "Do you think it's a really good idea to open and to really experience intimately the suffering in the world, your own or others'?", I'm not sure. [laughter] I'm not sure what the survey … So it's not obvious! [laughter] And even if we've been in these kind of circles, we need reminding. That's the thing without which compassion cannot arise, that willingness to come close and to touch.

And in so doing in our practice, we begin to develop a confidence that we actually *can* open to suffering, we *can* be intimate with pain, we *can* look it in the face, and we can be okay. There's a confidence that comes into the heart, and that's huge. That's really huge. Because probably the reason that – I keep knocking Newton Abbot; it's probably the same – well, I don't know if it's the same in

Totnes. Wherever. [laughter] I lost my track of thought. [laughter] Anyway, we develop the confidence by doing this, which is huge, because that's the one thing that would be lacking, I think, without the practice.

So this willingness. Insight. 'Insight,' meaning, again, how is it that human begins kind of create or co-create suffering? What are we doing that creates unnecessary suffering in the world, for ourselves and for others? That's what insight is – it's understanding how suffering is created, understanding it so deeply that we don't do it any more. When there's that insight, when there's that understanding of suffering, compassion comes automatically. Because we look around us and inside us, and we just see it's going on all the time through clinging, through ignorance, through misunderstanding. And with that insight comes compassion. As the deepening of the understanding of *anattā*, of this not-self, the emptiness of self, as that deepens, compassion is natural: less to protect, less barriers between you and me, less barriers between me and the world. A natural sense of non-separation. And the compassion is organic in that.

Also the importance of – the Buddha talks a lot about association with the wise in order to cultivate wisdom; as well as practice, just hanging out with people who are wise, talking with them, being with them, seeing how they live. I would add to that, association with the compassionate. Like really spending time with people who are really devoted to compassion, to service in the world. It kind of has a way of rubbing off. So a willingness to open, insights, the *anattā*, action. I haven't said that one yet: action, meaning actually doing stuff. We meditate, and hopefully we're transforming our intentions, we're transforming our hearts, so that spontaneously it wants to pour out into the world, it wants to pour its love out into the world, it wants to hold the suffering. We're transforming the heart gradually, reconditioning the heart at very deep levels. And so the movement is from inner to outer. But not to underestimate the movement from outer to inner. We act in the world out of service even when we're not feeling like it. We do something, we put ourselves in situations, and there are all kinds of opportunities in the world to spend some time devoted to service, to compassion. And that somehow transforms the inner as well. So action and association.

And the last one, right now at least, is some degree of happiness, I would say, or well-being, or joy, or something like that, whatever word is okay for you. That when we feel a certain amount of buoyancy it's much easier for the heart to move out, to be not preoccupied with self, not burdened by life. And that happiness is a kind of foundation, not only for the *samādhi*, as I said, but also for compassion.

So I have a friend, I think I mentioned the other day, and she really has an extraordinary capacity for compassion. She's just one of these people that has a natural huge heart. And she has in her, for all kinds of complicated reasons, she has a history of suffering from periods of depression. And when she's in that more folded-in place, her heart just closes down. I think she *wants* to be available, but she can't. She just doesn't have those inner resources. So taking care of our happiness, our well-being, is actually hugely important.

We might ask: what nurtures compassion? The flip-side of the same question: what actually blocks it? What's not helpful? What's kind of getting in the way a little bit? And so, remembering with *mettā*, we talked about the near enemies of *mettā*, the near enemy being attached love. Compassion has four near enemies. Four things, four qualities, that arise – as human beings, they will arise for us – they can *look* like compassion, they can be mistaken for compassion, but they're not; they're kind of diversions.

And again, not that they're wrong or that we want to judge them or that they shouldn't arise and we expect them not to arise. They're actually part of having a human heart, part of our humanity, part of the learning process. So really not to judge these when they arise, or shun them or anything. Actually to look into what the differences are. So they are – I'll go through them in a bit more detail – fear, anger, pity, and grief.

So fear. And oftentimes I've come across people practising compassion and they kind of have this relationship of fear to it. Again, fear of the suffering that they will open to, and it will be burdensome, or that they will be drowning in sadness and drowning in grief. We fear our own suffering. You know, this is very clear to us. There's emotional pain that we have or physical pain, and we have a response of fear to it. But that fear only compounds the suffering. It only adds to it. Now, we need to be very clear about this. Fear is actually not something very helpful in relationship to our own suffering, for the most part. And then in relationship to the suffering of the world, we can feel like little old me is supposed to open up to the, I don't know, maybe infinite suffering of the world, the infinite suffering of beings. And this little sense of self can feel overwhelmed.

So there's fear, there's anger. And this is quite common. It's quite a seductive one, the way that we can see suffering in the world and our compassion, what might be compassion, actually gets diverted into a kind of righteous indignation or anger at what's going on. It's extremely common. We blame: "If it wasn't for them, if it wasn't for you, this wouldn't happen." Or we judge others that we see to be causing suffering in the world. Or we judge our own suffering: "I shouldn't be suffering, I'm so stupid! I've been meditating for, you know, weeks or whatever, and I'm still suffering." [laughs] But this is really important: wisdom, and the wisdom in compassion, understands the causes and the conditions that give rise to suffering, understands what the Buddha would call the 'dependent origination' of suffering.

I think I mentioned it sometime. I did a couple of months' *mettā* and compassion retreat a while ago. And when I got to the difficult category, I had three people in the difficult category. And two of them were these two American politicians. It was quite challenging. [laughs] And just seeing the blame, the judgment, etc., come up, the righteous anger. But as I practised with it, actually beginning to take a little bit of a broader view and seeing that, okay, this particular politician was brought up in a certain environment, he had a certain family. I mean, his father … [laughter] You know, where he was sent to school, all of it. There's no way – not *no* way, but it would be *extremely* a tall order to ask him, having grown up in that environment, in that family, in that education system, the whole works, to somehow extricate himself from all that and have a whole different way of seeing the world. That's not to condone some of the stuff that's going on, but this is what I'm saying about dependent origination, causes and conditions, actually seeing it. We tend to blame selves, and we don't see the bigger picture. Again, this web of causes and conditions that comes together and makes someone see something a certain way, someone do something a certain way, someone say something.

So there's that. There's understanding the causes and conditions and dependent origination. Really, really important when we see, when we're trying to be compassionate to those who are actually causing suffering in the world. The other part is also a reflection on karma. And this is not a kind of revenge thing. It's seeing that whoever it is that seems like they're causing suffering, they are actually causing suffering for themselves. And I'm not talking about future lives and all that stuff. In this life, it may not

seem that way, but by cultivating greed, by cultivating insensitivity, by cultivating self-centredness, self-preoccupation, they are actually contracting their heart. There's a very real limit to how much a heart caught up in all of that, acting from all of that, there's a very real limit to the amount of true peace, true well-being, true joy that that heart can open to, despite what else comes their way. When we talk about karma, it's not a revenge – we don't get behind it because, "Yeah! They're going to get it!" [laughter] It's really, can we use that as a compassion, as a doorway to compassion?

The last two years that I lived in the States, I moved out of the sort of inner city thing to – I wanted a bit more greenery around me, so I moved to the suburb. And it turned out after I got there that – it was really nice, actually, but it turned out to kind of be a suburb of the American dream, so to speak. And so a lot of people had swimming pools. I didn't have a swimming pool. [laughs] A lot of people with swimming pools and cars and this. And a lot of the cars there were these SUVs, sports utility vehicles, you know, those big kind of … Do you know what I mean when I say SUV? Yeah, four-wheel drive, exactly. At that time in America, there was no emissions – they could have all kinds of pollutants in the exhaust, and there was no law against it, and they were also of course gas guzzlers, etc., like that. And I'd been quite involved with different environmental projects and movements and stuff.

And so I would walk around my otherwise very nice neighbourhood, and enjoying the greenery and everything, but actually fuming at seeing all these SUVs, and really getting quite bothered by it. I went to my teacher, and I explained what was going on, and she said – my teacher Narayan, she said, "Give them, send them *mettā*." And then she said, "And not only that, wish them *more* SUVs." [laughter] So I was like, "Hoo. Okay." So I left, and I could do the first part, I did the *mettā*, but I could not wish them more SUVs. It just seemed really not helpful. [laughter]

But what I think happened, something at a certain point shifted. Maybe it was from the *mettā.* And I began to see: most of these people were very nice. They were caring, considerate, friendly, etc. They just did not understand. They didn't understand. They just didn't see. They were uninformed. They just didn't make the connection. They were ignorant. One use of the word 'ignorance.' But that, I think what happened with the *mettā* softening it was, seeing that instead of *them* being ignorant, I was seeing ignorance does not belong to anyone. Many instances when *I* was ignorant, I *am* ignorant, of course. And it's like, ignorance is part of the human condition. And instead of belonging to them, it was just like, there is ignorance, and it doesn't belong to self. And somehow in that, there was the ability to be more soft with it, and the compassion could arise. I still thought that the SUVs were really a huge shame, and then, of course, you know, September 11th happened, and people not really even seeing the connection between the oil in the Gulf and all that stuff, but anyway.

There's a difference – I don't know if this corresponds to dictionary definitions, but what I would call 'judgment' and 'discernment.' And the Buddha talks a lot about discernment. Discernment meaning, what is it that's leading towards suffering? What is it that's leading towards the well-being of self and other? To me, you know, American – well, the world now; it's the same in London – all those SUVs, it's actually not leading to freedom from suffering. It's not helpful. Judgment would be when the self has wrapped itself around that discernment, and says, "You" or "I," "*I'm* different. *You're* doing this." Self is wrapped around the discernment, and it's come to be a thing about self, rather than just a thing about discerning what leads to suffering and what doesn't. So there can be discernment and still compassion, and that's really important.

And so the third thing, when there's anger – (1) understanding the causes and conditions, the dependent origination; (2) seeing that ignorance doesn't belong to self, that ignorance is just ignorance; (3) third thing, what the Buddha calls – it sounds a little strange – remaining percipient of the beautiful. Which means, basically, when we see difficult stuff going on, or someone acting to create suffering, we're drawn into that, and that becomes all we see. I wandered around my otherwise very nice neighbourhood; all I saw was SUVs. [laughs] The mind gets sucked into that kind of perception. 'Remain percipient' means find something in this person that's actually noble, lovely, of good intention, something to balance the lopsidedness of the view.

Okay, so there's fear, there's anger. Oh, and actually, one more thing: when the compassion has gone off into righteous anger or we feel that kind of anger come in, it's actually painful for us. So sometimes this might happen in the course of your practice, if you're giving compassion to the difficult person. To take a moment and just give the compassion to oneself, recognizing there's some pain there. If I'm involved in judgment, if I'm involved in blame, in anger, in all that, my heart is burning, my heart is contracted and painful. Just to take a moment, and turn round, and feel that pain, and touch it with compassion to oneself, and then to go out again.

So it's important that aversion doesn't come into the compassion too much. Compassion wants to alleviate suffering, but it's not that it wants to push it away out of aversion – and there really *is* a difference, and to feel in our practice and our lives the difference between those two. Compassion is not pushing away out of aversion; rather, it's almost compassion *holds* suffering, it holds suffering, and then adds healing and understanding. So it's something quite different.

Okay, so there's fear, as these near enemies, fear, anger, pity. Pity. And again, this can be, this can look, very similar, but you can feel it in the practice. You can actually feel it and see if you can play with it. Pity towards others is when we're looking down at them: "Oh, poor you, down there suffering, worldling!" [laughter] It creeps in, and sometimes in very subtle ways, you know: "Oh, that's not the sort of suffering *I* get involved in" or whatever. Sometimes it's barely a thought, but there's just a stance of kind of looking down.

You can see it also, interestingly, in ourselves. We can somehow get into self-pity, and that's quite common. Maybe it's when we're comparing our state of suffering with others, and we're sort of down. But to see that self-pity is something *dis*empowering. Compassion is something that's actually energizing and healing, and moves towards the alleviation of suffering. Self-pity will just keep it cycling. It's disempowering. It actually *keeps* suffering there. Compassion to self and other is empowering and not debilitating. So in the practice, you can see: when has pity crept in, and is there some way I can equalize things again?

All the near enemies, what they have in common is that there's too much self-view in the mix at that time. Whether it's anger or fear or pity, whatever, there's too much self, either my self or your self, their self. Too much selfing is going on. There's too much of that in the picture. Can we remedy that by beginning to see the commonality? See the commonality of suffering, of ignorance, of whatever it is. And so this happens as we're meditating, and sometimes we just need to make a little shift, see what's common, and it can help. So suffering is suffering, and it's something that we all have. And delusion is delusion, and it's something that we all have.

Last one is a little bit more complicated: grief. If there's too much grief comes into the compassion practice – and it's quite common – we can feel overwhelmed. We can really feel tired and burdened, and the practice can become tiring and debilitating. It's a little bit complicated, because sometimes we touch on things and it's necessary to feel the grief and to kind of release grief. However, maybe just to add, sometimes to look into: how does grief sometimes spiral and feed itself? So grief, even if it's a very real and necessary grief, we actually feel quite tired afterwards; even if it's very real, I need to release this, there's a kind of tiredness to it. That low physical energy can then actually set up the conditions for more grief, and it can just keep going like that, because the physical energy has sunk. So just something to be aware of when we're working with grief. Some of it may be really necessary. Sometimes it might just be spiralling in an unnecessary way. For the practice of compassion, we don't want to be too much over in the grief all the time. For some, it's going to be inevitable and it's actually a beautiful thing, that the heart is touched by that. But you want it to be balanced.

That aspect of balance, we did talk about it the other day, and I'll just mention it again briefly, because it's really important. As we open to the suffering, there's the empathy, there's the trembling of the heart, the quivering of the heart, the sorrow that we feel at that suffering in the world, the sadness that we feel. That's natural. If there's too much of that, we *will* get tired and feel burdened, if we emphasize that too much in practice.

So we can be aware, as the practice is going on, of where the balance is. And you can just lean over a little bit more to feeling the energy that's more going out to heal, to soothe, to comfort. That has a kind of brightness to it. It has a kind of healing quality that's touching ourselves on its way out. And it will give the awareness, the heart, some buoyancy and some sense of well-being and happiness. And it's really, really necessary. So that the practice of compassion can be really sustainable. It doesn't feel like, "Ugh. I'm exhausted now. Can we move on to the next *brahmavihāra*?" It actually feels like one could just keep going with compassion, because it feels very lovely. And one can keep leaning the mind into feeling that loveliness, that nourishment of that, and feeling it in the body as well. This is really, really important. And it's not a fixed point of balance that we find; it's always going to be moving. But it's something that we can be responsive to.

As the practice of compassion deepens – so we're working with this balance, and we're healing, we're sensitive to suffering, and we're radiating out the healing – as it deepens, sometimes there's a possibility it deepens to, in a way, a third aspect. Not just the empathizing and the giving out, but a third aspect of what I would call 'spaciousness,' or 'equanimity' comes in, or a kind of 'holding' comes in. Sometimes it can be there really is a sense of space [that] opens up in the practice of compassion. And it's almost as if that space – the space of compassion, or could call it the space of awareness, or just the space of the universe, whatever you want to call it – somehow feels like it effortlessly and organically holds whatever suffering arises. The space feels like it's infinitely vast, and it's just there, just present. All the suffering that has arisen, that ever has arisen, all the suffering that ever will arise, all the suffering that is, is accommodated in that space.

And at this point, if the practice – and again, not to grasp at any of this – but if the practice deepens to that level, it's kind of like the self has gone out of it at that point. It no longer feels like I'm sitting here *doing* the compassion practice, I'm *giving* the compassion, the self is cranking it and out comes the compassion. It's more like there's a sitting back and allowing the space to hold the suffering,

effortlessly. And that too, of course, takes away from the sense of burden – I mean, *radically* takes away from the sense of burden that we have, or overwhelm or tiredness. It's not the self doing it. It's not even the self holding it.

And we could say, you know, some people *do* say, the true nature of the heart, the true nature of awareness, the true nature of the heart, is infinitely vast. We can begin to get a sense of that sometimes. Or it can feel like it's actually a quality of the universe. It's somehow woven into the fabric of space, of the cosmos. It's there. And sometimes people want to talk then in the language of God. It makes complete sense, and absolutely, why not? It feels quite appropriate. Again, it's just words, but. Or in the language of the energy of a bodhisattva permeating the universe, the energy of Avalokiteśvara, the bodhisattva of compassion, or Jesus or whatever, just permeating the universe. In the Christian tradition, they talk about the cosmic Christ. And one Christian mystic, Julian of Norwich said, "Love is without beginning." And sometimes the practice can just, by itself, just open up to that other space. It's a possibility. Again, not to grasp at any of this.

Okay, now the other morning, I talked briefly about compassion to oneself. And again, just reflecting how common it is for us to feel, "Well, there's so much suffering in the world, and I really don't suffer much compared to – I open the newspaper, and I see what's going on wherever it is, in Sudan or wherever." But it's hugely important to give the compassion to oneself, and it's not building ego. You might think, "Well, I'm spending all this time giving to myself. Isn't that just pumping up my ego in some way?" Ego gets pumped up through the *wrong* kind of attention to oneself, actually through *lack* of self-love. When there's the lack of self-love, then the ego has to go out and make itself big in the world, and make itself this or that. When there's *mettā* and compassion for oneself, the ego can just take its rightful place in the scheme of things. And it's tremendously healing, just that simplicity of the compassion practice to ourself. How healing that is to bathe ourselves, our lives, our bodies, our minds, in compassion.

And then, as I mentioned briefly the other day, and just to mention them briefly, possibilities of other, sort of more *insight* openings through compassion to oneself. When we're doing the compassion to oneself, and there's not a particularly strong suffering there – so not when there's really a lot of something difficult going on; one's just going about in one's usual, humdrum meditative day. [laughter] And there's nothing particularly dramatic going on. I'm in the here and now, giving compassion to myself, and I'm just not too absorbed in the feeling of compassion. So it's *there*, maybe, or just the phrases are there, or whatever, but there's a little bit more wideness to include what I see, and the sounds, and what I'm feeling emotionally, and the thoughts and the body sensations. Just a little bit more wideness. There's a climate of compassion, and some degree of *samādhi*, which may mean that the phrases have got very sparse, or not using the phrases, or it's just one word or whatever.

In that climate of compassion, with a little bit more broad awareness, it's like a lens of looking at the present moment, the present experience, through the lens of seeing suffering and the end of suffering, in the moment. So we begin to see little sufferings, little ways that we're creating suffering. And organically somehow, because of the compassion practice, we can just unhook. It just unhooks. *We* don't really need to do it; it's just organically unhooked. You *may* find this. You may find it.

We become conscious of what we're clinging to in the moment. And it could be, "Oh, when is this walking period going to end?" It could be we actually feel ourselves, the consciousness, move out of

the here and now, and we feel with it the kind of contraction and the subtle suffering of that, in the climate of compassion, in the awareness. And it just, "May you be free." And we realize where the freedom is. It's *not* from moving out of the here and now. And we let go of that impulse. Or we may just realize the heart is closed down a bit, and that's not where the freedom is, that's not where the healing is. And it's almost like we're not really thinking about it. It's just happening. And the heart can open again when we see it. There can be a natural letting go there. Or something we're grasping at, or we're aware of how we're building things with the self-story. So there's actually some suffering, and then we're piling on, you know, decades of history and decades of future, and mother and father and grandparents and everything. It's all piled on there, and suddenly we've got this huge conglomerate of suffering. And we're actually seeing that in the moment: "Oh, this is what I'm doing." And I'm saying, "May you be free," and we see the freedom is actually just to let go of that, and just to be with the pain – which is probably considerably less than this whole mass of built-up stuff.

But it could be any level of insight. So, you know, it could be one's been working with emptiness a lot, and one sees: "Oh, I've just, I've moved back into making things seem really real. I'm out of the emptiness." Or "I'm giving things solidity in time." Whatever it is. Doesn't matter. This way of practising can have a way of, I feel, kind of consolidating whatever insight feels fresh. So we feel like, you know, you're on retreat, and I'm understanding this or that about how suffering gets created, and this way of practising can actually keep it being used, keep it active, keep it fresh, consolidate it.

So that's one possibility, and you don't have to go anywhere near that if you don't feel like it, but I'm just putting it out there. And the second one that I mentioned the other day was also: compassion to self, there's some degree of calming that happens, and in the calmness there's a little more sense of just inner space. And I begin to see – don't even ask – "Who is this self I'm giving the compassion to?" And I just see mind moments of experience. A moment of an emotion, a moment of a thought, a moment of a sight, a moment of a feeling, a moment of whatever it is – suffering, a moment of ease. That's all I can find, mind moments. I actually can't find anything else.

And so the compassion practice, as it calms, can begin to feel like I'm just actually giving compassion to these mind moments. There's nothing else there. There's a mind moment, and it's being touched with compassion. So this really does begin to free up the sense of self, and free up the compassion with it. Less sense of self, more compassion. And then we can take that level of insight and actually do it the same with others. I see there's nothing *here* but mind moments, nothing *there* but mind moments. We give compassion to someone else and, again, the calming, we see: "I'm just giving compassion to their mind moments" – in a way, their *ownerless* mind moments. There's no owner. They're just mind moments arising. Can give a real sense of softness and space, and emptiness, too, in the practice. This is bringing the *anattā* in.

So like I said, these are just two options, and really not to worry if they're not – if you're not including them, they're just options. Really not a big deal. Sometimes when we are suffering – in fact, a lot of the time – we tend to regard it as *my* suffering. *My* loneliness, *my* heartache, *my* tummy ache, *my* confusion, *my* grief, *my* sadness, *my* loss, *my*, *my.* And although we know it intellectually, we actually lose sight in the moment that my suffering is not different than the suffering of others. It's really not different.

So I remember being in a class with my teacher, and one of the exercises we had as a homework one week was: whenever suffering comes up, especially in meditation, seeing if you can reflect for a moment, "Someone somewhere is either going through this exact same thing right now or has." And actually bring that as a conscious reflection into the being with the suffering. Can have quite a strong effect. When we begin to see the humanity – our suffering kind of is human suffering – it can begin to soften, it can begin to open, and compassion for ourselves can begin to come in. Oftentimes with our own suffering, we're actually adding to the suffering by sort of adding an extra layer of isolation, and we don't even realize that we're doing it. We're just contracted around *my suffering* and we don't realize the commonality, and we've added that extra layer of isolation.

We've opened up to all the categories now, or you can take them in order or whatever you like. But sometimes when we're in the compassion practice, we notice, "Well, I'm giving compassion to this person. They actually don't seem to have much suffering in their life, and there's really not much there." That's valid, and we don't need to kind of imagine scenarios for them or imagine that they're sitting on some repressed volcano of suffering that needs to come up from their unconscious. You know, it may be the case, but … [laughter] The compassion practice doesn't need that. When there's no obvious suffering, we can just bring to mind a kind of sensitivity, a quietening, a sensitivity. Bring to mind that it's not easy being human. It's not easy just being alive. We share a kind of vulnerability. We share uncertainty. We share the challenges of being alive. We don't need to create suffering for someone. Or just to admit: I actually don't *know* what suffering you have in your life, what suffering you have had. I don't know what suffering is going on right now, maybe that I'm completely unaware of. I don't know what will befall you in the future. And it's that kind of "I don't know, but I know that being human, you need and are going to need compassion."

Again, bringing in this commonality, this sense of oneness. So you can actually reflect in the practice: you know, we *are* one, we are one in all kinds of ways. At a very mystical level, certainly we are one. But in the level that we're all vulnerable, we have bodies that are vulnerable to injury, to sickness, to decay, ageing, to death. Just to reflect that we share that; really bring it in in a conscious way, as a way of supporting the compassion. Seeing the commonality, seeing the oneness. And yeah, we share death. We share, as I said, an uncertainty, that life really *is* uncertain. And I'm sure we all know people that – or maybe ourselves – that some news or some thing has happened, and the life has been changed dramatically from one moment to the next, and we didn't know that was going to happen that morning. This is what it is to be alive, and to be in the field of the infinite web, in the field of dependent origination: that we live in an uncertain world that can change, and change dramatically, suddenly.

We're also one in that we share a kind of bewilderment with all of this. So what the Buddha calls *avijjā* – we don't fully, deeply, in our hearts, in our cells, yet, completely understand about suffering: why, how suffering arises, how we make suffering. And we share that until we're completely awakened. We share that, share that misunderstanding of life, of suffering, and also of what it is that *really* leads to happiness. So we can understand that intellectually, but actually, at another level, we're not really that clear about it or convinced of it. And so we can see that oneness, and bring that reflection of oneness in, and allow it to find its outflow in the compassion practice.

We need, as I said, to touch the suffering of life with the compassion practice, and also to see the commonality and see the oneness. There's a beautiful poem that, in a way, speaks about this. Some of you may know it. It's by a poet called Naomi Shihab Nye. It's actually called "Kindness," but I think that what she's really talking about is compassion.[2]

[56:07 – 57:46, poem]

I just want to say one final thing about bringing emptiness of self into the compassion practice, another possibility. Sometimes when we talk about emptiness, and the very word, it sounds like there's nothing there, or it sounds quite nihilistic or dry or whatever. Another kind of angle is almost to regard a person that is empty, another way of saying it is: they are infinite. A person is infinite. The nature of a person is infinite.

So what do I mean? If we reflect on this body, the science tells us all of us in this room share molecules that make up whatever it is, our nails and teeth and skin and all the complex functioning of the body. The molecules were actually all created in the same supernova explosion of some star that exploded a long time ago and kind of drifted in this cloud to the earth. Those molecules were all in the same star at one point. And going back way further, the whole universe was kind of compressed into one little, *very*, very small – with the Big Bang. It was all literally one thing, one fabric.

And we reflect: in the present moment, we are breathing the same air. Just through the course of this talk probably we've all breathed – 99.9 per cent of the air molecules have been in and out of each of us. That means there are very few air molecules in this room right now that have not been in and out of every person. [laughter] And as someone told me, right now, there's something like a 99.9 per cent probability that your next breath contains air molecules from the dying breath of Jesus on the cross. Things like that, you know. But we are in a constant – the air molecules come in, and they become our body. The oxygen goes into the bloodstream. We tend to see barriers and walls and discrete entities. When we look deeper, there *are* no barriers. It's a very fluid, amorphous, non-separate thing, this body.

Food – so Stephen Batchelor has this example of eating a banana. You're chewing the banana, and then you swallow it. Bananas being very mushy, at what point does the banana become *you*? [laughter] When it's being absorbed, and there's sort of mush in there, when does it kind of become you, and when is it still 'the banana'? It sounds funny, I know, but it's really worth reflecting on this kind of thing! [laughter]

The poet Walt Whitman has this famous line, "I believe a leaf of grass is no less than the journey-work of the stars."[3] He wrote that in 1855. I don't know what the kind of current astrophysical knowledge at that point was, but I don't think they knew about supernovas and that kind of thing. There's some kind of poetic mystical insight that he was having. And this actually *is* one system, in one way. And Thích Nhất Hạnh speaks a lot about this kind of way of seeing in his teaching.

There's another level, though: the oneness of the mind, the non-separateness of the mind. Minds have perceptions. So right now, there's colour, light. You're seeing these forms, whatever. There's a sound. There's the perception right now. Then there's body sensation, there's all of that, or inner perceptions. No perception, no mind. They go together. To have a mind, you need to have a perception. If there's no world, there's no perception and no mind. The mind is inextricably linked up with what it

perceives, which is the universe. Mind is not separate from the world. It *feels* separate. Self feels separate from others, from the world, from the universe. Mind feels separate. This is the great delusion. Not separate.

So all of this, at first, you know, it can sound like, "Well, that's a nice, cute intellectual idea. Maybe the next time I find myself at a cocktail party with nothing to say, I'll sort of strike up that as a conversation." And then watch the people wander away! [laughter] It's really not supposed to be just an intellectual idea. To begin actually inclining the mind towards that kind of reflection. It can begin to come into the practice on a very real level, and begin breaking the barriers.

Another way of saying emptiness – maybe it's someone's phrase; I don't know who, but – emptiness is fullness. There's a way that this being, these beings, you cannot separate them, mind or body, from the whole rest of the universe. There's no real place where it breaks and cuts off. Emptiness is fullness. We are not separate. It goes even beyond interconnectedness. There's a way that things are just interpenetrating when we really go deep into this. Interpenetrating. Beyond interconnected. Completely interpenetrating. Mind and the world are interpenetrating.

So over time we can bring these kind of reflections in. It's comes into the practice. It's a practice to reflect this way. But the outcome (except social ostracization!) is love and compassion. Looking this way, beginning to reflect this way, opens the heart to love and compassion.

Okay, I think I will stop there. So we have some time before lunch. I've said quite a lot. Are there any questions about either what I've said, or what's been said over the days? Or about the practice at all?

Q1: more difficulty with balance and near enemies when giving compassion to self

Yogi: I found what you were saying about the enemies of compassion –

Rob: The near enemies, yeah?

Yogi: I was sort of reflecting that, in a sense, the sort of enemies of compassion are more problematic when one's working, one's giving compassion to oneself rather than to someone else or the universe. Because, in a sense, there's more attachment, you know, to what comes up. And I was wondering if we could perhaps explore that a little bit more. Because, in a sense, I see the value in giving compassion to myself, but the possibility of then getting caught up in grief or sadness or whatever when things are seen …

Rob: Yeah, it's true. I think that would be quite a common pattern to get more caught up inside. But not everyone. People are different in their patterns. Some people get more caught up with, "Everyone else is wrong, and I'm okay." So this is important. Firstly, I like to encourage people to give quite a lot of compassion to themselves because of the healing involved, but also because it really does open up as a very deep avenue of insight, as well, into one's own particular patterns and how one gets caught. So there's that. So yeah, by all means, spend a lot of time on compassion to yourself if you feel drawn that way.

Going back to what I was saying about this balance between empathizing and the sort of healing or the kind of feeling the well-being going out: if one's taking care of that balance, one will also take care of the *samādhi* involved. Because you're tuning into what's nice, there will be loveliness to what's going on, in some quiet way, and there will be a settledness there. In that settledness, part of the result of the *samādhi* will be less tendency to create problems. That's what goes with *samādhi*. But also when there *are* problems, to see them more clearly and more spaciously.

So if you're practising compassion with the right kind of balance, it's good – you're actually opening up to the kind of things you would do in your life anyway, but seeing them more spaciously, more clearly, because they're less … And as I said with the near enemies, not to think they shouldn't come up; actually they *do* come up. They *will* come up. It's human, and if we can just include that as part of the practice, this is very much in the field of what developing compassion *is*: actually looking at what's not quite compassion, and being willing to discern the difference and practise with it. So they're not problems to shoo out the door too quickly, necessarily.

Yogi: Yeah. I suppose one of the things that … keeping that balance, as well, seems more difficult when working with oneself. That would be another thing that I'd be including in that question. And so in a sense there's also the issue of, if one has got caught, what would you recommend – to move to practising compassion to others, or maybe work in a more open way? What would you suggest?

Rob: Anything really. Sometimes you can just shift the near enemy. Like you notice, say you're blaming yourself for some suffering that arises, then actually seeing, taking a moment in the practice to reflect: it wasn't self's fault. It was all the conditions, and the past conditioning, and the present, and the situation, outer and inner, that actually led or are leading to what's happening. And just taking a moment to reflect, that can soften it, and then you can, in that softening, take up the compassion again. That might be one possibility. Sometimes it's skilful to actually go and work with someone else for a while and then come back. Sometimes you might want to open up the practice, as I know you do, and just open that and get that kind of letting go there, and then come back. If you can stay within the practice, if you decide I'm doing regular compassion practice and I'm within that, you can just kind of move to a sense of seeing the causes and conditions a bit more widely. And then the softening, and then coming back. That might be preferable. But they're all valid.

Yogi: There's certainly means to work there.

Rob: Absolutely. I mean, the near enemies *will* come up, and they're to be worked with – to be seen, to be understood, to be worked with. And as I said, it's part of being human.

Q2: compassionate action and attachment

Yogi: I wonder a lot about action that is born out of compassion. I can be in that space feeling very compassionate toward suffering in the world, and quite equanimous and spacious with it. But then when the question of action comes in, and this big thing in my life, actually, that's where the

equanimity goes. Because how can you have action without attachment to results? Because if you're not attached to results, then how can you be motivated for the action? If you *are* attached to the results, that is when it becomes overwhelming.

Rob: Yeah, sure. Again, it's not that we find one static place with all this, and it's like, "Okay, sorted out my compassion and my equanimity. It's all kind of fixed there." It's more that the whole thing is going to be shifting. So in our practice it's going to be shifting, and in the world it's going to be shifting. Sometimes we decide we want to do something to help, to be of service, and there *is* attachment there. Sometimes we're aware of the attachment, sometimes not. But I would say, don't *not* act just because there's attachment there. It's more like over probably years of practice, one learns to practise with there being attachment there, and kind of softening the attachment, going back and forth, softening the attachment but still working or whatever. So the presence of attachment, it shouldn't hinder one from acting. One acts anyway, and then the attachment is in one's field of practice at that point.

It might be that then one's acting, and it moves between quite attached and then having to be quiet and regain and find less attachment. Even the less attachment, one can say, "Well, I want to do something to help." Less attachment doesn't necessarily mean indifference; there's also *that* that might come up. It's actually moving between attachment and indifference, can be. All of this is going to happen. And in a way, it's just like saying, "Okay, I'm going to act. I know it's all going to come up, and I'm going to practise with it as it comes up." At a very deep level, I actually feel that it *is* possible to act in the world, to want to help suffering, realizing that it's all completely empty. There's no me doing it. There's no person receiving it. There's no action. There's not even any suffering in a *real* sense. It's all completely empty. And yet what should come out of seeing that emptiness is the desire to act. Seems paradoxical. In terms of one's practice it will move, and then it's a question of practising with that.

Yogi: Yeah, I think I'm more concerned about keeping the awareness in the action, rather than how to deal with it sitting on the cushion, how to keep the energy, you know. It's just overwhelming. You try whatever, and there are more hindrances than anything else.

Rob: In the action?

Yogi: In the action.

Rob: Yeah, I'm not sure – is there a specific situation that you're thinking of?

Yogi: It just came into my head …

Rob: Okay, what was it?

Yogi: The biggest hindrance is the sense of the self.

Rob: I think that what happens with these practices, and sometimes a lot of stuff that I've said today can sound completely abstract, you know – no self, no boundaries and everything. I think what happens is, after a while, it becomes something that's much more workable in a moment as we're moving through action, and more real. But, I don't know, that takes practice. It takes practice. Is there a particular – I mean, you don't have to say what it is, but is it a particular situation you're thinking of?

Yogi: No … [?]

Rob: It's like my story of the SUV thing. It was coming up, but really trying to challenge it. Like saying, "It's not okay that I'm walking around like this with bad feeling and ill-will and all of that. It's just not okay."

Yogi: SUVs are still there.

Rob: They are. But it's also like, first of all, I don't know what the emissions law on SUVs is now in America. But I think one can come to a point in practice where it feels like some of the stuff that we care about and move towards changing is actually not going to change in the world. For instance, like climate change. Who knows what's going to happen with that? But still, to be in the world with compassion, acting out of compassion is the best way to live. There's just no doubt about it. And we don't know what will happen. This is where the equanimity comes in – we actually are not completely in control of what will happen. Again, it's an infinite web of conditions. It's not just in our control. Somehow, as compassion deepens, the equanimity comes more and more into the practice. But even if something's not going to change, it's still that being in the world, viewing the world, and acting out of a place of compassion is just the best way to be. There's nothing that comes close to it. We can be angry or we can be indifferent or we can be selfish or whatever, but compassion is the best. And we don't know what will happen. We'll be speaking more about equanimity a bit later in the retreat. It's a hard one. It is a hard one. I really feel that we have to challenge it, though. In the moment, we have to challenge it.

Q3: using *mettā* to connect with compassion vs straight in

Yogi: In the sessions, I'm mixing quite a lot of *mettā* and compassion. What I understand is that compassion is born from *mettā*. It's just *mettā* meeting suffering. So I feel I need to connect with *mettā* before being able to be in the compassion space. So in the sessions, there's quite a lot of time with *mettā* before going to compassion. Is that …?

Rob: What happens when you *don't* do that?

Yogi: It just feels difficult to really connect with the feeling of compassion.

Rob: Okay. There are a couple of ways – it's fine. I think I would rather you could do just more straight compassion so you could be really clear about what the difference is. But it's fine if that goes on. You might want to just be aware of someone's suffering, kind of just sit with that, and see what the response is, and see what comes. Can be really skilful. Or, in the context of compassion, you're actually not getting so sucked in immediately to where the really strong suffering is. So you're thinking of the friend or the benefactor, whatever it is, and you're just aware of their being, and the fact that they're human and everything, and there's a quality of – it's almost like *mettā*, but you're just aware that life has suffering in it, too, and then you're giving it, and then you can turn a bit more and include what might be more obvious suffering. Does that make sense? But it's not too much of a big deal. If you can kind of whittle down the time spent on *mettā* and make it more compassion, that would also be good. Just get more and more used to the feeling of compassion, so that you can cue into that more readily. Yeah? Was that your question? Okay.

Q4: swapping and changing categories

Yogi: With the categories, could you start to sort of swap and change now? Or is it more useful to just stay day by day?

Rob: You can swap and change as you like. I mean, I think John said yesterday, hopefully, that you've got *this* much time to work through the categories. Did he say that?

Yogi: That's actually just what I wasn't quite sure [?].

Rob: *Ohh.* [laughs]

Yogi 2: Who are we working with today?

Rob: Sorry, maybe there was a misunderstanding there. Okay.

Yogi: It was a bit unclear. He sort of said both.

Rob: My understanding was that from yesterday the sort of message was, okay, until, on Sunday morning we're going to start another practice. So between yesterday and Sunday, you can go through all the categories at any pace or order or whatever that you like. And probably the usual order is better. But you can go through them.

Yogi: And what [?] at times if it feels right opening it up to all beings?

Rob: To all beings?

Yogi: Yeah.

Rob: No, not at all. Go for it if that feels more appropriate. And sometimes the *samādhi* does feel better, it feels there's more equality there with just openness and all beings, and do that. But do come back to particular beings as well. Is that clear?

Yogi 3: … overlapping with the categories. For instance, the person I've been using as difficult in the *mettā* practice was the first to come to mind, the person who's obviously suffering.

Rob: That's fine. Again, you want to take care of making the practice easy. If it feels like I'm not really connecting with anything here …

Yogi: That's why I'm asking, because that's what I've been doing, is overlapping and swapping. I can stay longer in that space.

Rob: Okay, that's fine. If it feels helpful, it's fine. It's just changing, doing that and then finding, "This is really hard work. This is not really happening." Then I would say it's not the wisest choice.

So again, if you go to all beings in the next few days, there are all those ways I said. You can just be in a space of compassion. Just random images of beings or what you might have seen on the news or newspaper or whatever, or beings that you know or don't know may just come in and go, and come and go. But the space is quite important. Just a space radiating compassion. Sometimes it can feel like you're just resting in that space, and there's very little doing, very little phrases. It's just sort of not doing much; it's just a space of compassion. That can be very helpful. Sometimes, again to emphasize, to be as much as possible in the body with it. So it's almost like the body becomes compassion. It's just radiating out compassion. You've become compassion. Can happen sometimes.

Q5: compassion for non-dramatic suffering

Yogi: … swapping the categories. The categories I use for practising *mettā* might not be as suitable as other people practising compassion.

Rob: Because there's not enough suffering there?

Yogi: Yeah. Or it's a bit strained to imagine [?] a newspaper story, a very sad situation that I could work with.

Rob: That's a really important question. Take maybe two or three people in the very obvious suffering category, so that might include this newspaper story. But I would say you actually want to keep the others in the other categories, because what we're moving to is a kind of compassion that's universal in the sense that it doesn't actually just restrict itself to very dramatic, obvious suffering. It's actually something just, there's a sensitivity that develops that – it's just realizing how subtle suffering can be, and that's also something that we have compassion for. And it might be a very beneficial spiritual

stretch to actually stretch and just begin seeing this oneness, this commonality. That's actually a really good way of stretching the heart that way. But if you want to add maybe one or two more people to the obvious category, that's fine. Okay.

Yogi 2: When working with all beings, is it okay to exclude George Bush? [laughter]

Rob: Who? [laughter] No, it's not okay! [laughter] Any quick last ones before lunch? Okay, let's just have a minute of silence before lunch.

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[1] Cf. James R. Mellow, *Charmed Circle: Gertrude Stein and Company* (New York: Praeger, 1974), 468.
[2] Naomi Shihab Nye, *Words Under the Words: Selected Poems* (Portland: Eighth Mountain Press, 1995). Archived at https://web.archive.org/web/20201004093657/https://poets.org/poem/kindness, accessed 31 Oct. 2020.
[3] Walt Whitman, *Leaves of Grass* (New York: Knickerbocker Press, 1902), 70.

Guided Meditation: Metta to phenomena

[0:02, guided meditation begins]

Directing the *mettā*, the compassion, not to beings, to living beings, but towards experience, towards phenomena that arise in consciousness. So right now, in that lightness of awareness, just noticing if something, anything in your experience is prominent, standing out. Something in the body, body sensations, perhaps; an emotion or a mind state, a feeling. Just noticing. Perhaps nothing is particularly standing out or prominent. So then just being in the body with whatever is in awareness in the moment.

And beginning to direct the stream, the flow of compassion, of loving-kindness, of love, towards whatever is in experience. Whatever it is, bathing the moment's experience with kindness, whether it's a body sensation or a thought, an emotion. Whatever it is. A state of mind. Just over and over, bathing it, washing it in love, in kindness. Or if it's more helpful at times to feel that there is a holding of the experience in kindness, in love, in compassion. Sometimes it might be helpful even to use the phrases, or one word of a phrase, or one phrase, and direct that towards experience. So whatever is going on right now, whatever the experience is, bathing it, holding it in kindness, in love.

Whatever is in awareness, just over and over, directing the flow of tenderness, of kindness, toward that object. Bathing it in love and compassion. Holding it in *mettā*. You can also experiment with a more receptive mode. There's a complete, complete and utter acceptance of whatever is in consciousness, whatever object is in consciousness. Complete kindness of acceptance. A complete open door. As genuine and as full a welcoming as possible for the experience. Inviting whatever is there into the space of love, the space of compassion, of tenderness.

[9:54] Just over and over, softening toward experience, welcoming completely experience. Bathing the moment, the object, in love and kindness. Whatever is there in consciousness in the moment, touching it with tenderness, fully accepting, bathing it in warmth, in *mettā*, in compassion. So really

letting go for now of our usual emphasis on kind of precision of mindfulness, of seeing things really clearly. Just letting go of that emphasis of precision, and really emphasizing the kindness, kindness toward what we see. And if it seems like the edges of things begin to blur or they lose their definition a little bit, or they begin to dissolve or fade a little bit, that's quite okay. We're not so interested in precision right now, just the kindness flowing, touching, surrounding, permeating experience.

So even if there is resistance, or numbness, or it feels like there is no feeling, or there's anger or fear, tiredness, bathing them too in love, really welcoming them, over and over. Whatever is there. Nothing is outside the range or scope of the kindness. Even any less obvious experiences, more subtle experiences – slight disinterest, boredom, a little bit of agitation – bathing it all in compassion. Holding it all in the space of *mettā*. Completely welcoming. So whatever arises, the arising is held in kindness. Whatever stays, the staying is held in kindness and tenderness. And its passing, too, held, bathed, welcomed, allowed, in *mettā*.

So nothing whatsoever is excluded. If there is, at times, a sense, a feeling of peace, including that, bathing that, too, in love and kindness. Completely opening, allowing. If there is a sense of happiness, of well-being, of stillness, including that. Including also the feeling of kindness, of warmth, of compassion if it's there. Bathing the kindness in kindness and welcoming. If there is an image or a sense of yourself at the moment, just an impression, an object in awareness, bathing that, too, completely allowing, holding it in tenderness. If you're aware of the intention toward *mettā*, toward compassion, intention of kindness, that, too, held in tenderness, bathed in kindness. Whatever is in consciousness.

[31:26] Does anything exist independent of our relationship to it? Just really genuinely welcoming as much as possible the experience. Completely allowing. Holding it in tenderness.

[34:45, guided meditation ends]

Love and Emptiness

Okay, so I want to talk a bit about love and emptiness, and pick up on what we introduced today in terms of practice. But first I think just a very brief sort of review of the show so far, sort of thing. And at this point, I don't think I need to sort of sell *mettā* any more to anyone – at least I hope not. But what are we doing here? We're cultivating *mettā* and compassion. And we can see, we can feel, here on the retreat and in our lives, the blessings that come from that, the gifts of doing that, for our selves, for our own lives, for our own being, and in the world, for others.

So one way of looking at what's going on – it's a very helpful way, a very real way of looking at what's going on – is that we're reconditioning the mind and the heart. That's not a very appealing word maybe, 'reconditioning.' But we're transforming, we're cultivating qualities of the mind and the heart. We are planting seeds of intention, of love and compassion, and they bear fruit in their time. They bear fruit. And in transforming the heart, we're transforming our intentions in life. So that gradually, slowly, in a very non-linear way, over time, the way we act in the world, the choices that we make, what we put out into the world, is transformed, is reconditioned. The way we speak, the words we use, what we say, what we don't say, is transformed. And our thoughts and our intentions in life are transformed. And

that's a very powerful thing, not to be underestimated. So that's one very important part of what's going on.

Another part in the sort of big picture of our lives and our practice, what we're also doing is, through the *mettā*, through the compassion, creating a kind of ideal inner climate for growth. I know for myself there have been periods of time when I've been really trying very hard to grow, to understand myself, to understand life – but there wasn't that climate of love for oneself, wasn't a lot of climate of *mettā*. And it was like banging my head against a wall, really. The *mettā*, the compassion, are ideal, the ideal soil.

Third thing: the Buddha, in his way of teaching, he actually didn't teach too much about technique, and meditation technique and that sort of – maybe he did, and it hasn't really been recorded. But what he did, one thing that he emphasized over and over and over again, was a sort of approach to practice which was twofold. One part is a kind of wholesome nourishment. So nourishing the heart, nourishing the mind, the consciousness, the being, in the most wholesome way possible. And that's one half of the practice. And the other half is investigation, insight, looking into life, looking deeply and learning. And these two – wholesome nourishment and investigation, insight – support each other and they feed each other. And as an overall principle of what practice is about, that's a very good working model.

So again, through the *mettā*, through the compassion, we're finding ways in our lives and in meditation of really nourishing ourselves very deeply in a very wholesome way – what the Buddha would call 'wholesome abiding' or 'skilful abiding,' to abide in *mettā*, to abide in compassion. And again, it's just important to mention (I've probably already said it, but): none of this is really about self-improvement, about me wanting to be a better person because I'm not good enough yet. That's not where it's coming from. We are re-cultivating qualities of mind and heart, and one can be fully committed to that engagement, fully committed to that transformation of the qualities of heart, fully committed to that, but there's no self in it. There's no measurement or comparing or "I should be better than I am." It's just gone. It's just not there as a potent force, and certainly not as a potent force for suffering. But the commitment to the cultivation is still there.

So there's this, whatever we want to call it, transformation, reconditioning. There's the climate for growth. There's the wholesome nourishment to balance with the insight. Some time ago, I think it was about a year ago, I was teaching a one-day retreat, and I was teaching it on compassion. And in the question and answer period, a man asked a question: "Well, okay, that's all very nice, but aren't you just reconditioning the mind? Aren't you just reconditioning? How will you penetrate through to the Unconditioned if all you're doing is recreating the conditions?" So I *think* he was coming from an earnest place, and it's a good question – the Unconditioned being another word for the goal of practice, of *nibbāna*, liberation. And I can't remember exactly what I said to him, but we *are* at one level, as I said, reconditioning the mind. There's nothing wrong with that. The mind *is* conditions. The mind has these habits and grooves. And it can have a groove of irritability, a groove of judgment, a groove of self-criticism, and they're really deep, and they've been deepened over decades. And one thing that we're doing is reconditioning the mind. And there's every validity in that, if we're interested in a life that's more open, more peaceful, more happy.

But then the Buddha also talks about the "conditioning that leads to the end of conditions." And this is quite important. Some cultivations and conditions actually do not just lead to more conditions – they

lead to what the Buddha would call ‘unbinding,’ a letting go of conditions. So *mettā*, compassion, *samādhi* are three such cultivations, three such conditionings of the mind that actually move (over time, and slowly) toward the Unconditioned. So, I think I’ve already said this, but we can feel like we’re here doing this practice, and we’re sort of grinding away at the phrases and the *mettā*, and we’re building loving-kindness and we’re building compassion, and it’s this fragile sort of structure that we’re hoping to hold in place. But sometimes, a different sense of it is visible, which is that we’re actually getting out of the way. We’re doing less and less. And in that doing less and less, we are building less and less, building less and less barriers. And there’s the love there. There’s the compassion. And in a way, this process just goes deeper and deeper until what we would call the Unconditioned becomes ‘visible,’ if that’s the word for it.

And then, as we’ve also talked over the time, through dedicated practice to love and compassion, there is, at times, possible, a sense of the separate self kind of dissolving a little bit to some extent. The boundaries, the barriers, the walls that we usually feel in place begin to just dissolve a little bit. And comes to some degree, into the practice, for a short period of time or a long period or whatever, a sense of oneness – that this sense of me and you, self and other, self and the world that we so take for granted, it just dissolves a little bit, and we have a different sense of life, a different perception of the reality of things. That can come, and it will go. It’s a perception that can arise and fade.

Through the practice, the walls of the self can begin to soften. In a way, we could say self and ego and all that is built by a kind of problematic self-view, a view of struggling with oneself, in a way. And to cultivate love and compassion is actually easing the view of self. And in that there is an easing of the sense of separation. So there’s oneness, and also as we’ve touched on over the weeks, the possibilities of getting a sense or glimpses of this *anattā*, this emptiness of self, through the practice, just through the practice of love and compassion.

Okay, that’s a sort of brief bus tour, like I said, of the show so far. This morning we began something different. So everything so far, the first two weeks, has been loving-kindness and compassion towards *beings*, which is of course how we tend to conceive of it: loving-kindness towards self, loving-kindness towards others and all beings. And extending the *mettā* in that very boundless and universal way.

I remember when I was living in America, and there was an urban centre there. I think twice a year they would publish their brochure, programme. And it would have the list of retreats and all that stuff in it. And for about five years or something, every time, every edition that came out had on the front of it this nice picture of a Buddha statue smiling or something, and this quote from the Lotus Sutra, which is one of the very well-known and well-loved Mahāyāna *sūtras*. And this quote said, “See all things with the eyes of compassion,” or “See all things through the eyes of compassion.” And so for five years I saw that on the front and said, “Very nice, okay,” and went and saw who were the teachers that were coming, what retreats can I do, etc. And at some point, it dawned on me, “Well, actually it doesn’t say, ‘See all *beings* with compassion.’ It says ‘See all *things* with compassion,’ which is a different thing.” So we begin to wonder, what does that mean? Does it mean regard the alarm clock with compassion? What does it mean?

There’s another Mahāyāna *sutra* called the *Akṣayamati Sūtra*, and that has another very odd sentence in it, which I’ll read to you. In the *Akṣayamati Sūtra*, it is said:

> At the beginning of the spiritual life, love is directed towards beings. With those who are further advanced on the path, love is based on *dharmas*. And for those who have seen the Unconditioned [for those who have seen into emptiness], love is not based on anything at all.[1]

So we might hear this, and we just think, "What's that talking about?" First thing is this word *dharmas. Dharma* is one of these words that can have a lot of different meanings. I think what it means here is what we were doing this morning: experiences, objects of awareness, things, stuff that is arising for us, whatever it is; a moment of some object of awareness is a *dharma*. And again, this is quite difficult to understand, but we think, "What does it mean?"

In a way, we began this this morning: directing the *mettā*, directing the compassion, towards experience, towards objects of experience, rather than beings. And just to review – we did the guided meditation this morning, but just to review. Whatever way of working with that is helpful to you, is fine. So it could be something's happening in the body or the heart or the mind or whatever, and there's a sense of bathing it, bathing it in love and compassion, directing the flow, the current of love and compassion towards that. May be more helpful to kind of feel or envisage a kind of *holding* of the experience, of the object, in the *mettā*, in love or compassion.

Should also say at this point, in a lot of the Mahāyāna teachings, they dispense at one level with the words 'love' and 'compassion.' They just use one word, 'compassion,' to mean *mettā* and compassion. So this morning in the guided meditation, I was actually going back and forth between using those words, and just to – not to confuse anyone. And you can use the phrases if that's helpful, you know. Again, we can go into this sense of consciousness, just awareness, the space of awareness just being a very open door. And there's *complete* welcoming, *complete* acceptance. So what's being emphasized here is the love, the acceptance. Absolute, radical acceptance. Not, as in a usual *vipassanā* practice or awareness practice, the precision, the clarity: "What exactly is going on? Can I see it moment to moment to moment?"

If we talk about mindfulness practice, both those emphases are there – there's the emphasis on precision and acceptance; oftentimes it's the precision that we tend to emphasize. So there's a reversal of that here. I'm not so interested in the precision, but we're really interested in the flow of kindness, in the holding, in the acceptance, in the welcoming. Really emphasizing as complete as possible, a genuine welcoming of the experience, of the moment's experience of the object in consciousness, for its arising, for its staying, for its passing.

And we can, as I say, we can direct the *mettā*, the compassion, towards the object. Or, in a way, you can kind of feel like you're relaxing back into a space, a space of *mettā*, a space of compassion, a space that's imbued with love. And without forcing, the objects of consciousness, whatever arises, is arising in that space. So sometimes in this practice, it will feel like, "Well, I can't feel any love. There's just a sense of resistance" or whatever. But to remember: there can be a sense that there's nowhere outside of acceptance. There's nowhere outside of love. So if we feel resistance, if we feel non-acceptance, if we feel judging, if we feel numb – whatever it is, the love, the space of love, can just be bigger, bigger than that, and see that, too, and embrace that, too, and bathe that, too, in the kindness, in the complete

welcoming. And this welcoming has to be, this total welcoming has to be as genuine as possible. So as Ram Dass says, if you're trying to accept something in order that it goes away, it has a way of knowing. [laughter] It knows, he says. So just to check that out. But if there is resistance, that too. Can take a step back and that, too, is included.

So at first, if you're just hearing this, it might sound a little odd, but hopefully today you've had a little bit of a sense of this practice. It can be also we are opening up to the flow of experience inside, and we're just seeing experience coming and going, and coming and going. In a way, the very fleeting nature of experience, in a way it deserves our compassion. Experience is almost nothing. It's poor. It's impoverished, in a way, and it needs our compassion. You could see it that way.

So a question about this practice. Maybe I can even ask you now: what happens to feelings when they're there and we really bathe them or hold them in love? What happens to mental states? What happens to emotions, to body sensations, to our perceptions of things? So this really is a practice. It's very much a practice as much as mindfulness is a practice. But you may notice and you may have noticed today – I don't know, but you may have noticed today – that there's a way that things can kind of soften. That there's an experience, there's a body sensation or an emotion, and it just begins to soften. Its edges may begin to blur, begin to dissolve a little bit. It loses its definition. It may even begin to fade somewhat. Did anyone notice anything like that at all today? Okay, some people. Good. [laughter] Phew! Otherwise we'd be straight back into [inaudible].

Okay, what's going on here? What is going on here? This is very curious. This is a very curious phenomenon. We could say, "What has this got to do with – I thought Buddhist practice and mindfulness and *vipassanā*, I thought all that was about being with things as they are, and being in the moment, and being with what is and all that. And here I am doing this practice, and everything is kind of fading or dissolving or losing its definition. That can't be right!" So again, to go back to something I said before, what practice is about is actually not about being with what is. It's not about being with things as they are or being in the present moment. That's not what it's about. It's about – what the Buddha keeps emphasizing – this balance of wholesome nourishment, feeding what's beautiful, wholesome abiding, and investigation. The investigation, investigating into what brings freedom – which may, at times, take the form of "I'm just being with what is, what seems there in the moment." That's one avenue. But that can never be the main point of practice. The main point of practice is moving towards freedom, which is actually something different.

How we move to that freedom, whether it's through mindfulness or *vipassanā* or *samādhi* or *mettā*, it's actually completely irrelevant and it doesn't matter at all. Different approaches, different times. Some people lean towards one or the other, but maybe one could say that knowing all approaches actually gives a fuller understanding, I don't know. But certainly different approaches at different times.

So with mindfulness practice, that we're, I think, more familiar with – *vipassanā* and insight meditation – there's an assumption there, that actually teachers are to blame for, which is that mindfulness is neutral. There's something called mindfulness. There are objects in the world – sights, and sounds, and smells, and tastes, and touches, and thoughts, and emotions, and all that stuff – and then there's something called mindfulness which is there, and it sees it as it is. It sees things as they are in a way that's very neutral, very not involved, not active, not influencing. But is that really true? Is

there really such a thing? So to think about outside our practice, we can see how much the mind state that we have at any time influences our perception. We have this phrase, "seeing red," when we're really angry. Completely consumed in rage, and we say "seeing red." Actually, the very language is pointing to this insight: that our whole perception is coloured through the anger. Or as I'm sure you've noticed at least a little bit at times on this retreat, sometimes there's just a feeling of *mettā* there, and then what kind of world do we live in, what kind of world do we inhabit? Sometimes it's so strong it's a heaven realm, it's so much changed the perception.

So anger colours the perception, *mettā* colours the perception. Sometimes when we're angry with someone else, we immediately rush to think, "I need to give *mettā* to this other person to sort of remedy the anger." Sometimes it's very interesting to actually give *mettā* to ourselves when we're angry with someone else. After all, we're probably feeling hurt, so we might need it. But it's quite interesting then, because when the *mettā* to ourself begins to kick in, we can actually notice: there may be a change of perception of the person, of the situation. Why? Because the mind is then coloured with *mettā*. So anger colours it, *mettā* colours it, certainly romantic love colours it. Mind always has some mind state. So with mindfulness, there's always *some* degree of something on the range from complete unconditioned bliss of loving-kindness to rage. The mind will be somewhere along that spectrum. It *has* to be.

Even if it's very subtle, the mindfulness is always coloured by something on that spectrum, some degree of pushing an object away or pulling it towards us, or having a *mettā* relationship with it or whatever. So there's a spectrum, and the mind is always somewhere on that spectrum. Which amount of love reveals the real object, reveals the way it really is? Anyone? [laughter] Who's going to say? There's always some degree there. Which amount reveals the real object? And we're noticing, in the practice, "Well, when there's a lot of *mettā* there, the object changes." It changes its form, its impression. What's the real object? What's this real world that we're referring to? What's this real moment, this real 'things as they are,' this real 'what is'? Is what is, what is? That's a question I want to ask. [laughter] Is what is, what is?

So we say, "All right, maybe not mindfulness. What about that other word, 'equanimity'? I've heard about that one. That must be the thing that's right there in the middle, at the perfect point. It even sounds like it, *equa-*, equa-something." But again, a deep practice of equanimity, notice the same thing: the perception of the object begins to change. It changes with the degree of equanimity. And there's a similar kind of fading with equanimity. Things make less impression on consciousness when there's a lot of love or a lot of equanimity. So we can definitely see this on the cushion and with this practice that we're doing now. You can see it with body sensations, with painful body sensations, with emotions, with whatever, absolutely. See it on the cushion in a very clear way. Can also see it off the cushion. This applies to our life too. Some situations where they're so pressing or we just can't stop thinking about them, when there's a lot of equanimity, a lot of *mettā*, I barely register, barely register the situation, or the importance of it anyway.

Okay, so, about this practice, someone last year – I actually didn't have a name for it, and someone last year coined the name 'kindfulness,' which is quite nice. [laughter] It might be a little too cute for you; I don't know. It's a shorthand anyway. So what about it? A couple of things. One thing is it's skilful means. It's a real skilful means for ease, for ease in the present. And the Buddha was hugely

interested in this, for people to find ways of relating to the present moment, find ways of abiding, and even abiding with what is difficult, or what feels difficult, with ways that are easeful, with a sense of ease. So it's what the Buddha would call a 'skilful means' for ease in the moment. It's really important in our life, really important to cultivate this practice so that there is that skill in means, able to abide skilfully with a sense of ease. So there's that.

But there are enormous insights here. Enormous insights. So the first one, at one level, is that it's the relationship with things, it's the relationship with experience, that is important. So oftentimes, and sometimes in mindfulness practice, sometimes we can be so much attending to the object – to the sensation or the breath or this or that or whatever – so much kind of caught up in the attention to the object that we forget, or we don't actually realize, what the relationship is. So basically – I mean, to put it very crudely – our relationship with experience is either peace or struggle, some degree of peace or some degree of struggle. Basically, that's it, in Dharma terms. We have a relationship of either peace with something or struggle.

A relationship of love, of *mettā*, of compassion with experience is a relationship of peace. It's a relationship of peace with what's going on. And we begin to see that when the relationship is skilful, is one of ease, the suffering goes out of the thing. So it can be what it is, it can be unpleasant, it can be difficult, whatever, but the suffering has gone out. So that's *hugely* significant, to really, really know this, that some experience, some thing does not inherently have any problem to it. Problems are empty, we say in Dharma language, so a thing cannot be a problem, cannot be experienced as a problem unless I am in an unskilful relationship to it: I'm struggling with it, I'm pushing it, I'm pulling at it, whatever. And to see that: the thing, the experience, the object, etc., inner or outer, is not the problem, cannot be a problem by itself. It's empty of problem. Problem is empty. Huge, huge insight there.

Second one, and actually even deeper, is, again, this emptiness of how things are. Even, sometimes – going back to what I said before – sometimes in the practice there are openings or there's a kind of melting going on. There's a sense of oneness. And it can feel relatively nondescript or whatever, but that's rare. Or it can feel completely mystically, cosmically mind-blowing. And again, anywhere on that scale. There's a sense of oneness. But actually, what this insight into emptiness is saying is that even oneness is not how things are. That's a perception. If you remember that note that I read out from the work retreatant about a sort of sense of dark, infinite space of love that was kind of holding everything and accommodating everything that she opened up to – even that sense, beautiful, cosmic sense of infinite, eternal love that's, whatever you want to say, woven into the fabric of the universe – that arises when the conditions are there. When the conditions are not there, it won't be there. Same with the oneness.

Emptiness of how things are. They're not separate. They're not one. They're not however. But I feel it's really, really important to say here: sometimes, often I think, what we hear in teachings is, "Don't get attached to a sense of oneness. Don't get attached to that sense of vast love holding everything, if that opens up, because that's just a perception. It just arises from conditions." And then we say, "Okay, I'll let go of that, whatever." Don't be in a hurry. If this is part of the experience, really not to be in a hurry to let go of that kind of thing. The power of those kind of perceptions to transform the heart and transform the mind over time is enormous, absolutely enormous. And if we hurry through, and just say, "Oh, just a perception. It's just conditions, just a fabrication," where do we go? We actually just go

straight back to the default perception, which is "I'm sitting here giving a talk, and you're trying to stay awake" or whatever it is. [laughter] That's the default. Human consciousness is programmed incredibly strongly to go to that default mode. What we begin to see in practice is that default way of seeing is not the reality. If we throw out what I would call the deeper senses of oneness, of an infinite love, whatever you want to call it, if we throw that out too quickly, we just go back to the default, and in a way, we're not challenging that default mode enough.

So there's a line. I don't know; it's curious. I'm not sure how many people even notice this – maybe people do, but – this is the *Mettā Sutta*, and towards the end, it basically is a description of how *mettā* leads to complete awakening. And so, in the very last paragraph, "By not holding to fixed views," etc., "reaches enlightenment."[2] [laughter] But that line, "By not holding to fixed views," not holding to the fixed view of separation, the default everyday view, our normal view, which six and a half billion people agree to. Not holding to that view. Not also holding to the view of oneness. Not holding to the view of infinite space of love. And there are other views too. This is the power of *mettā* practice, that one goes in and out – at a very deep level, if one gives months and months and months to this practice – one *will* go in and out of various states of consciousness, and then one just says, "Well, which one is real?" "By not holding to fixed views" – the liberation comes through understanding something about how perceptions, views, ways of seeing, are fabricated.

So truth, in a way, all we can say is that the truth of things is that they're empty. To say they exist is a little – you know, when we begin practising this way, it's actually a little bit problematic. To say they don't exist at all is also problematic. So the truth of emptiness is actually something – it's called the Middle Way, meaning it's not existence and it's not non-existence, and nor is it some kind of compromise ("Well, they sort of, half the time they …" whatever). It's something that's a different kind of level: neither existence nor non-existence.

So to begin – and that's what we're doing; we're just beginning this, because it's extremely deep and it's really, I'd say, it's a lifetime's journey, this questioning, this looking. To begin to see into the relationship and the influence of the relationship is to begin to see into emptiness. And to begin to see into emptiness is to begin to see into freedom. So this is what we're beginning.

We can see it in our practice, and we can see it on all kinds of levels. So we can also see it outside our practice. Or one might come to a situation like this, and here we are. You think, "Three weeks at Gaia House, right. I'm really going to get my *samādhi* together. I'm going to really quieten the mind" or whatever. And then one comes, and someone's fidgeting next to you or whatever, or coughing or whatever it is, and you say, "How am I supposed to …?!" You know, I've arrived at the meditation centre with this view – again, I've said it in another talk – of *what I want*. And then that begins to colour everything. We view the situation through *what I want*. So we can play with this. What happens if I come into the meditation hall, and here are all these, you know, irritating people again [laughs], or one particular person, and one says, "This person is giving me the opportunity to practise patience, to practise kindness," whatever? And see if one can actually genuinely make that shift, and see the situation differently. And then it's a gift, their presence and whatever it is they're doing.

And if you're kind of really adventurous and bold, you can come in and sit down and have a view, "Actually, I'm not here for *samādhi.* All I'm here to do is to love you. That's all. I'm just here to love you." That's very advanced practice! [laughter] So what we notice is, if we change the view, the

perception changes. The irritability goes from the situation. How we see the situation and how we see a person depends on what the mind is bringing to it – *mettā*, compassion, irritability, what I want, whatever it is. And the mind's always bringing something.

Okay, we're going to look at this from a different angle. To go back to – I was talking about last week or whenever it was – about fear. When there's fear in the mind, we tend to think, "Here's a thing, an event, or a situation that I'm fearful of. And there's the thing and the event, and then there's my fear." And we tend to view them as separate: the thing, the event, the situation, and the fear. They're separate. Independent, existing independent. And we can see that in any way – there's any kind of object, and the reaction to it. But we can really see – fear's good because it's quite clear, like anger – the fear colours our perception of the object. So we begin to see, you know, an ogre in the shadows when there's nothing there. There's nothing. In a way, that's obvious: fear colours the perception of the object. But we also need reminding of that.

I think I also said when I was talking about fear, fear is almost always about future, caught up with future thoughts. If I believe in a present, in the present moment that somehow exists in a real, independent way, that has its own inherent existence, independent of what the mind and the heart is bringing to it – if I believe in the present, in a 'what is,' in a 'here and now' that's like that – if I believe in this present thing having some independent existence, then to borrow an analogy of the Buddha's, "as sure as the wheels of the cart follow the ox that pulls it," there will be fear of the future. If I believe in the present being something real, independent of the mind, there will be fear of the future, because I'm believing in a present.

So can we again see: present is empty, because it depends on the mind state. It depends on what's there with the seeing. Past is empty. When we look back on the past, you look back at past romances or whatever, and sometimes it's, "Oh, that was nice. She was a really special one." [laughter] And other times, you look back and you think, "*Pfff,*" y*ou* know. Or on our education. If I think back on my time in school, sometimes it seems, "God, that was really pressured and there was a lot of cruelty around." And other times, "God, I really had a laugh, you know." Or whatever. The past is coloured by the present mind state. What's the real past? What's the independently existing past? Present is empty. Past is empty. Future is the same. Apart from not actually *existing* – where is it? – when it becomes present, it will become present, and it will be empty. If I don't really believe in the present, I can't really believe in the future, and I can't really believe in fear. I can't really believe in the power of that.

So going back to this *Akṣayamati Sūtra*: "For those who are further advanced on the path, love is based on *dharmas*." So this is now what we're doing. "For those who have seen into emptiness, love is not based on anything." I just want to touch very briefly on this. This appears in other texts and traditions. So Rumi, the Sufi mystical poet, has a poem. I can't remember the poem. "Love without an object," and something he says, "is the best kind of love." And in the Tibetan traditions, the Tibetan Mahāyāna traditions and the Vajrayāna traditions, talk about "compassion without any object of reference." And they talk about this being the very best of all paths, without any danger points. No danger of being disconnected and indifferent towards beings or anything like that.

And so I just want, very briefly – what does this mean, love without an object? So it's actually gone beyond the sense even of love to all things, to all beings, to all objects. It's actually something on a whole different level. And it comes, glimpses of it come or whatever, when there's very deep opening

to emptiness. Or can come then. But I just wanted to mention that as a possibility, and just to drop in – I think maybe it's too late now on the retreat, but it's sometimes interesting, I think, to notice the reaction when someone is talking or you read or whatever and it seems, "Oh, I'm really not there yet. I don't know what that is. That's way beyond me." Just to notice the reaction. Do we close down? Do we turn off? Do we immediately grasp at that and decide, "Well, my experiences I'm not interested in at all. I want *that*"? Or do we think, "Oh, I'm a complete failure"? Just to notice what goes on.

So the Buddha talks about *taṇhā*, craving that leads to suffering; grasping at things in a way that leads to suffering. And *chanda*, which is more like 'aspiration' or 'will to do': "That's something beautiful. I would like to know that. I would like to understand that. I would like to open to that." And so to have a healthy and noble aspiration – and I think going back to the opening talk, I was talking about that – really important. Really lovely thing. So, you know, the analogy of, there's the mountain, and there's the peak of the mountain, and that's where we're headed, but the step is right here, right now. And we can see where we're going, and pay attention to where we are right now. And it's both. It's finding a sensitive balance of that.

Okay, so what about this business of fading? Sometimes we bathe something in love or hold it in love, or there's really a lot of love there, and then the object begins to fade. What is going on here? Why is that? We can begin to see maybe, or get a sense, that love, in a way, has a whole range to it. And in its depths, love, in a way, like equanimity, is non-grasping. It has the quality of non-clinging, non-grasping. So again, the first level of insight, when there's no clinging, non-grasping – and I think this probably goes back to what John was saying about dependent origination – the clinging, the craving, when that's there, the suffering comes, and we can look at that link in the dependent arising, relax the clinging, relax the craving, relax the grasping. and we feel the suffering go out of experience. Really important link in dependent arising.

But the understanding of dependent arising is something that goes really, really deep. I mean, it's an extremely profound teaching. And there's, again, a whole other level. What we begin to see is that grasping makes the way the world appears. It makes the way things appear. On an even deeper level, and this is completely counterintuitive, grasping somehow *makes* the world appear at all.

So when we're practising *mettā* at a very deep level towards objects, there's this non-grasping, and there's a fading, because objects, for their existence, need to be grasped at. They need to have some kind of tussle going on with them, either for or against or whatever. So this is completely counterintuitive. We tend to think, "Well, of course an object exists. It doesn't need me to do anything to it." But we begin to see: the appearance of something depends on the grasping. So there is no *thing*, there is no *real thing* that is independent of grasping, of clinging, of what the mind is doing with it. No thing, no problem. If a thing isn't real, it can't be a real problem.

In the depths of love, there is this non-grasping. And we can also see, you know, grasping clouds our seeing. And this is very clear in ourselves and in others. When there's a lot of grasping, we actually don't see clearly. So when there is love and non-grasping, we're actually seeing more clearly, and in the depths what it means to see more clearly is to see more impermanence, more emptiness.

Seeing more emptiness brings with it freedom and love. It's an inevitable outcome of seeing emptiness: freedom and love. If I think I'm seeing emptiness, but it's *not* leading to a sense of freedom or relief or love or joy or peace or compassion, then there's something a little askew in the way we're

seeing or in our understanding of emptiness. So emptiness sounds very nihilistic, a kind of depressing, dry word, but actually the indicator of it is love and freedom. Seeing emptiness leads to love and compassion, because it's kind of done away with the reality of separation, with the reality of barriers, with the reality of real problems, real faults, with the investment we have in self-inflating or self-depreciation.

And eventually – as I said, we're just beginning here – but eventually where the practice goes is, we begin to see it's all empty. It's all empty. And this isn't nihilistic at all. There's something very beautiful in this. So self is empty, selves are empty, things are empty, inner things, outer things (so-called). Begin to also see minds are empty. And actually suffering is empty too. All of it, all of it, all of it. And somehow, kind of mysteriously, or even paradoxically, seeing even that suffering [doesn't really exist], that beings who suffer don't really exist, somehow it leads to even more love and compassion.

So listening to that, you know, again, it may sound completely abstract or far removed or whatever. But this is a very real possibility, I'm talking about something very real that's possible for everyone, everyone in the room. We tend to think about awakening, or we hear about awakening, and stories, and people's accounts, and this and that, and we tend to think, you know, one day I'll be either sitting in meditation – or *not* sitting in meditation, if that's our view, that it never happens in meditation, it only happens in supermarkets or whatever – and then there'll be this thunderbolt and that will be it. And it will just be over in a flash, and bada-bing, bada-boom, end of el problemo! [laughter] I don't know that it works that way. Maybe for a few people, I don't know. Really I think it's something that we go deeper and deeper, slowly, gradually, usually in a non-linear way, into this understanding of emptiness. And little by little, it becomes clearer and clearer, a more and more full understanding, and deeper and deeper. And it is, it is, it is a very real possibility. As a teacher, I'm just not interested in talking about anything abstract. Just, what's the point? So I'm talking about something very real, that's genuinely possible. Even if it feels right now that, you know, "I can't relate."

And so, just finally, when we talk about love, when we talk about the kind of scope and the range of love, we may already very clearly have a sense in our own practice that there are levels of love, we could say, or a continuum of love. And we as human beings, our consciousness, our heart, moves along that continuum. That's the nature of being human. And there's a kind of humility in that, that it *will* move along this continuum. So sometimes we cannot find a sense of love, we cannot find any feeling there. All we can do is the very basic thing of planting the seeds of intention, planting the seeds of loving-kindness and compassion. And that intentionality is an act of love, even if there's no feeling, it feels dry as a bone, or even angry or whatever. And sometimes it goes through all the levels that I've mentioned, to love without an object. But again, it's not that we're always going to stay in one state or another. It's something about being human, the amazing range of human consciousness. It's staggering, the capacity of the range of human consciousness to move along that whole spectrum. And somehow in that, and in accepting that movement, that's where our humanity is and our humility is.

Should we sit for just one moment? [pause]

Quite an involved talk. I think it might be helpful if there are some questions about anything that's been said in regard to love and emptiness, or about the new practice, the practice that was introduced today. It's not that easy to understand this business about emptiness. Any questions?

Q1: *mettā* towards *dharmas*

Yogi: When we're using the practice but when you're walking, should you be including the trees, the clouds, as phenomena?

Rob: Yeah. You can. Yeah, okay. Did everyone hear that? You can do that. In a way, there are a couple of different things that could be going on there. One is giving the tree *mettā* as a tree, as a perhaps sentient being – I don't know. And that's one level. And that would come under *mettā* towards beings still. But then there's another level, or another slight emphasis on practice, which we're now moving to a bit more, which is *mettā* to the sight, so to that impression in consciousness, that image in consciousness as a *dharma*, as an experience, and whatever is there, clouds or whatever. Yeah, you can absolutely do that. You can experiment with this, but you may find that seeing the kind of relationships that I've been talking about will probably be clearer when you're doing it towards things like body sensations and emotions and thoughts and that kind of stuff internally. But it's interesting what happens when you do it also towards sound and towards sight. So experiment. What I think *I'm* interested in is beginning to see this relationship. So don't always go where perhaps the relationship is harder to see. Spend some time where you really begin to see, "Ah, there's something going on here." Does that make sense?

Yogi 2: When John was explaining emptiness in this way, he was talking about phenomena being processes like, you know, considering all the conditions that brought them together to being here, and what will take them apart in the future. And with the technique you introduced this morning, during the day I've been considering things like thoughts happening or a tree happening. Trying to wrap intellectually my mind around it, the process, nature of what it's doing. I found looking at the relationship or actually knowing there was a relationship there became clearer. So I was wondering if you could speak about that some more.

Rob: I'm not sure I totally understood. So you were …

Yogi 2: I'm trying to describe something I'm not sure how to describe. Wondering if you … [laughter]

Rob: Is what you're saying that John had said that things come together because of conditions and …?

Yogi 2: Well, like trying to extend *mettā* and the compassion sensation, and trying to understand what it is that you're giving it to when it's something that's transient and impermanent.

Rob: Yeah, sure. So that would – and in the course of doing that, you began to notice that the relationship was a factor? Is that what you're saying? That's fine. I mean, I think that would correlate with, I can't remember which talk I gave, but maybe two back, when I was talking about bringing insights into the *mettā* practice. So actually seeing something is transient, or seeing it as empty and dependent on conditions, and then giving the *mettā* towards that. But yeah, that's fine. The relationship

can become clear that way. There's something about noticing how influential the inner relationship with something is, and especially because we've been doing the love and compassion, it's already current at that, and using that current to make an effect on perception. It can be really clear, and then it's undeniably clear that there's a relationship. It's very clear. That's all. But any way that it happens, it's great. I would say try doing it the other way round, so just that, and seeing if you can notice it that way too. Does that answer?

Yogi 2: Well …

Rob: Is there more?

Yogi 2: I was just putting it out there.

Rob: Okay. John.

Q2: acceptance, self-love, and fading

Yogi: There was a fading during the practice. But there also feels like there's acceptance which in some way reduces the greed/aversion. So my question is, is this another form of, like, self-love?

Rob: It could be viewed that way, because when I say, "If I'm loving myself, what am I?", one level of looking at it in terms of *anattā* is, I am just these experiences and my relationship with them. If that becomes one of more acceptance for all that, then it's a kind of self-love, absolutely.

Yogi: And is the acceptance, like, really reducing the greed/aversion?

Rob: Yeah, absolutely.

Yogi: I mean, if I'm having some craving and I fade into love, it seems like the craving subsides.

Rob: Yes, because – that's what I'm saying – in the depths, as *mettā* really deepens, it has this quality of non-clinging, non-craving, non-grasping. And it tends to dissolve craving, dissolve grasping. There's a way it works on that particular link of dependent origination from feeling to clinging to craving. And the suffering goes out. Is that clear?

Yogi: Yeah. I was just wondering if what I've been experiencing was, like, on, or sort of twisted.

Rob: No, it's right on. It's absolutely right on, yeah. [laughter] I assume that John did talk about that particular link, yeah? Clinging? Feeling, clinging? Okay, good.

Q3: clarification about what to practise, practice schedules; the spectrum and blending of *mettā* and *karuṇā*

Yogi: Just a question for the instruction this morning. I understood you to say that we're in some way to use both the *mettā* and the *karuṇā* and the practice of sort of a bit of one or another.

Rob: I should go over that again. What I'm suggesting for this final week is to choose two practices: either the *mettā* and this new practice, or the compassion and this new practice. Now, what you may want to do is really emphasize the new practice and just do a little bit of either the *mettā* or the compassion. Or you may want to just really emphasize the *mettā* or the compassion and a little bit of the new practice. Or half and half. The balance, I don't mind so much about. I think the only thing really in there is maybe not at this point to mix the pure *mettā* and the pure compassion practice. Okay? That's the only combination that's not … Within this new practice, sometimes it will feel more like *mettā* towards experience, objects; sometimes it will feel more like compassion; sometimes it will just feel like acceptance. That's where it doesn't really matter. It's just words, and just to go with whatever seems helpful with that. Okay?

Yogi 2: I'm finding it really hard to understand how you can't mix *mettā* and *karuṇā*. Because in the *karuṇā* or the compassion, you're having to do acceptance with *mettā.* There is a degree of *mettā* there. So I get confused when you say don't mix them.

Rob: Yeah. The *mettā* practice and the compassion practice, they will at times – at times, *mettā* seems so much like compassion, and at times compassion, you know, when there's not a lot of consciousness of suffering, it feels very much like *mettā*. So there is a spectrum there, and they kind of tend to blend. Just to reiterate, then: the compassion practice, it tunes into suffering. It just hones into the suffering, that resonance of suffering. And it stays there with that, receptive to that, sensitive to that, and then addresses that with what goes out, with the healing. Now, sometimes that will *feel* more like a *mettā* practice, and sometimes less so, but the point is that it's receptive to, sensitive to, and directed to suffering. That's all. That they feel similar and that they involve each other – don't worry about that.

Yogi 2: I can see better now the distinction. I'm also thinking, with this new practice, you're saying do one or the other – do you mean do one or the other at any one time, or throughout the week?

Rob: I mean throughout the week, take two practices now, one being *mettā* …

Yogi 2: So kind of choose it now and stay with it? Because …

Rob: I'd say choose it by lunchtime tomorrow. How's that? [laughter] And you know, with all these practices, we're just beginning here. You've got the rest of your life to explore it, three practices which are huge in range, huge in scope, and profound, profound, profound. So just, it's fine whatever you choose here. It's fine. Okay?

Q4: noticing reaction then giving *mettā* vs just giving *mettā* straight

Yogi: A couple of things you said in the talk came together for me when we sat in silence, about how *mettā* can kind of hold the experiences [?] other experiences can happen. As I sat, I felt my fingers were numb. So I went in and I met that experience: what does this feel like? Then I checked out my reaction to that: am I not liking it? And then I brought in a sense of just bringing acceptance toward all of that. Does that seem, that kind of sequential way of doing things, is that a valid way …?

Rob: Yeah, absolutely. Or you could eventually, if you'd been with us there would have been quite a current of the *mettā* by now, and you could kind of skip the middle one, just bothering to even see what your reaction is – just dump the *mettā* on. [laughter] So you could skip that. Also, what will happen with practice is you get very quick at doing it. So it's just whatever's in consciousness, whatever's prominent, there the *mettā* goes. And also quite quick to see what the relationship with things is. With practice, it just becomes very evident: there's some slight aversion here. And it's clear, and then the *mettā* comes in or the compassion or whatever. But what you're describing is great. It's really great.

Q5: grasping is a part of attention

Yogi: And another thing, if that's okay. You said about how for something to exist there has to be grasping. Is an example of that, if my eyes are open, and I'm seeing lots of light, but I'm not seeing [?] until I actually go and grasp it? It doesn't even actually exist for me until I see it.

Rob: When this gets very subtle, an analogy is that attention is kind of like prongs, calipers – it does *that.* And to see you now, I'm kind of … [laughter] It goes on in a very subtle way. There's a kind of grasping that goes on with attention. But we can also see that we can be paying attention to something, and then when we let go of a lot of grasping, that thing that we're paying attention to actually begins to blur and to fade. So it can be easier to see with the eyes closed and working with internal things, but eventually it's actually possible with your eyes open and with sound and everything. So grasping comes into perception. Grasping is *part* of perception, put it that way. It's part of perception. No grasping, no perception. But it's extremely subtle. In attention, there is a kind of grasping to. That's great.

Q6: if an enlightened person isn't grasping, why doesn't everything fade

Yogi: So when you say no grasping, no perception, are you talking about when things begin to fade?

Rob: Yeah.

Yogi: I'm not sure what my question is, I just wanted to clarify that. So if a person is enlightened, awake, and isn't grasping, what's the …

Rob: [laughs] This is actually one of those really odd questions. Did everyone hear the question?

Yogi 2: No.

Rob: If a person's enlightened, they're not supposed to be grasping, so how come they're not bumping into walls all the time? [laughter] At first, it can seem like an abstract question, but as one goes into this practice and you really see no grasping, no perception, it becomes a very real question: "I thought awakened people were not supposed to grasp." I've asked a number of people this question. [laughter] So a couple of things. One of my teachers, Ajaan Ṭhānissaro, he said, "I don't know. Ask an arahant." [laughter] Which I thought was a perfectly valid answer. In the Tibetan tradition, which I think, it sounds weird when you first hear it, but when you really go into practice, you see, "Well, maybe there's really something to this," only a Buddha, only a fully enlightened person can actually see the emptiness of something and perceive it at the same time. No other beings can do that. Either you're noticing the emptiness of something, in which case it fades, or you're considering it real, in which case it's there. My take on it, as well, is that a person can be awakened to some degree, and there's basically a momentum of *saṅkhāras*, of karmic momentum, to basically perceive things and things existing really. And that momentum for the duration of their life is enough to keep the world appearing for them. And then, theoretically, when they die, it all kind of dissolves into whatever it does. Again, that can seem completely irrelevant and abstract, but as one goes deeper into practice, it becomes like, "Hmm. What is going on here? How would that work?" Yeah. Okay?

Yogi 2: That was pretty much my question.

Rob: Yeah, it's an odd question and an odd answer. But the more I practise, the more I buy it, actually.

Q7: describing meditative states as 'emptiness'

Yogi: Just to make sure that I understood completely … well, not completely, but a little better. When you talk about emptiness, you're not talking about a thing; you're talking about a concept which says that nothing exists in and of itself? It only exists because of all of the conditions that arise that lead to its arising?

Rob: And it doesn't exist in any real, independent way. I cannot say how a thing is, because of what I said. And even for a thing to arise, it needs me to be *making* it somehow. In that way, emptiness is a concept, or even an adjective: things are empty. What we can also talk about, in practice terms, is states of relative emptiness. So it's using the word a little bit incorrectly, but it's valid. So there are degrees of very deep meditation we can talk about. That's a state that comes about with a certain level of seeing emptiness and then another state of emptiness. And you can talk about that too. But emptiness as a thing, strictly speaking, no, it's not really a thing. What you could also talk about is the complete fading of everything – all perception, all notion of time, all notion of subject, object, anything at all, self, thing, etc. Complete fading of everything. And what's left there, if you can even speak that way, you

could talk about Emptiness with a big E, or *nirvāṇa,* or the Unconditioned, or whatever language you want. So some people use it that way as well. But that's not really a thing either. Language is really stopped way short of that.

Yogi: Say in states when there is really no sense of separate self, there's still awareness. So that would be a condition …

Rob: It would be a condition, because there's still some object that's existing. At first, what can happen when we go into those kind of states, we think, "Well, everything's disappeared." But actually, looking again, you see, "No, there's still a subtle sense of something or other," even a sense of nothingness or oneness or time or whatever. So it's just this progressive deconstructing, in a way, you could say.

Yogi: The experience you were talking about previously, there is no object in that experience. Where there's no time, no dimensions, no – that's awareness without an object.

Rob: You could, some people use that word, 'awareness without an object.' Some people prefer to say, "Well, actually even there's no awareness there, because you can't really call it awareness." Again, like I said, the language is stopped short. It's gone beyond language, so it's difficult.

Q8: clarification about what to practise (2)

Yogi: On the choice of the practice for the week, we choose *mettā* or compassion together with this new kind of awareness. If I understand, the main difference is that we're sending compassion to *dharmas* or perceptions or experiences rather than to beings. So we can experiment, *mettā* for a person we have in mind, and *mettā* for the pain in our knee.

Rob: Yeah. And what I would do is actually be conscious of when you're in one practice and when you're in the other. So, you know, say this sitting would be *mettā* towards beings, and then another sitting *mettā* towards objects of perception or whatever. Maybe halfway through a sitting, you may feel, "Now I want to switch the practice," and that's fine too. But just to be clear which one you're doing, what will help with that.

Yogi: So awareness – we should practise this alternative sense of the object of *mettā* or the compassion.

Rob: Sense of relation with the object, yeah. Good. Is that clear? Maybe the last one.

Q9: why differentiate between *mettā* and compassion

Yogi: Carrying on with [?]. Often if I'm practising, say I'm practising *mettā* to [?], and in that practice the thought of some suffering in that being just brings them to my mind, it shoots into compassion.

Rob: It does.

Yogi: And vice versa. I'm practising compassion for someone, for their suffering, and something joyful appears. I remember last year you were emphasizing what's important is to be able to distinguish the two sentiments as different from each other. If you can do that, couldn't you free it up a little bit? It doesn't make sense to me to be so rigid; it blocks the flow.

Rob: [long pause] Okay. [laughter] Sure, yeah. Go for it. If that's what feels helpful, just do it. As I said, they will blend and bleed into each other. There is something that comes with just really developing one and staying with one and letting that go through its range, just having one kind of intention. One level, they do blend into each other, and they're mixed, and it's kind of all the same thing anyway; why bother making a difference? On another level, we do want to be – there's a slight difference, and we want to be sensitive to it.

Yogi: [?] What I said was that I will notice the shift while I'm practising that. My sentiment actually changes depending how the object changes for me.

Rob: Yeah, sure. And that's good, and that would be part of either a *mettā* practice or a compassion, to notice when it's actually more like – say a *mettā* practice feels more like a compassion practice, or a compassion practice feels more like a *mettā*. That would be part of developing each one. I'm just saying maybe, maybe there's something that comes out of just staying with one deliberately, and seeing it go through that range, and noticing it change colour as part of the practice, but just staying with one strand of intention. But I'm not going to be anal about it, so whatever. Okay?

Q10: too many *dharmas* to give *mettā* to

Yogi: Sometimes there are a lot of objects coming up in this new practice. And it seems kind of difficult to be directing the *mettā*, or it seems like there's a sense of hurry.

Rob: I would just maybe choose what's prominent and stay with that. You're just interested in, again, a skilful abiding, and seeing this relationship. Sometimes maybe a lot of objects are coming up, and it might be worth seeing: what's the feeling with a lot of objects coming up? Is there a feeling of "ugh," or agitation, or hurriedness or whatever? And actually giving *that*, because that will be a bit more steady, then giving *that* the *mettā*. Okay? So finding one thing that's a bit more steady and doing that. Okay? Great.

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[1] Cf. a translation from Tibetan at Jens Braarvig, tr., "The Teaching of Akṣayamati," https://read.84000.co/translation/toh175.html, accessed 26 June 2021: "Friendliness with living beings as its object pertains to the bodhisatvas who have developed the mind of awakening for the first time. Friendliness with phenomena as its object pertains to the bodhisatvas whose practice is in progress.

Friendliness with no object pertains to the bodhisatvas who have attained the patient acceptance of the fact that all phenomena are unborn."

[2] Sn 1:8.

Equanimity in Compassion

Okay, so today I want to talk about equanimity – it's the fourth of the *brahmavihāras* – and specifically I want to talk about equanimity and its relation to compassion (actually, maybe broaden it out if we have time). So as you know, there are these four *brahmavihāras*, four divine or sublime abidings, dwellings of the heart, and we've been working mostly on the loving-kindness (the *mettā*), the compassion (*karuṇā*). Catherine, I think – Monday, or one day – talked about joy, which is the third one.

And just a word about that: usually, that third *brahmavihāra* gets translated – the Pali word is *muditā* – usually it gets translated as 'sympathetic joy,' which has the meaning of, if someone is happy, if some good circumstance befalls someone, something happens in their life to make them happy, then instead of being jealous or indifferent, we are happy for their happiness. We're happy for them to be happy. And that's the usual way that *muditā* is translated, sympathetic joy.

I think that translation actually came from the commentaries, and in the Buddha's original discourses, I'm not sure that he used it that way. The meaning that I prefer is more something like 'spiritual joy,' which isn't a great word, I know, but what it really to me means is a joy, a happiness in life that's not dependent on the ego getting something, or being pumped up by something, or inflated, or feeling superior or whatever. So a joy in life that is not about the ego getting. And then, of course, as a sort of small piece of that, there will be sympathetic joy. When someone else is happy, I will be happy as well, as a piece of spiritual joy. But it would also include things like wonder at nature, like that kind of receptivity that I was talking about, like an openness to be touched by life, and touched by the beauty, the awe, the wonder of life, in a way that I can't own, I can't possess it; it has nothing to do with me. It has nothing to do with me being great, or giving me anything particularly. So some kind of joy that's not so based on the ego. That's the third one.

And then the fourth one is this word 'equanimity.' The Pali word is *upekkhā*. And this is a strange word. It's not a word we use much in English. And again, if you wandered down Newton Abbot high street and you asked people, you know, "How often do you feel equanimous?" or whatever, you'd probably get some puzzled looks! [laughter] It's not a very common word. And sometimes it can be hard to understand what it actually means.

It's a kind of steadiness, a steadiness of the heart and the mind. And again, there are two kinds of meanings. One is in relation to all things, so the mind, the heart, the being, stays steady, stays balanced, stays kind of unshakeable through its contact with all things in life. So in relation to whatever comes, however difficult, however wonderful, the heart, the mind, stays steady, stays upright, stays balanced. And that's the broader meaning of equanimity, and the way that the Buddha more often used it.

And again, I think through the commentaries, it has come to have a kind of second meaning in relationship to beings – so specifically as a kind of balancing factor in terms of compassion. Here we are cultivating compassion and opening the heart, sensitizing the heart to the suffering in the world, the

suffering of others, and our own, and sometimes acting in the world to try and alleviate the suffering, to be of service, to be of help. And yet, what we often find is that the suffering of others is *not* alleviated. It's not helped. There's still suffering for whatever reasons. Or there's just *too much* suffering in the world. It's actually endless. It's impossible for me to end all the suffering in the world. Can the heart stay steady with that? Can the compassion stay steady, so that we're not keeled over, bowled over, closing down or feeling depressed by that? So in relationship to beings, this is what equanimity means. It's a hugely important factor in compassion.

I want to just go into a little bit how that factor of equanimity feeds into the compassion practice, how we can develop it within the compassion practice, and then broaden it out. Some of it, we've already touched on, but I just want to draw it out once more.

The first aspect is (which I've said a couple of times at least) – in the compassion practice, it has two elements. One is this, what I would call 'empathy.' We are opening the heart to receive, to resonate with, to sympathize with the suffering that we see. So I see sorrow, and something in the heart trembles with that sorrow, it resonates with that sorrow. Somehow, I don't know – mystically, almost – sorrow that isn't ours, we witness it, and something happens in our heart. Our heart vibrates sympathetically with that.

That's only half of compassion. The other half is this energy, this intention that comes out of the being, so to speak, that goes out of the being, that wants to heal, wants to alleviate and soothe that suffering, wants to comfort it. In the practice, we can actually feel where the balance is in any one moment. So sometimes it will feel like we're very much in the 'feeling the sorrow' side, where very much there's quite some sadness, or grief, or just being moved. And sometimes it can be very lovely, and there's a sweetness to it, there's a beauty to it; the heart is open and touched. And sometimes it feels like the balance is more, we're just feeling in, tuning into that energy that's going out – the lovely quality of healing, of light, the balm, the comforting.

This is a balance that's always moving. It's always moving. So part of the practice is to be aware of, in any one moment, where the balance is. If we're tuning into that healing quality, what's going out, the comforting, the balm, it actually has a feeling of feeling pleasant, and of feeling quite healing. So in coming out of *our* being, it's actually touching us on its way out to others. And we feel healed. And there's a kind of pleasantness in it. There's a kind of brightness in it. There's a kind of healing in it. And there's even a kind of sense of well-being, of happiness in it.

So sometimes there are times, and periods, even, when there's a lot of grief. There's a lot of grief, almost, in the compassion practice. Something in the heart is opening, and it's almost like a veil – we're removing a veil, and the heart just comes in a very raw contact with the suffering of the world. We see, like a veil has been removed from the eyes, from the heart, and we're touching directly the suffering in the world. We see the immensity of it. We see the universality of it, the fact of death, the fact of change, the fact of disease, the fact of all of it.

And the heart can, in that – there is a grief, and there can be tears and sorrow and a real being touched at a very deep level, which in a way is important. For some people, that will be there at times, and it's part of the heart opening. It's not everyone that goes through something like that, but it can be there at times, very subtly, or more strongly. And in a way, it's part of our humanity to be touched.

We're not, in a way, wanting to be untouched and inhuman. It gives the heart a quality of some kind of opening, some kind of tenderness that's really important.

But we need to really be conscious of this balance in our practice of compassion. And I would say that in order that compassion in our life is something sustainable – in other words, we really feel like we can practise compassion all day every day for the rest of our lives, and not feel tired, not feel overwhelmed, not feel burdened by the suffering in the world – we need to keep tuning into that loveliness of what's going out, the nourishing quality of what's going out, the happiness of it, and keep being touched by that and our selves nourished by that. That gives the compassion, in that moment and in our lives, in the being, a kind of strength and sustainability. That's very much part of what equanimity means – strength, sustainability. It also gives a steadiness, gives a balance, and this unshakeability, which is all part of what equanimity means. And gives the heart a kind of buoyancy so that we don't feel, as I said, burdened, overwhelmed, sinking underneath the weight of the suffering of the world. This is hugely important. So there's that balance.

The other, or one other, piece that's really important with equanimity is *samādhi*, going back to near the beginning of the retreat. *Samādhi* in one sense is a kind of non-distractedness, you could say. When the mind is distracted, what's really happening is it's toppling over, pulled out to reach things. It's pulled out towards this, or pulled out towards that, and that very distractedness is a non-balance, a non-steadiness of mind. So really not to underestimate the benefits and the power of *samādhi* in the deepening of equanimity – *samādhi* in the *mettā* and the compassion practice, and *samādhi* generally.

I remember last year, after, I think it was after about two weeks, and there was one retreatant who, very thoughtfully, I thought, he said to me in an interview, "I think I don't want so much *samādhi*. I feel like when I go out into the world and deal with compassion in the world, the fact is, I'm moving in life. I'm moving. There's busyness, there's distraction, there's all of that. There's basically not a lot of *samādhi* compared to …" He was getting in relatively deep states here. "It would be more relevant," he said, "to practise here the rest of the time in states of non-*samādhi*, you know, actually when I'm quite distracted." I didn't ask him how he was planning to distract himself, but … [laughter] Anyway.

And so this was quite thoughtful, but as I say, not to underestimate. There's something that happens with *samādhi*. It sort of allows any quality, whether it's insight, whether it's *mettā*, whether it's compassion, whatever it is, to kind of sink into the cells, and to be there, woven in almost to the fabric of our being. So what's more common is to *not* have so much *samādhi*, think we've understood something, think we've developed a lot of compassion, and find that when we go out it's a bit shaky.

So again, not to say there's a cut-off point, but just generally that we want to be not underestimating the power of the *samādhi*. Having said that, what he said was also important, because sometimes we *are* very busy, very distracted, and it's important to practise, too, when we're busy and when the mind isn't that settled. So both are important.

Generally, as *samādhi* deepens, as a general quality in the being, it actually leads to equanimity. It's part of the natural progression of *samādhi* – through physical *pīti*, what I talked about; through happiness; through peacefulness; to actually descend to depths of equanimity. And then, in the course of that – and this is usually a progression that takes months and months, but in the progression of that, the equanimity, too, gets kind of sewn into the being, and it's really something that's accessible in life, not just in the *samādhi*.

Okay, so there's this balance in the practice that I was talking about. There's the *samādhi*. There's also this factor about how much the self is *doing* the compassion practice. So sometimes, especially from the beginning weeks, really, if you're on retreat, it can very much feel like I'm sort of pumping away at the phrases, and then sometimes there's a feeling of compassion, and then sometimes not. But it feels like the self is doing it, and the self is sort of trying to get this compassion to happen, and then feeling the compassion if it's there.

But some of you, I think, have noticed this – and again, not to make any kind of measurement out of this – but sometimes, as the sense of deepening happens in the practice, it can actually feel like it's not the self doing it. It's not *me* making compassion. It's not me kind of pumping everything up with the phrases, and sort of making sure it's okay. It's more like compassion is just something there that we can tune into, and the self a little bit gets out of the way. It's not the self doing it. This is quite an important area, or shift, that can happen in practice, if it happens. Self and equanimity have a very, in a way, clear and interesting relationship. Basically, the more the self-sense, the bigger the self-sense, the stronger the self-sense, the less the equanimity. It's actually that simple. It's either one or the other. As the self-sense gets quiet, as the ego gets quiet, equanimity is the natural state. There's less self in there, invested and worrying about, "Will this work out? Will it not work out? How's it all going?", and equanimity is a natural settling, of when there's less self being built up.

Sometimes, too, and some of you have reported this, as well: when there's less self doing it, there can sometimes feel like a spaciousness comes into the compassion practice. And again, it's not the self doing it, but it's almost like there is a space, like there is space in the universe, and that space is imbued, is kind of shot through with compassion. And that space, that space of compassion, holds any suffering that comes up in ourselves, in others, in an effortless way, through all time. So any suffering that was, any suffering that is now, any suffering that will be is just held, effortlessly, naturally, organically in that space.

And this is a sense that can open up. It's not me, little old me, holding someone else's suffering. It's actually, whatever you want to say, the universe holding it, the space holding it, the vast heart holding it. Spaciousness, space, is also a really significant factor of equanimity. So we could talk about equanimity as being steadiness and balance, but it's also a kind of spaciousness. That's a very prominent feature of equanimity.

Now, both of these – whether it's the self doing it, and it just feels like this being over here giving compassion to that being over there, or it feels like there's not really much self doing it; it's just compassion, it's just suffering being held in the space, just being held by a space of compassion – both are important and both are necessary. So it's not to feel like, "Oh, one's irrelevant after a while." This self giving compassion to that self is very human. It's part of our humanity, and it is a necessary aspect of our humanity, a necessary level, in a way, of compassion.

So there's the balance, the *samādhi*, the busyness (or not) of the self, and the openness to space and spaciousness. And also something a little bit more complicated, or potentially more messy, which is: sometimes when we are involved in a relationship, any kind of relationship with someone, or involved in helping or compassion, something gets out of balance, and what's really happening is I am wanting or needing something from that person or from the situation. Sometimes it's clear, and sometimes it's a little more under the surface. So sometimes to ask oneself, "What do I want or need for myself here?"

This can be quite complicated and messy and not clear, and it's not to say that we shouldn't have wants or needs either.

If we're talking about compassion to a friend or a relationship, sometimes we feel when the other is suffering, when there is a lot of suffering in the other, we feel, and especially if it goes on for a long period of time, we feel that "My needs in the relationship are not being met. My needs in this relationship are not being met." Or we are involved in a relationship or a situation of care for someone who is clearly causing suffering for themselves in an ongoing way. They're maybe in some addiction or some destructive behaviour or whatever it is, and again, it can feel like, "My needs in this relationship are not being met." So this is quite a common scenario, and I know, in my past, I've certainly been involved in these kind of situations. Someone once said to me – I mean, it's strange language they used – but it's a very high level of care, to be in that situation in a healthy way, and caring for someone who's doing that, without having it be unhealthy – on both sides.

Am I taking care of my needs, if that is the situation? So maybe I *do* have genuine needs. And again, this goes back to a talk a while ago: we can talk about loving-kindness and compassion, and it can sound all very abstract and completely clean and pure, but the reality of our life is that we are involved in relationships, and we all have needs and wants within that. So am I taking care of my needs? Am I finding a way to do that?

So it may be that we're in a situation where we actually end up feeling quite lonely. Or we feel like we need a friend. Or that, as I said, we're not being met, or we're not feeling loved. This is quite common. Sometimes it's a little bit even more complicated; we may be involved in a situation where we are actually invested somehow in being needed. So we're interested in compassion, but another sort of stratum in there is that a part of us actually wants to keep the person somewhat down so that we are needed. And again, this can come in in very insidious ways. Not, again, not to be scared of all this, because this is part of humanity, and it's part of being human. I think some psychotherapies call that co-dependence, that kind of – it's a whole system in place of, "You be messed up so that I can feel needed," and it's just something that human beings do sometimes.

Or we may be involved in service, in helping people or trying to help people, and we're actually wanting a sense of achievement. We want this person to get better so we can feel like, "Yeah, right, something happened, you know. I did something. I was helpful." And this is completely understandable and completely normal. Or we may be involved in – and again, totally normal, totally human – we want some recognition for our efforts. You know, we work really hard to help, in whatever field it is, and then just feel like, "Well, it's not really being seen," or being seen in the way that we want it to be seen.

So all of that. And it's quite, you know, complex and messy, and very human. Can I take care of myself in a healthy way? Can I get at least *some* of what I need in a healthy way? So some of this is not easy, but to begin asking that question in the situations. When we're involved in compassion and love, in a situation where it's difficult, where it feels like the person is difficult or there's aversion, there's judgement, there's irritability with them, or we're just frustrated, we're frustrated with the situation, with the stuckness of the situation, we're frustrated with this person, whatever – really, really skilful to turn the compassion on oneself. So again, we tend to assume, to go straight into, "Oh, I just need to inject more compassion towards them and clean it up that way." *We're* suffering there, and to really notice that and touch that with compassion. And then sometimes our relationship to the situation, the

person, and the flow of compassion in that situation begins to soften, the perception begins to soften, and we're able to work more easily.

You know, it's an immense task, I think, to take these *brahmavihāras* on in our life. And it's really a lifelong thing, to say "I'm really deeply interested, deeply committed to living a life, living in the world with love and compassion and joy," and somehow be steady through all of it. That's immense. And we do see that part of where the wisdom comes in is just realizing (and a lot of it is very clear) that there are limits to how much we can help, there are limits to our influence. So certainly we see this politically. In all political situations, all political structures, systems that I can think of, there's a real limit to the individual's, one individual's capacity to change. So we could see something like – well, all kinds of things that are going on now; just the limits of our influence politically.

A big part of bringing equanimity in is actually seeing the web of conditions, seeing that someone's freedom from suffering doesn't just depend on me. I can be doing all I can to help them, I may be the closest person to them, but it doesn't just depend on me. And so to begin to shift the seeing – this takes quite some time – to begin to see all the factors, all the conditions, the web of conditions that comes in to make any situation what it is.

So, for instance, a Dharma talk is quite an interesting example. It can seem as if I'm sitting here giving a Dharma talk, and you're listening. My experience is that's, you know, on one level, of course, that's what's happening. On another level, we're all giving this Dharma talk. It's a complete co-dependent arising. What's coming out of my mouth, the feeling in the room, the words I choose, the tone of voice, all of it is as much dependent on you and how you're feeling and what you're mirroring back to me, and this kind of interplay that's inextricable, as it is to what we all had for lunch in the day, and how tired I am, and everything is coming together. And I am quite tired! [laughter] Everything's coming together to make a Dharma talk. We tend to see it in terms of selves, and selves being responsible for things. It's a complete coming together.

Then, I'll say, as a teacher, you know, you want to put something out there, and you want to say, "Well, I hope this changes people. I hope there's some transformation. I hope it makes a difference in people's lives." And that's a very earnest aspiration, desire. But as a teacher, I have to remind myself this is probably just one little drop, or one little seed, which will meet a whole web of other conditions later on. So it may be something happens. Maybe, you know, as I'm talking, someone says, "I've got it! That's it! Actually, I don't need to stay for the rest, Rob. I'll be having tea if you want me." [laughter] Maybe. That would be great. But mostly it's actually just a little drop, and then one goes out into that infinite web of conditions in the life. Maybe it's just a seed. It meets another condition, then it begins to sprout. Maybe it sprouts a little here, and then it gets watered. Maybe it meets the wrong conditions and it just gets covered over, you know?

So we have to see that what we put into a situation in terms of compassion and care is only one little ingredient in a vast web of conditions. So even, it seems that we're doing all we can to help someone, just to realize that – certainly if they're going to live longer – they will meet other conditions, and maybe something you've done or said, it will just be enough that it can blossom later for that person.

But it's tricky, I mean, it's really tricky. This is a hard one. All these *brahmavihāras* are difficult, but certainly equanimity is difficult. And equanimity, just to be really clear, is not a kind of detachment,

coldness, greyness, disconnection. It's not indifference. Indifference is actually the near enemy of equanimity. So it can look like equanimity, look like, "Yeah, I'm fine. If you get healed, fine. If you suffer, that's fine," but actually, there's no real care there. So indifference is what *can* look like equanimity, but it's not. And this is quite interesting, especially in spiritual circles, when a lot of stock gets put into non-attachment and peace and kind of, you know, being 'beyond' things, etc.

In the Eastern religions, there's this doctrine of karma and past lives and everything, and sometimes people say, "Well, they're like that because of their previous suffering, and in a way, it's their fault, you know." Or in the West it's, "Oh, it's just God's will." I just can't really relate to that at all; to me, it's really not a useful way of thinking. Or rather, one has to *check* if it's useful, in the sense that, is an attitude like that bringing indifference? So once I was meeting with someone who was not on retreat, and she was talking about reincarnation and past lives, and she said, "Is it right? Is it wrong?", and I said, you know, "I don't know." I asked her, "Is it actually opening your heart or not? Are you feeling more care coming from it? Are you feeling more commitment to kindness, to compassion?" And she said "Yes," so I said, "Great. If that's what's helping, then go for it." And the view might change later on, but the barometer is really: what's it doing to the heart? So what is my responsibility? Response-ability – my ability to respond. It's not karma or God's will as a sort of, you know, leading to indifference, and this is really important.

So sometimes all those pieces of self-interest that I was talking about, and the way that self can kind of get entangled in a whole situation of care, sometimes that's relatively *not* there. The self is not so invested in an unhealthy way or in any way like that. And still, we vibrate, we resonate with the suffering. And the question for equanimity is: can the compassion stay steady and stay strong, but stay tender, that that tenderness of the heart remains? And sometimes it's very clear that we're seeing someone cause and perpetuate suffering for themselves through ignorance. They're caught in some pattern that they're not understanding – some addiction, some behaviour or whatever it is – and they're just perpetuating the suffering, causing suffering and keeping it going through ignorance. And that's hard to see. It's hard to be with. Especially when the compassion is there, it's hard to see. When there's love there, it's hard to see.

So traditionally there are these phrases for equanimity. And it's trying to make clearer to the heart that is already open, already soft and tender with compassion, it's trying to make it clearer, the limits of our responsibility and the responsibility of an other, and how suffering actually arises because of conditions, and often a person's actions.

Just to say, of course there's suffering in the world that comes – it's nothing to do with the person; it's just descended on them from the environment or political situation or whatever. And then there are other levels of suffering, other kinds of suffering, that are really what humans bring on themselves through ignorance. And this is what the Buddha's really interested in as well. So these phrases – I'll actually just read them:

"All beings are the owners of their actions. Their happiness and their unhappiness depends on their actions, not on my wishes for them."

"All beings are the owners of their actions and inherit the results of their actions. Their future is born from such actions, companion to such actions, and the results of their actions will be their home."

Third one, “All actions with intention, be they skilful or harmful, of such acts they will be the heirs.”

So to me, even just reading it, it’s quite sobering, you know, to a heart – when there’s compassion, it’s quite sobering actually realizing the limits. And so the equanimity practice in this very formal way is just bringing that recollection to mind, bringing that recollection to mind to balance the compassion, if it’s not already balanced.

And so, we *do* live in a world where, as I said, there are limits to our care. There are limits to the effects of our actions that we can see, certainly, and limits to what we can do. And so we see, and if you’re involved in service, you are involved in situations where one’s trying everything one can, one puts everything that one can in, and there’s still suffering, there’s still the situation. But, and I think John said this in the opening talk, loving-kindness and compassion, best way to live. The best way to live. So even if the action, even if the results, are not what we want them to do, the heart of loving-kindness and compassion is the best way to be in the world. And that heart balanced with a sense of freedom, balanced with a sense of equanimity. So this balance is not a tightrope. It’s not a kind of razor’s edge that we’re walking. That’s quite important. To me, it’s more a sense of a softening, a spaciousness. So it’s not something very tense, to keep on this balance of freedom and compassion. There’s a kind of softening that can happen as the wisdom deepens, as the equanimity deepens, also as the compassion deepens. And a spaciousness that comes with that.

So the more we see into the emptiness of self and the emptiness of all things, the more that kind of spaciousness and that kind of softness can come in, and we’re able to walk this tightrope (which really isn’t a tightrope), we’re able to walk that in a much more relaxed and effortless way. I would still say that’s very difficult, but the movement is towards a kind of softening.

To me, as we go deeper into really understanding what emptiness is and having that touch the heart – I think I said this the other day – what comes out of that is a sense of freedom, and joy, and peace, and wonder. Another sense that comes out is some kind of sense of devotion, I would call it. I don’t really know another word for it – devotion. And that can take all kinds of forms. A heart that has opened, or is opening to emptiness, there’s a kind of devotion to the world, at one level, that just comes in. So paradoxically, we see the emptiness of self, the emptiness of beings, the emptiness of the world, and we’re even more devoted to it somehow, even more devoted. And that devotion has a quality of not being so attached to the result. There’s a real softness in it. There’s a softening in it. So seeing into emptiness is not a kind of nihilism. I think I said this the other day as well. It’s a strange translation, but ‘emptiness,’ it can kind of make you feel like, “Well, there’s nothing. There are no people. There’s nothing. Nothing matters.” But to go into what’s called the extreme view of nihilism would give rise to indifference, which would be the near enemy of compassion. It’s a kind of disconnection – disconnect, not caring, disinterested, aloof.

So as we talked about in the compassion and the *mettā* practice, the more we actually contemplate this *anattā* in the different ways, the more we actually find it’s opening up love, it’s opening up a sense of connection. It should be, if we’re sort of on the right track with it. And we talked about doing that with contemplating just mind moments, ownerless mind moments, not really anyone owning these mind moments of suffering. And the different ways, and we talked about *anattā*, and also talked about this sense of emptiness being fullness, being non-separation, so that I cannot actually find a separate

being. It seems the most obvious thing in the world: here we are, a room full of whatever it is, numbers of beings, but as I look deeper and I go into it, I cannot actually find separate beings. Cannot find myself separate, cannot find others separate. And in that, the love is there. So there's that emptiness of selves – my self and other selves – and that brings the compassion, it brings the equanimity. And at a whole other level, there's even the emptiness of suffering. You can say, "Okay, well there are no beings, *really*," but even suffering, too, as you go really deep into it, that's also empty. And yet, paradoxically, seeing that brings compassion in a way that there's equanimity for it.

Okay. So at the beginning of the talk, I said that the most usual way the Buddha talked about equanimity was not so much in relation to beings, but in relation to all conditions, all things. So the mind, the heart, the being staying steady, staying balanced, unshakeable, whatever happens, whatever's going on, whatever is coming to the senses. Sometimes to ask ourselves: how much does my mind state depend on what's going on? This happens or that happens; how much does the mind state wobble with that? A steadiness with it is what equanimity is. All conditions, absolutely all conditions.

There are particularly eight, what's called the eight worldly conditions, that the Buddha placed a lot of emphasis on. So all conditions he's talking about, but there are eight in particular that he said, "These ones, pay particular attention to." They're four pairs: praise and blame, success and failure, gain and loss, and pleasure and pain. So four pairs. One pole of each pair we like. We like praise, success, gain, and pleasure. And the other pole we don't like, we don't want it. No one wants to be blamed or to be in pain or to fail or to lose what we like. And whoever we are in this life, whatever our history, whoever we are, whatever our credentials, we are going to be subject throughout our life to the wavering of those four polarities – no matter who you are. The Buddha certainly, Jesus certainly, Gandhi certainly, Mother Teresa, David Beckham [laughter], whoever. They're inescapable facts of life, the eight worldly conditions. To be in the world means to be subject to the movement along those four polarities. How steady can the heart be with that?

So often when equanimity's talked about, and the question is, "Well, *how* can I develop equanimity?", the contemplation of impermanence is usually given as the sort of – *that's* where it's at. And certainly there's a great power in contemplating impermanence. But I was talking a few weeks ago with another teacher, and she was saying whenever she starts giving a talk on impermanence, she notices people just sort of, "Impermanence, right," and this kind of screen goes up: "God, I've heard it before," which is understandable, because Buddhists just, you know, yap on about it. [laughter]

I would say, it is curious. Impermanence is extremely obvious. A five-year-old can agree that everything is impermanent – well, some pretty low age [laughter] can agree that everything's pretty impermanent. It's very clear to us. The question from the Dharma perspective is: are we seeing, are we contemplating impermanence in a way that's actually bringing a sense of freedom, bringing a sense of equanimity? And if we're choosing impermanence as an avenue of contemplation, finding a way of doing it that brings that. Because sometimes people are contemplating impermanence, and "Yeah, it's change, change, change"; there's no freedom coming out of it. So to find ways, and to talk with teachers and friends and whatever, and to find ways of working with impermanence, actually bringing, in the moment, a sense of freedom. In the moment, one feels as one's contemplating it, "Ah, oh, yeah, release, release." I think I touched on impermanence in one of the other talks, and I'm actually not going to go into that right now.

I touched earlier in this talk on *samādhi* and the progress of *samādhi.* The natural progress of *samādhi,* as it gets deeper and deeper – and I'm talking about really quite deep states of *samādhi* now – naturally move into equanimity. Naturally and organically, equanimity is a state of deep *samādhi*. How does it deepen? How does equanimity deepen? It actually deepens by letting go of grasping and craving. So the more, in the moment, we let go of grasping – of craving after something or trying to get rid of something – the more the being moves into equanimity. It's actually that simple.

And we can do this at subtler and subtler levels, and the equanimity just gets deeper and deeper. So we notice some very obvious grasping or aversion or craving, and we just relax that, let go of that, and the being, there's some degree of calmness. And then we pick up on a more subtle level, and we let go of that, and there's a bit more calmness, and it just goes deeper and deeper. That's how equanimity deepens.

One kind of subtle form of grasping is grasping at the 'I,' at the 'me,' at the self, so identifying with things. Another way that equanimity deepens is by just letting go of identification, letting go of identification, letting go of identification, and equanimity kind of descends on the being – or the being descends into equanimity; whatever way you want to put it.

We're almost near the end of the retreat now, but as a state, when there's a sense of the equanimity deepening, the other factor that helps it deepen is actually the mind tuning into how it feels. So it has a certain feeling-tone, equanimity, to it, a certain peacefulness, a certain stillness, and it's the mind kind of tuning into that wavelength, that resonance, and just being there with it, noticing it, feeling it, opening to it, and enjoying it, enjoying it, that allows it to deepen, to settle in the being.

It's interesting. For a lot of people, it's really an acquired taste – deep calmness, deep stillness, deep equanimity. It's really an acquired taste, because generally our sense of *oomph* in life, and *va-va-voom,* and you know, things we get excited about, are generally *not* in places of equanimity. They're in places of the self getting really excited about something, either something that we take as good or something that we take as dreadful, so some big drama we're caught in. And to steady and let the self kind of get quiet, and just stillness, and just stillness, and just equanimity – that can be, for many, many people, as I say, it's an acquired taste.

And just to mention briefly, also, the place of *muditā,* of joy, in the deepening of equanimity. I don't have time to go into this today, but joy, you know, whatever word you want – well-being, joy, deep nourishment, happiness, whatever word – that forms a basis for the being being able to really open to equanimity. Certainly in the *samādhi* it's also a basis, but in one's life, when there is more a sense of joy in one's life, we are less dependent on the external circumstances being this way or that way. It makes less of an impact, because we feel like we have enough. And this is a very gradual journey for most people, and a very non-linear journey. But looking into: how is it that my well of joy, my reservoir of inner happiness, can be deepened in life? And so looking into: how does the being open to wonder? How does it open to the mystery of life, to the awe of things? What's the place of art and music in that? What's the place of our relationship with nature? All of that. Certainly the *mettā* and the compassion practice build those reservoirs over time, build the inner reservoirs of happiness.

Sometimes we lose our balance, we lose our equanimity in relationship to a situation either inner or outer, because we are caught up in future thinking, and "What will the future be? Will this situation get better? Will this person get better? Will this inner situation get better? This emotion, will it ever go

away? What's happening with my body, will it ever go away?" We're caught up in future thinking. And so, for instance, something like climate change, how much of what's going on with that and the way that we as a species are (*if* we are) addressing it, how much of that is actually caught up in the future thinking. The scenarios on the front page of the newspaper: what will it be like in 2056? It's a lot of future thinking, which is fine. There's a real skill in future thinking. So again, in Dharma practice as well, what will my life be like if I don't take care of the kind of intentions I have in life, of the kind of actions, of the kind of speech, of cultivating what is beautiful? How will I be in twenty, thirty years if I'm still alive? What will have happened to the heart? And you can see this in other people, over decades. I shouldn't say this, but one just sees in other people – they've been cultivating or not certain qualities, and as they get older, one sees the being.

And so sometimes future thinking is actually really skilful, to see: where does this lead? Where is how I'm living, what I'm choosing, where is it leading me in my heart? But sometimes future thinking is actually not that skilful, and it can be quite skilful to drop it, to just drop future thinking. Not compound a situation, build up a sense of problem, by kind of tacking on the future to it. So here's this difficult situation internally or externally, and I'm just kind of imagining it going on forever, or "When will it end?" Do you see what I mean? You're building a solidity to it by time concept. And this goes on without us even realizing it.

So sometimes it can be really skilful to practise shifting into another mode where one's just kind of snipping off the past and the future, and just seeing, "There's just this moment. There's just this moment." Experientially, existentially, that's all there can be. There's just this moment. And in this moment, all there can be is an impression in awareness, experientially. So I'm not saying anything about "there is a world or there isn't a world," but from a sort of meditator's contemplative perspective, all there is now is this impression in awareness, whatever sense it comes through.

So I can get caught up in the idea of losing things, or "my house" or "my this" or "my that." All my house can ever be is an impression in awareness in the moment. All my anything can be is an impression in awareness in the moment. We get so caught up in a sense of solidifying things in a way that experientially they're actually *not*. Now, of course that view has its limits, but as a skilful means in meditation, it's actually very skilful. Really practising that, the whole sense of life can shift, over time – this whole sense of life being not as substantial as we tend to take it. This is another kind of approach to emptiness. It's quite a popular approach, actually: just seeing things as impressions in awareness in the moment.

A slightly more sophisticated approach is seeing things as just perceptions. They're perceptions that are built, that are fabricated. So this practice that we've been doing this week, with directing kindness towards things, and sometimes the things fade – one actually sees that, through the lack of kindness or the lack of acceptance, a perception is actually getting built, it's getting fabricated or compounded, to use the Buddha's words, constructed in the moment. Without the mind doing something, that perception cannot be there. So something, whatever's going on, is just a perception. It's just fabricated. It's empty, in other words. It's empty.

So through our practice and through our life, when we begin to stop elevating certain things and putting down other things – whatever they are, inner experiences, or outer things, or other people, or situations or whatever – when that movement gets less, when there is less pushing away of what we

don’t like and trying to keep or pull towards us what we do like, when that push and pull gets quieter (and it goes through a whole range of getting quieter, very, very subtle), this is the movement into equanimity. And similar to the practice that we’re doing now, there can be, as the push and the pull gets quieter, there can be a kind of fading of experience. Things just get quieter. They make less of an impression in consciousness. They just begin to dissolve a little bit.

Sometimes they can dissolve completely. There’s virtually nothing left. Sometimes there’s just a little dissolving. Sometimes it’s almost like the world has become a very soft, gentle flickering of sensation in a very quiet and spacious and relaxed way, and that’s all that remains of the world. It’s just a little burst here and a little burst there, of something that’s almost nothing. That’s a very deep level of equanimity.

And then, at that level, we may think, “Well, hasn’t it completely turned round?” So used to think, used to define equanimity as being a steadiness in relation to what’s difficult or what’s great, or what’s exciting or whatever, and the heart just stays steady. As the equanimity really deepens, not much really arises anyway. There’s nothing really happening. So I can’t really be equanimous in relation to what’s difficult, because there’s nothing there to be equanimous in relation *to*. It’s gone. It’s taken a whole different level of meaning.

If, sometimes, equanimity deepens to that kind of level, there’s a real beauty in that. So again, sometimes we hear this word, ‘equanimity,’ and it’s a strange word, as I said, and it can sound kind of cold and dry and grey or whatever. But to people committed to practice and open to that kind of thing, there really is a wonder in it and a beauty in it. There’s a juiciness in it. I don’t know any other word. It’s not dry. It’s absolutely not dry, and there’s also love in it. There’s absolutely love in it. In that state, there’s a kind of non-separation. We’re not building a sense of self and other, a sense of separation, by getting involved in this tussle, in this push and pull. In the non-separation, there’s love, effortlessly.

There’s a very important thing here. Sometimes, you know, describing kinds of experiences or states – it’s not to snatch at the experience. What’s much more important is the understanding. So sometimes there’s an experience, sometimes there isn’t; the more important thing is the understanding. And the understanding there is that, again, similar to the practice that we’ve been doing this week, how a thing appears depends on my relationship to it. Whether it appears at all depends on my relationship to it. How a thing is, then, depends on the push and the pull, and is inherently immeasurable. There is no *real* way it is. It’s immeasurable.

So this is more important than a certain kind of experience. We’re actually beginning to see into, in a very deep level, the immeasurability of all things. All things, so-called ‘inner,’ so-called ‘outer,’ their true nature is immeasurable. And that understanding begins to go deep in the being, and we really begin to understand that in an unshakeable way, and it’s that understanding that brings the deepest equanimity. Because then whatever happens, we know that it’s not real in its own right. It’s actually immeasurable. And that brings a really deep equanimity, and also a really deep love, a really deep compassion. Because we see the universality of it all. That principle is something that applies to all consciousnesses – not even just human beings; all consciousnesses. Whenever there’s a consciousness, the appearance of things to that consciousness depends on the push and the pull, the relationship with. And that’s universal. That universality, seeing that, understanding that, brings equanimity, as I said, but brings very deep compassion, because it’s got very deep wisdom with it.

Shall we just sit for a minute together?

Okay. So I do have some practical announcements, but we can take a little time, if you like, if there are any questions, either coming out of what was said now or some other talk or the practice right now. We have a little time if there are any questions.

Q1: equanimity through *samatha* or insight

Yogi: In terms of generating *samādhi* and equanimity, is *samatha* the best approach to that?

Rob: Yeah, that's an important question, yeah. *Samatha* in the sense of taking one object, like the *mettā* or the compassion or the breath or whatever it is, and just going deep in that, yeah, eventually that will lead to a deepening, through different stages, and there will be equanimity. So that's one way. The other way is more a kind of insight way, and that would be what I touched on here – being conscious of grasping, of pushing, pulling, aversion, holding on, craving, etc., in the moment, and just relaxing that, finding a way to let go of the craving, the aversion in the moment. And then what happens is, craving and aversion is actually an agitation of the being, and so there is a relative degree of calmness. Then, potentially, I mean, you could call *that* a deepening of equanimity, but in that calmness, because of the calmness, the calmness allows a more subtle seeing, a deeper seeing, so one actually can sometimes pick up on more subtle levels of craving, grasping, aversion, clinging, and feel that, and let go of that. And so one way that the whole thing can deepen is just by getting more and more subtle with that. And at a certain point, it gets very subtle, and will include things like just taking some experience to be me or mine or whatever, and we'll go through a whole range of subtlety with that. So that would be going at it via an insight way.

Yogi: So in a more open, spacious way.

Rob: Exactly, yes. And so in the open, spacious technique, there's a degree of resting, but there's also some degree of *doing*, but the *doing* is a kind of letting go – one just keeps letting go, and then feeling the loveliness, the release of the letting go, and then feeling, "Ah, there's a bit more," and letting go. So it's not a great sort of [huffing and puffing]; it's quite spacious. And there's just enough doing, in the letting go, to keep the space alive and soft and deepening in equanimity, all of those things. And some of the clinging gets extremely subtle, *extremely* subtle as you go deep into it. If you get really skilful at all of that, what you can do, especially if you have a background in *samatha* practice, is once that open space is there, it's almost like you can filter out the equanimity and choose to focus in on that, and then have a much more contained equanimity which is more like a deep state of absorption. That takes quite some practice, but it's possible, so one can actually move between these two – between a more open kind of equanimity.

Q2: which is best when the mind is distracted (*samatha* or insight)

Yogi: Early on in the talk, you mentioned that a lack of equanimity is the sense of the mind sort of reaching out and grasping after things. If you're noticing that going on in yourself, which of the two approaches that you just described would you recommend?

Rob: If it's relatively gross, in the sense of I'm trying to concentrate on this thing and the mind keeps getting distracted by this and then that and then this and then that, and one feels like one can't keep the mind with the *mettā* practice, that sort of level, I would just keep doing the steadying of the mind with one object. If there's already a sense of steadiness, then that's enough steadiness to pick up on the sense of just how it feels to grasp after something or to push something away, and you can kind of feel it. If there's a bit more spaciousness, you feel it in the subtle, physical, in the subtle body sense. It's just a kind of contraction of the subtle body sense or a contraction of the sense of space, that it contracts when we grasp or push away, and one notices that and then one just lets go. If there's a bit more steadiness of the awareness, that's a really good way too. They're both valid, and in a way, the answer is really to experiment. So sometimes even in the course of trying to stay with one object, and there's a lot of restlessness or something, sometimes the best way is just to be more open – feel the pull of that restlessness, so that you actually feel it as a "Ungh," and you just relax it.

Yogi: Yeah, it's like there's almost like a feeling of suffering that's coming out of that and …

Rob: Yeah, yeah, that's great.

Yogi: [?] You said when there's a degree of spaciousness already. I'm just feeling the push and pull and the suffering that's in it.

Rob: I would just feel free to experiment with both ways. Feeling the suffering is important because, in a way, there's a lot of insight in this approach. What we begin to realize is that something's catching our attention in the environment, maybe, that's very simple – a pain in the body. It's unpleasant. There's a pushing away of it through aversion, and there's suffering there. And actually noticing, feeling the suffering. Sometimes it's very subtle suffering that we're talking about. Sometimes it's less subtle. But sometimes it can be just the sense of contraction is a sense of suffering. And one notices that when there's pushing or pulling or aversion, there's suffering there. As I relax that, the suffering goes. And being actually sensitive to the suffering and the release of suffering is really key in the deepening of equanimity. So there's a real sensitivity to suffering and its release, and suffering and its release, and suffering and its release, as the process deepens. So it's actually good to be sensitive in that way.

In the moment, which will be the right approach, it's hard to say. And it's more a question of which practice you're kind of doing at the time. It can be quite important to have, "This is the practice that I'm doing. This is what I'm doing 90 per cent of the time, and this is my sort of emergency backup practice that I'm taking out in emergencies." [laughter] And then, you know, when I'm trying to stay with the *mettā* or whatever, and it's really not happening today or this sitting, and I've been plugging away for forty minutes, half an hour, whatever it is, okay, now I plug in the other practice. Other times, the more spacious practice is the main one, it's really not happening, and I need to settle the mind with

one object. But it's good to have like one thing: "This is what I'm doing. The other one's a backup." That will help, I think.

[*Transcriber's note: this ending was followed by some practical retreat information, omitted in this transcript.*]