

Love and the Emptiness of Things
Lovingkindness and Compassion as a Path to Awakening
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What I want to talk about tonight is love and the emptiness of things. But first, in a way, I want to review some of the salient features of what we've been doing so far. So at a very basic level, of course, we've been, we *are* cultivating *mettā*, loving-kindness, cultivating loving-kindness, and cultivating compassion. And I don't think that I need to persuade anyone of the blessings of that at this point on the retreat. And so we see, through the cultivation, the blessings of doing this that come for self and for other. And if it's not clear yet what comes out towards other, it does get clear as we move into our life, our usual life.

So to repeat the analogy that I've used many times, we're planting these seeds, planting the seeds of intention. And we're reconditioning the heart and the mind, which essentially, you could say, is a whirlpool, a web of conditioning, of conditions and habits of conditions. And we're reconditioning it slowly, patiently, gradually, and in that, through that, transforming the heart, transforming our intentions, so that the way we act in the world, what comes out of our mouth, our thoughts, all of that, is gradually, slowly transformed. Remember the Buddha's words: "Drop by drop the bucket is filled."¹ That's a very basic level of what we're doing.

Another aspect, or rather part of that, is that through cultivating loving-kindness and compassion, we're also nurturing and establishing the best possible climate for our growth: so psychological, emotional, spiritual growth. It's the best possible climate. And I know, if I reflect back on my past, trying at times to work very hard on understanding myself or on transforming myself, and yet not holding that process, not holding myself in that process in a climate of kindness. I was barely aware of it at the time. And what happens? Just running into a brick wall. Or it backfires in some way. And maybe there's some transformation. But the fullness of that will not be available. And so whatever growth we're talking about – meditative, spiritual, however – the loving-kindness and compassion are the best possible climate.

When the Buddha described his path, the path that he set forth, it's interesting – he didn't teach that much about technique and meditation technique. There's a little bit, but it's not generally that common. Rather, what he does over and over is encourage us to strive for two things, to work to develop two things. **(1)** One is a **wholesome nourishment**, a wholesome sense of the being, the body, the mind, the heart, being nourished. And 'wholesome' meaning ways that don't lead to our harm or the harm of others. Wholesome nourishment – so what's in that? It's all these qualities: loving-kindness, compassion, generosity, equanimity, etc., mindfulness. And developing these qualities that give the being a really deep, really satisfying grounding in nourishment. It's like there's a reservoir inside. Slowly, slowly, there's a reservoir inside. And that wholesome nourishment is one aspect of what he encouraged. **(2)** And the other aspect is **investigation for insight**. And these two kind of wings of the path: developing what's beautiful for the nourishment, and then the investigation.

So, in a way, the *mettā* is, again, part of that very deep wholesome nourishment. And the more we have of that, in a way, the freer we are in life. We are less dependent on others, less dependent on

circumstances. We have enough. We have enough, and it's not cold. It's not uncaring or isolationist. It's just that we have enough, and it can flow over. Part of the wholesome nourishment is *samādhi*. So for me – I don't know how it seems for you – it seems like a long time ago that I spoke about *samādhi*. But I was hoping, talking about it at the beginning, that it would be something that we would keep in our minds, in the sort of back of our awareness for the whole retreat. And it's interesting: we come here for three weeks or longer, or whatever it is, and a lot of stuff happens. A lot of stuff happens in our experience. We go through a lot of stuff. There are a lot of aspects to what we're doing. We talk about love and compassion – there are a lot of aspects to that.

One aspect, and I've talked on this, is questioning. So we question: "What is compassion, actually, when I really look at it? How is that different from, say, pity or whatever else? What is my attitude towards that? What blocks it?", etc. So there's a real questioning going on. That's very much a part of what's going on. And at times, as you all know, things come up for us. We find ourselves in difficult territory, old feelings come up, or just feelings in the moment come up. We're struggling. Or it's just something charged, not even that much struggle. That, too, is part of the process. So there's the questioning. There is allowing ourselves to feel what needs to be felt at times, feeling the feelings.

And there's the encouragement, the nurturing, of the *samādhi*, which is actually a quietening of the questioning and a quietening of the turbulence of feelings, which sometimes seem like they really *demand* to be felt, *demand* to be looked at. So all that somehow needs to fit into the picture of what we're doing. Sometimes we're more questioning, sometimes we're more allowing what needs to bubble up, and sometimes we're just developing the *samādhi* and letting things get quiet, developing that journey into the depth, into the stillness, into the subtlety.

Now what I see – and this is kind of reviewing a bit what I said about *samādhi* – is that most people that I come across in meditation circles tend not to give as much emphasis or believe as much in the importance of *samādhi* as perhaps they should. It's almost like we don't quite trust that or give it as much weight. And so partly – I'm just refreshing – that's definitely a factor here for the depth and the depth of understanding, the depth of opening, the depth of transformation, as I said. *Samādhi* is one of the factors. It's just one. So all the others are important. But it's one of the factors that allows the love and the compassion to kind of come into the cells. Something very visceral almost about it, very deep. But again, they're all important. All those aspects are important. To know what one's tendencies are. Is my tendency to avoid? What is it?

So there's this wholesome nourishment and insight, and we're kind of developing both in a lifetime of practice. With the cultivation of qualities that bring wholesome nourishment (one of which is *samādhi*, and loving-kindness, and compassion, etc.), very important to see that it's not about self-improvement. And how easily the judging mind comes in, the measuring mind comes in: "How am I doing?" And particularly with concepts like *samādhi* or *mettā* or compassion, whatever it is: "I have it. I don't have it. How am I in relation to others?" So it's really not about self-improvement, and the whole notion of a self to improve begins to just loosen in time with practice. And yet, we can still be really committed to this process of cultivation, of developing the nourishment, of reconditioning. And yet there's no self at the centre of it. No self at the centre of it, and yet we're totally committed.

So this reconditioning is – it sounds such a mechanical and dry word, but it's actually a very important part of what's going on, as I said. I remember – it was a couple of years ago. I taught a day

retreat on compassion in London. And in the question and answer period, a gentleman stopped me. Well, he didn't really – he asked a question. And he said, "Conditioning, conditioning, conditioning!" [laughs] He said, "All this conditioning – isn't it just going round in the circles of what's conditioned? How are you going to move, how is the mind going to move towards what's Unconditioned? And the Buddha talks about what's Unconditioned as the goal of the path. Aren't you just playing endlessly, fiddling with conditions?" [laughter]

I think he was coming from a genuine, caring place. [laughter] I'm actually not sure to this day. But there is, first of all, the importance of just that relative level, of just reconditioning the mind, as I said. At one level the mind, you could say – again, it's not a very glamorous image, but the mind is a web, a mass, a vortex, a spaghetti bowl of habits, of conditioning. And we *can* begin to recondition that. Tremendous amount of freedom, well-being, peace, joy, etc., come out of that, just at the relative level. And that's absolutely fine and actually crucial. *And* there is the conditioning, the setting up of conditions, the nurturing of conditions that actually leads to the Unconditioned. And actually in its deepening, and in its unfoldment, leads towards the Unconditioned, what is not conditioned, what is not born of conditions, what is not a condition. That's partly to do with what I'm going to talk about in this talk. I'll come back to that.

So this is all still review, but last point. As we do *mettā* and compassion practice – and many of you will have felt this to some degree, to any degree, any degree is good – that the sense of self can soften at times. And the actual self and the walls of the self, the boundaries of the self begin to soften, begin to be more open, more spacious, more permeable, in a way. And this is hugely important because we get a glimpse of living without this self-constriction, living without binding ourselves and defining ourselves and wrapping us up, wrapping ourselves up so much in the self. We begin to get a sense of perhaps oneness, or a flavour of this not-self, this no-self, this *anattā*. And so loving-kindness and compassion just lead naturally to a less fixed, less rigid, less tightly bound sense of self *at times*. At times it moves that way. And something in that opening, in that softening, begins to shake up and awaken some understanding about the self and the nature of the self. And again, giving compassion and love to oneself – it's not building up the ego. It's not building up the sense of self. And to explore this in our lives and in our practice – the way the sense of self gets built up, the way the ego gets built up, is through a *problematic* relationship with the self, a judgmental, a critical, a harsh relationship with the self, a rigidly defined relationship with the self. Problematic self-view builds up the ego. And when we have *mettā* towards our self, compassion towards our self, that actually begins to soften. So there's an easing of the sense of self – at times, at times – with these practices.

[14:23] Okay, so far, so good, I hope! All *that* is in the realm of what we could call traditionally understood practices of loving-kindness and compassion. I remember, quite some years ago – I don't remember when it was – I lived in America, and nearby was an urban non-residential meditation centre, Cambridge Insight Meditation Center. And about twice a year, they would publish their programme of speakers and weekend retreats and day retreats, and this and that, and courses. And for a period of about, I don't know, five years at least, every time it would come out, twice a year, it would have a nice picture of the Buddha on the front and a quote. And for about five years, the quote was from the *Lotus Sūtra*, one of the very influential Mahāyāna *sūtras*. And it said:

See all things with the eyes of compassion [or see all things through the eyes of compassion].²

End quote – “The Buddha.” And usually I would just get the programme, and you know, “Who’s coming? Yeah, very nice, okay. Which courses do I want to do?” And it took a while, but then at some point I just noticed, “Hold on. It doesn’t say, ‘See all *beings* with the eyes of compassion.’ It says, ‘See all *things* with the eyes of compassion.’” What could that mean? Does it mean to regard the microphone with compassion? The poor microphone has to sit here and listen to me drone on and on. [laughter] Is that what it means?

There’s another Mahāyāna *sūtra*. It’s called the *Akṣayamati Sūtra*. I don’t think it’s nearly as well-known as the *Lotus Sūtra*. There’s a line in there, and it says:

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 *dharma*s. And for those who have seen [well, say, deeply into emptiness, let’s say, or seen the Unconditioned; actually, let’s say, seen deeply into emptiness], love is not based on anything.³

So:

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 *dharma*s. And for those who have seen deeply into emptiness, love is not based on anything.

Now, we could certainly hear something like that and be understandably quite perplexed at what on earth that is talking about. And actually, I have actually changed the translation here because I feel that there’s been a misunderstanding there. But anyway, it’s a difficult thing to understand.

So a couple of words, translations: first of all, ‘compassion’ and ‘love,’ in a lot of the Mahāyāna traditions, they use it interchangeably. Or rather, they more often use the word ‘compassion’ to mean both what we’re talking about – compassion – and loving-kindness. Here they’ve done the same thing but with ‘love.’ Less rigidly different, the terms. So both of those statements, the *Lotus Sūtra*, “See all *things* with the eyes of compassion” – it means with kindness and compassion.

And what is a *dharma*? What does this mean – “love is based on *dharma*s, directed to *dharma*s”? A *dharma* has a lot of different meanings in the teachings. And one of them just kind of means ‘things.’ It just means ‘things,’ but it means ‘things’ as experiences or objects of awareness. So some *thing* arising in awareness is a *dharma*. So whatever that is – a body sensation, a thought, an intention, a mood, a mind state, a moment of *samādhi*, whatever it is, compassion – they’re all *dharma*s. So it’s just a thing in awareness, a thing as an experience.

Yogi: Are *dharma*s never just things on their own? Does it always has to be related to the awareness or the experience?

Rob: My understanding is yes. That's a subtle but quite fundamental shift, yeah.

Now, on one level, at first, this doesn't make any sense logically, and "What on earth is it talking about?" But we saw with the guided meditation this morning, and you've been practising today. Just to review that a little bit. We can, in our practice, direct this stream, at times, when we feel a stream of loving-kindness and compassion, actually direct it towards experience, whatever the experience is, and actually bathe that experience in loving-kindness and compassion, *or* compassion, or both, or a mixture, or whatever it is. We can *hold* it in compassion, *hold* it in love, or *let* it be held in that water of love. If you're just talking about the techniques now and the ways to experiment with it, we can use the phrases or just a word in the phrases, if that feels helpful. You can experiment with this mode of opening the door of awareness, opening the door of consciousness, and totally, totally welcoming, just opening it up so it can be there.

So emphasizing the love, emphasizing the loving-kindness and compassion, emphasizing the loving-kindness and the compassion and the *acceptance*, and not so much emphasizing the precise clarity of noticing or noting or seeing exactly what's going on. Oftentimes, when we talk about mindfulness and we practise mindfulness, that's what gets emphasized, is the clarity of what's going on, the clarity of seeing what's going on, the precision of seeing. So it's a different approach when one's *really* emphasizing the acceptance, which also is talked about as part of mindfulness. But really leaning towards emphasizing the acceptance aspect, the love aspect. Emphasizing a total welcoming, as long as it's genuine. One works in the practice to make it completely genuine, really, really welcoming this experience so that the arising of any experience is completely welcomed, completely held in that love.

Yogi 2: Does that include the discriminating aspects? You know, when you start discriminating automatically between kind of good and bad, or the feelings, you know, the emotions around the experience – the discriminating mind sets in automatically sometimes.

Rob: I'm not quite sure what you mean, Will. Can you save it for the end? Because it sounds important. Is that okay? Because we'll have questions afterwards. I think there's something important there, but can we save it? Is that all right?

The arising of all experiences, the staying – so an experience of phenomena, a *dharma* stays in consciousness for a while, short or long – and it passes. And so the arising is held in love, is bathed in love, is completely welcomed. The staying and the passing – completely held and bathed in loving-kindness. So as I said, there are a few different, *slight* different emphases of approach even within what we just said. One can work in a more *directing* way – so this is what came up this morning – can *direct* that stream when one feels it, *direct* that intentionality. Or it can be much more holding and much more of a kind of relaxing into a space that's imbued or shot through with loving-kindness. Much more receptive mode. One can be directing or receptive. It's fine.

[23:22] At times, of course, what's going to come up is resistance or no feeling or whatever. But there's something about this. It's almost like, whatever's going on, the attitude of acceptance and welcoming can always just expand a little bit and include whatever it is. Any resistance, any "I hate this, I hate ... *da-da-da-da-da*," whatever it is, just expands, so – "That's okay. Welcome, welcome,

welcome.” So in a way, there’s nothing outside the domain, outside the range, of this loving-kindness, this compassion. Nothing is outside it. Whatever’s going on can actually be welcomed and included.

In a way, for some people, a way in is, when we look inside, and what we encounter when we look inside is just a *stream*, so to speak, or an endless cornucopia, an endless arising and passing of experience. It’s just, whatever arises, it just passes. Whatever arises, it just passes. Everything is so fleeting. And so things, phenomena, *dharma*s are fleeting by their nature, when we look at them. And in a way, you could say, they’re deserving of compassion. They’re impoverished. They barely last. You know? So question: what happens to feelings when we do this, when we bathe them in love, when we totally welcome, when we hold them in that? What happens to the feelings? What happens to mental states?

Yogi 3: They dissolve.

Rob: Thank you! [laughter] I’m so glad you said that because it’s happened every year, but sometimes I think I’m going to ask, and everyone is just going to stare at me blankly. [laughter] But I’ve decided I know what I would do in that case: I’d make everyone sit up all night until they ... [laughter]

But anyway, what happens to feelings? What happens to mental states? What happens to body sensations? What happens to our perceptions of things? They can – and this really is a practice, so it might be clear to some people at this point. It might be less clear to others. It’s really fine. This is one option in the wealth of Dharma options there are. And one may take to it, or may not take to it. It’s fine. And it’s a practice. It’s a practice that one can develop, and that’s really important to see. But it can be, as it’s been said, that things, *dharma*s, experiences, phenomena, may soften. They soften. The experience of them actually softens. They begin, can begin to lose their edges. They can begin to lose their definition, to blur. Even, as Jeanette said, they can dissolve, or they can fade, either a little bit, or a lot, or completely. Did people find that generally? Even a little bit? Yeah, okay. Phew! [laughter]

So, it may be, particularly for someone – well, no. It just may be that we hear this or come across this and think, “Well, hold on here. Let’s just hold on a minute. That can’t be right. That can’t be proper *vipassanā* meditation. That can’t be proper insight meditation.” But remember, the Buddha didn’t teach insight meditation. And what I said at the beginning – what he taught much more is this wholesome nourishment, wholesome developing of what’s beautiful, and the well-being that that provides, and the *well* of well-being that that provides, *and* investigation. It’s not that he taught a particular technique or you have to do this or that. It’s those two together that were taught.

And out of that, out of the wholesome nourishment, the deepening of this inner reservoir of well-being, gradually, slowly over time – *that*, together with the investigation, in whatever form the investigation takes, brings a freedom. That’s what he cared about, and that’s what we should care about, is the freedom. The actual route to the freedom, whether it fits in the neat confines of our image of some technique or not, that’s totally irrelevant. The route doesn’t matter, the freedom matters. And the principle is almost always the same for the Buddha: wholesome nourishment, investigation. And of course, in a life of practice, one has different approaches at different times. Of course one does. And straightforward, what we normally understand by *vipassanā* practice – beautiful, beautiful practice, very powerful, very valid at times.

[28:38] But let's explore this a little more. In mindfulness practice, there's actually an assumption there, quite a big one and often a subconscious one, one that we're not quite fully aware of. Or maybe we're actually saying it out loud. The assumption is that mindfulness is something neutral. The assumption is that there's something called mindfulness that – this came up in a question and answer period a week or more than a week ago. The assumption is that there's something called 'mindfulness,' that what it can do is attend to things and see things in their naked actuality, something called 'mindfulness' which doesn't interfere in any way, and it's just seeing 'things as they are' – that phrase, 'things as they are,' which is a very well-worn phrase in the Dharma, 'things as they are.' And the assumption is that mindfulness, letting go of the story, letting go of my likes, dislikes, and all that, coming close to things, I'll see the bare actuality of what the thing is. Or I will see, be in touch with what is. And sometimes, even, as I say, more problematically, we can come to take as a view of the path, as a view of the goal, that the goal of the path is 'being with things as they are,' 'being with what is.' And these become very charged concepts: 'what is,' 'things as they are.' But again, that's never, never, never the goal of the path. It's a beautiful way of practising. It's a beautiful way of being – *cannot* be the goal of the path. The goal of the path is an understanding, a very deep understanding, that brings freedom with it. It brings freedom. It's something gone beyond this 'what is' and these notions. I'm going to fill that out.

Now, let's explore this a little bit. It has to do with the nature of perception. And if we just step back and look at how perception works in our life, we have, all of us, had the experience of feeling angry in some situation. And anyone who wants to kind of grow up and mature psychologically has to admit that anger *colours* the perception at times. And we even have a phrase in English: one is 'seeing red.' I was seeing red, or he's seeing red; she's seeing red. The very words are implying this colouring of perception. One's looking at the world, at the situation in that moment, through the lenses of anger. And the perception is correspondingly changed – of a person, of ourselves, of a situation. And (some of you may have tasted this on the retreat) other extreme: when the *mettā* feels like it's going very well, there's a softness, there's compassion, and one walks outside. And one's just having a cup of tea or whatever it is, and the *beauty* – one feels there's a tranquillity there. It's almost that one is in a deva realm, in a heavenly realm – you know, obviously, just a short period of time. But it's something that can arise.

When there's a lot of love around, how does the perception change? When there's a lot of anger around, how does the perception change? When we are angry with another – and I've probably said this at some point in the retreat – typically when we're doing *mettā* practice, we think, "Oh, I'm angry at him or her. I should give *mettā* to them because, you know, anger's bad, and I should kind of wish them *mettā* instead." Can be really skilful. What happens when, instead of immediately going to give the *mettā* to the other person that we're angry at, we give the *mettā* towards our self? Oftentimes we need it because we're feeling hurt. But it can be a very interesting place to start. And what one may find is that the *mettā* to oneself – things begin to soften. The mind, the heart begins to soften because one's meeting oneself with *mettā* – *can* do. Things soften, the mind softens, the eyes then soften, and the *perception* softens, because perception is dependent on the state of the mind.

So, we could say we have a continuum of – at one end, murderous, homicidal rage. [laughs] And on the other end, beautiful love, beautiful loving-kindness and compassion, and the softness and the openness of that. The mind is *always* – there's always some degree of love or anger, moving towards an

object or away from an object, pushing, pulling. There's always some degree of love or aversion in the mind. There's always some degree. So even with mindfulness, we tend to think, again, there's just this pure thing called 'mindfulness.' But any moment of consciousness has some degree of grasping at experience, wanting to move towards it, pushing it away, aversion, love. It always has some degree, even if it's very, very subtle.

Yogi 4: So neutral doesn't really exist?

Rob: Yeah, I'm going to explain. It's good! It's great! [laughter] So there's this spectrum. There's this spectrum, and any moment of consciousness from, as I said, complete rage to bliss of loving infinitely all beings, etc. – there's a range. Any moment of consciousness can be placed somewhere on that spectrum, somewhere on that continuum.

Which point on that continuum reveals the real object, the real way things are? So I see that with the mind moving on this continuum, the perceptions change. Which one reveals the real object?

Yogi 5: There's no real object.

Rob: [didn't hear Yogi 5] Anyone?

Yogi 6: You mean internal objects also?

Rob: Anything.

Yogi 7: It's all relative, isn't it?

Rob: [laughs] Okay, good!

Yogi 8: You can't.

Rob: You can't, okay? Can't. Human beings – actually *consciousnesses*, slugs, sheep, human beings, all of them – believe in real objects. Now, this is where this becomes very interesting. We can say, "No, it's all relative," and everything, and that's beautiful, and insight is being born. And sometimes, though, even if we say that intellectually, we still believe at some level in real objects, internal and external. But as people have said, in a way, there is no real thing. There is no neutral point. There is no real object. There is no object independent.

Now, someone *could* say, "Okay, well, if it's not mindfulness, then maybe it's that thing, equanimity. I've heard about equanimity." And the word 'equanimity' sounds, you know, *equal* + *imity* – whatever *imity* is. [laughter] Somewhere in the middle, and maybe that's the neutral point, right there. But again, someone practising equanimity practice deeply would notice the same thing – that as the equanimity deepens, objects are changed. There's a change of objects. So love and equanimity – the result of their presence, the result of them being in the heart, in the mind, is that objects make less

impression in consciousness. They're less prominent in consciousness. And we can see this in the practice – sitting, walking, on the cushion. Certainly, as some of you have found out, when there's a pain, what happens when we do that? What happens when we do that? When there's an emotion, what happens when we bathe it in love?

And of course, one can see it off the cushion, outside of the meditation hall. So there's a situation that *really* seems important or is troubling us a lot. And when there's a lot of love, or when there's a lot of equanimity, it barely impacts. Or its importance just doesn't – it doesn't seem so crucial, so pressing. Or the actual fact of it barely imprints on consciousness.

There's a lot here. There's a tremendous amount here. On one level, what can be discovered here is what the Buddha might call 'skilful means for easeful abiding,' for wholesome abiding, skilful means to develop ease in life, in a situation. So this is one approach to when there's something difficult: being at ease with that. This is so important. Again, going back to the wholesome nourishment, wholesome abiding – do we know, are we developing in our life, these skills to be able to be at ease more and more? How profoundly important that is to our life, to our whole sense of the quality of life and the ease of our life. Are we skilled? Are we interested in developing that skill of easeful abiding, of having ease? Even when something difficult is going on – one has an illness or there's a difficult situation, or whatever it is – there's the possibility for ease with that. So, skilful means for ease. But also, there are insights here, and they're extremely important and profound.

So the first one is that it's the relationship that is important. It's the relationship with what the experience is; it's the relationship with any object that's important. Oftentimes in insight practice or Zen practice or whatever it is, we're giving attention to objects, giving attention to experience – and understandably; that's kind of what we're told to do. But sometimes we're so kind of transfixed with what's going on, with the object going on, we're giving it so much attention that we don't see what's around that attention, the relationship that we have with the object. Sometimes we don't even realize what that relationship is. Putting it very crudely, you *could* say, relationship with objects – *dharma*s, experience, phenomena – relationships are basically either a relationship of peace or a relationship of struggle: trying to hang on, trying to get rid of, whatever. So it's either a relationship of peace or a relationship of struggle. When there's *mettā*, love and compassion, in that relationship with whatever's going on – love is peace. Love is a relationship of peace. To have that relationship of love is to have a relationship of peace, basically.

And we can see. We can see that when the relationship is non-struggling with what's difficult, it's non-struggling, the suffering goes out of experience. The suffering goes out of experience to the degree that we can soften our struggle with it. To the degree that love comes into that relationship, that peace comes into that relationship, the suffering goes out of experience. This is so crucial. And again, when we struggle with something, we tend to think, "I have this problem," or "This thing going on in my life or this thing going on in my consciousness *is* a problem." To practise this way and to see, inherently, it cannot be a problem. It cannot. In Dharma language we say it's *empty* of problem. The problem is empty. The problem is something we bring into it through our relationship with it. In itself, any experience is empty of problem. It's so important, that level of insight. So absolutely crucial. And you can – even as I say it, you get a sense of the immense kind of both potential and responsibility that gives to consciousness. Immense. That's one level, and we can go a bit deeper.

There's the emptiness of how things are; there's the emptiness of 'what is' (so-called). And so this is what we were talking about before. And people were saying, "There is no real object," etc. Earlier in the retreat, we were talking about moments, at times, that consciousness can open up into this sense of oneness or communion. Sometimes it opens up in a very vast way. Vast sense of oneness – beautiful. Beautiful for consciousness to open up to, at times. But even that is actually empty. It's still a perception that's come into being through the way we are looking, through our relationship *with*.

And if you remember that lovely note that I read out in one of the talks in the first week from the work retreatant, she was talking about this big black space filled with love and holding everything. Beautiful opening. And to have the sense of that and very sort of mystical, religious sense for some people. That, too, is coming out of conditions. It's born out of conditions, held together by conditions, held together by the way we're viewing and the relationship *with*.

So, interesting – there's a line in the *Mettā Sutta*. And it's funny. Sometimes I wonder – it's not a line that often seems to get extracted much. But if you read the *Mettā Sutta*, and if you just read it with an open mind, it basically describes *mettā* and the beauty of all that and what one should do, and then says, "This leads to awakening." And what it says here is, it goes through the *mettā* and says, "This is said to be the sublime abiding." Then it says, "By not holding to fixed views, the pure-hearted one," etc., "gets enlightened."⁴ By not holding to fixed views – of how things are, how I am, how an object is, how the world is. By not holding to fixed views – that's where this is going. That's the piece. That's the hinge pin.

So in a way, we talk about things and objects and experience. The truth of them, in a way, is not that they exist, really, or that they don't exist. They exist dependent on our relationship *with*. So in this teaching of emptiness, it's called 'the Middle Way': a middle between saying things exist and saying they don't exist. It's called 'the Middle Way,' neither existing – and it's not sort of, "Well, they exist kind of half of the time," or something like that. [laughs] It's something that's beyond those. To say things don't exist is clearly not true. But to see that they don't exist in any way independently from the way I am looking, independently from the relationship *with*. So when it says they don't exist, it means they don't exist independently, inherently. Or as the Tibetans say, they don't exist 'from their own side.'

How we're approaching this is we're beginning, through the loving-kindness and compassion practices, to begin to see into the relationship that we have with experience. And to begin to see into relationship that we have with experience is actually to begin to see into emptiness. It's to begin to see into emptiness. To begin to see into relationship is to begin to see into emptiness. And to begin to see into emptiness is to begin to see into freedom. That's where the deepest freedom is. It's right there.

So as I said, we can see this in formal meditation practice – sitting, walking, etc. You can also see it in one's life or in more complex situations. For example, take a situation like a meditation retreat. And one comes, and one comes on *this* retreat. Come to Gaia House, three weeks of retreat, and you think, "Great! I'm really going to work on my *samādhi* and get really quiet and calm," and then one comes into the hall, and it's pretty packed in here, and someone's shuffling next to you or coughing or whatever it is, and irritation arises. And the whole view of the situation, of that person, is seen through the lens of irritation. We've come into the situation with the agenda of 'what I want,' and that's colouring everything. And then the view, the perception, changes.

We can play with this. The beauty of practice is that you can play with all this and experiment with it. Could I change that view in a situation like this or some other retreat? And this person is restless, or whatever it is – could I view that situation, then, as an opportunity to learn patience? Then every time there's some disturbance, it's an opportunity to learn patience. And the whole view has changed. Or if you're super advanced, Vajrayāna ... [laughs] You sit there and forget the *samādhi*, forget everything: "My whole purpose of being here is to love you, just you." [laughs] Play with it. What happens? The view changes and the perception changes. The perception we have of things is dependent on the view, of how we're seeing.

So I was speaking about fear some talks ago, and can draw this into that area as well. And fear is a very interesting one because it can be quite clear with fear. We tend to think, we tend to feel, we tend to believe that there's some thing or event going on or about to go on or will go on in the future, and then I have fear about that. I'm afraid of that. And somehow in there is the assumption that the thing and the event and the situation and the fear are separate, they're separate, and that they're independent. There's, again, an object, any object, and there's how I might relate to it. And I could relate with fear or with equanimity or whatever it is, but the object is still the object no matter how I relate to it. And begin to get the sense that that's not really the case. Now, with fear, to a degree, at least intellectually, it's obvious. We can see how fear colours our perception. You know, you're afraid walking at night in the dark, and you see the shadows, and it looks like, you know, a big ... [laughter] And it's not. It's just the shadows coloured with the perception from the fear.

Yogi 9: How does that relate to doing? You know, because doing is not an object. So you're fearful of doing something, a performance, maybe, or exercising a skill, but there's a fear around your performance.

Rob: It's still a situation that you're viewing. You're viewing how it will be in that situation to do it or not do it well.

Yogi 9: It just doesn't come across as an object. It's kind of neutral, if you like, or it's only what you put on it.

Rob: Well, put it this way: your doing of something is – if there was nothing charged about your doing and how well you performed something, there wouldn't be any fear there, and you would see that doing in a different way. It would become different through the way you're seeing it.

Yogi 9: So you charge it yourself?

Rob: Absolutely. When I say 'object,' I mean in the broadest possible sense of the word 'object.' So that whole situation is a so-called object or thing or event, situation.

And when I talked about fear before, I mentioned that a lot of fear is caught up with future thinking. We're often afraid of something in the future, and the thinking around it is something in the future. Even if it's next few seconds or a long time in the future, whatever, it's future-thinking based. If I

believe in ‘the present,’ if I believe in a present moment, a present situation, as something that has real, independent existence – if I believe in the present, then fear of the future is inevitable. It’s just waiting to happen. And to use the Buddha’s analogy, “as sure as the wheels of the cart follow the ox that pulls it,” if I believe in the inherent existence of the present, fear of the future will come.⁵ There will be fear of the future. But we can see, through these practices and others, that the present lacks inherent existence. It’s not independent. The past, too, is not independent.

So I can think back on – you know, one thinks back on romances of one’s past life. [laughs] Depending on one’s mood, you know, it’s like, “Ah, she/he/they were lovely, and wasn’t that sweet?” [laughs] And in another mood, you think back, and you think, “Yikes! What was I thinking!” [laughter] Or you know, if I think back to my education, my school, my high school, and sometimes I think back, and it was a very pressured environment academically, and a lot of cruelty – I went to boys’ school – a lot of, yeah, cruelty. And sometimes I look back in another mood, and I think, “Yeah, we really had a laugh. That was really fun. That was really ...” You know. The present is not independent; the past is also not independent. They depend on the mind state in the present. The future is the same. The future is the same. The future is only going to become present and past. It’s dependent. It’s not independent. It’s empty. When I begin to see this, it’s like, I don’t really believe in the present; you can’t really believe in the future. And if you can’t really believe in the future, fear has no footing. It has no footing. I can’t really believe in fear.

If we go back to that *Akṣayamati Sūtra*, and talked about three sort of levels, and in the third level it said, “for those who have seen deeply into emptiness,” or seen the Unconditioned or whatever, “love is not based on anything at all.” And just to briefly explore this. It appears in other traditions as well, and other sources. The Sufi poet Rumi has a lovely poem which I read once and have since misplaced or cannot find again. But he talks about, or a couple of lines in it, love without an object – love without an object, not based on anything at all. It’s not even love towards all beings or all things; it’s actually without an object. And again, the mind can just be, like, baffled by that. He says, “Love without an object,” and I think the next line is, “That’s the best love of all.”

In some of the Tibetan traditions, in the Vajrayāna, they also talk about compassion without any object of reference – same thing – compassion without any object of reference. And it’s also said that that’s the best of all paths, without any potential pitfalls in it. So just to mention that as a possibility, as something ... oftentimes coming – when one goes deep into emptiness, or there’s that kind of opening, one can begin sometimes to get a glimpse of this.

In a way, actually, I want to just drop something in here which I may have said before, but I think it’s pertinent. I think it’s important, when one’s listening to teachings and such, to notice one’s reaction to what’s being said. So often I was talking about this love without an object and very sort of deep teachings or high teachings or whatever. And just interesting to notice what goes on for us when we hear that. There’s a whole range of reactions that are possible. Some people hear something like that – and I see this quite a lot – and just turn off, just turn off. Something just shuts down – can’t hear it, don’t want to hear it. Or you know, I see people picking at their nails and stuff. [laughter] Something goes on – don’t want to know, can’t handle it. Or we may get *really* excited. And there’s a beauty of that; there’s a beauty of Dharma excitement. But sometimes we get so excited that we think, “Where I am now is completely irrelevant and not worth anything. *That’s* where I want to go.” [57:28] Or a kind

of intense striving can come into practice. I think it's just important to see where this is landing in the moment, in oneself. And just to notice that. And of course, it can land in a very lovely place of just simple aspiration. But there's a range there, and it differs at different times, and just to see.

The Buddha talked about two movements of mind, two energies: *taṇhā*, which literally translates as 'thirst' – this never ... unfulfillable, endless wanting, wanting, wanting, craving. And another energy called *chanda*, which – they're both kind of 'desire.' You could translate them both as 'desire.' But *chanda* is more 'aspiration,' 'will to do.' It's actually the fuel for our practice. And where do teachings land? Does *taṇhā* grab hold of them and make a problem out of it? Or does *chanda*? Do they land in *chanda*? And so, there is really a place for healthy, noble, beautiful aspiration in our practice. And we can hear stuff, and it lands in a good place. I think it just needs some awareness, just to notice what goes on. And I don't know where it's from, but the image of walking, wanting to climb a mountain. And there's the mountain in the distance, and one wants to get to the mountain peak, and one has one's vision set on that, but also just the footstep in front of one. And one holds both. And there's a sensitive balance there that's important.

Okay. So this fading, this fading. I want to say more about that. So things can dissolve to some degree, or completely, or fade to some degree, or completely, when we do this, when we let go of – or when we hold them in love. Why? What's going on there? Why is that? Love – love or compassion, whatever word – love, like equanimity, it shares something with equanimity. We can talk about a kind of continuum of love or deepening of love, but in its depths, in the depths of love, it shares something with the quality of equanimity. And that is, in its depth, it's non-grasping. So it's very different then from the typical Hollywood scenario of love; we've moved quite a way since that. And in its depths, the nature of love is non-grasping. Like equanimity, it's non-grasping. And we see – again to reiterate, there are a couple of things here. We see that – John talked about dependent origination, so he probably talked about that link between clinging and craving and then the suffering that comes out of that. And that's one link. Did he talk about this? That's one link that's very available to our scrutiny and experimentation. We can actually learn to relax the grasping and see the suffering go out. It doesn't feed suffering. Equanimity and love, in their depths, are non-grasping – there isn't a pushing away or a pulling towards. Non-grasping.

But we can go a little bit deeper with the dependent origination. Grasping *makes* the way things appear; it is something that *makes* the way things appear. Also, grasping makes things appear. Grasping makes the world appear. So this is completely counterintuitive. Grasping makes the world appear. We tend to think, "The world is *there*. Objects are *there*." Grasping makes the world appear.

Yogi 10: Can you explain that?

Rob: [laughs] I think ... Well, first of all, to see it in one's experience, that with this kind of practice, when one's emphasizing this approach, the more welcoming there is, basically the less aversion, the less pushing away and pulling towards (we say "less pushing and pulling"; that's less grasping), and what we notice is that the world, the world of experience, appears less. And if there's really very little grasping, it can be that very little appears at all. It just kind of dissolves, dissolves, dissolves. So it's

really to see that. And to conclude from that, there's something about grasping that's actually building experience. I don't know that one can explain it any more than that.

Yogi 10: I realize that.

Rob: But the seeing of it is absolutely crucial. I mean, if we talk about – what does it mean? What does liberation mean? There's no liberation without seeing that. And then if you really want to turn your consciousness inside out, grasping builds experience. What builds grasping? Experience. I can't grasp without anything to grasp at. Dependent co-origination – the mind cannot get around this. It cannot put it into nice, neat little packets: "There's *this*, and then there's *this*, and then there's *this*, and this is different. First comes this, and ..."

So dependent origination is a map, a conceptual map that eats [itself], like a snake eating its own tail, a conceptual framework that leads to the dissolving of conceptual frameworks. It's pretty far out. [laughter] Not easy to understand, so I really know that I'm not talking about stuff that's easy to understand. But we *can* begin to see this. This is the amazing thing: we *can* begin to see this. And when one sees it, the more one sees it, the implications are totally radical. It turns our basic intuitions about life and experience inside out, upside down, on their head. That's how radical the Dharma is. And begin to see, there is no *thing*. There is no thing independent, independently existing, no separate thing. No thing, no problem! The problems that I make in life are dependent on me relating to things as separate things.

So we also see that as we let go of grasping, we notice that grasping is also a factor which clouds our seeing. When there's grasping, we're blurring our vision. We're covering up our vision. We're distorting our vision through that grasping. So, love and non-grasping also lead, bring with them, a seeing more deeply, more clearly. In Dharma terms, what does it mean to see more deeply and more clearly? It means to see things like impermanence and this very emptiness, to see that more clearly. That's what it means. And out of that seeing more clearly comes freedom and actually comes even more love. And the whole thing builds freedom, and builds – or rather, it opens freedom. It allows freedom and love.

[1:05:31] Now, it *can* be that hearing about emptiness, when we first hear about it, it sounds very nihilistic, very destructive teaching, very scary often, teaching. But if our practice of it and contemplation of emptiness is not leading to love and compassion, is not opening love and compassion to some degree, there's something askew in how we're seeing it, in how we're practising it, in how we're viewing emptiness. So by its nature, it should lead to more of a sense of love. If it's not, we need to look again. There's something we're not quite understanding. We're just a bit off balance with it. But it leads to more love, to less of a sense of separation, less of a sense of barriers, less of a sense of fault-finding with oneself, with others, with situations, even – less self-inflating, deflating, etc. And in a way, the path of practice as it deepens is to see that – we begin to see that all things are empty. All things. So selves are empty – my self, another self. Things are empty – so-called 'inner' things, so-called 'outer' things. *Minds* are empty – what we call 'consciousness' is actually empty, doesn't really exist as something separate, independent. Suffering, too, is empty. Suffering doesn't actually exist independently. And somehow, with all of that, in all of that, mysteriously, even though no selves, no

others, no suffering, even, somehow, more love and compassion is coming out of it, in the sort of mystery of the paradox of it.

And so I want to reiterate, I'm aware that sometimes we hear this, and it just, "I don't know what this is talking about." But this is actually possible for us. This really is possible. So if not through this avenue, through other Dharma avenues. We *can* open this up, in a very real way that begins to have a very real impact on our lives and the way we live.

Just finally, from the *Akṣayamati Sūtra* and from our practice, we can see that there's a *continuum* or a *spectrum* of love, we could say. That's not a very good word. Or *levels* of love – even worse word. But the human consciousness moves on that continuum. It has to move on that continuum. So sometimes we do not feel love, and we're just sitting here kind of really grinding away at the phrases, planting the seeds of intention. Sometimes we even feel angry, and yet we're trying. And that very trying, even though we're feeling nothing or feeling the opposite, *is* an expression of love – absolutely. And there's a whole spectrum right from there, all the way through love to self and other and humdrum, "I love my cat, I love whatever it is," all the through to this very exalted-sounding love without an object. And that's all there. And the human consciousness, amazingly, can move on that spectrum. It *does* move on that spectrum. And that whole spectrum is available for us. And in a way, our very humanity is *in* that movement. So we can't always be in the exalted realms – no way. Our very humanity is in the movement. And in a way, our very humility is in the movement. It *has* to move.

Why don't we sit together for a minute or two before we have some questions?

[silence]

[1:11:18] Okay, anything? Anyone?

Q1: the meaning of the word 'emptiness'; meditative states as stepping-stones; to fully understand the nature of perception is to be awakened

Yogi: The phrase that grows in my mind when you're talking about 'emptiness' – does seem a bit of a bleak word. 'Womb of potentiality' – does that work?

Rob: Umm. [pauses]

Yogi: No, obviously not. [laughter]

Rob: Careful. It may work at times for you. Play with it, play with it. But there's probably something in it that doesn't cover quite – emptiness has a lot of aspects to what it means. And in a way, it's also very thorough. So it's like, sometimes we can have a word like that, and we're leaving something unchallenged. And there needs to be a real thoroughness. So we've got rid of a lot of stuff, but there's left this sense of a womb or whatever, and that kind of thing. But it may be a really important stepping-stone, so don't necessarily just throw it out immediately. You want to experiment with it a little bit. But bear in mind, it's probably not going to be a final resting place.

Yogi 2: I think in the Mahāyāna, they use a phrase: the *dharmadhātu*. It's the womb of emptiness that everything emerges from.

Rob: Yeah, so ... Okay. [laughter]

Yogi 2: Sorry about that!

Rob: No, it's good. This is really important. Thank you very much for bringing it up. There are certain experiences that are deep experiences, quite common, and relatively speaking, quite accessible for a committed meditator. One of them will be a sense of consciousness opening out in very vast spaciousness, and one is just open and being. There's very little sense of self, and just a sense of things emerging from this space in quite an insubstantial way, emerging from the space and disappearing back into it. Beautiful state, very open, oftentimes brings a lot of love and a lot of sense of freedom with it. Not that far off for a committed meditator. If it sounds fantastic, it's actually not that far off. Very, very beautiful, a lot of freedom in it, a lot to learn from it, and yet what happens – and I see it so much. And it's gone on more than 2,000 years. It predates the Buddha – one then gives an inherent existence to that spaciousness, and that spaciousness as a womb, as a source. It reifies that, and then people substitute the word 'emptiness' for that empty space. It's a beautiful and, for a lot of people, a really necessary stepping-stone.

So the other extreme (and I should have said it when I was talking) is these states that can open – oneness, or this kind of big space out of which everything is emerging, or compassion that is woven into the fabric of the universe – beautiful states, you don't also want to rush through them. So again, there's a Middle Way here: you don't want to stop there, pitch your camp, build your house, say, "I've arrived. Now all I need to do is just get used to this," and say, "This is the ultimate truth. I've discovered it." [laughter] It happens! Believe me. It happens in texts you can find – it's gone on for thousands and thousands of years. I meet people all the time where this has gone on, people who have done a lot of practice. So it's very tempting to do that. So you don't want to do that on one extreme. But on the other extreme, you don't want to just say, "Oh, this is just another condition. Better get going!" [laughter] There's something in opening to a state like that – whatever it is, infinite consciousness pervading the universe – these are all quite related states, very, very, potentially incredibly transforming for the long term. People often fall into one of two extremes with them. One is to reify them and think they've arrived somewhere, and actually stop short their questioning in the path. It's just, "That's it. There's nothing more." Or dismiss them too quickly and not hang out and really let the being, let the heart be transformed by what's in that state and what one can learn in that state.

But when the Buddha talks about emptiness and talks about awakening, he's talking about understanding the very nature of all perception itself. So all perception – even the perception of a space out of which all things arise and pass. All perception, and somehow seeing beyond, seeing to the beyond of all perceptions, any perception whatsoever – of space, of consciousness, of time, of a present moment, of things, of self, of others. All of that is seen to be empty and gone beyond. So it's quite ...

Yogi 2: Is that because it's conditioned?

Rob: Well, to say – how do you mean?

Yogi 2: Well, the experience of that, if you're in meditative states – it *is* conditioned.

Rob: The experience that you were describing is still conditioned. Now, there's a sense – and as I said, it's a very beautiful sense – that a person in that state will feel, what's conditioned is the things arising and passing back into that state. But the space itself, what some people call *dharmadhātu*, or some people call it *rigpa*, or a lot of different charged words get used, or infinite consciousness, cosmic consciousness, etc. – [a person will feel] that that's *unconditioned*. It can seem, in the experience – very beautiful – that that's *so* steady. And everything else, all other experience – body sensations, thoughts, emotions – all that is arising out of the stillness, *imperturbable* stillness, and dying back into it. One *feels* like one is seeing the birth and death of experience, and what remains seems unconditioned, and it's *there*. And it's just a matter of, sometimes I lose contact with it; then I get back into contact. But still, one hasn't seen and understood at the deepest level the nature of perception. The Buddha said to understand fully the nature of perception is to be fully awakened. Put that way, it doesn't sound very sexy, does it? [laughter] But there's something in there – it's so *uncompromising*, and so, kind of, “I won't put the pole here; I'll keep going, keep the questioning alive,” until one has totally understood this dependent arising and how anything at all – no matter how beautiful, how subtle, how refined, how seemingly ultimate – comes to be. And that doesn't mean dismissing everything as just conditions, and it's just all irrelevant. It doesn't mean that at all, because one also opens to the Unconditioned and the beauty of what that means as well. So, thank you. It's a really, really important question.

Yogi 3: Are you going to give a talk on the Unconditioned?

Rob: Not on this retreat, no.

Q2: working with old anxiety

Rob: Are people clear with the practice side of this approach?

Yogi: No. [laughs] You spoke about fear, but what I've been working with today is anxiety. It's very much not future-based. In fact, it feels very old, you know, and it just gets [?]. And it's not dissolving. Maybe I can just apply a little bit more patience, or maybe I'm not applying the method in quite a right way. But it did hang around all day. I mean, in some way, it doesn't matter. So what? It's been thirty years ... [?] I mean, am I just not applying the method right? Because it's closely related to fear, but it's not fear. There isn't really any thinking, and certainly not any future thinking. It's just hanging around. Because I know where it comes from, I was trying to picture it wrapped up in a nice, cosy [?].

That was kind of how the, you know, sort of surrounding it with love when it was coming. But it didn't dissolve. In fact, it got worse – or should I say, stronger and even less pleasant than it was at the beginning this ...?

Rob: Okay. I'm not sure if you're doing it right or not. It's possible that there is a hidden agenda of trying to get rid of it through doing this.

Yogi: Not that I can see, but yeah, if it's hidden I wouldn't see it. [laughter]

Rob: Okay. It's possible. So you could try just really going to more of a sense of welcoming, rather than wrapping it in love. Really, really welcoming – that's one option. Remember, this is just one technique, one approach out of many. But if you want to explore it further, I would emphasize the total accepting and the welcoming. When anything comes up – whatever it is, anxiety or anything at all – there's conditioning from the past. As you say, this comes from the past. But that past conditioning is *not enough* for it to arise in the present. A thing cannot arise in the present without me doing something as well in the present. And you *can't* change the past, so to speak, but what we can do is understand, "What is it that I'm putting *in* in the present which is sustaining or even allowing this thing to arise?"

Yogi: Is it going to be one of the three root poisons?

Rob: You mean greed, aversion, or delusion? Yes, absolutely.

Yogi: I did start to see a little bit of self-identification there, just in the last sitting. But I hadn't seen that before.

Rob: Yeah, so that would be another approach very similar to what we're doing. Self-identification, like grasping, is a builder of experience. It turns out that when we identify with what's going on, that also builds things. So you could go – if you got a foot in the door that way, great. And you can find, "What happens when I ...?" It's just something going on, and one is identified less and less. It's also, one's building experience less.

Yogi: So how would I do that?

Rob: Well, how did you – you noticed there was identification?

Yogi: Yeah, I just noticed it.

Rob: Okay. Is it possible to see an experience as 'just happening – it doesn't really belong to *me*'?

Yogi: Again, I thought I was, thought I did. But you know, there's so much ... [?] I can't ... [?]

Rob: These are practices that take time. If it's not working today and one needs relief today, then introduce some other aspect – compassion to oneself or whatever. So again, it's just some people this will be significant for, others less so. Most people, anyway, it's something to develop over time, and it's one of many practices. You want to have a range of options that you can draw from.

Q3: giving compassion and kindness to wholesome states

Yogi: I was wondering, it seems like the unwholesome states definitely need compassion or kindness, but what about the wholesome states? I just say, “Oh, this doesn't *need* ...”

Rob: What happens anyway if one gives compassion and kindness to wholesome states? What happens? Does anyone ...?

Yogi 2: More love comes.

Rob: What did you find, Toni? Did you try it, or you just thought it was perplexing, and you didn't try?

Yogi: It was perplexing, because I felt, though I had a feeling of gratitude that arose, I said, “Well, this really doesn't *need* compassion!”

Rob: Yeah, lovely. Okay. I mean, you could *not* worry about whether it needs it or not, or whether it seems to need it, and just go ahead and give it some and see what happens. [laughter]

Yogi: It just felt – I mean, why give compassion? It didn't make any sense.

Rob: Absolutely, yeah, sure, understandable. So one thing is to just bypass that thinking and just go ahead and do it. Another thing is what I said about experiences and phenomena are fleeting. So gratitude is something – metaphorically speaking, all experience is impoverished because of its fleeting nature. And it's almost like it's just part of the stream of experience, and so give it compassion, you know, using metaphorical, almost poetic kind of images. Don't think about it; just do it. It's more, we're interested in the ability to do that. As someone said, “If I do that, then maybe something opens up *more*.” So again, skilful abiding in ease, and deepening ease, and also the insight – “What happens when I do it?” So I would just kind of set it aside and just go ahead, full steam ahead.

Q4: welcoming wholesome experiences as well as difficult experiences

Yogi: I sort of related to that. I mean, you were saying about this is complete welcoming, like when the first sun comes out in the spring, and you completely open to it. That – wholesome things arising – it seems to me it's fairly easy to do that. But you know, pain, something like that – I mean, this is going to take time, isn't it, to kind of find a way?

Rob: It may take time, absolutely. So I mean, people are very different. Some people immediately pick up on something, that it's actually easing this – like I said, when there's grasping there, when there's pushing away and pulling, there's more suffering in the experience. So even though there's pain, it pays to relax the grasping. Some people see that immediately, and it's just very clear: "Well, okay. Let's just do that." Others, it takes longer, and it's fine. And so, it may take time, but it also may not take time. Is it harder with more difficult experiences? Yeah, maybe, but also maybe not. Just play with it. Play with it and see.

Q5: hidden agendas to get rid of stuff with *mettā*

Yogi: Could you tell again more about these hidden agendas to get rid of stuff with *mettā*?

Rob: Yeah. Well, if one directs love towards something or bathes it in love, and then one notices, "Oh, this problematic thing goes away a little bit," and then a little time goes by, and something else problematic comes up, and the immediate thought is, "Ah, I'll knock it on the head with some *mettā*!" [laughter] "And hopefully that'll get rid of it." One just has to watch that that's the intention, or if that's there. And it *will* creep in. It will creep in, but can one either be coming from, as much as possible, a place of curiosity? I'm just curious what it does when I do that, just curious. So it's a different thing. I'm not looking for it to go away. I'm just curious about how things arise and what the nature of experience is. So either curiosity or one can just kind of intend for the welcoming to be completely genuine, just really, really genuine. So it's something you have to feel when it's there, and just try and soften it or open it more inside.

Q6: experiencing the Unconditioned; the difference between the Unconditioned and other levels of meditation

Yogi: Is it possible for something that's conditioned to experience the Unconditioned? Are we trying to do that? Why not pitching a tent ... [?]

Rob: I don't know how to answer that question, but I know that it's possible to open to something which is unconditioned in a way that brings freedom, and in a way, that's all we need to know – that that's possible, and that the conditions, we can take care of the conditions that move us towards that. That's possible. Whether it's something conditioned experiencing something unconditioned, or – I don't know about that. I don't think that's quite the right question. It's more like, "Is it possible to experience something unfabricated, unborn, unconditioned, deathless?" Yes. Yes, it's possible, you could say, for consciousness to open out into that. But even that's not quite the right language.

Yogi: How does one know that that's what it is, and it's not the other levels that you explained? What's the difference?

Rob: The difference is that in other levels there's still a sense of things like space and time and a present moment and consciousness knowing something or knowing itself, or something. In an experience of the Unconditioned, all that is just gone. It's something totally beyond what words can describe, what concepts can describe – beyond an experience of time, beyond an experience of space, etc.

Yogi: *Gate gate pāragate ...*

Rob: [laughs] Okay, that's probably enough talking for tonight. It's just after nine. Time for some walking meditation, and the last – well, you don't have last sittings any more, do you? Okay.

¹ Dhp 122.

² This quotation does not appear in the *Lotus Sūtra*, though the text does include a description of Avalokiteśvara as *sarvasattva-kṛpamaitralocono*: “having eyes of loving-kindness for all wretched beings.” Also see the translation from Chinese at Tsugunari Kubo and Akira Yuyama, tr., *The Lotus Sutra* (Berkeley: Numata Center for Buddhist Translation and Research, rev. 2nd edn 2007), 302, https://www.bdk.or.jp/document/dgtl-dl/dBET_T0262_LotusSutra_2007.pdf, accessed 26 June 2021 “The pure seer Avalokiteśvara ... Sees the sentient beings with his benevolent eyes.”

³ 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 bodhisattvas who have developed the mind of awakening for the first time. Friendliness with phenomena as its object pertains to the bodhisattvas whose practice is in progress. Friendliness with no object pertains to the bodhisattvas who have attained the patient acceptance of the fact that all phenomena are unborn.”

⁴ Sn 1:8.

⁵ Dhp 1.