

Love and Emptiness
Lovingkindness and Compassion as a Path to Awakening
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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 'skillful 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 *dharma*s. 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 *dharma*s. *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," you 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 *dharma*s." 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 problema! [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 *dharma*s

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 Āṇissaro, 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 *dharma*s 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 *dharma*s 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.

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.