Using Insight To Deepen Love and Compassion
Lovingkindness and Compassion as a Path to Awakening
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So we can cultivate, develop, expand the heart's capacity for loving-kindness. That is possible for us, and in the process of doing that we need to be asking, well, what helps that process? What feeds that process? How does that expansion come about? How does the heart grow in loving-kindness? We need to be asking those questions and also asking, what blocks it? What starves it? What gets in the way?

And so very broadly speaking, just the repetition of the phrases, on the cushion, in the walking meditation, just having faith in that level of reconditioning the mind, reconditioning the heart – hugely significant. And just over and over again, we are retraining the intentionality in the mind and the heart. And sometimes, when the *samādhi* itself is there, that, too, is a way in which the heart's capacity increases.

There are many ways this happens. Some are on the cushion in full meditation and some informal. So how we act, how we speak, what we choose, how we are in our interactions – that's feeding the *mettā* as well. And we need to inquire into that – as important what happens outside of formal meditation as it is inside. And then, within formal meditation, sometimes it feels like it's going well, okay? It feels good. There's the *samādhi* there – great, lovely, and put a lot of emphasis on this, inclining towards that. So this is why we keep saying about the body, the body sensitivity. And you drop a word in or a phrase, and it has some resonance in the body sensitivity, or the body feels peaceful, there's a feeling of peace around, there's a feeling of warmth, of happiness – actually connecting with that in the body, feeling it, feeling just a sense of comfort in the body, just a vague, unremarkable sense of well-being. That connection with those kinds of feelings in the body helps the *samādhi*. It allows the *samādhi*, the unification to go deeper. And in so doing, the *mettā* kind of gets into the cells, becomes, in a very deep way, part of the habit, a habit for the being, a habit for the consciousness via the body and via the *samādhi*.

And sometimes, it doesn't feel to be going well. It feels like there's no feeling, I'm even irritated or whatever, aversive, there's fear around, whatever it is – doesn't feel like it's going well. That's fine too. And what we said right at the beginning: just keep having faith in this planting of the seeds with the phrases, just planting the seeds of intention. Not to jump too much into judging one's practice, by whether it feels like it's going well or whether it feels like it's going badly. There's too much going on, so to speak, underneath the radar, in the darkness of what is not conscious, and we have to kind of respect that and have some faith in the process.

[4:08] I can't remember if I said this already in here, but when a farmer or a gardener plants a seed, the germination of that seed, the nourishment of that seed goes on underneath the ground, in the darkness, invisible. And it's very similar with the *mettā* practice. There's a lot going on at levels we don't actually have access to. To trust that. So there is certainly the fact of the *mettā* deepening and expanding through the *samādhi*, but also deepening and expanding through just this patient faith in the planting of the seeds.

What I want to go into today is the relationship of insight and the deepening of love and the deepening of compassion. So on this retreat, what we talk about – and we've already started, and it kind of gets more and more as it goes on – is the way that the practices of love and compassion actually bring insight, as part of what they bring. They bring a liberating insight. They bring insight that frees. This is not the usually understood way of understanding love and compassion, but it's there. And as we practise loving-kindness and compassion, insight comes with that – *can* come with that. It's a possibility.

What I want to talk about today is the other way round: how it might be that insight feeds loving-kindness and compassion. So I'm talking about the ways loving-kindness and compassion can be fed: in our lives, in our interactions, in the *samādhi*, through the patient planting of the seeds, and now just this piece about insight leading to love and compassion.

Sometimes we can be doing this practice, and we feel as if we are creating the *mettā*. You're sort of sitting and huffing and puffing and squeezing and … [laughs] And if you're lucky, you know, a drop of *mettā*. It feels like it's something fabricated, created, which it *is*, on one level. But sometimes we might ask ourselves a question: is love something created? Now, actually it *is*, but are *we* creating it? What's actually going on there? Or is it maybe the case that love and compassion may be the natural state and a natural expression when the heart, when the consciousness is not entangled or obscured or clouded by clinging and by delusion? It's much more as if one is *uncovering* love and *uncovering* compassion. So that's an interesting question: what's actually going on here? Are we creating it? Or are we *uncovering* it? Are we *allowing* it?

When we talk about insight and insight meditation, it's a very good question to ask: what does that mean? What is insight? What is insight meditation? Insight is an understanding – so either intellectual or intuitive, any kind of understanding – that releases clinging, and in so doing, releases suffering. So that the mark of insight is this release of suffering. That's how you know that what's going on is an insight. Suffering either goes completely or just lessens to some degree because of some way of seeing or some way of understanding. Insight releases clinging, and in releasing the clinging, the struggling, the pushing away, the pulling, the holding on, the identifying – any form of clinging – insight releases the clinging. And because it releases the clinging, suffering is released.

When the Buddha talked about insight meditation, there's a number of ways of interpreting it. One way would be that it's just kind of sitting around, or watching what's going on, and trying not to *do* much. [laughs] And hopefully out of that, *budoom*, up comes an insight, which is perfectly valid, to an extent. [laughter] But sometimes we might find, you're watching your breath, or just, you know … [huffing and puffing] "In, out, in, out, arising, falling, arising, falling," and *hoping* that out of that, insight cracks into the being. Or just trying to sit there doing nothing, and again the hope, the assumption is that in that 'doing nothing,' an insight will be born. There is definitely something to that, and in a way – I'm not putting it in very attractive terms, but it's actually a very beautiful approach to practice.

Oftentimes, though, the Buddha talks about another approach, which is more, "Can we practise ways of seeing and ways of relating?" So what he means when he talks about insight meditation or insight is *practising* certain ways of looking at experience in the moment, *practising* ways of looking that bring release, that let go of the clinging. So we typically look in ways that actually lead to clinging,

lead to suffering. That's what we do all the time. The Buddha said, "Can you learn to look in different ways that bring release?" Release of the clinging brings release from suffering, and that brings love. That brings love.

So insight, practising ways of [seeing] – I'll go into what I mean. I'm talking a little bit abstractly. I realize that it might sound a little abstract right now. I'll explain what I mean as I go through today. Practising ways of seeing and relating that bring freedom, release, and love. And what I want to go into today is, is it possible (and these are just possibilities) that we can incorporate some of those ways of looking, some of those practices, into the *mettā* practice itself, so that we've kind of got a refining of the *mettā* practice that's possible, and the compassion practice that's possible? I'll explain what I mean.

[11:13] In a way, I sort of want to start by going off on a bit of a tangent. But it always seems relevant on this retreat, so I'm going to do it again. And that has to do with – to speak a little bit about fear. So fear actually is an example of a kind of clinging or a kind of aversion. Fear is actually a species of aversion that blocks love. Fear blocks love. And to investigate this in our lives. Is that the case, that when we're afraid there's a kind of closing of the love? And we might notice – if you pay attention, you might notice that love and fear have this kind of inverse relationship. Originally, the Buddha offered the *mettā* practice to a group of monks who were really, really afraid in the forest. That was his initial offering as an antidote and as a response to fear.[1] But we might notice in our lives that when fear is strong, love is weak. And when love is strong, fear is weak. They have this inverse relationship. And conversely, we might also notice, in ourselves and in the world, when fear is strong, violence – either a psychological or a physical violence – is strong. It goes with fear. You can see this very easily in animals, in beings, in ourselves, in political groups, in ideological groups.

So I want to say a little bit about working with fear, because often it *does* come up in the context of a retreat like this anyway for people. And working with fear would usually come under the umbrella of insight meditation, learning to work with that. I mentioned in one of the talks (I think it was the talk on *samādhi*): sometimes in a practice like this – we're sitting, walking – *something* feels like it's deepening and opening. And maybe just isolated moments, or little stretches of time or whatever, the being, the consciousness, finds itself in territory that's unfamiliar: much more open, perceptions have changed a little bit, the body feels different, the sense of separation feels different, the sense of self feels different, maybe dramatically so, maybe just a little bit. And this can bring up fear.

And very, very skilful to learn, if the fear is not too strong, then actually one has a choice in that moment. With that opening, the opening of the being, the opening of consciousness, there will be some pleasantness with that, alongside the fear. And this fear and the pleasantness coexist. What usually happens is we get sucked into the fear, and like a magnet, we go into the fear. We get pulled into it and spun around by it, with it. Sometimes it's possible just to sit back a little bit and have a look: I've got this pleasant enjoyment in the body, there's openness, there's warmth, etc. There's a letting go, and there's fear. And learn – and this is a skill, it's a practice – learn to incline the awareness towards what's enjoyable in there. So in that openness, there *will* be something that's enjoyable. It's an acquired taste to learn how to dip in a little bit, dip in. You can be in control of this. You can dip into what's enjoyable and not give so much attention to the fear. You don't have to ignore it, but you also don't have to feed it by getting obsessed with it and worried about it and drawn into it. So this is a practice, but it's actually very important, when the fear is not that strong.

But sometimes, of course, fear does feel stronger. Or it feels like we're unable to do that. And sometimes we get very strong fear, maybe in the context of a retreat and, of course, outside a retreat. When we look at fear, we have to ask, what actually is fear? What is the experience of fear? It's an interesting one – or anxiety. And when we look, what do we see in the experience? So oftentimes we don't hang out with it long enough to actually unpack it and see what's there. What we notice with fear is usually unpleasant body sensations – in the extreme, the heart is pounding, the tummy is in knots or butterflies. Unpleasant body sensation, and aversion to the physical sensations. We don't like them. We want to get rid of them. That's there alongside the unpleasant sensations. So body sensations and aversion.

[16:25] Thoughts. Often thoughts, and often future thoughts, associated with fear, and unpleasant thoughts about what's going to happen or what might happen. Thoughts associated with fear, as part of the constellation of fear, and again, their unpleasantness, the aversion to them, aversion to that. So there are the body sensations and the thoughts, and in each case there's aversion.

Third factor, a little more subtle, with fear is the kind of climate of the mind, the inner texture of the way the mind feels. And when there's fear around, it shrinks. The mind shrinks. It gets small. You notice this with fear? The actual consciousness feels like it's constricting. That, generally speaking, is unpleasant. Human beings don't like a constricted consciousness. And so, again, it being unpleasant, there's going to be aversion to it: I want to get rid of it. I want it to go away. So there's the body, the thoughts, and the texture, the climate of the mind, and correspondingly, the aversion to that.

These aversions are very important to investigate, because when we ask, "What's my relationship with fear?" – and this is a fundamental Dharma question, "What's my relationship with *anything*?" – usually the relationship with fear is, we're afraid of it. We're actually afraid of fear. We have fear of fear. This is part of what makes fear *fear*. It's that we're actually afraid of the fear itself. As our meditation practice, in general, develops over time, we learn to – we *can* learn to accommodate that experience of fear: the body experience, the thinking experience, and the texture of the mind experience. We learn to just bring mindfulness to it and just to be with it. And what we get, slowly, over time, is a sense of confidence that it's just some unpleasant sensations, just some unpleasant thoughts: "I can be with this. Awareness can hold it." What's almost always lacking with fear is confidence. We don't feel confident that we can actually be with the fear and accommodate it, and be okay with it. With practice, bringing mindfulness to all of it, we just see: it's just that, and it's accommodatable. Confidence comes. It's hugely significant.

So usually our relationship with fear is one of aversion or fleeing. We want to get away from, run away from the unpleasantness of it. But that very aversion and fleeing makes the experience of the fear increase. This fear of the fear, this aversion to the fear, is part of the whole constellation. It's part of the whole mechanism and wheel of fear. It makes it more difficult. When there are unpleasant fear sensations in the body and we flee them out of aversion, out of fear of them, where do we go? Where do we flee to? Straight up into the head! The energy goes away from the groundedness in the body and straight up into the head. There's more energy in the thinking. There are already unhelpful, unskilful, unpleasant thoughts in the thinking, looping around. You've just injected a whole lot of extra energy in there because one is fleeing. And it increases, actually feeding the whole fire of the fear.

[20:20] So the reaction that we have to fear is not something separate from the fear itself. They're not two separate things. The reaction is part of the anxiety itself. So you can check this out. They're not two separate things. If we can soften that reaction or take away that reaction somewhat, what we'll notice is that fear cannot support itself. It cannot support itself. So not to take this on authority just because I say it or someone else says it. See if one can experiment with this when fear is around. Fear needs me to be aversive and reactive to it. The reaction is part of the mechanism. What happens when I soften that reaction? Fear cannot support itself without me fearing it, without me reacting to it.

Sometimes our relationship with fear is putting pressure – part of the aversion – pressure on it to be different. It's all the same: it's fuel for the fire of fear. So to be aware of these mechanisms, to see, "Can they be relaxed? Can I soften them?" Or judging myself – if I judge myself that fear is around, again, it's fuel for the fire. What am I assuming about myself because there's fear around? What am I assuming about my practice? That I'm a failure, that it's rubbish, that I'm not getting anywhere – just because fear is around? That's also something that we're injecting into the moment that's building the fear.

So fear is human. Can we see the humanity of it? Can we bring kindness, again, to meet that humanity, to meet the fear? So when we say, "May *I* be safe and protected. May *I* be …" whatever the other phrases are … [laughter] When we say that, who is the 'I' in that moment? There's fear around. Who is the 'I'? The 'I' is me with fear. It's not me without the fear, me when the fear goes away, me and idealized fear. You could say, in that moment, you are you with fear, I am I with fear. It's included. We have a tendency – it's all part of the aversion and the almost normal reaction to fear, to want to get it away, and to even exclude that part from the *mettā*.

A lot of fear in our lives, in a very general sense, has to do with the future – "What will happen to me? Will I be okay? Will it be all right? Will it turn out okay? What might go wrong?" – on all kinds of levels. You know, basic body level, survival level, but all kinds of other levels, emotionally, in terms of security, in terms of relationships, in terms of possessions, anything, future thoughts: "Will it be okay for me?"

One really, really fundamental Dharma question comes up then. Fear about the future and "Will I be okay? How will the future be *for me*?" Fundamental Dharma question: do I really know how to really, really, *really* take care of the future? What does it mean to *really* take care of the future? And so, Dharmically, what is it that leads to a sense of security, happiness, well-being, peace in our life? What is it?

The Buddha, over and over again, points to cultivating qualities of heart, qualities of mind, qualities of being – like *mettā*, like compassion, etc., generosity, equanimity, mindfulness, a whole host of inner qualities that become our kind of (what's that word?) 'investment portfolio.' [laughter] If you know that term from whatever, stocks and all that stuff. Very actually rare maturity in practice, very rare maturity. Often we can just say, "Yeah, yeah, I know, that's what I need to be happy. I know that I really need to build these qualities. I know that's where happiness comes from." Very rare level of maturity in practice to come across someone who's actually living that out, and putting the investment in that, and not worrying *so* much about the other stuff. And of *course*, we need to take care of material things, etc. But it's actually quite a mature practice that has come to the point when it's just convinced in the heart, in the being: "I know where to put my eggs. I know what it is that leads to happiness and peace. I know

how to take care of the future." And you think how much fear, as well, in this respect has to do with, "What will they think of me? What will people I'm meeting – what are they going to think? Are they going to think I'm stupid, or ugly, or boring, or whatever it is?" How much of our fear is social fear, is around that?

When we cultivate beautiful qualities of the heart, beautiful qualities of the mind, they bring with them happiness. And there is enough happiness, and then what people think of me becomes *almost* insignificant. This is very real, and as I said, it's quite a rare maturity that actually lives that out in one's life, through one's practice. We take care of the future. Fear is fear of the future. How do we take care of the future? Through cultivation. Through the kind of cultivation that we're doing here, and a whole host of other qualities.

And also in the relationship to the present. Is the relationship to the present one of openness, of kindness, of curiosity, of interest, of mindfulness? When the relationship to the present has those qualities in it, the future takes care of itself, just moment by moment. Those two pieces – cultivating what's beautiful, and taking care of the relationship with the present – the future is taken care of in the deepest way. And in a very real way, we come to worry less about, "Will there be enough money later on? Will there be security? Will I be okay in terms of a house? What will happen in terms of, will I find a partner? Will my partner die? Will they stay with me? Will I be alone?" All that stuff, not that it's not important stuff in our lives, but its hold on us, and the fear that oftentimes is around – we don't even realize it's around, running our lives, running our choices. How much of that stuff is actually dictating our choices in our life? And we don't even register it as a kind of fear. And that stuff just begins to get less because of the power of cultivating what's beautiful, over time. And this is something very real. It's not theoretical, and it's not unrealistic. It's something very, very real that can come into the being, into one's life in a very real, very practical way.

Right, that was my tangent. [laughter] But I do feel it's important, and it's actually an aspect of clinging, and what we're talking about – releasing clinging. Fear is a kind of clinging/aversion that you can release through practice.

What I want to explore in the remaining part of the talk is this way that insight practices can potentially be used as a kind of background within the *mettā* practice. I want to offer some possibilities. Really just hear them as that: *optional* possibilities. So for some people, this will be very interesting, very applicable, and fascinating. For other people, it will just be, "Okay, doesn't really attract me. It doesn't seem to have much to do with me." It's fine, but I want to put them out there.

So these are just some of the possibilities, and I think I want to go through – I think there are seven here [**(*i*)–(*vii*)** below]. I mentioned the other day, in the talk the other night, as we do the *mettā* practice, in a very non-linear way, there can be a deepening. And there can be a sense, at times, of merging, and the heart merging with the heart of another, or a sense of oneness opening up – *can* be, at times, for some people. When we talk about *anattā* – and John talked the other day about *anattā*, and I touched on it – when we talk about that, it's actually not the same as oneness. It's something a little bit different. But that oneness is still really important when it comes.

So what I want to put this in the framework of is what's called the three characteristics. Some of you may be familiar with this and some less so. The three characteristics of experience, the three characteristics of phenomena, which the Buddha talked about, and they are:

(1) ***Anicca***, which means 'impermanence,' changing nature of everything that arises, disappears. All things are changing, impermanent, *anicca* – impermanence.

(2) ***Dukkha***, which means 'unsatisfactory.' So all things, again, are not capable of bringing lasting satisfaction. They're not ultimately satisfying. They're unsatisfactory.

(3) And the last one is ***anattā***, which means they're 'not-self.' They don't belong to me. They're not mine. They are not me.

Now, when we first hear those, we can think, "Well, that sounds pretty bleak. Things are impermanent, unsatisfactory, and there's no me or whatever," and it's just like, "Oh, these Buddhists!" [laughter] They're not supposed to be bleak. Unfortunately, there's a whole current in the teaching that's gone on for about 2,000 years [laughter] and it's still very alive and healthy today, that actually says: "This *is* bleak, and the more bleak and miserable you get from reflecting on it, the better." [laughter] "If you think about impermanence, and unsatisfactoriness, and this 'not-self' business, and you really feel, 'This is terrible. This is really bad news,' then you're really on the right track in your practice!"

I pretty much completely disagree, and I don't think that's the way the Buddha intended it or meant it. They are ways of looking, skills in looking, that in looking bring – *should* bring, if one's going about it the right way, *should* bring a sense of freedom and love. They're practices, ways of looking, lenses for looking at experience in the moment that *should* bring with them freedom and love. And if they're not, if they don't, it means one needs to play with it, tinker with it, until one learns to contemplate that way, contemplate one of the three characteristics, or all of them, in ways that actually bring freedom and love. So it is unfortunate there is this – well, quite a number of strands in the traditions that really feel that one should have a kind of existential angst, or trembling, or fear, or misery, or depression, or kind of *blah*, or whatever. [laughter]

Yogi: Who are these people so we can avoid them? [laughter]

Rob: Not going to mention any names while the tape recorder is running. [laughter]

Yogi 2: I could turn it off.

Yogi 3: Is it a cultural thing?

Rob: Is it a cultural thing? No, it's not. Thank you for saying that. It's not just a cultural thing. It goes back to early commentaries, in fact, early commentaries from about five hundred years after the time of the Buddha's death, and probably they were around even quite soon after the Buddha died, and it took root there. It may be exacerbated by cultural aspects, yeah, certainly, but it's not just cultural.

[34:14] Anyway, so these three characteristics, what I want to go into, this is just a framework for what I'm talking about, these possibilities which may or may not be interesting to you. And if they're not, that's really fine. And one can keep doing the basic practices – absolutely fine. But also want to put out there a sense of how deep these practices of love and compassion can actually go. They're almost – not infinite, but an incredible depth of refinement and subtlety that can come into this practice. And one

can just deepen them and bring insight and understanding into that in ways that are very beautiful. It will be attractive to some people. It will seem to fit in with one's previous practice for some people, and less so for others. But I just want to lay it out as a sense of possibility for people.

(1) So the first one is this ***anicca*, impermanence**.

(*i*) At one level, what the Buddha meant, what he talked about, is **remembering death – remembering death and the unpredictability of life**. So we can be doing the *mettā* practice, and one's directing, attempting to direct the *mettā* towards another being and just holding, in the background of awareness, just a light reflection on the fact of their mortality: "They will die. Like all of us, they will die." Now, remember, as I just said, it shouldn't be bleak. It shouldn't be depressing, so only to use this if it feels like it's actually unlocking some love and compassion in the heart. If one introduces it and it just feels like, "Ugh, gosh," a terrible fear, or morbidity or a paralysis comes in, leave it. But you may find that just giving the *mettā* to the benefactor, giving the *mettā* to the neutral person, whoever it is, difficult person, and one just reflects, "They are subject to death. They are subject to death." Very likely, they don't know *when* they're going to die. Not just death, but they're also subject to the whole range of what this word *anicca* means: uncertainty, change. And our life involves an incredible amount of uncertainty and change. That's the nature, that's the fabric of our existence. And they, like us, are subject to that. So just holding this lightly, this sense of *anicca* that they are vulnerable to, holding that in the awareness very lightly, as one's doing the *mettā*, can either kick-start the *mettā* when it feels like it's a little bit blocked or it can't really get off the ground, or deepen it at times when it already feels like it's going.

(*ii*) There are a few more with this, just within this realm of impermanence. Another one in relation to death, and it's actually more subtle and perhaps more difficult for people. I'm not sure. Practising – again, all this is practice – **practising learning to see *this moment* in the context of our death**. So I'll explain what I mean. Science, cosmology, tells us that the universe is 13.7 billion years old – pretty old – and that it will last as least as long. Actually, its future is a little bit uncertain, but … [laughter] It's either going to collapse back again after about the same amount of time, or keep going, don't know – long, long stretches of time. Our life within that is what? Fifty, seventy, ninety, a hundred years, if one's lucky. And there's a sense – you can practise with, you can play with this sometimes – having a sense of one's life and the lives of others being a very small, a *tiny* span in the vastness of time, and a vastness of space. And if possible, you can even bring that into the moment.

So right now, right now, in this moment, there is a moment of experience going on. [snaps fingers] What's happening? There's visual form, there's colour, there's sound, there's sight, there's a moment of perception – and it's almost like putting that in the context of this incredible vastness of time. We don't know what came before our life. We don't know what comes after, no matter what all the theories, including the Buddhist theories, say. There's *this moment* in the context of a massive, almost unfathomably unthinkable unknown. And you can toy with this playing of perception. Something comes: this moment, death, and vastness. And again, instead of unlocking fear, sometimes it can unlock more love. So, things you can play with.

(*iii*) What's most common when we talk about – or in the tradition, when people talk about impermanence and the contemplation of impermanence, is **trying to look, in the moment, at quite a rapid, moment-to-moment impermanence of phenomena**. So every moment, there's something new.

Every moment, a thought arises, a moment, a sound, a this, a that. And then when we pay attention to our experience, we see phenomena arising, passing quite rapidly. Now, one approach within that – and remember, we're putting these insight ways of looking in the context of our *mettā* practice – sometimes you're doing the *mettā*, and you can just open the awareness up a little bit more to this impermanence. These are just possibilities.

And one notices, all I see in the moment is change. There's just a moment of this [snaps fingers], a moment of that [snaps fingers], a moment – I can't find anything in there that's 'me.' So this is the way impermanence feeds into an understanding of *anattā* and not-self. The sense of self that one has, almost normally, the natural sense of self is that it's lasting and solid and fixed: "I am the same self I was twenty years ago, and thirty years ago, and I will be, if I'm still alive, in ten, twenty years." We have a sense of a fixed, independent, solid, lasting self. But when I look closely at my experience, what I notice is change, change, change. There's nothing I can find that I can point to and say, "Well, *that's* what my lasting, fixed self is." All I see is change, and the question is, "*Where* am I? Who am I?" And when I look at the impermanence of the present moment, there's a way that the sense of self can become much more permeable, less solid. All I'm noticing is just moments of change. I can't find this solid self. And there's the possibility, in the context of *mettā* practice, to open up that way.

And what *can* happen, again, instead of fear and anxiety and all that, is it deepens the love. It can deepen or kick-start the love – this sense of, "Actually, I can't find anything here that's permanent." Now, you could also contemplate another person, and contemplate, "There's nothing to find *there* that's permanent." And this is where it starts to get a little strange, because we tend to think of love being between self and other. And as we go into the nature of the self, we find less and less of one. We find less and less solidity. And in that very moment of finding less solidity, instead of the whole love crumbling because we feel, "Well, who's giving love to whom?" [laughter] If I don't find anything here – I don't find any object to give it to – the opposite can happen. And almost paradoxically, there's a deepening of the love. Less self, less *other* self to give the love to, and somehow, there's a deepening of the quality of the love – *can* be. Remember, all this is just actually very rapidly painting a whole range of possibilities. That was three, with the impermanence.

(*iv*) There's another one, and this is really quite subtle, this one. So I'm not going in any particular order of difficult or subtle or whatever, but … point to it. It kind of follows on from the one I just said. If I look at my experience in insight meditation, or even broadening my awareness in the *mettā* practice – I'm doing the *mettā* practice, but I just open it up a little bit – and again, what do I see? Change, change, change, change, change. Can't find anything that's not changing. What do I find, though, when I look, and I look for myself? All I see, all I can find, are perceptions.

That's all I can find: perception of carpet, perception of microphone, perception of Julie, perception of person, perception of sound, perception of body, perception of emotion – all I find in my experience is a series of perceptions. When I look inside, that's all I can find. Can't find anything that's not a perception. It's not possible. Can't find anything that's not a perception. A perception needs the world. So, to perceive the carpet, I need for that to be there. **All I find when I look for myself are perceptions, and those perceptions are not separate from the universe, from the world**. We tend to think of the self as something separate and independent. When I look for it, all I find are perceptions, which are actually inseparable from the rest of the universe. They are inseparable. This is quite a subtle

point. It's not an easy point either to understand or to work with in meditation, but I want to mention it. I find nothing but perceptions, and they are inseparable, and in a way, it's seeing – it's a way that this impermanence can lead to an understanding of emptiness. Can't find a separate self. And again, can't find a giver of the love or a receiver of the love and yet, in that, it deepens the love.

So that was, I think, four possibilities in the realm of impermanence. I'm just putting like a buffet out there that you can choose from if you want. [laughter] And I'm very aware, some of this will attract your attention; it *may* not be right on this retreat to explore it. But some of you will be attracted and say, "Some other time, I'd like to explore some of this." And just to know what's available, what is a possibility. So there's impermanence.

(2) Second characteristic: ***dukkha*, this unsatisfactoriness, or 'suffering'** is another way.

(*v*) So now this one is back to a relatively simple way of going about things. Just to realize: suffering is part of life. Okay? Suffering comes into everyone's life, in all kinds of ways and all kinds of levels. This is just a fact of our existence. First Noble Truth, Buddha said: "There is suffering, *dukkha*." There is suffering, and a whole range of it and a whole breadth of it. And sometimes we're doing the *mettā* – and later on, all this applies to compassion practice as well, and we'll move on to compassion next week – **one is doing the *mettā* practice, and just to drop in, directing it to someone else, just to drop in, "We are all in the same boat. We are all in the same boat with suffering."** So, this body experiences suffering. That body, this body, experiences suffering, experiences pain, experiences discomfort, experiences illness at times, will experience death. Some of these blend into each other. But just to reflect – you can just drop this in or have it as a light background to help the *mettā*, or kick-start the *mettā*: "We're all in the same boat. We all share these encounters with suffering in our life. We all meet suffering in all kinds of ways – through the difficulties we have in relationship, and circumstance, and life, and experience, internally in the body and the mind." To bring that in as ways of feeding, deepening, injecting some life sometimes into the *mettā* practice. So we're all in the same boat. (It's not a great phrase, but you know what I mean.)

(*vi*) Second one, still in the realm of this characteristic of *dukkha*: If, at some point, either on this retreat or another retreat, if you **just lightly put your attention in the chest area – in the heart centre, the heart chakra, whatever you want to call it – you just lightly keep the attention there, and you notice how it opens and closes.** The actual sense, energetically, or even subtly physically, of the heart, heart centre, opens and closes. And it *will* open and close many times in a day, countless times in our life. Opens and closes. **If you just have a light attention and interest there to when it's open and when it's closed, the heart centre, what you notice is: when there's clinging, guess what? [laughs] Closed, no entry! When we release clinging, the heart centre opens.** Now, you can actually feel this. This is, again, why I keep going on about the sensitivity to the body. You can actually feel this: the heart centre opening and closing. It may not be that dramatic, so we may not be talking about colossal differences of opening and closing, but just little movements, and notice the relationship with clinging. Why did the Buddha go on and on and on and on about clinging? Clinging brings suffering. Clinging closes the heart. Releasing clinging brings freedom; it also brings love. And we can notice this so we're crystal clear about it, and there's just no arguing about it. It's very, very clear to us. We feel it in the heart and in the body.

Now, the good news is, part of the good news is that we can learn to become sensitive to this movement, to notice when there's clinging. By 'clinging,' I mean pushing away what we don't like, over-identifying with things, trying to hold on to things, to grasp at things – all that is clinging. And we can begin to feel that and see this relationship, as I said, with the heart. And that when we release the clinging, the heart opens and love comes. And we can develop over time – it's a gradual process – but we can develop our capacity to become sensitive to when there's clinging around.

So sometimes clinging is extremely obvious. You know, we're literally hanging on to someone's leg: "Don't go! Don't leave me! Don't *leave* me!" [laughter] This is very obvious. Or, you know, "If you go, I'm going to jump out of the window" or whatever. [laughter] It's obvious that clinging is there. But clinging has an enormous range to it. Again, like all these Dharma questions, it gets extremely subtle, extremely subtle. Part of the good news is that we can develop the subtlety of our sensitivity and be more and more aware of when clinging is there.

Again, why do we keep going on about the sensitivity to the body? Because in this sensitivity to this region of energy, this energy field, this feeling field, as I develop the sensitivity to that, as I keep the sensitivity and the awareness there, that body sense will reflect to me, will indicate to me when there's clinging around – holding, pushing, struggling, identifying – because some kind of contraction and tension comes into the bodily experience, even if it's very subtle. Even if it's very subtle – in the belly, in the shoulders, in the back, just very, very, subtly in the whole body experience – and that can be our indicator of when there's clinging. And sometimes – even better news – we don't even know what we're clinging to, but just the releasing of the body, the relaxing of the body sense, can release the clinging and open the heart.

So one way of practising, another of these possibilities in our buffet is – again, you're doing the *mettā* practice, you're doing the compassion practice, and again, you open up a bit more. And just to be aware, **use the body sense to be aware: "Is there clinging right now? Am I pushing, pulling, struggling with things, experience, in the moment? If there is, can I relax that clinging, let go of it, relax the body, relax the clinging?" See what happens to the love.** Again, it can kick-start the *mettā* when it feels blocked, or like it's not really getting anywhere off the ground in any moment. Or it can deepen it. And one can actually – all of these, one can stay with them and let the *mettā* deepen with them and through them.

Clinging – pushing away what we don't like, pulling towards us and grasping on what we do like – as I said the other day, that builds the self-sense. So the self-sense is dependent on clinging, and clinging is actually dependent on the self-sense. They're mutually dependent. The more self-sense, the more other-sense. Self and other go together – the more separation, the less love. See how this all fits together, and why the Buddha just kept going on and on about this stuff?

(3) So there's *anicca*, 'impermanence,' *dukkha*, 'unsatisfactoriness' or 'suffering,' or how suffering arises through clinging, and the last one is ***anattā***. So to say a bit about this, this **'not-self'** teaching – it's really, really important to realize that, in Dharma practice, we're not setting out to destroy the self, to explode the self, to erase the self, even to dissolve the self or to merge the sense of self with some cosmic being or cosmic sense of something. The other day I mentioned oneness in the talk, and the possibility of this sense of oneness. And sometimes there *can* be a sense of the being opening and merging with something and a real sense of oneness. That's really beautiful, really precious, and really,

really helpful. But it's still – it's a little bit different from this *anattā* business. It's extremely valuable, if and when it happens, to open to that, and have that change of perception, and feel the beauty of that, and feel touched by that. But *anattā* is something different, and it's *not* that that is what we're going for in understanding *anattā*.

Anattā is, really, we want to understand something about the nature of the self, understand it in a way that brings freedom. We want to understand something about what the self is, and how it is, in a way that brings freedom into our life. So going back to fear for a second, fear is based on this self-notion. Without belief in the self, there can't really be fear. Where is the fear going to take root? It's around self. When we begin to understand, deeply and in the heart, this emptiness of self, we realize there's actually nothing real here to protect, to defend, to worry about, and fear gets released at a very deep level in our lives.

So we want to understand something about self, and it's actually not easy to understand, this teaching of *anattā*. It's really not easy. I've never encountered anyone who gets it right away. And even if one can get it intellectually very quickly, it takes a long time for the heart and the being to absorb that understanding in a way that's bringing freedom. So it's tantalizing as a teaching. We hear it, and we sort of get it, and we want to understand it, and we get frustrated sometimes. Sometimes we grab hold of the understanding in a bit of the wrong way.

There's a story from the Jewish tradition, and it's Yom Kippur, which in the Jewish tradition is the holiest day of the year. It's the day of atonement, when you bare yourself to God, and you reflect on the year that's passed, and all the ways that you haven't lived up to your aspirations, and the goodness of being that God is asking of you, etc. And it's Yom Kippur, and a very serious, holy atmosphere in the synagogue. And the rabbi is there, and suddenly the rabbi sinks to his knees and starts beating his chest: "I am nothing, I am nothing, I am nothing." And a little while later, the cantor, the guy who leads the singing, sinks to his knees: "I am nothing, I am nothing, I am nothing." And then a little while after that, the janitor, the person who cleans the toilets, sinks to his knees: "I am nothing, I am nothing, I am nothing." And the cantor turns to the rabbi and says, "Look who thinks he's nothing!" [laughter] There's a way we can actually make more self out of this question of not-self. It's like we grab hold of it, and we're going about it in the wrong way.

Again, the Buddha, usually – he does want us to understand this, understand something about the self that frees, but the most common way he goes about it is: is it possible to, again, practise a way of looking, a way of looking that we're not familiar with? And in that way of looking comes freedom and comes love. And it's really a practice. Again, in this buffet, some of you will be familiar with some of these ways already from particular ways you've approached insight meditation. For others it might be quite new to hear this.

(vii) What's the way in relation to *anattā*? He wants you to practise a way of looking. We *can* **practise a way of looking – regarding our experience as 'not me' and 'not mine,' 'not-self.'** So typically, typical human consciousness, something comes up, something comes into our experience – a thought, an emotion, a body sensation – and we regard it, without even thinking about it, oftentimes, without even realizing that we're doing it, sometimes, we regard it as 'me': "I *am* that emotion. That's *how I am*. That's *who* I am." Or 'mine': "That thought belongs to me. This body sensation belongs to me. This body belongs to me." The whole range of it, we identify, either identify or take ownership of.

This is going on 99.9 per cent of the time of our waking and dreaming life. An incredible current of habitually identifying with, taking as 'me' or 'mine' our experience, and particularly the five aggregates which John talked about: **(*a*)** the **body**, **(*b*)** the **feeling-tone** of experience, pleasant, unpleasant, neutral, **(*c*)** our **perceptions**, **(*d*)** the whole range of our **mental thoughts and formations**, and moods and mind states and emotions, and **(*e*)** the **consciousness** itself, the awareness itself.

And – sometimes deliberately, sometimes we realize we're doing it; most of the time we don't – we're saying, "Me. Mine. This is me. This is mine." And the Buddha is saying, can you practise – it's a gradual thing to develop this practice – can you practise seeing it in the moment, as 'not me, not mine'? So a body sensation comes up, and it's 'just happening.' A thought comes up and it's 'just happening.' It's 'not me, not mine.' And one learns to actually look at the experience through a lens – instead of the lens of 'me, mine, me, mine, me, mine' – **look at the experience through a lens of 'it's just happening, it's not me, it's not mine.'** It's a practice. And again, what happens? It may seem paradoxical. What happens? Freedom and love are liberated in that way of relating. I'm talking about very real possibilities for practice. And again, for those with that experience or have got that way of practising already, you can drop that in as a backdrop for the *mettā* practice. So you open the awareness up and just regard things as 'just happening,' as 'not me, not mine,' and into the experience comes more love.

[1:01:46] One of the particular areas where we get entangled, and certainly on a meditation retreat, is self-judgment. So something comes up for us, or our practice feels difficult, or we're sitting here doing *mettā*, and then we get irritation, or aversion, or some negative thoughts, and we judge that. We judge ourselves, and we measure ourselves: "How am I doing? How is my practice going?" Very normal. That measuring and judging and comparing is actually part of the nature of what self does. The way self builds itself is through judging, measuring, comparing, and evaluating.

So to recognize that it's going to be part of the experience. It's going to be part of the experience. The question is, how can I relate to it in a way that's most helpful? That's a whole other subject, but first of all, one of the ways is just to keep doing the *mettā*. And realize that we have a habit of judging, of measuring ourselves, of comparing, of evaluating, and just to keep doing the *mettā* is taking away the energy from that habit pattern and feeding what's more helpful: the *mettā*, *mettā* to our self. But also, sometimes, to just see that these thoughts that we're judging, or this state of mind, it's like they arise out of nowhere. They're 'just happening.' They're 'not me, not mine.' We take them to be 'me' or 'mine.' They're like a shooting star in the sky, in the night sky: it just appears out of nowhere and then disappears. The more we can begin to see things that way, the less identification, and the less dragged down we are in self-judgment, self-criticism, comparing, measuring, evaluating ourselves. So this is really a practice that we can develop.

And one can do this business with the non-ownership of the aggregates, you can do it with another being. So again, you're directing the *mettā* to another being, and just say, "*Their* body doesn't belong to them. Their feelings, their emotions, their thoughts, their consciousness – it's all ownerless. It's just stuff happening, stuff arising." And again, you get this sense of not much of a giver of love, not much of a receiver of love, and yet it deepens it, can deepen it.

Okay, so that's all I want to put out there today. Please take what feels helpful in all this. I've put a lot of information out there, and generally, in this retreat, there's an awful lot of possibilities and

information. It's important that you take what feels helpful, and the rest – to let it go, really let it go. I put a lot out there because people are very different. They have different histories and different backgrounds and different likes and dislikes and inclinations. Take what's helpful, one or two pieces, and let the rest go. It's important that you find ways of working that feel juicy and alive to you. And the rest, just leave it. You can come back to it another time, or you can just leave it. It's totally fine. Take what's helpful, and let the rest go.

[1:05:17] Okay, so, we have some time if there are any questions about what I've said today or in the instructions, or what's been said by any of us over the days. Anything you want to ask about or comment on.

Q1: taking or leaving the seven possibilities

Yogi: Rob, would it be possible – those seven, just to briefly refer to them on the board, so that … [?]

Rob: I'll try and write something, yeah. I'll try and come up with something. Yes, definitely. And remember, no one's going to do all seven [possibilities for working with the three characteristics]. If you leave all of it, if you don't go anywhere near it, and you just have what we've talked about so far, that's absolutely fantastic. I'm just talking about possibilities. You might take one, and at times use it – great. You might take two, and at times dip in with them – great. But I'll try and put something on the board, yeah.

Q2: self and *anattā* in *mettā* practice; *mettā* without object; forming the self to different degrees on the sliding scale of emptiness

Yogi: Can I ask about different ways of seeing? I was practising with my neutral person, and I think I was trying to find ways of making him more interesting. [laughter] And to start off with, it's kind of taking the way of, "Okay, what's it like to breathe with this person?"

Rob: Mm, lovely, yeah. Beautiful, beautiful.

Yogi: And I started finding that it was almost like – I felt like I might be *stalking*, more so … [laughter] And it also got too fixed. It felt like I was fixing them too much – how they were doing, how they do life, or who they were. And so I had a go at practising this *anattā* thing. And I found that I couldn't hold both. It felt too – it feels like *both* are true, and so, I found I couldn't hold both. I couldn't actually hold the *anattā* for very long. So I went back; I tried to find a sort of slightly less *fixed* way. But I'm just interested in, okay, there are different ways of viewing self, so how …? You said something about things coexisting, and for me they didn't. The two of those didn't kind of exist that way. So how do you work with …?

Rob: Good. So in other words, the two – you couldn't do both, meaning you couldn't keep the sense of their self and also the sense of their not-self? Yeah, okay, thank you. Very important. So, anything is

good. Anything is game in this retreat – well, within certain parameters, but … [laughter] In other words, whatever feels helpful at a certain time. So your initial thing was, "Let's make them a bit more real, a bit more …" And in a way, we make things real by fixing them in certain ways. What you could do, just on that level, is – I remember years ago, in a class, someone was playing with dressing their – I can't remember if it was their neutral person – dressing them up in different outfits. [laughter] And so, if you've got a visual imagination, you actually picture them in different outfits. And if you want, there can be quite a range of those outfits that gives them a range of – it doesn't fix them. So anything from army fatigues to sort of what one would wear – an ascot or something, and sort of hats with … you know. I'm being silly, but you can play with how you see them just on a very mundane level. In other words, you said, "Oh, I'm fixing them in this kind of character, or this is how they do things." Maybe just broaden that. You *don't* know, and just imagine them some other way. You understand?

This other part – you're quite right. What you find, if you do this enough, if you work with the *anattā* of someone, is that as you contemplate someone's non-fixedness of self, their emptiness of self, they actually begin, in your consciousness, they begin to blur. And you can't fix them and hold them. So that's actually really good. It's great. Now, two things can happen. One is, with that, there can still be a sense of love. It doesn't seem so fixed and so directed, but you just follow that sense of love, and you stay with the sense of love, and don't worry so much about exactly where you're directing it, okay? Does that make sense?

Yogi: I just lost them. They became completely blurred, and I just lost them.

Rob: Yeah. So I'm saying one option is – I'm going to give you two options. One option is to let them become lost and blurred. And either, like I was saying in the talk the other day, *they* become blurred, but a sense of heart or consciousness or *being* is still there … No? Okay, not even that. Was there a sense of *mettā* there at all?

Yogi: At that point, no. I just kind of went back to … [?]

Rob: Okay. What you may find, sometimes, is that the person becomes blurred, the sense of them becomes blurred, but there's still a sense of *mettā*, and you can just feel into that and keep with that. And it's fine; you just have a vague sense of their beingness, or maybe *very*, very vague, *very*, very blurred. But there's just a sense of *mettā* that doesn't seem to have so much of an object. That's fine. That's actually good, and just to be in that *mettā* that doesn't seem to have so much a sense of an object. Okay, that's one option.

The other option, and this takes probably some practice, is that you can kind of *play* – you will eventually find that you can play with how *formed* you make someone. So you can play with kind of going into that emptiness, but not too much, so you still keep them around a bit. You kind of see that they're empty, but you also don't go too far into that – you can kind of pull them back and forth on this sliding scale of emptiness. It might sound completely unreal, but it's actually a very real possibility. You can develop the control of that. So you kind of make them somewhat empty, but not completely empty, so you've still got a sense of somewhere you can direct the *mettā* towards. If you've got that far

in the playing, you'll probably find that it's just a matter of time before you can play with that. Does that make sense?

Yogi 2: Is that imagination?

Rob: Is that imagination? In what sense?

Yogi 2: I'm just wondering if that's not just visual imagination.

Rob: Oh. No, because it's coming out of a contemplation of their emptiness. You're *seeing* – rather than just sort of imaginally scrubbing someone out like that, you're actually reflecting on the nature of their being, reflecting on the nature of their aggregates, etc. And it's that reflection, without trying to manipulate any images in any way – that itself. They begin to get much less defined. So it's something that's coming from a way of seeing and a way of relating.

Q3: *mettā* leads to fearlessness

Yogi: Thank you for your tangent on fear. That was very good and appropriate for me. And I realized the Buddha, I think, is in the *mudrā* of teaching fearlessness.

Rob: Aha. I didn't know that. Thank you. Great. Good.

Yogi: I spoke to John about this; I asked whether this practice that we're doing can lead to fearlessness, or some elements of fearlessness, because – I mean, I personally find it very inhibitory, and also because of that, there are great losses attached to it. So thank you.

Rob: Good, you're welcome. As I said originally, the Buddha introduced this whole practice to a group of monks who were living in the forest and very, very afraid, living in the sort of wilderness in the forest. It was originally an antidote to fear. So can it lead to fearlessness? Absolutely, absolutely.

Q4: availability of recordings

Yogi: I just wanted to ask, the talks, are we able to get hold of them?

Rob: Yeah. That's this … Just checking the microphone's on! [laughter] We haven't got a very good track record in this retreat of recording, but yes, they will be available.

Yogi: Are they only available, like, to download? Or can we actually …

Rob: No, I don't think they're actually available to download. There will be discs, and I think CD or MP3 is how they'll be available at the end of the retreat, and you can order.

Yeah. And that's actually a good point. In a talk like I gave today, partly – I don't know if it's sensible or not, but sometimes I feel like I'm almost … There's so much information, and partly, in a way, one is giving it to the tape recorder, because I know it's too much to take in in one go. And one's bombarding – you've had instructions this morning already. And so it's almost like, "Yeah, take the tape, and just take a few pieces out." In a way, that's just going to give a lot of stuff that you can – you can go with this for years, years. You get to see, three weeks is a pretty short amount of time to investigate this stuff. You *could* come for three months or three years, and you'd still be busy with the depth of all this and the range of all this. So it's really important that the tape is there, if you feel interested, and you begin to, "What was that thing he was going on about …?" Or you're doing your best to pay attention, but it's just too much, just kind of going over the head right now. And that's one of the occupational hazards of this stuff. But I prefer to put a lot out, and hopefully people pick different pieces. But great that we have the tapes so that you *can* refer back to them. Don't worry, as I said, if you feel like, "Oh gosh, I only got about 3 per cent of what you just said." It's totally fine.

Q5: writing notes during talks

Yogi: And it's okay to write notes?

Rob: Totally okay to write notes as well. And actually, I like it when people write notes. Not that you have to, but it shows me that people are actually still awake. [laughter] Unless you're writing a shopping list or something. [laughter] It's very good. And it's an interesting thing, with a page of something, if we transcribe the talk, you can always just flip to that page, whereas with a talk you actually have to go through it in time, and it's hard to pull out the pieces – especially in a talk like today, which is basically a long, fat instruction talk, in a lot of respects. It's hard to pull out pieces when you have to go through a whole – whatever it was – an hour I talked for. Sometimes seeing it in a written page, you can just find that place, "Ah, that's exactly what I want." It's actually more helpful.

Q6: when to use insight practices; responsiveness

Yogi: The mind can only do one thing at the same time, right?

Rob: Uhh … [laughs] Well, say a bit more.

Yogi: Another teacher suggested this, so on the *vipassanā* retreat in India. So whatever you do, you move between one thing and another, somehow, like what you just asked about. Is it so or not? So that you can play around, and it doesn't actually fragment the mind, as long as you play around with things that, together, those ingredients will support *samādhi* somehow?

Rob: Can you be a bit more specific?

Yogi: No, I can't. I'm just wondering about, how can it work in such a way that when you offer all these elaborations – can they help you to come to a greater sense of wholeness more quickly somehow, because the understanding deepens and the heart opens, right? And brings it together if the ingredients are right. Or is it so that the mind can only do one thing at the same time? I think the question is, can the mind do more than one thing at the same time, if you're in *samādhi*? Because somehow, when I am in a sense of wholeness, it seems like the mind can do anything; the thoughts can come in, and it doesn't bother me. Right? But if I'm not, and I'm already really scattered, or [?]. But to myself – or I was lost. You know, and it's all very fragmented. Is it then better not to invite all those elaborations?

Rob: Okay. I think I understand. It's interesting. Some people may hear some of what I've talked about today and say, "Well, my mind is too scattered; I need to get the basics down." And there's something to say about that. When the mind, as you say, has some degree of *samādhi*, some degree of collectedness, it's much more malleable. We find, "Oh, I can play with this. I can pull this piece in. I can do more than one thing at once," because there's openness, there's presence, there's malleability in the mind. We can shape what's going on. But it may also be that we feel a bit unconnected, and the *mettā* is not going very well, the *samādhi* is not going very well, and you pick up one of these pieces, and you just try doing that, and it actually helps to kick-start. So generally speaking, it's probably better to wait until there's some degree of *samādhi* and some degree of collectedness, and you feel like, "It's going okay. Let me drop some of this in." But it may equally work that it just helps to kick-start when it feels a bit blocked. Can the mind do more than one thing at once? In *samādhi*, you could say it could, yeah, when that's around. Yeah. So it's not going to this and then to this; it's more like, in the expanse of things, holding things together, and learning to do that.

Yogi: Because it could lead to more fragmentation, or it could have the other effect.

Rob: It could. Yeah. And if it leads to more fragmentation, leave it, and come back to what's much simpler. So all of this, again, is in the context of responsiveness. You do something, and if it works, great. Do it more. Go for it. Do it deeper. Experiment. If you try something and it feels like, "Well, that took a nosedive," you know, go back to what's simpler, what's easier, what helps. Is that answering?

Yogi: Yeah. Thanks.

Rob: Good. You're welcome.

Q7: incorporating *anattā* into *mettā* practice

Yogi: Rob, I've done, as you know, a little bit of using the phrase "not me, not mine" to look directly at experience. I was wondering, when you're doing the *anattā* sort of slant on *mettā*, do you incorporate the phrase into the phrases of *mettā*? "May – not me! – be happy …" [laughter]

Rob: Careful you don't get it wrong – "May I *not* be happy!" [laughter] It's a tricky one. You'll have to find what works. What I find is if you stay with just the "not me, not mine" as a very light thing, but let the *mettā* phrases go, but keep the intention of the *mettā* around. So it's like you're holding both things at once. It can seem very complicated, but it doesn't need to be. So you just drop the "not me, not mine" in, as a very, very [light] whisper of a phrase, in the context of the intention for love and wanting to feel when that love is there, and then *feel* the love. So you're interested in feeling the love that comes out of it, but you can let the *mettā* phrases go at that point, yeah. But experiment. I wouldn't put them in in the way of, "May – not me!" No, it's more – you might be down to just a word at that point, so "happy" or "peaceful," you know, and that's going on at the same time. But experiment and see. You may be doing the whole thing without any words at all, not even the "not me, not mine" or the *mettā* phrases. A lot of this is playing, playing with it and finding out what happens. Is that enough? Yeah? Good, okay.

Okay, is there anything else?

Q8: letting go of words; trusting in one's own practice; body sensitivity

Yogi: I think I find that the more words, the further away I am. And so, the faster I can let go of the words, the better.

Rob: Yeah, yeah. To work in the way that feels the most helpful, absolutely, and not to assume that you have to keep trundling the phrases out and that that's what *mettā* practice is. It's not. As I said right at the beginning, *mettā* is not a technique. We're interested in technique, but what we're interested in is finding the technique and the approach that works for you. If, for the most part, that means no words, you're not alone in that. You're absolutely not alone in that. Just to recognize, "That's how it is for me right now." Totally fine. It's more that the intention and the opening and the inclination towards *mettā* is being nourished. That's all.

Yogi: Some of what you've been talking about, tweaking, and the different ways of looking at it, are easier then …

Rob: Without the words?

Yogi: It's just, there are no words.

Rob: Yeah, sure. There can be more space, and more space in the mind, and that's easier.

Yogi: I just trip over my tongue, so to speak.

Rob: You may well, yeah. So you know what's good for you, and that's good, and you just go with that. Yeah. Just to trust yourself with that – yeah, I think that's important. To be enough in contact with one's experience that one trusts, "This is working for me, and I know it is, and it's okay. And I trust that."

That's really important, to trust one's own practice, what one sees and feels for oneself in one's own practice.

Yogi: But you've said before that *mettā* can kind of come from anywhere, like the head, the big toe, whatever. But again, I think, for me, it's getting out of the head that's the big one.

Rob: So this body sensitivity that I've been talking about – it's very important. And putting the awareness, just gently keep putting it other places – belly, heart centre, etc. And the more you do that with that sensitivity, the more the energy, the more the awareness kind of rests there, takes its centre there. And then it can radiate from there. That's great. Good.

Q9: interpreting and working with bodily experience in different ways

Yogi: I feel like my body is lying to me. I had this lump in my throat, and now it has been there for three days. But now I'm thinking that I have only a sore throat! [laughter] But it's so much to believe that I'm doing really bad now. So do you have any suggestions for how to practise with it in meditation?

Rob: I think so. What you're describing is actually really common. Something comes up in our experience, particularly our experience of the body, and we tend to interpret it in a certain way, in the way we're looking at it. And in so doing, we perceive it a certain way, and that actually can become self-fulfilling. So sore throat – "Oh, feels like a lump in the throat." And then actually we *begin* to feel miserable. I remember having a very irritated eye once, and tearing, and feeling sad. This was years ago. And there was nothing going on emotionally, but it was just, somehow the association of that physical sensation and the way I was looking at it and interpreting it. So, again, a couple of options.

One option is, actually, wipe the slate clean a little bit and say, "I don't *know* what this thing is." And so it's possible sometimes to leave the *mettā* and just approach the throat, just openly, and just be with those sensations. This is more insight practice territory, but just be with those sensations in a very light, very delicate way, so you're just holding them. And in a way, in the context of this retreat, you're just holding them in kindness, and just letting them be there, but feeling into them, and seeing if it begins to tell you about an emotion or not. That's one option.

The other option in the context of this retreat is, "Okay, something going on in the throat – I'll put my attention elsewhere." And so, another area of the body, maybe the heart area or the belly, may actually feel really okay, or comfortable, or even warm and open. And we keep getting dragged into what's a little bit problematic. Like a magnet, we go there. And if possible, just keeping it where it's okay. So they're kind of opposite suggestions, and you can play with them both. In the second one, it may be that you can find a place where it's okay, and actually just radiate the *mettā* from there, or feel the *mettā* from there. And eventually, it washes over everything.

[1:28:54] So it's important, I think, to keep open to them both, because sometimes there *is* something going on emotionally, and we need to connect with it and hold it and explore it. Other times,

it's just the way that we've gotten into perceiving and interpreting things, and we need to kind of go away from that. Does that answer? Yeah?

Yogi: Yeah, that makes sense. If my arm feels good, I just have to make my arms stronger?

Rob: That's one option. Rather than making them stronger, it's more like just letting the attention rest there, and enjoy that they feel good, rather than getting pulled into what feels difficult all the time. It's the attention and the enjoyment which allows the awareness to kind of rest there and get into that more.

Q10: concerns that insight might negate *mettā*; connecting with emotions and seeing emptiness as two wings of practice

Yogi: I was just thinking that part of my *mettā* practice is to introduce or open up just more to my feelings. I was just a bit concerned that if I introduce, along with that, the recognition that this is not-self or this is impermanent, that might negate that process somehow. Maybe the *mettā* itself could be negated.

Rob: Right. Yeah. Very important question. Again, kind of stepping back and taking a big view. If we think, "What's involved in this life of practice? What's involved in the long run in terms of practice?" One wing of it is learning how to open to ourselves, learning how to open to our emotions – how to be with them, how to acknowledge them, how to feel them, how to respect them, how to connect with them. That's very much a part of what can develop, or what we can rediscover in our practice: really reconnecting with the emotional life and honouring that. That's what I hear you saying.

And a whole other wing is this business about emptiness. Sometimes, you're quite right that bringing in a reflection of "not me, not mine, not-self," etc., does tend to kind of dissolve whatever emotion is there. Now, it's almost like holding both these wings at once. If all one ever did, or all one ever could do in one's practice is just dissolve emotions, and one didn't really have the skill and the capacity, or the willingness, or the fearlessness to be with emotions and feel them, and be able to hold oneself in the emotions, and connect with one's emotions – if all one had was emptiness, it would be like a bird with one wing trying to fly. It's not going to get anywhere. It's not going to get off the ground, or it will just go round in circles.

If all one had was a very beautiful ability to be open with one's emotional life, to connect with it, to respect it, to express it, to hold it, to love one's emotional life, to be clear about what's going on in one's emotional life – if all one had was *that*, again, like a bird with just one wing. One is missing the whole other half of practice. I think you're talking about a long term of practice, to really learn to hold these two together and kind of, "Do I understand both? Have I got skill in both? Am I really open to my emotions, but can I also kind of let go of that whole arena of emotions and see beyond it in that way?" To have both – again, we're talking about quite a mature practice – is it possible? Absolutely. Some people feel, "Well, I have to do one before I do another." I'm not sure if that's possible. You may have periods in your life where you're encouraging one more than another, and that's fine, and right now

might be a period where you're actually wanting to respect the emotions more and be with the emotions more, and that's totally fine – in which case, maybe shelve the other stuff for another time.

Yogi: Is it about appropriateness, then?

Rob: It's about, again, what's appropriate and helpful right now for you. In a way, sometimes we need to have an overview and quite a large view of our whole life and practice, which can be difficult, you know. "Where has my life been? Have I been an avoider of emotions? Have I been too wrapped up and entangled in emotions?" And then seeing, "What do I know how to do? What do I need to develop?" So you're asking a very big question. Do you see that?

Yogi: Yeah. What I'm trying to find out is, where is this Middle Way?

Rob: You have, again, a couple of options. One is to just know what you're doing at any time, and sometimes say, "I'm just going to really respect the emotion and go into it and feel it, not do anything with it, to accept, feel it, and open to it, and hold myself in that, connect with it." Sometimes you do that. At other times you can explore some of these ways I've talked about letting go. Sometimes you'll find that beautiful emotions deepen with that. But more difficult emotions tend to dissolve. Sometimes you'll find that. But you can have a choice, even on this retreat, just as long as you know what you're doing when.

Or the second option – this is totally valid – is you can just shelve one of them for a while and just say, "I know I need to get to the other one, and I'll get to it sometime, but not on this retreat." So both of those would be the Middle Way – the Middle Way meaning aware that they're both important in one's life, and one needs to learn how to do both. Without both, the practice hasn't really opened into its maturity. Exactly how you go about that, you have two options there. Does that make sense? Yeah? Good, okay.

Q11: ability to move between different ways of seeing as the mark of mature practice

Yogi: It sort of feels like there's been quite a lot about whether things can coexist or whether they kind of happen one after the other. Are you saying that the kind of mark of a really mature practice would be that things *do* coexist, and we can hold them both, like whatever truth they are, and before then it's kind of like sometimes you have to shelve one thing … or what?

Rob: We're going to get onto this in the third week, but if we just talk about emptiness, I'll just say something now. I hope it doesn't confuse. But when you contemplate emptiness in certain ways, things disappear. So problematic emotions disappear; objects disappear from consciousness. It's said that only a Buddha, only a fully enlightened Buddha – not even an arahant – just a Buddha is able to contemplate emptiness and actually keep the object around at the same time. What I meant by "mature practice" was more that we're able to move between different ways of seeing things. And a way of seeing is just that – it's not ultimately true. It's just a way of seeing. In some instances or some interactions or some inner

environments or situations, it's most helpful to see in one way. Here we've had an argument, and you and I have had an argument about something, and there's a difficulty, and I come to you, and I say, "Hey, Elizabeth, it's all empty." You're probably going to punch me. [laughter] What certain situations need is very relative, conventional language. We need to talk about our emotions; we need to express what we feel to each other; we need to respect that. I need to respect my emotions and your emotions at that level. So in that moment, that's what's helpful, that way of looking. But I'm saying a mature practice is able to move between picking that up, putting it down, picking up other ways of seeing – emptiness, *anattā*, etc. – and putting them down, not getting stuck in one or the other. Does that make sense?

Yogi: That answered my question, Rob.

Rob: Okay, good, good. It's a tall order. Not to underestimate – I'm talking about quite a large span of time that one would develop this in. But it's definitely possible, it's absolutely possible, and it's there, again, as a potential and as a possibility for us as human beings and as practitioners.

Q12: seeing emptiness brings about letting go of grasping, fading of difficulty, and deepening of happiness

Yogi: Rob, when you said that the bad things, when we really look closely at them, tend to disappear, and the good ones tend to increase, why is that?

Rob: Okay. [laughter] We're going to get into this in the third week. So we do a week on loving-kindness, a week on compassion, and a week on what all this has to do with emptiness and all that. So usually, when there's something difficult around, an emotion that's difficult, or even a body sensation that's difficult, or anything that's difficult, we tend to think, "Well, that thing exists, and then I can relate to it in any way that I choose to." Or maybe I can't choose, but I relate to it. So there's a thing, and then the relationship we have with it.

As we go deeper into understanding, Dharmic understanding, one realizes that the thing – it's a bit like what I was saying with fear – the thing and our relationship to it are actually not separate. So the way that I'm looking, and my relationship, is something that *feeds*, is part of what creates and feeds and shapes and colours any object in the present moment. So an object doesn't exist independently of the way I'm looking at it, and the way I'm relating to it.

Sometimes we can sit there and say, "I'm being mindful. I'm being mindful. I'm being mindful," but actually there's a subtle aversion wrapped up in that mindfulness, or a subtle grasping. And we don't actually realize it. That subtle aversion or grasping is enough to keep something difficult going, because the aversion is part of what's feeding it. You understand?

As we begin to learn to let go of that aversion, for instance, or grasping, or identification, we begin to let go of certain factors, we're actually taking away some of what is building an experience. And so, it begins to fade. Difficult things are held in place, basically, by aversion, by grasping, by identification, by all these things we're talking about letting go of. So as you let go of them, they tend to fade.

Happiness, at one level, or peace, or joy, is also held in place by grasping, to an extent. But it's a more subtle kind of grasping. What one finds is that if one lets go of the grasping towards happiness, the happiness actually deepens. It becomes more refined. So it goes from, for instance, a very sort of bubbly happiness to a more peaceful happiness. It's dependent – because we're not holding it in place by the way we're looking and relating. Does that make sense, or have I confused …? No? Okay. We're going to talk a lot about this in the third week.

Q13: no thing exists independently of a consciousness that shapes, colours, and fabricates it; assumptions around 'bare attention' and 'naked awareness'; struggles in life depend on belief in independent existence

Yogi: Does that mean they exist outside of ourselves?

Rob: Well, ultimately, no. That's what all this is pointing to: nothing exists in a way outside of one's self, outside of what one's bringing to that. So it's a different question than, "If a tree falls in the forest, and there's no one around, does it make a noise?" It's not going there, to that question. It's avoiding that question. We're talking about experience and understanding experience in the light of suffering arising or not. So it's very personal, experiential, very real for us. We're not asking abstract philosophical questions about that. That's very important in terms of the Buddhist path.

Yogi: So if you get to the point – this is hypothetical – you get to the point where you could let go of that subtle grasping and clinging, so that your perception didn't colour the object in any way whatsoever, is that what you would call 'naked awareness'?

Rob: Okay. So this … [laughs] Tea is late today, by the way, because of her. [laughter] No, no, this is great. This is great. There aren't many better questions than what you're asking and what's being asked. These are the real – they end up being the kind of deepest questions that a human being can ask about life. At the moment it might seem a bit cerebral and everything, but they're actually really important, deep questions. Eventually, all practice leads to these kind of questions, and really seeing them for ourselves, because the understanding, as I keep saying, leads to freedom and love. There's nothing about being clever here; it's just that the outcome of going into these questions is really deep freedom and very deep love. We'll definitely, as I said, revisit this very strongly in the third week.

But when we talk about insight meditation and mindfulness practice, it carries with it an assumption of naked awareness or bare attention. It's actually a word that the Buddha didn't use. It's not there in the suttas, if you read the suttas. It's not there. It might be there once, or it might not even be there once.

Yogi: Which one? Naked awareness?

Rob: Well, same. Naked awareness or bare attention. Yeah, same, same. It can be really helpful as a concept: "My mind is all over the place. I'm aware that I'm projecting all kinds of things onto people

and experiences, etc. I'm colouring things. I'm distorting things in all ways. Let me see if I can be mindful, be very simple in the awareness, and get underneath all those views and opinions, likes and dislikes, distortions and images, and preconceptions. Underneath, I'll meet the experience with as naked an awareness as possible." That's part of what we tend to call "mindfulness," and the assumption is that there is such a thing and that one can get to a point where one is not colouring objects in any way, and then one has arrived at, "That's how the object really is. That's how it is. This is it. This is *things as they are*," which is also a phrase that's very popular in the Dharma, "things as they are," and actually a phrase that the Buddha used. But that's not what he meant when he used it – "things as they are."

Rather, what he meant – "things as they are" – you cannot find a consciousness, a state of mind, a moment of consciousness, that is not shaping or creating or colouring or fabricating an experience. We tend to think, "Well, mindfulness is this sort of midpoint where you've got rid of all this other stuff." Or we think, "Yeah, equanimity is that." But when you really go into it, there's no such thing. The very nature of consciousness itself is that it's always creating an object and shaping, colouring – 'fabricating' is the Buddha's word – fabricating an object. As such, there is no place to stand where you see a thing as it is *independently of the way I'm looking at it*. What we're doing in this retreat, what we're leading up towards, is using love and compassion as a way of seeing that. It doesn't sound obvious at first, but it will hopefully become clear. [laughter] It *will* come clear. [laughter] It will come clear.

Yogi 2: We have faith. [laughter]

Yogi 3: So, Rob, does that mean the craving and aversion around an object, or just the – you know, I see a green and yellow thing, and I think I see primrose and … So, do you mean both discrimination and …?

Rob: The whole level of it, as you go deeper into it, the whole nature of perception begins to be unravelled, and the assumption that things exist independent of the way we're looking at them is seen to be a falsehood. It's just not true. To understand that, that's what it means to understand emptiness. That's exactly what it means, and that's what the Buddha taught: liberating insight. That's exactly what he taught, what he meant. So when the Buddha uses the words "things as they are," what he means, what he meant, was "things as they are" – it's *dependent*, dependent co-arising. They don't exist independently. To see a thing as it is means to really recognize – and again, totally in one's heart, one really knows – that it doesn't exist independently. We struggle with things in life partly because we believe that they exist independently: "This knee pain – that's *really* what it is. It really hurts. It really hurts exactly this amount. It's not that bad, but it's quite bad." And we believe it exists independently, and then we struggle with things. At a very deep level, when we begin to undermine that belief in the independent existence of things, then our whole sense of reality is opened up. It's almost as if suffering can't land anywhere; we can't land anywhere to struggle with anything. Or we believe that less and less, put it that way. And then comes more and more a sense of freedom, and love comes. It will

become clearer in time what the hell this has got to do with love and compassion. But there's a reason we put it at the third week. But it's coming up now, and it's fine. We're moving in that direction.

Q14: relief as a mark of insight

Yogi: I was just thinking, relief in case of pain …

Rob: Yes, yeah. Absolutely. And relief is a mark of insight, yeah, the feeling of relief is a mark of insight.

So, *if* there's someone who doesn't understand this right now … [laughs] Just kidding. If you … [laughter] If this isn't totally crystal clear right now, don't worry. Going back to – I think I started the talk on *samādhi* saying, when we were conceiving of this retreat, I had a good think about it and thought, "What's a person going to get out of this?" You can't go wrong. So it may be that we get to the end of the three weeks, and all this stuff about emptiness is "I've got it." [snaps fingers] "I've really understood." Great. Fantastic. I really hope that's the case. It may be that it didn't *quite* … That's okay too. You'll still have developed the loving-kindness and compassion. It's still moving towards awakening. And still there will have been the development of *samādhi*. It's all in there. You cannot fail here. And we're not grading people either, so … [laughter] We're going to talk about it more and more. It will come together.

Okay. Let's sit just for a minute or two together.

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[1] According to the commentary to the *Sutta Nipāta*, the Buddha taught the *Mettā Sutta* (Sn 1:8) as a protective discourse to a group of monks who were experiencing frightening visions and sounds produced by hostile deities. See Bhikkhu Bodhi, tr., *The Suttanipāta: An Ancient Collection of the Buddha's Discourses Together with Its Commentaries* (Boston: Wisdom, 2017), 566–7.