

RELEARNING LOVELINESS

The bud
stands for all things,
even for those things that don't flower,
for everything flowers, from within, of self-blessing;
though sometimes it is necessary
to reteach a thing its loveliness,
to put a hand on the brow
of the flower,
and retell it in words and in touch,
it is lovely
until it flowers again from within, of self-blessing

— GALWAY KINNELL

"To reteach a thing its loveliness" is the nature of metta. Through lovingkindness, everyone and everything can flower again from within. When we recover knowledge of our own loveliness and that of others, self-blessing happens naturally and beautifully.

Metta, which can be translated from Pali as "love" or "lovingkindness," is the first of the brahma-viharas, the "heavenly abodes." The others—compassion, sympathetic joy, and equanimity—grow out of metta, which supports and extends these states.

In our culture, when we talk about love, we usually mean either passion or sentimentality. It is crucial to distinguish metta from both of these states. Passion is enmeshed with

feelings of desire, of wanting or of owning and possessing. Passion gets entangled with needing things to be a certain way, with having our expectations met. The expectation of exchange that underlies most passion is both conditional and ultimately defeating: "I will love you as long as you behave in the following fifteen ways, or as long as you love me in return at least as much as I love you." It is not a coincidence that the word *passion* derives from the Latin word for "suffering." Wanting and expectation inevitably entail suffering.

By contrast, the spirit of metta is unconditional: open and unobstructed. Like water poured from one vessel to another, metta flows freely, taking the shape of each situation without changing its essence. A friend may disappoint us; she may not meet our expectations, but we do not stop being a friend to her. We may in fact disappoint ourselves, may not meet our own expectations, but we do not cease to be a friend to ourselves.

Sentimentality, the other mental state that masquerades as love, is really an ally of delusion. It is a facsimile of caring that limits itself only to experiences of pleasure. Like looking through the lens of a camera that has been smeared with a little Vaseline, sentimentality puts things into what is called "soft focus." We cannot see the rough edges, the trouble spots, or the defects. Everything appears just too nice. Sentimentality finds pain unbearable and so rejects it.

Our vision becomes very narrow when we need things to be a certain way and cannot accept things the way they actually are. Denial functions almost as a kind of narcotic, so that vital parts of our lives end up missing.

It is fear of pain that provokes and sustains this splitting off of parts of ourselves. To avoid feeling pain, we shut out

crucial portions of awareness, even though this closing off, this internal separation, is deadening.

Sometimes as individuals, or as members of a group, we may sacrifice the truth in order to secure our identity, or preserve a sense of belonging. Anything that threatens this gives rise to fear and anxiety, so we deny, we cut off our feelings. The end result of this pattern is dehumanization. We become split from our own lives and feel great distance from other living beings as well. As we lose touch with our inner life, we become dependent on the shifting winds of external change for a sense of who we are, what we care about, and what we value. The fear of pain that we tried to escape becomes, in fact, our constant companion.

The Buddha first taught the metta meditation as an antidote to fear, as a way of surmounting terrible fear when it arises. The legend is that he sent a group of monks off to meditate in a forest that was inhabited by tree spirits. These spirits resented the presence of the monks and tried to drive them away by appearing as ghoulish visions, with awful smells and terrible, shrieking noises. The tradition says that the monks became terrified and ran back to the Buddha, begging him to send them to a different forest for their practice. Instead, the Buddha replied, "I am going to send you back to the same forest, but I will provide you with the only protection you will need." This was the first teaching of metta meditation. The Buddha encouraged the monks not only to recite the metta phrases but to actually practice them. As these stories all seem to end so happily, so did this one—it is said that the monks went back and practiced metta, so that the tree spirits became quite moved by the beauty of the loving energy filling the forest, and resolved to care for and serve the monks in all ways.

The inner meaning of the story is that a mind filled with fear can still be penetrated by the quality of lovingkindness. Moreover, a mind that is saturated by lovingkindness cannot be overcome by fear; even if fear should arise, it will not overpower such a mind.

When we practice metta, we open continuously to the truth of our actual experience, changing our relationship to life. Metta—the sense of love that is not bound to desire, that does not have to pretend that things are other than the way they are—overcomes the illusion of separateness, of not being part of a whole. Thereby metta overcomes all of the states that accompany this fundamental error of separateness—fear, alienation, loneliness, and despair—all of the feelings of fragmentation. In place of these, the genuine realization of connectedness brings unification, confidence, and safety.

In Buddhism there is one word for mind and heart: *chitta*. Chitta refers not just to thoughts and emotions in the narrow sense of arising from the brain, but also to the whole range of consciousness, vast and unimpeded. As we open to the experience of chitta, we come to an understanding of who we are, with an ability to care for ourselves. Through the force of love, the presumed boundaries between ourselves and others crumble into ash as we touch them.

What unites us all as human beings is an urge for happiness, which at heart is a yearning for union, for overcoming our feelings of separateness. We want to feel our identity with something larger than our small selves. We long to be one with our own lives and with each other.

If we look at the root of even the most terrible addictions, even the most appalling violence in this world, somewhere we will find this urge to unite, to be happy. In some form it is there, even in the most distorted and odious disguises. We

can touch that. We can draw near and open up. We can connect, to the difficult forces within ourselves, and to the different experiences in our lives. We can break through the concepts that keep us apart. This is the true nature of love and the source of healing for ourselves and our world. This is the ground of freedom.

Metta is the ability to embrace all parts of ourselves, as well as all parts of the world. Practicing metta illuminates our inner integrity because it relieves us of the need to deny different aspects of ourselves. We can open to everything with the healing force of love. When we feel love, our mind is expansive and open enough to include the entirety of life in full awareness, both its pleasures and its pains. We feel neither betrayed by pain nor overcome by it, and thus we can contact that which is undamaged within us regardless of the situation. Metta sees truly that our integrity is inviolate, no matter what our life situation may be. We do not need to fear anything. We are whole: our deepest happiness is intrinsic to the nature of our minds, and it is not damaged through uncertainty and change.

In cultivating love, we remember one of the most powerful truths the Buddha taught—that the mind is naturally radiant and pure. It is because of visiting defilements that we suffer.

The word *defilement* is a common translation of the Pali word *kilesa*, which more literally translated means “torment of the mind.” We know directly from our own experience that when certain states arise strongly within us, they have a tormenting quality—states like anger, fear, guilt, and greed. When they knock at the door and we invite them in, we lose touch with the fundamentally pure nature of our mind, and then we suffer.

By not identifying with these forces, we learn that these

defilements or torments are only visitors. These forces are adventitious, not inherent. They do not reflect who we really are. The defilements or the *kilesas* inevitably arise because of how we have been conditioned. But this is no reason to judge ourselves harshly. Our challenge is to see them for what they are and to remember our true nature.

We can understand the inherent radiance and purity of our minds by understanding metta. Like the mind, metta is not distorted by what it encounters. Anger generated within ourselves or within others can be met with love; the love is not ruined by the anger. Metta is its own support, and thus it is free of inherently unstable conditions. The loving mind can observe joy and peace in one moment, and then grief in the next moment, and it will not be shattered by the change. A mind filled with love can be likened to the sky with a variety of clouds moving through it—some light and fluffy, others ominous and threatening. No matter what the situation, the sky is not affected by the clouds. It is free.

The Buddha taught that the forces in the mind that bring suffering are able to temporarily hold down the positive forces such as love or wisdom, but they can never destroy them. The negative forces can never uproot the positive, whereas the positive forces can actually uproot the negative forces. Love can uproot fear or anger or guilt, because it is a greater power.

Love can go anywhere. Nothing can obstruct it. *I Am That*, a book of dialogues with Nisargadatta Maharaj, includes an exchange between Nisargadatta and a man who complained a great deal about his mother. The man felt that she had not been a very good mother and was not a good person. At one point, Nisargadatta advised him to love his mother. The man

replied, "She wouldn't let me." Nisargadatta responded, "She couldn't stop you."

No external condition can prevent love; no one and no thing can stop it. The awakening of love is not bound up in things being a certain way. Metta, like the true nature of the mind, is not dependent; it is not conditioned. When we practice meditation and perceive this quality of mind, we also contact the essence of metta. This produces a tremendous change in perspective. At first it is as if we were sitting on the shore and watching waves dance on the surface of the ocean. Later in meditation it is as if we are under water, in the calm, still depths, watching the waves above us moving and playing. Still later we perceive that, in fact, we *are* the water, not apart or separate, and that waving is happening. This is also how metta embraces all.

The Pali word *metta* has two root meanings. One is the word for "gentle." Metta is likened to a gentle rain that falls upon the earth. This rain does not select and choose—"I'll rain here, and I'll avoid that place over there." Rather, it simply falls without discrimination.

The other root meaning for *metta* is "friend." To understand the power or the force of metta is to understand true friendship. The Buddha actually described at some length what he meant by being a good friend in the world. He talked about a good friend as someone who is constant in our times of happiness and also in our times of adversity or unhappiness. A friend will not forsake us when we are in trouble nor rejoice in our misfortune. The Buddha described a true friend as being a helper, someone who will protect us when we are unable to take care of ourselves, who will be a refuge to us when we are afraid.

Once, when someone described to the Dalai Lama how

much fear they were experiencing in their meditation practice, he said, "When you're afraid, just put your head in the lap of the Buddha." The lap of the Buddha epitomizes the safety of a true friendship. The culmination of metta is to become such a friend to oneself and all of life.

The practice of metta, uncovering the force of love that can uproot fear, anger, and guilt, begins with befriending ourselves. The foundation of metta practice is to know how to be our own friend. According to the Buddha, "You can search throughout the entire universe for someone who is more deserving of your love and affection than you are yourself, and that person is not to be found anywhere. You yourself, as much as anybody in the entire universe, deserve your love and affection." How few of us embrace ourselves in this way! With metta practice we uncover the possibility of truly respecting ourselves. We discover, as Walt Whitman put it, "I am larger and better than I thought. I did not think I held so much goodness."

Directly seeing the natural radiance of our minds reteaches us our own loveliness. To allude to a phrase in the Zen tradition, this is our original face before we were born—before we were born into identification with a separate, limited self. Recognizing our own power to love points us directly to recognizing this primordial radiance.

Confidence in our innate potential to be loving human beings empowers the cultivation of metta. Our potential to love is very real and is somehow not destroyed, no matter what we experience: all of the mistakes that we might make, all of the times that we are caught in reaction, all of the times we have caused pain, all of the times we have suffered. Throughout everything, our potential to love remains intact and pure. Through practicing metta in meditation and in daily

life, we cultivate this potential. Love joins with our intention, as partners in healing ourselves and our world.

In some ways our greatest ally in this practice of love is our wish to be happy. This wish functions as a homing instinct for freedom when we can unite it with understanding what actually brings us happiness. But sometimes we may feel that we do not really deserve happiness; we may feel almost ashamed of wanting it. Yet this wish is one of the finest things about us, opening the door to transcending our limited lives.

In certain philosophical systems in India during the Buddha's time, it was believed that if the body was tortured enough, abused enough, the spirit would soar free and be liberated. Nowadays most of us are not inclined to torture our bodies to free our spirits. However, we do seem to have our own variation of that theme by believing that if we abuse our minds enough with self-hatred and self-condemnation, somehow that abuse will be a path that liberates us.

For a true spiritual transformation to flourish, we must see beyond this tendency to mental self-flagellation. Spirituality based on self-hatred can never sustain itself. Generosity coming from self-hatred becomes martyrdom. Morality born of self-hatred becomes rigid repression. Love for others without the foundation of love for ourselves becomes a loss of boundaries, codependency, and a painful and fruitless search for intimacy. But when we contact, through meditation, our true nature, we can allow others to also find theirs.

We so often in our lives serve as mirrors for one another. We look to others to find out if we ourselves are lovable; we look to others to find out if we are capable of feeling love; we look to others for a reflection of our innate radiance. What a tremendous gift, to enable someone's return to the awareness of their own loveliness! When we see the goodness in others,

we are enabling them to "flower from within, of self-blessing."

Seeing the goodness in someone does not imply ignoring their difficult qualities or unskillful actions. Rather, we can fully acknowledge these difficulties, while at the same time we choose to focus on the positive. If we focus on the negative, we will naturally feel anger, resentment, or disappointment. If we focus on the positive, we will forge a connection to the person. Then as we look at their negative traits or actions, we do it as their friend. If two friends are looking at such difficult things, they do so standing side by side.

This mirroring quality, whereby we "reteach a thing its loveliness," is one of the greatest attributes of metta. The power of metta enables us to look at people and affirm the rightness of their wish to be happy; it affirms our oneness with them. The power of love reflects both to ourselves and others the manifold possibilities available in each moment.

I once heard a young man talk about his life as a child in Cambodia. All of the children in his village spent years imprisoned in a barbed-wire encampment. Four times a day people were brought to the outskirts of that encampment to be killed. The children were all lined up and forced to watch. According to the rule, if one of them started to cry, then he or she would also be killed. This boy said that each time people were brought to be killed, he was absolutely terrified that among them would be a friend, neighbor, or relative. He knew that if that happened, he would start to cry, and then he would be killed himself. He lived with this terror for years. He said that in that circumstance, the only way he could survive was to completely cut off all feeling, to dehumanize himself altogether.

After many years the political situation changed in Cambo-

dia, and this boy was adopted by an American family and brought to the United States. At that point in his life, he knew that now he would be able to survive only if he learned to love again, to break down the walls that he had been forced to create. The young man related that he learned to love again by looking into the eyes of his foster father and seeing there so much love for him. In the mirror of his foster father's love, the boy realized that he was indeed lovable, and that therefore he was also capable of extending love.

Looking at people and communicating that they can be loved, and that they can love in return, is giving them a tremendous gift. It is also a gift to ourselves. We see that we are one with the fabric of life. This is the power of metta: to teach ourselves and our world this inherent loveliness.

Metta binds all beings together. Buddhist psychology identifies it as the cohesive factor in consciousness. When a person experiences anger, the heart is dry. It becomes moist when that person feels love. When we put together two substances in nature that are dry, they cannot cohere; there is no way for them to join. When we add wetness, these two substances can bond; they can come together. In just that same way, the force of metta, lovingkindness, allows us to cohere, to come together within ourselves and with all beings. The beauty of this truth moved the Buddha to say that sustaining a loving heart, even for the duration of the snap of a finger, makes one a truly spiritual being.

EXERCISE: *Remembering the Good within You*

Sit comfortably, in a relaxed way, and close your eyes. As much as possible, let go of analysis and expectation. For ten to fifteen minutes, call to mind something you have done or said that you feel was a kind or good action—a time you were generous, or caring, or contributed to someone's well-being. If something comes to mind, allow the happiness that may come with the remembrance. If nothing comes to mind, gently turn your attention to a quality you like about yourself. Is there an ability or strength within yourself you can recognize? If still nothing comes to mind, reflect on the primal urge toward happiness within you, and the rightness and beauty of that.

In any of the above reflections, even if impatience or annoyance or fear should arise, don't be disheartened or anxious—see if you can return to the contemplation without guilt or judgment. The heart of skillful meditation is the ability to let go and begin again, over and over again. Even if you have to do that thousands of times during a session, it does not matter. There is no distance to traverse in recollecting our attention; as soon as we realize we have been lost in discursive thought, or have lost touch with our chosen contemplation, right in that very moment we can begin again. Nothing has been ruined, and there is no such thing as failing. There is nowhere the attention can wander to, and no duration of distraction, from which we cannot completely let go, in a moment, and begin again.

EXERCISE: *Phrases of Lovingkindness*

In doing metta practice, we gently repeat phrases that are meaningful in terms of what we wish, first for ourselves

and then for others. We begin by befriending ourselves. The aspirations we articulate should be deeply felt and somewhat enduring (not something like "May I find a good show on television tonight"). Classically there are four phrases used:

"May I be free from danger."

"May I have mental happiness."

"May I have physical happiness."

"May I have ease of well-being."

I will describe these phrases here in detail, and you can experiment with them, alter them, or simply choose an alternative set of three or four phrases. Discover personally in your own heartfelt investigation what is truly significant for you.

"May I be free from danger." We begin to extend care and lovingkindness toward ourselves with the wish that we may find freedom from danger, that we may know safety. We ultimately wish that all beings as well as ourselves have a sense of refuge, have a safe haven, have freedom from internal torment and external violence.

There is a nightmarish quality to life without safety. When we live repeatedly lost in conditioned states such as anger and greed, continually being hurt and hurting others—there is no peace or safety. When we are awakened at night by anxiety, guilt, and agitation—there is no peace or safety. When we live in a world of overt violence, which rests on the disempowerment of people and the loneliness of unspoken and silenced abuse—there is no peace or safety. This deep aspiration is the traditional beginning. "May I be free from danger." Other possible phrases are "May I have safety" and "May I be free from fear."

"May I have mental happiness." If we were in touch with our own loveliness, if we felt less fearful of others, if we trusted

our ability to love, we would have mental happiness. In the same vein, if we could relate skillfully to the torments of the mind that arise, and not nourish or cultivate them, we would have mental happiness. Even in very positive or fortunate circumstances, without mental happiness, we are miserable. Sometimes people use the phrase "May I be happy" or "May I be peaceful" or "May I be liberated."

"May I have physical happiness." With this phrase we wish ourselves the enjoyment of health, freedom from physical pain, and harmony with our bodies. If freedom from pain is not a realistic possibility, we aspire to receive the pain with friendliness and patience, thereby not transforming physical pain into mental torment. You might also use a phrase such as "May I be healthy," "May I be healed," "May I make a friend of my body," or "May I embody my love and understanding."

"May I have ease of well-being." This phrase points to the exigencies of everyday life—concerns such as relationships, family issues, and livelihood. With the expression of this phrase we wish that these elements of our day to day lives be free from struggle, that they be accomplished gracefully, and easily. Alternative phrases could be "May I live with ease" or "May lovingkindness manifest throughout my life" or "May I dwell in peace."

Sit comfortably. You can begin with five minutes of reflection on the good within you or your wish to be happy. Then choose three or four phrases that express what you most deeply wish for yourself, and repeat them over and over again. You can coordinate the phrases with the breath, if you wish, or simply have your mind rest in the phrases without a physical anchor. Feel free to experiment, and be creative. Without trying to force or demand a loving feeling, see if there are circumstances you can imagine yourself

in where you can more readily experience friendship with yourself. Is it seeing yourself as a young child? One friend imagined himself sitting surrounded by all the most loving people he had ever heard of in the world, receiving their kindness and good wishes. For the first time, love for himself seemed to enter his heart.

Develop a gentle pacing with the phrases; there is no need to rush through them, or say them harshly. You are offering yourself a gift with each phrase. If your attention wanders, or if difficult feelings or memories arise, try to let go of them in the spirit of kindness, and begin again repeating the metta phrases:

"May I be free from danger."

"May I have mental happiness."

"May I have physical happiness."

"May I have ease of well-being."

There are times when feelings of unworthiness come up strongly, and you clearly see the conditions that limit your love for yourself. Breathe gently, accept that these feelings have arisen, remember the beauty of your wish to be happy, and return to the metta phrases.

FACETS OF LOVINGKINDNESS

A pearl goes up for auction. No one has enough,
so the pearl buys itself.

—RUMI

LOVE exists in itself, not relying on owning or being owned. Like the pearl, love can only buy itself, because love is not a matter of currency or exchange. No one has enough to buy it, but everyone has enough to cultivate it. Metta reunites us with what it means to be alive and unbound.

Researchers once gave a plant to every resident of a nursing home. Half of these elderly people were told that the plants were theirs to care for—that they had to pay close attention to their plants' needs for water and sunlight, and should respond carefully to those needs. The other half of the residents were told that the plants were theirs to enjoy but that they did not have to take any responsibility for them; the nursing staff would care for the plants. At the end of a year, the researchers compared the two groups of elders. The residents who had been asked to care for their plants were living considerably longer than the norm, were much healthier, and were more oriented toward and connected to their world. The other residents, those who had plants but did not have to stay responsive to them, simply reflected the norms for people their age in longevity, health, alertness, and engagement with the world.

This study suggests, among other things, the enlivening power of connection, of love, of intimacy. This is the effect that metta can have on our lives. But when I heard about the study, I also reflected on how often we regard intimacy as a