

Ethics of Metta

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Good morning everyone and welcome. Who ended up on the schedule for today kind of late, just yesterday afternoon I think. Some of you might be here expecting Tenzin Choki. I made a scheduling mistake and she'll come on the 16th. If you don't know her, she's a wonderful former Tibetan nun. I've known her for 30 years.

Before she was a nun, she was deeply involved with an agency in Santa Cruz, working with the county legal services and neighborhoods with conflict resolution, training people in conflict resolution. She's a master at this kind of wonderful art that's so important for us all. Then she did lots of serious practices as a Tibetan nun. I think she did two of the three-year retreats that they do, kind of solitary retreats. She did a lot of practice and study with compassion. So between conflict resolution and compassion, you're not going to go wrong.

She's a little bit sorry she's not here for you today, but she'll be here in two weeks. I'll be at the IRC this next week, and then the following Sunday is my son's graduation from college. So then I'll be back the following week on the 23rd. I want to mention that because I'm pretty sure I'm going to have a special meeting after the Dharma talk that day, maybe both on Zoom and here live for people who want to come to it. We were approached a few weeks ago by the leadership at Hidden Villa. For those of you who don't know Hidden Villa, it's a nature preserve and farm in the middle of Silicon Valley, kind of.

It's up against the Los Altos hills there, off of El Monte, behind the community college that's there, going back up into the hills. Beautiful place to go visit and hike. Before we had our own retreat center, we did retreats there for ten years, sometimes as many as five a year. It was just a fantastic place to do retreats. They have a hostel there. So we were approached by the leadership there, interested in having IMC back there and maybe a partnership with us of sorts so that we could have regular use of the hostel again.

It comes at the same time that we've been kind of a little bit exploding the retreat center and offering retreats in that the retreat center is fully scheduled. But now we've started to offer retreats elsewhere. We call them off-site retreats, renting facilities. We now have 14 people, I think, in our teacher training. It's less than a year left, four-year program, and we have seven teachers already. So we have like 21 teachers able to teach retreats. So that's also an explosion.

Now suddenly to be offered Hidden Villa as a place where we can do more retreats is a wonderful gift. We haven't worked out all the details, but there's a long history, as I said, with Hidden Villa in many, many ways. It's a kind of part of our peninsula family or something of connections. But the real challenge for us, the biggest challenge for us to be able to do that is we do everything on a volunteer basis. Everything is offered freely and volunteers. All the things we do already, our volunteer base is fairly thin.

So to imagine having more volunteers to put on retreats at Hidden Villa, the imagination has a hard time seeing it. It's very important when we do things that we try to do it without any stress. That's kind of like our calling card. Otherwise, if all volunteers, it doesn't really work. So I thought of having a meeting that day for people who are interested in what we're doing there at Hidden Villa, the option there, and to talk about the volunteering. Maybe some of you have been there before and done retreats there, and some of you have volunteered there before, and we did retreats.

Some of them don't necessarily come to IMC anymore. They're kind of in the woodwork. They're behind the camera up there and watching on YouTube and things like that. So we thought we'd have a meeting and see who would come to a meeting like that to talk about that possibility and how to manage to put it on before we go back to Hidden Villa and kind of continue the discussions with them and to explore what that partnership might be like. So I thought maybe at 11:30 on the 23rd we could do that. We'll announce it again. I'll put it on the calendar and on the website.

It's kind of a phenomenally fortunate thing that's come our way. It seems like it's just like to partner with Hidden Villa to be able to offer retreats there. Maybe they do other kind of partnerships with them. It's a phenomenal thing. One of the things also over the last couple of years that I've been involved in is training people in doing Buddhist caregiving in relationship to the natural world. We have this Buddhist eco-chaplaincy program, involved in training a whole bunch of people to be able to do retreats in the wilderness, camping retreats, and backpacking retreats, other things.

So we have all these Hidden Villas right there in the natural world. We can probably do some

pretty creative things there as well. So, as for the talk today, this last week I gave a series of talks on the fundamentals or the foundations of Buddhist ethics, Introduction to the Buddhist Ethics. I talked about how part of the foundations of it is the—I don't know if I want to call it a principle, maybe that diminishes it—but the principle of non-harming at the center of it, the idea of becoming skilled in learning to recognize what is wholesome, what is healthy for us in the heart, and to live from that inner psychological health is a foundation for Buddhist ethics. Another one is that we're involved in training ourselves, that Buddhist precepts are not admonitions or commandments. They're trainings that understood you're not going to be perfect at it.

But we're training ourselves and cultivating, developing ourselves to become ethical. And then as we become more ethical or train this way, then ethics becomes second nature. It becomes our nature. It becomes who we are. The word for ethics in Buddhism, it's often translated into English as ethics, is the word *sīla*, S-I-L-A. That word has two meanings.

It means behavior. Then it came over time to mean nature, like a character of a person, something deeper in a person's nature. So the word, something people have translated as virtuous behavior, virtuous conduct. At some point it becomes a person's natural virtue to be ethical, to not cause any harm. It's not something you have to think about doing. It's just who you are.

You're not going to intentionally want to harm anyone. It's just your nature to be that way. That's especially the case of those people who mature in this practice to what sometimes is called enlightenment or realization. So if anybody hears that you've been hanging out with the Buddhists or doing Buddhist practice and they ask you, how do you know when someone's enlightened? Now I'll give you an answer that I think is very profound. That is that you know when they don't want to harm anybody. Isn't that a great answer? I think it is.

So today I wanted to do another piece of this foundation for Buddhist ethics, and that is *mettā*. *Mettā* is a wonderful word that has been translated many times into English. My most common favorite translation of it is goodwill. Sometimes I like kindness. It's often known in popular Buddhist English speaking circles as loving kindness. Sometimes I really like that word. Some people like the word benevolence.

So there's all kinds of different ways people use the word and all the variety of translations we have speaks to the idea that *mettā*, whatever it is, is not the one thing. But it belongs to a family of attitudes, of emotions, which have to do with, which on one hand can be called our social emotions, or positive social emotions or attitudes, or maybe a little bit more precisely,

the caregiving emotions, the emotions of care. Rather than caregiving, maybe emotions of care, where care has two meanings. Care means you want to support someone, help someone, care for someone that way. But to care also means that something is important. So to have emotions of care is also emotions to have respect for other people, to see that, appreciate them and value them, to value people because you care about them, and it has this kind of caregiving kind of attitude too.

Mettā is in that family of things and rather than thinking it's one thing, to take all the whole family of caregiving emotions you can kind of imagine making a color wheel from them. The color wheel that has no sharp lines between any of the colors, and all the colors just kind of gradually fade into each other, move into each other. If you see in a color wheel, sometimes the primary colors stand out kind of more intensely, but they don't have any sharp lines between the other hues of that color. So the same way, we have this wonderful wheel of potential caregiving emotions that we live in, that sometimes in Buddhism we talk about loving kindness, *mettā*, *karuṇā*, compassion, appreciative joy, which is *muditā*, and equanimity as a form of love, *upekkhā*. But there's others. Generosity could be one.

So what is this *mettā*? In the classic language of Pāli, *mettā* is a cognate or connected to the word *mitta*, which means friend. Some of the oldest definitions of *mettā* is it is known as *mettā* because it arises in one's relationship to a friend. So it's kind of, some people just like to translate it as friendliness. That *mettā* is a kind of friendliness with the idea that that friendliness is a wonderful thing to have warm, friendly feelings for a friend. Then the idea is to universalize that feeling so everyone's your friend. Wouldn't that be nice?

Maybe that's a little bit of a lower bar than saying loving kindness. Because as soon as you have the word love in it, you know it's a high bar and it's possible to have a goodwill or a friendly attitude to people you don't like. I think it's realistic that we have people who somehow doesn't quite work for us. There's something about them that's quite not, you know, maybe they're aversive and irritating, and maybe they're always a cynic. They're just kind of like, oh, here we go again. So you don't quite like them, but you can still have an attitude of friendliness that's genuine, that's part of your character, your nature, that your heart is open to them and you care for them in spite of the fact that, you know, well that doesn't kind of work for me how they are.

I don't know if I said that in any way that would offend anyone or trouble anyone, but I was trying to say something that it's nice to lower the bar of what goodwill could be. Because then it's easier to do it. To think you're supposed to be loving to every single person you see, it's a little bit hard to imagine that, you know, that's a high bar to attain. So, in terms of

ethics, I like to think of Buddhist ethics as the Buddhist ethics of friendship. The kind of way you would be with a very good friend. I don't think it feels good to think about killing your good friend.

You're probably actually willing to sacrifice even your life for some good friend. The opposite feeling might be there. You're probably not going to steal from your good friend. This would just feel kind of yucky, I hope. Probably you're not going to, you know, assert yourself in a violent sexual way, in a dominating way on your friend to hurt them sexually. You probably know it doesn't feel good to lie to them. Then the last precept is not getting intoxicated. I've known people who have harmed their friends when they got intoxicated. Somehow that just didn't work for friends, family, all kinds of people. There's been tremendous harm being created.

So the idea is to be careful with what you take in so you don't harm anyone. So the ethics of friendship is one quality of Buddhist ethics. That, I think, gives a very different flavor for what ethics is, if the primary reference point is some kind of Western puritanical ideas of commandments and ones that involve punishment and, you know, completely black and white or, you know, night and day kind of, you know, right and wrong. So here's more of this definition. *Mettā* is called *mettā* because it is friendly. It refers to tender or watery love. Watery love. Some people translate this as moist love.

But watery, I think of like a wonderful container, like a bladder or something that holds water, and you shake it and the water kind of moves inside or shakes inside and this wonderful resonance in the heart that we have when something happens and the heart kind of is not frozen and it's, you know, it's watery so it kind of responds, it's a responsive thing. Some people have translated this word as a lubricating friendship, lubricating love, lubricating *mettā*, lubricated heart. That's a little odd because I think of the oil for your car. But also, I have to say, it means that there's no resistance. So your heart is lubricated. It means that things just flow right through, right in, and it's just available. Really, a well-lubricated heart is like another metaphor. It's a heart that's so open that things go into it and pass right through. They don't get stuck. When things get stuck, that's when we get in trouble.

Here it says, the characteristic of *mettā* is to promote well-being. So it's a quality of friendship where we have goodwill and we want well for others. That's the characteristic of it. As opposed to having love or friendship with someone, and it's characterized by what they can do for me. It's about my well-being that counts, what I can get in the relationship. To promote the well-being of the other, its function is to prefer well-being over, I guess, ill-being. There is something to prefer. There is to prefer to have a sense of ease and happiness and

joy over unhappiness.

Its manifestation is the removal of annoyance. Isn't that nice? Occasionally one or two of you will probably get annoyed. So it's such a nice feeling when that annoyance is gone. Annoyance is kind of an irritant for yourself. Its proximate cause is seeing the loveliness of others. Isn't that great? What does it take to be able to see the loveliness of other people?

I know that sometimes that's not available because we're annoyed, because we're angry, because we're filled with the desire, we're filled with delusion, we're filled with confusion, fear, all kinds of things interfere. We're so caught up in our agenda. We have to do so many things. Being over busy interferes with friendliness. Being over busy interferes with our ability to take in another person so that we see their loveliness. Wouldn't that be a nice life if you went around seeing loveliness in everyone? Yes, but you've got to be realistic. We have a lot of things to do. What's more important? What could be more important than seeing the loveliness of beings?

It succeeds, *mettā* succeeds, when ill will subsides. It fails when it produces selfish affection. I guess selfless affection. No, selfish. Selfish affection it says. I guess I was hoping for something different. Selfish affection. And similar, there's another one. How does one abide with one's heart accompanied with *mettā* extending outward in one direction? So there's an idea that you can take this attitude and have it feel like it's expansive and extensive in all directions, but you start with one direction.

How does one abide with a mind or heart accompanied with *mettā* extending outward in one direction? Just as one would feel friendliness on seeing a dearly beloved friend, so does one extend loving-kindness *mettā* to all creatures. So, I like very much that we have different English translations of *mettā*, so that we don't box her in and think it has to be one thing. Why it's not a one thing is that the social emotions we have, the positive ones, how we have them, what they are, depends a lot on other qualities of heart and mind that we have. Those shift and change over time. So to come to a conclusion today, this is what *mettā* is, might keep you from noticing how it shifts and changes over time.

One of the great joys for me in doing Buddhist practice now for these decades is to see that my understanding of love, my understanding of friendliness, of goodwill, *mettā*, *karuṇā*, all these things, how it lives in me has shifted and changed as other aspects of this practice has changed me in different ways. So for example, how practice has changed me. Sometimes you sit down to meditate and I'm preoccupied. Maybe I'm a little bit tense and spinning up my thoughts and I sit down and part of what mindfulness meditation is, is getting out of the way of ourselves. So that how we are at any given moment has a chance to be seen, to be

known, and to settle. Still to this day I've noticed that my mind tricks me.

That is, I'm involved in some kind of intense thought and preoccupation. I think the whole world centers around that preoccupation. I think this is the way it has to be. I have to fix this and solve this. Or this person is so terrible and I have to do something. I'm kind of caught up in this world of something. Sometimes it's not interpersonal, sometimes it's like there's not enough time and I have to clean the house and have the dishes cleaned, but I don't have enough time for it. How am I going to do this? I'm rushing around trying to do three things at once. The world is in this thought bubble of its own preoccupation.

So then I sit down, and it's still there. But then it gets, after a while, it gets softer, gets quieter. The shoulders go down, the belly relaxes. After a while, even the eyes relax and soften. I notice that my thinking has slowed down. After a while, those thoughts have stopped occurring. I'm there just with my breath in a simple way. The pressure and the tension that was kind of compelling those earlier kind of thought, is seen and known, it's still there, but now it's just pressure, my mind or somewhere. I just sit breathing with it, getting out of the way of it, knowing it, and it quiets down and settles. Then when I finish the meditation, lo and behold, I realize, wow, I was caught in a delusion before I meditated.

I thought I was living in this thought bubble that made its own little universe of what had to happen and how things were and what things mean and all that. But that was in its own little thing that I thought was the truth. Now I see it very differently. So what I've learned is sometimes when I feel like I don't have enough time for things, is I'll sit down and meditate for 10 minutes. After 10 minutes, I have lots of time. It's remarkable. Who had the true view of reality? The Gil who thought they didn't have enough time for things and the one who sees lots of time after meditation. Is the after meditation one deluded because I'm just forgetting all the list? So things start settling and changing and my relationship to myself begins to change.

For example, there can be self-criticism. Sometimes some people have self-hate, which is also one of those thought bubbles, those little thought worlds we can live in and has its own authority, has its own kind of inner dynamics and working. Sometimes, you know, they say, you can't solve a problem with the problem itself. You have to kind of step out of the problem to solve it. So, you know, some things that seem so intense and so important and so true in the mind and how the mind thinks, you have to find a way to step out of it to see something different. Meditation, again, can be one of those things. There's other ways of doing this. Just spending time at a park, going for a walk and being under trees. For some people, being with a friend, exercising that some people can do a little bit with. So at some point, some-

thing can shift that self-criticism, and we're not operating, that's not the operating principle anymore.

Then there's a different way of experiencing oneself. Maybe at first it's just the absence of self-criticism. But then with time, the tender heart, the watery heart, be able to show itself. It's been eclipsed. Then there can be a feeling of being content, being at peace, being calm, being settled. Oh, it's good to be this way. Then it starts becoming easier and easier to view oneself as one's own friend. To have friendship towards oneself. To care for oneself. To have a positive view of oneself.

As that process goes deeper and fuller, finding a peace with oneself, a contentment with oneself, a peace with the present moment, a contentment with the present moment, there's room for all kinds of other positive emotions to arise. One of them is a simple delight, a joy in being alive. It's one of the great, wonderful aspects of meditation. Sooner or later, sometimes it's later, to have the bubbling up of meditative joy that's there for no reason. It isn't like you won the lottery, or had the great date, or something. It's just because you're alive, and you're just so content and happy, and who would have believed that you can be happy without getting something, you know, getting praise, or getting things, or, you know, something, pleasures in the world. But it's phenomenal to feel this.

Then, when you're with your friend, your friend, you're not coming to your friend with a need. You're not coming with your friend wanting something from your friend. There's nothing wrong with having a need and wanting something from a friend at times. But imagine coming without a need and without wanting something from them and feeling friendly for them. A friendship that is without need from me. That's a big gift to give someone. Imagine having love for someone and you have love without a need for someone else. Imagine having a love, a feeling of friendliness, of kindness, of tenderness, that has no object. That's just there, just like a joy that has no reason. There can be love that has no object in particular. It's just a state of kindness, a state of love.

Then your friend happens to walk into the middle of that bubble. So you're just loving. But it's not like you're focused on them, that you're going to have to get something from them. So loving kindness then creates a very different context for ethics. Because, so for example, with romantic love, sexual love, that usually comes with desire. Nothing necessarily wrong with that desire. It's how we live it. How we live it can be tremendously harmful to sexual desire as we know. I'm sure most people here have been harmed by someone's sexual desire once upon a time. Or have harmed.

But if *mettā* is the reference point for romantic love, then there's a reference point that is a

kind of a love, a friendliness, that is free of having to act on a desire. It creates a different reference point than desire. Desires can still be there, but there's a whole other attitude that then informs how we go about a relationship. But that *mettā* that has that kind of, is free of need, free of desire, free of needing to prove ourselves or get anything, is a rare thing to have in this world. But that is a phenomenal basis for how we live a life of non-harming.

So part of what we do in Buddhism is to celebrate our capacity for these wonderful positive social emotions. We emphasize the value of learning to recognize them, appreciate them when they're there. One of the ways that we sometimes emphasize this is look for the situations in your life where it's easy to have this. Look for a situation where it's easy to have a friendly attitude, easy to have goodwill that expects nothing in return. Look for situations where it's easy to be generous to someone, or compassionate, or for some people it's more difficult, is to share in their joy, their appreciative joy, their success. Look where it's easy. Then from where it's easy, be happy with it. Appreciate that you have this capacity. Value it. This is good.

Then begin to expand it to more and more people. Spread the circle to include not just the people it's easy, your family and your friends, but start spreading it out to the people who are not your friends, not your family, to people who are neighbors further away, to people who are, you know, who are acquaintances. What does it take to have this positive goodwill, this *mettā*, this caregiving, concern for the well-being of others? What does it take to go out onward in order to make your circle bigger and bigger? That's the exercise that Buddhism teaches as a way of universalizing our *mettā*, our love, our care, our compassion. It even goes so far as how do you cultivate *mettā* for an enemy?

They don't say anything about not having an enemy. Somehow I guess they assume that there are people, always going to be someone who can be an enemy. But even an enemy, which seems like a really high bar, that you would have some basic goodwill, basic friendliness to them. You might have a lot of caution around them because they're your enemy. So it's not like you have to open the doors of your house and invite them in. But there is a kind of healthy goodwill that you can have.

I remember once when someone was really angry, someone I didn't know very well, hardly at all, was really angry with me for nothing I had done, but somehow wanted to blame me for the event. Came over and was yelling at me, angrily. I stood there listening, listening, took a while. I thought, what is the kind thing to do here? Do I justify myself? Do I explain myself and explain it away? Or do I say that he's wrong? What do I do here? He gave me a lot of time to think about it. So that was nice.

So he finally stopped, and with the most goodwill I could have, I looked at him and calmly said, you know, when you speak that way to me, I feel afraid. So there was no blame, I wasn't like attacking him, I was just telling him what was the effect it had on me. Because it was, I had some fear, but it wasn't like I was fearless in that situation. But that's, if I say that, then I'm maybe taking care of myself, but also it's my way of not, of having some goodwill for him, some wanting not to criticize him, but trying to open the door for some other way. In fact, as soon as he heard that, he relaxed. He kind of, I don't know if he apologized, but he relaxed and kind of brought the conversation to a close and left.

So that was my little exercise in trying to find the goodwill and trying to find how to be appropriate to take care of myself in this kind of challenging situation where, at least for that moment, I must have been his enemy, the way he was talking to me. So to expand outwards. But how do we do that not as a should, not as some kind of, you know, Pollyannish way to kind of go around, kind of seeing everybody's loveliness as if we're in a pretend way. One of the ways is to become skilled through mindfulness practice to understand how we don't do that. One of the really important principles of Buddhism is that there are Buddhist ideals, like loving-kindness or *mettā*, peace, equanimity, calm, all kinds of... Buddhism has no shortage of ideals to carry as a burden.

But the way to experience these ideals is to be mindful to study what interferes with them. What gets in the way? You know, I hate people. That gets in the way of the love. So study the hate. Find out what's going on. I don't have time for people because I need to become wealthy. Okay? So then study that ambition. What's going on for you? Really stay present. Meditation, mindfulness, is one of the laboratories for taking a deep, honest look at ourselves. To stop enough to really see what's going on. Then we begin working through some of the things that interfere.

One of the very powerful things to begin realizing is to understand when we're causing self-harm to ourselves by our attitudes. If we're spending a lot of time being angry at others, they might not even know we're angry at them. But we're certainly harming ourselves. If we're spending a lot of time chasing after some kind of ambition and it's becoming stressful for us and we're closing down to everything else, we're being harmed from it. Mindfulness creates a heightened sensitivity to notice where we harm ourselves by our attitudes, our way of thinking, our beliefs, our actions, the words we have. So as we've been seeing that, and that settles down, remember I talked about just sitting present, getting out of the way and seeing what's there, but allowing it to settle and settle and quiet, then we don't have, the thing that interferes with the ideal is no longer there.

Then what happens then? Well then, you thought you were supposed to be loving, it turned out that's not what the situation called for. The situation called for compassion. Or the situation called for celebration. Or the situation called for a simple generosity. Or the situation called for doing nothing. Just sometimes it's, you know, to have, you know, in this situation let's just leave this person completely alone. That would be the best, most kindest thing to do. So this idea of looking at what interferes so that we can respond with positive social emotions because they are who we are, not what we're trying to live up to. So friendliness is one of the bases for Buddhist ethics.

So, we have a few minutes left. I would love it if you would take maybe just a couple of minutes to share with another person if anything in this talk sparked something interesting in you. Something that kind of, oh, that's an interesting idea around this topic of *mettā*. Maybe you hadn't heard before, maybe you have, but it sparked something. Maybe if you turn towards, maybe you should do one or two people near you. But look around, make sure no one's left alone sitting there, everyone included. Then we'll do it about four minutes or so, and then I'll ring a bell and we'll come back for a minute here. If you don't want to do this, of course, you can leave. Or just sit quietly. Oh, yeah. He's blind. He can't see. Oh, yeah.