To Love As If It Matters

Dharma talk by Diana Clark

September 7, 2025 at the Insight Meditation Center, Redwood City, CA

Introduction

Good morning. It's nice to see you all. For those of you who don't know, I'm a teacher on Monday nights and recently also on Thursday nights, and I'm sitting in for Gil this week while he's out teaching a retreat. My heart is just full being here on a Sunday morning. It's lovely. It's so great to practice together and to be in community in some kind of way.

Recently, my heart has been touched by one particular poem. I've shared this poem in a few different settings, some of them here at IMC. So if you've heard me talk about this poem, I'll say a few things a little bit differently today. But if you've heard me talk about this poem today, can that be okay? Maybe just like me, the more times I read it, there's more stuff in here that's beautiful. And I feel like, oh, I could teach a whole course on this or something.

So here's this poem. It's by this poet, Rosemerry Wahtola Trommer.[1] I just think she's a fabulous poet. I'm often reading her poems as part of Dharma Talks. And this poem is called "Because."

So I can't save the world. I can't even save myself. Can't wrap my arms around every frightened child. Can't foster peace among nations. Can't bring love to all who feel unlovable.

So I practice opening my heart right here in this room and being gentle with my insufficiency. I practice walking down the street heart first

and if it is insufficient to share love, I will practice loving anyway.

I want to converse about truth, about trust. I want to invite compassion into every interaction.

One willing heart can't stop a war. One willing heart can't feed all the hungry.

And sometimes daunted by a task too big, I tell myself, what's the use of trying?

But today the invitation is clear. To be ridiculously courageous in love, to open the heart like a lilac in May, knowing freeze is possible and opening anyway,

to take love seriously, to give love wildly, to race up to the world as if I were a puppy, adoring and unjaded, stumbling on my own exuberance.

to feel the shock of indifference, of anger, of cruelty, of fear, and to stay open, to love as if it matters, as if the world depends on it.

To Love as if it Matters

I appreciate that the poet, I'm pretty sure she doesn't even use this word "because" in her poem, but there's something really beautiful, like it's all pointing in this same direction. There are lots of things, as I said, that we can say about this poem. One is, and I'll just talk about this briefly, the poet she writes, "So I can't save the world. So I practice opening my heart right here in this room."

We have these ideas, these notions about saving the world. These are like generalizations. Of course, there's this movement. We want to help others. We want to be a force of good in the world. But sometimes we get lost in these concepts of like saving the world. Wow. That feels overwhelming. It feels like, how do I even do this? Where do I start? And what can I do?

And so Rosemerry in this poem, she's taking us from saving the world and feeding the hungry children, a little bit more specific, but she brings it to something that we can do. "So I practice opening my heart right here in this room." And I would say so much about dharma practice, so much about meditation practice is this very movement from taking it away from concepts, ideas, beliefs, notions, opinions that are in the mind and bringing them to something more tangible here and now. Opening the heart, feeling the brokenheartedness, and meeting the broken heart with an open heart, as best we can. As best we can. We can't always do that. It's not always available for us. But there's this way if we get lost in just our ideas about how the world should be, then we get paralyzed and kind of closed down.

And so Rosemerry is pointing to, can we go from these ideas and notions to just our actual felt experience? Just in the same way with meditation, we are feeling the sensations of breathing, feeling the sensations in the body, opening to sounds, things that are happening right here, right now. Because there's this way if we are lost in concepts and ideas about how things should be and then we map them onto how things actually are. We have these ideas of, you know, these expectations we might say or hopes or wishes or how things should be and then we map them onto what's actually happening. It never fits. It just doesn't.

And there's this way when we are feeling this, "Oh, wait. I want things to be a certain way, but I'm experiencing this and they're not the same." And when we feel this gap between what we're experiencing and what we want to be experiencing, there's dukkha.[2] This is part of dukkha. Some of you know this word dukkha often gets translated as suffering. But it's an amazing word. It's a single word that has this wide, wide range of meaning from just this terrible, horrible, awfulness to just this slight little something's not quite right. One word for this huge range. So dukkha is when we have these ideas and we have our experience, they don't match and we feel like, oh, things should be different. Maybe it's not even clear how they should be different. We

just have this feeling like things should be different. This is the dukkha that the Buddha is pointing to with his second noble truth.

So not only is this part a feeling of dukkha, but there's this way in which Rosemerry is pointing to in this poem, when we feel this mismatch between our experience and what we want, these ideas, sometimes we feel like, "Oh, I'm doing it wrong." We may not even be sure what doing it wrong means. Maybe it's not that explicit, but there's this way in which we might have this feeling of being inadequate. Whatever I'm doing, it's not enough. It's insufficient. Inadequate. And then somehow that turns into, "I'm inadequate. I'm insufficient" in some kind of way. Often this isn't explicit, but this is kind of the feeling of the dukkha that shows up.

And Rosemerry in this poem, she points to, okay, what are some ways in which we can meet that feeling of insufficiency, the feeling of inadequacy, of somehow not being enough? And so here are some lines from the poem. She says, "One willing heart can't stop a war. But today, the invitation is clear to be ridiculously courageous in love. To love as if it matters, as if the world depends on it."

So she's encouraging us. Can we open our hearts? Which happens here in the present moment. Not the idea of opening our hearts, but can we do that as best we can? It's not always available for us. Sometimes we're closed down and the suffering is great and we can't just open our hearts. But Rosemerry is encouraging us to do this. And not only that, many of you will know these lines, these famous lines from the Dhammapada.[3] "Hatred does not end by hatred. By love alone does it end. This is a timeless truth."

So there's hatred, there's obvious hatred, but this word hatred, we could also say in really small ways, refers to this subtle way in which we're saying, "I don't want this. I don't want this experience. I don't want what's going on in my mind right now. I don't want what's happening in the world." So this word hatred can stand for this way in which we want those people over there to start doing something different, or it can also be this way of like, "Oh, I don't like this experience I'm having. I want another one, dang it." But that could be obvious or subtle in so many ways.

So can we like this idea of love? Maybe love is too strong of a word. Maybe we can use something like openness or maybe just warmheartedness or maybe we can use a word of goodwill or what about just non-aversion, right? You know, just stop pushing away in the subtle ways that we do, right? It's incredible the different ways that we can push away experiences.

So, Rosemerry has in this poem, "I practice opening my heart right here in this room and being gentle with my insufficiency." So maybe gentle is a way that we could think about this word love also. So this idea of mettā,[4] bringing mettā. Many of you will be familiar with this Pali word. It gets translated lots of different ways. Loving-kindness is a very common way, sometimes

translated as love, goodwill, benevolence. I like to use warmheartedness. I like warm-heartedness because it's vague enough. There's like a room there for lots of different ways to find oneself with it.

And with this mettā practice, as part of Buddhist practice, is a way in which this warm-heartedness, we could even say this non-aversion, just gets developed so that it can be expressed in universal dimensions, like just bigger and bigger and bigger circles of individuals or situations. And there's this way that we can cultivate this. I appreciate so much that Buddhist practice is not expecting us to just turn our mind like, "Oh, that's a nice poem. Okay, I guess I'm going to be courageously in love all the time now." Wouldn't that be great? Right? But of course, it doesn't work like that. Instead, there's this, let's cultivate this. Let's develop it. It's this recognition that it's not so easy. There's this way in which it takes some effort, some intention. Otherwise, there would not be any of these terrible awfulnesses that are happening in the world, right? If we all just were like, "Oh, love, let's do that," we'd be fine.

So there's mettā practice. Many of you will be familiar with this. This is a part of a meditation practice where we bring to mind a lovable being. This can be an actual being or an imaginary one. It doesn't have to be a human being. I appreciate so much that Bhikkhu Bodhi,[5] he's this renowned scholar in our tradition. He talks about, he teaches a lot about mettā and he says that he starts with a squirrel. Ajahn Brahm,[6] another senior person in this tradition, he talks about how he starts with kittens. So, kittens, puppies, babies, squirrels, or maybe there was somebody earlier in your life that was a coach or a mentor that really made a big difference in your life. I had a swim coach when I was really young and he really supported me and helped me in my little swim career that I had when I was young. And when I think back, that was just the pure generosity of his heart, taking me aside, having special workouts, giving me some special directions. And it was, you know, what a beautiful thing at that age. I just, you know, didn't appreciate it. But now I really do.

So to bring to mind a lovable being with whom we have an uncomplicated relationship. This is key. Uncomplicated relationship. Bring them to mind and we wish them well. So often we're saying phrases, "May you be safe, may you be happy, may you be healthy, may you live with ease." So in the same way with mindfulness meditation, we might have the breath, the mind wanders, and we come back to the breath. With loving-kindness meditation, we say these phrases, the mind wanders, we come back to the phrases.

And this mettā meditation, sometimes you feel things, this warm-heartedness, sometimes you don't. And that's okay. It's not like we're trying to manufacture, conjure up, or create something. We're just creating the conditions in which this love, non-aversion, warm-heartedness can arise.

There's this way in which, as I spoke about it earlier, we have these ideas about how things should be and then there's how things actually are. That happens with mettā practice as well. We might think, "Oh, this should be easy," or "I should have this love bursting out of my chest in some kind of way or something like this." And then we feel like, "Oh, I'm not feeling this. I'm doing these phrases." And then we can either be dismissive, "that doesn't work," or, "Oh, yeah. Here's another indicator that I'm inadequate in some kind of way." It's so amazing, right? How we can just take all these experiences and insert, "this means that something's wrong with me."

Maybe I'll just say that mettā shows up in so many different ways. It can be just a warmth or a gentleness. Maybe it's just a calming, like a settling, or maybe there's just a sense of soothing, like some of the ragged edges of our experience are getting soothed in some kinds of ways. Or maybe it feels energetic and bright. Maybe it feels like, "yes," you know, this kind of an energy. Or maybe there's a feeling of healing to it. Maybe that's not even clear, but there's a feeling like some type of healing can be happening with this. So, just to open it up that this mettā, when we're doing mettā practice, can show up in so many different ways.

Because if we feel like it has to be one way, not only if it's not that way, we're either dismissive or think we're doing it wrong or something's wrong with us. I kind of had that feeling at the beginning when I did mettā. I was like, "Yeah, whatever, I don't want to do that." But I really started to just do mindfulness practice. But mindfulness practice is great, concentration practice is great, but it can also be a trap. Because there's this way in which if we're not noticing how we are always thinking like, "Oh my gosh, I can't believe I was lost from the breath for so long," and "Oh, here we go again." If we're not noticing that little grumbling that's happening in the back of the mind whenever we wake up after being lost in thought and come back, there's this way in which we're cultivating grumbliness because we're doing it again and again and again every time. So it's really a tremendous support to have some of this warmheartedness as an integral part of insight or mindfulness meditation or concentration practice.

I heard this story recently from another dharma teacher. I'm going to adjust it a little bit here for this, but I just love this story. So, it's a brother and a sister that are living in the woods and the brother goes out for the day and a thunderstorm shows up, a terrible, terrible thunderstorm. And the brother takes refuge in a cave, not knowing that this was spider's cave. So spider came and wrapped up the brother, hung him from his feet, wrapped him up and then injected him with some type of poison. Here's brother hanging in the cave upside down.

Sister says, "Uh, brother didn't come home on time. Oh, my feckless brother probably took shelter in spider's cave. Maybe spider has him." So, sister goes to the cave. Spider isn't there and sees brother hanging upside down, wrapped up in spiderweb stuff and not moving. But she knows what to do. She knows what to do. She goes out and gets all kinds of wood, lights a fire, a big roaring fire, and she's pouring water on it. And then there's steam coming off of the fire,

maybe on rocks that are nearby the fire. She's pouring water on. There's more and more steam. And the steam is melting the spider web that's tying up brother. And it's also bringing the poison out, you know, out of the pores. So eventually the spiderwebs get undone enough, the poison gets drawn out of brother and he's able to get himself down and they walk home together.

We could say this steam that helped undo the way that the person was wrapped up and helped to bring the poison out is mettā. It is mettā. And this way that we wrap ourselves up thinking like, "Oh, things have to be different, must be different," this could be a way in which we're wrapping ourselves up, tying ourselves up into our ideas about how things should be. And then the poison could be this way that we're feeling like we're insufficient or inadequate in some kind of way because things don't match the idea of how they should be. Mettā, loving-kindness, warm-heartedness is a way that can help melt this, help to find this way forward from the way that we get wrapped up and stuck in so many different ways.

From yet another dharma teacher, I heard this expression as he was describing mettā practice. He said we can sometimes have these ideas that if we're going to do mettā it has to only be, you know, big love in some kind of way. But often what happens, and wow, I have had this experience where you say, "Okay, I'm going to do this mettā practice. I'm going to sit down and do these phrases, bring to mind a lovable being and do these phrases." And I have had everything except mettā arise. In fact, like the opposite of mettā. I could not believe how much hatred was coming up in me. I was like, "Wow, where did this come from?" I thought I was a nice person. Where is all this stuff coming from? It was really troubling. Honestly, it was really troubling. This happened on a retreat for me and I spoke to the teacher and the teacher said, "Yeah, this is what happens sometimes with mettā practice is all the non-mettā starts to show up." There's a way in which this practice sometimes is a purification practice, which is not comfortable, not fun, but it's part of what's allowing new ways of being to show up. In some ways, it's part of the metabolism or purification or cleansing of what's in our hearts and minds.

So this dharma teacher, he was describing this. I heard this many years later and he said, "We don't have to be squeaky clean mettā machines." I love this idea. Like we are not robots just having phrases, just giving out love. We're humans. We have these rich, complicated, multi-dimensional lives. Of course we do. Of course we do. And can that be okay? Can that be okay that if sometimes we sit down and we want to do some mettā practice, we might not feel mettā? Can we hang in there anyway and do this practice?

Some of you will be familiar with Sharon Salzberg.[7] She's a person who's primarily responsible for bringing this practice to the West. And she describes that when she was first learning to do this, she felt like it was so dry and boring. But here she is, "May you be safe. May you be happy. May you be healthy. May you live with ease." And she thought, "Oh, gee." But then she was in

her room during the retreat, so she had been doing it for some time, and she was in a room and she describes where she dropped a glass jar. She says, "You idiot." You know, she hears herself saying that and then she says, "But I love you anyway." She said, "Oh, that's different." She was used to calling herself an idiot, but to have this, "But I love you anyway," just show up, it's like, "Oh, okay, this mettā, it was doing something." It didn't feel like it. She didn't notice it at the time, but this idea that, "Oh, okay, it does have an impact."

And I described this mettā practice as bringing a lovable being to mind, someone with whom we have an uncomplicated relationship, and to do these phrases. But it can be enormously helpful to also do mettā for ourselves. For some people, this is the most difficult, it turns out, because we have this sense that we don't deserve it or we've done all of these wrongs or maybe it's not even clear why. We just know that we don't like to do it.

It's kind of interesting. I would say in our society these days, we've created a society that has this conflict, you know, like go out there and get things done, save the world, but don't do things for yourself. That's really selfish. Don't take care of yourself, you know, that's selfish. But go out, save the world, get a successful career, be the best parent ever. You know, we kind of have these, there's so many podcasts and books, you know, they're all about this. So there's this way in which we feel like, "Oh, but to actually love ourselves and to care for ourselves..." We can't really do so much more unless we are caring for ourselves, it turns out. And we usually don't find this except the hard way when we feel ourselves completely burned out and depleted and feeling like, "I just can't do it anymore."

So there's this way in which I would say, you know, we often hear this on the airlines, right? To put your own oxygen mask on first before you put it on somebody else. The Buddha talked about this too, of course not about airplanes, but he says, "If you're sinking in the mud yourself, it's quite impossible for you to pull out someone else who is sinking in the mud. If you're not sinking in the mud, it's quite possible for you to pull out someone else who is sinking in the mud."

So, this real invitation is, can we have some loving-kindness for ourselves? Can we expand? Start where it's easy with the lovable being and maybe stay there for quite some time, months, years, honestly. Because what happens is if you stay there, it just starts naturally to overflow. It just naturally starts to overflow. Or you can start with the lovable being and then just maybe expand. "May I be safe. May I be happy. May I be healthy. May I live with ease."

And just imagine if we were to have some loving-kindness for ourselves, how our life would unfold differently. We'd be more willing to take risks, produce something that maybe could be a tremendous benefit in the world. Our creativity, take risks with creativity, show up in the world offering our beautiful things that we have to offer. Or maybe there's this way we wouldn't be so

hesitant to express love to others because we're not expecting that they actually have to return it back to us in precisely the way that we want it. And maybe there's this way that we're not asking other people to make us feel better. If we have love for ourselves, then we're not like secretly demanding to everybody, "Please love me, please like me, please pay attention to me," which we do in so many ways, right?

So this idea of giving love to others, to show up in the world for others, requires that we have a foundation in which we have some love for ourselves. So it's not about what we think we've done or what we've not done or what we think we deserve or don't deserve or how we think we measure up. It has nothing to do with that. It's just the simple fact that we exist, that we're human.

And when I first started training to be a Dharma teacher, part of what we would do is I would sit in on practice discussions. You know, when a dharma teacher would meet individually with a practitioner and they would have a talk about their practice and I would be like a third person just seeing how a dharma teacher did that. This is how Gil trained. This is how I trained. This is just how all dharma teachers get trained. The very first time I did that, it was a retreat. So, you know, hours every day of sitting in on this, I actually was shocked. I just didn't know how there were so many versions, different details of course, but so many different versions of people showing up saying, "I don't feel good about myself. I feel inadequate." Often it wasn't that clear, explicit. Sometimes it was, but it was just this way in which we so often just don't feel like we're enough in some kind of way.

You're enough. I promise you. All of you. Everybody. And we don't hear this nearly enough, I would say. And so often we have to say it to ourselves. And this is where mettā practice really is a tremendous support, can be this way in which we can give this love and this care for ourselves so that we can, if we feel so moved, show up in the world so that we can help the world.

To give loving-kindness to ourselves is a foundation from which we can give to others. And then maybe one thing I'll say is, so what can support this movement of giving loving-kindness to ourselves? Can we just have a certain amount of confidence that our minds and hearts can grow? They can change. Neuroscientists tell us about neuroplasticity, right? That it's something that happens. So can we have a certain amount of confidence that things can be different and mettā practice is worth giving a try? And if it feels dry, if it feels boring, if it feels hard, maybe that's okay. It wasn't easy when, you know, trying to change things is never so easy in the beginning. But we are all so hungry for this, for this loving-kindness.

So can we have some confidence? We're just retraining the orientation or the intentionality of the heart and the mind towards warm-heartedness or non-aversion. And if it doesn't feel to be going well, can you have confidence anyway? You can borrow some of my confidence. I've done

a lot of mettā practice. I needed to do a lot of mettā practice. And for me, it was on another long retreat and I just had a lot of heartbreak and a lot of tears, a lot of sadness and a lot of just feeling awful week after week after week after week. And I was meeting with the teachers regularly and this one teacher said to me, "You know Diana, loving-kindness practice is life-changing. Why don't you try it?"

I'm so thankful that this person said it to me. I happened to be in the retreat setting at that time. So, you know, I left his office and boom, started doing it right that moment for quite some time. But I really needed that encouragement. I had this idea like, "Oh no, it's all about mindfulness." And it's true, mindfulness and concentration can be really helpful, but I just hadn't seen how much I was beating myself up and wasn't allowing my heart to soften.

Conclusion

So let me just plant the seeds for some of this loving-kindness. I'll end with reading this poem again. This poem is "Because" by Rosemerry Wahtola Trommer.

So I can't save the world. Can't save even myself. Can't wrap my arms around every frightened child. Can't foster peace among nations. Can't bring love to all who feel unlovable.

So I practice opening my heart right here in this room and being gentle with my insufficiency.

I practice walking down the street heart first. And if it's insufficient to share love, I will practice loving anyway.

I want to converse about truth, about trust. I want to invite compassion into every interaction.

One willing heart can't stop a war. One willing heart can't feed all the hungry.

And sometimes daunted by a task too big, I tell myself, what's the use of trying?

But today the invitation is clear. To be ridiculously courageous in love, to open the heart like a lilac in May, knowing freeze is possible and opening anyway.

to take love seriously, to give love wildly, to race up to the world as if I were a puppy, adoring and unjaded, stumbling on my own exuberance.

To feel the shock of indifference, of anger, of cruelty, of fear, and stay open.

To love as if it matters. As if the world depends on it.

To love as if it matters. As if the world depends on it.

It's a beautiful thing to practice together, to allow ourselves to be touched, to cultivate openness.

Thank you. Thank you. And I wish you all a wonderful rest of the day, safe travels home, and may you love wildly a little today. Thank you.

---

1. **Rosemerry Trommer:** An American poet. ↩
2. **Dukkha:** A Pali word often translated as "suffering," "stress," or "unsatisfactoriness." It refers to the fundamental unsatisfactoriness and painfulness of mundane life. ↩
3. **Dhammapada:** A collection of sayings of the Buddha in verse form and one of the most widely read and best-known Buddhist scriptures. ↩
4. **Mettā:** A Pali word meaning loving-kindness, friendliness, benevolence, amity, friendship, good will, kindness, love, sympathy, and active interest in others. ↩
5. **Bhikkhu Bodhi:** An American Buddhist monk and scholar. ↩
6. **Ajahn Brahm:** A British-Australian Theravada Buddhist monk. ↩
7. **Sharon Salzberg:** An American author and teacher of Buddhist meditation practices in the West." ↩

Additional talks by Diana at AudioDharma.org

Additional transcripts and links to YouTube videos at Moonpointing.com with deep bows of appreciation to Dan Murphy.

More information about Diana's teachings at DianaClarkDharma.org

Share the love! Donate to Diana