

## **Loving What Is** *by Vajrapriya*

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*Talk given on the men's weekend event at Padmaloka in January 2008*

**Jnanavaca:** My name is Jnanavaca and I'm just going to introduce Vajrapriya... not that you haven't met Vajrapriya – all of us have met Vajrapriya, and you've probably had a sense of him already even if you don't know him very well – but I said that I would chair the talk that he's about to give.

I just want to say a few words about Vajrapriya... his name means “devotee of the vajra”. I just asked him whether I could say it was “lover of the vajra”, and he said I could (rather sheepishly) ...[LAUGHTER]... so, “lover of the vajra” is Vajrapriya. *Priya* is this beautiful word meaning “devotion”, or “love” – it's a very sweet Sanskrit word. And *vajra*, of course, is the diamond thunderbolt of reality.

And Vajrapriya, I think, is very well named. The vajra side of him is, I think, particularly obvious in his mental clarity, in his determination, in his clarity, and something about his no-nonsense attitude to the situation – to life – to whatever he finds himself in.

I mean, this weekend he was asked to step in and lead this weekend at, I don't know, 24 hours notice – he only found out the day before yesterday – and it is not untypical of him just to say, ‘Yes, I'll do it’, and then do it with more than competence: with real care, concern and flair. He is a very, very devoted man, in the sense of devoted to whatever the situation is. For a long time he was the Centre Manager in Cambridge, in the Cambridge Buddhist Centre, and he worked largely on his own to keep that Centre going; I'm sure lots of other people contributed but Vajrapriya had a major, major role there, before he became Mitra Convenor in Cambridge.

And the other aspect is the tenacity; Vajrapriya won't let go of the truth. We were recently studying last year with Bhante (Sangharakshita)... and it is a bit daunting to study with the great man! Most of us were a bit sheepish about asking questions more than once – do you know what I mean? – if you ask something, and then Bhante says, ‘.....’, and you sort of say, ‘Ok!’... But not Vajrapriya! Vajrapriya said, ‘But, what about...?’ and, ‘What about again...?’ and, ‘How does that square with this...?’ – and he had this tenacity which was delightful: courageous and delightful. So, there is something of the “*vajra*” in all of those things.

But the “*priya*” is in his care and concern, I think: for people, for the situation, for the Dharma, for the truth – and there is real love in that. Despite what he was saying yesterday, he is a very, very open-hearted, warm-hearted man. I've known him for about fourteen or fifteen years, and I know that. So, Vajrapriya is very, very suitable, eminently suitable, to talk about *metta*: and his title is, *Loving What Is*.

[APPLAUSE]

### **Finding and Clearing Away the Spring of Metta**

**Vajrapriya:** Thank you for that very generous introduction, Jnanavaca.

Last year I spent a fair bit of time in Spain – or actually this was 2006 – a fair bit of time in the

mountains of Spain, at what is now called “Akashavana”; my partner was opening up the retreat centre that is the ordination retreat centre for women now. And I learned quite a bit about springs; if you live in the mountains of Spain, you have to know quite a bit about springs.

And when a spring isn't used – when it's not kept and maintained – what happens is that it sort of slowly turns down into a trickle; it gets clogged up with bits of moss and earth, and the spring loses its life.

And what you do, when you open up a new spring, is rather sweet, really; it's a very gentle operation. You see a leak coming out of some fissure in the rock and you sort of reach in, and you find out where the earth and bits of moss are, and you very gradually remove these accretions of organic matter.

It's tempting to sort of take a bulldozer to it; sometimes people do this, or take a jack-hammer or something and tear it back and get a nice new fresh wall for the water to come through. But springs are mysterious things and sometimes they don't like this; sometimes they decide to find a new route and they just go and end up somewhere completely different; they find an underground route somewhere completely different.

Also, interestingly, you are meant to do the opening up of a spring in the full moon. I love that – I'm not quite sure what to make of it, but that's what they say.

So I think *metta* is a bit like this. I think that allowing *metta* to flow is a little bit like this. It is a very organic, very delicate process. And I think that *metta* is like the water table; it's like a high water table. It is as if there is this infinite capacity of *metta* present; it's just trying to find a way through all these fissures in our being, trying to find a way to express itself; and all we need to do is find these routes and find out how to de-clog them a little bit.

And we've all got these routes. I'm sure we can all find the ways that *metta* expresses itself. Sometimes it expresses itself in a particular way, or to particular people, and we just need to find and encourage these modes of expression.

So, as I was saying last night, I think it is quite easy to look for *metta* in the wrong place, or in the wrong way.

I was speaking with Saccanama and he said it's a little bit like a panto (we've got a pantomime going on in Cambridge tonight) – you know: ‘...it's behind you!’ We can be desperately looking for *metta* somewhere but actually it's right behind us.

We might be looking for some huge torrent of some really strong feeling pouring out... I remember my first FWBO meditation teacher, a very wonderful man, and whenever he gave a talk on the Metta Bhavana it was so inspiring. I heard many of them, and I used to sit there completely enraptured, and he would speak about *metta* not being this piddly, tiddly emotion, but this ‘*huge volcanic emotion that pours forth!*’... and – you know – I would sit there and be all inspired and it was great to hear that... and yet at the same time it can also lead us to looking for the wrong kind of thing. That's no criticism of his teaching – it definitely had the right effect – but maybe that's not actually how we experience it.

So I want to look at ways that different people might experience *metta*, and I want to look at ways of starting to clear these blockages.

## The Five Buddha Mandala Families and Metta

And one way I thought of looking at the different styles is by considering the Five-Buddha Mandala (some of you will be familiar with this: maybe others aren't). It is an illustration both of Enlightened consciousness, and of how Enlightened consciousness gets distorted by ego-clinging into the Samsaric forms that we know so well.

So it's as if the totality of the Buddha Mind is so awesome and multi-faceted that the Vajrayana decided to refract it into particular components, and over time it got refracted into at least five forms – the five forms I'll look at today. It is a very complex symbol, the Five-Buddha Mandala, so I won't go into it in anything like any detail.

So there are these five Buddhas – the five Jinas – that are each associated with a particular set of qualities that include both Nirvanic experience and also Samsaric experience. I'll try to explain this a little bit.

They each express the way that Enlightened energy expresses itself, and the way that Enlightened energy gets distorted into Samsaric energy, and each of these Buddhas can be said to be the head of a particular Buddha family that in some way ties together a set of qualities. So we can be said to belong to some of these families more than others.

It's a bit like a sort of Buddhist personality/psychological analysis – you know – a bit like a Buddhist 'Myers-Briggs', or something like this... and I'll skirt through them fairly quickly in terms of the type of love they may express – 'how would someone in this particular Buddha family express love?' – *maybe*. (The way I'm looking at this isn't traditional; I'm just trying to draw on what I know of the tradition to imagine how these families *might* express love).

### The Vajra Family: Mirror-Like Wisdom Versus Hatred

So we'll start off in the East of the Mandala, with Akshobya. Akshobya is the Blue Buddha, associated with the Vajra; he's the head of the Vajra family. He is said to have a particular wisdom: the 'mirror-like wisdom' – an objective, clear wisdom, very steady. He's got the 'touching the earth' mudra. A very imperturbable, steady figure.

So, maybe the way that Akshobya (or a member of the Akshobya family) would express wisdom is a bit more like 'equanimity': very reflective, objective. This can sometimes be a bit infuriating, I think, especially for maybe more passionate people – maybe especially for women it can be a bit infuriating (question mark!) – while other people can find it very invigorating and can really appreciate it. It can come across a bit cool – maybe even a bit bristly. But it's worth remembering that the *vajra* is not only a symbol of reality, it is also a symbol of compassion; so there is something very compassionate in the purity of the "mirror-like wisdom".

So, members of the Vajra family are *steady* people; they are good people to have around in a fix. As I said yesterday, they may be the sort of person who you don't necessarily think of as a good friend until you find that, in a particular fix, your good friends have vanished and you are left with this steady Vajra friend.

They can be a bit poky – maybe they call a spade a spade – they can be a bit brusque; and they may let you know if they think you are harming yourself. This is maybe something a bit like "tough love" or what used to be called "fierce friendship" – and of course we can see the kind of dangers that this leads towards... Akshobya is associated with the poison of hatred, so Vajra-family people tend to be given to ill-will, irritation, criticism, judgement and hatred. These are the kinds of ways

that the mirror-like wisdom gets distorted... and I'll be saying more about this.

### **The Ratna Family: Generosity Versus Pride**

Let's move on to Ratnasambhava, the Buddha in the South. Ratnasambhava means 'Jewel-born'. He is the head of the Jewel Family, the 'Ratna' family – the 'wish-fulfilling jewel', in fact – a symbol of generosity. Ratnasambhava is a sunny character, a bright yellow Buddha associated with bounty and abundance. So Ratna-people – Jewel-people – are sunny, generous, effusive people. They tend to delight in the people around them. They appreciate the world around them; they appreciate the people around them. Generous with praise and appreciation, they've got an eye for beauty. They tend to really encourage the people that they meet.

It could all get a bit self-indulgent, maybe... could get a little bit too much, a little bit too lovey-lovey... who knows? Chögyam Trungpa talks of the Ratna-people as being "fat" – a sort of certain "psychic fatness"! And Ratnasambhava is also associated with the poison of pride, so maybe there is a certain kind of pride associated with having all this to give. They can give and they can give... and the ego can appropriate that bounty.

### **The Padma Family: Warmth & Love Versus Craving**

Moving on to the 'Padma' family in the West... and Amitabha is the head of the Padma family – the red Buddha; the ruby-red Buddha. His primary quality is love: so, normally when we think of love, of *metta*, we think of Amitabha. He just seems to speak of love, of warmth, of strong emotion – so it's very easy to think of *metta* in these terms: strong emotion, radiating.

Padma people are not only very warm but very attractive; it's really lovely to be around Padma people because you can sort of just get off on all this warmth they're giving you! You know that they *want* to be with you; this is the great thing about Padma people – you don't have to wonder about it, as you do with a Vajra person – with a Padma person you *know* they like you, and that's great! That's just great.

But... it can get a little bit engulfing, a little bit attached... and Amitabha is associated with the poison of craving. So this is the flip-side of this strong warmth, is that it can get a bit attached: the ego likes this and it wants more and it wants more... and maybe Padma people get a little bit attached by what they want in this other person. They're giving all this love but actually maybe they want quite a bit from them as well, and maybe when they don't get what they want, then maybe things change...?

### **The Karma Family: Action versus Envy & Busy-ness**

So, moving on to the North, we've got Amoghasiddhi, the Green Buddha of the North. He is the head of the 'Karma' family, the action-family, whose emblem is the double-vajra. So he has the energy, the accomplishment – his name means the 'accomplishment that isn't obstructed'. Somehow he knows exactly how to cleave through reality to bring about the most beneficial results for everything around him. So Karma-family people are very *responsive*. They see what is needed, and they act. This is a way that love can express itself simply through *action*, simply through responding to the situation.

I'll tell you a story of one New Year that I spent with my partner. At the time, we didn't see much of each other, and we had, I think, about five days down on the South coast over New Year, and this was much looked forward to. And on the drive down, she got iller and iller and iller... and then we arrived there and she just crashed out with flu, and she stayed that way for the full five days; and

she felt terribly guilty about this – you know – “Our wonderful holiday!”; “Oh, what a shame.”

...And actually I loved it! – in a funny sort of way, I loved it – because I knew exactly what I needed to do; I just needed to look after her. I didn’t have to decide “where are we going to go today and what are we going to do, and what are we going to eat, and where are we going to eat?” and all these sorts of things that actually get me a little bit kind of anxious and edgy. All I had to do was make the food and look after her and read when she was asleep; it was very simple.

I always personally feel happier when I know what I can do to help. I do some voluntary work at a hospice, and so I’m surrounded by all this suffering, by all this pain: people in the most appalling states of physical discomfort and psychological pain – the most appalling things that can happen to the body – I didn’t realize! And I can’t really do very much... but I *can* make them a cup of tea; and I *can* sit and chat, if that’s what they want.

...So, this is the ‘Karma-family’. So what is the danger of the Karma-family? Well, maybe the danger of love expressed in this way is it can get a bit *busy*; it can get a bit too focused on doing things for people; sorting things out; making sure everything’s just so; and not quite noticing that these objects that you’re tending to are actually people. It can get a little bit too superficially, objectively focused on people as objects rather than as living human beings.

Also, Amoghasiddhi is associated with the poison of envy. So people who are quite focused on accomplishments, focused on activity, focused on having effects out there in the world... the ego can appropriate that and start trying to size up: “how am I doing in relation to other people’s achievements in the world?”

### **The Buddha Family: Spaciousness Versus Spaciness**

And then to the central Buddha, Vairocana. Vairocana is the White Buddha and, in a way, his qualities encompass all the other ones. He is the central, defining figure of this particular Mandala. But he does have some *particular* characteristics. He is head of the ‘Buddha’ family, so he is a central principle – he encompasses all the others – and so there is a sense of *spaciousness*, of all-encompassing.

So, Buddha-family people tend to be very *spacious* people – very accommodating; un-reactive. They sort of don’t, somehow... (it’s a bit curious to me)... they somehow don’t feel they have to get into *judgements* about things; they don’t have to come down on one side or the other. And because of this they can have a kind of pacifying effect on the people around them. Even if people around them are caught up in strong feelings or strong conflicts – internal conflicts or external conflicts – the accommodating spaciousness of a Buddha-family person can somehow just hold all this together and pacify the situation. They may be quite contemplative people.

The tendency, the possible danger, of the Buddha-family people is maybe a bit more ‘spaciness’ than ‘spaciousness’. Vairocana is associated with the poison of ignorance, so Buddha-family people can maybe be a bit kind of vague. People like myself can call them ‘flakey’ because they seem so open to anything – they just don’t seem to want to make any kind of critical decision about anything!

I was in a taxi on the way up here and I was talking to the cab-driver, a really interesting guy who was telling me all about his spiritual experiences! And it was just great because there was this kind of sense within me that I wanted to decide whether he was a complete flake, whether he was lying, or whether it was all true. He was telling me about seeing people’s past lives side-by-side like a sort of movie-screen alongside people; seeing lights on people’s bodies depending on where their

illnesses are; and having spirits inhabiting him and going away again; and it was this fantastic conversation... and for once I could sit there and really enjoy it, without thinking, 'Flake!' or 'Loony!' or 'Nutter,' or whatever it is... [LAUGHTER] ...I managed to get a little bit of 'Buddha-family' wisdom there, maybe!

So that's the five families.

### **What Blocks Metta?**

...So, I've said that *metta* is like this kind of 'high water-table'. So do you believe this? Do you believe that *metta* is 'there for the having', if you like – there for the expression? If there's nothing in the way, do we believe that it can just flow? I just want to say that I'm talking about it in this one particular way – there are many different ways of talking about *metta*. Very often it is talked about in the sense that we find the little seeds of *metta* and we water them with awareness and let them grow – and that's another perfectly valid model – I'm not making any critique against that model, I just felt inspired to bring in a different model. The more models we've got, as long as they're vaguely correct, the better, I think. It's not a metaphysical statement, the sense that *metta* is there waiting to express itself; maybe it's a bit poetic. But it does seem to me that when superficialities occasionally get wiped aside, then *metta* is there.

I like a story that Stephen Covey tells about being on a train – (this is the man who wrote *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People*) – he's on a train and next to him there's a guy with a few kids, and the kids were just running riot up and down the train; and Stephen Covey was trying to be all good and saintly and patient and so on. And eventually he just got so riled he leaned over to this guy and said: "Excuse me, sir – do you realise that your children are causing a lot of distress?" And this guy said, "Oh... I'm so sorry. My wife – their mother – just died, and I don't know what to do with them."

And suddenly the whole mental state shifts – and Covey just says, "Oh, I'm really sorry – is there anything I can do?"

Suddenly compassion – *metta* – was just *there*; it was available; but it just needed a little bit of understanding to get rid of the superficialities of the situation.

Do you really want people in the fourth stage of your Metta Bhavana to come to harm? – (don't answer that!)... [LAUGHTER]... Would it be easier to forgive them – to love them – if they were terminally ill? ...I'll come back to this.

What I am going to do now is speak a little bit more personally about what I feel blocks *metta* for me. I am a bit more of a Vajra type... and this is not meant as a public confession – I just want to give you something that may stimulate your own reflections, and hopefully some of the things I say will be true for you and that will sort of ring bells, but I'm sure each of us have got our own particular patterns that we need to look at as well. So I'm going to talk about the ways that I work with my particular patterns, and in the workshop hopefully you will have the chance to reflect on your own particular patterns and how you can work – share ways that you work. And in the groups we'll have the chance to talk about it.

So... I've said Akshobya's wisdom is the 'mirror-like wisdom' – Akshobya, the head of the Vajra family. And I think what happens is that the distorted version of Akshobya's wisdom is a kind of *broken* mirror, a kind of *fragmented* mirror. There are bits of the mirror missing, and there are other bits of the mirror that are distorting.

So Akshobya's mirror is objective; it is equanimous, it is unattached. And what happens is that when it gets shattered, it gets shattered by a sort of egoic clinging. And the trouble is that that distorted, fragmented mirror thinks it's still objective; it thinks it understands reality and it thinks that its judgments – its criticisms – are true; and this generates an aversive quality, or maybe it is generated by an aversive quality.

So some aspects of the mirror are pretty good; it reflects reality quite plainly. But other aspects either just *aren't allowed* – it's like: "This does not belong in my world!" – or it gets severely *distorted*. I'll try and elaborate on that a little bit.

I found myself saying to someone the other day (and I knew that this wasn't going to help it but I had to say it anyway!) – I said, "You know, I think you're being lazy." And at the time I thought, "There must be an NVC way of saying this, but I don't know what it is, and I don't care; I'm going to say it!" ...[LAUGHTER]... And actually it was profitable, because after the reaction we came to quite a good place; we came to quite a good understanding. But initially there was a sense that what I could see – *all* I could see – was *laziness* writ large across this person; it was like there was this behaviour, and there was this big label: "Lazy". And it seemed like the only way I could get *past* that was by saying, "This is what I see" ... actually I wasn't quite that open-handed with it... I just said, "I think you're being lazy!" – and then working to understand that actually there was some reason *why* this person was being lazy: why they were behaving the way they were.

I was on a solitary this last year and I was trying to work quite strongly with Metta Bhavana, and I got to the point of doing quite a bit of Metta Bhavana and bringing all these people to mind, and experiencing quite strongly my reactions to them: my judgements of them, my stories about them. And I thought, "What would it be like to suspend all these judgements and criticisms?" – you know, maybe just for a month or two, not forever! – just for a little while... and there was this sense of terror – it was like death! To suspend criticism felt like a kind of death to me; it felt like an outrage to my highest values, or the highest values of this distorted Vajra-type, *not* to have opinions and criticisms about things. It was like I was going to become brain-dead, a sort of dumbly smiling idiot or something!

I've got a bit of a reputation as an arch-critic of NVC (Non-Violent Communication) – because I abhor the idea that everyone's self-declared needs are valid! What if people are just deluded? What if they're just neurotic? They need to be *told*! They don't have a need for space – they're just lazy! ...[LAUGHTER]... So, there's much that could be said about the wise use of the critical faculty. I'd love to give a three-hour talk on it... [LAUGHTER] ...about judging behaviours and not people, and all this sort of thing... But I think the main thing to say is simply to *notice* – to notice the pain associated with judgment. That probably tells you if it's wise or unwise. Notice the quality of contraction or expansion; that will tell you the kind of mental state that you're in.

### **Mindfulness as a Technique to Unblock Ourselves**

So this moves onto ways of working: ways of working with these patterns.

The first way, I think, is simply mindfulness. It all boils down to mindfulness in the end, as someone said. It is a well-known psychological fact, I think, that that which we can't accept in others is usually some aspect of what we have a difficult relationship with in ourself. So, this is where there are bits of the mirror missing; it's like (and I'm just talking about myself now): "Weakness, especially in men, is just not allowed – I'm sorry..." So, if I meet someone who comes across as a bit kind of weak, then, ooh, I just don't want to go there, thank you very much – because there's some aspect in myself that just, well, you know – we're talking psychological conditioning here – but it sort of feels like I don't *allow* myself to be weak; it's just "not on". Someone once

asked me if I'd ever lost control – and I said, “No” – and they said, “Oh... oh, I'm sorry.” – which took me by surprise!

Loud people. Loud people are taboo, I'm afraid, in my world! Talkative up to a point... [LAUGHTER] ...but then, beyond that point, *no*. Not allowed. Not permitted in my world.

People who are unafraid to blow their own trumpets! Not allowed in my world. I'm quite happy to be praised but I won't do it myself – you know – I find it very difficult to say anything very sort of constructive and positive about myself, so I dislike it when I see it in others.

I find it very humbling to see how instinctive all these responses are; it is just so deeply conditioned. And I'll just go on to talking about the way that our – well, *my* – responses to people seem to be *immediate*. You know – when I meet them for the first time there is usually some kind of *immediate* response or reaction.

So, still working along the lines of mindfulness, I want to tell you about “Grafton Centre Practice”. Now the Grafton Centre is a local shopping mall in Cambridge – a covered shopping centre – and something I like to do there is get a sandwich and sit down on the little bench, and you have hundreds of people per hour – probably thousands of people per hour – pouring past you, just constantly coming. And it's a fantastic opportunity, because *they* don't really notice me sitting there eating my sandwiches, but I can kind of clock *them*. Actually, what I tend to clock (if my eyes are allowed to do their own thing) is all the pretty girls. So that's the first thing I clock – I just sort of track the pretty girls, and I just sort of sit there noticing that – “Oh, yeah, there's another... oh yeah, there's another one...” And I notice the aversion either to “ugly girls”, or to “brutish guys” – there's a bit of fear that arises with brutish guys; it's not just simply aversion – and I notice how semi-invisible *old people* are to me.

So what I try and do is bring attention to everyone roughly equally, just notice this completely knee-jerk response that seems to come, just flows over me as the people flow past me, and notice the little stories and the little judgements that come, as well. I find it quite humiliating, again, when I can tune in to this sort of *sotto-voce* little storyline that goes on in my daily life: all the judgments, all the stories that are going on in relationship to the people around me.

So as a practice on this retreat I encourage you just to notice that, as far as you can – just notice your reaction to people on the retreat – people you're drawn to, people you want to move away from, people in your study group who are saying stupid things! – people who say fantastic things! – just notice what is going on there. Is there any connection between your relationship to yourself and what you notice in these people?

So this is a basic level of psychological understanding I'm talking about – using mindfulness to bring attention to our responses to people around us, and learning. We can learn from these responses about ourself, and we can take learnings about ourself back out into these responses.

Just to be clear: there is nothing wrong with *liking or disliking* people, forming initial impressions. This is all *vedanā*; this is all the results of past conditioning. It is not karmic, in this sense. What *is* significant is being able to hang loose to them – to notice them, but not let them affect our behaviour significantly. And for that, we need awareness.

### **The Metta Bhavana Meditation Practice**

This leads on to another technique, so to speak: the Buddhist technique *par excellence* for this practice is Metta Bhavana, of course. Metta Bhavana is like a laboratory of awareness in which we



can start noticing these blocks, start noticing the missing bits of the mirror, start noticing the distorting bits of the mirror.

So, practically speaking, in *metta* practice, I encourage you not to be *doing* so much that you don't notice your *reactions*. Especially at the beginning of each stage, I recommend quite a lot of time just to be receptive – just to bring the person to mind as fully as possible, and just sort of come into relationship with them and just notice what's going on. Be curious! – “Is there anything in the way here?” – just try and get a feel for them – “Is there some ‘view’ of them? How am I feeling with this person? Is there something in the way here?”

And in the fifth stage something that I occasionally like to do, with the universalising, when you're spreading out – you know – I was taught to do it *geographically*, to spread out geographically, but sometimes what I like to do is find different ways of spreading out. Like, different stages of, say, everyone who is really very poor – people who are really suffering through extreme poverty – as one stage... and then people who are poor but just about getting along.... and then people who are reasonably well off... and then people who are filthy rich. And see – where does the *metta* flow easily, or where does it not flow easily?

Or children... and then young women... and then young men... middle aged women.... middle aged men... old women... old men... just see if there are any blocks, or any areas where the *metta* is very free.

So, again, we can use the groups (later) to discuss the Metta Bhavana, if there's anything you want to go into.

### **Bringing our Understanding to Bear in Our Lives**

So with the Metta Bhavana, and awareness generally in our life, we can bring this semi-conscious operation - of disliking, judging, liking - and start allowing transformation to take its place.

I'll tell you a little experience of a Karuna Appeal – I imagine most of you know about Karuna appeals – they are a very strong practice where you go door-knocking as part of a community for six weeks, raising funds for the Karuna Appeal, for the Karuna Trust. And it's a very strong experience; I think most people find it a strong experience. And on the first appeal I did, I was sharing a room with someone and we sort of didn't quite hit it off – we didn't really get on very well, you know – we were polite, and all that. And I noticed that whenever I came in the room he wouldn't make eye contact with me, and I started doing the smiley thing – just trying to get eye contact, and all that – and after a while, he gave me this very strong feedback... it was a bit over the top actually, but anyway... ...[LAUGHTER]... um... very strong feedback – about how he experienced my hatred! And I thought, “Uh-oh – I've been rumbled here! I'd thought I'd been covering it over with my nice little smile, but actually I was getting quite irritated and annoyed with him.” And he just said: “Look, I don't want anything to do with it, thank you very much.”

And I found myself in this complete crucible where here I was, sharing a room with this guy, and I had quite a few weeks to go, he didn't want anything to do with me thank you very much, I was feeling all this anger and ill will – and what was I going to do? And I was sitting with this in extreme discomfort for a few days.

And then something happened – I don't know what happened, I can't tell you – but I knew it had happened when one morning I was sitting in the kitchen and there was a guy doing the washing up. Now, the washing up – you know what washing up is like! I am the only person in the world who *knows* how to wash up, ok? And the same is probably true for you. I know how to wash up without

too many suds – you know – just enough suds... and, you know, rinse it all off properly... and not use too much hot water – energy efficiency and all that stuff.

And he was standing there with this hot water pouring away, suds up like this, and he was sort of *throwing* the crockery and plates in, and, you know, giving it a quick squidge... and.... and... I sort of looked at this, and I realized, “Actually – I’m not annoyed!” And when I realized that I wasn’t annoyed, all this love came up and I thought: “This is the perfect expression of him!” – this fantastically exuberant, over-the-top way of washing up – with *suds*, and *water*, and *noise* – it was just the perfect expression of this fantastically exuberant person. And something changed from then; it’s hard to say what, but it was a very significant moment for me. In fact I think that appeal was the most transformative experience I’ve had, in terms of working on hatred and harshness.

So, I think that judgment and criticism seems to be a deep pattern; maybe it’s fairly typical of a Vajra-family person. It’s a bit like the mind ticking over – the mind not really very aware of itself – just tends to settle into these patterns.

Another technique that I try to use, to work with this, is *conscious appreciation* of people – voiced rejoicing in people. This is a very simple practice, just noticing the positive aspects of the people around me that I just take for granted if I’m – you know – again, part of the ticking-over of the mind is just to completely take for granted everything vaguely positive and praiseworthy that people around me do, and focusing on the things that are wrong. So, yes, a very simple practice of appreciation and rejoicing, which is of course conducive of *mudita* (I’ll be referring to how the Brahma-viharas relate to the different techniques) – so *mudita*, or sympathetic joy.

A little quote from someone called Mark Rutherford:

*“It should be part of our private ritual to devote a quarter of an hour every day to the enumeration of the good qualities of our friends. When we are not active, we fall back idly upon defects, even of those whom we love most.”*

So, rejoicing in merit is a way of dealing with that.

### **Noticing Dukkha as a Source of Hatred and Aversion**

We could ask, “What causes hatred?” That’s quite a big question, isn’t it? What causes hatred?

You could have the very short answer, which is that hatred is one of the poisons, and it’s been associated with Samsara since beginningless time – full stop.

You could have a very long answer to do with psychological conditioning factors: looking at different behaviours in the past, and so on – how we have been conditioned; how we were raised.

I was struck by quite a short Buddhist answer. In a way it’s completely blindingly obvious, but it sort of hit me in a talk – I think it was by Vijayashri – on hatred. She said, very simply: “*All moments of hatred are conditioned by a moment of dukkha.*” It’s as simple as that. “*All moments of hatred are conditioned by a moment of dukkha.*” The simplicity of that, and the impersonality of that, were quite shocking to me: in dependence upon *dukkha* arises hatred, in this particular form. So the implication of this is very wide-ranging; if we can notice the initial *dukkha* we don’t have to follow through with hatred – “staying in the gap”, as it is often said.

Another technique, still related to mindfulness, but slightly different, is that I’m trying to get very interested in the various ways in which I *miss dukkha* and spin off into *aversion* of one kind or

another. So, typically a moment of *dukkha* arises in me, and immediately there's a sense of *blame*: "Who is responsible for this? This doesn't belong in my reality – who put it there?" So this brings about anger, judgmentalism, hatred, ill will, all the rest of it.

And I get so much of this, working at the Buddhist Centre. I deeply care about the Buddhist Centre. I can care too much, in my own particular way, because I might just happen to hear a phone being answered in a way that I judge to be "badly" – or I might hear a phone *not* being answered. Or I might see that leaflets aren't out, or whatever it is. What happens is immediate: "Who's not done that? Who's responsible for that?"

Cycling on my bicycle – it's *extraordinary* the amount this happens – someone gets in my way. Would you believe it? Someone *gets in my way!* And I just notice those little moments of "How dare you? How dare you pull across me?" Even if it was their right of way, still, "How dare you?" It's not so much a voice, but just this little kind of "Argh – he got in my way!" This is the egocentric mind that thinks everything should revolve around *me*; everything should allow me to have a smooth ride through life.

Or alternatively, witnessing someone else's pain. If I'm with someone and they're telling me about something that's difficult in their life, different things can happen. I can go into my head and try and find the right words to fix them – say the right thing – and that blocks me from actually noticing "Here is a real human being who is suffering". Tuning into them and just really being aware of them, and connecting that way.

Or something else that can happen when I witness someone else's pain - this happened with a friend of mine when I was trying to show them how to use the computer, and they were doing something really stupid – and they were getting really kind of fed up with this and frustrated... and I was getting frustrated at their stupidity! Because "It's obvious how you do this". And, you know, I was getting a bit frustrated trying to show them what to do, and they were getting more frustrated. And then I thought, "Oh god, they're suffering, aren't they? This is really painful for them, and it's really painful for me. And it's so unnecessary. It's all so unnecessary."

So just trying to *notice* the *dukkha* in the situation defuses all that frustration and aversion.

The practice that I use to try and get in here – just *noticing dukkha* as *dukkha* – is that I'm trying to use a very simple technique of breathing, breathing it in. You might have heard of *Tonglen*. It is just simply a way of approaching *dukkha* for what it is by taking it in, just breathing it in, and noticing it, not avoiding it, and breathing out a sense of spaciousness, patience, accommodation.

And this is the most fantastic practice because as soon as you do this you are immediately connected with the rest of humanity, because the whole of humanity – the whole of sentient existence – experiences *dukkha*: and if only I can rest with that, then there is immediate connection and compassion. This is the raw material of *bodhicitta* – the quicksilver elixir.

So – yes – this is a royal road to compassion, to *karuna*.

Just another quick thing about *dukkha*: you don't need to be *ashamed* of *dukkha*. I think there is a sense that there's something *wrong* with feeling *dukkha*. I think this is one reason why it is so easy to spin off into blame and all these other things, or self-blame – you know, there's the *dukkha* of self-blame – "There's something wrong with me", "There's something wrong with my practice", "There's something wrong with the practice that's been given me", "There's something wrong with... *me!* I'm put together wrong, or something!" And this is what can happen if there is a sense of *dukkha* arising internally. But we *don't need to feel ashamed* of *dukkha*, and we don't have to put

on a brave face. It's part of being human! Kathleen Raine says:

*"To make the imperfect perfect, it is enough to love it."*

### **To Know Reality, You Must Love Reality**

So this leads me on to the title of my talk, *Loving What Is*. And it brings me to my name. Yes, "devotee of the vajra" is one way it can be translated. A loose translation, I think, is "loving what is". The *vajra* is "what is"; it is just reality in its simple starkness. So Vajrapriya is simply "loving what is". It's actually the title of a book by someone called Byron Katie... which I've not read, to be honest!

So I want to tell you the story of how I got my name. It was given to me by Kulananda, and he explained to me, "Vajrapriya – devotee of the Vajra"; and he gave a little kind of addendum, a little kind of appendix, in a very kindly way which was quite a teaching that's been with me ever since. He said: "To know, you must love."

...To know, you must love. To know your friends you must love your friends. To know reality, you must love reality.

This has been an ongoing *koan*; I've been struggling with this. I don't want it to be true! Surely I can know just by knowing! – meditate like mad! I don't have to do all this messy "loving" stuff! But the thing is, while there's not love, there is always going to be imbalance in the mind; there's always going to be bits of the mirror missing. Love is the only thing that can approach "what is" fully.

Without love, we're always going to be relating to others in terms of "our view of the world", or "what we can get from them". What we really need is a willingness to really imaginatively occupy someone else's world – and that takes love; that *is* love, really. We can't explore the territory of humanity like a scientist – because other people aren't objects; they are whole worlds unto themselves. Iris Murdoch says: "Love is the difficult realization that something other than oneself is real."

So, yes – this is the territory of compassion, and maybe equanimity. Someone once said to me: "*Metta is what arises when you realize that being human isn't easy.*" I love this! That really is imbued with the flavour of *karuna* – of compassion.

### **Taking the Perspective of "Life and Death"**

So my final technique, if you like, isn't really a technique; it's all about perspective. I've called it "The Perspective of Life and Death". Ultimately, a lack of love is a failure of perspective – it's a failure of vision – or it's a diminished perspective, a diminished vision. To understand all is to forgive all. I mentioned Stephen Covey on the train; once he understood, he not only forgave these noisy children, he felt great compassion.

So this is, in a way, the flip-side of my name. To understand all is to forgive all; to understand all is to love all. There is a reciprocal relationship between loving and understanding. Bhante says:

*"One can only love people in so far as one understands them, and be ready to love them more when one understands them better."*

And the perspective of "life and death" is the ultimate vantage point. Aloka says:

*“All negative mental states are a failure of perspective.”*

So, how do we take the perspective of “life and death”?

Well, I was on a retreat with Prakasha a while ago; it was on the *Tibetan Book of the Dead*, and he did some very powerful rituals and reflections. And on one of the rituals he killed us all – which came as a shock! ...[LAUGHTER]... we thought it was a game but he assured us it wasn't, actually! And he read us *The Tibetan Book of the Dead – the Bardo Thodol*, and he got us to reflect on being in the Bardo – in the Bardo where we meet Yamaraja, the Lord of Death, who reflects back our life; he reflects back our *karma*. And he got us to imaginatively enter this world of having our life reflected back to us. And I don't know if he asked this question or if this was a question that arose for me, but the question was, “Have I loved well?” It seemed to boil down to this question – if I was in this position, it would sort of raise this question. “Have I loved well? If I were to die now, will I have loved well? Am I loving well?”

So I just think this is a very fruitful reflection to take. One of my favourite quotes from the Dhammapada is:

*“Others do not realise that we are all headed for death. Those who do realise it will compose their quarrels.”*

If we can take this perspective, from the ultimate vantage point of death, then all the superficialities of our life, all the particularities that seem to call on us so strongly, can just recede a little bit and take their true place, with the humanity just simply relating to humanity as the most *important* perspective, the most important aspect of life.

So with all these different techniques that I've mentioned, I just want to bring it back to a very simple practice that integrates with all of them. In any moment – especially when you notice something blocking *metta*, but in *any* moment – you can simply let the heart-mind be as spacious as possible. There is almost a kinaesthetic flavour of *metta* – a sort of felt-bodily experience of *metta* – that is expansive; it is almost physical – open-chested – it seems to reflect itself in an open chest, and opening the chest can help to encourage it. So that is something we can always come back to – a very simple practice.

## **Summary**

I'd like to summarize. I've said that *metta* is a little bit like a high water-table – in other words, there is this huge body of *metta* like a huge body of water, and our task is simply to gradually unblock the various channels, open up increasingly the channels that let it flow.

I have said that it expresses itself differently for different people, and that one way we can have a flavour of that is by looking at the five Buddha-families: how might *metta* express itself through members of those different families? – and some of the possible blockages as well. Incidentally, I don't want to give the impression that we all belong to “a family” and “that is us”. It's like any psychological classification; it is much more fluid than that. There are aspects that we will relate to more than others – and maybe we'll belong to a few families, so to speak.

Then I looked more personally at my own typical basic blockage: what I referred to as “Akshobya's broken mirror” – the broken mirror that doesn't allow some aspects of reality to be reflected, and distorts other aspects of reality. And the way I work is through mindfulness - noticing judgements, views, reactions arising - noticing them *kindly*. We always develop *metta* with *metta*. Metta

Bhavana is a crucible, is a laboratory, for doing this kind of work.

I mentioned conscious appreciation and rejoicing, which encourages *mudita* – sympathetic joy, sympathetic appreciation. I talked about staying with *dukkha*, noticing *dukkha* – trying not to let it spin off into aversion, as far as possible – and “loving what is”, just loving life as it presents itself to me. This gives a sense of *karuna* (compassion).

And then finally I mentioned the perspective of “life and death” – the ultimate perspective – what really matters in this perspective, which leads to a flavour of *upekka* – of equanimity.

And in all of these, we can come back to a simple kinaesthetic sense of opening, of spaciousness.

I will just mention one more practice, which we’ll be doing tonight: which is Puja. These blockages, these habits, these patterns that can stifle *metta* – they are often bigger than us, or bigger than our conscious mind, if you like. We can’t necessarily work at them very directly in our conscious mind. So, as part of this opening up into the bigger mind, we can call on something bigger than us – call on the Buddhas, if you like – call on the Bodhisattvas, or however you want to think of them. Call on higher aspects of ourselves, if you wish. So we open up to the larger reality. And when we do that, then it is as if our heart-mind *is metta*. We *become* that high water-table. This is a quality of heart-mind that we can bring to any experience; it is not something that we have to generate consciously in an interaction – it just *is* us. And ultimately we can just bring this quality to any experience; it just flows completely freely, depending on how it needs to flow.

And when that happens then we can really start being a people of loving-kindness – we can really start bringing this quality of *metta* into being a people of loving-kindness; and we can really be said to be “loving what is”.

Thank you very much.

...[APPLAUSE]...