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**Introduction to Metta
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You know the Chinese curse: May you live in interesting times. Well, it's not Chinese and it may or may not be a curse depending on your point of view. It is attributed to a British politician in 1898, Joseph Chamberlain:

I think that you will all agree that *we are living in most interesting times*. I never remember myself a time in which our history was so full, in which day by day brought us new objects of interest, and, let me say also, *new objects for anxiety*.

For most of this past year we have been exposed to the reality of what it means to live in interesting times. It's also been a year that's really highlighted how we cultivate preferences for this way or that, this person or that, this approach or that.

All this is anxiety-provoking because our preferences don't seem to make a difference in the world. So, we take mindfulness programs, go to retreats, promise to sit meditation every day hoping that will make a difference. And, it can!

But, even that leads to preferences! Our practice isn't steady, it lags. We don't get the good feels we did the first time. It was keeping us calm, now it's not. Maybe for some of us, practice goes really well. It leaves us calm and steady, replenished and restored all the time. That's great too!

Why do I say, "that's great too" rather than "That's the way to do it"? Well, because we have a mind that believes there are two paths: one

that leads to light and one to dark. We prefer the light to the dark. Preferences are inescapable.

But in that preference, we create the conditions of our frustration, misery, and internal darkness.

There's a poem attributed to Zen master Sengcan but perhaps written in the Tang Dynasty long after Sengcan.

The Perfect Way knows no difficulties
Except that it refuses to make preferences;
Only when freed from hate and love,
It reveals itself fully and without disguise
(trans. by [D.T. Suzuki](#))^[7]

This is a hard practice. We have preferences. We want this, not that. We like this, not that. We believe this, not that. And it goes on. It doesn't even have to be big philosophical issues. It can be about carrots and peas, spinach and broccoli, ice cream and cake. And it can be about how I thought something would be, not how it is.

Retreats are a great time and place to see how these preferences arise. The drive here, the room, the food, the people, the rain, the noise, the schedule... the teachers! It's all life and death to the untrained mind!

There problem is when we practice this preferential mind, we don't become more discerning. We actually become more rigid, more anxious, more rejecting of our experiences.

And of others.

This weekend is an opportunity to practice meeting that preferential mind. Cultivating the non-preferential mind. And we're going to do that through the practice of loving-kindness or loving-friendliness.

Now many of you are familiar with loving-kindness practice or *metta*. What some of you may not know is the origin and intent of the practice. We tend to approach *metta* as a way of dealing with suffering from a distance. "Oh, that person is having a tough time. I'll send *metta*!" Well, *metta* isn't something we can Express Post or UPS off to someone. Nor is it something that eases our own feelings: like signing off an email that is somewhat mean-spirited with "*metta* to you" or hoping that sending *metta* will make a grumpy friend or relative less grumpy with you!

Just like anger towards someone else is a poison only we drink and has no effect on the other person, *metta* sent to change someone else only reinforces fears and our need to control the world to feel safe.

Fear is the reason we practice *metta*. The Buddha taught *metta* to his monks as a way of changing their fearful mind. They were in the forest, being attacked by nasty spirits, and came running to the Buddha so he would make the spirits disappear. Kind of like going to therapy and hoping the therapist will make the moods go away.

So, the Buddha taught them *metta*. When you think about it, it doesn't quite make sense, right? Here are all these wild spirits attacking and how is repeating the phrase, "May you be at peace" going to get rid of the spirits. Well, here's the key: *metta* is not instrumental. It's not about casting a spell that makes the other person a better person.

Metta is a way of transforming our own inner demons and nasty-spirited-nature! It's re-configuring our brain so that we can be more open and embracing of our wounds, vulnerability, suffering, and

challenges. And here's the kicker: we do this so that **we** aren't part of the bad spirit gathering!

When that becomes the intention of our practice, the result is a willingness to tolerate our faults and missteps. It also leads to a faith in our mind to change for the better. And the outcome of **that** is to be more tolerant of others and open to our connection to them.

In these couple of days, we're inviting you to work with that preferential mind, to cultivate a friendliness towards yourself and others. To notice how your preferences lead to no one's suffering but your own.

Practice whole-heartedly. Don't settle for the superficial, trite, feel-good thoughts. Like all thoughts, they too are not facts.

Practice because it matters. To you, to me, to us, to everyone. But start here. With you. Then prepare to be surprised.