

Vinny Ferraro
Week One, *The Power of Connection: Cultivating a Generous Heart*
September 5, 2016
“Starting a Practice of Lovingkindness”



Welcome, everyone. My name is Vinny Ferraro. I'm the guiding teacher at Against the Stream Buddhist Meditation Society in San Francisco, and I'm happy to be here with you all. We're going to spend some time over the next four weeks going over the first two of the *brahmaviharas*, which go by many other names, including the four heavenly abodes and the four immeasurables.

I understand the brahmaviharas to be the four qualities of the heart, or the four flavors of love. The first is lovingkindness, or unconditional friendliness. The second is compassion. The third is appreciative joy. The fourth is equanimity. Over the next four weeks, I'll be focusing on the first two in particular, lovingkindness and compassion.

My understanding is that these are like two beautiful wishes. Lovingkindness sees what's good in beings and sees every being as the same: wishing for their happiness. We share that with one another. Compassion sees what's difficult, sees what's hard and wishes for its release.

When I first started learning these practices, they felt a bit supplemental, like, as one of my teachers said, "an after-dinner mint." This is not my understanding now. As I look back at some of their traditional uses, these practices can bring you all the way to liberation. I think that's beautiful.

Another misunderstanding that I worked under in the beginning was that I thought I was trying to send some psychic telegram to people. I was disappointed when they said that they didn't think about me at 4 o'clock while I was meditating, sending them all of this love and compassion. With these practices, we use the power of connection to uncover, cultivate, and more deeply feel these qualities in our own heart. We begin to wake up to how much power we have and where we can put the power of our attention.

We begin this practice with ourselves. How do we wish ourselves well? I mean *all* of ourselves. There are many parts of ourselves. There are the parts that we're proud of and that are easy to

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love. There are the parts that are more challenging, which maybe we've been trying to change for years. What is it like to be uncritical, unselective of ourselves?

There was a time in my practice where I wanted to suppress anything that was bad within myself. The dharma gives us the promise of a wider freedom, where we don't have to be good to be whole. We can accept all of ourselves—what's easy and what's challenging. The parts of me that were more difficult were the parts screaming out for care and attention. It can be a relief to no longer cut off the parts of ourselves that need our love the most.

As we practice, we notice that when there's room for us to be whole, there's room for other people to have their strengths and limitations as well. We focus our attention in the hard area. Traditionally we use phrases to help the stability of our minds. Those phrases include: “May I be happy. May I be peaceful. May I be at ease.” You don't have to use these exact phrases. Use the ones that resonate with you the most. When we offer these phrases, we offer them in a number of directions. “May you be happy. May you be peaceful. May you be at ease.”

There are five directions to which we offer these phrases. Usually, we start with wherever is easiest. Sometimes that's ourselves, and sometimes it's not. Sometimes it's easiest with somebody that we care about. Wherever it's easiest, start there. We use that as a reference point for how deeply we can feel that feeling, and then we expand out gradually to include our friends and our loved ones, where that feeling still comes mostly naturally.

Then we expand to people we're neutral towards, people we don't know so well, people we pass everyday in the grocery store, in our neighborhood. We expand out a fourth time to people that are more challenging, more difficult. Then we expand a fifth time to hold all beings in all directions. We hold the entire world in our hearts. This is where we get in touch with the boundless quality of unconditional love. Unconditional here means not being batted around by our preferences.

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When I wake up in the morning, I try to make a commitment that I'm going to be loving. Throughout the day, wherever my day takes me—whether it's going into a prison or walking through my neighborhood or talking to my family—there are a lot of opportunities to practice. Through the course of the day I find myself getting stressed out or up against a wall emotionally. I'll ask myself, "Hey bro, are you still love? Is that commitment still real to you?"

I find my teachers in the strangest situations. When I say “teacher,” I mean somebody who stretches my heart beyond what I think is possible. How can I accept an entire situation, and not just bits and pieces of that situation? How can I expand my love into all beings, when I can only love what's lovable, what's easy to love—what kind of lover does that make me? Can you imagine my wedding vows? “I'm going to love you as long as you're lovable.” It's crazy sometimes, the way we hold ourselves hostage from love, and how we withhold our love from others until they begin to act right. This is a prison in itself—a prison of preferences.

Sometimes when we practice, it seems as though everything *but* lovingkindness arises. I feel anger, resistance, aversion; all of it comes up to stand in the way. But it's perfect that this is what arises. We can then reflect then on how long have we been practicing these unskillful qualities—some of us for decades. We have to understand that these things have a timing of their own. The novelist and philosopher Aldous Huxley was asked at the end of his life, “What's the takeaway? What did you learn from all this study?” He said, "Maybe try to be a little kinder."

I've heard the Dalai Lama echo that sentiment. We're in good company when we keep our focus on lovingkindness. We begin to see when we give attention to all parts of ourselves, we can be much less critical in general. We can soften our gaze toward ourselves and toward others, and everybody's happier about that.

When I think about my neighborhood and my life growing up, I wasn't taught this—that I would be happier if I was nicer. It wasn't a major value, where I came from. This was big news to me: that I could be happier just if I was kinder. We eat off the same plate that we use to feed people.

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As we begin to accept ourselves more, we have more room for the people around us. As I was friendlier to myself, I began living in a friendlier world. These practices of the heart are what changed my life. It took me many years of practice to understand them. I began today talking mostly about my misunderstandings and the pitfalls. These can be powerful. I commit to doing these practices right alongside you during this month of talks. At the end of every week, we'll go over what happened and discuss where we're headed next. That's my commitment as we explore this territory together.

Let's take it off the cushion as much as possible. We can utilize this practice in our jobs, with our families and our neighbors. It's how we walk through the world, extending kindness in every possible direction.