Ceaselessly Responsive

Carol Wilson · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Carol Wilson · 59:15

So the last three weeks I've been talking about anatta, non-clinging, various aspects of the suffering of identifying or clinging to any aspect of experience as self, and hopefully conveying some sense of the freedom of putting down the burden of constructing everything around the idea of me, me, me.

Tonight I just want to speak about the balancing manifestation of non-clinging, of emptiness, which is the second wing of the two-winged bird: friendliness, compassion, benevolence, connectedness of beings.

I know often the idea of anatta, of no-self, or just the idea of not clinging to anything in this world—the idea, not the actuality—can be less than attractive. Most people, I don't think, begin practice thinking, "Yes, let me achieve a state where I just really don't yearn for anything, where it's just that six-limbed equanimity, no movement towards or against, just cooled out." It actually, to me, sounds lovely. But it can seem unsettling or downright frightening, or it can be misconstrued as a sense of uncaring indifference, annihilation, basic psychotic disconnection. Of course, we all know it's none of that.

But still, if emptiness were the only manifestation, if that was our only aspect of understanding, there's a piece missing, a piece incomplete. Essential right view, anatta, no-self, is not about a kind of cold, indifferent void. Everything's empty of intrinsic self—me, you, and everything else—so nothing makes any difference. That's sometimes called falling into emptiness, and it's a great piece of delusion because it's only half of the picture.

The way the Tibetan tradition describes our empty nature is that it's empty of self, but has that radiant, naturally awake knowing aspect, and it manifests by being ceaselessly responsive. In other words, this empty, awake knowingness, confronted with the need to act, is ceaselessly responsive.

The natural expression of the wakeful, non-clinging heart and mind will be the response of wisdom: that of friendliness, metta, of benevolence, of non-harming, of compassion, of equanimity in the face of nothing one can do—equanimity which is connected but not trying to change that which can't be changed—and of appreciative joy, when that friendliness, that connectedness, that empty knowing connects with the joy of another. The natural response is appreciative, empathetic joy.

The natural expression of the mind, the heart of non-clinging, of this knowing—just in a moment, doesn't have to be forever, but just in a moment of really knowing anatta, no intrinsic self—the natural expression of this is that instead of the contracted, ceaselessly self-referential mode of responding to any experience, that contraction, that closure of me, me, me is gone. The mind of non-clinging, the heart of not clinging, is that of a heart and mind that is not limited, that is not contracted. And the natural expression

of that is kindness, friendliness, compassion, or just, as one teacher said, doing the obvious—just responding in the obvious way that can be of assistance.

To me, even just on an intellectual level, never mind experience, it makes total sense. Because when there's that sense of me—and again, we've been talking about this all month—every situation we walk into, there can be that relentless, obsessive self-referencing about everything that happens. And the experience of that gives rise to separation, gives rise to greed, gives rise to fear, gives rise to need, to me and the other.

I can remember telling that little story about sitting in the airplane with the empty seats next to me, perfectly happy until I started realizing that it was an overnight flight, that if no one came and sat in those seats, I would get to lie down. And as soon as I realized that, every single next person getting on the plane was my enemy until they passed that row.

That experience is not totally unusual. I don't think I'm a total psychopath that I had that experience. It's that me-centric quality—it's all about me. Everyone getting on the plane only mattered in terms of what they meant to me. The mind, the heart is constricted, is narrowed. There's a sense of separation. Everyone else is seen only as how they reference me. We can see this all the time.

As soon as I saw what was happening, without getting into judgment, I just thought, "Oh, this is a lot of suffering." I just really felt that. And I was able to just say, "Okay, may you be happy." Let's just change it to metta. I could do that. That self-referencing just really dropped. And then the way that manifested—I didn't get up and hug everybody in the plane or anything. Just sitting there, nothing looked any different. But there was not anymore this sense of the enemy. It was just, oh, here we all are in the plane together.

It's not like a huge deal, but it is. The difference between that need to calculate and separate and protect and fear, and just the sense of "okay, here we are, whatever happens"—that's all. But it's huge. In that space of "well, we're just here together and I don't have to protect my seat at the expense of everybody else's comfort," there's just really not a problem. One does what needs to be done. It's an openness to life, rather than this constriction, this separation.

This is how Nyoshul Khenpo described it—he was a wonderful Tibetan Dzogchen master: "The difference between the impure and the pure mind, the deluded mind and the enlightened mind, is mainly a difference of narrowness and openness. In our present deluded state, our mind is extremely narrow. The more constricted and narrow the mind, the more it thinks only of itself, completely disregarding the well-being, happiness and suffering of others. Conversely, the enlightened Buddha is one who considers the infinity of sentient beings, rather than being concerned only with his own ego and individuality. Thus the entire path from ordinary being to Buddhahood is the gradual opening of mind. And that is precisely what we call the bodhicitta—literally, to grow and develop that enlightened attitude. The concept of growth is used here for the passing from a completely narrow attitude focused principally on oneself to an open loving heart whose scope instinctively encompasses the infinity of sentient beings."

So this natural movement from narrowness to openness—he's putting that down as the whole path in a way. And I really like it. First, it's completely normal and natural: the experience of heart, of friendliness, which you could call metta, of non-harming compassion, of happiness with others' happiness, of equanimity. These are not some incredibly esoteric, distant experiences that we have to endlessly practice to maybe somehow attain. They are a truly normal and natural response of the heart and mind that's imbued with wisdom in a moment. It's the natural, normal response of the truth of who we are.

All this fear and separation and self-concern is a kind of incredibly exhausting something we've learned, very unfortunately, way back somehow in the sands of time. It just takes up so much energy, and we get so involved in it that we don't notice enough, or maybe trust enough, or have confidence enough in the natural expression of the truth—of impermanence, of not-self. The natural expression of non-clinging is metta and compassion, friendliness and compassion, metta, karuna.

They manifest in terms of intention. Remember last week I talked about non-clinging, and that one of the ways we can cultivate, to move our noticing in the direction of non-clinging, is intention—the second stage of the Eightfold Path, samma sankappa. The intention of renunciation, letting go of clinging. The other two aspects of wise intention that the Buddha speaks about are how the intention of ill will changes to friendliness, metta, and that of cruelty changes to non-harming, to compassion.

So again, in this manifestation—this ceaselessly responsive aspect of the fact that there's no one home—the way that manifests is when we need to think, speak, or act. The intention, the motivation in the mind, is fueled by, is triggered by friendliness, compassion, non-harming. And as I said, this is totally normal and natural.

I was giving a talk on metta last week in Cambridge, and the example I like to give, just for how natural metta is: metta is really just the open state of friendliness, of well-wishing, that comes when our attention, our heart and mind, connects with the good, or connects with our common humanness—or common not even humanness, beingness. The natural expression of that is just a simple friendliness, well-wishing.

The example I gave is if you see two little kids playing, or two little puppies, and you're in a relatively open space. In other words, if you're completely self-absorbed in some big problem, you could see anything lovely and it just doesn't register. That's the self-absorption, the small mind, the small world. But if you're just walking out of here, open, present, nothing special, and you see two little kids running by, the natural response is just a kind of happiness, a kind of wishing them well. Your mind doesn't necessarily say, "May you be happy and peaceful and free from suffering"—that's a trained thought. But there's an "oh yeah," a wanting them to be happy. You don't say, "Hope that little kid—what is he doing?" Unless you're in a bad mood. And the bad mood prevents the connection in that moment. Same if you see a little puppy. It's just normal and natural. It's not some big esoteric state.

And in the same way, that open-hearted connectedness, when it naturally connects with suffering—the normal response is compassion, empathy with the suffering. And if there's a movement or something to

do to help, one would do it. Doing the obvious doesn't require rocket science. So if the kids are playing and one of them picks up a two-by-four and starts whacking the other one in the head—hopefully we're not so lost in some mindfulness state that we don't respond.

That's a little missing piece there—missing the connection.

We also wouldn't grab the two by four and hit the kid with it to show him, right? That would be overreaction. But the empathy of attention that connects with suffering—we'd feel the suffering of both. The suffering of the kid getting hit, the suffering of the kid who's hitting. And we'd intervene, one hopes. We would intervene in whatever way: take the stick, do whatever. But with this connectedness, this compassion that can see that there's harm without hating the one, loving the other, making good or bad, and just doing the obvious. This is not rocket science. Not unreachable.

Two things. One is to realize that it's the natural manifestation of wisdom, the natural manifestation of our understanding of practice, of the way things are when our delusion is not in the way. So it will happen naturally and strengthen. But also, through our mindfulness, through our practice of noticing what's going on here and now in this mind and body, we actually will begin to see more and more times that we have a choice where to let the heart and mind dwell. We, more than we know, have a choice to stay in that closed creation of separation and fear, or to choose openness, friendliness, compassion. It doesn't mean we're choosing ultimate, total bodhisattva bodhicitta, but that we do have a choice. Like that time when I was sitting in the airplane—I didn't do some big deal, but I saw what my mind was doing: the separation, the enmity, the fear. And I said, "You know, I don't need to do this. Let me change the channel." Sometimes that's all we need. So one thing is realizing that we do have a choice.

The second is really looking and seeing: Do we each actually have the confidence, the trust? I don't want to say belief, because that's kind of too intellectual—but the actual confidence in the depth and power of friendliness, of compassion, of connectedness out of emptiness as a way to be, to live, to act, to relate in this world. I know from the culture it's not exactly what might have been what I was taught verbally. And there are many people who act in ways that really inspire and show me this is possible. But I wouldn't say it was the predominant message that comes in from all the different aspects of culture that we're exposed to.

In any case, I think it's just worth a look, over and over: Where do I place my trust, my refuge? Where do I choose to let my mind dwell? And do I really know there's a choice?

One of my favorite lines from the Buddha: "Whatever a person frequently thinks and ponders upon, that will become the inclination of their mind." So just bear that in mind. Without judgment, without negativity, just notice what your mind frequently thinks and ponders upon, left to its own devices. And that becomes the inclination. We're all of us old enough to see there are quite some habits going through this mind. That's one of the things that really shows up in the silence of retreat—the inclination of mind. And what's really being shifted on this deep level through mindfulness, or through metta and karuna if

you're practicing metta, is the habit of where we let the mind dwell.

So do we really believe it's a possibility to choose friendliness, to choose compassion, to choose non-harming? Do we think we have to wait until we're an arhat for it to naturally manifest? The Buddha spoke of liberation of the heart, which is love.

I know many of you have heard this story. I just like it because it shows the power of really knowing—not believing, but knowing the actual truth of the unified nature of our being and the expression of that as love. Do you know the story of Maha Ghosananda? Do you all know who Maha Ghosananda is? He's very old now, and I think he's getting kind of senile. He's a Cambodian monk, and he got out of Cambodia during or after the time of the Khmer Rouge, when so many millions of Cambodians were killed. He's a Buddhist monk, and Cambodia was largely a Buddhist country. Since that time, he has been all over the world. He's been a real peace activist.

He's the real inspiration for the Cambodian people, known as a true metta being. He's done peace marches through Cambodia and has been quite an activist.

So he came out of Cambodia into the massive refugee camps where so many had fled from the Khmer Rouge. And he, along with probably almost everyone else in the camps, had had most, if not all, of his family members murdered. He comes to this refugee camp where there are thousands and thousands of people coming out of starvation, torture, murder, terror. They're living in this refugee camp. I can't even begin to imagine what that would be.

He came to the camp—he wasn't so famous at this point, but they recognized him as a monk and a symbol of their religion and culture. He set up a little place, perhaps a small temple, and people came to hear him give a talk.

This is just what I heard: What he did was start to chant. Remember, these people in Cambodia were Buddhists, so they would be familiar with the specific chant as well as with what it was saying. But he just came, and in the power of his heart—what do you say to people whose lives and everyone they love is destroyed?

He simply started chanting: "Never by hatred is hatred conquered, but by readiness to love alone. This is the eternal law."

And he just kept chanting that over and over. After a while, other Cambodian people started chanting it until they were all chanting it together.

To me, it's a lovely story. But the point it brings to me is this: one couldn't go and do that from thinking it's a nice idea. He couldn't walk into and be the carrier of that level of destroyed life, of so much violence and suffering, and chant that and uphold that and bring people together—unless it came from a place of absolutely knowing that it's true. That hatred is never conquered by hatred. This is an eternal law, only by

love alone.

Maybe we don't know that every minute, but do we know it in some moments? Can we trust enough to access that level? This is the truth of who we really are. Not some idealistic idea of how we should look, how we should speak, how we should act. That doesn't hold up. It doesn't work. It has to come from our deep understanding. And this is what our practice is opening up to us.

To me, it's one of the reasons sangha can be such a refuge—because of the conflicting messages we get from culture. Well, I do. Maybe you don't pick them up. There are quite a few other messages in all different cultures.

I read this on the BBC news last summer about a new bar in China, in Nanjing. It's called the Rising Sun Anger Release Bar. It's a bar that lets customers smash glasses, rant, and even hit specially trained workers. The owner, Mr. Wu, was inspired to open the bar by his experiences as a migrant worker. He has employed twenty men who've been given special protective gear and physical training to prepare them for the job. Most of the customers are women who work in the service or entertainment industries.

They went out on the street interviewing people. The clients can ask the men to dress as the character they wish to attack. One woman said the idea of beating someone dressed as your boss seems very attractive. "We get no place to vent anger." This place was in the news because it was really taking off.

But they interviewed another man on the street who said, "No, no, violence is not the answer. You need to adjust your lifestyle or seek psychological treatment."

So Mr. Wu's dealing with that too, because for the most stressed-out cases, he has counseling available from psychology students he recruited from the local universities.

That's one message we get—that we have to vent our anger, there's nowhere to do it, and you feel better if you do.

So where are we putting our trust? Where are we taking refuge? Again, it's not a should, but looking deeply and seeing what's really true for me.

And remember, every moment can be different. We can't control externals, but we can begin to take responsibility for our own actions, our own minds and hearts. This isn't a judgment thing. This is really seeing and trusting that the natural response of a moment of awakened mind and heart is metta, is love, is compassion. You don't have to create it, but we do have to pay attention.

You know that story about the two wolves? I'll read it. An elder Native American was teaching his grandchildren about life. He said to them, "A fight is going on inside me. It is a terrible fight. It is between two wolves. One wolf represents fear, anger, envy, sorrow, regret, greed, arrogance, self-pity, guilt, resentment, inferiority, lies, false pride, superiority, and ego"—and add your own. "The other stands for joy, peace, love, hope, compassion, sharing, serenity, humility, kindness, benevolence, friendship,

empathy, generosity, truth, faith. This same fight is going on inside you and every other person too," the grandfather added. The grandchildren thought about it for a minute, and then one asked his grandfather, "But which wolf will win?" The old Cherokee simply replied, "The one you feed."

That's what I mean about paying attention. The Buddha used that image all the time—feeding and starving. It's very interesting that he used that exact image. Noticing how we pay attention. What states of heart and mind are we feeding? What ones are we starving? Are we taking refuge in states of mind that can create and continue the sense of separation or superiority or self-judgment or fear? Or are we taking refuge in the sense of compassion, of just meeting what's happening without judgment, of generosity, of mindfulness?

There was an interview I heard on public radio the year the Red Sox won the World Series and beat the Yankees. This is baseball. This is American. It's a big deal if you like baseball and you're American. And if you lived in Boston, it was a really big deal because the Red Sox was the Boston team. Anyway, it was an over-the-top big deal.

So this was an interview with a Red Sox fan right at the end of the World Series when the Red Sox had beaten the Yankees. This fan said, "The joy was not in the winning. It was in the sorrow and misery in the Yankee fans' eyes. It's like a dichotomy, if you know what I mean." And this fan said, "This was the best moment of my life." Oh my God—judgment, judgment.

Then they interviewed a Yankee fan. And the Yankee fan said, "This was the worst moment of my life." The interviewer said, "Don't the Red Sox deserve to win sometime? Because the Yankees, they always win." And this Yankee fan said, "Yeah, sure—when I'm dead."

And I'm sure they all thought they were having a good time. I mean, it's supposed to be about a good time, isn't it, sports? So what wolf are we feeding?

When we hear a story or meet someone or have an experience that inspires us—like when I think about Maha Ghosananda and his chanting—I personally feel really inspired. It touches something in me. And for all of us, we all have different things that inspire us.

Another important point I want to make is that that inspiration inspires not just because of that person, but because they are bringing out a truth that's already an expression of who we really are. That we can even feel inspired is proof that this is an aspect of who we are. So rather than thinking, "They're so good and I'm such a worm," it's much more useful to notice: ah, inspiration, appreciation of goodness, appreciation of the possibility of kindness and love. You don't have to jump to "I am" or "I'm not," but just let in the supportive, onward-leading power of that inspiration, opening to it, beginning and continuing to deepen where we put our trust.

And at the same time, we can consciously cultivate friendliness, connection, compassion.

His Holiness the Dalai Lama teaches that compassion develops through two things: deep insight into what suffering is—and that insight arises by focusing on our own experience—and second, compassion strengthens with a sense of empathy, connectedness with all beings, that wisdom aspect of non-separation. Compassion develops and strengthens by deep insight into our own suffering experiences on one side, and also deep connection to our oneness with all beings.

This is one of the reasons why the difficult times in retreat are so important. They're essential. Sometimes I think they're the most growth-producing, most wisdom-producing aspects of our retreat—the difficult times, the times we stumble, the times we're flat up against some really suffering pattern of our mind. And the times we think, "I know this, I've seen this a million times. Enough already, I'm done with this." And then of course you turn around and it comes up again. Self-judging, arrogance, greed, delusion, whatever.

The fact of its presence—it's arising due to previous actions, previous karma. These are the habits of our mind, where we've been in the habit of letting our mind dwell. Whatever it might be. Self-judgment's a good one. Arrogance is another. Striving is another. Comparing, all that stuff. That it's arising is simply the past karma, the vipāka, karmic result. How it's met in this moment—that's the new karma that's being created.

So our self-judgment comes up. We're really caught in it. It's it. "I've had it. I'm out of here." Oh, right. "I've had it." It feels like this. Just that willingness to be here for it without adding anything extra—that's a huge shift from trusting in the negativity, the separation, the ideas of perfection, all the things that are wrong with me. That's a huge shift from that to friendliness, just like this, compassion.

You really see then that your suffering is the same as the suffering of the world. Seriously, when you're all wrapped up in self-judgment—and granted, self-judgment is totally all about me, it's about the most me-centric thing there is going—but you know what? I haven't spoken to everyone here, but I've spoken to a lot of people. I can tell you, if you're completely caught up in your judging, you are not alone. You're with about 98.5 percent of any yogi I've ever talked to. So you can't even take yourself judging personally. You can't even build up a whole story about how you're the worst person on the planet. It's just another symptom of the dukkha of being a person. It's completely impersonal.

And so if you can meet even self-judging—just feel the pain of that. Wow, how much suffering is that? And then we realize it's just like a stand-in experience for the dukkha of all beings who are suffering, who are judging themselves. There's a way that our personal suffering, when met with just this clear-eyed mindfulness really, friendliness, non-judging, becomes the avenue into this oneness with beings, this natural compassion for the suffering of all beings on the planet.

The suffering, the difficulties, the demons we meet in our practice here—they're very important. This is where we're really understanding emptiness and compassion. And you don't get a nice little sign: "Yes, this is difficulty, and this is what percentage you're learning from it." We don't get self-fulfillment from it. That's why it works. If you really duke it out judging yourself and you had a little thing here that said,

"Yes, but if you just stick with it, three more bad thoughts, you're going to really have this much more compassion," right? Would that work? It would just feed our ego totally.

So we have to be in there with nothing personal to show for it, nothing to refer back to, and just surrender. And then it touches that tenderness of the human heart, that tenderness for life. Our suffering is all suffering.

Really start to get a sense of the difference. We can have the idea that compassionate action is good—really sincere, ideal, mean it, want to act from that—from the intellect down.

But it doesn't have the depth, the power, the stay-with-it-ness that comes from really knowing we're not separate. The kind of compassion that comes from really being able to be with your suffering, with another's suffering.

Let me give you an example. Actually, today—this morning—I turned on NPR, the public radio news, and it came on in the middle of an interview with somebody. I was sort of listening, and right away they were talking about nonviolence, the theory of nonviolence. So I was interested. And after just a few lines, I recognized who it was. The man being interviewed started talking about Gandhi and how he'd studied Gandhi's teachings. It was a man named James Lawson, who has always been very inspirational to me for many years.

I actually have something I wanted to read about him, since hearing him talk on the radio this morning made me so happy. They introduced him as a leading theorist on nonviolence, and he has been since the Korean War. He was in divinity school during that time and had studied some of Gandhi's teachings in India. When the Korean War came, he was a conscientious objector. He said, "I just cannot go to war. I cannot commit violence." As a conscientious objector, he could have been deferred for being in divinity school, but he said no—it's not fair. There was a draft at that time, and he said it's not fair for him to take a deferral when other people can't. So he went to jail. He spent fourteen months in jail.

They asked him in the interview what that was like, and he said—this is a quotation from him—"When I was in jail, I discovered a strength and power in me to live out of my own conscience."

Now, where I'd heard of him before: he did discover a strength and power. During the civil rights movement in the late fifties and 1960, in Nashville, when there started to be sit-ins, James Lawson was one of the leaders of that whole movement. He was training the students, because that was a period when a lot of college students—mostly African-American students—were doing sit-ins and being subjected to a lot of violence, a lot of horrible stuff. James Lawson was one of the trainers in nonviolence, because he was deeply, deeply committed to nonviolence based on Christian love.

So this is what I wanted to read today, from a book about that period—an example of his acting from that place of knowing the power, the commitment to nonviolence and love. Not as it *should be*, but from that power he speaks about: the strength and power to live out of his own conscience.

This is a story about the marchers in Nashville demonstrating for the right for African-Americans to eat at lunch counters in downtown stores. They were marching, and a bunch of white motorcycle toughs attacked the two guys at the end of the line while the other marchers were ahead. They knocked one down, and the second guy, Bernard Lafayette, came and threw himself on the first guy to protect him. Then they were beating on Bernard. Jim Lawson saw what was happening and walked over. He didn't rush over—he just walked over calmly.

When he arrived, it shifted the attention of the white toughs from the guys they were beating to James Lawson. The thing about Jim, Bernard remembered, was that he was so self-assured, so confident, as if he were accustomed to dealing with white toughs beating up black demonstrators every day. The leader of the whites was wearing this DA haircut and a black motorcycle jacket. He was really enraged when he saw Lawson's coolness, and he spat at him. Lawson looked at him and asked him for a handkerchief. The man, stunned, reached in his pocket and handed Lawson a handkerchief. Lawson wiped the spit off his face. Then he looked at the man's jacket and started talking to him. Did he have a motorcycle or a hot rod car? A motorcycle was the answer. So Jim asked a technical question or two, and the young man started explaining what he had done to customize his bike.

Amazingly, Bernard thought, these two men were now talking about the levels of horsepower in motorcycles. A few seconds earlier, they had seemed to be sworn enemies, one ready to maul the other. By this time, both Solomon Gordon and Bernard Lafayette were back up on their feet, the line was moving again, and Jim and the young man were still talking about the man's motorcycle. In that brief, frightening moment, Jim had managed to find a subject which they both shared and had used it in a way that made each of them more human in the eyes of the other.

As they walked away, Jim waved to the man. The man remained still, neither accepting the friendship nor, for that matter, rejecting it. It had been a marvelous example of Christian love for Bernard.

That really inspires me—that power and courage that truly comes from knowing on a different level what's true and what's possible.

It was interesting because in the conversation today, the interviewer kept asking him about violence, about the Middle East, about what happens when someone's trying to kill you. And James Lawson kept saying, "You're asking the wrong questions. You're looking from the wrong angle. It's really about a completely different configuration of power and where real power comes from." That just reminded me so much of the awakening that comes from practice. It's really about a completely different way of looking at ourselves, at life. That's what is true.

So we really look and see: Where do we take refuge? Do we even have the sense that this could be possible? Because if deep in our heart we think, "This is a waste of time, this is impossible, that can't happen"—if that's the story we're telling ourselves over and over—that's what we're going to end up believing, taking refuge in.

That's why mindfulness as a tool, as a practice, is so powerful. A moment of mindfulness—just meeting that thought that says "this is impossible," meeting the fear, meeting the self-hatred, meeting the pain, meeting the disdain you feel for someone else, meeting whatever arises—mindfulness is just totally present without adding extra, without belief or disbelief, without pushing away, without holding on. And because it's not falling into our usual denial system, it just meets whatever happens, it allows the possibility to perceive in a different way. That's what I was talking about in previous weeks: perceiving more accurately allows us to see that it's not all about me.

So if we do start noticing the story we're telling ourselves is "this is impossible, my ego is too strong," whatever—we don't give up. We notice that. That moment of noticing it, that's mindfulness. It's a moment of freedom from that story. And you just have to notice that to see, "Oh yes, a whole other way is possible."

Nisargadatta Maharaj said, "Once you can say with confidence, born from direct experience, 'I am the world, the world is myself,' you are free from desire and fear on the one hand and become totally responsible for the world on the other. The sorrows of humankind become your sole concern."

We all have moments where we can maybe see that I am the world, the world is myself. Our particular sorrows can be the avenue into really opening to the sorrows of humankind—with that connectedness that allows us to care, with the wisdom that allows us to see if there's something we can do to help. Great. If there's not, we don't need to turn away. We can still stay open, still stay connected.

But also, if we don't meet—it's not just about difficulties, it's also about beauty, about joy. And if we don't meet suffering with some wisdom, we can really drown, just as you can fall into emptiness if there's a sense of no-self without compassion. If we go for the compassion without the wisdom, we also fall off the side.

His Holiness the Dalai Lama says that compassion must be supported from our insight into emptiness of inherent self. This is where the vast meets the profound. Knowing that people's suffering is avoidable, that it is surmountable, our empathy, our sympathy for their inability to pull themselves out of it leads to a more powerful compassion—the same thing Nisargadatta was saying. But without that knowing that their suffering is avoidable, without that emptiness, our compassion may be strong, but it is likely to have a quality of hopelessness, even despair.

I can certainly relate to this. If I look at the state of the world and specific instances—you want to fix this, you want to help this, you want to do that, and of course you can't help everything or fix everything. If that's looked at, even just our own suffering, just the suffering of our family—looking at my aging parents, doing what I can, but unable to take their suffering away—if that's not met with the knowing of emptiness, that it's not just all about the particular personality, it's unbearable. So compassion and non-self support one another. They allow us to deepen in wisdom and love, really from the inside out.

Just paying attention to where you let your mind dwell. When it's on suffering, if it's your own suffering,

really meeting it with kindness, with compassion. Knowing that that's your avenue into knowing that we're the world. Sometimes when I'm on retreat or off, I can't get there for my own suffering. It's too much. It's eating us up. We're drowning in it or we're just shut down or we're afraid or we're just in a self-judging loop. So then sometimes I'll switch and just notice, in the big picture—not in a drowning way—but just the suffering in the world. It keeps my heart open and connected.

So whenever I hear a siren going—a police siren or an ambulance siren—I just like to, in myself, stop a minute and let it in. Someone's life is really changing right now. I don't know whose, I don't know how. In the city, how much do we hear sirens? Just little things like that. Whenever you see a crushed animal on the road. Whenever you—well, reading the news, my God.

Sometimes it's overwhelming, and then we need to see that we're drowning in it. But sometimes when I feel disconnected and shut off and I can't open to my own suffering, tuning into that of others, I can really see the impersonality in dukkha, in difficulty. Mine, theirs—it's all the dukkha of the world, and it connects us to beings.

On the other hand, we need to recognize when, as the Dalai Lama says, it's getting overwhelming. Sometimes we get so that we only focus on the suffering—our own or others'. We think the world is in such bad shape that to really cultivate compassion, we need to keep focusing on what's wrong, on the pain. And we drown. We're not balanced. That's not the complete truth either.

So just as here in practice we talk about really using skillful means when you're bottoming out—to contemplate something inspirational, to maybe shift to metta, or maybe to just open your field of perception and notice something beautiful, notice something touching—this is really important because, as Sharon Salzberg writes, it reintroduces us to the fact that completeness and unity constitute our most fundamental nature as living beings. No matter how terrible or wonderful our lives have been, no matter what we have gone through or what we are suffering now, our natural innate wholeness is always present, and we can recognize it.

Oddly enough, sometimes we recognize our innate wholeness through suffering. Sometimes that's too much, and we recognize our innate wholeness through deliberately contemplating the beautiful.

If you can't find anything beautiful because the dukkha lens is on too strong, the Buddha actually recommends—and this is serious—to contemplate your own generosity. Really sit, reflect, and let in all the acts and thoughts and speech of generosity you've offered. Another practice is to contemplate your sila—your non-harming actions, your skillful, kind actions. Not necessarily generous, but not lying, not harming—all the kind and good things you've done.

If it's hard to let that in, if it seems egocentric—it's not. That's a kind of warpedness we've gotten into in this culture. But if you really contemplate your generosity—not like "aren't I a good person," but just remembering a time you've been generous, the doing of it and the receiving of it—happiness comes. A

kind of wholesome happiness that brightens our mind, brightens our heart, and allows us to then open again, past creating fear and separation.

So again, really looking at where we choose to let our mind dwell—and more than we realize, we do have a choice.

The last thing I want to say is about the power of mindfulness in all of this. This is Sharon again: "Gratefulness of being, which we might experience as happiness, can also be described as love. To be undivided and unfragmented, to be completely present, is to love. To pay attention is to love."

I want to close with a poem I often read, because it's a great example of this—how everything is here in paying attention. It's by Mary Oliver, called "Singapore."

In Singapore, in the airport,
a darkness was ripped from my eyes.
In the women's restroom, one compartment stood open.
A woman knelt there, washing something in the white bowl.

Disgust argued in my stomach
and I felt in my pocket for my ticket.

A poem should always have birds in it.
Kingfishers, say, with their bold eyes and gaudy wings.
Rivers are pleasant, and of course trees.
A waterfall, or if that's not possible, a fountain
rising and falling.

A person wants to stand in a happy place, in a poem.

When the woman turned I could not answer her face.
Her beauty and her embarrassment struggled together,
and neither could win.
She smiled and I smiled.
What kind of nonsense is this?
Everybody needs a job.

Yes, a person wants to stand in a happy place, in a poem.
But first we must watch her as she stares down at her labor,
which is dull enough.
She is washing the tops of the airport ashtrays, as big as hubcaps,
with a blue rag.
Her small hands turn the metal, scrubbing and rinsing.

She does not work slowly, nor quickly, but like a river.
Her dark hair is like the wing of a bird.

I don't doubt for a moment that she loves her life.
And I want her to rise up from the crust and the slop
and fly down to the river.

But maybe it will.

If the world were only pain and logic, who would want it? Of course it isn't.

Neither do I mean anything miraculous, but only the light that can shine out of a life. I mean the way she unfolded and refolded the blue cloth, the way her smile was only for my sake. I mean the way this poem is filled with trees and birds.

So let's sit quietly for a minute.

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