Compassion (Karuṇā)

Carol Wilson · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Carol Wilson · 58:44

So tonight I wanted to talk a little bit about compassion, karuṇā, in the context of what I talked about this morning in the reflection—the sense of when we realize emptiness, the lack of inherent existence of any phenomena. I read from Dilgo Khyentse this morning: when you realize all phenomena are empty and at the same time appearing, existing, we don't just leave it there, hanging out in nothingness. The natural response, the corollary, the kind of completion—you could say the other side of the realization of emptiness—is the manifestation of the good heart, as His Holiness calls it: generosity, mettā or friendliness, compassion, non-harming. It just makes sense.

This is one of my favorite ways of expressing it, from Nisargadatta: "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 senseless sorrow of humankind becomes your sole concern."

Think of that not in a depressing way. It just makes total sense when we consider how concerned and caught up we usually are with the obsessive self-referencing of me, me, me—I'm the center of everything, good, bad, indifferent. We've talked about that a lot. When we're consumed by that, there's not really room to feel with, to have your heart quiver with, to be open to, present for the pain and sorrow of all humankind. We're hardly even present for our own.

The natural effect, the natural response in a moment when the heart, the mind is realizing this lack of inherent self-existence—the flip side is that we're all it, it's all us. What the Tibetans call "ceaselessly responsive" is the response of caring, the response of connectedness. Whether the appropriate response would be compassion in the face of pain or suffering, muditā in the face of joy, simple connectedness, friendliness, mettā whenever we meet anyone, or generosity if that's called for. I like to think of it as a tenderness for beings, ourselves included. Rather than desire and fear—the desire to complete ourselves, the fear that somebody else or something is going to get in the way.

Nyoshul Khenpo said that someone who realizes that all phenomena are empty and who realizes the non-existence of self or ego will naturally have spontaneous compassion for all sentient beings who do not realize this truth of emptiness and so continue to suffer through delusion and clinging.

Have you ever noticed that? In ourselves, of course—it's always easier to notice it in others. When we can see that someone's really suffering through holding on to some idea, through holding on to needing something, and we can just see, not with judgment, how unnecessary that is. When we're seeing that with balance, with equanimity, we don't think, "That stupid jerk, get over it." The natural response is simply,

"Wow. So much suffering over something that isn't even real." Like when we're waking from a nightmare—it's the natural response. It's not like we have to do something, crank it up. We can work with that, sure. But what I love about awareness, what I love about mindfulness practice, is that simply by recognizing the truth of how things are, compassion, mettā, generosity spontaneously develop, grow, and manifest in us—starting with thought, moving to speech, moving to action. You don't have to be some special kind of person. It's the natural response.

This struck me last time I was in Burma. This could be completely not true—it's just something I made up—but it struck me in terms of the sense of naturally moving from the constriction of "all about me" and how narrow that is and how self-serving and how much that breeds desire and fear. I was noticing, from hanging out in Burma and with different Burmese people, how my sense of "me"—and also what I experienced with my family, with friends here in the States, in the West—is very much that me is me, like one person. It's about me and my identity and my ego and making my way in the world. It's a one-person sense of identity.

What I've noticed quite often in groups in Burma in particular, and some in Thailand too, whether it's the family group or even a group of people sitting at a table together day after day in a monastery on retreat, is that the sense of looking at "what about me" is really "what about us"—the me being extended to the family group or the group at the table. Just a natural kind of inclusion. Not of everybody, but at least a little bit bigger than just me.

For example, I'm remembering years ago I was on a long retreat at a meditation center in Mobi, actually where Venerable Ariyānani used to live. You'd sit for the meals at the same table every day with the same people, so I sat with three other women.

And they were always so happy to do it for her. It was lovely.

But in terms of sitting—because you share, they put pots of curry out and you share them, you don't get your own plate—I would notice that I'd be in my own little Carol's-meditating-world, taking my curry completely in my own little space. And the other three, all of them, were much more tuned into the whole table. They'd notice if I was running low and hand me more. And I made a point of mentioning that this one woman was kind of greedy and self-involved, because I'm not trying to say she was some especially compassionate person. But that was just more the sense of me extended beyond itself to the group.

Somehow this was like a huge insight for me—that it's a convention. It's just a convention.

And so in our practice, when we simply recognize for a moment that this idea of me is just a thought, just a convention, just a feeling, the natural response that comes from that is compassion, is inclusion. As Ajahn Sumedho likes to describe it, awareness is the point that includes—nothing left out. That's the natural way we move into compassion.

Nyoshul Khenpo also describes this beautifully. I'm paraphrasing here, but he says that the difference

between the deluded mind and the enlightened mind is mainly a difference of narrowness and openness. A deluded, ordinary mind in our normal life tends to be very narrow, meaning closed in on itself, mostly concerned with the happiness and well-being of ourselves and those really close to us—our family—not really thinking too much or giving much concern to the happiness and suffering of the vastness of sentient beings. But through our practice, what happens is our mind and heart constantly becomes less rigid, broader, more open, not so narrow. This is really the way of the Buddha, who lived with compassion and care for all sentient beings, no one left out. Our whole path is a movement from this narrowness of self-centeredness and concern only for those close to us, toward considering the well-being of all sentient beings.

I like that.

So the way this shows up in terms of how the Buddha describes the workings of the mind—the connection between emptiness, compassion, friendliness, generosity, and how we are in the world ceaselessly responsive—is this: when you're sitting, or walking, or eating, everything comes and goes. All phenomena come. There's sense door contact. You notice it. It goes. Nothing's more important than anything else. Nothing's to be clung to as me or mine. And in that space—I keep saying awareness doesn't care what's happening, right? Nothing really matters. And that's true on that side of emptiness.

But if we take it without the corollary of ceaselessly responsive, if we take that into the world as "nothing really matters, awareness doesn't care and neither do I, whatever is happening is just what's happening, just what is, and the hell with it"—that's called falling into emptiness. It's actually massive delusion.

Ceaselessly responsive is when whatever factors in the mind or heart coalesce in a moment into what the Buddha describes as intention, motivation. Intention—right intention—is actually the second step of the Eightfold Path, the first being right view, right understanding. So you could say this understanding of no inherent self-existence is right view, one example of right view; the Four Noble Truths, right view. How we understand ourselves in the world forms the qualities, the states in mind and heart that coalesce our energy into intention. And intention is that quality, that factor in the mind, a volition that leads to thought, to speech, to action.

When the Buddha spoke about right intention—sometimes translated as right thought—he was being very specific. The intention of greed transforms, and it transforms naturally through wisdom into renunciation or generosity. The unwise intention of ill will transforms naturally into friendliness or mettā. The suffering, the unwise intention of cruelty transforms naturally into compassion. And I would add that pity or indifference as well transforms into compassion.

This starts by simply being a state of mind, a quality of mind and heart we experience just sitting here in response to thoughts, in response to experience. But it moves—a stronger intention motivates speech, and a stronger intention motivates action.

So ceaselessly responsive: when we talk about compassion, the description of compassion is the quivering of the heart in response to suffering, our own or another's. And sometimes Buddhism gets the reputation of being very passive.

So you might think, okay, so we sit here and let our hearts quiver and feel good about ourselves, and that's the end of it. But of course not. Of course not. That's where we start. But as compassion grows stronger and the appropriate situation arises, that intention will naturally move into speech and action.

Intention is really interesting in terms of understanding action and result—kamma and vipāka—in terms of how the Buddha talked about it. Because kamma just means action. And when he speaks of wholesome or unwholesome action, it's not a moralistic judgment, but rather action that leads to happiness, goodness, to wholesome results, versus actions that cause more suffering for ourselves and others—that's unwholesome. The seed of the action, the determining aspect, isn't the result of the action, because that's not in our control most of the time. The seed of action is the intention.

This is what I've been going on about for two months now—that what we're doing is purifying the mind stream, purifying the heart stream, the habits of our mind. This is what forms our intentions. This is the heart of awakening, the heart of how we move and act in the world. Because the same action seen from outside could come from many, many different intentions. And I know personally that one can really fool others as to one's intention. It looks good. But the seed inside ourselves—well, we can even fool ourselves, but it can't fool kamma. It's just what it is.

The example in the suttas about intention is this: a bhikkhu at the time of the Buddha who was blind was doing walking meditation outside in the forest. He was said to be an arahant, completely awakened, which means in the way the Buddha talked about it, it would not be possible for him to harm living beings. There would be no cruelty, greed, or aversion in his mind. So he's doing walking meditation, and there's a whole stream of ants, and he's walking back and forth across these ants and killing them. Some of the other bhikkhus saw this and went running to the Buddha, saying, "He's supposed to be an arahant, but he's killing ants! What do you say about that?"

If you read the Vinaya, the whole book of monastic rules, it's not meant to be funny, but it's interesting because I really get a sense that human nature hasn't changed very much. A great many of the rules come from bhikkhus running to the Buddha going, "Yeah, yeah, yeah, he's doing this!" And then the Buddha responds, "Okay, obviously the spirit of it would be this, but I see I have to make a rule." And we won't even get into it, but in the beginning there were hardly any rules and they just keep adding up.

Anyway, the Buddha said, "Yes, well, he is an arahant"—only the Buddha could say that—"but he's blind. He does not know that there are ants there. There is no intention, no motivation, no volition in his mind whatsoever to harm living beings, and so it's not an unwholesome karmic action."

I think that's interesting, just putting it out for us to explore in ourselves. Because our tendency is to think,

well, if it comes out to a good effect, it's been good. And maybe it has been good—that's still good. But the seed is really in the intention. Now, once that bhikkhu knew there were ants, if he just said, "Well, who cares," and kept on walking, that's very different. Very different.

So this is the place to really explore in ourselves what it's like when we think, speak, and act from desire—or not. From aversion—or not. And again, what I'm saying, what I really love, is that through clear seeing, through wisdom naturally arising in the mind as a function of moment after moment of clear seeing, our habits of mind, our intentions naturally transform. Naturally.

How many times—maybe even just here if you've been coming for a while, or in your life—just pick somebody who's bugging you. Don't pick the biggest, most difficult person in your life, but just something that's bugging you. You're crossing paths, you're feeling aversion, judgment, blame, the whole deal. And at some point you stop. You stop projecting, you stop buying into the ill will, and there's just this sense of connectedness.

This happens to me all the time. I just stop and let myself look at or feel with or just be there with a sense of that person. Or in my mind I think, "How would I feel if I acted like that? How would it feel to act like that?" Immediately, in that openness to connect—not the hugest thing in your life, okay, but in littler things—in that connectedness, the sense of me and what I think and my views is gone, and compassion naturally is there.

Wow. That would be suffering. There's no more anger. There's no more judgment. There's not even that sense of me and you. It's not about what's best for me—it's what's best for us. And that just naturally comes about. Trying to think what to do in a situation, instead of me and everybody else, it's us. The "us" might be here in this room, here in the center, in the whole world.

It doesn't mean we know what's best for us, right? That's another piece. It doesn't mean we have all the information, and sometimes we'll never have all the information. And it may be that what we really clearly think is best for us, we're not actually able to put into effect.

Okay, then our job, our awareness, the wisdom is: can we keep coming from the compassion, the connectedness, rather than the frustration of all these incredibly dense people not seeing so clearly what's best for us and acting on it, by God.

How we speak, think, and act—mostly when we're not consciously choosing but simply letting whatever comes up arise—is the habits, the old habits we've been talking about. It's beautiful to see them transform. One of my favorite lines from the Buddha is: whatever one frequently thinks about, dwells upon, that will become the inclination of the mind. And without getting scared about it, just explore. What one frequently thinks about, dwells upon, that becomes the inclination of the mind.

A lot of what happens for many people in intensive meditation retreats is that we see, kind of like in neon lights, some of the habits of our mind—some of the not-so-lovely habits, but also some of the beautiful

ones. Part of why people are really struggling, when it feels like you're up against the wall or moving through muck, is because habits we didn't even know were habits—they're so familiar, like an old glove—start to stand out in neon.

But seeing them is different from believing them and being them. That's the key. That's the transformation. How we meet what's currently arising in our mind—that's where wisdom and compassion are developing. Not by what's happening, but by how we meet it.

The habits of our mind become who we are, the intentions. I've been spending the last few years a lot of time in nursing homes, assisted living homes, hanging out with elderly men and women with dementia—really a lot of time. I won't say Alzheimer's, because sometimes that seems to eat at the brain and actually change the personality like a disease. But there's a different kind of dementia, which my mom has, where you're essentially the same person, but you're just not remembering so much. And the habits of mind are just so clear. I want to tell you, sometimes it's scary. They're just so clear.

My mother has become much more childlike and enjoying. We'll be on the way somewhere, like the doctor, and she won't remember where we're going or even why. When I remind her, she doesn't even remember that she's sick—unless she coughs. But on the way she'll stop and go, "Wow, those trees are so beautiful! I just love looking at those clouds." Fifty times on the way: "I just love looking at those clouds." And it's fresh. It's new.

There are other people—Ajahn Sumedho tells this story. He went to some nursing home in England and there was one old lady; the first thing she'd say is, "You're not getting my money." So sad. I mean, that's the reality. My mother, every time I go: "What can I do for you, honey?" That's her thing. It's both beautiful and scary to see.

What I really want to emphasize is that we may not even realize how much the habits of our mind are shifting simply through the moment-to-moment clear seeing of awareness. That's really extraordinary. We're just noticing what's happening, noticing what's happening, noticing what's happening. But in each moment that we notice what's happening, we're not feeding greed. We're not feeding aversion or ill will. We're actually strengthening connectedness, compassion.

In every moment of activity, we are committing to something—the question is, to what? It's not so much the object we're committing to, but the way, what's in the mind that's paying attention, what quality of mind is present in how we meet this moment.

Currently arising experience—say a moment of greed, a moment of love, some memory from the past, some fear—that's the result of previous action, previous karma. That's just what's happening. How we meet it in the moment is the present moment karma, which will create future results. This is why how we meet our joys and our demons in our life, in our meditation retreat here—that's why the difficult times are so important.

And it really doesn't matter the magnitude of the difficulty. Some people at times might have huge suffering, either in their external life or huge trauma coming up, or they're simply a kind of person whose nervous system is incredibly sensitive and it seems like massive suffering. Someone else might think, "Well, my suffering's nothing. My knee just hurts, or I'm feeling a little lonely." But it's not about comparing suffering or the quality or degree of it. All of our suffering, any of our suffering—it's good enough.

It's good enough to awaken with. It's good enough to meet with this openness of heart, of mind, this connectedness that is the response of compassion in the moment.

When we hate what's happening, when we push it away, that's the response of aversion. Okay, next moment—another chance to meet it with compassion. It doesn't matter.

If we just had retreats that go from good to better to best, pleasant to beautiful to sunny, light and bright and peaceful, and that's all that ever happened—it just wouldn't really do the job. But I somehow know, I've never met anyone for whom that's all that ever happened. Some people get more difficulty than others, but it doesn't matter. They still suffer. Don't worry—everybody's suffering. And we get just the suffering we need, you know?

When His Holiness the Dalai Lama talks about compassion, or bodhicitta, which is the ultimate compassion, the noble or awakened heart—the conscious motivation to practice, to awaken, in order to bring all beings to awakening. So our conscious motivation in meeting our knee pain, in meeting our loneliness, is to really meet it with compassion, not only for ourselves, but so that we can be of aid to all beings. It's vast.

But he says, how does this vastness of compassion develop? It starts with insight into what suffering is, what pain is, what sorrow is. And how do we get that insight? He says by focusing on, by meeting our own experience, by really opening to suffering in our own hearts, in our own minds. Where else are we going to learn it? And from that place—and again, this is still the Dalai Lama—that compassion then strengthens as we move into a sense of empathy, a sense of connectedness with all beings.

I love that in terms of meditation retreat, in terms of awareness in our life. Where do we start? We start where we are, right here. How do we start? Simply by meeting this moment with kind attention. Sharon Salzberg likes to say that to pay attention is to love. I really like that. You get the sense when you're suffering, if someone's just really there with you—kind, present, non-judging, not trying to fix, just really there with you while you talk or whatever you need to do. To me, that's a real experience of feeling loved, feeling received, feeling cared for. And in some ways, it's kind of rare sometimes.

So we start by bringing that to ourselves. To pay attention is to love. To love is to connect with, to accept, and from that the wisdom arises that moves into the ceaselessly responsive—whatever is appropriate. We just start simply in this moment right now.

Desmond Tutu, the archbishop from South Africa who won the Nobel Peace Prize, who was one of the instrumental people in organizing and carrying out the peace and reconciliation process after the end of apartheid—he was recently in Boston. I heard a little snippet of what he said on the radio this morning. He was facilitating a group of Israelis and Palestinians. But what I actually heard was a moment where he was taking questions from young women and men, late teenagers in Boston who were coming from schools in areas where there was a lot of violence, a lot of hatred.

One young man asked him, "Bishop Tutu, you say that we learn to hate. We're not born hating. It's not our natural state—we learn to hate. But I'm a student in this violent environment where there's so much hatred and so much fear. So how can we, in the midst of this culture, learn to love? How can we bring that to the culture?"

And Desmond Tutu said, with a great deal of emphasis, a great deal of passion—he said to him, "You can make a difference." He really emphasized it: "You, you, you." And you could tell he was pointing to all the people there. He said it so fervently: "One person can make a big difference. You start with you. Learn to love here and now."

Now this is me saying, so what we can do is you, you, me, start now. Learn to love—at least learn not to hate this present moment, whatever's arising. Beautiful, ugly, scary, boring, not what we need, crappy practice, whatever it is. Learn to love. How do we love? Simply by paying attention. Whatever it is.

This is from Pema Chödrön. She says, "How are we ever going to change anything? How is there going to be less aggression in the universe rather than more?" She says it starts by being willing to feel what we are going through. It starts with being willing to have a compassionate relationship with the parts of ourselves that we feel are not worthy of existing on this planet. If we are willing through meditation to be mindful not only of what feels comfortable, but also of what pain feels like—if we even aspire to stay awake and open to what we're feeling, to recognize and acknowledge it as best we can in each moment—then something begins to change.

Just even aspire. Don't even try to be successful. Just have the willingness, as someone said today, to be here.

And just today, it hit me really strongly. I think I was walking up here, walking somewhere. At the moment, my mother's really sick, and I have to go down there in a few days and go through some whole thing. It was just kind of weighing on me. As I was walking, I could feel that little bit of distance—I could name it, I could feel it, but there was just that little bit of separation. And in the noticing, boom, my attention just really dropped in. I quit trying to hold myself separate.

How many times has this happened in my life? A million, right? That I've been watching my mind and suddenly: *Oh, right.* As soon as you drop in, quit fighting, surrender, quit trying to figure out, just feel whatever it is—you don't have to know what it is—that's the place where compassion naturally arises. The

sense of love, the sense of connectedness. Duh, you know? Holding away is separation. Feeling is connectedness. There's nothing else to do.

And also, I might say, the place of freedom. There's no more fear, no more problem. It's just this. I've experienced that a million times. The habit is still to push away. But oh, right—this is the place of freedom. Right here. The place of connectedness.

So really looking at how we meet what's arising, how do we meet the demons that are coming up in our own experience here? I want to read you a story from Milarepa that I like—which is why I'm using the word demon.

You know who Milarepa was, right? The incredible Tibetan yogi, one of the most famous, in his cave for years and years. A great poet. I'm going to condense this considerably.

He was in his cave, and his mind had become very blissful. He'd been there a long time, so he was really tripping out on his meditation. He went out to gather wood and carried some back up to his cave. When he got there, he found seven metal demons with bodies the size of thumbs and eyes the size of cups. Some were making fire. Some were bringing water. Some were grinding tsampa, barley flour. Some sat performing various magical tricks. Basically, they'd made themselves at home.

When Milarepa saw them, he became frightened. So he meditated on his deity. He uttered a subjugating mantra.

He performed a subjugating gaze. He did all the tricks he knew to make them go away. Then he meditated on compassion and friendliness. But he still could not pacify them.

I just love that, because that's the order, right? Do everything you can to make them go away. And then, "Oh yeah, compassion." But they still don't go.

So he thought, maybe these are local deities of the place. And I have been here for months and years, and I have not really praised them. So then he sang them a song of praise, basically saying, "Okay, okay, we can live here together." And at the end he said, "You non-human demons assembled here are obstacles. So drink this cup of friendliness and compassion and be gone."

And you know, three of them went away. Three of them went away. But he was still unable to make the other four go away.

So then he said, "Oh, I realize your magical obstacles." And he sang a song of confidence in his understanding and in the view. I'm skipping it because it's really long, but it's beautiful poetry of confidence in his understanding, in the view. He ends that with, "It's wonderful that you demons came today. You must come again tomorrow. From time to time, we should converse." So it's like, "Oh, okay."

Three of them vanish like a rainbow. The remaining one performed an imposing dance, and Mila thought,

"This one is vicious and very powerful." So then he sang a song of the view, the pinnacle of his realization. He reached into his deepest realization, and this ends with, "A demon like you does not intimidate me. If a demon like you could intimidate me, the arising of the mind of compassion would be of little meaning. So Demon, if you were to stay here longer, that would be fine with me. If you have friends, bring them along. We'll talk out our differences. Ah, Ma, I feel compassion for this spirit."

And then he prays: "Lord Vajradhara, whose essence is Akshobhya, grant your blessings so that this lowly one"—meaning himself—"may have complete compassion."

Thus Mila sang. And with friendliness and compassion, and without concern for his body, Mila placed himself in the mouth of the demon. But the demon could not eat him, and so vanished like a rainbow.

Our steps of compassion. And when we really surrender, really surrender, we find the true compassion and the wisdom and the emptiness. But we can't fool it. We just can't fool it.

I want to come back again to the fact that in the way I'm talking about it, the heart of compassion, of connectedness, of mettā, is in the understanding, in the intention. It's interior, you could say—from the inside out. And for sure, there are many people doing wonderful things in the world, really wanting to help, and this is great. But mostly, if it's from the outside in, from an idea of what compassion is or what loving-kindness should be, it can still do good. I'm not saying that we have to wait until we're absolutely perfect Milarepa before we do anything. But if it's from the outside in, matching an idea, matching a view, for the most part it's not sustainable. And it's not really this depth of wholesomeness.

We all know about peace marches that turn violent, or people really doing active social service work, environmental work—really good stuff that is so difficult that it ends up getting fueled by anger, by despair. It starts to eat the person up from the inside. Not sustainable in that way. That's not complete enough. That's not really the compassion that's coming from the inside out.

I just love to hear about, read about, meet people that do seem to come from the inside out. It's incredibly inspiring. And you see, far from being passive or what we'd call a doormat, there's incredible courage. It doesn't mean they can necessarily fix everything. The Buddha couldn't fix everything.

But you really get a sense of the power of this coming from the inside out, that the wise motivation we can keep drawing from, this ceaseless response, is because it's fueled by really knowing in ourselves the wisdom of our basic goodness.

I see the difference in myself when I'm trying to be compassionate versus when it just naturally springs forth. It's a world of difference. The second one has nothing to do with me. It's just life responding to itself. The first one is all about me. And maybe I do something useful, but there's this tightness, this constraint. It's just very different, and it's not sustainable.

So I'll give some examples because I love them. One that's always deeply affected me is from Martin

Luther King. At one point in reading a biography of him, he was talking about the bombing of the church in Birmingham where four little girls were killed—really, really an awful thing. His whole movement, the whole peace movement, was coming from the place of nonviolence. It wasn't just Dr. King. But one place he said, "No matter what people do, I refuse to let hatred become our motive. I refuse to become bitter." That just really touches me. I refuse to act from hatred. I refuse to become bitter.

And another place I read, still about Dr. King, was about this sense of not making someone the other. That's how we get into hatred. That's how we get into bitterness. He was on a plane, and there was a Justice Department lawyer—this was a time when the Justice Department wasn't being very supportive, just kind of trying to work a little in the background. At this point, one of Dr. King's main advisors was a lawyer from New York, a white lawyer who many years ago had some communist connections—you know, in the 50s he'd gone to some communist meetings or something. This was around the early 60s, when it was still a big thing if anyone had been a communist or ever shook hands with someone who was a communist. It wasn't that far from McCarthyism.

So this Justice Department lawyer spent the whole plane trip trying to urge Dr. King to abandon this friend who was also one of his advisors. He kept saying, "Look, this guy used to have communist connections. You shouldn't be seen with him. It's going to look bad for your movement." Dr. King was being very polite and listening and responding. And suddenly this Justice Department man got it. He said, "Oh, this man I'm talking to—Dr. King—he would never shun even the most hateful segregationist bomber. If that person came up to him and really said he wanted to meet him as another human being and shake his hand, Dr. King wouldn't put him out of his heart." That's not this guy's language, "out of his heart," but he wouldn't shun him. And the lawyer realized: never mind a friend. So Dr. King is being very friendly to me, but he's not about to make this friend the other because maybe he has some bad connection. He's not about making anyone the other.

Really, how can we do that if it doesn't come from deep within our own understanding, our own way of being? It can't just be an idea. How are we going to act when the chips are down?

Aung San Suu Kyi is another one like that. You know who she is, right? She was still under house arrest for the better part of eighteen years. I read once that she said when she first went back to Burma—she lived in England with her husband and kids—she first went back in 1988, not to be part of the democratic movement and the demonstrations that were happening. They weren't happening yet. She went back because her mother was really sick and dying, and she went to take care of her. So she just happened to be in Burma in '88 when the demonstrations and uprising happened, when the democratic demonstrations were so ruthlessly put down. Because her father had been a hero of independence in '48, '49, she became the figurehead—because of her own strength of heart.

But this is what she said: "I never had any idea to become the head of the democratic movement for Burma or any kind of icon to the Burmese people. I suppose people think I'm extraordinary because I'm so

simple that they can't believe it. I have very ordinary attitudes towards life. If I think there's something I should do in the name of justice or in the name of love, then I'll do it."

The motivation is its own reward. Just that quality. Incredible courage, right? It's not about being a doormat at all.

I have friends who live across the street from Aung San Suu Kyi's house. So mostly for years, ever since I've been going to Burma, that road has been blocked off. But last year—now, forget about it—but last year there was a little short instant where it wasn't, and so they sneaked me into their house for tea. It was kind of cool, just to see, oh, Suu Kyi's over there. I mean, it was still guarded, and it's way in the background. But just seeing someplace gives you more sense of the reality.

And so just driving by her house, which you can't really see, but just down in there, I was talking to my friend Kinson and I thought, wow, just on a daily basis, what must her life be like? She's been locked up in this house with maybe one or two ladies to help cook for her and take care of her, no phone, no other contact, for years, all by herself. What would your days be like? What would your years be like? Her husband died. Her kids have grown up. What would it just be like on a day-to-day basis? What quality of sincerity, of wisdom and motivation, the willingness to keep coming from? And she does—every time anyone has a chance to speak with her, she keeps coming from clarity, wisdom, and compassion. She's never in any public way given into anger, bitterness, or just "get me out of here." Incredible power of heart and mind. And she said, if there's anything I think needs to be done in the name of love, in the name of justice, then I'll do it.

But in terms of actions in the world, it isn't easy. In terms of just being with ourselves, with the pain of ourselves, it isn't easy. For great karuṇā, for ourselves, for the world, it doesn't matter. And it really moves from self into the world. I know you must have experienced this. I have many times. Well, just like today, when I dropped into that sense of the sadness—the sadness of change and old age and suffering and illness. It stops being about me personally or this particular story. Not even thinking about it—it just becomes the pain of the world. In that moment, there really isn't a sense of differentiation or "why me" or "why my mother" or "why?" It's just like, oh yeah, this is part of life on this planet. And we feel really connected whenever I've been in a hospital or when I've had friends going through difficulty.

This might sound silly, but I'll say it anyway. It isn't personal. But someone was telling me once she was on retreat and she was doing eight precepts and really, really hungry at night. And at first she was having a lot of aversion, a lot of reaction to it. And then it kind of hit her. This might seem like a coddled American who's had everything, but it was very sincere. I thought it was very touching. She said, "I've spent so much time in India where there are so many people who are really starving. And I thought I was compassionate, but I never really let it in. I mean, we can't really know what it's like to be starving, but I never even could let it in what that might feel like. And when I just open to my little simple hunger pangs without it being all about me, it opens into the hunger in the world. I really get a sense—oh, there are people everywhere

in the world going to bed hungry, and they don't have a choice."

We never know what way the connectedness takes us in, but really the sense of our dukkha stops being personal and it starts being that of all beings.

So whether it's for here, whether it's in the world, great compassion really needs to be balanced with wisdom, with equanimity—with the equanimity that first knows we can't control all the results. We can't. Like Martin Luther King or like Suu Kyi—how can we stay open? How can we keep connecting when the results not only don't turn out good, but sometimes turn out really bad? How do we not let bitterness become our motive? Moment to moment, moment to moment. Also knowing that we can act with really sincere compassion and, as I said before, not have the big picture, not be able to have the big picture, but still do what we need to do.

Sister Chan Khong, who is the nun who's a close colleague of Thich Nhat Hanh, talks about in her autobiography during the Vietnam War, when she was quite young then, and still quite a peace activist, a Buddhist activist.

And at one point she was thrown in jail, a South Vietnamese jail, for handing out peace pamphlets, something like that. She was in a big holding cell with maybe sixteen or twenty women of all ages. And she said in that cell there were two young girls, eleven, twelve years old, who had been swept up in one of the sweeps the South Vietnamese did of a village. "These are all Viet Cong," and they threw them in jail. They were just young girls in the wrong place at the wrong time—the wrong place being where they lived. They had done nothing, and they were in this bad environment with some hardened criminals.

Sister Chan Kong got released soon through connections; her family had connections. As she was leaving and having, I guess, an outtake interview with the head of the jail, she said to him, "Oh, by the way, there are these two young girls. They didn't do anything. It's really not good for them. Maybe you could let them out."

And he said, "Oh, so I see that the prisoners are talking to each other. I see that the prisoners are exchanging information. This is not okay. I'm going to really harden up the conditions here. Thank you for letting me know this."

How would you feel? How can we refuse to let bitterness become our motive? How can we keep going? And also, for me, I could imagine being a more passive type. I say, "Okay, that's the last time I ever try to do anything to help anybody. I'm just screwing it up worse." But that's also aversion, despair.

So that's our koan. I don't have the answer. But I do know: moment to moment, moment to moment, how am I meeting this moment? And when it all seems too big, when the vastness of suffering in the world seems too big—I know for me there are plenty of times when I just feel overwhelmed. Listening to the news, or it can be my own life, it can be pick your spot on the planet. Overwhelming. If I keep going into that, it is too much. The wisdom, the compassion isn't strong enough in that moment. But if I can just come

back from ideas to meet the moment, then it's possible again.

One thing I want to offer, because it's been really interesting and helpful for me, is a practice that Dilgo Khyentse Rinpoche mentions in his book *Heart Treasure of the Enlightened Ones*, which is a lot about Chenrezig, who in the Tibetan cosmology is the Buddha of compassion. He's talking about imagining that all phenomena are Chenrezig. He says when it's like this, you imagine in this sense all appearances, everything you see, all form is Chenrezig's body. All sounds, whether it's the sounds of animals or the wind or people or machinery, all sounds are Chenrezig's voice, the voice of the Buddha of compassion. All thoughts, all moods, all mental experiences are the blissful unity of compassion and emptiness. Everything is the manifestation of Chenrezig.

Play with that. I was playing with it once when I was on a self-retreat for a month, and it was... no, don't get too trippy about it. But just notice—I especially was doing it with thoughts and emotions. I thought, "Oh, that again." That's Chenrezig's emptiness and compassion. That's just Chenrezig manifesting. Somehow magically I didn't get all upset at it. "Oh, Chenrezig, emptiness and compassion just manifesting." Everything is of one taste, and the response of acceptance and compassion really came quite naturally. It's just a lovely shift, for me, on how I perceive all aspects of the universe. All sounds were Chenrezig's voice, so I didn't differentiate between the dogs, the motors, the sounds I like, the sounds I don't like. What is that? Oh, it's Chenrezig. Hard to get mad at Chenrezig. And it really was quite lovely in the effect that it had.

I just want to offer that.

And in terms, again, of this refusing to become bitter—the story of the Dalai Lama, an interview with him where he's talking about young Tibetan men. He was having a discussion with them, and they were basically saying, "Look, your way of working with the Chinese, with nonviolence—it isn't working. They're taking over Tibet, destroying our culture." The young saying to the old: "Old man, it isn't working. We need to do something else. We need a different procedure, a different way."

And in this interview, the Dalai Lama was weeping. He said, "You may be right. Maybe it isn't working. But I cannot be otherwise. I cannot."

So I just want to end with a line from Adyashanti:

Saving all beings is not something that you do. Saving all beings is a verb that you become. You become the saving of all beings. That's just what you are.

Emptiness and compassion working together.

So let's just sit quietly for a moment.

Compassion (Karuṇā)

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