Unity of Compassion and Emptiness

Carol Wilson · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Carol Wilson · 1:01:46

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Unity of emptiness and compassion. The main point I want to make is not that these are two ways of talking about, or two aspects or manifestations of, the same reality, the same understanding, the same wisdom. It's not as if they merely go together. Rather, there's no way that real understanding of emptiness—that no experience is lasting, that there's no specific self in anything—does not manifest as compassion, or loving kindness, friendliness, or equanimity. They just go together.

And conversely, the real depth of compassion, the ability to really be present, that quivering of the heart together with the capacity to be here for one's own difficulties, for another's difficulties—it gets more and more possible with greater and greater depth and breadth only through the wisdom of emptiness. The two really are the same, two aspects of the same thing.

But of course, as life is, as our practice is, as we develop, things don't remain completely balanced all the time. We can, in our mind, put too much emphasis on one or the other, or think one's missing and get kind of upset because it's not all perfectly balanced every moment.

Here, a lot of what we've been talking about includes both, but in terms of the practice of mindfulness, the practice of insight, the teachings of anatta, dependent origination, the sense of non-clinging—really recognizing the emptiness of self, the freedom of heart and mind in non-clinging—as quite a few people have said, there can be moments when that recognition is really freeing, and other moments when some of the words that have been used can feel alien, unfamiliar, uncaring, inhuman.

As Guy said, quoting Trungpa I think: nostalgia for samsara. You just want to get back to it. It feels like we're really in there, in the juice, really. That's really what it's all about. And compassion would be in there with your heart ringing and caring and crying and grieving. Without that oomph, something's missing.

And sure, part of it is that in touching the space, more and more the sense of freedom of heart and mind in non-clinging—it is unfamiliar. Hopefully it gets more familiar, but at first it is unfamiliar. And our habit of not liking the unfamiliar leads us to think something must be wrong, something is missing. Which, thank God it's missing—that's the whole point of our practice. But something does feel absent at that time.

But that's also not all. One of the lovely ways that some Tibetans describe the natural state of mind is that this emptiness also has the quality of spontaneous knowing, as we've been pointing to—just natural cognizance. Like, as Sally was saying, you hit the bell, you hear it. It's immediate. It just happens, out of

nothing, going back to nothing, out of the emptiness. That's spontaneous.

The third quality that rounds it out—because there's no shape and no nothing—is that emptiness is ceaselessly responsive. The heart and mind of awakening, of non-clinging, of wisdom, in the real knowing of emptiness, confronted with a situation requiring action, will naturally respond from either compassion or loving kindness or joy or equanimity—whatever is appropriate. Ceaselessly responsive. Not distant, empty, indifferent, cold, void, nothingness.

to kind of fall into a view, a taste of emptiness that does seem alien, indifferent. To some of us, that's a near enemy really of equanimity, but you can kind of—they call it falling into emptiness—where there is not really the ceaselessly responsive nature.

This is from Nyoshul Khenpo, who was a great Dzogchen teacher: "The danger is that we hear too much too soon. We think we have understood shunyata, or emptiness, and we err on the side of the absolute in a nihilistic fashion, and we're obscured by concepts—the concept of emptiness." Nagarjuna said, "It is sad to see those who mistakenly believe in material, concrete reality, but far more pitiful are those who believe in emptiness." Believing in emptiness because that's just a concept.

Nyoshul Khenpo says, "Those who believe in things can be helped through various kinds of practice and through the way of skillful means. But those who have fallen into the abyss of emptiness find it almost impossible to reemerge, since there seem to be no handholds, no steps, no gradual progression, and nothing to do."

I think sometimes this might be what people are afraid is going to happen with just a little taste of non-clinging. "Oh yes, it's all empty, so who cares? It's all empty. It doesn't matter. I can do whatever I want. Whatever happens to you, it's all empty." If, not just in a moment but over time, that's where your practice seems to be taking you, where your understanding seems to be taking you—yes, it's only partial. Something's missing.

But don't get all freaked out, because unless we're really, really strongly attached to the view of emptiness, the concept of emptiness, simply the natural unfolding of wisdom, paññā, awareness, understanding—the mind of non-clinging naturally expresses as compassion. They really do support each other, and you can trust that.

So really, if there's some taste of it that feels alien, unfamiliar, don't freak out. Don't go running away. Give it a little more time. Let it open up. It takes time—a little bit on this side, a little bit on that side. If you trust, they come together, manifest as compassionate.

The understanding of emptiness, the mind of non-clinging, exactly because the energy is released from that contraction, that obsessive self-referencing—all our energy in a way is contracted around the sense of me, me, me. Sayadaw U Tejaniya gives a great example. He says it's like we measure, without realizing, every experience from the felt sense of me. Me here, seeing out there. It's not that we say that, but it's a

sense of "this is me, and I'm seeing; this is me, and I'm hearing; this is me, and I'm thinking, 'Oh, how can I help this poor person? How can I be compassionate?' Or 'I'm not compassionate enough.'" He said it's like you're at the center point. In Tibet, they measure the foundation of a house by picking the center point, using a string, and then measuring all the way around to get the footprint of the house. So it's like that with us—the center point.

And so those moments when that's not there, the energy is all released into tenderness for beings, a connectedness with life. There's not this need to protect and fear and plan and manipulate and control.

This is from Nisargadatta Maharaj. I like this a lot. He says, "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 sorrows of humankind become your sole concern."

So that release from self-obsession releases us, you could say, into being the world. And the natural movement of that is compassion, is connectedness—but without that sense of personal doing or personal fear or personal overwhelm. It's really very different.

Just as we can fall into emptiness, into a concept of emptiness—this indifference, this separation, this "oh, it all doesn't really matter," just floating above the clouds, "this is equanimity"—so we can also fall into compassion when it's not held with the real understanding of emptiness, the equanimity that comes from that, the understanding that we don't control. That equanimity allows us to really be here in the face of difficulty. Without that, that's when we can easily start to either drown in the amount of suffering or our reactions to it, or fall into that kind of denial, shutting down.

So many people say, here and other places, "I really want to open my heart." We do. We have this sense often, almost physical, of the heart here being contracted, our sense of connectedness to the world being separate. You can really feel when there's aversion in the mind—that sense of separation, that sense of alienation.

So with the sincerest wish or wanting or intention to be compassionate, and we are—all of this is in degrees, right?—but when compassion isn't supported, really held from the foundation of emptiness, well, at some point we either have to pull back or we get lost.

The question that comes up often is: how do we contrive to stay open in this world? How can we keep connected? How can we even begin to open to the pain in this world? And it's a bombardment, isn't it? Even just sitting here where you don't have to listen to the news or the newspapers or talk to your family members—it's a bombardment.

I just want to share three things from this week that I heard, the ones that happened to touch me out of thousands of stories, just to remind us this is the world and it is difficult. How, without the deep knowing of emptiness, do we expect to really be present without being ground down?

The first story is from Burma. As you know, in Burma last year there were many totally peaceful demonstrations from monks and activists and ordinary people—really about prices getting high. They weren't even complaining about the government at first. But anyway, a lot of demonstrations. In the past year, a little over a year, they've arrested over two thousand people. And two weeks ago they started sentencing them. In the last two weeks alone, they've sentenced over a hundred people to terms like sixty-five years—sixty-five years for things like using a cell phone without a permit, because that's what they can get them on.

I heard an interview on the BBC. The reporter was in Bangkok because he couldn't get into Burma, and he was talking on the cell phone to one of the activists. Her name is Nilar Thein. At that point she was in hiding. It was a very clear connection—she was talking in Burmese but you could hear her voice clearly, and it was being translated.

Her story: she and her husband, whose name is Kyaw Min Yu but he's called Jimmy, had both been in jail after the 1988 demonstrations. She was in jail for eight years and he for sixteen. They came out, got married in 2006, and had a little baby. But they're part of this 88 Generation Students group—a very well organized but very underground movement, totally committed to peacefulness.

When these demonstrations started in August, they both talked about it along with all the others in their group, and they just marched in these peaceful demonstrations. That's all.

At this point, when they were talking to her, her husband had been arrested immediately in 2007. She had been on the run and hiding for months, at first with her young baby, just a few months old. But that got too dangerous for the baby, so the baby was with her in-laws. The government had guards all around the baby, knowing she would try to see it. So she couldn't go to see her own baby.

They're having this conversation with her, and she sounded so clear—not fanatical, not rabid at all. Very clear, very normal, saying, "Sometimes I despair. I really miss my baby. My husband at least gets to see the family. He's in jail, but the family can visit. I can't even do that. But this was my decision. We all decided who would go out and get arrested, who would go into hiding. We're just following that."

The interviewer was asking, "Don't you ever despair?" And she said, "Well, I have moments when I think I could be doing something more useful. But my friends say, 'No, don't give way to emotion.'" She sounded really clear, and she said, "I've been through so much worse." She's also sick—asthma and bronchitis. "When I was in jail and in solitary and really ill, they would bring me these things to sign. I'm just really clear: when you know what's important and what you believe in, that gives me the courage and the strength. And I know I'm not going to despair."

She said, "I've been through worse than this." And she was just so clear and calm.

Anyway, she was arrested a couple of months ago. She just received a 65-year sentence. Her husband got 65 years too, along with over a hundred other people. And they're splitting them all up now. They're not

letting them stay in Yangon anymore. They're scattering all these people to jails all over Burma so their families can't reach them. They can't bring them medicine. They can't bring them food.

That's one story. One story, and there are hundreds of others in Burma. I'm sharing this not to overwhelm us, but just to notice where our mind and heart goes with it. That's one example.

Another one. This is just coming at us. This is this world. There's a lot of fighting in the Democratic Republic of Congo again. I saw a little bit on the news. They were interviewing a young boy, a 10-year-old, who with his mother and grandmother had to run from their village because his father and his three older brothers were killed, along with many, many people massacred. They were in hiding, trying to get a little food and water from neighbors, but there wasn't much. He had to leave school and could probably never go back. And the grandmother, who was over 90 years old, was out for three or four days walking, sleeping rough, just trying to find some food to bring back to the family because she was afraid they would starve to death. And there they sat, just talking to the interviewers.

That's another story. And again, just notice—can we take it in? Can we be here with this? Does the mind get sad? Does it push it away? Does it blame? Does it get angry? There's no right or wrong. It's just for us, with wisdom, to see what arises, what's compassion, how much we might push away.

A third story, just one of a billion stories of old age. The mother of a very good friend of mine, 91 years old—I know her well—lives in Germany. She's been very bright, very active, slowly getting weaker over time. She had a stroke about two months ago, was in intensive care for two days, then back to assisted living. Her daughter and son, my friend, came from Asia, and they've been taking care of her. She's been back in the hospital with internal bleeding, then out again.

She's not so clear anymore. She speaks part gibberish and part coherent sentences. Her body's really weak. She's never been afraid of death. But now she's talking to her dead relatives, calling on spirits. She wasn't particularly religious, but she's saying, "Please, I'm ready. Please help me come to where you are. Please help me come to the other side." But her body won't give up. It keeps getting worse. Then she's in the hospital. Then she's back. This has been going on and on. So they sleep there. They take care of her. They wash her. They feed her. What she's going through, what they're going through to be there with her—

Just to know that this is one of however many billion stories unfolding in this moment.

And I watch for myself. When can I be there? I think of her a lot. When does my mind not want to go there? When does it just want to shut it out? Just seeing all of that.

This is what we're bombarded with in this life. And if our idea of compassion is coming on a really deep level from a sense of *me* personally doing something, holding or creating this mental state—that's helpful. Inclining the mind towards compassion rather than anger, rather than shutting down, that's helpful. That's part of what I'll talk about.

But in the big picture, if it's all coming from a sense of self, from a sense of *me*, we can't maintain it. At some point it gets overwhelming. I'm saying maybe it doesn't for you, but at some point, just to be open in this world—without emptiness, we drown one way or the other.

There's a great quotation from James Baldwin I just came across. He wrote, "I imagine one of the reasons people cling to their hates so stubbornly is because they sense that once hate is gone, they will be forced to deal with pain."

I could see for me, in stories where there's a sense of a political oppressor or people acting in really awful ways, hate might be strong, but anger or blame—that is easier than feeling the pain. That's what compassion calls us to do. And without the *pañña*, the wisdom, the insight—we just start with a little insight—without that, the personal, individual, strength-of-will mind can't hold it.

But when there's that sense, like Nisargadatta says, where we can say with confidence, "I am the world, the world is me," then I don't have to hold it. It's just how it is. And we move from having to be the compassionate person, having to somehow overcome, to just this—the phrase that I really like is a sense of *bearing witness*. Just being able to be here. And we start just with our own pain.

Bearing witness. Or as I heard on NPR, they have a series called StoryCorps, where they just have people write in and tell a short little snippet of some story of their life that's important, that they want to share. And their motto is, "To listen is an act of love." Bearing witness is an act of courage, an act of compassion. It's that willingness, that ability to be present, to see through.

For myself, I'm really inspired by people who've done that with their lives—by many artists, poets, writers—who maybe weren't the activists in the way of marching or political organizing or doing something in that manner, but who had that ability to really bear witness without falling into anger and hatred. And sharing that is a really powerful force for connectedness and compassion in this world, I believe.

A tiny example: the Russian poet Anna Akhmatova, one of the most famous poets in Russia in the 20th century. Her life spanned from before the revolution, through the revolution, through the Civil War and the starvation, and then all the purges and the terror of all the years of Stalin. Her friends, her husband, her son were all arrested. Some of them were killed. Some were sent to gulags. She wasn't allowed to write. And then came the starvation in what's now St. Petersburg during World War II. On and on. She was just part of all of that, and she was able to write about it.

Just this little story. She's talking about what was called the Yezhov Terror in 1937, one of the big purges when Yezhov was the head of the secret police. So many people were swept up and sent to jail, and if it was one of your relatives, mostly the women who weren't arrested, they would go and stand in line at the jail in Leningrad every day, hoping to hear where their relative was and to hand over a package of food. Every day.

So she's saying, in the beginning of this whole poem called *Requiem*, covering five years, 1935 to 1940:

No foreign sky protected me.
No stranger's wing shielded my face.

In other words, she didn't leave for Europe as much of the intelligentsia could have.

I stand as witness to the common lot,
survivor of that time, that place.

In the terrible years of the Yezhov terror, I spent seventeen months waiting in line outside the prison in Leningrad. One day, somebody in the crowd identified me—because she was quite famous. *Standing behind me was a woman with lips blue from the cold who had, of course, never heard me called by name before. Now she started out of the torpor common to all of us and asked me in a whisper*—everyone whispered there—*"Can you describe this?"*

And I said, "I can."

Then something like a smile passed fleetingly over what had once been her face.

And then there's a whole long poem that follows. But it's a beautiful poem. It's filled with heart. All her work is filled with heart, with sadness, with appreciation of beauty, of love, of life. It's not a hateful rant. That's what bearing witness is.

So where do we start? That's what our practice is. Can we bear witness to ourselves? To what's going on in your own mind and body here, sitting here. It doesn't matter if you think, "Well, it's just a knee pain and people are starving." That's denial. That's resistance. That's pushing it away. "No, my pain doesn't count." Pain is pain. Suffering is suffering. We're not so special that our pain doesn't count. So can we bear witness? What is my pain then becomes the pain of all.

His Holiness the Dalai Lama speaks of this when talking about bodhicitta. Of course you're familiar with compassion itself. Karuna translates as the quivering of the heart in connection with suffering, in connection with pain—the natural expression of the awakened heart. Bodhicitta, the awakened heart, tenderly leads us to practice with the intention, with the wish that through our practice we can awaken in order to bring all beings to awakening. That's a vast intention, the most vast aspect of compassion. I'm not saying we should have that. I'm just sharing what the Dalai Lama says about it.

As I mentioned last week, it's a beautiful and very supportive and inspiring aspiration because it gives us the courage to come back and bear witness to ourselves. And the Dalai Lama asks: how does this tender heart, this bodhicitta, develop? He says first, through deep insight into what suffering is. And that arises by focusing on our own experience. Then from that, compassion strengthens with a sense of empathy and connectedness with other beings.

But the point I want to make now is that simply by bearing witness in this way, this willingness to be here for our own experience, it naturally opens up to empathy with all beings in that moment when that so me-centricness lets go. What had been my own particular brand of grief or sorrow or back pain or illness becomes simply grief. All beings experience grief.

Pema Chödrön shares a passage from Stephen Levine. She's talking about bodhicitta, this kinship with the suffering of others, this inability to continue to regard it from afar, the discovery of our soft spot, the discovery of bodhicitta—a Sanskrit word that means noble or awakened heart, inherent in all beings.

Stephen Levine writes of a woman who was dying in terrible pain and feeling overwhelming bitterness. At the point at which she felt she couldn't bear the suffering and resentment any longer, she unexpectedly began to experience the pain of others in agony. A starving mother in Ethiopia, a runaway teenager dying of an overdose in a dirty flat, a man crushed by a landslide and dying alone by the banks of a river. She said she understood that it wasn't her pain, it was the pain of all beings. It was not just her life, it was life itself.

We awaken this bodhicitta, this tenderness for life, when we no longer shield ourselves from the vulnerability of our condition, from the basic fragility of existence. That's what's going on in our practice—opening. So often you feel vulnerable, fragile, so we open deeper and deeper to that.

But you see why. There's also the opening into emptiness, the non-clinging, the recognition that it's not all about me. The two have to go together. They don't always develop completely evenly. Sometimes it's so fragile, so vulnerable, we're so tender, and the mind can't hold it. That's the time when we pull back and work more with awareness. We work more with the sense that awareness doesn't care, that awareness can hold everything. Then there are other times when we think, "Yes, awareness doesn't care"—okay, let's just come back into the tenderness. But mostly it takes care of itself.

And that's why, I think Annie said this the other night, the difficult parts of a retreat—of our whole life—are so important. Where else can we first bear witness to the human state? Not just the human state, but that's the one we know. Where else can we bear witness to it? But also, this is exactly the place where the wisdom of non-reactivity, of acceptance, is changing the habit.

So the difficult stuff that comes up—our patterns, our greeds, our aversions, our self-hatreds—it all feels like, *oh, this is all stuff that's supposed to go away. If I had any understanding whatsoever, this stuff wouldn't be coming.* And then we just get lost in that. Instead of seeing, *oh, right—kilesas, greed, aversion, fear, delusion—this is the human condition.* Again, you're so special, you know? Three weeks, six weeks, three years of practice and no more of that comes up? No, it comes. It's arising. This is what we're here to see. How the mind meets it in the moment is what's creating new karma. That's creating new patterns.

So in that moment of hating the pain, that incredible greed for the seventeenth piece of cake or the first piece or whatever, the aversion, the self-judgment, the judgment of somebody else, the feeling just awful

about yourself because you haven't been kind, the pain in your back, whatever it is—in that moment when we recognize, *oh, it's like this. Aversion. I really have aversion. It's like this. Wanting. I am such a greedy loser*—when we can meet that with, *wanting is like this*—in that moment, in that moment of acceptance, of bearing witness, what's being practiced is compassion, is acceptance.

Just as we say awareness doesn't care in the moment of awareness, it's the same with compassion. First of all, compassion doesn't arise except in response to suffering. That's one thing. So maybe something beautiful is arising, and you meet that without clinging—that's equanimity or the friendliness of metta. But to really see that if you're able, even for moments, to bear witness to the difficulties in your mind, in your body, in the environment, in your memories, in your home life—this is how the wisdom of emptiness, of non-clinging, and the natural response of compassion are coming together and being strengthened. It doesn't seem like much, just sitting there with your nutty mind, but it is. It really is.

The world is complex. Situations are complicated. Compassion, you know, really—this is again why it has to come with wisdom for it to be reliably real. I like to say it needs to sort of come from the inside out rather than from the outside in.

Compassion, wisdom, all of it starts as a nice idea. We start with a concept, and we work from that concept, of course, because that's how our minds are. *Compassion means being with someone in pain, doing what we can to alleviate suffering.* And yeah, that's great. And our tendency is, as we've talked about, intention—the motivation that leads to speech and action—that's the heart of karma. That's the seed of all action. That's really where it begins.

But in our normal life, in the way actions and responses are judged in the normal world, it's more like whether the desired result happened determines if our actions were good or bad, useful or not, compassionate or not. If we help somebody who's suffering, great—we could be compassionate. But if we feel compassion and we try to help and we just mess things up more, we tend not to think that was compassion. We think, *I blew it. Compassion should be able to fix everything.* Even the Buddha couldn't keep his kinfolk from going to war with each other. Compassion doesn't mean we can fix everything.

And it takes real wisdom, real trust, real courage to keep coming back to our inner understanding, our inner intention of being willing to be here, to bear witness with wisdom and then act in the way that's appropriate—but from a mind of wisdom, not from a mind of wanting to fix, or hating it and wanting to change it.

And this can be very complex. We all know stories—friends tell me—of going on peace marches here a couple of years ago and seeing how many of the activists, for whom this was a really big part of their life, were so angry, so bitter. And at some point, frustrated and wanting to turn to violence and breaking windows. It's understandable.

But that's when the compassion or the wanting to change things for the good of the world—when the

motivation doesn't really come from that deep wisdom of emptiness, from that understanding that we can't control, from that commitment really to understanding, to compassion.

We've worked with retreats for environmental activists, wonderful people, deeply committed, doing really important work. One lawyer said he was working hard, but he said he needed his anger. "I can't go into court without my anger. These other lawyers are so vindictive, and if I don't have my anger, I'll just be crushed. So don't give me metta. Don't tell me about all this stuff." But he practiced. And at the end, he saw how you can't just compartmentalize. The anger was eating him up too, spewing out on his family. And he really saw that.

It takes enormous faith and courage to trust that we'll go off, we'll try to do our best, and end up responding from some sense of me, what's best for me, or from anger, or from fear. We'll all do that. Or we'll shut down. We'll all do that. But to see that—okay, anger is like this—and come back again just to our own pain, bearing witness to our own pain, and allowing ourselves to come back into contact with really the mind, the motivation, the intention of compassion, over and over and over, trusting enough not to act until we can get in touch with that.

Joseph mentioned Martin Luther King the other night. There's one quotation from him I like very much on this line. When he was in the Birmingham jail, this is one line he wrote in a letter: "We are caught in an inescapable web of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly affects us all indirectly." And everything I've read of him conveys this sense of never making someone the other. Compassion isn't just compassion for the obvious victim or the obvious person being oppressed. Compassion includes everybody, includes the world. And out of that one clarity, maybe one can see what seems the best action. But we don't always know. It's this sense of commitment to that motivation.

So King said once, in 1963, after one of the terrible bombings of a church in Birmingham where four little girls were killed, he said after that, "I have come to see even more as we move towards our goal of justice that hatred must never be our motive. I refuse to become bitter." I mean, I can't even imagine. "I refuse to become bitter."

Or the Dalai Lama, a few years ago, when he was being berated—you know, his deep commitment to nonviolence, to a nonviolent way of trying to get China to withdraw from Tibet, which of course isn't happening at all. Some young Tibetans were basically berating him, saying, "It's not working, it's not working." And in this interview I read, tears were streaming down his cheeks and he said, "Maybe you're right. Maybe it's not working. But I cannot be otherwise. Maybe I'm wrong, but I cannot be otherwise." He could not abandon his deep commitment to compassion and nonviolence.

It's a complex world. We can't know. We can't know all the situations. We can't control it all. Can we have that faith, that courage, and the willingness to be with the pain of our own sense of failure sometimes? To trust in the power of the pure mind, the pure heart, to act from compassion, from caring, from connectedness?

Without the wisdom of emptiness, I don't see how it's possible to keep doing that. The doubt, the confusion would just get too strong.

This is the Dalai Lama again. He's saying that compassion must be derived from our insight into emptiness. This is where the vast meets the profound. If we don't have that, we fall into despair. Knowing that people's suffering is avoidable, that it is surmountable, our sympathy for their—and our—inability to pull themselves out of this suffering can lead to a more powerful compassion. But if it's not supported by the wisdom of emptiness, our compassion may be strong, but it is likely to have a quality of hopelessness or even despair.

I'm not saying this to suggest that if we notice hopelessness and despair, we should jump on ourselves. Of course there's going to be hopelessness and despair. We don't have to be afraid of it. That's again where we come back to bearing witness with ourselves. Oh, hopelessness is like this. But don't confuse hopelessness and despair for compassion. That's where the wisdom and our own self-compassion let us be with it.

And this is a line from Adyashanti I liked a lot: "Saving all beings is not something that you do. Saving all beings is a verb that you become."

So we really need a resilient and flexible heart, a real sense of trust in the mind of non-clinging, and a willingness to keep showing up even when the way isn't clear, even when it seems like we don't even know what to do, and that compassion seems like it's not strong enough.

It seems like the situation is too complicated or too horrible—like the Dalai Lama with Tibet. It doesn't seem to be working.

So then we really find ourselves, we really come down to: What do I really know? Where do I really place my faith? And at this point, having a "should" in our mind—"I should put my faith in compassion"—it's not going to work. But that's okay. And we keep on practicing. We keep on looking. We keep on seeing. This is where compassion is supported by equanimity.

A couple of examples. Without the wisdom of equanimity, we get confused. Because the motivation itself, in a deep sense, can be a true compassionate motivation. It doesn't mean that when we act from it, we get the results we want. The results of actions are out of our control. How hard is it? There's a great story about how we can't control the outcome, we can't control others' responses. And often we try to get as much of the picture of a situation, but often we don't have the big picture.

The story I often tell is from Sister Chan Khong, who is the nun who has worked with Thich Nhat Hanh ever since the Vietnam War. They were both peace activists, but really committed to nonviolence, to compassionate action, and to mindfulness practice. Very sincere practicing Buddhists.

She told this story from the Vietnam War, where she was put in jail for passing out some leaflets in South

Vietnam. She was in one cell with a bunch of other women, and in the cell were two young girls, eleven and twelve years old, who had just been caught up in a sweep of a village that the South was claiming were all Viet Cong. They threw them all in jail. But the girls had done nothing, and it was a bad environment.

So Sister Phương, as her name was then, got released because her family knew the chief or whatever. And as she was going out, she had an exit interview with the head of the prison. Very compassionate and very forthrightly, as she is—she's a very strong woman—she said, "You know, these two young girls, they did nothing. Eleven and twelve. This is bad for them. They should be released."

And the head of the prison said, "Oh, I see that the prisoners are talking to each other. They're communicating with each other. And this must stop. I'm going to make the conditions more rigorous." And that was it.

So with all the compassion and wisdom that she could have, doing what seemed right, things got worse. Can we stay open with that? Can we bear witness to our own experience, not get lost in anger, bear witness to our anger or our sense of failure? Can we not give up on the power of compassionate action, of a pure mind and heart?

I know I'm throwing out all these challenges. I'm not saying I have some answer. I'm saying this is a profound exploration for our life. And it's going to bring us up against everything in our hearts and minds and in the world that's in the way of that. It's both seductive and scary and painful. We'll get lost, we'll turn away. But the faith that comes—even just a glimpse of the emptiness of not-self, of the purity of our basic goodness, we can put it that way—the more we learn to recognize and trust this basic goodness of who we are, of the natural mind, then even when we can't quite find it in all the craziness, that's more and more what we come back to. Sort of like how Martin Luther King or Sister Chan Khong does.

So just to say, it's not a one-time thing. It's a life process. Enormous patience, enormous kindness to ourselves as well as to others.

So again, this is Sister Phương. She wrote this during the Vietnam War. She was just in her late teens at this time. Two of their friends, social workers who had been working in a village, had been killed by a grenade attack. This was her eulogy that she said at the funeral:

"We cannot hate you, you who have thrown grenades and killed our friends, because we know that people are not our enemies. Our only enemies are ambition, jealousy, hatred, and the misunderstanding that leads to such acts of violence."

Please allow us to remove all misunderstanding so that we can work together for the happiness of the Vietnamese people.

So that's powerful to begin with when your friends have been murdered. But I read this because it's not as

if she just sprang forth as this being of compassion and her life simply rolled out like that. It was an act continuing moment after moment—an act of commitment and rediscovery of the place of mindfulness, the place of wisdom that allows compassion and action to emerge.

I say this because she wrote quite some years later—you know, she and Thich Nhat Hanh were both unable to return to Vietnam during the middle of the war, and they lived in France and started Plum Village for many years. In her autobiography, written I think in the eighties, already twenty years later, she talks about her commitment to never act unless she can act from compassion.

She was still an activist, and at the point she was writing, there was a phase when the Vietnamese government was arresting many monks and nuns and artists. She was involved in a campaign—whenever someone was arrested, she would write letters to the government and try to get a whole movement going, similar to what Amnesty does now.

This is her talking about that:

"Every time I received news of a new arrest, I became angry. And I knew that I had to do walking meditation. Sometimes I would walk several hours in order to regain my calm. Sometimes I needed several days or even weeks to relax my heartbeat, knowing how unfairly the authorities had acted in arresting such a monk, nun, or artist. I always waited until I felt serene before beginning any campaign. Thanks to this serenity, my words were gentle but firm, and people found it easier to cooperate."

What inspires me is that sense of ongoing commitment and the understanding that it is a continuing process to reconnect with our serenity, our basic goodness. To act from a genuine motivation of compassion and caring is so much. It may get better results, but more truly, it's the expression of wisdom and compassion—and her willingness to wait weeks, if that's what it takes.

For us to know: this is someone who has devoted her life, who is a remarkable woman, and this is what it is. This is what, knowingly or not, we signed up for when we set foot onto our spiritual path of awakening. And it's beautiful. It's inspiring. It inspires others.

Bearing witness to our pain, to our suffering, balanced with the equanimity of emptiness, means we can open to more. We can open to more. And it's not suffering. It really is that beauty of connectedness. With wisdom, compassion opens. With bearing witness to our own suffering and that of others, compassion opens. With the simple intention to act from kindness—not some big thing, but just a willingness toward some kind act—compassion opens.

This is from Tulku Urgyen, who was a wonderful, very powerful Dzogchen master. Well, his son, Tsoknyi, first said it: it works both ways. Compassion naturally manifests as an expression of emptiness. When we understand emptiness, compassion naturally manifests. But also, compassion starts with methods of compassion and kindness. Simply being kind can open us up. Because to be kind, we're touching. And this applies in little things.

I've been talking about wars and people dying, but this is present in every aspect of our life. Nisargadatta says that when we realize we are the world, all aspects of our life are calling us to wake up to our non-separation, to our compassion, to bearing witness.

Dilgo Khyentse Rinpoche, in his book *Heart Treasure of the Enlightened Ones*, offers a commentary on a Tibetan text. He speaks about Chenrezig, the bodhisattva of compassion, and I want to share a practice I found so lovely and inspiring, putting it a little in my own language.

Chenrezig embodies the great compassion inseparable from the vast expanse of the Buddha's wisdom—the totality of emptiness and compassion. This practice involves seeing all aspects of experience as the manifestation of Chenrezig himself.

Rinpoche says: Through the blessing of Chenrezig's body, you perceive the whole universe as Chenrezig's Buddha field. Through the blessing of Chenrezig's speech, you perceive all sounds in the universe—the sounds of water, of fire, of wind, the cries of animals, human voices—as the reverberation of Chenrezig's voice.

Imagine that. Next time someone's breathing too loud in the hall, it's Chenrezig's voice. Next time the francolins are calling, it's Chenrezig's voice.

And even more: through the blessing of Chenrezig's mind, you experience all thoughts as the display of Chenrezig's awareness.

Try that. I was practicing on a self-retreat like this, experiencing every thought as the magical display of Chenrezig—

Boy, my relationship to everything was really different. Every animal, every sight, every sound, every mood—this is just the display of emptiness and compassion. This is just Chenrezig manifesting everything. Everything becomes an aspect of emptiness and compassion. It becomes the way that we open up to the world, so that our whole life becomes—not every moment, but just play with that—an expression. Nothing is too mundane. Nothing is too gross.

Let me share a couple of little stories of kindness like that, stories about the power of kindness. This one comes from NPR, from a prisoner who had been in jail for twenty years.

He said: "One day in the prison yard, a scruffy orange cat showed up, and I was one of the first to go and pet it. I had not touched a cat or a dog in over twenty years. I spent at least twenty minutes crouched down by the dumpster as the cat rolled around and luxuriated beneath my attention. What he was expressing outwardly, I was feeling inwardly. An amazing bit of grace—to feel him under my hand and know that I was enriching the life of another creature with something as simple as my care. I believe that caring for something or someone in need is what makes us human.

"Over the next few days, I watched other prisoners responding to the cat. Every yard period, a group of

prisoners gathered there. They stood around talking and taking turns petting the cat. These were guys you would normally not find talking to each other. Sometimes I saw an officer, a guard, in the group—not chasing people away but just watching and seeming to enjoy it along with the prisoners. Bowls of milk and water appeared, along with bread wisely placed under the edge of the dumpster to keep the seagulls from getting it. The cat was obviously a stray and in pretty bad shape. One prisoner brought out his small, blunt-tipped scissors and trimmed burrs and matted fur from his coat. People said, 'That cat came to the right place. He's getting treated like a king.' This was true, but as I watched, I was also thinking about what the cat was doing for us.

"There's a lot of talk about what's wrong with prisons in America—we need more programs, we need more psychologists and treatment. But I think what we really need is a chance to practice kindness ourselves. Not to receive it, but to give it."

And then one last example of how simple compassion can be, just everyday compassion, from Studs Terkel. He died just this past October—a legendary oral historian. This was his last piece they recorded on NPR. He loved the human voice, and he noticed when it was missing, as it was one day on an airport shuttle train in Atlanta.

I've taken these shuttle trains a lot. They come every ninety seconds, taking you between terminals. So Terkel is on this shuttle train, and a machine-like voice rang out from above, informing him and his fellow passengers that the train was about to leave the concourse. Otherwise, it was dead silent. The pneumatic doors were closing when a young couple pushed them open to get in.

Without missing a beat, that voice above says, "Because of late entry, we're delayed thirty seconds."

People looked at that couple as if they had just committed mass murder, Terkel said. The two cringed, and Terkel spoke up. "George Orwell, your time has come and gone!" he yelled out.

The passengers greeted his attempt at humor with complete silence. "And now they looked at me," he said, "and I'm with the couple. The three of us are at the Hill of Calvary on Good Friday."

"My God, where's the human voice?" Terkel asked the passengers. Nobody said anything.

So he noticed a baby on the train. He went up to the baby. "Sir or madam," Terkel said to the infant, "what is your opinion of the human species?"

And the baby started to giggle.

"I said, thank God—the sound of a human voice."

From Chokyi Nyima: "When watching the magical display of this world as it seems to be, spontaneously an overwhelming despair and pity well up in me."

When watching its nature of innate simplicity as it really is, I cannot help but feel wonder and break out

in laughter. When watching the one who feels pity and the one who is laughing, both disappear and cannot be found. Now what to do?

So let's just sit quietly for a minute. That's what we'll do.

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