Unity of Emptiness and Compassion

Carol Wilson · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Carol Wilson · 1:00:56

Looking out at you, one wouldn't really get it that this is a practice or a path of happiness. A couple of you are smiling. I mean, I don't smile either when I'm sitting, but it just kind of struck me.

Tonight I just want to offer some reflections on the unity of emptiness and compassion. We've been talking about both of these major aspects of the truth, the way things are—especially after Guy's talk a couple of nights ago and the way we've been speaking about awareness, the sense of real emptiness, that all phenomena are empty of inherent self-existence, that in the moment of awareness any object can come and go and it just doesn't matter. That knowing is completely unaffected by whatever is happening.

There are different ways we can take that. On one level, obviously, that can be really freeing, really opening from that constriction of self. But other times that can be heard or felt or experienced, depending on what's going on in the mind, as disconnected, cold, indifferent, really. A kind of gray void. What am I doing this for if nothing's going to matter? Is that what I'm practicing for, so I don't care about anything? In a sociopathic kind of way, it can seem.

What's really important to keep remembering, to keep tuning into, is the way this sense of real freedom, of wisdom, the path of awakening, is spoken of. You know that thing of the bird with two wings—the wing of wisdom, the wing of compassion. Or the way the Tibetans speak about it, which I really like a lot. In knowing the empty nature, really knowing that, it is freeing. But that's only one aspect of the awakened heart and mind. The nature of the pure heart and mind is, yes, empty of any inherent self-existence. They use three ways of describing different angles, you could say.

The second one is the naturally knowing, the spontaneously knowing aspect—which again, when Guy was talking about citta, it's like that. There's a sound, you hear it. That's spontaneous, it happens. It's always awake and always available.

But the third aspect is really key, or we don't in our self experience the totality, the roundedness, the completeness of freedom. And that's that this empty, naturally cognizant knowing is, as the Tibetans say, ceaselessly responsive. The natural response of the awakened heart-mind in any particular situation is that of compassion, or metta, mudita, equanimity. It's responsive. It's not sociopathically, coldly indifferent. And at different times for all of us, in our practice, in our path, we may be more in tune with one than the other.

The emptiness we've talked about—and this is something I ran across from Tsoknyi Rinpoche in his book *Natural Great Perfection*. I find this a little funny, so don't take it as "oh my God, I'm doing something

wrong." But he's talking about understanding shunyata, emptiness. He says the danger for many of us is that we hear too much too soon and we think we have understood shunyata, emptiness, and so we err on the side of the absolute in a nihilistic fashion and are obscured by concepts of emptiness. Has that ever happened to you?

He says Nagarjuna said it is sad to see those who mistakenly believe in the material concrete reality, who don't understand emptiness. But far more pitiful are those who believe in emptiness.

I think that's great. You get that—believe in emptiness. It's another concept that it's so easy to put. "Well, it's all empty, so it doesn't matter." Have you run into that in people? It's often—nobody here, of course, and none of us would ever fall into that because we're so clear—but really often it's like people who've done a little bit of reading and really haven't done much practice at all. "Well, it's all empty, so I can do whatever I want," that kind of thing.

This is again how Rinpoche went on: Those who believe in things can be helped through various kinds of practice, through the way of skillful means. It's our practice. 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.

So in some ways it's funny, but just for a moment. Remember, we're not going to fall into the abyss of emptiness and get stuck there. And nobody here is stuck there. But there are moments, you know, when it's so clear there's nothing to do. And that's really a wakeful, present, true moment. And then a moment later or an hour later, it's not like that anymore. It's a concept. We remember, "Oh yeah, there's no one here and nothing to do." But it's not the truth of our alive experience in that moment.

It's a memory. It's a concept. And we've stopped—and we all do this—we've stopped being totally present and fresh in that moment. We're remembering how free it was when there was nothing to do, but really that's not what's happening, and we need to use some skillful means.

So playing with it—see, it's very subtle. At that point, it's subtle.

This is the other way, when the wholeness comes from the compassion side, the sense of the ceaselessly responsive. It's another way of saying it, from Nisargadatta: "Once you can say with confidence, born from direct experience, 'I am the world, the world is myself,' you're 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."

It's on the other side. The emptiness is a little bit what Heather was talking about last night. Once you really, just for a moment, see you're everything, in that moment the natural response is compassion, tenderness for beings, connectedness to beings. Exactly because in that moment all the energy, the mental energy, is not bound up in this constant, obsessive, exhausting self-referencing.

So just noticing how much of our energy is in this contraction, this constriction of me, me, me. From that place—and that place is momentary, everything's momentary, remember—we're not always in the contraction of me, me, me. And most of us who are not yet Arhats are not always in the knowing of complete emptiness and natural, spontaneous caring and compassion. We fluctuate.

Emptiness and compassion are indivisible. Emptiness is free from grasping to a self. Compassion is benevolence for all beings. And we can see how those two come together, support each other in big experiences and little experiences here and in our daily life.

So when that contraction, that constriction of me, is basically seen through, released, not happening in a moment, the natural sense is of "I am the world, the world is me"—it's *us* rather than *me*.

Instead of everything being the way Tsoknyi Rinpoche described it once—I really like this—he said the original yardstick, the measurement for samsara, that which everything is measured from, is that feeling of "me here now." He said in Tibet, when they're going to start building a house, the way they lay out the footprint of the foundation is to take a point in the middle and get a string for how wide you want it to be. And from that point in the middle, you measure all the way around, sort of like you're making a circle.

So he's saying the measuring point for samsara, from our place of suffering, that center point is—and this isn't a thought so much, but the feeling sense of—"me here now." You know what I mean? When we're just sitting here, we hear a sound, and the felt sense is: What does that mean about me? That sound is disturbing me. How do I feel about that sound? Or not even the thought, but just the felt sense of me, sound over there, measured from this felt sense.

Of course it's not always present, that felt sense, but much of the time it is. And that's the measuring point of samsara. When that's there, then that self-referencing, that constriction—everything becomes about me and what does it mean about me, me and others. When it's not there, what's naturally expressed is this tenderness for life, this lack of self-centric view. And then the natural response of the mind, the heart, is just whatever is appropriate in the moment. It's more inclusive, more kind.

A simple little example that I just remembered today. A long time ago, I was staying in Thailand, in a little kuti, a little hut in a meditation center. In this kuti, it was my first few weeks there. I hadn't really adjusted to the climate, the bugs, everything. And after a couple of days, I saw a spider. I mean, a really big spider. The body—never mind the legs—was bigger than my fist. We're talking a big spider. And running around up there... I mean, I'm not phobic about spiders, but I don't love them. And this was big. And I didn't have a mosquito net.

So first, this spider—you've got to get it out of my space. You know, all the normal stuff you'd think.

And then at one point, it just clicked in my mind: actually, the spider was here first, and I'm in the spider's space. And then it shifted further to our space. Just for that moment, there was simply the release of "it's all about me." What's the spider? Oh, it's our space.

Nothing really changed externally, but the whole relationship internally transforms. You can still respond, do whatever needs doing. I eventually did take that spider in a bag and carry it out very kindly. Sorry, I'm taking over your space now. Sorry, I'm bigger than you, and I'm taking it away. But at least I wasn't doing it with hatred in my heart. You can still do whatever. And until I could catch it, I wasn't afraid and hating it.

A little thing. But you get a sense of how just that shift from self-referencing to "oh, just things happening"—this, this, this, not all about me—how the natural response to that emptiness is ceaselessly responsive kindness and compassion.

The good news, really good news, is that in terms of this natural response—ceaselessly responsive compassion, mettā, equanimity, clear seeing—these arise naturally when there's wisdom in the mind, in the heart. And as we've been hammering on the whole time, hopefully, the simple moment of mindful presence with something, aware of what's happening without buying into greed or hatred or delusion, just seeing what Heather was talking about last night, just recognizing experience as it is without a big agenda, without reactivity, without distortions in perception—that moment-to-moment mindfulness is what allows wisdom to arise.

And then quite naturally, like with me and the spider, you don't have to think, "Oh, I should be compassionate. How can I get..." It naturally happens. And our habits really begin to shift naturally through the sati, the mindfulness. That's what we've been talking about.

The Buddha talked about three wise intentions in terms of the Eightfold Path, which begins with right view, as somebody was discussing the other night. The second factor—I spoke about intentions, remember—concerns what's in the mind, in the heart, what qualities, what mental factors give rise to action. That's the seed of karma, wholesomeness or unwholesomeness.

The Buddha is rather specific in terms of the second step of the Eightfold Path, which is variously translated as right thought or right intention. He's very specific that the three right intentions arising through clear seeing represent a switch from wrong intention: greed turns to renunciation, to letting go, to openness. That can then further move to generosity, to dāna. Ill will is replaced by friendliness, by mettā. And cruelty is replaced with compassion. Clear seeing isn't listed as a wise intention because that's the wisdom which actually allows these other right intentions to arise.

So they happen organically with wisdom. But also, we don't have to just sit back and hope and pray. We are cultivating with mindfulness, and we can also consciously tune into when our response of mind and heart arises from separation, from fear, from me-ing, and recognize when it can actually begin to shift.

The Buddha has one of my favorite lines: whatever one frequently thinks about and dwells upon, that will become the inclination of the mind. Interesting. A little scary some days when we see what the mind is thinking and dwelling upon. But also recognizing why each moment of pure present moment attention is

so powerful—because in those moments, we're not dwelling in the old habits of me-ing, of fear, of aversion, of greed. Even if aversion is the object of the mindfulness, in that moment of mindfulness, you're not dwelling on the aversion. And this is really very powerful.

So mindfulness is not so self-referential, and that's already naturally cultivating moments of emptiness of self. If it's real clear seeing, real wisdom, it will have that juice. It may not be compassion; it may be equanimity, because it depends on the situation. But it won't be that cold, distant, "it doesn't matter" disconnect. It won't be that. When we're in that disconnection, it's like a partial understanding of emptiness, but it's not whole. It's not complete. Something's missing. So just keep looking. Look again.

I want to talk now about other ways we can consciously tune into and cultivate these beautiful aspects, particularly compassion and mettā. The brahmavihāras offer one approach. I know compassion is described as that quivering of the heart, the natural response of an awakened heart and mind when it comes into connection with suffering—one's own or others', ultimately no different. And the ultimate expression, the—

The total awakened expression of compassion, in the way the Tibetan tradition speaks of it, is bodhicitta—meaning basically awakened heart, awakened mind.

I want to read the way Pema Chödrön describes it, which is quite down to earth:

"This kinship with the suffering of others, this inability to continue to regard it from afar, from a distance—this is the discovery of our soft spot, the discovery of bodhicitta. Bodhicitta is a Sanskrit word that means noble or awakened heart, said to be present in all beings." Yes, even us. "Just as butter is inherent in milk, this soft spot is inherent in you and me. We awaken this bodhicitta, this tenderness for life, when we can no longer shield ourselves from the vulnerability of our condition, from the basic fragility of existence."

In the words of the 16th Karmapa, "You take it all in. You let the pain of the world touch your heart and it turns into compassion."

This is really our practice. It's somewhat what Heather was talking about last night—how that willingness to be with whatever opens into wisdom. This is the other side of that: willingness to be with whatever, the beauties and the sorrows, the fragility, the basic, inherent, inescapable fragility of our bodies, of our hearts, of all of life, of everything.

It doesn't have to be scary, but it's so tender. It's so inescapable. And when we touch it, just let it touch our hearts in one moment, the natural response is this compassion, this tenderness for beings.

Pema Chödrön again: "It's said that in difficult times, it is only bodhicitta that heals. When inspiration has become hidden, when we feel ready to give up, this is the time when healing can be found in the tenderness of pain itself. In the midst of loneliness, in the midst of fear, in the middle of feeling

misunderstood and rejected is the heartbeat of all things, the genuine heart of bodhicitta."

So the suffering of beings—it may be so-called other beings—also the suffering of this being is quite adequate to discover, connect with, and trust both emptiness and the tender heart of bodhicitta.

This is from His Holiness the Dalai Lama, who, as Guy said, is meant to be the incarnation of the Bodhisattva of compassion, so we figure he knows what he's talking about.

The other way bodhicitta is spoken about is that through this heart of compassion, it becomes a possible motivation—the highest motivation, really—for our continued and sincere practice: that we practice with the intention to benefit all beings. Through touching this fragility, this tenderness, this compassion for all beings, it transforms into this deep wish to awaken from the confusion that keeps us circling in samsara, and not just for ourselves but for everybody who's stuck in some sorrow. So that's the other way of thinking of bodhicitta.

His Holiness says: How does it develop? The first is with deep insight into what suffering is. Deep insight. And where do we get that? It arises by focusing on our own experience. Where else will we learn? And that's enough.

Then, as we open to our own suffering, compassion strengthens into a sense of empathy and connectedness with other beings. Interestingly enough, opening into our own suffering is a path into empathy and connectedness with others.

Many times I've experienced this—where my own particular suffering in a particular time, when it's finally really met and accepted (and we definitely go through a lot of layers before it's finally really met and accepted), it moves through from my own particular story into the suffering of beings. And sometimes that's really very touching and amazing, how that happens. I can't make it happen. I can remember times it's happened. I can try and kid myself it's happening now. But when it really happens, you really feel it.

The example that always comes to mind was many years ago. I was in the hospital for a week or so, pretty sick. I was lying there in a room with three other women. At one point, it just kind of hit me. I looked around—three elderly women. I was in the orthopedic ward, that was just where they'd had a bed. They were in all kinds of casts and in a lot of pain. And then, just from being with my own pain, I looked and thought, "Oh yes, I'm not here alone."

And then it just naturally—I wasn't thinking this—it spread out to: how many people are in this hospital? How many hospitals just in this little area of Massachusetts where I was? Not even a big city—five or six hospitals. And then it just kept going, trying to imagine how many people in how many hospitals in the world. And that's only the people lucky enough to be in hospitals. It's just vast and endless.

This is where we need the two sides. Without the understanding of emptiness, we drown in that suffering. But with the willingness to just open into "oh, it's like this," it moves from the self-centeredness into the

vastness, the tenderness for beings. That's why the difficult times in retreat, the difficult times in life—really what Heather was speaking of last night—are so important.

And even though we say this over and over, and even though in the interviews we say it, and I say it to myself when I'm in a difficult time, somewhere in there it's so hard to trust when we're in the difficult time. "Yeah, yeah, I'm trying to be mindful. I'm trying to have compassion." We give lip service. We try to believe it's really important. But bottom line? We know we have to get through this time to get to the real stuff—the joy, the spaciousness, the emptiness, the *jhāna*, whatever the heck it is. It's really rare that we say, "Well, I know this place, this difficult place of being lost in this obsessive fear, this obsessive anger, this obsessive self-referencing, whatever the story is—guilt, whatever it is—this is the place of juice. This is where emptiness and compassion are going to manifest." Yeah, right.

So learning to trust it. And the difficult times are also important because what's arising—whether it's so-called external or internal—once it's arisen, it's the result of past karma. Our obsessive patterns, for example, are the result of all the habits of our mind. We think about something—God knows how many times. You know how fast the mind is. Think of your age and how many times you've had that thought about how bad you are, how you're no good. How many times? We think we have a couple of thoughts—"may I be free from suffering"—and it's going to go away.

So that thought coming up, very familiar, that's the result of our past karma, of our past intentions. How the mind and awareness is meeting it right now in this moment—that's the present moment karma. That's the present moment intention. And so how we meet each moment of experience, that's the path. How we meet our suffering experience and our beautiful experience, that's the manifestation. If we meet it with simple acceptance, with kindness, that's the manifestation of compassion.

It doesn't have to be that tenderness where your heart's like bursting out of your chest like they have in cartoons, and you're weeping. Sometimes it's like that. Mostly not, which is good, because how could we get through life if every time we touch suffering, we're weeping? "Oh, it's so beautiful." That's lovely once in a while. But something comes up, that sense of "you are so stupid," and the mind goes, "Oh, that's judging." Just like that. Just a little moment of accepting and judging. That's painful. That's compassion. And it's also possible because of the emptiness, the non-self clinging, not building a whole story around it. Both of those are happening then. That really is the path.

Sharon Salzberg likes to say, "To pay attention is to love." And notice, if you're really giving attention—start with someone else, because that's easier than oneself. Just really there. Someone's describing their troubles, their problems, and it's someone you care about, and you're able to just really be there, really open, really listening. In those moments, we're not self-referencing.

There's no room for that. With total attention, we're not even thinking of it. The self-referencing is simply gone. There's openness. You're just really paying attention. That's a quality of compassion, of love, of pure presence. That's what we're practicing. That's what we're cultivating. It's really very powerful.

Taking this back to yourself then, first consider how—if it's ever happened—you feel when you're really suffering and there's someone there who can just truly be there for you. They may or may not be able to do anything. And sometimes that impulse of "let me fix it, let me fix it" isn't actually the same thing as being there and really holding in their heart, in their mind, your suffering as you simply talk about it. That sense of someone just bearing witness, of someone just being able to totally be present for you—before there's something to do, or maybe there isn't something to do. That comes later. But first, just that total accepting, receiving presence. There's something powerful about it, isn't there?

So can we turn around and offer that to ourselves? In our moments of huge suffering, in our moments of little niggly discomfort—your toe hurts—it doesn't really matter. The power of bearing witness is huge in this world.

I want to read a little snippet of a poem from Anna Akhmatova. I really like her a lot. She was one of the most famous Russian poets of the 20th century, and her life spanned really the whole period of twentieth-century Russia—from before the revolution, which was sort of aristocratic, through the revolution and the civil war and vast periods of starvation, into the whole terrors of the Stalin period. She was part of all of that, watching people—other poets—starve, her husband and son both being arrested in different purges, herself almost starving, and through the Second World War when many people were starving in St. Petersburg and in Moscow. For most of that time she wasn't allowed to be published. But even before she was banned, she was very famous. Russians just really love their poets, and she was beloved. And so by dint of living through all that, that's what she wrote about. That was one of the reasons, I think, she was so cherished.

This little snippet of a poem is from *Requiem*, 1935 to 1940. She's talking about the terrible years of the Yezhov Terror—a period in the mid-30s. Yezhov was one of the people who worked with Stalin; at this time he was head of the secret police. It was one of the periods of huge, huge arrests. Anyone you knew could be arrested for anything, people sent off to the labor camps. Her son at this point had been arrested.

Requiem, instead of a preface:

> In the terrible years of the Yezhov terror, I spent seventeen months waiting in line outside the prison in Leningrad.

People would wait every day to get news of their loved ones or to try and bring food.

> One day, somebody in the crowd identified me, called me by name. Standing behind me was a woman with lips blue from the cold who had, of course, never heard me called by name before.

Remember, she was famous.

> Now she started out of the torpor common to us all 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.

It just so speaks to me of the power—the ability, the willingness—to really be in it and openheartedly bear witness without shutting down, without blame. It connects us. It's really powerful in this world.

And it's not possible without also some understanding of emptiness. Otherwise we drown. Otherwise we go under. This is the other side. Emptiness needs compassion. Compassion needs emptiness.

Again from the Dalai Lama: "Compassion must be derived from our insight into emptiness of inherent self."

This is where the vast meets the profound. The vast needs the profound.

Without the unity of compassion and emptiness, we can fall into despair. And this may sound difficult to hear, but knowing the emptiness—knowing that people's suffering is avoidable, that it is surmountable—our sympathy for our inability to extricate ourselves leads to a more powerful compassion. But without the emptiness, though our compassion may be strong, it is likely to have a quality of hopelessness or even despair.

In my own experience, it can go back and forth between the two poles. There's the emptiness that isn't quite in touch, that feels really free, but there's a little disconnect. And it can flip to the other pole, where there's that sense of real tenderness in the vastness of suffering, but it's not quite balanced in that moment by the emptiness. And we fall into despair, helplessness, hopelessness.

Big picture, it's okay. We're balancing, we're balancing. Small picture, we notice when we're in despair, when it's helplessness, hopelessness. I've noticed in myself how easily that helplessness can switch to anger.

Working with people who have a strong commitment—say, working to save the environment, or in peace marches, or just trying to help someone you really care about—you see that they're suffering, and maybe something in their environment or situation isn't fair. It seems like, why did they have to go through that and not other people? Sometimes we can touch the pain, and sometimes there's nothing we can do.

I have friends who go to a lot of peace marches over the years, and they often say it starts out really upbeat, but sometimes people end up really angry or embittered. Or people working in the environmental movement feel, "I have to really use anger in the courtroom." Lawyers saying, "How can I come into the courtroom without anger? The other people are so angry and harsh. I need my anger." And it can feel justified.

I know in myself this helpless feeling. I have friends in difficult situations, and there really is nothing I can do other than really be there, really hear, really stay open. And then when that moves into helplessness or heads towards despair, I've noticed how a feeling of anger at anything can give me a sense of power, a sense of strength.

Helplessness—I know for myself, and really from talking to many people—it's different for everyone, but for many people, helplessness is one of the bottom-line feelings we really don't like. It's one of the ones that many people have developed really strong defense mechanisms against. So I can see for myself when it's moving into helplessness, I start saying, "Well, it shouldn't be like this." And it's energizing. The anger feels powerful. And it seems like it's getting something done. "You just wallow around in this wimpy helplessness, feeling compassion. What good is that?"

So really looking at this balance—anger may get stuff done. But the real heart of freedom, of real compassion and emptiness, starts from the inside out, not from the outside in. Again, it comes back to that sense of intention we talked about the other night. In our culture, we tend to evaluate ourselves and our actions by the results. If we get good results, it was a good action. We did the right thing. We forget to turn around and see: if we're just getting more and more angry, we got the results we wanted, but we really upset a lot of people and ran over them. And that's not the point.

A peace march where people end up smashing windows and burning cars—there's something missing. There's some missing piece there. Environmental activists, deeply, deeply committed, acting for the good of the planet, and they're getting eaten up by anger—again, there's something missing in the piece of understanding. The same is true for us.

We all have, in our own way, strong defense mechanisms that have been in place for each of us around particular feelings—maybe helplessness for somebody, or a real sense of loneliness, or deep fear, or maybe deep pain from childhood. So far, everyone I've met, including myself, has some really strong defense mechanisms in place that keep our conscious mind from even touching certain aspects of pain.

I'd say for most of us, when these defenses were first created way back in childhood, there was good reason for them. I can see some of my own patterns around feeling real terror, feeling afraid and unloved and abandoned—but I couldn't go there because my mother didn't know, and I had to take care of her. As little kids, these things came up to help us deal, to help us manage, to help us keep going. So we don't hate the defense mechanisms.

But at this point, it's a different story. We learn to recognize them. For me, I remember I talked the other night about when my mind hits that crazy place. I just call it that because it feels so intense. And now I think, great, I'm getting close to one of those. That's great. Because I know, as I said, when I can feel, oh, that's that little kid terror—it's like a sense of relief. Oh, okay. I can feel little kid terror. That's okay. I'm not going to die from it. In fact, boom, back into the tenderness. Tenderness for beings, tenderness for that little kid, tenderness for all little kids, just essential tenderness, only possible because of the sense of emptiness.

Eckhart Tolle put it a nice way. He says, "Compassion arises by allowing, by non-resistance to both levels of pain." We don't resist the so-called outer pain, the madness of the world, and we don't resist the so-called inner pain, our personal reactions. Both levels. When there's non-resistance, but with wise

attention, with mindfulness, with clear seeing, that's when we're really open into wisdom and compassion.

And as the Dalai Lama said, our own suffering, our own experience—that's the conduit, that's the way in, that's really all we need, our own particular experience. Gandhi said, "Almost everything you do will seem insignificant, but it is very important that you do it." So in terms of this, just whatever's arising in our experience, it may seem insignificant, but we start where we are.

And this is really where the shift happens. We want, I'm assuming, to be good people, kind people, compassionate people. I'm assuming that's probably something, in one way or another, we all share. Kind to ourselves, kind to others, as well as free—they go together. But again, the sense of working from the inside out, rather than from the outside in—"I should be kind and compassionate, it looks like this"—and then we try to make our behavior match. We know that doesn't work.

Starting from the inside out is where there's the wise motivation that comes from moments of really knowing our basic goodness. Those times when you've really recognized and touched just the simplicity, the purity of heart and mind, which we talk about a lot. No big deal, but just, oh, it's like this. The moments Heather talked about when we just stop fighting whatever's going on and open to it—the ten thousand joys, the ten thousand sorrows. Oh. It's like this. Those moments of touching with the mind, with the heart, are what begin to give us and strengthen the deep trust so that the real heart of compassion and emptiness comes from the inside out, not from the outside in. And trusting enough to act from that.

Different people inspire me in that. I just want to give a couple of well-known examples. One, of course, is Martin Luther King. There's one quotation I read from him—remember in, I think it was 1954, when there was a bombing of a church in Alabama and four little girls were killed. He said after that, "I have come to see even more, as we move on toward the goal of justice, that hatred must never be our motive. I refuse to become bitter." Really touching the heart of deep, deep suffering in a place where I know I would get angry, and justified in the anger, and overwhelmed—and he says, "I refuse to become bitter."

Another person, and this is a little longer, but I love it—this man is kind of one of my heroes, although I've never met him. I've only heard him and read about him. James Lawson. Again, it's from the Civil Rights Movement. I heard him give an interview on NPR around Christmas a couple of years ago. I didn't hear the beginning of the interview. I just came in in the middle, and this man was talking, and then I suddenly recognized from what he was saying who it was—that it was James Lawson. I got really excited.

He was one of the real leaders of the beginning civil rights movement. He's a doctor of divinity and one of the leading theorists even now on nonviolence, on the theory of nonviolence. Back in the fifties, he was very committed—he's African-American, from Ohio—he was very committed to theories of nonviolence. He actually went to India and studied with disciples of Gandhi. Gandhi was dead by then.

During the Korean War, he was a conscientious objector. He could have gotten out of going because of being a minister, but he said that wouldn't be fair, so he went to jail. And he said—this I heard in the

interview—that in jail, he discovered a strength and power in himself to live out of his own conscience, to act from his own really deep wisdom and understanding. This is the power of coming from within.

So the interviewer was asking him all these questions: How do you deal with violence? What do you do when someone's being violent? And he just said—and I can't explain it more than this—it just kind of turns it on its head. He said, "You're asking the questions from the wrong angle. Nonviolence stems from a completely different configuration of power." So all the questions about people being violent and what you do about it—he's saying it's a whole other way of looking at the world.

I'll just leave it at that and read this story about him from David Halberstam's book, *The Children*, which is about some of the young people in Nashville in 1960 who started all the demonstrations, the sit-ins and everything. At that time, he had come down to Nashville and was giving the young college student demonstrators workshops on nonviolent action. Remember, they were deeply committed to Christian love and nonviolence. That's where this was coming out of. That's where he was coming from.

So they were marching in Nashville, and as they were marching, a few white toughs suddenly attacked and knocked down a man named Solomon at the end of the line. They were kicking him, and another young man, Bernard Lafayette—this was his first chance to really use his training in nonviolence—came over and threw his body over his friend to draw the attention of the guys beating him up. And so then they started beating and kicking him.

And then Jim Lawson came over. He'd been conducting all these workshops. He did not rush over as to an accident, or even as if to stop a beating. Instead, he walked over very calmly, as if to a long-standing appointment. His arrival shifted the attention of the whites from the fallen Bernard Lafayette to 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 fallen black demonstrators every day of his life. The leader of the whites was wearing what was the prevailing uniform of the day for toughs—a black leather motorcycle jacket and that big kind of haircut, what they called a DA haircut. When he saw Lawson, he was enraged by his 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. And Lawson wiped the spit off himself as calmly as he could. 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. 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. By this time, both Solomon and Bernard were 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, and 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.

It doesn't solve everything. It doesn't solve all the problems. But that to me is such an inspiring example of how compassion and wisdom work from the inside out. A real courage, and it's powerful.

The other aspect I want to mention again—of how this courage, this compassion, needs to be balanced by wisdom—is the wisdom of equanimity. Because remember, in equanimity we recognize we can't control the outcome. We can't control the results. So when Jim Lawson went and talked to that guy, he didn't know what was going to happen. When we open to our own suffering and to others', we don't know what's going to happen. Life is ambiguous. Situations are complex.

Without the vastness of equanimity, the power of equanimity—and this is the emptiness of knowing that all things come and go, that awareness is unstained by all—we wouldn't have the courage and the trust to come from compassion, from love, from equanimity, from mudita, and to let it go into the universe. We can't control. So in equanimity, we can't control others' responses. We don't always have the big picture. And yet we still need to make decisions.

You know, the eight worldly winds come and go. If you've ever had to be the health proxy for someone—like I had for my father the last couple of years of his life, my siblings and I—you understand this deeply. No matter how much documentation is drawn up ahead of time, you can't cover what all the situations are going to be. And you're in the situation: Do you put this tube in or don't you? Do you take this tube out or don't you? You don't know what's going to happen. You don't know what the person would want.

You need to come from as much equanimity and compassion as possible—the equanimity of not knowing, but also the equanimity of recognizing it's not about my fear, my dislike, my feelings. You try and do the best you can.

I remember one time my father had a tube in. He kept getting pneumonia, and the doctor said, well, he hadn't wanted anything special done, so we're going to take it out. We're sure he's going to die. So I was there, and I said, okay, do it. Of course he didn't die. He didn't at all. He got really strong. He kept doing that. The doctors would be completely amazed—how could he come back from this? So then another time they say, well, you shouldn't put in a tube because he's going to die, and it'll just make him linger. But you put in the tube and he gets better. You don't know. You just don't know. And every situation is different. So one does the best one can, with compassion, not holding to a desired result.

All life is like that. It's so complex, so ambiguous.

Sister Chan Khong, who works with Thich Nhat Hanh—I use this story a lot, but it's really touched me. Long ago, during the Vietnam War, she was an activist, as was Thich Nhat Hanh. Neither side, the South or the North Vietnamese, trusted him. So one time she was thrown into jail by the South Vietnamese for having distributed some peace pamphlets of Thich Nhat Hanh. She was in a big cell—this is from her autobiography—with quite a few other women, maybe fifteen or twenty. And there were also two young

girls, eleven or twelve years old, who had just been in a village that the South Vietnamese had swept through, taking everyone there, thinking they were Viet Cong.

Sister Chan Khong got released through her family knowing somebody. That's how things work. And as she was leaving and having her outtake interview with the head of the prison, she said, "Oh, by the way, there are these two young girls here. They haven't done anything. They're not Viet Cong. They're in this terrible environment with all these criminals. They really should be released."

He said, "Oh, okay. I see from what you're saying that the prisoners are talking to each other, and this is not acceptable, so I'm going to really tighten up the conditions here."

So how would you feel? Could you walk out from that and not turn bitter? Not get angry? Not be afraid to keep on acting as best you could from the best understanding you have? It's a koan. It's a koan.

The same is true with ourselves. We meet ourselves with real compassion—our suffering, with compassion. And we try to act not just to make ourselves feel better, but to discover what is most supportive for our awakening. Sometimes we think we're really seeing everything, but there are subtle levels of fear, aversion, clinging we don't see. We're acting as best we can, but it doesn't quite work—we're still somehow feeding our denial system. That's the best we can do.

What do we do then? Say, "Well, I couldn't see clearly, I couldn't do it right, so to hell with it—I'm just not going to try anymore"? Other times we do see clearly. We simply need this trust, this willingness to keep going.

The Dalai Lama, in an interview once, was confronted by young Tibetans taking him to task—the new generation saying, "Look, basically, old man, your nonviolent approach to the Chinese is not working. They're taking over. It's not working. Something else needs to happen." As new generations always do.

In this article, it said that he was really listening, as he does, and there were even tears in his eyes. He said, "You may be right, but I cannot do otherwise. I cannot be otherwise than to act from nonviolence and compassion. That's just the truth of who I am. And you may be right."

That ambiguity. That not having the whole picture. Not getting the results. Not fixing the world. The Buddha couldn't fix the world. He couldn't even fix his own kinspeople—they kept going to war with each other over water and this and that. What do we think we're going to do?

But he also didn't say, "I can't fix the world, so I'm going to go into my pleasant abiding here and now, fourth jhana, see you later in forty-five years." He could have done that too. No, he spent his whole life walking around, sharing the Dhamma. And that's all you can do—share it. Share it with yourself, share it with the world. Meet every moment with this compassionate, clear seeing. That's all we can do.

It's not being a doormat. It's not being passive at all. When we're clearly connected with what's here and now, again, ceaselessly responsive with wisdom, the best appropriate action just presents itself.

Master Sheng Yen, a wonderful Taiwanese Chan master, says, talking about no-self: "One clearly knows how to behave or respond." As another teacher calls it, it's doing the obvious. Something happens—face it, accept it, handle it, put it down. I just love that. Any situation comes up: face it, accept it, handle it, put it down. So simple. So straightforward. No big, fancy, amazing thing.

I'll end with a quotation from Pema Chödrön about bodhicitta: "At the relative level, our noble heart is felt as kinship with all beings. At the absolute level, we experience it as groundlessness, our open space."

And this, from Chökyi Nyima:

When watching the magical display of this world as it seems to be, spontaneously an overwhelming despair and pity well up in me. But 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?

Thank you.

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