Compassion and Emptiness

Carol Wilson · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Carol Wilson · 1:01:05

I want to talk tonight on the broad theme of the unity of wisdom, of emptiness and compassion. I often talk about this because the questions it raises in my mind are really the heart of my practice, the heart of the conundrum or the paradox of life for me in spiritual practice. So I'm always looking at it.

It's the question of how to open the heart and mind, how to remain or keep opening the heart and mind in this complex and painful and sometimes really insane world—with both incredible beauty and love and unbearable suffering to even hear about, never mind witness or participate in.

On the one side there is this. On the other side, the absolute knowing that everything's just arising and passing. As someone said today really beautifully—I'm not going to get her words exactly right—it's all just part of one arising and passing flow. There's nothing separate. From that place where there's almost nothing to do, nothing to have, nothing to be, from that knowing: how to continue to respond in this world? How to respond when the motivation isn't fear or greed or self-interest?

In a way, to me, those are the two questions. How to stay open in this world, how not to drown in the suffering—that is the compassion that can't really be deep compassion without the wisdom of emptiness. They have to come together. The second question—how to respond from the place of knowing everything's just coming and going and there's no separate anything and it's all just happening—that's the wisdom of emptiness that manifests quite naturally as compassionate, kind action. They go together.

Of course, they're not always equally strong. They're not always even accessible at all. But that's, to me, the deepening koan. Sometimes it seems completely unintelligible to me. Sometimes it's so obvious that they arise together and there's no question whatsoever, nothing to even talk about. It's just so clear how it is. And then all the shades in between.

I'm just offering some reflections and not in any way saying I've got the answers here. But to me it cuts to the heart of the whole reason for spiritual life, for any life, really.

The wisdom of no self, of emptiness, of no separate self, of nothing being more important and lasting than something else, the wisdom of not needing to have preferences—you can have them, but not being attached—the freedom of the heart and mind, of non-clinging. That's one side. The other side naturally arises when the mind and heart isn't clinging: the natural response will be one of wholesome, skillful action.

Just how I was thinking about it tonight—you know those moments we talk about a lot, and you all have them. I call them moments of recognizing the purity of heart or mind, just a moment of simple presence.

You know those moments. It's often in nature because nature's easier, especially here. It's not bugging us. In fact, there aren't bugs and nobody's telling us anything. It's easier to just open without our own defenses and sense of self.

I read a book once called *Alone*, and the only thing I remember from it is a line that said: it's easy to be with nature because nature has no subconscious. There's not this subconscious stuff bugging each other. Just walking in the dark now and seeing the stars and hearing the frogs—those moments when you stop, and there's no particular self-referencing at all. You're not sitting there going, "Oh, a moment of purity, no self-referencing." You're just in that place of whatever you want to call it—perfection or love or simplicity or completeness.

In that place, in that moment, a thought of harming could not arise. It doesn't compute. In that moment, in that place, if a response was called for, it would be one of what the Buddha talked about as the wise intentions—I'll talk about them in a minute—that is the natural manifestation. Non-harming, compassion, goodwill, generosity: the natural manifestation of the pure heart and mind. They go together.

This is what could be called bodhicitta, the awakened heart, the awakened mind. I want to read a little from Pema Chödrön because I love her very down-to-earth description of bodhicitta, the awakened heart, the noble or awakened heart—what bodhicitta means. Guy spoke about it the other night. She calls it the soft spot inherent in all of us. She calls bodhicitta simply a tenderness for life that awakens 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. Compassion, tenderness for life, the appreciating from the touching without separation, the knowing of the fragility and the beauty of life. Compassion or kindness or non-clinging is the natural response. It's not even like, "Let me think about how to respond." It just naturally flows. They're two sides of the same coin.

Nisargadatta: "Once you can say with confidence, born from direct experience, 'I am the world and the world is myself,' then 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."

Responsible for the world—not meaning that you personally have to fix it all. That's where we go with our self-cherishing: "I'm responsible for the world, and I'm sure not doing a very good job." That's not what it means. But once we know with confidence—and just for a moment, not once and for all. Don't wait for the once and for all. It goes back and forth. So in those moments when you can know with confidence, "I am the world, the world is myself," in that moment we are free from desire and fear, and the senseless sorrow, the sorrow of humankind because of ignorance, does become our sole concern. That's the tenderness, the fragility, the beauty that touches our heart and elicits a natural compassion, a natural expression of connectedness. I love that particular quotation, actually.

So this is really what I want to talk about in different ways—these two sides of the same coin, just different ways of going in. Another way of seeing how they need each other, how they have to be together, is often when we talk about anatta, which we've talked about quite a bit this retreat: the sense that there's no intrinsic separate self, and all the myriad of questions that the questioning mind comes up with that I do not need to recap, because you all know.

But one of the fears, one of the ideas the thinking mind throws up—an idea that's not based on actual experience, but that arises in many of our self-centered thinking minds—is that the idea of a life of non-clinging or of no separate self doesn't really sound appealing. And all the "what about" and "what if": "What about pleasure? What about love? What about preferences? What about just knowing who I am? Why would I want to live like that?" It's almost as if the idea is that the epitome of wisdom, of emptiness, is some kind of dull, cold, gray void—void of everything, void of happiness, void of everything. That obviously, hopefully it's obvious, isn't true.

Because as I was saying, it's not that at all. It's just the potential for response when response is called for. And the response that naturally arises—and this is the beautiful part in the way the Buddha breaks things down. I mean, he was certainly an organizational genius in terms of organizing how the mind works. Amazing, really. Can you imagine sitting down and coming up with all this stuff? It's amazing.

So in terms of talking about how this penetration of the truth of no separate self, of not self-cherishing, of non-clinging—how that manifests in the world is right there in the Noble Eightfold Path. The first step in some ways is samma ditthi, right view, right understanding, which would be this wisdom piece. Really seeing there's nothing separate, knowing that in a moment. Samma ditthi leading to the next steps, which are translated variously as wise thought or wise intention. And intention, remember we've talked about that—intention being that urge, that mental movement that leads to thought, speech, and action. So wise intention leading to the next steps of the path, which are wise speech, wise action, wise livelihood. And then into the meditation piece, although it's not really separate.

And the really cool thing, if you really look in your experience and hopefully see that it's true for you sometimes, because that helps us trust it more—the really cool thing is that with the deepening understanding, just those little purity moments I was talking about, you don't have to have the big flash-bam-it's-over. Just the little purity moments. And you don't even have to have a really brilliant thought that lets you know you own it. You can trust. In those moments, what starts to happen, what actually does happen, is the habits of our mind, the intentions, the unwholesome ones—our big friends greed, hatred, and delusion. But in terms of intention, he speaks more about greed and hatred.

They naturally start to transform. The wise intention—or the intention of greed—naturally transforms in the light of wisdom into non-greed, which manifests both as renunciation and as acts of generosity. And hatred is broken into two things. There's ill will, which naturally transforms in a moment of purity into friendliness, into goodwill or metta. And the other aspect is cruelty, which can take place internally.

Cruelty can be a kind of anger, a striking out, all the way to real cruelty and hatred. And that transforms into compassion, into non-harming, into really caring for and wishing to alleviate our own and other people's suffering.

It's remarkable because this is the natural movement. You'd have to fight not to have this happen. And it makes sense, really, even on the intellectual level—which is useful. I'm always talking about dropping under it, but using our thoughts, as Sally talked about last night, thoughts aren't to be hated. If we can just understand what a thought is, we can use it quite helpfully, instead of having it run our lives, which is more what happens.

On the intellectual level, it even makes sense when you consider the energy that is bound up when so much of our thought, our selective perception, our motivations, and what we do is caught up in self-referencing. You've noticed that, right? Once in a while, how much of our thoughts are about me, how much of the day is about me, how much of whatever happens in the dining room is about me—and then we have to have all our reactions and our responses and then our self-judging for our reactions. No wonder we're exhausted at the end of the day. It is exhausting. It's really exhausting.

So in those moments, have you wondered why, when that's not going on, the energy's better? There's more because all that energy is released into presence. It's released into awareness. It's available, instead of being bound up in this junk that we call our self-story and our life.

So just explore, just a tiny little way. I'll give you a tiny little example that isn't even anything judgmental or bad—just a small illustration of how the shift works. Here at mealtime, there's a sign for dana where people can offer for the meals, which they do in Burma really every day. It's quite nice to see. At IMS we have that too, but the way it works there is you walk into the dining room and there's a wall where you get your plates, and right on that wall there's a big whiteboard calendar with maybe half the month, the dates up, and then if there's a donation that day, it shows who made it and the dedication. So you walk up and you see about fifteen days at a time. Half the time, I never even look at it. Other times I glance. But this one time, a couple of years ago, I had made a donation for some day. And I remember walking in, and as soon as I walked in, I immediately looked at the board, and I didn't see anything else. I just wanted to see my day. Where's my day? What does it say? Just that sense of the narrowing and the tightness and the self-referencing.

And then I saw, "Oh, yeah. Oh, look at all these days. Look at all these lovely dedications. Look at all this generous stuff." As soon as that was just let go of, naturally there was the expansion and the appreciation of people's generosity, and a kind of friendliness. Goodwill came, quite naturally.

That's a lot of our practice, right? Just the tightness, experiencing it. "Oh"—there's a piece of wisdom, a piece of seeing it. How many times have you noticed, please say at least once, that it naturally kind of opens up? You see that. You have to see it, by God, after three weeks. At least once. But it does happen.

So the thing about intention—and what I'm sure Guy will be talking about a lot more—is that intention is really the seed of the wholesomeness or unwholesomeness of action, thought, speech, and action in the way that the Buddha understood it. And as we've said before and will say again, that goes a little counter to our normal societal ways of assessing the benefit or the usefulness or the success of an action. Usually it's based on whether that action achieved the desired result, which is typically some kind of measurable or observable result. Of course that's reasonable, but that usually determines whether something was a good action—what I wanted to happen, happened.

But what we may forget to look at—or I was certainly never really taught to look at—is how the Buddha understands the purity, the wisdom, the deepening compassion, the habits of our mind and heart. What's being fed? What's being starved? The whole seed of the action is in the intention.

So something may achieve a seemingly good result, but we were driven in the doing of it by total greed or total anger. In terms of looking at what's being cultivated, what's being fed—it's greed, it's anger. Now, take away "feeling greed is bad, anger is bad, so therefore I'm bad." You have to not go there. But just be exploring: does greed and anger, as it gets stronger, increase my sense of happiness or unhappiness, suffering or unsuffering? Does it increase the ability to be present with myself and others in difficult circumstances? Does it increase a sense of separation? Does it open to more of that place of connectedness and beauty?

This is to explore for ourselves, not just to say, "Greed is bad, I'm not going to do it, I'm so bad." That's separate, separate, separate. But this is a really interesting place of exploration—that the natural result of wisdom, of clear seeing, of non-self, of emptiness, is that these wise intentions of non-clinging or generosity, goodwill and compassion naturally grow and strengthen. Our habits of mind and heart really change.

And again, even in little things. I know if you contemplate back—not when your mind is filled with judging, because we can't trust any assessment that's made with a mind colored by greed and aversion. You can't. You can't trust any thoughts that come as a clear assessment. But when your mind is relatively balanced, just contemplate, reflect, and I'm sure you'll come up with moments where somebody was driving you crazy. You were filled with anger or blame or judgment, or you turned it against yourself—wherever we go with those things. Really in it. And something just shifts. It gets down. You really look at the person.

So many people say this. You just look at the person and something about them goes in. You open to them and feel their pain, and the whole story of me and them and their being bad and anger—it's gone. It's gone for that moment. Just the willingness to move out of the self-referential state, where it's all about me and this is bothering me. Oh wow, look at that. It's another angle. It's us, not me and you. I mean, that's saying it verbally, but it happens on another level. That piece of non-separation—immediately, cruelty changes to compassion, ill will changes to goodwill, wanting to keep my things for me changes to a letting go.

Yeah, it might be only for a second. We're not talking about steady state. But just notice this. See if this is really true for you at times.

I think Sally—somebody read this quotation from the Buddha—that whatever one frequently thinks about and dwells upon, that becomes the inclination of their mind. That's just common sense. This is why, of course, the brahmavihāra practice is so valuable—it's obvious that we're actually substituting verbal thoughts. So that's good. That's when I think Sally quoted me at some stupid thing I said one time about fake mettā being better than real aversion.

But what I meant, if I think back—I'm not really sure what I meant. But if I think back, it's like even saying "May I be happy" when I don't feel it. But I don't mean "You stupid jerk, you scum of the earth." At least I'm saying, "May I be happy." A friend of mine was talking about a Tibetan teacher who was discussing acting compassionately, and one of his students said, "But I don't feel it. I don't feel compassion." He said, "I'm not telling you to feel. I'm just saying act compassionately." And sometimes—it's not hypocritical—but sometimes it actually can go that way.

Anyway, where I was going with this: the brahmavihāras are more obvious on the level of actual thought. But even more powerful and profound is every moment of mindful awareness. Because mindfulness, those moments of clear seeing, is pure citta in a way—pure mind. Real mindfulness isn't colored in that moment. It's not corrupted by aversion and greed and confusion, just recognizing what's happening.

So you're just sitting and there's earth element in your butt. And it goes from being some whole story to, "Oh yeah, hardness." That's a simple moment of mindfulness. That's a moment of wisdom, of non-self-referencing. That's a moment where the intention is shifted from unwise, suffering intention to wisdom, to non-harming, to friendliness.

That's why the steadiness, the continuity of mindful awareness has so much power. But it's also why we often don't notice what's happening.

Because it's not any big bells and whistles, but it's steady, steady, steady—opening us to wisdom and changing the habits.

And habits are powerful, right? Habits are powerful. I won't go into it a lot. I'll just say that in the last maybe four or five years, I've been spending quite a bit of time in various nursing homes and assisted living facilities because of my various parents in various places. And so you really get to see a lot of different people, basically in various stages of dementia.

One of the things I would say that goes on in dementia—and it's different for different people—but one of the things is that your personality defense systems, where you're trying to put on a good face but it's not really your big habit, you can't quite remember that one anymore. And so the real habits just start coming out. And you can really see.

There are some places I go in—and there are more women than men usually in these places, but men too—where someone is just really very friendly and affectionate and kind. And every time you go in, she's saying, "Oh, I'm so happy to see you!" And it's not about me. I mean, she doesn't know who the heck I am. But there's just this friendliness. You can tell this is a kind, friendly person.

And then there's someone else sitting there, and you're trying to say something, kind of saying, "Leave me alone." You say, "Do you want to go to this meal? Do you want to go eat now?" And they're all just, "No, I don't want to go eat, you can't make me." And I say, "You're right, you're right. You don't have to eat if you don't want to eat, sorry."

But you never know. And you really can see the habits of a lifetime. What we've cultivated.

I want to set aside certain things—I think Alzheimer's can actually affect the brain in a way that changes the habits, and that's a different thing, right? There's nothing we can really do about that. Parkinson's too, and things like that. But I'm talking about—and I'm including my mother in this—I can really see that the organic kind of mind is still there, and her personality is still there. I've known her, and if anything, her sweetness has come out more. Luckily, my mother's sweetness has come out more. But it was always there in ways.

I want to tell you, for me, it puts the fear of God into me. What's it going to be like? I better get working now.

It's not so funny. Think about it. It's not so funny.

So while these qualities—and I'm going to use compassion as sort of a stand-in for all three of the wise intentions, because in some ways compassion or non-harming, caring, kind of includes all of them—compassion in the way the Tibetans speak of bodhicitta, this tender, awakened heart whose highest manifestation is the sincere wish to practice and awaken so that one can help awaken all beings. I feel this tenderness for life can manifest in many forms.

This happens naturally through our growing understanding and insight and wisdom, through growing trust in awareness and less trust in the painful habits. And also, we can consciously incline the mind with wisdom, with interest. What are we feeding? What are we starving? Sometimes we can't make a choice, but sometimes we can. There's some book called *Choose Love*. Sometimes we can. Choose compassion.

Sometimes we'd like to and we just can't. But even in those times, we can usually choose mindfulness. We can usually choose awareness of the fact that I totally hate everybody and everything and I can't change that right now—but I'm aware of that.

I'm not kidding. No, no, I'm not kidding. That's something.

Awareness, as Sayadaw U Tejaniya says, is the point that includes. It includes everything. Awareness is not colored or stained or damaged by anything. Awareness can even include hatred. And when awareness

includes it more and more, and we begin to take our trust and our stand in awareness, hatred's not being fed anymore.

It may seem really strong and overwhelming, but there's a back and forth. Something starts to shift. It really does.

The Dalai Lama, speaking about cultivation—cultivating compassion—said something that's really key. He said compassion develops through deep insight into what suffering is. And that arises by being present with our own suffering experience. Where else is it going to arise?

We think—I often think—I should be working in a refugee camp, I should be somewhere where there's really suffering. But look at your own mind and heart. There's plenty of suffering and confusion and pain. This is the place we can start to bear witness. This is the place we can learn what compassion and kindness and being present in the face of suffering really is. It's our best laboratory and workshop.

This is why—and I mean this, I know people don't believe us when we say this in interviews, but it's really true—the really difficult aspects or times on a retreat are so key. Because this is the place where the deep suffering, habits, and confusion are really coming up in the light of awareness. As I think I said, one of my teachers used to say, in the light of awareness, all the snakes come up out of their holes. That's what happens. But there's more awareness, there's a little more trust, and there's a commitment. It's in our life too. It isn't just on retreat at all. But retreat is such a valuable opportunity. It doesn't mean we're going to fix it all. That's not what compassion's about. But it means we can bear witness with kindness, with presence. That's really what learning about compassion through our suffering is.

So that's the first piece he says: compassion awakens through deep insight into suffering by opening to being with our own suffering. And then, through this opening to suffering, to dukkha, compassion strengthens as it moves into a sense of empathy or connectedness with other beings and with all beings.

That can also start right here. People give examples of this—just little examples. Having back pain, or having a sense of deep grief, and really struggling with all of it: the pain, the reaction, the aversion, the frustration. But at some point—and for many people this happens—it's not that the pain lessens, but the sense of it being all about me somehow drops. And there arises this recognition: so many people in the world have back pain, or worse. It's not a finger-shaking thing, but it's like, oh, my back pain, my grief is a stand-in, a representative for the grief of the world. It isn't my grief or my back pain. It's like, this is the world. I am the world, the world is myself. We all take turns manifesting different aspects of suffering and beauty.

In this way, what's going on here in retreat—and we can bring the same attitude into our life, of course—it's just more structured here. We have less to distract us. That's why the pains and difficulties seem so big. We have less to distract us. That's done on purpose.

What's arising? That's what's arising. You could say that's the vipaka, the result of previous karma,

previous cause and effect ripening right now. How that's being met in the moment—that's the intention being cultivated. So when what arises, no matter how beautiful or difficult or how lost we seem, just that conscious intention to be mindful of it. You don't even have to think "compassionate," just mindful. Just, as Sylvia keeps saying, being friendly with whatever's happening.

That's huge. Every moment, how we meet what's currently arising now is the cultivation of compassionate intention. It's the cultivation of wisdom and it's the manifestation of wisdom. It's really extremely powerful.

So we get so—just like with intention and action—we tend to look so much into the result of action and miss the intention. And similarly, on our retreat, hard stuff is happening, physical, emotional, dukkha in whatever way, and we tend to either focus on what's happening and how to fix it, or how we can't fix it, or how we're not meeting it properly. Instead of just looking at what's the attitude in the mind that's meeting it. Just to have the potential.

I was reading a book recently about nonviolence, different aspects of nonviolence through the ages in history. And there's one line from Dr. Martin Luther King that I really liked. It says, "Nonviolence means avoiding not only external physical violence, but also internal violence of the spirit. You not only refuse to shoot a man, you refuse to hate him."

Compassion, this cultivation of compassion as an expression of deep wisdom, it's that level. Not just refusing to shoot a man, we refuse to hate a man. It's refusing to hate any aspect of our experience. It doesn't mean you have to love it either.

So I want to balance that with Ajahn Sumedho, the same thing in his very down-to-earth way. If you're being very idealistic and you hate someone—or yourself, or you hate something that's arising in your experience here, just to keep it on that level—then you feel, "I shouldn't hate anyone. I shouldn't hate anything. I'm a Buddhist, and Buddhists should have metta for all living beings, and I should meet everything with metta. I should love everybody if I'm a good Buddhist." He says all that comes from impractical idealism. Instead, try having a little metta for the aversion you feel. Recognize aversion for the pettiness of the mind, the jealousy, the envy. Metta meaning peacefully coexisting, not creating problems, not making it difficult or creating problems out of the difficulties that arise in life, in our minds and bodies. It means the stuff happens, and we hate them, all of that happens. We don't have to go the extra step, or when we see we're going the extra step, just let your awareness get a little bit bigger and include that too. Oh yeah, look at that habit of hating the hate. Look at that habit of just, "This shouldn't be happening and I should know better." Look at that.

And in that moment, that's a shift of wise intention, of wisdom—from hating the hate, blaming, to "Oh, it's like this." I love that saying, "It's like this," because you can't really go there without somehow dropping the deep identification and resistance. Oh, it's like this. What do you do with that? Nothing. It's just like this. Okay. A step back into that, at least in the direction of that natural purity.

I'm not saying—and you know already, right—that this is easy or simple in any way. In any way. We wouldn't have to practice so hard, we wouldn't be so... spiritual practice wouldn't be both so central to our lives and so difficult, and we wouldn't have so much inspiration, really, and be so deeply touched by people who can manifest this if it was just run-of-the-mill easy. On the other hand, I feel if we didn't really know, already know below the level of thinking, the truth of this, then we also wouldn't be deeply touched and inspired by people and beings and acts of compassion and wisdom. We just wouldn't even recognize it.

But I'm not saying in any way that it's easy. Our denial systems—well, that's what you've all been seeing, part of what you've been seeing: our particular personal denial systems, our personality denial systems when we come in contact with certain aspects of personal suffering. And in a few interviews today, people were kind of laughing where we go, "Oh, this habit of my mind, I never saw it before." Well, actually, I did see it, but you kind of go, "Oh, I see it, but I'm not really doing that. That's not really happening." And we come back. And then suddenly some veil drops and you go, "Oh, I've been completely blaming myself. I've been completely filled with guilt all the time." And there's a part of your mind that goes, "Yeah, I know. I've been seeing that forever." But not really. The denial, delusion—it's an amazing, fascinating force, really, I think, the force of denial.

So I'm not in any way saying it's easy. One way of denial is just absolutely pushing away physical, emotional suffering altogether, right? The denial of what I read the other night—going for the pleasant, running away, doing something.

We all know that pattern. And that's part of what the structure of retreat doesn't let us do as much. But there are many other forms of denial.

Self-judgment is a huge form of it. *This shouldn't be happening. In fact, it's not happening. It's only happening because I'm a loser. If I could do it right, this wouldn't be happening.* Or blame or anger. Find your own denial systems. They're really strong. Some is just plain, outright denying that suffering is even happening, because it's too painful to touch.

I've told this story before, but I'll tell it again. I was in the hospital once, many years ago, and I'd been there a while. I was having to get a lot of IVs, where they have to stick the needle into your vein. After you've been there a while, your veins kind of start depleting, and it gets harder to get the thing in. So this one day, a nurse was trying to do it and she couldn't. They tried two or three times and couldn't get it in. It's not killer pain, but it's not nice. And I wasn't in the best space.

Finally she said, "Okay, I'll go get the doctor." And I thought—no disrespect to any doctors—but I thought, *now I'm really in trouble.* Because the nurses are the ones who do it all the time, not the doctors. So she went and grabbed some doctor walking by. I didn't even know the guy. He comes in, and it's the same thing—poke, poke, poke. A little tear came down, because I was being a good girl, but it really did hurt. And he goes, "What's the matter with you? This doesn't hurt."

At the time, I didn't think, "Oh, that'll make a good story." But it has. I've gotten much more use out of it than those couple of minutes of pain.

But that level of denial—I really could actually understand it. His intention was not to hurt. He wasn't being cruel. That's where you can see that stabbing someone could come from many different intentions. His intention was trying to help. And trying to help, and seeing that you can't control the result and you're hurting someone—that's hard to deal with sometimes. We want it all to be nice. We want it all to be good. We want our good intentions to manifest. But it's not so clear-cut. Life isn't like that. It's ambiguous.

This is where compassion really needs the wisdom of equanimity. The vastness of emptiness. We can drown in our own suffering. Then try just reading the newspapers on a bad day and you think, *I can't bear that.* I go through periods where I listen to the news every day, and on some days it feels like I'm drowning. I can't possibly open to this.

That's when—and just being here in your own stuff when it's really strong—that's when the compassion is touching the suffering, but you're getting sucked in, drowning in it. It's too much. It's overwhelming. And there's still the me, the *me* in there. This isn't a judgment.

It's just seeing that the compassion isn't balanced at this moment by the wisdom of equanimity.

Equanimity functions in many ways—there's the vastness of no particular self, the recognition that it's all coming and going and that we can't control outcomes. But equanimity too can fall out of balance. It's not exactly denial, but more like a delusion, what's sometimes called falling into emptiness.

You know those times where there really is a sense, when you're sitting or walking, that everything's just coming and going, coming and going. Nothing lasts. Nothing seems more important than anything else. And you think, out of this, how would you act? What difference does anything make? In this place, nothing really makes a difference. And then that's the place where we find the impulse to act disappearing—falling into emptiness. It can turn into a long period of delusion. It's not our main problem, but it can happen.

Nyoshul Khenpo, the teacher Guy spoke about the other night, warned about this. The danger is that we hear too much too soon. We think we have understood emptiness or sunyata, and we err on the side of the absolute in a nihilistic fashion, obscured by concepts. "Everything's empty." Nagarjuna said, "It is sad to see those people who mistakenly believe in material concrete reality, but far more pitiful are those who believe in emptiness." Those who believe in things can be helped through various kinds of practice, through 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.

Don't misunderstand this. You can hear the difference when we say "there's nothing to do, nothing to have, nothing to be" and that comes from real wisdom in the moment—there's a natural response if there's something to do. But we can sort of know it intellectually and sort of get lost in the ideas.

Somebody comes, somebody's suffering. "There's nothing to have, nothing to do, nothing to be." Disconnect. So that's when wisdom needs to be balanced with compassion. This is why they really, together, are the strength of awakening.

I'm not saying it's easy. And in some ways what it really calls from us is what I think everyone here already has, or you wouldn't be on this path, you wouldn't have been doing so much practice in so many different ways, you wouldn't still be here. But it's really about tuning into your deep aspiration, a commitment really, tuning in over and over and committing ourselves over and over to whatever form the aspiration takes—whether it's a commitment to awakening or to compassion or to integrity or honesty or wisdom, whatever form it takes for you.

We need to sometimes consciously call on it, because the denial system and the overwhelming capacity of so much pain and suffering, so much in this world—and so much of it clearly needless—make it so easy, from what seem like the best intentions, to engage in action. And there's so much, you know, it's endless what any of us could do that really starts from the sincere intention to help, to serve, to come from wisdom, to cultivate love, whatever it is for you. There are a million different ways.

But if we can't keep coming back to staying in touch with that deep inner intention, springing from wisdom, springing from non-self-cherishing, then however wonderful the things we do, it starts to be that the good intention is from the outside in rather than from the inside out. And it starts to get a little off, a little twisted. This is really where the Buddhist emphasis on the purity of intention matters—it starts from the inside.

We all know stories about peace marches where people are marching for peace and the thing turns violent. Where it gets so lost in frustration at people being clearly vindictive, harmful, angry, and the only way we can think to affect change is with anger, with hatred. It's kind of sad that sometimes the main way we know to call up energy is through greed or anger. Sometimes people have said to me, "If I give up greed, what am I going to do, just sit in my room the rest of my life?" But that's the thing to learn. Action can come from other intentions. Real compassion is a great source of action and courage when it comes from the inside out, from not just an idea but from our understanding. When understanding supports compassion, it's so transformative.

But this is really, I think, the koan part, the part that's the whole practice of a lifetime for me. The world is so complex, so ambiguous. Even coming from the inside out, even if we can really get in touch with the depth of our wisdom and motivation, it doesn't mean there's any guarantee that our actions are going to affect the result we want. Can we still take refuge in the depth of our understanding and our commitment to non-harming or compassion? It gets really hard, doesn't it? To trust enough to keep coming back to that.

And then there are times when it's just ambiguous and you don't have all the information. You don't have all the information, and it's so painful.

You just might want to shrink away. How do you stay open in that?

Have you ever had to be the medical proxy for somebody who can't make decisions for themselves, and you have to decide whether the doctor should do this intervention or not? Keep them alive or not? And believe me, whatever things they said to do, something different always comes up. You make the best decision you can. You think, "Well, they would want this to happen," and you do it. And then there's so much suffering that comes from that which you couldn't have known. You think, "My decision put them through these extra three weeks of this suffering."

Can we stay open in that without blame, without judgment, and without needing to say, "It's too much. I don't want to be here"? It's not personal. But we can't control the results of anything. And we don't have all the information a lot of the time.

Can we make a resolve, over and over? Ajahn Sumedho—I was on a retreat here last summer, and he was talking, maybe to the teachers afterward—and he talks so much about having total confidence in awareness. Just trust in this thing. That's his confidence in awareness: awareness can be with anything.

Then he was talking about a really difficult period at his monastery at Amaravati, not so long ago, maybe a few years before. He's the head of the monastery, so he was coming under a lot of criticism. They were having long meetings. It was just one of those long, organizational, really painful periods. And he was getting all the blame.

He said, "I hate being blamed. My personality hated it. I'm thinking, I'm trying to do the best I can. Don't you get that? And everyone's hating me." He was really starting to get caught, he said. And then he stopped. After this had been going on for weeks, months, he said, "I just stopped and I saw I was really getting sucked back into fighting it, resisting it, blame. I thought, I just have to make a determination—an absolute determination—to trust awareness."

This is not an idea, but a deep, heartfelt intention to really trust it, even when you're doing the best you can and everything's going to hell and everybody's blaming you and you know you're just trying to come from wisdom and compassion. Even then, can we take that deep refuge? For him, it's trusting awareness. For each of you, it might be something else. But to keep trusting, to have confidence in the truth of how things really are, to spring from that, and not to get so sidelined into thinking, "The way I want it to be isn't happening, so this must not work. Let me try something else."

For me, it calls up everything, and I fail in it a lot of the time. That's why I get so inspired by people who can model that for me.

One, of course, is James Lawson, who has been a Christian minister for many years but was also a very strong leader in the civil rights movement along with Dr. King. Before the civil rights movement, in the early fifties, he was very deeply committed to nonviolence, and he was a conscientious objector in the Korean War. Because he was a minister, he could have been excused from going to jail. But he said, "No. If

other people have to go to jail, I will too." So he went to jail for it. After that, he went to India—Gandhi was dead by then, but he studied there.

This is the point I want to make: afterward, he became one of the teachers of the civil rights movement, teaching how to carry out all the really powerful demonstrations and civil disobedience from a deep understanding of nonviolence—which is, as Martin Luther King said, not just not being overtly violent, but not letting yourself hate.

Lawson said, "When I was in jail, I discovered a strength and power in me to live out of my own conscience." That's really what I'm talking about. How do we find that strength and power in ourselves to live out of our own conscience? And it leads not to being a doormat, but to incredible acts of courage. It doesn't always get what you want, but it really can bring out that inspiration, that sense of possibility in other people.

And Aung San Suu Kyi, who has been under house arrest in Burma for going on seventeen years now—she's a very potent symbol in Burma of the democratic movement.

People really love her – all normal people love her – but they can't even say her name. But she stands for nonviolence. And she says over and over, "My purpose is to purify the mind and heart." She said, "I never meant to become the leader of the democratic movement in Burma. I just try to do whatever's right in the name of love or in the name of justice." She says the motivation is its own reward.

You can't say that what's actually happening is good, or that it even looks like it's going in a good direction. But out of this place of commitment to what seemed true and just, and purifying her own heart, she's been willing to stay. She could leave the country at any time – she could just never go back. So she's been willing to stay there while her husband, who was English, died of cancer, while her two adolescent sons have grown up. She really has no contact – she's really under house arrest. But she knows in some way that she's the heart of inspiration to so many people. And she really is.

One year I was teaching up in Chazwa, in this monastery up in North Sagaing. We visited some little nunneries nearby. We went into one where we often go – it's a poor little one, and they have a little outside patio. Then they took us upstairs in their crummy little building. They have a room where they roll up their mats in the day, and maybe all fifteen nuns sleep there at night. Very crummy, falling-down wood. They took us around, and they had this tiny, crummy little bookcase with the doors closed. They opened it up, pushed aside some books, and whispered, "Look." They had a picture of Suu Kyi, of Daw Suu Kyi. And they were so proud – just these little, almost uneducated nuns. They had to hide it like that, but they were so proud of it, so happy. It's like that with everybody.

So she knows it in some way. But she's not saying, "Oh, I'm the leader." And also, it's not, "It's not working, so I'm out of here." It's finding that sense of deep commitment from wisdom and compassion. Not a doormat. But just knowing that who we are and how we act has an effect, whatever the actual thing that

happens is.

And even in very simple ways – I'm not saying we need to be Martin Luther King or James Lawson or Aung San Suu Kyi. Just little actions. All our actions, where we're coming from, has an effect.

I heard this on the radio – John Sununu, who was the chief of staff to the first President Bush. He was talking on the BBC about presidential transition after the last election, choosing team members, and how important it is to choose team members. About foreign policy, he said people may think that the work and the interaction in the State Department and with foreign diplomats is all based on the greater vision. But really what it comes down to is personal interaction. That's the driving force. So it's really important who you get on the team.

And that does matter. It's like the world is just people. Where people come from ends up showing up in what they do, how we act over the long term.

So in terms of cultivation, mindfulness is our strongest tool. It's our strongest reliance, absolutely, because moment after moment of awareness opens us to see the truth clearly. No question about that. But also, just small, simple acts have a huge effect for us. Just the willingness to have this commitment to our deepest aspiration, and to just do a small act of kindness, just a small act of non-hatred towards ourselves, towards others. Either way, you see that we're not separate.

So I think I'll just end with a story that I heard on the radio – one of these people giving their stories.

And it's from a prisoner who'd been in jail for 20 years, convicted of second-degree murder in 1985. He's saying, "Caring makes us human."

I won't read the whole thing, but he's talking about how a small, scruffy cat showed up in the prison yard one day. "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 behind the dumpster as the cat rolled around and luxuriated beneath my attention. What he was expressing outwardly, I was feeling inwardly. It was an amazing piece 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 wouldn't usually find talking to each other. I even saw sometimes an officer 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. The cat was obviously a stray and in 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, more psychologists, treatment of various kinds. I think what we really need is a chance to practice kindness ourselves. Not receive it, but give it. After more than two decades here, I know that kindness is not a value that's encouraged. It's often seen as weakness. The culture instead encourages keeping your head down, minding your own business, and never letting yourself be vulnerable.

"For a few days, a raggedy cat disrupted this code of prison culture. They've taken him away now, hopefully to a decent home. But it did my heart good to see the effect he had on me and the men here. Simply by saying, 'I need some help here,' he did something important for us. He needed us. We need to be needed. I believe we all do."

Ashanti Davis said, "When I do something for the sake of another, no feeling of conceit or amazement arises. It's as if having fed myself. I look for nothing in return."

Let's sit for a minute.

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