Compassion and Emptiness

Carol Wilson · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Carol Wilson · 1:01:43

So tonight I want to talk about how the wisdom of emptiness is naturally expressed as compassion—really the unity of emptiness and compassion as wisdom.

A lot of what's been talked about the last couple of evenings, and what's been coming up in many people's practice, is seeing this sense of just *this, this, this*. No past, no future, no reference outside. And our habitual mind—our linear, logical, rational mind, the way we think about things—doesn't tend to find a lovely idea in our projection of what life would be like if we were living from the understanding of no self, if we were living from within the wisdom of emptiness. Often the intellect projects something quite unappealing.

Words people have used with me are *alien, disconnected, inhuman*. What Trungpa calls a kind of nostalgia for samsara: "I'd rather be caught in my stupid patterns, but at least it's me doing it, and I'm familiar with it." Or *uncaring*—this fear of a dry, gray kind of emptiness where you can't tell the difference between beautiful and scary, where you don't care if you have peanut butter or sauerkraut, where it doesn't really matter.

On another side of that is when we taste the freedom, the liberation of emptiness. And of course, for all of us, it's not complete all at once. There's a way that then the thinking, rational mind can own that, making a description of it that is no longer the living experience. And that's the kind of emptiness where you can tell the difference between peanut butter and sauerkraut, but really, nothing matters. It's all empty. So what I do doesn't matter. In some way, those are the words we use—awareness doesn't care—and we turn that into "nothing matters, so whatever I do..." That's also a real misunderstanding, a misconception. It's what the Tibetans sometimes call falling into emptiness.

I want to read a couple of things from Nyoshul Khen. This can actually be quite subtle, and it can be a place we hit in our lifetime of practice. Remember, we're always looking at it from a certain angle, as long as we don't stop and think this is it.

The danger in falling into emptiness is that we hear too much too soon. We think we have understood shunyata, emptiness, and we err on the side of the absolute in a nihilistic fashion, obscured by concepts—concepts of emptiness. Nagarjuna said, "It is sad to see those who mistakenly believe in material, concrete reality, but far more pitiful are those who believe in emptiness."

Let me give you Stephen Batchelor's translation of that same verse: "Buddhas say emptiness is relinquishing opinions. Believers in emptiness are incurable."

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

You can hear all the spiritual material that's around, and sometimes you can hear how—when we're not following someone or some path the whole way, when we just read snippets—it just says nothing matters, there's nothing to do, there's nothing to have, there's nothing to be. Buddha dasa, right? And when we take that and make it a concept—"Well, there's nothing to have, there's nothing to do, there's nothing to be. You're saying whatever's happening, just notice it. It's fine. It doesn't matter"—there's a piece of that which is accurate, but when we turn it into a view, we've fallen into that abyss.

Now, don't be afraid of that. Because what I'm wanting to say with the unity of emptiness and compassion is that the real moments of trustworthy glimpses, experiences, understandings of emptiness—or the non-separateness of things—naturally give rise to compassion or tenderness of heart, as Pema Chödrön puts it. These are the natural effects. We respond appropriately.

So that's something we can kind of check out in ourselves. I'll give you an example from Stephen Batchelor writing about Shantideva, who wrote *The Guide to the Bodhisattva's Way of Life*—one of the Dalai Lama's favorite texts. Stephen should know about it since he translated it from the Tibetan many years ago. He's writing about it in his preface to his translation of Nagarjuna.

He says that when Shantideva, this great Bodhisattva, when his closed sense of self dissolved—*closed*, that's really what it's like. Sogyal Rinpoche says we're closed in this trap of our emotions and thoughts and personality. Here we sit day in and day out in this little closed-in space. So when Shantideva's closed sense of self dissolved, he did not vanish into the abyss of nothingness. He did not. But what happened is he saw that to be empty is no longer to be full of oneself.

And that's what's so exhausting. Quite a few people have mentioned in the last few days, listening to Winnie's talk and Howie's talk, they're saying, "I'm just seeing every thought about me and my stories and my views—it's so exhausting." It takes a lot of energy to maintain this little cage that we're sitting in, our ideas of ourself. But when that dissolves, we don't go into nothingness.

I want you to listen to this—not exactly a poem, but Howie read it last night. Hear it again, this Zen nun's words, from the sense of how the openness into emptiness of any separate self is the same as compassion. See if you can hear how these two things go together. Maybe you don't, maybe it's only me, but see if you can get a sense of how these two things are united.

Togetsu saw that arising arose, abided, and fell away. She saw that knowing this arose, abided, and fell away. Then she knew there was nothing more than this, nothing more than this. No ground, nothing to lean on stronger than the cane that she held. Nothing to lean upon at all, and no one leaning. And she opened the

clenched fist in her mind and let go and fell into the midst of everything.

We don't fall into the abyss of nothingness—we fall into the midst of everything. And the inescapable, natural response of that is the tenderness of heart, of metta, of compassion. It's an aspect of wisdom, appropriate response when response is needed.

This is again Stephen Batchelor talking about Shantideva: "For his insight into emptiness does not merely change the way he views the world, but it also transforms the way he feels about it. His heart is opened to the anguish of others, which prompts a spontaneous longing to assuage their suffering"—which is really the seed of bodhicitta. But it's not a kind of crazy, disconnected longing. Shantideva also acknowledged the irrational nature of such a passion, knowing that just being relatively a limited person, there's no way he could assuage the suffering of all beings. "I don't even know myself," he said. But still, that's the natural effect of opening to emptiness, falling into the midst of everything.

It's natural when we see how much of our energy, our thoughts, our emotions are so self-referential, and how this really does create a limiting separation that seems so real only because it's being recreated moment to moment in the mind. The self-referential sense—just to notice it. Not to stop it, just to notice it. It's just another thing to notice.

Sogyal Rinpoche describes it in a way that I personally really love because it's vivid. He says that this felt sense of me—not an intellectual idea, not talking about ego and this and that, but just as you're sitting here, the felt sense of *me*. Can you connect with that? No, not because there's no me—can you connect? It's not any big whoop, it's just a little *ugh*, you know?

He says that felt sense is like the original yardstick of samsara. In Tibet, when they're making the footprint for the foundation of a house, they start from a point in the middle. They have a long string of however wide it's going to be, and from that point in the middle, they measure with that string all the way around. You get the footprint of the house. So that referential center point that everything's referring back to—he's saying that's the sense of *me* when it's arising and we don't quite realize it. He calls that the yardstick for samsara.

Our job is just to notice it, not to try and get rid of it, but just notice it. When we don't notice it, that becomes the seed for all this incredible energy that goes into creating and maintaining what we wish we didn't have to create and maintain. We're trying so hard to get rid of it—but "I'm" still trying so hard to get rid of it, and "I'm" creating—and we forget to notice this little sense of *me*.

And when we think about it not being there, it's really scary. Back to that sense of a fall into the void of nothingness.

Because the mind can only know what it already knows. And what it already knows is severely limited. So that's why we're always talking about trust.

This relentless, obsessive, exhausting self-referencing—quite a few of you have mentioned just noticing, even for a moment, sometime when it's not there. And people have said, "My gosh, I didn't realize how exhausting this burden is." And then it comes back. You want to shoot yourself. But when it comes back, you don't have to take that personally either. You don't have to take it personally.

In just that moment when self-referencing isn't the center of the world, we fall into the midst of everything, and what naturally awakens is what Pema Chödrön calls this tenderness for life, tenderness for beings. The way she describes bodhicitta is she calls it noble or awakened heart. This bodhicitta, this tenderness for life, awakens naturally without our doing when we can no longer shield ourselves from the vulnerability of our condition, from the basic fragility of existence. When the pain of the world touches your heart, it naturally turns into compassion.

It's really not something we have to do. "I have to be the compassionate one." Not that we can't incline the mind—I'll get there later—but at this point, I just want to keep pointing to how the recognition on a deep level, a cellular level, even though it comes and goes, of emptiness, of no self, of not-separate-self—that is the basis for what Stephen Batchelor calls a spontaneous empathetic responsiveness. Or he actually calls it this: emptiness is the basis for the ethics of empathetic responsiveness.

And this is how Shantideva says it, very basically: "When I act for the sake of others, no amazement or conceit arises. It's just like feeding myself. I hope for nothing in return." Just like feeding myself.

Stephen says that when he realized this idea of a separate self was just an idea—but when we're caught in that cage we create, the spontaneous concern for others does arise. We all feel some compassion, some spontaneous concern for others. But when we're in the midst of that house created by the yardstick of samsara, then that spontaneous concern for others is limited, right? It's felt for those who fall within the range of what is mine—me and mine and those I love and those I can let in somehow, where it feels safe. The pain of those outside this range can be treated with indifference or disconnect, or on occasion we're even kind of happy to see someone else suffer.

What goes away is this range of inside-outside. It's just like having fed myself—I look for nothing in return because there's not this boundary where we only care about what's within it.

Now, the other side, though: for the vastness of compassion, also the vastness requires wisdom. Just as the wisdom of emptiness is naturally trustworthy when it has the compassion, the non-separation aspect, the natural tenderness—which could manifest in many different ways, but people know it, many people have described it, you can tell—it's not indifferent, it's not disconnected, it's not "oh, who gives a..."—it's really there.

But in the same way, the vastness of real compassion, deep compassion, is only possible with the wisdom of emptiness, of no separate self. It really requires that. Our intellectual and really heartfelt, sincere wish to be compassionate, our understanding of it and having that as an intention, a goal—that's really useful.

Don't get me wrong. I'm not saying that's not helpful. It's wonderful, because it will incline our mind towards more wisdom, and the more wisdom will incline our heart towards more compassion.

But you can see the limits of acting from compassion when it's not married, when it's not really met by the depth of wisdom, because we don't have all the information in a way. We're still looking from within the self-interest, trying our best, but we don't realize how narrow that little box is.

I heard a great example. Well, to me it's an example—maybe I'm stretching it a bit. But I heard this on the radio in the fall, I think. It was actually an economist talking about the economic theories that if you act on rational self-interest, it'll be for the good of everybody—which already we can see doesn't sound so great in Buddhist terms.

But anyway, the example he gave, I loved. He said there was recently—I don't know how recent, in the last few years—some new bridge that was built in London over the Thames. I don't know if it was a footbridge or also for cars, but he was talking about foot traffic on this bridge right after it had opened. So many hundreds of people were walking across this bridge, and it was new, but it started really shaking and trembling, I guess particularly on one side—which, you know, not so great. It just opened.

So all these people, it started shaking and trembling. Each person did what seemed like, for themselves, a rational thing to do, which was they moved to the other side from where the shaking was. But everybody did that, because everyone was just acting in their own little world of rational self-interest. So all several hundred people moved to the other side, which of course made the whole thing a million times worse.

So you get the sense. We do what seems appropriate, logical, useful. But without the wisdom, we can't see past. We don't even take in the big picture without consciously thinking, "Oh yeah, let me think." Just because we're limited in space and time—what Einstein called the optical delusion of separation in space and time of ourselves. So the wisdom of emptiness allows for clear seeing, accurate recognition of the bigger picture. Not everything. We're not going to always have all the information, but a much bigger seeing of what's going on, which allows for more possibility of an appropriate response.

Another aspect of how emptiness is essential for the vastness of compassion is what we all probably feel at many times—which is when the tenderness, the suffering, the fragility of the world is touching our heart. We do feel quite deeply and sincerely that tenderness for beings, for ourselves, for others. And we can be with it a while, and then suddenly it's like we're drowning. It's too much. And God knows there's so much suffering in the world once we start opening to it all.

The question, as it often comes up in my mind, and as many people I've heard say, is: how can I stay open to the suffering in this world? Or how can I hold all the suffering? And in the question itself, you can see the seed of the problem. I can't. It's not about me as a separate being holding some concept of all the suffering in the world. There's no separate me anyway. There's no one to hold it and there's nowhere for it to be held. It's just arising and passing, arising and passing, arising and passing.

The rational mind says, "But that's negating suffering." No, it's not. But the sense that I have to hold it is exactly where we drown. It's not possible. And we'll all come to that place many times—not to judge it, but at that point see, "Oh wow," feel the constriction, the overwhelmingness, the overpoweringness of that sense of trying to hold it all, and just bring compassion to that. That's all. Don't try to figure out emptiness, but just recognize, "Oh wow, this is unbearable right now. Unbearable feels like this." Seriously.

Ajahn Sumedho has a great line he'd say a lot. He was talking about something different—something unpleasant, sweating through his robes in Thailand or something. But I keep remembering this line he said. He said, "I'd be with it so long. It'd be just unbearable, unbearable. I think this is unbearable. I can't bear it another moment." And then I'd find that I could. Because that's just a moment. "This is unbearable." When I feel that, then I go, "What's actually so unbearable about this moment?" And it turns the awareness in, and then I start looking again. And it's usually, okay, that was a mood. "I can't bear it." But that's an aside.

So when you're feeling like, "I can't bear this. How can I hold it?"

It's too much, the suffering of the world. This is exactly the place where we begin to, and continue to, learn how to recognize, cultivate, and strengthen compassion in our own experience—here, now, this moment.

It's what the Dalai Lama says in talking about the cultivation, the development really, of bodhicitta, this noble or awakened heart. How does it develop? It develops through deep insight into what suffering is. Not what you wanted to hear, is it? Deep insight into what suffering is. And this arises by being present with, opening into, our own experience. This is from the Dalai Lama. This is where we start.

And he didn't say this, but as some people say, each of us, the suffering of our own personal—and yes, we're still in the realm of the personal, the relative, the conventional. The absolute, they go together. One doesn't negate the other. The conventional me suffering here, now—this is the place compassion can begin, that wisdom develops, that we recognize the emptiness, the falling into the midst of everything. Nowhere else.

And he goes on to say that by focusing, by being with our own experience, this is how the bodhicitta begins to develop. And then the compassion strengthens as it moves into a sense of empathy, of connectedness with other beings.

This is what all of us at different times experience. Not all the time. I'm not saying every moment of our practice should be opening into the experience of deep suffering. Definitely not. All different kinds of things happen. So if that's not your experience now, don't go out of here thinking there's something wrong. "I should be suffering." You'll have your chance. Don't worry. But sometimes other things are developed. It's moving in many ways.

But quite a few people, just in the last couple of days in interviews, are in different ways and following different routes finding themselves in the middle of some kind of deep unpleasantness, some kind of

suffering. It could be physical. For many people, it's kind of running into emotional patterns—not so much stories from life, but the way the mind is relating, the patterns that come up in relationship to actually doing our practice. Which is where they really catch us, actually. When it comes up about our past, it's really painful and we suffer, but we can also see it easier. When it's about how we're relating to practice—self-judgment, for example, like what he talked about—when we don't see the agendas, we're just beating ourselves up. "I want to be more concentrated. I want it. So what should I do? I should try harder. I should focus more. I should get more concentrated." We don't see, "Oh, that's just wanting." And we do see, "Well, how can I get rid of the wanting? Well, if I got more concentrated, I could get rid of it." And we just cycle, cycle. We all do this all the time.

And because it's about what we're doing now, and it can be quite subtle, it's easy to miss. It can come up very subtly, and we don't notice it for half a day or a day. And then suddenly you feel like your head's in a vice, and you just go, "What happened? I was just minding my own business, and now it's intense." It's amazing. And you'll go, "Oh, it's that judging mind again. I've seen it a million times, but it snuck up on me. It took a little turn. It moved into more subtlety."

But anyway, my point is many people have been saying this and really saying, "Oh, and I see, I'm really getting it this time. This is the practice." Which of course makes me really happy to hear. Yes, concentration and samadhi are really important, and sometimes that's the direction of practice. Sometimes experiencing on a subtle level the seven factors of enlightenment is practice.

Sometimes what practice is about is the purification of memories and remorse. None of this we choose—it happens as it needs to happen. But many different people have been saying that practice has suddenly taken this turn into really being in these habits with some awareness, enough awareness to see the habit. But we think it's not enough awareness, because if it was enough awareness, it would just stop and be done, right?

But the way we learn that these habits are suffering—this is my particular rule of thumb, but it certainly seems to be true—is by really suffering in them over extended periods with awareness the whole time. Which just seems to make it worse. "Oh God, I see it. I really see it. Okay, I really see it. Now I really get it." And then it goes away for a while—a week, a month, a year—and then you're back at the next occasion. "Oh, I forgot about this, but now I really see it."

But anyway, my point being: this is why the so-called difficult times of retreat, when we say it's so important, we're not just trying to be a cheerleader and get you through it. It's really the place where emptiness and compassion open up from. When people come and say, "I'm really seeing this is what is, what's arising now—just this is all there is," this is the practice. It's not to get through the difficult to get to bliss. It's not to get through the mediocre to get to the difficult. It's not to get through anything to get anywhere else. It's to be totally here without reference back or forward to anything. And when here, right now, is really suffering and difficult, this is just as much the place of awakening.

When it's difficult and we really are bringing awareness to it, it's messy awareness. I think I said this the other night, but samsara is messy. Awareness of strong, difficult emotions is not going to be all nice and tidy. "Oh yes, anguish, anguish, tightness, contraction. I note it and it goes away." That's how they talk. It sounds so nice when they say it. "Oh, anguish is like this. No, no, I'm just floating on a cloud." No—it's messy. It hurts. And when we notice it and drop into it, guess what? It's even more tender because we're not fighting it anymore. We're not resisting it. We're actually feeling it. But the feeling with awareness is our protection. It's the opening into wisdom.

So these difficult times of retreat—that's what it's about. The Dalai Lama says this is where compassion for ourselves begins and where it naturally moves into empathy with beings.

People have mentioned this, not just here but all the time. Take grief—grief's a good example. There's a personal story, you're feeling the grief, it's really strong, and you're starting to really be able to be with it and feel it. There's the story and the grief, and you're being with it, and suddenly it gets—I don't know—deeper. It changes. Even though your story's still there, nothing takes away the story, but people can feel it's like a qualitative change, and you couldn't really call it suffering anymore.

Because—and the way I can best say it for me—it's kind of changed into the grief of the world. It's like this story is the representation of the grief of the world. And the natural movement of heart and mind with that is compassion. And compassion is one of the beautiful states. It's weird. It's weird because it comes out of suffering. It's weird to our logical mind. But compassion is one of the beautiful states, and it feels qualitatively different. You're connected with the suffering, the grief, the sadness, the pain, but it stops being mine. It is mine also, but not only mine.

And what makes—this is me talking, not from the suttas—but in my sense of what the vastness of all the brahmaviharas is, what makes them vast, what makes them beautiful, is exactly that there's not that constriction of me. It's the vastness of knowing we are in the middle of everything, whether it's suffering or whether it's joy. And that vastness is experienced as beauty, as peace, as ease, as brahmavihara—the divine abodes. That's what brahmavihara means.

So how does the difficult open into the wisdom of non-separation, the vastness of compassion? Really, again, it's only in this moment. It's completely determined by how we're meeting, how the mind and heart is meeting currently arising experience.

Because as we know—as we all know now, because we're all adepts—we all know that whatever's arising is out of our control. We're born with that in some way. I didn't cause this pain to arise; it's just happening, even if this understanding is only intellectual. And even how we meet it isn't totally in our control. But the way that compassion and wisdom are developing is exactly that kind, clear, non-judging awareness is the expression of wisdom and the deepening of compassion right there.

The pain comes up, and it's simply, "Oh, burning is like this." It doesn't feel like any big thing. You don't

really notice, "Oh, I'm developing compassion, isn't this great?" Just: burning is like this.

But that moment—as the Buddha said, and I'm sure it's been quoted here—what we dwell and think about, that becomes the inclination of the mind. We've spent plenty of time dwelling and thinking, "I hate pain," or "I don't like this pattern," or "I want to be a better person"—yada yada, that's what Winnie talked about. But the moment of meeting—"Oh, pain is like this. Oh, incredible stabbing in the heart. Wow, that's really painful, feels like this"—that is the expression of wisdom. That is the cultivation of compassion in that moment. Where else could it be? Nowhere else.

I think Sally told this story about Sayadaw U Pandita, saying it happened to Kamala, but it didn't—it happened to me. I was in a hugely judgmental frame of mind, which I didn't tell him. These teachers, they just know. I was simply describing what was happening, and he was basically saying, "Wouldn't it be better? It's a silent retreat. Wouldn't it be better not to talk to yourself in that tone of voice?" And it wasn't critical. That was said with so much compassion. Because right here, how we're meeting present moment experience is where wisdom and compassion arise, are strengthened, and developed.

Just what's happening now is all we need. We don't have to have some big, huge, amazing experience. How we meet the conditions arising and vanishing is the path. Just small moments. It doesn't have to be huge, heart-cracking open, Martin Luther King moments. We can just be very simple.

Sharon has a great line: to pay attention is to love. By love I don't mean, "Oh, you're so wonderful, I love you." Love is just that open-hearted friendliness, acceptance, non-separation. This is just how it is. To pay attention. Just to pay attention—steady, steady, steady. The wisdom of falling into everything and the compassion naturally open by themselves. We don't have to create it. We can't. We can't create wisdom, which should be a huge relief—that just through the steadiness of kind awareness, steady, steady, steady, wisdom arises by itself.

People have noticed that all of a sudden there's wisdom, but it was so effortless. "I didn't do it." Exactly. Exactly. And can we trust that we're only getting in the way?

Notice too when there is a time that in your heart, in terms of compassion, some piece of information, some piece of suffering comes in from somewhere else, and you feel like there's just that natural meeting with compassion. It's interesting—and this is in daily life, not just here—just to notice what are the qualities in the attention, in the mind, in the heart at that moment that makes the receiving and the compassion naturally come forth.

It may not work for any of you, but again, I was listening to the radio. I like listening to public radio because you get lots of interesting snippets of life. The interviewer was talking to a man who had been a war correspondent for a long time for some network in Britain. But now he wasn't, because he had discovered that he had something called Huntington's disease—a genetic disease, a degenerative nerve disease, really bad. You get it and it starts to manifest when you're in your mid-40s, and you just gradually,

gradually, everything deteriorates and you die. And it's genetic.

So his father had had that. And he and his mother and his brother had to watch his father deteriorate and die in his late middle age. Then you could get tested for it. It passed more through the male line. So his brother got tested and had it. And now his elder brother was in the middle stages of it. So then he got tested, and he has that gene. And in terms of medicine, if you have that gene, you're going to get this thing. And of course, they have no clue how to help it.

So he was just talking—so far he had no symptoms. And he was just describing this very clearly. And for some reason—and this is the more interesting thing, because there are a million stories like this—something enabled me to just receive it in that way. I was just listening, eating my breakfast. You know how you do. I wasn't like, *ah*—just eating my breakfast and sort of listening. And then something let me let it in.

And there are different ways you can let it in. You can let it in with *oh my God, it's horrible*, and you're in despair. And I'm not calling that the wisdom of compassion. I'm calling that overwhelm. It's touching us, but then we close around it. *I can't bear it*, and we're in overwhelm. And maybe it's because it comes too close to something. We're not comfortable with feeling that pain in ourselves, so we have to push it away.

Or the other time, if we hear it, we go, *oh, that's a shame*. You know how we do that. *Oh yeah, that's really a shame. Poor guy.* And we sort of mean it, but we're distracted. We're in our own little world.

But this time, I was just sitting there looking, and I realize now what opened it to me was the details he gave that allowed for empathy. And this is the detail he gave that really—*oh*, I get what that would feel like. Because I didn't know until then. I don't have a genetic disease that I'm aware of that I know is going to hit. And he's in his mid-40s. You know it's going to happen.

He said, now every time he goes out to the store—he stopped his job, he wants to be with his kids and his wife—every time he goes out to the corner store to get the newspaper or something, every time he takes a walk, his mind kind of wanders. And he didn't say this heavily. This is just how it is. *I always wonder, is this the time I'm going to first stumble? Is this going to be the day that I feel the first little tremor in my arm?*

I thought, *whoa*. That went in.

So my point with this is that that simplicity of describing experience hit a place where I could really have empathy. And the empathy is—you just feel how that could be. Without adding a whole big story, positive, negative, or anything, it's just, *oh yeah*, somewhere we're all in that boat. You don't have to go further. That's already making too much story.

But my sense is just that—how that just being present without expectation or story or self-reference—the empathy naturally arises. And with the empathy, we care. *Oh, the poor guy.*

That's really a shame. We do care. But it's not really the tenderness for life, the compassion of falling into

the midst of everything.

Let me read you this Mary Oliver poem. I read it a lot because I love it—about how simple mindfulness naturally opens wisdom and compassion in the midst of everything.

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

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

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

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

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

Yes, a person wants to stand in a happy place in a poem.
But first we must watch her as she stares down at her labor,
which is dull enough.
She is washing the tops of the airport ashtrays, as big as hubcaps,
with a blue rag.
Her small hands turn the metal, scrubbing and rinsing.
She does not work slowly, nor quickly, but like a river.
Her dark hair is like the wing of a bird.

I don't doubt for a moment that she loves her life.
And I want her to rise up from the crust and the slop
and fly down to the river.
This probably won't happen.
But maybe it will.

If the world were only pain and logic, who would want it?
Of course it isn't.
Neither do I mean anything miraculous, but only
the light that can shine out of a life.
I mean the way she unfolded and refolded the blue cloth.
The way her smile was only for my sake.
I mean the way this poem is filled with trees and birds.

As Colette says, "Look long at what pleases you, and even longer at what pains you." The wisdom and the compassion are the natural effects of our willingness to just be present with things as they are.

As I was saying, we don't have to—in fact, we can't—create wisdom.

I want to talk for a minute about wisdom. There are three levels of wisdom talked about in the suttas. The first level, and they're all useful, is called *sutamayā paññā*—wisdom that's heard, that's learned. The stuff that we read, the things we hear people say, information that comes in. This is definitely useful. It's important to have correct or useful information.

The second level of wisdom, called *cintāmayā paññā*, is really thinking, contemplating. We take the information and turn it over, use our intelligence, really look at it and see: Does this actually make sense? This is also really useful.

But for most of us—and certainly what I've learned—that's the level where we basically operate. We think this is where everything happens, this middle level. But the third level, called *bhāvanāmayā paññā*—and *bhāvanā* is the word for mental cultivation, used for meditation—this is really the level of insight, of deep transformative knowledge or wisdom, which arises through insight, through meditation.

We can use the second level to help us incline our attention, incline our memory toward re-recognizing on the third level, on the insight level, when we've actually experienced it.

This is the way Dilgo Khyentse Rinpoche talks about it. He says we study, we learn the teachings, we contemplate—all really important for all of us. So if you're listening here every night, that's giving you information that hopefully on some level meets your inner intelligence, and you see if it's helpful or not.

But then he goes on to say about this third level: "Unless we also come to some inner realization by actually applying the teachings and mingling them with our minds, the knowledge remains theoretical. So we ponder deeply the meaning of the Dharma until it permeates our whole being."

That's really what we're doing here. Pondering, yes, but also paying attention, being with moment to moment experience until the meaning of the Dharma—the emptiness, the compassion, the freedom from clinging—permeates our whole being.

In that way, it's not that we create wisdom—compassion arises naturally. But when we remember it, if it's

useful to incline the mind, we can use this second level of contemplation, understanding, intelligence to incline the mind in the direction that deepens us into the third level of wisdom, of insight, of really mingling the teachings with our mind.

Just to give a couple of examples: it takes patience. At first it takes some insight into—and everyone has had this, believe me, we're not talking earth-shattering insight—the emptiness of separate self, the non-doing nature of things just happening, and the natural effect of recognizing that: our connectedness, our caring, our tender heart. Even just for a moment, we see that.

Then when we're not actually contacting that insight but it's a memory on the second level, that can still be useful. We can use our understanding, all the skillful means we have, just to incline our mind back in the direction of cultivating compassion rather than impatience, cultivating compassion rather than self-hatred.

It just takes patience. Patience.

You know Sister Chân Không, the nun who's been working with Thích Nhất Hạnh? She used to be Sister Phượng, ever since she was sixteen during the Vietnam War.

Now she's older. They were working with social work, with young people. They were basically kicked out—they left the country during the war and couldn't come back because both sides hated them because they wouldn't take sides. She's totally committed. I read her autobiography. From the time she was sixteen, she's been committed to mindfulness, to compassionate action, to activism. Living in France, she's still committed to this. She practices every day.

But it's not like, "Oh, now I see. Now I know. I don't have to do anything anymore. The compassion just flows. I never get caught." It's this quality of commitment to our understanding, and patience.

She talks about a period—this was a while ago, but many years after she left Vietnam—when a lot of nuns and monks and activists and artists were being arrested in Vietnam. And she was involved in organizing a letter-writing campaign to the government. She said, "Every time I received news of a new arrest, I became angry. And I knew I had to do walking meditation."

Is that the first thing you would think of? "I'm angry. They did this thing. It's so wrong. I need to do walking meditation."

"Sometimes I would walk several hours in order to regain my calm. Sometimes I needed several days or even weeks to relax my heartbeat, knowing how unfairly the authorities have acted in arresting such a lovely monk, nun, or artist. I always waited until I felt serene before beginning any campaign. Thanks to this serenity, my words were gentle but firm, and people found it easier to cooperate."

I love that. I use that all the time because it's the sense of knowing that compassion doesn't mean passivity. Compassion can mean real proactive action. But compassion married to wisdom means that compassion is

all about the intention in our heart, in our mind—not about result.

And this is, again—I know we've talked a bit about intention—but intention is the seed of action, the seed of karma. And compassion, the way it shows up in the Eightfold Noble Path, is as the second factor: wise aspiration, *samma sankappa*. Three specific wise intentions are mentioned: greed transforms to renunciation, ill will transforms to loving-kindness or *metta*, and cruelty and aversion transform to compassion. It's one of the wise intentions.

When we're really cultivating, really inclining our mind towards compassion out of wisdom, out of our own experience—but of course, until we're completely awakened, our experience is limited. It goes back and forth. There are times when the compassion is just that natural flow. We're not really thinking about what's going to happen and what are they going to think and what can I do. It just arises spontaneously.

But when we're not quite in touch with compassion as intention, we can easily get into an idea about how compassionate action should look, or what we should do. And often, when we're not in touch with intention, our idea of the action being right or appropriate tends to go to whether it gets the result we want. That's how we judge actions: Does it get the result we want? And that's the one thing that's completely out of our control.

In our practice, in our daily life, in every action that we do, every way that we live, when we're working with inclining our heart and mind towards compassion and just noticing when it's present—the cultivating isn't about what it looks like from the outside in. The true compassion comes from the wisdom, from the inside out.

We can start from the inside out, really feel compassionate—like Sister Chan Khong—and really want to take proactive action in the world. We can start from really feeling compassion and connection and caring. But it's so easy, isn't it? The world is so frustrating. The world is ambiguous, no matter how much we care and how much we might know.

She says, "I know they acted unfairly." It's so easy for us to slip into frustration, into trying to make the result come out a certain way. And when that doesn't happen, we get lost in either frustration or self-judgment or whatever. And it can get really carried away—like people who are opposed to abortion because it's killing, and then they kill doctors who perform abortions, and don't see any kind of disconnect in that. And that kind of thing has gone both ways.

It's easy, when we're on the ideologue level, to still think that's compassion, right?

But we're not in control of the externals. This is what James was talking about last night regarding the "iddy-potties" – getting in tune with what has become the Dalai Lama's refrain: our sincere motivation. That's what we can trust. That's our reward. And he should know, my God.

There's a story from an interview with him that has touched me deeply for years. His whole commitment

to nonviolence, especially in terms of the Chinese overrunning Tibet – he's so profoundly committed to nonviolent response. But externally, it doesn't really seem to have helped at all. In fact, the Chinese have increasingly overrun Tibet, and the culture is being more and more destroyed.

So in this interview I read, some young Tibetans were talking to him. He's like the old man now, in his seventies. And they're saying – perhaps in a kind way, but essentially: "It's not working. It's not working. You speak about nonviolence. Okay, we respect it. But old man, it's not working."

And he said – this is a touch of openness, not "I'm right," but the compassion, the falling into the midst of everything – he said, "Yeah, I hear you. Maybe it's not working." And then they said tears were running down his face. He said, "But I cannot be any other way."

To me, that is incredible courage. Because he's not blocking anything out. He's hearing all the pain around him. He's returning to his motivation. As Dr. King said one time, "I refuse to become bitter. I refuse. Hatred must never be our motive" – taking a clarity of intention. Now, of course, you could drift into bitterness, but we recognize it with kind awareness. And in the recognition, there is its own transformation. We don't have to create the compassion, just fall back into that willingness to be present. It doesn't mean being a doormat.

So I want to close with a story that inspired me about the vastness of wisdom and compassion, and the ambiguity of life. We just don't know.

This is a common story, but two days ago, on Thursday, I was listening to the BBC in the morning. They said it was the twentieth anniversary of the day Nelson Mandela was released from prison. I don't know if Sally talked about him the other night. Twenty years. And they played a little snippet on the radio – so you couldn't see it, but you could hear – the moment when he was released. They described what they called his "long walk to freedom" from the jail cell where he was held into town.

You could hear people cheering and the commentators talking, then parts of his speech in different languages, some in English. It was so moving to me. You could feel, just in hearing it, the energy – how much people were touched by it. Of course, having twenty years of hindsight, knowing what's happened in the meantime, and having seen that movie *Invictus*, which I did see and found really interesting – to witness how he came out of that experience able to bear witness to so many years of personal suffering and so much suffering of others. Not only the people in jail with him, but of the whole country.

And to have that breadth of vision, which he seemed to carry through into his period of leadership – the breadth of vision that we're all in this together. He could really seem to see that the suffering wasn't only among the black people and people of color, but that through their hatred and separation, the Afrikaners and white people were also suffering in a different way. It was just one big mess of suffering. The compassion – it isn't about going easy. It's really being able to be straight, to do what his heart and wisdom told him to do in all different kinds of situations. He couldn't plan it all out.

That movie was about using rugby as a way to bring the races together, because rugby was an Afrikaner white sport and blacks mostly hated it. In fact, they wouldn't go to rugby matches, but when they'd hear about them, they'd cheer for whatever team was playing against the South African team. They just hated it – the white rulers' sport.

So Mandela decides to use rugby as a way to bring them together. Very practical, using what's right in front of him, calling on people. And he got so much flack, called to meetings with all the other black leaders saying, "What, are you crazy? We're not going to do this."

And he would just stand up and say, "No, this is really what we need to do. This is what we need to do." He had so much stature because he wasn't coming from hatred or ideology, but really from this depth of compassion that was fed by the wisdom of interconnectedness. There were just example after example after example of that.

And it's inspiring. For me, and I'm sure if not this particular story then other things would be inspiring to you, because it touches what we know is true as our potential as human beings. I mean, if it were just so different from us—oh, he's amazing, but he's some kind of freak of nature—our intellectual mind might say that. But the inspiration, which brings brightness, which brings energy, which brings vigor, which brings willingness to do, arises because it's touching on that deep wisdom and compassion that's the essence of what's true. Somewhere down there we know this. We've all glimpsed it.

I think the reason I love just looking at huge figures—people, famous people, or people you hear on the news who manifest this—is because it helps us to trust it more, instead of believing our little small minds, our little separate self.

So I just want to end with a short quotation from Nisargadatta Maharaj, one of our favorites:

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

So let's just sit for a minute.

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