Courage and Compassion

Carol Wilson · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Carol Wilson · 1:03:43

In the last week or so, I've been really struck—and this tends to happen to me about this time, four or five weeks into most long retreats—by the diversity of what each of you come in with. Actually, each one of you comes in with a diversity. You never know who's going to walk through the door; it's so changeable. At this point in the retreat, I'm struck by how intense it all is and how much you're all going through in different ways. Up and down, contraction, expansion, contraction, expansion.

It's not overwhelming, but sometimes it's really inspiring to me. Sometimes I just have a sense of amazement—it's extraordinary that you keep going. Other times, the intensity is on the side of lots of energy, lots of inspiration, lots of openness. But what I'm struck with is the commitment, the energy, the courage that it really takes to keep hanging in there like you are and to meet what's occurring in all the different realms.

I know sometimes that's difficult. It can change so much. Sometimes the insight is just flowing. It's relaxed, spacious. You just see things coming and going. It's so clear that there's no problem, never has been, never will be. And then the next time it's like, "Oh my God, I'm never going to see through to the end of this. It's just hopeless. It's never going anywhere." It goes from profound ease and insight to profound identification—sometimes in the same day, sometimes over a series of days.

The whole retreat is like life itself. It goes closing and opening, closing and opening, like the breath, or like the tides, or really like the energy of the universe—like a sine wave, up and down, up and down.

Part of what's great about a longer retreat is that hopefully you start to get it a little bit: that's just the nature of things. Instead of each up being your personal triumph and each down being your personal failure, you begin to see the pattern. Though perhaps you think, "Okay, maybe the up isn't mine, but the down is certainly my personal failure."

When Joseph mentioned emptiness and compassion just the other night—how compassion is the natural expression of wisdom, of the heart-mind of emptiness, of when all the energy isn't coagulating into a sense of me—there's so much space for empathy, for compassion. In the up periods, in the expansion periods, that just seems obvious. Of course compassion and wisdom are the natural state of things.

In the down periods, I know sometimes never mind even just compassion, but moving into even the mention, the possibility of bodhicitta—of the aspiration that my practice, my life, be a source of awakening for all beings—it's like, "Are you kidding me? What does that have to do with my sitting here, lost in aversion, at this tingle in my back? I'm ready to kill. I know it's a little overreactive, but I don't get

what this has to do with compassion or bodhicitta. It doesn't really seem too connected."

I want to talk a little about the ups and downs and the sense of how when it's about me, it's much more difficult. You know that, but I'll explore it some more. In terms of how our path unfolds—and each of our paths is different—we never know how it needs to unfold, even tomorrow, even in the next minute.

Something I've learned I really trust, except when I forget it, is that even when it seems like my particular suffering, my particular pain, my particular story, and I'm really caught in the personal nature of it—each of our so-called particular stories is just our individual experience as a representative of the suffering of all beings, so to speak.

In the particular, when we continue to simply be with it, open to it, meet it with kindness, with compassion, with courage—just to bear witness to our own incredibly painful or incredibly stupid pain—when we just bear witness to that over and over, that's the cultivation of compassion and wisdom. We really see that this is just the particular expression of what is universal.

Ajahn Sumedho used to say when he would start a talk in Thailand, "Welcome, brothers and sisters in old age, disease, and death." We're all in it together.

Our tendency at times can be, when you're in the down cycle of the sine wave, when you're in the contraction, of course it's about me. That's part of the contraction. But that's not when you feel connected to all beings, is it? That's when we either want to go off and hide.

You don't want to come to an interview because you don't want to have to really admit how completely you're failing at the moment, even to yourself—never mind to us. You don't even want to say it. "Oh, it's not going well. I've completely failed. It's all about me." We don't tend to feel connected.

But actually, any particular suffering—you think whatever you're going through, you're the only person who goes through it? No. Maybe you'd like to be, but no. And instead of it being an isolating experience, simply by meeting our confusion or suffering with mindfulness—of course, the kindness of mindfulness, that's a quality of compassion—non-judging, not having an assumption about what should happen, just the courage to keep showing up, the wisdom arises by itself. And by itself we start to... the expansion comes again, the opening into the fact that even though it seems like my individual little poor me, even this can be the avenue into connection with all beings.

His Holiness the Dalai Lama talks about compassion a lot, obviously. Compassion is described as the quivering of the heart in response to suffering, feeling with—it's just empathy, really, not a pushing away. And His Holiness says, how does it develop? Through deep insight into what suffering is. And guess how we get that deep insight, he says: it arises through focusing, through opening to, through being present with our own experience. And then the compassion strengthens through continually being open to our own experience. It strengthens with the empathy to ourselves, and naturally moves into empathy with all beings, connectedness to all beings.

As Sogyal Rinpoche says, just cultivate the correct motivation in your heart, just the compassion. It turns into bodhicitta all by itself. But this talk—I'm not concerned with bodhicitta because it'll happen all by itself. I just want to talk about what he's saying here in terms of the opening, in terms of the acceptance, in terms of the strength that it takes, which is enormous, to be present for all this stuff. It's enormous strength, over and over.

But that's why the difficult times in life and the difficult times in retreat are so important. They're key to someone who's on a path of awakening. And if we're on a path of avoid, repress, deny, the difficult times aren't so key. But for the path we're on, they're so important. And so I just want to talk a little bit more about that tonight. Hopefully it's a little bit of a pep talk, but you never know.

As I mentioned, watching the ebbs and the flows in your own practice—even though each thing that's happening is so immediate, everything's so intense—your world has both really shrunk in a way to this area, these four walls, a lot more than you even realize. And so incidents that happen here reverberate hugely. Have you noticed that in your mind, in your heart? Hugely.

Because all our conditioning is still popping up. It just happens to all be focused here. Like my teacher said once—someone said to him, "Oh, you're a monk because you're giving up all desire." And he just cracked up. He said, "Don't kid yourself. A monk can take all that craving you have in the world, and that same amount of craving, bring it down to two things: food and their robes. But the amount of craving can still be the same." So in a way, sometimes that's what's happening here.

So when you're in the midst of an intense, open, beautiful experience, even though intellectually you go, "I know. I know it's impermanent. I know it comes and goes. I'm seeing the mind that says, 'Oh, finally you've got it.' I'm seeing it. I'm not clinging to this." And when it goes—which it does—we say, "That's okay. It's all right. I know it's going." It's kind of okay for a while. But somehow the next day, suddenly everything's just wrong. And it's so intense. And each time, this is how it is. This is how it is.

It's so up. It's so down. And even if you sat and looked back over these four and a half weeks, you might not even be able to remember how many changes you've gone through. You may be able to remember some of them. So we get the sense a little bit. But still, when you're in them, it's everything.

When insight and wisdom are there, they're so strong. And then they go. And we're so caught—but with the added little extra goody of being able to see that we're caught, to actually know that we're caught and identified, whereas before we didn't know that. And since we know we're caught, and yesterday we weren't, clearly we shouldn't be caught now. We're caught because I'm useless. I can't do it. I did something wrong. You know the whole thing.

So doubt comes up, impatience, frustration, and whichever particular way your personality is inclined, it can go to doubt or self-doubt or frustration or impatience or out the door. I can't imagine why you're laughing.

We're also coming up against—as many of you have expressed—whatever views and expectations we hold about our abilities, or the practice, or what should be happening. And even when we think we know what our expectations are, often there's really some subtle one in the background. I can't count how many people have said in the last few days, just as a passing reference and not a big deal, "Well, at this point in the retreat, blah blah blah." It should be or it shouldn't be, compared to another retreat, compared to what? But "at this point"—even that we're thinking anything indicates some subtle expectation, as if we know what should be happening.

So our views, our ideas about ourselves, about practice, about what's going on are constantly being challenged. And really, day after day, even if it seems familiar to you, it's not. It's unknown territory. The conditions are never exactly the same as they were that other retreat when you experienced the breath in this particular way and you know what the next thing should be. And then it isn't that. Oh my God, what does this mean? It's better. It's worse. It's this. It's that. It's like—give it up. We don't know.

We're always being challenged. But we like to have a framework, a path that we can compare ourselves to, even if that makes us feel bad. At least we can have a path to compare ourselves to. Or it makes us feel good. That's even worse. I mean, it's both the same. It's both a trap.

But it's really difficult. We get into the frustration, into the comparing, into the doubt, the self-doubt, when the reference point is me, is all about me. When the changes are just happening—you know, it's really calm, you're really present with the flow of changing objects, choiceless awareness is peaceful—and then it changes but there's just really no clinging, it's no problem. That can happen. And then you're tired and things are not so clear, but the mind isn't really reactive—it's no problem.

But the reverse—when suddenly it's been all cloudy and it opens up. And I'm not saying choiceless is better and cloudy is worse; I'm going by what people tend to judge themselves about. People don't usually say, "Cloudy—great! Choiceless flowing—I'm blowing it." Usually not.

When it goes from a way you like it, that feels effortless and flowing, and it changes—there's the sense of, what did I do wrong? How can I keep it? How come my concentration and mindfulness, which were proceeding very steadily for two and a half weeks, how come now it's all over the shop? What am I doing? How can I fix it?

And it's really—we're always looking to some reference point, some pattern we can put it in—but the suffering here, the thing that feeds our doubt and confusion, is the sakāya-diṭṭhi, the personality view.

We've mentioned this before. Diṭṭhi is view. Sakāya—well, Sāriputta defines sakāya as just the flow of the six sense experiences that we've talked about a lot, just the six things coming and going.

Sakāya-diṭṭhi—well, actually, let's go to the Buddha. "This is the way leading to the origination of personality." One regards—and in parentheses it says "all phenomena," but that's just shorthand—one regards any one particular of the six arising experiences as "this is mine, this I am, this is myself."

It's just a fast little moment. You go outside, it's chilly—"I'm so cold." Or you're sitting here and there's a little sound and you go, "I don't like that unpleasantness." Or there's a pain in the back—"my back hurts, this is mine." Or you see someone else walking and that comparison arises, that māna—"I'm so this, I'm so that." It's really just a clinging, the movement of clinging. But it comes and goes in a moment.

This is the Buddha again: "This is the way leading to the cessation of personality." One regards any particular sakāya, any particular sense experience, any of the five aggregates Sally talked about—which are also sense experiences—one regards thus: "This is not mine. This I am not. This is not myself."

Sometimes that's just theoretical. Sometimes saying that doesn't connect. But sometimes when you're feeling relatively clear but a little caught up, you might just notice in relation to whatever's arising and go, "Hmm, this is not mine. This I am not. This is not myself." It's interesting. Not with judgment, just... "Hmm, this pain in my knee—oh, my knee—actually, where's the knee? There's sensation. The sensation is not me. It's not mine. It's not myself." You can just drop that in from time to time.

But when it's all about me—my story, my failures, my beautiful experience—it can be overwhelming. And when it tanks, when it goes in the wrong direction, or it's suddenly really intensely overwhelming, or you just feel like, "Ah, I can't do it, it's just too much, I can't do it"—stop a minute.

First of all, we don't even know what the "it" is that I can't do. But "I can't do it." Open to the bigger picture. The sakāya-diṭṭhi has narrowed down to "I've got to somehow do it better, I've got to somehow whatever it is."

Just the big picture. This really helps me a lot. When I'm with something—and sometimes it's not that I can't do it, sometimes what's arising is just so difficult—you really kind of know what to do, open to it, be with it, but something in you just says, "I can't." You know, "I can't do it."

That's when I find consciously bringing in the bigger picture helps. This is the particular representation of this particular aspect of suffering in the world. That doesn't make it go away or better, but sometimes it gives me more courage, more motivation to be with it.

I want to say I don't mean it in the way that some people have said, as a way of denigrating your own suffering. "Well, I feel this pain, but what about all the people who are in the hospital? So I shouldn't be complaining." You might notice what that attitude is in the mind, right? It's aversion. We're not talking about aversion.

We're talking about, "Oh, okay, let me just for a moment be the representative"—even of something like hunger. "How can I be hungry when people are starving?" No—I'm hungry. That could actually bring us into empathy with people who are really hungry, or people who are really lost in confusion.

This practice is a continuing call to the courage to open into the unknown of each moment, to meet things we never thought we could meet. When we fall back into our personality beliefs—well, this is beyond me,

I'm just a simple soul, I thought maybe I'd have a few nice meditation experiences, but I could never be enlightened. I mean, I come, I practice and all, but for me to really be free? If I really look at it, do I hold that possibility? Of course, as Ajahn Sumedho likes to say, it's not the personality that's enlightened, which is actually a huge relief.

Ajahn Sumedho said something really interesting in a retreat we were on once. He was talking about Westerners, people with a Western education and cultural upbringing. He said he feels that for people with a Western education and upbringing, one of the biggest hindrances is self-doubt—self-doubt in terms of not having confidence or faith in our own insights, our own experiences, those momentary experiences of the potential of freedom. Absolute moments of freedom—really seeing, say, the emptiness of personality view, or just seeing that something you were really suffering from is no problem. I mean, you've all had experiences of seeing impermanence, seeing the uncontrollability, and the freedom that comes with that.

He says that for our insights into awareness, our liberating insights, in part our self-doubt is so strong because—this is Sumedho's view—our personalities and our belief in our personalities is so strong that we really rely on and take refuge in our personalities in a powerful way. Our personalities become our reference point. So when something doesn't go the way we think it should, we're back in our personality.

Let me give you an example. When in a relaxed, non-grasping mode of practice, there's not much velcro, not much clinging, things are just happening, the sine wave is just going—then it might be really obvious, as Buddhadasa says, that the sense of self is simply a condition that arises when there's grasping or clinging in the mind. That's all. Just a condition that arises when there's grasping or clinging in the mind. Clinging to anything—clinging to this thought, clinging to a view, clinging to a pleasant feeling, clinging to an extra piece of toast, whatever it is.

And that can also be noticed. Sense of self arises. Sense of self vanishes. It's really no big deal. Just another thing to notice. There's no personality view really going on at that time. Even so, emotions can be coming, thoughts are coming, our personality patterns can still be running. But we're just seeing them as causes and conditions. I know if I walk into a particular situation—say I'm by myself, on a retreat, and I've been in my room sitting just by myself, and then I walk into the dining room—unless I'm incredibly still in the mind, as soon as there's seeing, little judgments start to come up. But that can just be seen as cause and effect, cause and effect. It just goes into empty space. There's no big personality view around that.

It's fine. There's a tenderness. There's a peace. This is how it is. You can just really see it coming and going. No problem.

And then, as you know, the contraction starts. You can't quite say why it changed. You can see it's a little more sticky. There's the judgment coming. Judgment, but it's okay. It's a little more sticky, but you're still seeing it. It gets stickier and stickier, and then no problem. And then all of a sudden, it is a problem. A big problem.

"I am so judgmental. Why doesn't this stop? It was so clear. How can I get caught back in this again?" I, I, I. And we're back in.

This is what sakkāya-diṭṭhi means. We really believe this view of "I did this. I shouldn't be doing this. I should be better. But of course, this is the type of person I am. What do I expect? I expect to be enlightened." You know, "Okay, I'll schlep through another day, another week, another month. I'll keep doing it because what else is there to do? But we all know, where is it going to go? Nowhere. Because my personality is so strong."

And this one we really believe. We really believe. We take refuge in our personality so much. It's the default reference point. And from this place comes what makes it really hard sometimes to keep going.

Let me just give you an example of how it could be different. A friend of mine, a Burmese guy, was on a retreat with me in Burma, and he was translating. He hasn't done too much practice. He's very intellectual, but still different conditioning. He was translating for U Lakhana, and the instructions were the noting practice where you note whatever's arising. As U Lakhana described it, he was saying if anger arises, you note "anger, anger, anger," and it goes away. If this arises, you note "sadness, sadness, sadness," and it goes away. And then he left.

Sometimes the other teachers would take questions. And one American—Canadian guy—said, "Well, I note it three times and it doesn't go away. What am I doing wrong?" And he's really upset. "What can I do? It lasts longer than three times!" And we're all saying, "Of course, never mind," all the stuff we tell you.

Later, my friend who was the translator said, "Oh, that was so interesting, because it doesn't go away in three times for us either."

I said, "Oh, I didn't hear what you said. Well, what do you do when it doesn't go away?"

He said, "Well, we go, 'Oh well, never mind.'"

You get a sense of the difference, the suffering that comes from each approach.

I was listening to a talk, a talk on a CD by Pema Chödrön.

I was just driving in my car, listening to a talk by Pema Chödrön about compassion. What I remember most is her point about how in life and in retreat both—though retreat is just magnified, intensified—as we stay on a path of practice, a path of awakening, anyone who stays on the path of really exploring their experience, their mind and body in a steady way, we're going to come up against that which we really, really, really don't want to have to face, one way or another.

This is a lot of what starts to happen at this point on retreat. It might be some huge trauma from the past. A lot of times it can just be irritation, or discomfort, or sleepiness. It doesn't have to be some huge thing—it might be, but it doesn't have to be. It's some pattern of mind that we've almost unconsciously structured

our lives around not having to totally be there with. We can move away.

And here, as the spirals deepen—I say sine waves, but it's also like spirals—have you noticed you keep seeing the same insights over and over, deeper and deeper? "But I saw that one. I got it already. I know this is a habit. I'm ready to be done with it." No, you're not. Down and down, spiral, spiral. It's got to come in a deeper, more subtle way.

That which we really don't want to be with can take many forms and different intensities at different times. But just know that it's not a mistake. It's what requires so much courage and steadfastness and faith and compassion—to just continue to show up in every sitting and every walking.

By this time, you know you're more or less aware as you're moving through the day, as you're doing things. You really have got it that your mind and body is going with you wherever you go. You really can't get away from it too well.

And so when we're in the *sakkāya-diṭṭhi*, patterns can come up. It can be unworthiness. It can be loneliness. It can be the groundlessness of impermanence, the chaos of no control. It could be the judgment of no clear progress. It could be aggression. It could be boredom—massive boredom. It could be anything or all of the above, different things at different times. But when it comes up: "I can't do it."

Pema Chödrön was saying she had noticed in all her years in the monastery and working with people that so often people come for longer retreats or shorter retreats, or she's seen them working through their lives. They can come and practice for a few years, coming and practicing but mostly getting the goodies. Come to feel a little bit better, come to have some nice meditation, come to feel better in their life—which there's nothing wrong with. Feeling better in our lives—everybody around us feels better if we feel better in our lives. I'm not putting that down.

But she noticed how when, for some people, it hits this place that we don't even know we don't want to go there—but we don't—they're out the door. Just out the door. "Oh, this isn't what I signed up for."

I'm not saying anyone here is doing that. You're all still here. Maybe right now you're in a space where you're going, "Oh, this is great. I'm in the dessert phase." That's wonderful. We need to have some dessert phases so that we can go back and ask, "Now can I find the courage? Can I find the wisdom to meet this new thing with compassion and to really trust that this isn't something going wrong?"

This is really the depth of identification, of personality view, opening up to be met with wisdom and compassion. How we meet this difficult experience right now is the cultivation of wisdom and compassion. Compassion isn't something that happens out there.

It's like meeting this experience right now without aggression, without pushing away, without needing to change. This is what we've been talking about the whole time. There's nothing new about that. But noticing—it's not about making the experience better, but just the fact that for a moment you take a

breath and you go, "Okay, fear. Fear is like this."

Quite a few people have mentioned they've been able, just for a moment, to recognize: fear is like this. That's so different from when fear's driving the bus, when fear's telling us all the stories, all the stuff we do not to feel fear. Or aggression, or greed, or loneliness, or grief, or impatience—you name it. We all have our particular ones.

And so, as Ajahn Chah said, it's like many people are out the door. I just want you to appreciate that you're not out the door. We may take a little hike in our heads, but then we wake up and we're still here. That's okay. Because this isn't about pushing, but it's about finding that motivation that comes really from love of awakening, from kindness, from courage. The courage actually comes from the wisdom, the faith, that gives us a stronger courage to keep going.

And that's why, as you go along, it both gets easier and more difficult at the same time. Have you noticed that sometimes? It's like what you're going through maybe the last couple of weeks, you think, "Oh, this is just what I was going through in the beginning." But it's not. It's so much more intense. You really would have been out the door in the beginning. But now people are coming in and describing this intense stuff, and I'm just starting to think, "Well, how are you doing?" And they go, "Oh, but I'm really fine. I really have the balance. I have the courage. I have the wisdom to be with this." And you do. That's huge. That's amazing.

And that's a movement out of *sakkāya-diṭṭhi*—to see we have no clue what's really possible, not to limit ourselves with our personality beliefs.

So just some examples of when we get to this place of, "Okay, that's it. I don't have the motivation to keep going." Just to recognize those and see we can find it. Again, one is the strong thing of "I"—it's all about me, I can't do it, it's not going right, I had it but I lost it. That doesn't sound like much in the beginning of practice, but as you're getting deeper in, sometimes the fear that the way the meditation is going is a sign that you're never really going to be able to do it—that can be terrifying. The thought "I'm really never going to understand the truth" can be totally terrifying.

There's a sutta where a monk named Assaji was sick and dying. The Buddha came to him and said, as he was dying—and this was a common thing he would say to monks—"I hope you are not troubled by remorse and regret in regard to your actions, in regard to your *sīla*."

And Assaji said, "I do. I have quite a lot of remorse and regret."

The Buddha said, "In regard to your virtue?"

"No, no, not that."

"Well then what? If you have nothing to reproach yourself in regard to virtue, why are you so troubled by remorse?"

And Assaji said, "Formerly, venerable sir, when I was ill, I could keep on tranquilizing the bodily formations. But now I cannot obtain concentration. And as I cannot obtain concentration, it occurs to me: let me not fall away. Let me not fall away from the path. Let me not fall away from awakening."

So he's dying, and he's in this deep panic because he can't concentrate, thinking he's lost the path. Lucky he had the Buddha there. Because the Buddha said, "Hey, those ascetics and brahmins, Assaji, who regard concentration as the essence and identify concentration with asceticism, who fail to obtain concentration—they might think, 'Let us not fall away.'" But then he gives him the whole teaching: "What do you think? Is form permanent or impermanent?" Going through all five aggregates.

You know, the consciousness of the whole five aggregates that Sally talked about. He goes through the whole thing of everything's impermanent, including mental formations, which concentration is. So therefore, if you understand it, there's nothing to fall away. You're not falling away.

But see how even someone who had been practicing with the Buddha and was quite attained can fall prey to that sakkāya-diṭṭhi of "I've lost my concentration, it's all over, and I'm dying without having awakened." Panic, total panic. And the Buddha says, no, that's not true.

So here we're practicing that, practicing it over and over and over. When you say, "Oh no, I've lost it," right then, that's where you bring in the awareness. "Oh, 'I've lost it' feels like this. Sakkāya-diṭṭhi feels like this." And there's awareness there. That's all. You don't have to fix it or talk back to it or rearrange it or get a new personality or anything. "'I've lost it' feels like this." And you're back with awareness.

Another place we kind of hit a wall, where we just think, "I've really worked hard, but I can't do it one more time," is often when we're with physical or mental experience that is actually very, very difficult—very painful physical experience, very painful mental experience. Many of you have been going through that. And it gets harder, especially when it's a difficult habit of mind, when we not only keep getting caught in it but we also see that we're getting caught in it. "I'm actually more neurotic since I started meditating than less. I not only get angry and yell at someone, I also deeply feel the shame of being angry. And I add on the shame of being a bad meditator on top of it." And it's like, "Oh, great." Or the pain and the reactivity, whatever. "I just can't handle it anymore."

Sumedho also had a great line talking about something else in Thailand. He was sweating through his robes in the hot season. If you haven't been in a hot season in Asia with all these robes on, it really is like being in a tin roof baking. It's like you're in a hundred-fifty-degree oven in the sun. And he said he would just feel like, "I can't bear it. I can't bear another moment." And then he'd find that he could.

And that's really how it is. I get to a place of physical pain, or more often it's aversion in the mind. Not that you're pushing, but the mind just kind of shuts down. You go, "I can't bear this anymore. This is unbearable." And I ask myself at that point, "Oh, really?" And this isn't a judgment. "What's so unbearable about it?" It's a way of getting into what actually is so unbearable about this right now. I usually can't find

what's unbearable about it. Although a hint: there's almost always aversion in the mind. Pretty much always aversion.

That doesn't mean, as we've said, that when you're having strong emotional memories, trauma, fear, whatever, and at times the energy of the emotion is much stronger than the energy of mindfulness and you're just getting swept away over and over—the skillful thing doesn't mean push through it. That might mean you back off. You change your object of awareness. You go to mettā. You take a walk. But that's not saying, "I can't do it." That's saying, "Oh, okay, let me find a way to balance the awareness and strengthen the heart to keep on exploring." That's very different. That's skillful means. That's wisdom. We all do that.

Sometimes, again, it's just that sense of, "I've seen this so much, this is such a strong habit, I'm never going to get free of it." And we're back in that cage of sakkāya-diṭṭhi, where we don't trust beyond our personality view, where we don't trust the depth of our own aspiration, of our own motivation, of what's possible, where we think we know but really we have no clue.

When you first started meditating, however long ago that was, would you ever have imagined you'd come on a six-week or a three-month silent retreat? You think you could bear it? Most people's first retreat is really hard, and if it's not, then your next retreats are even harder. So we really have no clue what's possible.

Another place I want to mention, and this is a little different—not exactly that strong suffering, but as you start to see some intimation that freedom from clinging, or opening to the groundlessness of change, the groundlessness of no stable place to rest... we start to get a sense, some idea, that I'm going to lose some sense of myself. Something—you don't even know what. I use this kind of feeling of some sense of your personality that's comfortable. Or it's often a projection, not actuality, but a projection: "I'm just not going to care about beauty anymore. I'm not going to care about my family." And even though Joseph was talking about how we still appreciate pleasantness, it is different without the clinging. We're not so driven by it. And it does happen that things that were so incredibly important aren't so important anymore.

And then I go, "But I don't know if I want to give up whatever—fill in the blanks. I don't want everything to be old, dull, gray. I can't tell the difference between pleasant and unpleasant, between beauty and garbage." You know, if a leper's finger falls in my food bowl, I don't care—which is one of the stories of Mahakashapa. Okay, I'm not aiming for that one, I don't think.

But it can, in a subtle but quite profound way, be like a sense of dying to something. And we don't want to die to that. There have been many times in my practice where I've felt a deep sense of real grief, as if some part of me—this is a concept, but some part of me, some sense of Carol personality, I couldn't even say what—is dying, is going away, is being lost. And there's this sense of wanting to hold on to it. Why? God knows. It wasn't so lovely. But a sense of wanting to hold on to it—a comfort with the familiar. Like it's an old cloak, an old shabby cloak we put on, but it's me and I'm familiar with it and I don't want to look into these other possibilities. It's just a habit, but it's like a series of small deaths. So we mourn them and find

the courage, find the willingness to step up again, to be present, to see we really don't know where the next step is going to go.

One of my teachers used to say, "Pick up your foot and then don't put it down again anywhere." It's kind of like that.

So sometimes in practice, the places that get the most unsettling as you practice more and more—maybe the most likely to make us want to roll up the mat and leave—is when we're experiencing the deeply unsatisfactory nature of things. There are times in practice when the so-called dukkha lens reveals that nothing's really satisfying. That's the first noble truth. There are times when that's just so obvious, and there's nowhere to go to get away from it. It's true, but it's not complete. It's not where we stay. But there are times when we just see that there's no home—in the mind, in the body, in the world.

I went through a phase where I knew that was true, but it would come up: "There's no home." And it was terrifying. There was no home, and it was terrifying. And my mind would go, "I can't bear it." And I'd ask, "What actually can't you bear?" "I don't know, but I can't bear it." And it would keep going on and on. It's a phase. But it's frightening. It's disconcerting.

Or the no control—everything gets chaotic. At times, choiceless awareness is open, spacious, peaceful. And then all of a sudden, it's not. You still think, "I was doing open choiceless awareness, but now it's chaos." Everything is going like crazy.

It's not that I can just notice what's happening. It's all over. It's chaos. And yes, samsara is messy. It's not all nice and tidy. It doesn't mean anything's wrong, but it's very disorienting.

Stephen Batchelor says emptiness is not just the experience of oceanic bliss. It is a falling apart of all of our strategies of self-interest, self-centeredness, of seeming protection. That's why it's so scary sometimes. And although it's freeing, it can also bring up great disconcertion, confusion, dis-ease, even fear. It's like being in no man's land. We're losing our reference points.

That's when we want to go back to the sakkāya-diṭṭhi, our reference point. You know, that cage, but it's our reference point. But you don't have to even think about all this. Just that willingness to notice fear. Fear. That's all we need to do. Meet that with karuṇā, with compassion.

And we find we have the courage to recommit over and over and over to—what? We don't know. When we started out, we might have had some idea what we wanted, where we were going. We have to have some idea; we wouldn't have started without one. And I imagine you're finding your ideas of what this path is about, what freedom might be, where it's going—changing. I bet for sure your ideas, even your ideas of who you are and what you're capable of, have really changed.

But then we solidify new ideas. Yet as the wisdom grows and the compassion grows, so the faith grows. And even though what we open to is even more unknown, more disconcerting, with fewer and fewer

landmarks, there's a stronger faith, a stronger wisdom to meet it. So practice gets both more difficult and easier as we go along.

But there's no way to really avoid, as Pema Chödrön said, that thing we really don't want to meet. What we do find is that we have more wisdom and more compassion and more faith and courage to actually meet that thing, whatever it is, a little bit at a time.

I want to share a story, an allegory that I really like. I've used this before, and it gives me a sense of how we have to keep making choices over and over. Every time you show up again when it's difficult, you've made that intention. Or rather, you haven't made it—the intention has arisen. Let me be here for this moment. That's an intention of wisdom, of courage, of resolve, which is one of the pāramīs, of compassion. Let me just meet this moment. I don't know where it's going, but let me just lift up my foot again.

Over and over, we're making that commitment. We're re-motivating ourselves. It's not just a one-time thing. That's why I have so much respect for all of you being here. On the hard days, it's like you have to make that commitment every moment almost, just to stay in the sitting, just to get up. You get up and your mind says, "I'm out of here." And then you find yourself in the walking room doing walking. You're walking, and at the end of this walk you think, "That's really it." And then you find yourself in the sitting, doing the sitting. You're showing up.

Because the faith gives you the energy to show up, and that energy gives more wisdom, that gives more compassion, that gives more courage, that gives more faith—and it just keeps spiraling and opening deeper and deeper into the unknown.

A couple of years ago, I had a bad flu and was home for a couple weeks. I couldn't read or anything, so I was watching videos, and I ended up watching the Lord of the Rings trilogy—the whole thing, all in a row. I'd seen it before, but watching it straight through struck me. It's really an allegory, and probably many of you know the story. What struck me was how the courage of choosing is strengthened by wisdom, how we go into situations we never thought we could face. And then it not only strengthens our courage—it strengthens our wisdom and compassion.

And it has a momentum all its own.

So this little being Frodo, this hobbit, gets involved in this whole quest because he has faith in a wise, older wizard. The ring of power, which is evil—the wizard tells him about it, but Frodo has no clue. He's just given this task in his little safe hobbit world, kind of like a perfect English countryside where there's just not really suffering. And he has to take this ring out of his hobbit world to a nearby place he's never been and give it there. He's told it's dangerous. Don't tell anyone. But some friends go with him.

So he's nervous, but it's an adventure. He's never been out. He's trying to do good, and he has no clue—no clue what he's getting involved in. He couldn't even imagine if he wanted to.

And so this trip to this little nearby town outside of hobbit town is a million times more dangerous than he thought. These dark riders, these wraiths—ring wraiths—like ghosts on horses, trying to kill him and his friends. They barely make it to this place in the pouring rain. They get into this establishment that's kind of coarse—not evil, but really rough men. And they're completely out of their element.

"Thank God, here we are. Gandalf's going to be here. We can give him the thing." Well, Gandalf isn't there. Nobody's heard of him. They don't know what to do. And then some of these riders come again and start trying to kill these little guys. Meanwhile, the hobbits have no sense of how much trouble they're in, so they're acting in inappropriate ways—calling attention to themselves, acting out. They're almost killed.

"What do we do now?" And they have to place their faith in this kind of weird-looking guy they've never met or heard of. He says, "You have to come with me. We have to go even further away from your home to this elf land." They don't trust this guy, but they've got nothing else to do. What else can they do?

So they go on this journey of a few more days and they're attacked by these riders, really almost killed. Frodo almost dies. He's stabbed with this magical knife. They barely manage to get him to the elf land of Rivendell before he dies. He's there for weeks. They manage to pull him back.

So here he is, and it's been ten million times more scary and frightening than he ever could have imagined—more evil than he ever thought existed in the universe. But they've also shown a lot more courage than they expected. And now here they are in this elf land, which is like a deva realm. They've always heard about elves, these beautiful, good people.

Up to this point, good and bad has been really very clear. There are clear delineations. You know who's good—the elves. You know who's bad—the ring wraiths. Okay, Strider wasn't clear at first, but once you get to the elf land, you know he's good. And so they're in this deva realm. "Wow, this is amazing!" Better than they ever thought anything could be—after worse than that.

"So this is it. Now we can turn it over and this was a wonderful adventure and I see there's beauty in the world. Now we'll go back home and la la la, everything will be the same."

No way, right? No way.

It turns out that this ring—they have to figure out what to do with it. It has to be taken to the most evil, dangerous place in the whole universe to be destroyed. And who can do it? They're already fighting about it. So little Frodo realizes he has to do it. Again, he knows this is far worse than he ever thought. And he doesn't think he can do it. But no one else is stepping forward. At the same time, he still has no clue what he's signing up for. But he signs up for it. And a band of friends come to help him.

So he thought this beautiful deva realm was the end of it. That was only the beginning. Only the beginning. And then begins this whole three books' worth of a trek with the seven friends through all kinds of dangers. Gandalf, the leader, gets killed. After a while, this band of seven starts to be torn apart

from within. The evil in the ring begins to infect one of the people. And Frodo realizes it's getting stronger. But he's just this scared little guy. He can't even trust this group of people anymore. He has to go alone—over to the evil land of Mordor, which is just belching smoke and evil beings. He has no clue how to get there. And he has to go by himself. His faithful friend goes with him into the land where the evil head of everything is getting ready for war. There are tens of thousands of evil orcs. And he has to walk into the middle of this without any battle skills or anything, by himself, because now he can't trust even his friends.

His one little friend goes with him. And as they're getting over and walking, walking, walking for days into worse and worse and worse, trailed by a little kind of evil being who's always trying to ingratiate himself and steal the ring—then the evil stops being just from outside. It starts to eat up Frodo from the inside. He starts not trusting his most devoted companion, who never really had any kind of badness in him. He starts to trust the evil little guy that's following them. And it starts to be that you can't tell what's good and what's bad, what's evil and what's wholesome. It all starts to reveal—as Solzhenitsyn said, Alexander Solzhenitsyn—it's not that some hearts are good and some hearts are bad, but evil and beauty is like a line that goes through all human hearts. And Frodo is finding that.

As he's getting closer and closer, he starts to realize something. First he was doing it because it seemed good and adventurous. Then he was doing it to save his world and make his world okay. Then for his friends. But as he goes on, he realizes: there's no way I'm going to live through this. It becomes so clear he's only doing it because it must be done for the benefit of all beings. He's getting more and more eaten up by the evil in the ring, but the strength of this goodness, the only thing that drives him on, is completely impersonal by this point. There's no way I can survive this. But he keeps on going, keeps on going. And it really is turning into bodhicitta there.

He goes right to the end with no clue of what could happen. And in the end, he can't do it all by himself. Even at the very end, that little seemingly evil twisted being—because that's there, it makes it possible. It bites off his finger and throws the ring, and it falls with the ring into the fire, because at the last minute, Frodo just couldn't let go of it. Just couldn't let go. But then he didn't need to, because events came together in such a way that it happened.

I love this story because if Frodo knew from the beginning where it was going—no way. No way in the world would he have taken it on. But as it goes on and on, the horror brings out a courage and a wisdom and a compassion and a love that just gets stronger and stronger and stronger, giving him the strength to be with more and more difficult things. And the motivation moves from being all about me and my happiness to just really what's for the good of beings. I didn't say it that way at the time, but it was like that. We see the same things but not in the same way.

So I want to end with a quotation from Pema Chödrön about bodhicitta, noble or awakened heart: "We awaken this bodhicitta, this tenderness for life, when we can no longer shield ourselves from the

vulnerability of our condition, from the basic fragility of existence. You let the pain of the world touch your heart, and it turns into compassion."

So let's just sit for a moment.

Thank you for listening.

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