Emptiness and Wisdom

Carol Wilson · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Carol Wilson · 58:23

What I think of as the unity of wisdom and compassion—really, tonight I want to focus on how it relates to our practice here. Later, perhaps I'll talk more about action in the world, but here I really want to talk about practice.

Our practice cultivates wisdom. It also cultivates compassion. Wisdom and compassion go together. They're like two bundles holding each other up.

We've talked a lot in the dharma talks about different wisdom aspects of practice—investigation, understanding and exploring our moment-to-moment experience in ways that reveal the impermanent, changing nature, the not-intrinsic-self nature, the five aggregates. We've talked all about that. And this is true. This moving into the experiential understanding of emptiness—not just an intellectual understanding, but experiential, even just for a moment—is essential to the experience and understanding of freedom, to living in freedom.

But so often people hear about it, read about it, experience it a little for themselves, and a question comes up, or they have a particular response to anatta or no-self: "It's just these five aggregates changing back and forth." It's not really inviting. Sometimes people feel it's distancing, alien, a kind of disconnect, a kind of non-caring. It can be really scary too—unsettling, sometimes frightening. Or people think it's veering into indifference, annihilation: just all aggregates coming and going, what difference does anything make? And we sit up here and say, "It doesn't make any difference. Mindfulness doesn't care."

I think, okay, so that doesn't quite seem whole somehow. It doesn't quite seem complete. And that's true, because that's only half of the equation. Emptiness is completed with compassion. Compassion is completed with emptiness. Or put together, you can't really separate the two in wisdom, in wholeness.

This is from Nyoshul Khen Rinpoche, who was a wonderful Dzogchen master. He died just a few years ago. I like this quotation. He says, "The danger is that we hear too much too soon. We think we have understood shunyata, or emptiness, and we err on the side of the absolute in a nihilistic fashion, and we are obscured by concepts. 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. Those who believe in things can be helped through various kinds of practice, through the ways 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."

When someone says, "Oh, everything's empty, nothing I do matters," and gets into that as a belief rather

than an experience, that's incomplete. As Rinpoche says, far more pitiful when we believe in emptiness.

So the wisdom of emptiness needs compassion—karuna, metta, all loving-kindness. And the great thing is, it's not that we then need to somehow think about how to construct this or add it in. It's the natural expression of the mind-heart that's not clinging—not clinging to self, not clinging to views. That sense of the deep experience, or just a moment of emptiness.

The Tibetans have a great way of putting it. When realizing this emptiness of self, of intrinsic separate self-existence, they say the mind, the heart, is ceaselessly responsive. It means that when there is a situation, something to respond to—maybe just hanging out in emptiness and spaciousness with things coming and going—but when there's a need to respond, the natural, unplanned response of the wise mind and heart will be of friendliness or metta, of compassion or of equanimity, of appreciative joy, of wisdom, according to what's appropriate. It's this appropriate response, ceaselessly responsive. And it makes total sense.

When our energy is not bound up in this obsessive, ceaseless, exhausting self-referencing—have you noticed how much energy that takes? And then you hate it. Have you noticed how much energy that takes? Because that's the same thing: "I hate that I'm self-referencing." That's an endless loop; it goes on forever. But when a moment is just put down, so much energy is released. And when it's with wisdom, the response is appropriate to the situation.

Compassion also is completed through wisdom. The wisdom of emptiness—emptiness of particular self, emptiness of it being all about me, emptiness of thinking I have to know everything ahead of time—but total presence.

This is from the Dalai Lama about this. He's, of course, Mr. Compassion. And he's saying that compassion must be derived from, must arise from our insight into emptiness of inherent self. Because this is where the vast meets the profound—the emptiness of self, the profoundness of compassion for living beings. Only those two, both profound experiential understandings, support one another.

He's saying that without the wisdom of emptiness—and even just momentary, let's keep it momentary, not jump into Arhat—without that wisdom, compassion can so easily fall into despair. Have you noticed that? Knowing that people's suffering is avoidable, knowing that my suffering is avoidable and is based on confusion, but without the wisdom of emptiness, we really can fall into a quality of hopelessness, even despair. So while the compassion may be strong, when it still has some element of me-ness in it, it's limited, and we fall into despair or hopelessness.

With all balancing acts, with all our practice, sometimes one side's stronger, sometimes another side's stronger, but they really serve one another. And we don't actually—my point is—have to sit around and think, "Should I work on wisdom today or should I work on compassion and metta?" No, you don't have to think about it at all. It's natural. And what we're doing here is cultivating both. I really hope that's the only

point I'm trying to get across tonight.

As I was saying, when our energy isn't bound up in this relentless self-referencing, so much is released. Stephen Batchelor is a British writer who has translated a lot of Tibetan writings. He translated the Guide to the Bodhisattva's Way of Life by Shantideva. This is actually from his introduction to Verses from the Center, his translation of Nagarjuna, which is all about contingency—really all about emptiness, the emptiness of any single inherent existing thing. Contingency is his way of expressing what I was trying to express with yathabhuta: that as things have come to be in this moment is all these different conditions coming together. And now this moment, new ones coming together and changing. You can't pull any condition or experience out of that and say, "This is solid, unchanging."

He's talking about emptiness, but he's talking about Shantideva when he spontaneously spoke this Guide to the Bodhisattva's Way of Life. He said, "When Shantideva's closed sense of self dissolved"—that's a good way of putting it, isn't it? A closed sense of self, me and everything else out there, just for a moment. The next moment it may not be there. But when it dissolved, he did not vanish into the abyss of nothingness.

That's what's important to remember when it feels a little frightening, that emptiness. You don't vanish into the abyss of nothingness. When you're in despair, maybe you would wish you would vanish into the abyss of nothingness—that's called nihilism. But you don't.

Batchelor saw, he knew, that to be empty is no longer to be full of oneself. I love that. To be empty is no longer to be full of oneself. That's all. Doesn't it just sound like a relief, even if we imagine it?

And then the natural expression—this very famous line from Shantideva: "When I act for the sake of others, no amazement or conceit arises, just like feeding myself. I hope for nothing in return." Acting for the sake of another is just like feeding myself. Empty of oneself, opening to all. And it's the natural expression, ceaselessly responsive.

It's lovely, wonderful, amazing actually, that it's the natural response of the mind, the heart, in the experience, in the cellular understanding of emptiness, of non-self. To be free of self is to be empty of self. We can reflect on it—I'm talking about it, that's the intellectual level, and you're hopefully listening. We may reflect on it, and we can notice aspects in our actual deep experience. That's the main thing. But then we just really need to keep practicing—mindfulness or metta practice, both—and trust. Not turn it into a view where we try to think our way into what should be compassion.

Just like asking, "What should I be seeing with wisdom?" And then you beat yourself up because you're not seeing some idea you made up. Same with compassion. We have to trust that the depth of compassion and wise response can arise from no longer being full of ourselves.

This example I've used before—I really like it. I'm assuming it's true, but you never know anymore. Even when you hear stuff on public radio, you still never know. So I heard this a couple of years ago. They were actually talking about economic philosophy right after the crash in 2008. They were discussing the

economic philosophy of acting in rational self-interest, and they were going, "Duh, it didn't really work." But the example they gave is what I like.

So this, I'm assuming, is true. But even if it's not, it works. There was a new footbridge built over the Thames River in London. When it was opened, people were walking over it, kind of inaugurating the bridge—hundreds of people. It was a big deal. So whatever, four hundred sticks in my mind, but I don't know. People are walking over this bridge on the inaugural day, and there's so many people that it starts shaking. Really shaking and vibrating. Highly embarrassing for the opening of a bridge. But anyway, that's what was happening.

So it's shaking, kind of leaning. Each person, acting in rational self-interest—thinking, doing what's for the good of all—stepped to the other side from the way it was shaking. But all four hundred of them stepped, because each person was acting for herself in rational self-interest, thinking, "If I act for my own good, it will also be for the good of others." I mean, we can sit here and go, "Duh," but how often do we do that? So everybody moved to the one side, and the whole thing just got worse. That didn't work.

My point is, even with our best of intentions—"I want to be compassionate"—when we don't understand accurately, we can still do good things. Don't get me wrong. It's not like I'm going to go sit in my room and never do anything helpful until I'm an arahant. I'm not saying that. But we don't have the big picture, and sometimes we can't tell. That's all just to know that, just to see how the deep understanding of emptiness makes compassion so much more vivid and real—and vice versa.

Without the emptiness, we have this sense of, "How can I keep opening to my own suffering—never mind the suffering of the world—just my own suffering?" It's like, "How can I hold all this without drowning?" That's a question that would often come to my mind. In my own story, or listening to the news, or there's phases where you hear, and we each have phases, where a lot of people you know are suddenly really sick or going through difficult times. You know how there's phases like that? You just kind of go, "Ah, I want to be there. How can I hold this all?"

And that's the question of the me, as if I could somehow hold it all. No. Nor do we have to. It's just suffering arising in emptiness. "The winds of change blow across emptiness—whom can they harm?" The sufferings arise. Being open to it is just that willingness to connect, to touch, to be present, just as it is. Sound familiar? This is a huge aspect of our practice.

And the way our minds work—our minds work with making distinctions. And that's useful, not to put it down.

And the way we talk, the way we do particular practices—in our habit of making distinctions, we can talk about wisdom, emptiness, karuna, compassion, metta, as if they're two different sides of the same thing. But we can think of them as two different things. And in our practices here, there are various specific techniques, specific practices.

Mindfulness practice, which is essentially what we're doing here—moment-to-moment kind mindfulness—I really, really hope that you've heard at least once from one of us, in the way we try to describe mindfulness, that a moment of sati has a quality of kind attention in it. Does that sound familiar? The quality of metta, the quality of compassion.

But essentially, mindfulness—steadiness of awareness of just what is—we've been talking about it as the condition for wisdom, for clear seeing to arise, accurate recognition, seeing into emptiness, seeing into non-self, and then that allows for compassion. And then once a week, we're cultivating the specific metta practice, which can also be done with compassion, with appreciative joy, with equanimity. In that practice, we're really specifically inclining the mind through practice to that particular quality of mind and heart of metta, of compassion.

They can seem like two very different practices, and they are specific practices. But big picture, in terms of our work here, in terms of our life, I want to say: sati-pañña, mindfulness-wisdom practice, and karuna-metta practice—both are cultivating wisdom. Both are developing kindness and compassion just by the very nature of both aspects.

The Buddha, in talking about Brahmavihara practice, says—he calls it "pervading," and I'll read the whole thing—with loving kindness, with karuna compassion, with appreciative joy, with equanimity, these are called immeasurable deliverance of mind, measureless deliverance of mind. He goes on to remind us that lust is a maker of measurement, hate is a maker of measurement, delusion is a maker of measurement.

I've read these before in relationship to the purification of mindfulness. Now he's talking about it in relationship to the immeasurables, to the Brahmaviharas. He talks about the immeasurable deliverance of mind: "Here, a bhikkhu abides pervading one quarter, sending out one quarter with a mind, with awareness filled with goodwill. Likewise, the second, third, fourth quarter, all the directions above and below, around and everywhere, with an awareness filled with goodwill and to all as to himself. He abides pervading the all-encompassing world with a mind, with an awareness imbued with loving kindness, abundant, exalted, immeasurable, without hostility, without ill will." This is called the immeasurable deliverance of mind, immeasurable deliverance of heart.

This is a description of the potential of loving kindness as a deep cultivated practice, of compassion as a deep cultivated practice. Immeasurable, one, because they are developed towards all living beings and thus have a potentially limitless range. We're really just not picking and choosing, but developing loving kindness, compassion towards all living beings, including yourself.

But I would also say they're immeasurable, measureless practices because in a moment of pure mind imbued with loving kindness, or with compassion, or with any of the Brahmaviharas, in that moment there's a real falling away of the concepts of me and other. Even though in the formal practice we use phrases of sending loving kindness to me, to this other person, and visualizations—we use the relative, we use concepts, of course—notice how it moves, that there's this potential of loving kindness equally to all

beings. Because in that moment of loving kindness, it's not about me cranking up this good feeling in my heart and sending it to you. It's because the separation that comes about through lust, through ill will, through delusion, drops. And so there's the boundlessness. These practices also open us to this boundless quality that's empty of self, that's empty of separation.

I know personally for me, a lot of this kind of wisdom has arisen in formal metta practice—which I was thinking for years, "No, no, no, I'm into the wisdom side. I don't want to do metta. I won't get any wisdom from that." Huge wisdom. From seeing the concepts that the mind constructs, that we believe, that keep us separate.

And of course, just as wisdom arises in the metta practice, certainly in our mindfulness practice, cultivating mindfulness and wisdom, metta and compassion arise together spontaneously, inseparably from the ongoing momentum and deepening of mindfulness. You can't really separate the two.

Sometimes in the way our experience is unfolding here on retreat—what's going on for you in the sitting and the walking and what you talk about—one or the other side of the coin may be more obvious. Or you may be looking for one or the other and upset because that's not the one that's happening. You know, the sense of wanting to see the subtleties of vedana leading to papañca, and how the papañca creates the sense of self, and what's the difference between consciousness and the contents of consciousness, and how does saññā work with vedana, and is saññā also a mental formation, and all that stuff—really wanting to see cause and effect. Sometimes that's just naturally what's arising, and it's fascinating, and it's just clicking along.

There are the other times. Have you noticed? The other times when, as much as you may want to—"Yesterday I was seeing this subtle vedana and it was so far out, so I'm really going to work on that today and get to the next level of it"—you wake up, and from the moment you wake up, you are just filled with... fill in the blank: grief, self-loathing, grumpiness, boredom, hunger, self-hatred, loneliness, wanting.

You fill in your own blank. But this is in the way. How can I get rid of this and get back to that subtlety? And you know where it goes from there—just spinning, spinning, spinning.

And you come and you talk to us, and we say, "Well, it's really important to meet this with kind attention." And maybe you don't say it, but often people go out thinking, "Right. That's really second-tier practice. When you can't do the real thing, meet what's happening with karuna. It's better than hating it. I guess intellectually I can see that." But underneath, we know it's not the real thing, right? So we'll do it until finally this junk goes away and I can get back into whatever we think we want to get back to that's giving us so much wisdom. In the meantime, we'll mark time.

And I really beg you to know: this is not second-tier practice. It's essential. Essential. It's not like, "Oh, we'll develop compassion because at least we've got something to fall back on." This is an essential part of our waking up.

And how do you think compassion develops? You know what I'm going to say, but unfortunately for us, it's true—from the Dalai Lama. How does it develop? Through deep insight into what suffering is. And how does that develop? The Dalai Lama says this arises by focusing, by opening into our own experience. Where else?

So it's like the first step of really opening to compassion is by opening into our own suffering experiences. That's the personal level. But what's far out again is that the personal opens to the universal. It opens beyond the personal. And again, you're coming into the emptiness of the small self. The Dalai Lama goes on to say that the compassion then strengthens into a sense of empathy, into the real experience of connectedness with all beings.

So really, it can happen—not every time, but it can happen—that when, with whatever little sati we can muster, some little memory of what mindfulness is, we just meet this with kind attention, opening into our own personal suffering becomes the avenue to empathy, to opening into the connectedness of all beings, the emptiness that is also the fullness of caring and compassion for all beings.

That's why the difficult times of retreat, the difficult times of life—we don't wish them on anybody, but nobody gets out without them. That's why they're so important, whatever the difficulty is, because this is right here, the crucible for learning, for experiencing, and for deepening the habit in our heart and mind. The trust, the faith in connectedness, in compassion, in clear seeing as the avenue of freedom and the avenue of real non-separation from beings in the world.

Everything that happens is useful in this way. Not to get rid of the difficult times, but to really see: this is the place. Like Dogen said, "If you can't see the truth right where you are, where do you expect to find it?" When this goes away? No—right here, right now.

Sure, sometimes it's too much for us. Of course. Not having the mind go, "Okay, open to this suffering—boom—now I'm open to connectedness with all beings, compassion, emptiness, la la la." Of course not. But just to know that whatever's arising in this moment, in our mind, in our body, is arising due to all the infinite causes and conditions. In this moment, the past is out of our control. What's arising now, we really can't make it different in this moment, can we? Do you believe that? No, we're going to keep trying, but we can't. This moment is what it is.

How the mind and heart meets this moment is the creation of present-moment habits. And so if what's coming up is your deep habit of self-hatred or loneliness or aversion to somebody else or whatever you can't bear—that's what's coming up. How we meet it with just that intention of clear mindfulness, that's actually an intention of wisdom and compassion. "Oh, it's like this." Not that it goes away or that we understand or anything—just that connectedness in a moment is the development, the strengthening, and the heart and mind coming to find more of a refuge, more of a trust in the wisdom, but also in the compassion to meet whatever's happening.

And far from weak, it's maybe the most powerful. It gives so much strength.

Chögyam Trungpa wrote once that true fearlessness comes from the tender heart. From the tender heart. Not when we're closed and fighting and warrior-like. The tender heart. Just touching this. So tender. And we don't need to be afraid of touch.

Even Sayadaw U Pandita, Mr. Warrior himself—he told me once when I was in an interview with some horrible thing going on, I don't even know what, it didn't matter—and he said with so much compassion, I always felt so much compassion from him, he said, "You know, with mindfulness, with awareness, you don't have to be afraid of anything."

I think they're both the same, the tender heart. The tender heart is where true fearlessness comes. That's the compassion way of looking at it. With awareness, with mindfulness, you don't need to be afraid of anything because mindfulness can hold it. Two different ways of expressing the same thing.

Sogyal Rinpoche said, "The times when you are suffering can be the times when you are open. And when you are extremely vulnerable can be where your greatest strength lies. When you can say to yourself, even for a moment, 'I'm not going to run away from this suffering. I want to use it in the best, richest way that I can so that maybe I'll become more compassionate, more helpful to others.' Suffering, after all, is what teaches us about compassion. If you suffer with awareness"—I'm saying, with tenderness—"you know how it is when others suffer. And if you're in a position to help others, it is through your suffering that you will find the understanding and the compassion to do so."

This is not a second-tier aspect of our practice. It's just as much about the courageous presence, the courageous opening to what is, as mindfulness is.

I want to share a story from the world about the power, the incredible courage that comes with this deep understanding and commitment of non-personal love—to really meet suffering in a different way, in a way that I could never have imagined from my own ideas.

This is really about two people. One is Jim Lawson, whom I haven't met. He's one of my heroes—an older man now. He's an African-American minister, and in the 1950s he was deeply committed to the practice of nonviolence. He went to India and studied with followers of Gandhi, who had died not that long before. His commitment was so deep that during the Korean War, he went to prison as a conscientious objector. He said he could have gotten out of prison because he was a minister, but he didn't feel that was fair if other conscientious objectors had to go to prison. So he's a person who really walks his talk.

In the late 1950s, when the Freedom Rides were about to start coming out of Nashville and the beginning of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee was forming there, Jim Lawson was the one teaching workshops about the theory of nonviolence and how to work with nonviolence—not as an attitude that's put on, but as an inner expression of your understanding of your heart, of who you are in the world. As Martin Luther King said, nonviolence means you not only don't shoot a person, but you refuse to hate a

person.

What I want to read comes from the biography of John Lewis, who was one of the original Freedom Riders, one of the young students in Nashville who later became head of SNCC. He's been a congressman from Georgia since around 1988. In his autobiography, he's writing about their first marches, but it's really about mettā and compassion and courage.

He says: "Suffering puts us and those around us in touch with our consciences. But suffering can be nothing more than a sad and sorry thing without the presence on the part of the sufferer of a graceful heart, an accepting and open heart, a heart that holds no malice toward the inflictors of his or her suffering. This is a difficult concept to understand. It is even more difficult to internalize, but it has everything to do with the way of nonviolence.

"We are talking about love here, not romantic love, not the love of one individual for another, not loving something that is lovely to you. This is a broader, deeper, more all-encompassing love. It is a love that accepts the hateful and the hurtful. It is a love that recognizes the spark of the divine in each of us, even in those who would raise their hand against us, those we might call our enemy.

"This sense of love realizes that emotions of the moment and constantly shifting circumstances can cloud that divine spark. Pain, ugliness, and fear can cover it over, turning a person toward anger and hate. It is the ability to see through those layers of ugliness, to see further into a person than perhaps that person can see into himself, that is essential to the practice of nonviolence."

These are powerful words, because this is a man who was beaten severely, numerous times—on marches, on the freedom rides—thrown into prison over and over. This is where he's coming from. He's not talking off the top of his head.

This is the power of this love, metta, compassion that sees through individuality. "The spark of the divine" is Christian language, but it points to the spark of truth beyond our personal self.

Taking this back to our practice for ourselves, we can recognize that our own fear and pain and ugliness and anger clouds that recognition of the spark of the divine, you could say—of the natural emptiness, the pure heart of goodness. It clouds the recognition of that in ourselves, doesn't it? Until we feel that we're just that little, narrow, limited self, feeling these really difficult feelings, and we meet it again with anger.

And when we say, "No, meet that anger"—okay, you're meeting it with anger, great. Anger feels like this. That doesn't fix it. That changes everything. That's the movement from buying into the small self where the spark is hidden, where I am the anger. It's the movement from that into the vastness of emptiness. Anger's like this. It's an expression of the suffering of the world, in my particular experience.

The personal, as the Dalai Lama was saying, can move into the universal. But first we have to find that moment of full-hearted, wise connecting with the personal suffering. We don't get to jump over that piece.

We don't get to jump over it. But our own suffering is good enough.

There are amazing people like John Lewis and all of the Freedom Riders—amazing. But it doesn't mean that if we're not doing that, we're not doing the work. Meeting it here, meeting what's going on here.

Joko Beck asked the question: "Can I find in myself a willingness to rest in this confusing and painful situation?" Whatever it is. And don't let yourself talk yourself out of a confusing and painful situation just because you don't like what's happening, or you didn't get what you wanted for breakfast, or the person you work with—you don't like working with them. That's nothing compared to a Freedom Rider, right? So no, don't dismiss it. Suffering, here and now.

Can I find it in myself, a willingness to rest in this confusing and painful situation? Not the story, but that feeling of whatever it is—loneliness, sadness, self-judgment, wanting, "I'm not good enough," "I can never do it," doubt, whatever it is. You can't name it, it's just ugh. Okay, ugh. It feels like this.

That connectedness—just a moment of connectedness. To me, that's the essence of metta. That's the essence of karuna. The heart-mind, the citta, the consciousness is completely open, turned toward connecting. Spontaneous compassion and understanding springs from that.

Here's a small example from a couple of years ago. Again, I was listening to public radio—you learn a lot of things listening to public radio, though you have to wade through a lot of stuff too. They were interviewing a man about a disease I was not familiar with called Huntington's disease, which is, as I understood from the interview, a genetic disease passed along the male line from father to son. If you have the genes for it, you're basically going to get it. It comes on in middle age. You'll be fine until middle age, and then it's a severe nerve deterioration, and you die. A really intense, difficult thing.

They were interviewing this man whose father had died of it, and whose elder brother had just died from it as well. He himself was just coming into middle age. He had no symptoms of it, but he was entering the time when he would get it. And he was just talking about it. This man was in London, and he had been a war reporter for the BBC or wherever, all over in these really horrific situations. But he was saying that in some ways, this was the most frightening.

Just talking, and he's speaking very matter-of-factly. And my point is, I was listening. You know how you listen, and you go, "Oh yeah, shame, oh yeah, that's really..." I mean, not like blowing it off, but going, "Oh, that's really hard, that's really sad." It's kind of... you know, we're a little bit open, sort of compassionate. "Oh, yeah, I'm really sorry, it's hard for you." It's not a bad thing, but you know what I mean. It's kind of, "Oh yeah, that person's making a lot of noise. They must be suffering. Metta, metta." And so I was just listening and really thinking, that was pretty tough. And we all have our problems. No, no, it wasn't that bad. I was kind of open.

But I guess being a journalist, he was very clear. They were interviewing him well. And then this one line—it just hit me. It just went in. Because it was so connectable. I really connected.

So he was saying, "Every day when I go for a walk down to the corner store to get the newspaper, or I'm just going for a walk, every day as I'm walking, the thought comes up in my mind: Is this going to be the time when I feel the first sign of weakness?" Assuming, from what all the doctors tell them, that it's going to happen. I mean, you never know, but assuming that. So every day he's just going for his walk, but is this going to be the first day that he feels it?

And just the... I don't know, something about that is so accessible, isn't it, as an experience? I was like, whoa. And then I really felt the compassion, which can have the edge of poignancy, the edge of feeling. Compassion means feeling with the suffering. It doesn't mean despair. But it doesn't mean, "Oh, la la, isn't that suffering?" And really, I felt so clearly that that's my situation. It's all of our situations.

We may not have such a clear forewarning of "this is the thing that's going to get you"—which it still might not be. But for all of us, really, every day, it's true as I'm taking a walk. I'm not saying take your walk going, "Is this the time I'm going to have a heart attack? Is this the time?" I don't mean that. But the unknown, the not knowing. And in fact, as Spring talked about with impermanence, yeah, all of us. Is this the time? Is this the plane ride that the plane's going to go down? I don't know. You wake up in the middle of the night in some weird state. I mean, I never used to think this before, but now I think, "Well, what if this is like a stroke or something?" And I don't get scared. I go, "Wow, I want to really be here."

Well, that's really all of our states. But what opens into compassion is just that open-hearted connectedness, like listening. Just like mindfulness is like listening to our mind, listening to our body—just that subtle quietness of hearing. And compassion, karuṇā mettā, really is too. Just listening.

I read a lovely quotation from James Baldwin, the writer. He said, "An enemy is someone whose story we have not heard."

So coming back to ourselves, those aspects of your experience that at times are the enemy—just listen. Hear its story. I don't mean the whole story of your life and this and the third grade and your mother. Maybe that comes with it.

But I mean, just let it exist in your loving awareness right now. Grief feels like this. You don't have to do anything about it. Just that gentle touching of it. Let it tell its story, just how it is now. Self-hatred, doubt—whatever it is. Just bearing witness, courageous witness, to the suffering of the world in the particular form of my story of loneliness right now.

And it starts with me, but that's okay. As we're able to be with, for example, my loneliness, at some point—either you don't even realize it—but you're with a friend who's feeling so lonely, and you can say, "Yeah, I know what that's like." You don't have to fix it. You can be there with them.

Have you ever had a period where you're really sick or really suffering—some loss or whatever? And people care. They want to help. But you get the difference between someone who wants to help, meaning make it go away, which can't be done, or someone who's been there before and can just sit with you, be

with you while you tell your story or cry or whatever. To me, it's a vast difference.

How do we know it? From being with ourselves.

So sometimes it manifests in that way later with a friend, a person, or anyone who's suffering. Sometimes it actually occurs as we're sitting here, being with what's going on. It's not our natural tendency. And we've talked about that a lot in terms of the vipassanā, haven't we? The tendency to flee from the unpleasant. Of course. When we say just hear the story of the suffering state, the mind goes, "Hey, I don't want to make friends with my violence. I would like it to go away, thank you very much."

But remember, it's that connection—it's that connection that opens us to the truth.

John Samedo has a lovely way, I like it anyway, of describing mettā in connection with the difficult. Because mettā—the proximate, the immediate cause for a moment of mettā to arise—is focusing on the good. That's why we start in the easy way. But it doesn't just stay with the good. Mettā isn't "I like this good part of you, but that part has got to go." It spreads out and includes everything as a mental state. It's a beautiful state. So it starts by seeing the good, and then it includes everything.

Samedo says, "With mettā, one is not blinding oneself with an ideal." So it's not "Oh, everybody's lovely, everything's lovely, you're so lovely, may you be happy." No, you're not blinding yourself with an ideal. It sees more clearly. Instead, one is witnessing the unpleasantness in a situation, in a thing, in a person, or in oneself, without creating anything around it.

That I love. That is the emptiness of wisdom. Just witnessing, that tender witnessing of the unpleasant, let's say in ourselves, without creating anything around it. Not a story about how useless you are. Not getting into all the memories of how it should be different. Not a story about "I can't bear it." Not a story of "Again, for the four-thousandth time." Not a fear about where it's going to go, "Oh, this is unbearable." That's just it—don't create a story around it.

Unbearable. Although, as you know, Samedo has this great line about when he was practicing in Thailand, sweating through his robes in the hot season.

And believe me, it's pretty much unbearable over and over for years. I just get to the point where I say, "This is unbearable. I can't bear this another instant." And then I would see that I could.

That's what I love. It's actually one of the lines I say to myself. I'm going, "I can't bear this." And then I ask, "Well, what actually about this moment can't I bear?" I get interested. So far, I've never been able to find what it was, because "I can't bear it" was a mental state. "I can't bear it"—what? Well, I don't like how my knee feels. Grief is really unpleasant. Okay. Look and see. We can bring humor in. What helps us be present?

So our particular experience, even here, can often open into the universal—in small ways, in large ways—where your feeling of sadness, of grief, begins to transform. Many people over the years have

reported this, and some here too. It's personal, and you have your story and all, and it is your personal story. And suddenly, there's a moment when they really open into the grief, the sadness, the loss, and suddenly it's like, "Wow. This is experienced by everybody at some point. Everybody."

And it really is a whole different feeling from "I can't bear this," or "poor me," or even whatever story we're telling. This is one of the things we share as humans on this planet. Not every moment. We also share joy. We also share love. But sometimes I think when there's a moment of deep loss, for example, or a moment of insecurity, or a time when we really don't know what's going to happen, or we're really getting sick—and it just spreads out. Whoa, how many people right now are experiencing loss? Think about people going through war, or so much hardship.

And this isn't a judgment. Thinking this with judgment isn't helpful. But thinking, "Well, this is so hard for me. How is it for people who've lost three kids in a war?" And then not to answer that question, but just to hold, "Oh, this is all of us." I'm kind of feeling the particular that opens into what all of us are going through. And this is the opening into compassion and the opening out of our small sense of self.

So that we really start to see: we are the world. We're each a unique, specific representation of the world, of all humans, of the nature of mind, of the nature of body. We all experience sorrow and loss and joy and love, just like we all experience greed and aversion and boredom and mindfulness and wisdom. Kind of like you can look out here and—something James likes to say—it's like everyone's taking turns, you know, being the wise one, the compassionate one, the sleepy one, the concentrated one. And then the next day it's like it all shifted, musical chairs or something. We're all just partaking in the nature of life at different moments.

And so sometimes when it's too much internally, I open up and just let the world present the nature of the world. Let the suffering of the world wake up my own mind and heart to compassion. Whenever I hear a siren go—a police siren or an ambulance siren—I can feel that somebody's life is changing radically right now. Another time, that could be me. Other times, it has been me.

Go out and just be with nature and the beauty and the joy and the suffering and the unknown quality. All the chipmunks running across the road—have you seen them? You're not driving, but they like to shoot out running across the road. And it's really hard. Try not to hit them. But sooner or later, you see one that's been hit. You just never know.

Nature is beautiful. Nature is cruel. Nature is just how the world is. There's suffering and joy and beauty and happiness. Let it all in.

I love fall.

It's incredible. It's alive. The colors are so beautiful. And they're beautiful because the leaves are dying. The leaves have to die. There has to be winter so they can come again the next year. Nature's like that.

I'll tell you a little nature story about change. I was sitting in Switzerland a couple years ago in this beautiful chalet—just a beautiful spot that friends of mine have. It was June. I hadn't been there in June before. There are fields, small fields all around, and lots of cows up and down the hillsides. So the fields were quite high, filled with wildflowers. The whole air everywhere smelled like honey. I was in raptures. It was really like I was just ecstatic with the beauty. That place makes me really happy anyway. The air is clear, you're up high looking at the high Alps. And the air just smells like honey and the fields are filled with wildflowers and it's incredibly beautiful.

And then after a week or so, it was going to rain. The farmers all came. They worked really hard and cut down all the fields—they make hay for the cows. And then they did this really Swiss thing, which if you haven't been there, you don't know this part of Switzerland. They spray cow manure all over everything. They don't just spread it on. They have a machine that sprays it in particles in the air all over everything, all over the fields. I've been through this before. And when it started, I said, "Oh my god." You can't be outside. The field is right there on all sides. Got to run, close all the windows, and keep them closed for the whole day. It's really intense. You don't want to go out. So I didn't quite make it, but almost. And then I'd go out, and the honey smell was gone. A very different smell was there, quite pungent for several days.

But this is life. The flowers are beautiful, you cut them down, they feed the cows, the cows make the manure. You need the manure so they can grow the fields, so you can have those beautiful flowers the next year. How can you separate any of it? Some is beautiful and some really stinks. And some is in between. All of it. Nature tells us all of it. Just open up. When you can't stand it internally anymore, externally open up. You'll see someone else suffering. That can arouse compassion too. And then come back to yourself. There really isn't any separation.

I'll close with a quotation from Nisargadatta Maharaj: "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."

Free from desire and fear on the one hand, and totally responsible for the world on the other. "I am the world, the world is myself." Karuna, metta practice, mindfulness, wisdom practice—two sides of the same thing.

Either one, both of them—we can't escape from recognizing this truth.

So let's just sit quietly for a moment.

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