Emptiness and Compassion

Carol Wilson · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Carol Wilson · 1:01:49

So tonight I want to talk about the unity of emptiness and compassion.

We've been talking a lot about the quality of awareness or of mind—to use Guy's way of talking about mind—as this naturally knowing nature: natural knowing, this sense of naturally awake, and also being empty of any intrinsic, lasting self-existence.

Another way of talking about that emptiness is anatta or not-self, which we've been alluding to all along in the way that we point to how mindfulness simply notices whatever arises. Whatever arises also passes and is not, as the Buddha said, fit to be considered me or mine. Or another way we've talked about it, a phrase I often use, is: awareness doesn't care.

Now those aspects, that way of talking about the nature of mind or emptiness or not-self, can sometimes not be so appealing to people. Sometimes there can be a reaction—well, what is this? If awareness doesn't care, is it just some kind of cold, gray void of emptiness, or a sense almost of an alienating kind of experience? If awareness doesn't care, what's the point of being aware of everything to get to the point where you don't care about anything? Is that what the culmination of our Buddhist practice is about?

Of course not. But sometimes an incomplete understanding of emptiness or not-self can seem like a deep understanding. We can have deep insights into emptiness, into the no intrinsic lasting self-existence of anything, or the ephemeral nature of all the sense experiences. Nothing happening, as Guy was saying last night, but the six sense experiences over and over and over and over. After a while, it's like it doesn't really matter which one's happening. They're all just coming and going. Sayadaw U Pandita said to me once—I must have been complaining—"So what do you want, different objects to note?" Basically, it doesn't matter.

So on that level, that's an incomplete understanding of emptiness, because the third aspect of the nature of mind, the nature of knowing, is that the pure heart-mind in a moment is also, as the Tibetans say, ceaselessly responsive. In a moment of wisdom, the pure mind and heart, when confronted with the need to respond, the natural expression is either compassion if it's in the face of suffering, metta if it's just a sense of connection, mudita if it's joy, equanimity if it's something that there's nothing one can do about, or just calm, just wisdom.

But it's actually not uncommon to do what Nyoshul Khen Rinpoche called "falling into emptiness," where we can intellectually or even experientially have a deep understanding or experience of not-self, of emptiness, of the sense that awareness doesn't care, and think that's the whole picture.

I want to read this from Nyoshul Khenpo, who was a really wonderful Tibetan master. He's talking about this danger: "We hear too much too soon. We think we have understood shunyata, emptiness. We err on the side of the absolute in a nihilistic fashion and are obscured by concepts."

This is really easy. The experience of no intrinsic self-existence can so easily slide into a very subtle conceptual overlay about it. We think it's still the experience, but it's thinking about it. And that's very different.

Nagarjuna—this is Khenpo again—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."

It's very subtle, but we can quite fall in. Or as Nagarjuna said in Stephen Batchelor's translation: "Buddhas say emptiness is relinquishing opinions. Believers in emptiness are incurable." The difference between belief and our actual experience—what's so fascinating is how subtle that difference can be. This is what we would call falling into emptiness, and it's not a complete picture.

This third aspect, ceaselessly responsive, which is usually described as compassion, connection, tenderness for beings, an appropriate response—this is really the necessary counterpart. Compassion and emptiness go together. One without the other is not holistic, not a whole understanding. They have to really support one another.

To me, it's easy intellectually to understand how the experience, the understanding of emptiness, of not-self—this sense even in a moment of release from this obsessive, exhausting self-referencing of every experience—how that naturally leads to compassion. I mean, this self-referencing takes a lot of energy, doesn't it? Have you noticed how exhausting it really is? And in those moments when it's not happening, so many people say, "Oh my God, it's such a relief." There's just space to notice something else other than "what about me?" There's lots of other things to notice too.

So there's so much energy just naturally available in the mind stream, in the physical and mental experience, when it's not all bound up in this relentless, obsessive self-referencing. That energy naturally expresses in doing the obvious, whatever is appropriate for the welfare of beings, whatever being happens to be right in front of us.

Sogyal Rinpoche gives a great description of this relentless self-referencing. He talks about how in Tibet, when you're going to start to construct a house, when you lay the footprint, the foundation, they start from a center point and have a long rope or something, like a yardstick, and then from the center point measure all the way around to get the circumference of the footprint for the foundation. He said, in a way, that's the original yardstick for samsara, this original measuring point for samsara. It always starts from

the sense—not the idea, but the sense—of me here now. I'm the center of it. And from this felt sense, not even an idea but this felt sense of me, everything is measured in samsara.

I'm seeing, I'm hearing, I'm seeing that person walking. This happens over there, but it's seen from this angle. You know what I mean? It just seems natural to us.

And then, on the occasional—or less occasional and more common, the more we pay attention—you start to notice the moments when it isn't all from that particular angle. Like, oh. It doesn't have to be from that. And when it's not all measured from me, me, me, me, me, huge other perceptions are available and appropriate response can naturally arise. We can see the whole situation in a much clearer, more balanced way. We're still part of it, but we're not the center of everything. And all assessments aren't made by what does it mean for me.

This is just a natural effect of a moment of experience or understanding—either the not-self sense or just the natural arising and passing of phenomena, the sense of contingency. Everything arising, as I said in the first talk, that yathā-bhūta understanding of things as they have come to be in this moment, the effect of innumerable conditions and causes. We couldn't even list them all. If you want to list the causes of your sitting here now, it's endless. We'd have to go back to the Big Bang. It's endless. And then the effect keeps on going out and out too.

When we're not the center, there are so many other perceptions available. And this is what maybe you know and trust, and maybe you don't yet, and maybe you think it's not true. But my real deep faith and personal experience, as far as it goes, is that the natural result, the natural manifestation of the pure mind and heart—of the mind that's not colored by kilesa, the mind that's not seeing from the point of me—the natural response of that manifestation, that moment of pure mind, is one of compassionate attention, natural response to what needs to be done. It's not that we have to go out and create it. It's the natural effect of seeing that it really isn't all about me.

Because what does being about me create? Wanting and fear and needing to protect and needing to prove. Well, you know the whole deal. You've been sitting here looking at it for a month. You know all too well. It's just a misperception.

On the other hand, though, the ceaselessly responsive quality of compassion, this tenderness for beings including ourselves, this natural responding to ease suffering or to do whatever's appropriate—this also needs the balance of wisdom. Compassion without wisdom, without the wisdom of equanimity, without the wisdom of not-self, of the vastness, of the "mindfulness doesn't care," without the wisdom of seeing that it's not about our preferences—that's when we get lost. Either we don't have the clarity, the big enough picture to act appropriately (not that we always will anyway), or that's when we drown in the suffering. Because I'm not big enough to hold it.

We can have an idea about wanting to help, about wanting to be present with my own suffering or with

others, about wanting to do good. But the idea not supported by the wisdom and the reality of how things are can't take us far enough. At some point we get lost.

Here's one way to describe this. I heard on the radio—I think I mentioned this last year—they were talking about the economic meltdown of the last couple of years and about a particular economic policy. I'm no economist, but this policy of rational self-interest. Well, we all know how well that's been working in terms of the banks and the stock market. But that was actually, apparently, a really thought-out policy.

The example that was given, and I'm assuming it's true, was of a footbridge built recently in London over the Thames. Some big footbridge, and when it was first opened with a lot of fanfare and there were hundreds of people walking on it, rather to the embarrassment of the builders, it was really shaking from all the people. Too many people were on it. And I guess it was kind of tilting to one side—not really a great thing.

So the people on it, each person acted—this was the example of rational self-interest—trying to do the best thing, but from me, where the center is me. It was tilting to one side, so people moved to the other. But they all moved to the other. And so since everybody, all four hundred people moved to the other side, the bridge just crashed over the other way.

That's like a sense of trying to do the right thing but seeing only from my perspective. There's not the wisdom, there's not the vastness to see more accurately a bigger picture.

He says, when we know that people's suffering is avoidable, our empathy for their inability to extricate themselves leads to an even more powerful compassion. But if that's not balanced with the vastness of emptiness, we really can fall into a quality of hopelessness, of despair. Can you relate to that? Sometimes it's not even thinking people's suffering is avoidable, but just the vastness of how much suffering there is in this world. When I'm trying to process all that, I can't. Really, if I think I should be able to fix it, or I should be able to be present in the midst of all of it without flinching away—it's easy to fall into despair.

So you can see how the two naturally balance, but they are two sides of the same thing. The wisdom of not-self, of emptiness, and the ceaseless responsive quality of compassion—both need each other for the vastness and the profound nature of them. Luckily, through our practice, they do grow together. I just want to talk a little bit about each of them and their balancing.

Recently, I was in Fairfax early in this retreat, and I was early for a meeting I had with somebody. So I was just hanging out in this little Tibetan store there, and they were playing the Om Mani Padme Hum chant. It was very peaceful and pleasant being in there, so I hung around longer than I normally would. In the back, they had lots of different statues—different Taras and Buddhas and this and that. I've seen a million statues. I don't usually buy stuff like that at all. But this one green Tara just really spoke to me.

Green Tara is one of the manifestations, the expression of wisdom and compassion, of compassionate action—the green Tara woman, a Tibetan manifestation of compassion. I just loved it, but it was expensive

and I didn't buy it. I went away and thought about it, and it kept coming up for a few days, so I went back and bought it. I have it now sitting in the teacher room.

I didn't really think it through very much—I just liked it. But now I've been looking at it every day, and I realize what I like about it. Well, what my mind's projecting into it, right? It's a statue. But what I like about it is that, to me, this particular statue really does manifest this union of equanimity, this serenity of emptiness, the wisdom of that, with the capacity to respond as appropriate.

If you know the iconography, the green Tara is sitting in meditation, but one foot is resting on a lotus so that when there's some compassionate action that needs to happen, she can just stand up right away and go do it. But it's not like a woman sitting there all leaning forward, "Okay, is there something I can do? Let me go help." It's completely serene—like in deep meditation, no sense at all of being pulled out or bothered by anything. A little bit the way Guy described Buddha Dasa last night: really present, but everything's just coming and going in the field. And the eyes are open, so it's also not this sense of meditation where we pull in and the world's a little bit of a bother. No separation—that's really what I get out of it. The deep compassion, the deep serenity and peace of emptiness, with the foot out to respond when it's appropriate. But not looking for trouble either. I really like that sense of balance.

This is from Padmasambhava, quoted from *The Words of My Perfect Teacher* by Patrul Rinpoche. I'm sure you've heard this before. He's talking about how the view is the most important thing—the view of emptiness, of freedom, of not-self. However, he says, do not let your actions slip in the direction of the view. If it does, you will fall into the mistaken views of demons prattling on about how goodness is empty, evil is empty. That's the same thing about falling into emptiness.

It doesn't matter what I do. Good is empty, evil is empty, everything is empty. He says don't let your actions slip in the direction of the view. But on the other hand, don't let your view slip in the direction of action either, or you will be caught in materialism and ideology.

So does that make you crazy? Then you have to like... but if you're thinking about how to do it, forget it. It's not something we think about or figure out. "Now I'm going to hold the view, but I've got to keep my actions in check." No, that's just thinking. Trust in the sincerity of our motivation and trust in awareness. The clarity and the balance of these two arise naturally if we're just paying attention.

Padmasambhava continued, and this is the famous quotation: "My view is higher than the sky, but my attention to my actions and their effects is finer than grains of barley flour."

And that's exactly what we're cultivating—the steadiness of mindful awareness, or all the different ways we talk about it. Guy was speaking today about resting in the heart and just seeing what pulls us out when we don't need to be pulled out. That's the view of emptiness. But our attention to our actions is so present and sensitive and careful—our actions and their effects.

If it's just the view—"it doesn't matter, it's all empty, whatever I do"—you just cause suffering because you

don't realize... even though you didn't treat someone well, "that's your problem." That's not the view higher than the sky. So action, respect for cause and effect, remains as fine as grains of barley flour. But as I said, the natural effect of understanding emptiness is compassion.

Just a little example, if you can relate to this. The times when you've had moments—and I know you all do, many—as Guy said, just the moment of real presence, what I would call the purity of mind, heart, nothing special. Maybe it's on one of those frosty mornings and you're just standing there looking at the frost, but not with clinging, and it just brought you into a sense of... *ahhh*. I saw people standing like that when I was walking up the hill the other morning, and I could feel it right away. Oh yes, just this.

So that sense of *just this*, but with pure presence. Not wanting anything. And in those moments, you're not thinking about yourself. You're not comparing. "Is this moment of presence, is this frost as nice as it was yesterday?" It doesn't make any sense. Just this. Or you're having tea, you're taking a step, and in those moments it doesn't matter what—you know what I mean, I can see you understand.

In those moments, can you imagine doing something harmful in that space? Could the thought even arise? Just in that moment, someone walks by and you think, "Look at that jerk"? It just doesn't arise.

Sometimes people say they're afraid of opening to this awareness that doesn't care, because then what if we don't pay attention to our actions? What if we do hurt people? This is our worry mind, not coming from actually trusting the experience in that moment.

And this again is from Padmasambhava. Someone once asked him, "Once we've realized emptiness, does it still harm us to commit negative actions?" Padmasambhava says, "Once you realize emptiness, it would be absurd to do anything negative." Absurd. You can't even imagine it. The thought doesn't arise.

That's actually the beauty of it. We don't have to make ourselves perfect. The perfection is naturally part of the pure mind. We just have to learn to trust it, to recognize it, more and more and more.

How compassion manifests in terms of speech or action or thoughts is very different for each one of us, and that's a whole different question. There's not a particular way it should manifest. But notice those moments of peace, of clarity, and the fact that nothing—it's absurd to even think anything negative. And notice how that's a different experience from a subtle kind of near enemy of it, like the near enemy of equanimity, which is, "Yeah, that's right, it's pretty, everything's empty, nothing matters, it's all coming and going"—and it's just a little bit disconnected. It's like, "I don't care." It's not so much that awareness doesn't care; it's more like *I* don't care.

I'm not here, so I don't care, and whatever happens, I'm sorry for their suffering and I'm sorry for mine. Oh well, it'll all take care of itself in the end when the world blows up. No, that's my New York mind.

But you can feel the difference. You can feel the difference. It's both subtle and worlds apart. And we can start to notice it for ourselves and really trust the purity and the natural expression of it. It's not

something we're creating with our personality or that we need to create or that we can create or that we need to hold onto. We don't need to prove we're a compassionate, good person. This is natural. Our job is just the moment-to-moment awareness that allows for perception to clear enough to actually recognize things the way they are.

In terms of our mindfulness practice here, in terms of how we live our life, it's also true that compassion as an intentional response of the mind, of the heart, is developed and cultivated by the way we pay attention. By the deliberate focusing of our thoughts on, say, the compassion practice—shifting the intention of mind from ill will or cruelty to compassion.

Here's the Dalai Lama again, talking of course about bodhicitta, which is the biggest kind of compassion—the awakened or noble heart, kinship with the suffering of all beings, that sense of motivation to awaken in order to bring freedom to all beings, to benefit all beings. That basically is compassion. And when the Dalai Lama talks about how it develops, he says it develops this empathy with beings, this deep aspect of compassion, through deep insight into what suffering is.

And guess how we get that? This is still from the Dalai Lama, not me. Guess how we get that? It arises by being present with our own experience. Nowhere else.

As we open into our own experiences of suffering—he's not saying our experiences are only suffering, but when we are experiencing suffering—that willingness and the wisdom that gives us that willingness to be present with our own suffering, then compassion naturally begins to deepen. Compassion strengthens from just being present with our own suffering to a sense of empathy and connectedness with other beings. So it moves from the personal to the universal.

I know from talking to people here and at other retreats that this is something quite a few of you have actually experienced. It's not really that esoteric. A sense of whatever your particular suffering could be—it could be a headache, it could be feeling grumpy, it could be that you're hungry, it could be really strong physical pain, whatever it is. Grief, sorrow.

And first we fight it. We do all the numbers of how to be mindful to make it go away. We know all of those tricks. And then when we finally say, okay, I'll really open to it—but still in the back of our mind—okay, if I open to it, it'll go away. Until finally there's no other option. There's nothing else you can do, and it isn't going away. You know even if you leave, it won't go away. So then the mind just has to let go and just touch it. Just touch that heart of grief or that physical pain or the aversion in the mind or the sorrow or the grumpiness, whatever it is.

There are times when just by really opening with complete self-abandonment really, surrender, tenderness into that particular suffering in whatever way it's manifesting—so often people find it's my story at first. My particular history, my memories, my physical pain, my worry about the future, whatever it is. But as the awareness just continues to touch, to be with it, often it just naturally moves into a sense

of: oh, so many people in the world experience this.

And it really moves at that moment when you've really hit compassion, when actually the suffering is still there but the state of mind that's touching it is really that beautiful state, that brahma vihara of compassion. Where the personal, our personal dukkha, our personal suffering becomes like a representative of the universal. And really it always is. Each of us is just a particular conglomeration, representative of the universal. So we have our stories, but grief is the grief of the world. Physical pain, the pain of the world. Loss, sorrow, sadness, grumpiness, whatever it is. There's nothing that really only I, the only person who ever suffered this.

It feels like it. We can feel so alone in our suffering sometimes. That's actually a big thing about it. Once I was in the hospital for some days, caught up in my own little story. And then after a few days I started to open. I was in a room with three other elderly women. And I just thought, oh, look at these ladies.

They're really suffering. And then I thought, how many rooms in this hospital? How many people just in this hospital? How many hospitals in this city? How many cities with how many hospitals just in this country? I mean, it just goes on and on and on. It's mind-boggling.

And so that's not to diminish one's own suffering. Rather, it's that opening into the suffering of the world. This is really what I think the Dalai Lama is talking about—where the willingness to bear witness with courage, with kindness, to be present in the midst of our own difficulties, our own suffering, becomes the avenue into empathy with beings, the avenue into this depth of compassion.

Do you hear how in that is also the sense of not-self? It's not about a little separate self. The compassionate self naturally opens into a sense of communion with beings, not separate individuals.

In terms of our practice—and I don't just mean on retreat, but since we're talking about retreat—this is why the difficult times, the times when everything isn't going the way you think it ought to be going, are so important. We say that, and I'm sure people think, "Yeah, you just say that to keep us here, to keep us going through another day. Oh yes, that's really the best time of retreat." But it's so, so important.

Whatever's arising in this moment, as I was saying before, yatha bhuta—it's the effect of innumerable causes and conditions. It's arising right now and cannot be changed. We can't go back in a time machine and change the causes so this moment is different. It's here, it's over, it's this. You could say that's the result of past actions. But how our mind and heart meets this moment of experience right now—that's present moment action. That's the seed of present moment karma.

So the most beautiful thing could be arising, the most boring thing, the most painful suffering mental state or physical experience. When, just for that moment, it's met with the clear intention of mindfulness or compassion, just compassionate acceptance—that's what's being cultivated in the moment.

Really, it's not about getting rid of or looking for trouble either. But it's also not about trying to eliminate

these unpleasant experiences so there's smooth sailing, and that becomes the proof that our practice is progressing. Rather, how the heart-mind, how the moment of mind and the factors within it, meets this moment of conditions as they arise and change and vanish—that is the path.

This moment of mindful presence, when we're not judging, when we're not putting anything extra on it, has just that quality of acceptance. It may not be what you actively feel as compassion, but it's this total accepting presence that can see clearly what is. That is both the expression of wisdom and compassion and also the further cultivation, the further development of wisdom and compassion—just that ability. We can't always do it, but the willingness to surrender into this moment with clarity and without fighting. It's what we've been talking about the whole time, so I don't have to elaborate. But to recognize that this is both the manifestation of wisdom and compassion and also the further development of it.

As Ajahn Sumedho said once, years ago, the suffering of our life, our normal life, is all we need to be enlightened with. And I would say it's all we need for the development of deep compassion. We don't have to think we need to save the world. I mean, it would be nice if we could. Even the Buddha couldn't save the world. We do what we do, which is our own particular path. But how this moment is being met, what's the quality of consciousness meeting this moment—that's really the place where all the awakening and all the confusion is happening, right here.

Retreats are so important, and we don't always get a good sign saying, "Great, you met this moment with wisdom and compassion. Good, you're that much further along." Unfortunately, we often don't even know. You can be in those spaces—I've talked to people about it, and I've shared that I've been there too—where you're just in some psychological or physical suffering. It seems like it's going on and on. You recognize it, you can see your mind getting caught, you can see how it's getting caught. And it's still getting caught. You can feel that it's caught, and you're getting aversive to the fact that it's caught, and you're getting despairing that it's caught. Then you get up and go through another day, and it started out okay, but then here it is, caught again. And you think, "Why am I doing this? What is the purpose of this? This is insane." It feels like you're spiraling downward. We get so lost in the reaction to getting caught.

And you also can't chalk up every moment of mindfulness. You don't really know how many moments there's actually mindfulness and compassion meeting it, because it still feels lousy. You don't think, "Great, that was a moment of compassion with this being caught. Good, one score on the compassion side. Okay, three strokes on the getting caught side." It doesn't work like that. You're in it, you're in it, you're in it. For six weeks, you're in it.

Who knows how long? And then, like for me, sometimes I'd come out, and you don't come out and go, "Oh, now I see—I've burned through that one." You don't. But somehow later you realize... you know what? When this comes up, it's got a lot more holes in it. It's a lot more transparent. It's not catching me so much. And you can't say when that happened. But the quality of wisdom and compassion has developed so much just by that willingness to keep showing up.

We don't get self-confirmation because it's not about self-confirmation. It's about the abandoning of the need for self-confirmation. That quote from Dogen that I've already said two or three times that I love: you may not necessarily know about your own enlightenment because it's not a self-confirmation process.

This sense of how we pay attention—I think James said this from the Buddha: whatever one frequently thinks about and dwells upon will become the inclination of the mind. So when you're noticing getting caught, you're just noticing all the negative. But you're not noticing how often what the mind is dwelling upon is mindfulness, is acceptance, is really some level of compassion and wisdom—because we're so selective in our perception toward what we don't like. Notice these others. That's what Guy was saying last night too.

And so we don't need to look for huge experiences. And it is a real exercise—well, you see how hard this practice is—an exercise in moment-to-moment trust and faith, not just on retreat but in our whole life. I keep trying to point all of us to recognize these moments of intrinsic purity, of freedom, of goodness—and that compassion and love and wisdom naturally arise without our having to do it. We keep pointing to that because it really takes a great deal of faith, of confidence in the truth, in your own understanding, to keep on showing up.

You see how hard it is here, and it only gets harder in our daily life where so much stuff is bombarding us. And so to have the confidence—okay, I just have to meet this. I don't have to fix it all. But to keep showing up, and trust that the wisdom and compassion are continuing to develop. It takes a lot of confidence because life is sometimes so hard.

And in terms of our best ideas about acting in a compassionate way in the world—I would imagine, without knowing everybody, just people that are dedicating their lives to awakening, to practice, as you are here—basically, you're pretty decent people. Pretty much the people that can spend this amount of time here, you know, you like compassion. You're into love. You'd like to help people. We have a deep commitment. But as we see, the mind is not so tractable sometimes. And the world doesn't always go along with our plans. I don't know if you noticed that. The world tends to not behave—never mind the world, other people—tend to not behave in the way that we would like them to.

And so with the best of intentions to act, to really do good, to act from compassion towards ourselves, towards others—if we don't keep finding in ourselves, keep coming back to our motivation, our internal motivation, and the faith and confidence that feeds it, and the wisdom that feeds it, it's just really easy to get sidetracked.

So basically what I'm saying is that compassion, supported by wisdom, really needs to come from the inside out. It's a matter of our deepest motivation and intention arising from wisdom, rather than trying to figure out how to act what we think should be the compassionate way to act and then trying to do it. We have to work first at really cultivating, really seeing how compassion comes from our understanding, from our deep inner intentions.

We see in the world all the time where activists or people who are really trying to do good end up getting really bitter, or there's so much arguing about different views—even though both views come from people that want to help. But so much attachment to views, and the mental states that can get fed by that, are ones of anger and hatred and really fighting with each other. It can really get out there. You know, when people who are anti-abortion—so they're pro-life, right? Everyone else is anti-life, but they're pro-life—and then people who are pro-life kill doctors who perform abortions. It's like, you know, it's crazy.

We can sit here and say it's crazy, but that way of "I really want to help" and getting so fastened onto the view and missing the fact that our intention has changed, that it's not really compassion—in the moment, it's actually anger. And this is where our willingness to be present with our own suffering without blame, but with this level of honesty, of integrity with our experience—this is what the practice requires. This is what all of you are doing all the time. We wish it were otherwise, but actually it's like this. This is how I'm really feeling. That is wisdom.

And so it takes this real commitment—a commitment to honesty and compassion, and purifying our own heart and mind and intentions.

Let me read a couple of examples that really inspire me. One is Martin Luther King, who says it so clearly: "Nonviolence means avoiding not only external physical violence, but also internal violence of the spirit."

You not only refuse to shoot a man, you refuse to hate him. That's the level of real compassion, of real clarity of intention.

Or Daw Aung San Suu Kyi, who said she's surprised that people think she's so extraordinary, because she says, "I'm just very simple. I have very ordinary attitudes towards life. If I think there's something I should do in the name of justice or in the name of love, then I'll do it. The motivation is its own reward."

That's kind of like the Green Tara movement. You act from the clearest motivation you can, knowing that we cannot control results. We can't control how other people respond, even when we act with the clearest intention and motivation. We may not see the whole picture. And still, how do we stay open and connected? It has to come from our own understanding, our own wisdom—both of emptiness and uncontrollability—and the importance of compassion as a sense of connectedness with beings.

We can't just do it as an idea. This, again, really inspires me. It's coming from the autobiography of John Lewis, who was a congressman from Georgia for twenty-something years, representing Atlanta. But back in the early sixties, he was a student in Nashville and one of the original students who started the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee. They were doing the Freedom Rides and were really committed to nonviolent action for integration. They were taught by a man named Jim Lawson, who had studied Gandhian principles of nonviolence. Very, very courageous people.

This is from his autobiography, and he's talking about what nonviolence really means to him:

"One of the most fundamental principles of the Gandhian notion of satyagraha—nonviolent action—satyagraha really means 'truth force.' And that's really what he's talking about: that it is not just a technique of achieving specific goals, it's not just a tool to achieve unity and freedom in the world around us. True satyagraha, as Gandhi taught it, is about a fundamental shift inside our own souls. It's rooted in the achievement of inner unity, of inner freedom, of inner certainty. It's a place we find within ourselves, a calm, sure place. And once found, that place is not swayed or disturbed by the thousands of details of the world around us that bombard us every day."

Doesn't that sound just like how Guy was talking about Ajahn Buddhadasa last night?

But then he's not just talking theoretically, because as I said, he was one of the freedom riders, he was beaten up often, he was really on the front lines for years of this struggle. And as he goes on, he says:

"This is a difficult concept to understand. It's even more difficult to internalize. But a heart that holds no malice towards the inflictors of his or her suffering has everything to do with the way of nonviolence. We're 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 and embraces the hateful and the hurtful. It is a love that recognizes the spark of the divine in each of us, even in those who we might call our enemy. This sense of love realizes that emotions of the moment and constantly shifting circumstances can cloud that divine spark in anyone. 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."

That level of understanding—it can't be an idea. It's really a transformation on a deep, deep level of our understanding of ourselves and the world. He's saying an ability to see deeper into a person. So it's not uniquely Buddhist, obviously. He's deeply Christian. But the truth doesn't have a label on it.

And clearly this is not an easy thing. So to come back to what I was saying earlier: we don't need to look for huge experiences to test ourselves. Moment after moment, the experiences of our life—this is where we really look. Rather than trying to be compassionate from the outside in, we start inside and let our understanding reflect in our actions.

And it can be really very simple. As the Dalai Lama said, to trust in the sincerity of one's pure motivation. The world is complex, and we don't always have all the information, and we can't control results. Can we still stay open with ourselves, with other beings, when it didn't go the way we think it should? Can we not get into blaming ourselves?

An example that comes to my mind: if you've ever been the health care proxy for someone who's aging and ill with a little dementia—which I was with my siblings, for both my parents—you have to make decisions. Even if you've talked about it with them ahead of time and you think you know all their wishes,

the situation is always different, more complicated. You can't possibly go through every conceivable alternative while they still can make the decision. And then you always have to make a decision that you didn't know what it was going to be. And it always has to be in a hurry. And you have as much information as you have, but not all of it. What would they want? What would be the least suffering decision?

And you make the one that you think is most in line with their wishes, but you can't know—even doctors can't know all the medical ramifications of what's going to come from that decision.

So often we would make a decision. And the siblings have to agree—that's another thing. But we'd make the decision, and that wasn't too bad in my case; we would usually agree. And then there'd be some other medical thing that would happen, and the decision that seemed to be the most compassionate, the one that would cause the least suffering, would turn into something that added two weeks of a different kind of really seemingly unbearable suffering—suffering that wouldn't have happened if you'd made a different decision.

How do you stay present and open with compassion for yourself, with compassion for them, with compassion for the doctors, and awake in that? We can't control circumstances. It's not about getting the result we want. It's about the sincerity of our motivations. Our wisdom—the wisdom of emptiness, the wisdom of the conditionality of things—is what gives us that vastness and strength.

If it's all about me doing the kind thing, making the right decision, making it all good for somebody else, that's just not going to last very long. It's going to crash and burn as soon as things don't go right, as soon as I'm in a grumpy mood when I should be doing the compassionate thing. But when it's bolstered, supported by the understanding of not-self and the vastness of emptiness and the fact that everything's just coming and going—conditions coming together—and my decision is part of the conditions but not all of them, we can stay open. We can stay present, or more present. We show up again when we go away.

One of my teachers, Sayadaw Tejaniya—a couple of years ago, he's a character. If you met him, you wouldn't think, "Oh, what a wonderful, compassionate, loving being," the way you might with some Tibetan teachers. Tejaniya is great, but he's not like that. He's like a character. That's why I like him.

A couple of years ago, he was supposed to come to the States and Europe and do some retreats, and he canceled everything. It was because of some really weird political stuff going on in his monastery. Not just in Burma—the country has horrible politics, and it reflects sometimes in what goes on in monasteries, just so you don't get too idealistic about what can happen there.

I don't want to go into the whole thing, but basically, another abbot—Tejaniya is the main teacher, and his teacher, Shwe Oo Min, who is revered in Burma, had appointed him to be the teacher. But he wasn't the abbot. The abbot is the head monk, kind of the organizational person. He's usually the most senior monk. It's rare that the main teacher would not be the abbot.

So of course, over years, there came to be some friction. The abbot basically wanted more power, more recognition, and he started getting really weird and doing strange things—trying to get control of the money that the lay people organized, telling yogis they couldn't come, making them leave, not letting them see Tejaniya. It was just really bizarre and felt awful.

I wasn't staying there; I was staying somewhere else, but I'd go chat with Tejaniya and he'd tell us what was going on. As it got weirder and weirder, some of Tejaniya's supporters bought land nearby for him to start another place. I said, "Well, why don't you just go there?"

He said, "Shwe Oo Min, who he reveres—this is his place, and he wants me here. I'm not just going to cede it. I'm not going to abandon it as long as I can be here."

But he was hardly doing any teaching. He was just staying in his house. And the other abbot was making things really uncomfortable and negative—bad-mouthing, all kinds of bad stuff going on. The other abbot was also talking to the lay group that oversees the monastery and the senior monks, saying all this bad stuff about Tejaniya.

I said, "Why don't you go back and tell them this other stuff that's going on?"

He said, "No, I don't want to add more akusala to the situation." Akusala means unwholesome. He was just watching his mind. He said, "I'm not going to go with an unwholesome mind and bad-mouth people. I really trust that whatever needs to happen will happen."

The other thing that was interesting is he just loves watching his mind. He said, "On the other hand, it's really interesting. This is like an exam for my mind. How does my mind deal with this? With all this negativity, with all this stuff being taken away—I'm just really fascinated to see how it goes, how my mind deals."

He really couldn't leave, because if he left, the other guy would take it over. So, long story short, after some months when it was really getting bad, some senior overseers of the whole monastic system—monks up in Mandalay—came down, checked out the whole scene, and they had the power to decide: this guy or this guy.

And so just going around talking to everyone, I mean, it was obvious. So the other guy's gone, Tejani is in charge, and now he's the abbot and the whole place is completely different. But I was really impressed by that, you know—the deep motivation: "I'm not going to add more akusala to the situation." Because all he had to do was just say the truth. But going looking for people to put the guy down? That's not the same as passive indifference.

Because when the time came and the monks came to check out what was going on, he told the truth. He wasn't just giving up. It wasn't like, "Okay, never mind, I'll leave." He was staying there, but just not adding more akusala. I was quite impressed by that.

And so that quality of commitment—in whatever way it shows up in our own life, it can just be little things. It doesn't have to be an amazing,
everyone's-so-impressed-with-the-compassionate-work-that-we're-doing kind of thing.

Sylvia tells a story that I really like, about herself. Some years ago, she was at a luncheon where they were all sitting at different little tables, and she was at a table with some people she didn't know. And they were just doing kind of gossip and putting down—you know, just criticizing everything and putting down other people and whatever. She's sitting there feeling uncomfortable, thinking, "What should I do? Should I join in, to kind of be part of things?" That didn't feel right. "Should I give a little rap on wise speech?" That didn't really feel like it would go over too well.

So then she did—and this is what I love, it's so simple—she just started talking, and as you know her, she just happens to be a very positive person anyway. She just started saying true but wholesome things. Like, "Oh, this chicken salad's really quite tasty, isn't it?" You know, little simple stuff. But wholesome. Wholesome and true. And she said in not that long a time, it really changed the tenor of the conversation.

I've tried that sometimes when I remember. And it's really true, because basically goodness feels better. We appreciate it more. We don't even realize we're falling into negativity. That's an act of wisdom and compassion. It doesn't have to be an amazing thing. So we just show up however we show up. We don't know how it's going to turn out.

It may turn out that our whole life changes from doing the obvious. One teacher calls it just doing the obvious. I have a friend who, after Katrina, didn't have a job—he was between jobs. He thought, "Well, I'll just go volunteer for Habitat for Humanity for a few weeks." How long ago was that? Five years. He's still there. Habitat for Humanity hired him. He's living in New Orleans, working really hard. He doesn't like New Orleans—he's a real Boston kind of a guy. He's not a party guy, and this is a party city. He goes, "I'm in AA. I don't want to be partying." But he's down there just serving, and really happy to be doing it.

We never know. We never know. So we just do the obvious. Take that little step off the lotus when there's something that presents itself to do. And when there's not, just really resting at ease in whatever arises, with wisdom and compassion.

So I'll just end with this. From Master Sheng Yen, who was a wonderful Chan master—he just died, was that last year or the year before? He was talking about how the sense of no-self, the understanding of no-self, transcends subject and object. But one clearly knows how to respond or behave—doing the obvious. And this is his way of saying it: something arises. These are his four steps.

Face it. Accept it. Handle it. Put it down. I love that. Face it, accept it, handle it, put it down. It's over.

At the relative level, our noble heart is felt as kinship with all beings. At the absolute level, we experience it as groundlessness, or open space.

So let's just sit for a minute.

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