Compassion and Mindfulness

Carol Wilson · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Carol Wilson · 1:00:36

Tonight the topic I want to share about is compassion—just sharing some thoughts, really reminding us all about compassion. Generally, it's a good thing.

I've been saying a lot that mindfulness doesn't care. It's really very freeing when we realize that whatever's arising, mindfulness can be with it without being damaged or stained, without preference, without making a big story of "me" around anything. That's incredibly liberating when we not just intellectually know it, but when we experience it.

And yet, to our intellectual minds, that understanding can seem troubling—this sense that in some ways nothing matters. Everything matters, but nothing matters. Mindfulness doesn't care. We think, "Hmm, I'm not sure that's really the wisdom I signed up for." The heart-mind of no clinging, which is really one of the Buddha's descriptions of freedom, isn't particularly juicy when we think about it. Which is good—juicy isn't particularly helpful. But the idea that mindfulness doesn't care can lead our associations into a sense of disconnect, a kind of not-caring that has a tinge of distance, a tinge of passivity, or of nihilism.

Of course, the freedom of the heart and mind that's not clinging, the mindfulness that doesn't care, isn't about taking us out of the world of connection or out of caring for other beings. But it's a different kind of caring.

The phrase that's been going through my mind for the last three days is just that one line from the poem by T.S. Eliot, from "Ash Wednesday," where he says, "Teach us to care and not to care. Teach us to sit still." To me, that's a great pithy description. The not-caring is really the essence of understanding selfless emptiness—that no experience can be held to be existing separately as about me or mine. Mindfulness doesn't care, and so it can be present. We can be present with all things equally, but not equally disconnected—equally connected.

Out of that lack of obsessive, exhausting, relentless self-referencing for every sense contact that arises—have you noticed that? It's exhausting. Totally exhausting. Everything that happens has to refer back to me. It's sort of like six degrees of Kevin Bacon, only it's more like two degrees: how many thoughts before it refers back to you? Not many. It's fun if you can laugh at it. But mostly we're believing it, we're hating it or loving it or buying into it. It's exhausting. Don't believe me—check it out.

When our heart, our mind, when the energy of consciousness is not bound up in this relentless self-referencing, when awareness is equally present with whatever's arising, resting at ease in whatever arises, then the natural response of the awakened heart and mind, the appropriate response in the face of

suffering, is compassion. Because when we're not so concerned about me, me, me in that sense of separation, then when there is suffering or pain in ourselves or another, rather than the flinching back of "Oh no, I can't handle this" or "This is wrong"—there's presence. The natural response of the awakened mind and heart is to be present with whatever's happening. And if there's suffering, compassion is the natural response.

So it's two sides of the awakened heart and mind: the non-clinging, the non-constructing about "me," and that allows for the clear seeing of things as they are. Teach me to care and not to care. The not-caring is the emptiness, and the caring isn't a caring about me and you as what you mean to me, but the spontaneous, impersonal, yet very tender caring for life as it presents itself.

Because there's wisdom, and we're not blinded by our self-referencing, if there's something one can do to alleviate suffering, one tries to do it. Many times there's not something one can do, and one doesn't have to turn away or flinch back or say it's too unbearable, that I can't fix this.

One of the ways compassion gets confused in our daily life—the near enemy of compassion, you could say—is grief or pity or being overwhelmed. And before we get to that stage, often I find in myself, and someone was telling me they saw it in themselves the other day with really a lot of insight, that someone will be suffering and the impulse comes to do something about it. It might still be a good thing to do; it might be a way you can help that person. But if you really look inside yourself, the impulse is one of aversion. It's too unpleasant to feel this discomfort seeing you suffer. So let's, for God's sake, fix it. There might be something useful to do.

It isn't compassion. It isn't compassion.

That's why the real depth, the natural, spontaneous depth of true compassion comes together with this wisdom of emptiness, this wisdom of awareness that doesn't care.

So sometimes when people say, "How can I hold all the suffering in the world?" We can't even imagine all the suffering in the world. "How can I hold all my suffering? How can I hold the suffering of my friends?" And exactly—that wording is exactly why we can't. We don't hold anything.

When we're in our unseen or familiar concept of me and my heart, and this is just too much to be with—yes, sometimes that's our experience, of course. But when it's about me somehow holding, of course not. It's the I, that limitation of separation, that is actually in that moment the cause of the inability to be present. This isn't to judge or anything. It's just to explore and see how it works.

Because when we're holding to me, that limit of me creates immediately the sense of other. And then right away we have that duality and we can hold this much but not more. But we don't have to hold anything. Just as someone said to me, just let it pass through. Let it go through. The question: through what? Nothing. Nothing. Just passing through emptiness.

But when we can't see with that vastness, even though we may act with as much caring as we can—and we still should act. Let's not wait until we're all arhats before we do anything wholesome or helpful for somebody. I'm not saying that. But just to realize that when we're still caught in the delusion of self or the resistance to pain, we'll do the best we can. And please, we do do the best we can. But we can't see clearly the whole situation because of being blinded by clinging to sense of self, by self-cherishing. Those are kind of catchwords—don't make them too heavy.

Like this example I've used a few times, something I heard on the radio a couple of years ago about a new footbridge that had been built over the Thames in London. When it opened, people were walking over and it was some big deal. According to what I wrote down, a few hundred people were walking over the bridge and it started to shake. It started to sway to one side, which is very embarrassing for a newly built fancy bridge. So it was swaying, and each person acted in the most sensible way to stop the swaying, which was to move to the other side. Of course, all four hundred of them moved to the same other side, which just made it sway even more the other way.

It's that kind of sense—we're doing the best we can, but we can't quite see past this self-created boundary. And that's not a judgment, it's just to look and see the moments when that's not there.

The spontaneous action—like when you see a statue of Green Tara, a Tibetan statue. She's one of the embodiments of compassion. In the statue, she's sitting in meditation. The statue I have, her eyes are open, so there's this sense of connectedness, which to me is the essence of compassion: wisdom and connectedness. And one foot is always kind of up on a lotus petal, so she's sitting at ease in meditation, but always about to get up and do what needs to be done. Not planning it out, just the spontaneous expression of wisdom and connectedness. That's how compassion shows up.

So tonight I just want to talk a little bit about how we can explore this in our practice here, more than about action in the world, which is a whole other topic. But since we're in the middle of retreat, this is the way I want to talk about it tonight.

Sometimes thinking of compassion as the natural result in a moment of the awakened heart and mind can be really inspirational. Sometimes not. Sometimes it can just feel like it's so far away. And I also know there are times we can turn anything against ourselves, right, if there's enough negativity and self-loathing in the mind. We can turn the whole concept of compassion against ourselves.

Have any of you ever done that?

There's no way I could be compassionate. I want to be compassionate, but I'm just so selfish.

Say you take what I said earlier about looking at how many thoughts it takes before it gets back to me, whatever happens. And instead of laughing at it, you're having a bad day. So you look at that. In two thoughts, it's back to me. *I am the most selfish, uncompassionate, self-centered person in this room, on the retreat, on the planet. There's no way I could ever cultivate compassion. I came here to cultivate compassion,*

and instead these angry thoughts are coming up. I'm hopeless. It's horrible. And in fact, the longer I'm here, the more angry thoughts I'm noticing.

And if you come and tell us that, we'll say, "Oh, that's great. That means mindfulness is getting stronger, right?" And you walk out and think, *What a crock. These guys will say anything to keep us going.*

Okay, sometimes. But I don't think we outright lie. We do want to keep you going past the hardest patches. But I think pretty much what we say, we think it's true.

Sometimes also—and these are all different things our minds can do; we're not all doing all of it—but sometimes when we're cultivating vipassana here, most of what we talk about is mindfulness and insight. We've been doing loving-kindness practice once in the afternoon, and we'll be starting with karuna, compassion practice, tomorrow.

I know for me, just by the nature of how the mind works, it easily can set up duality. *Doing wisdom practice, insight practice—what about compassion? I can't do them both at once. So I do a little karuna, I do a little metta—may you be happy, may you be peaceful—but I really came here for insight.* And then Carol just said if I really understand emptiness, then I'll have compassion. *So let's get back to the insight. Push, push. That's really where it's at.*

Or you could do it the other way around too. *It's all about metta and compassion, and this other stuff—forget about it. If I open my heart completely, then wisdom will come.* And we make it like we're doing one or the other. That can get confusing. It's a completely unnecessary dualism.

Sure, in terms of a specific practice, you're doing vipassana or you're doing the form of metta or karuna practice. But in the days here, in what you've been going through with the mindfulness practice—not "just," I mean, this is really quite profound—there are times when pañña, wisdom, really feels like that's where the energy is. That's where the juice is. Not that you're having insights popping off every two seconds—I know you wish—but the mind is more noticing how things change, or more noticing cause and effect, or the first and second noble truth, or just investigating the five aggregates, or perception, or vedanā. Just in that modality of interest in what's happening.

And when that's happening, everything's cool, right? That's when it's going good, when there's interest.

What about those other times? Sometimes you have other times when it's not quite so interesting. When the suffering personality patterns emerge. Once in a while that happens, right? They show up. You notice them with mindfulness. They get stronger. You notice them with mindfulness. You get really caught. And then we start to just spiral.

Come in, I was caught in this thing for three days. I couldn't be mindful." We get frustrated. We get lost—whether it's fear or aversion or self-judgment. We get taken up by loneliness, or we're fighting sleepiness. You know all the different things. Fill in the blanks.

And isn't it easy at that time, somewhere in the back of the mind, to think, "Okay, they say I'm cultivating mindfulness through this. I'll say fine." But really, we feel like we're marking time until the practice really starts clicking in again. "So I'm being with self-loathing for three days. Yeah, that's... right. Okay. Yeah, I'm mindful of it. Yeah, I really see how that's cultivating mindfulness and wisdom. I have a lot of faith in that. Thank God Aaron talked about faith because I really forgot why I was here at all."

This happens over and over and over. And if we're just focused on insight in that way, if we've somehow put all our marbles into the idea of it's all about wisdom, we really do feel like we're just marking time until the practice gets good again, until it reemerges. We think, "Well, I only have two more weeks and these are three lost days. What am I going to do? Three lost days."

Well, this is not marking time. Marking time would be if you get in your car, go out, have a pizza, and go to the movies. That is a lost day in terms of practice, that is marking time. So a lost day is possible. I remember years ago, at a three-month retreat, somebody was so caught up in the World Series that they went to a motel so they could watch it. I call that marking time.

But when you're hanging out with this other stuff, when it's painful and you're suffering from it, but you're hanging with it—this is actually how compassion is being developed and cultivated in the moment. Compassion—I don't necessarily mean it as a huge, heart-opening emotion. It can be, but it doesn't need to be. Compassion really, one of the definitions, is the quivering of the heart in connection with pain, in connection with suffering. It's really just that sensitivity of awareness, of presence, of heart that doesn't have to run away and doesn't meet the difficulty with aversion, with clinging to me.

So just a moment: "Okay, self-loathing feels like this." We keep saying that over and over. "Give me a break. Self-loathing feels like this." But I'll try it because there's nothing else to do. And there's one moment—and I don't mean the lights go off and you have a huge insight and you're overwhelmed with love for the world. Just a moment where there's no greed, no aversion, no referencing back to self. Yeah, self-loathing feels like this. Just that sensitive presence for a moment—that's compassion. That's just the beginning of cultivating compassion. It's happening in the midst of our mindfulness practice. It's happening all the time. It's the furthest thing from marking time to really notice this.

The Dalai Lama, in talking about compassion—and of course he's the reincarnation of the bodhisattva of compassion, over and over—speaks about it as tender heart, noble awakened heart.

And of course, the Tibetan tradition talks about compassion taken all the way to the bodhisattva intention of wanting to awaken, not only for our own sake, but in order to awaken others.

But the Dalai Lama talks about the cultivation of compassion. We don't just sit back and wait. And he says two things really happen with this. The first is, how does it develop? Through deep insight into what suffering really is, the experience of suffering. And guess where we get that? That arises through stillness and wholeness by focusing on our own experience. As Ajahn Sumedho often says, your own experience of

suffering is enough to get enlightened with. We don't have to go looking for any extreme suffering. It finds you. It finds us. Our own suffering is enough for compassion to develop with.

And then the Dalai Lama goes on: as we learn to open into our own experience of suffering, the compassion strengthens into a sense of empathy and connectedness with the world, with all beings. In my language, I would say what's happening is that as mindfulness doesn't care, as awareness doesn't care, it's just present in that purity with suffering—then that self-referencing, that prison of self-referencing, isn't being created in that moment. The sense of separate artificial boundaries isn't being created in that moment. And so our own experience of suffering does broaden into a quite natural sense of empathy and connectedness with the world.

So really, we start here. We start where we are. We don't have to go work in some NGO or live in a favela in Brazil in order to really prove that we're compassionate. And it can feel, when we talk about compassionate action in the world—which, as I said, I'm not focusing on tonight—when we talk about compassion and our mind goes there, our intellectual mind, to the suffering in the world, the immensity of it... how much am I doing? And then it can easily come back to: here I am, sitting on my butt, thinking about my knee hurting, and "Oh, I'm cultivating compassion thinking about my knee?" We can turn it into real negativity. What am I doing? It's completely self-centered, blah, blah, blah. Notice that that's aversion.

Really starting to explore and see if it's true, what the Dalai Lama says—that compassion does begin to develop through learning to be with our own suffering, with wisdom, without pushing it away. That's why the difficult times in retreat are so important. As I said, our tendency is to just wait the difficult times out, to not realize that these are actually the jewels. We think the jewels are the big insights we have, because they make us feel great, we like them—but they last two seconds and they're gone. The difficult times, when we're willing to really meet them with presence, these are where the jewel of understanding can arise and deepen.

So just that willingness to bring the same quality of attention. The Dalai Lama again, when he was asked one time about what looks like such a lack of compassion in human society and what he thinks about that—because he always talks about our basic goodness—he said perhaps we just pay less attention to compassion and caring. We reinforce it less. Whereas in some sense, we tend to really embrace hostility and anger as emotional states. We get really involved in them, fueling and reinforcing them. If we were to give the same amount of energy, attention, and reinforcement to compassion and caring, they would definitely be stronger.

So part of our practice here in the difficult times is that by bringing this quality of pure, tender awareness, mindfulness, to the difficulty—your difficulty—we are reinforcing compassion, presence, acceptance.

So why don't we do that more? Why do we have to talk about it so much? If it really is a natural result of wisdom, the natural expression of understanding, why is it so difficult for us at times to be present with our suffering? I mean, when we go, "Yeah, well, it hurts. Who wants to be here where it hurts?" Right,

exactly. That's deep, deep, deep conditioning.

I can't talk about compassion without talking about the First Noble Truth that the Buddha spoke of. I want to mention that briefly because I feel the deep-seated tendency we have—which has been talked about, I think, by Pascal in the first talk—to move away from the unpleasant. We've talked about that a lot. You've all seen it. The body hurts, you can't get away from it, so we go into fantasy. Deep, deep conditioning. And we're sort of getting that it doesn't bring us happiness. But we're not really getting how being with suffering brings us happiness either, are we? It's kind of like, okay, there's just not really another option.

But Pema Chödrön, in a talk I was listening to, made a distinction I like. We tend to talk, when we're talking about compassion, about life in retreat, about being with the difficult. She said, what if we think about it not as learning to be with the unpleasant, or learning to be with suffering, but rather that at some point, we all come up against having to be together with that which we really don't want?

And it's more that I don't want this to be happening. Rather than saying it's bad or even unpleasant, the more accurate way of talking about it, as Pema is trying to say, is that we're with something we don't want. And that's not to blame, but to help us look back and see what's happening in the mind right now around this difficult experience that's creating the suffering.

So this is where I need to talk about the first noble truth. As you know, we will give a talk later on all four noble truths, but you're aware of the first noble truth, right? You've all heard that—the first noble truth being dukkha.

Now, often that's translated as suffering. And one of the reasons I don't personally think that's such a good translation, especially into English anyway, is the connotations that it brings. The first noble truth, when the Buddha talked about it, he said it's to be understood. And as soon as we say "suffering," unless you're in a really clear space, isn't it easy for just a little tinge of aversion to come in around that? Oh, the first noble truth of suffering. Great. Yeah. Right. Already we're not understanding it, because that's not what he's saying. The first noble truth is to be understood.

I could give a whole talk on this, but the way Bhikkhu Bodhi puts it—like one line to describe what the Buddha is saying in the first noble truth—is "the basic unsatisfactoriness running through our lives." That's Bhikkhu Bodhi's definition. It doesn't mean everything is horrible. There's plenty of beauty. There's plenty of pleasant feeling, and it changes, right? It's that it's basically unreliable, basically unsatisfactory.

And why is that a problem? Then you get to the second noble truth. It's a problem only if we're clinging to it and trying to make it be satisfactory—if we're thinking, "this shouldn't be happening."

So that's where I want to go in terms of seeing how compassion develops and what gets in the way of compassion, what gets in the way of our being present with difficulty—whether it's physical pain, whether it's emotional unpleasantness, whether it's loss, whether it's having to be together with what we don't like, whether it's having the pleasant go away. All these things happen, and that's just the way it is in this

world. Again, it's not rocket science if we look around, just like when I talked about impermanence. It's obvious, except somehow it isn't.

So in this realm of the first noble truth, on some very deeply conditioned level—not a place in the mind, but a habit of mind—there is the sense that some pains we can be with, some difficulties we can be with. But the ones we all hit in practice and in life, particularly here on retreat because it's magnified when you're looking at it, is that thing of "this is wrong." This is bad. What did I do wrong for this to happen? It shouldn't be happening.

We do that in life too, but particularly here. Often when you like your meditation and it changes—what did I do wrong? When the difficult stuff I was just talking about comes up, when you have to be with loneliness, when you have to be with despair, when you see old conditioning that's really painful, you think, "Well, I should be past this by now. Why is this coming up? What did I do wrong? I was so concentrated, and now this stuff is coming." It's all, as one yogi used to come and say to me, "going to hell in a handbasket." I have no clue what that means or what a handbasket is, but it gives you a sense.

And so the first noble truth—why did the Buddha say, of the four true things, if you understand these, you'll be awakened? He says there's a basic unsatisfactoriness running through life. He's not saying, "Okay, let's stop being happy. Let's get really depressed." No, the understanding of it frees our hearts and minds. The understanding of the first noble truth takes us out of delusion, takes us out of a relationship to this basic unsatisfactoriness—pleasant, unpleasant, neutral, change, difficult—takes us out of a relationship to that experience that's based in delusion and denial and confusion. That's where our suffering comes from.

And I think the reason that compassion develops from being with suffering—the reason we have to develop it, let me put it that way—is because our knee-jerk reaction is "let's get out of here," or "something's wrong." And also, don't we often, in times of suffering, feel even more isolated than before? Kind of alienated or shamed, like something to hide? You know how people often say, "I look around and everyone else is sitting like a Buddha"—and they even know it's not true, but everyone else is doing so well, and only they are lost. And that's kind of how we feel.

So the difficulty, the suffering—in this case I'm using suffering as unpleasant, difficult experience, which is what compassion arises in connection with—the suffering has the effect of increasing our sense of self-cherishing in a strange way, of limitation, of isolation, of aloneness. And it also strengthens the sense that something is badly wrong.

And in some subtle way—do you ever find this? I find it all the time in my meditation practice. Even though I totally know better, I somehow keep equating pleasant with right. And that's just the Buddhist teaching saying, no, we don't understand. Pleasant, unpleasant, neutral. Pleasant, unpleasant, neutral. The mind keeps changing every second.

So the First Noble Truth is to be understood—not to engender aversion, not to engender fear, not to serve as further proof of our strange separateness, of something wrong with us. But rather, it's something that is a commonality of all beings. So when we open to a moment of real difficulty and the mind is totally present, the heart is really present, that's why it can open into a sense of connection with all beings—because all beings suffer.

Ajahn Sumedho says he used to start talks in Thailand with, "Welcome, brothers and sisters in old age, disease, and death." And we are all brothers and sisters. Sometimes we experience wonderful stuff. Sometimes we experience suffering. It takes turns. But it's really a way of opening into tenderness for all of us.

But the delusion that comes when we don't really understand the First Noble Truth—and it's a profound understanding, not simple, I'm not meaning to say it's simple—the delusion is rooted in the misunderstanding, as Joko Beck says, that somehow I can hold myself separate from this painful and unwanted experience. Do you get a sense of that ever? Have you felt like that? If I could just get it right, I could watch it, but it's over there and I'm over here. I don't have to really feel it. And if we do it right, we'll stop it.

Even though you all know this—we've said it a million times and you even know it yourself—don't we often say, "Well, I was mindful of it, but it kept on happening"? Somehow mindfulness means it should go away. The pleasant stuff we're mindful of should keep happening, right? You don't say, "Oh, I was mindful and it went away." With the unpleasant stuff, we think mindfulness means it should go away. But no, it's just being here with it.

And it's such a deep habit that it leads into... we can't see clearly. We can get into real denial. But just this subtle aversion—I want to hold myself separate—means that in that moment the mind, the consciousness, the awareness isn't just connecting completely with the experience. It's a little bit pulled away. And that delusion and that aversion or ill will, as I said before, colors the perception. And then there's no way we can accurately perceive what's going on.

This is the Buddha: "Again Brahman, when one dwells with a mind obsessed and oppressed by ill will and does not understand as it really is the escape from ill will, on that occasion one neither knows nor sees as it really is one's own good, or the good of others, or the good of both."

We just can't see accurately—not even our own good. And so we can really get lost in thinking that the further I get away from this unpleasant thing, the better it is for me. Not seeing that that's just strengthening the tendency of aversion and denial and separation and alienation and suffering. And it can lead into total denial.

I think I mentioned the other night that I love denial. I just love it because it's such a powerful force. I read a book a few years ago called *Unquiet Ghost* about the author who went to Russia in the 1990s and was

interviewing people still alive who had been part of the gulags under Stalin—which was twenty to forty million people in the gulags. I think twenty million people died there. So many people were arrested. Family members were arrested for no reason. It was really like a reign of terror. And it was never talked about, of course, at the time, because all you had to do was say one bad thing about Stalin and someone would report you. That was it—you'd be in the gulag for ten years.

So Adam Hochschild went in 1990 and was just talking to different people who were still alive, and they could talk about it at that point, after the Soviet Union had come apart.

Anyway, it was a really interesting book, and in some ways it almost seemed like a meditation on the power of denial in the mind.

One thing he quoted—Adam Hochschild quoted George Orwell on what he called the courage of perception, what Orwell calls "the power of facing unpleasant facts." It takes a lot of courage for us to face unpleasant facts on a moment-to-moment basis, just here in our practice.

One example of how that played out in the period of Stalin—this is from the book, from talking to a lot of people. He said the people who tried to avoid arrest by lying low, by moving from place to place, by kind of hiding out, they actually had a pretty good chance of success. The arresting mechanism was really strong, but the searching and finding mechanism wasn't that strong. But people rarely tried to do that. Because despite mass arrests, almost everybody believed, "It won't happen to me."

He said people believed it because people deny bad news because it implies worse news. If I'm about to be arrested knowing I did nothing, it means the whole system has gone mad. And so people just thought, "It won't happen to me. It won't happen to me."

That sense of fear, or sometimes our absolute inability to face unpleasant facts, really leads into this deep habit of just not recognizing accurately what's happening. And that's so poignant and sad because accurate recognition, as we've been saying, is what frees our heart and mind from suffering.

So can we find in ourselves a willingness—and I think this is from Joko Beck too, I love this sentence—can I find in myself a willingness to rest in this confusing and painful situation? Again, just for a moment. Don't project it into the whole day, into your whole life, but just for a moment. If you're feeling sorrow or confusion or fear or pain and your mind is going, "No, what's wrong?"—just, can I find in myself a willingness to rest in this confusing and painful situation? Just now.

In that moment, that attitude is the practice of compassion. We're cultivating compassion by how we meet each moment of experience. What arises in a moment in our practice is the result of all the previous conditions—you could say the vipāka, the karmic result of all the previous conditions. In a way, it's just arising. The present moment habit that's being created is how that particular experience is met in the mind.

This is not to scare you; it's meant to be encouraging. Sure, sometimes we can see the habit of our mind, as I'm saying here with denial, is to meet unpleasant experience with "I'm out of here." And that's feeding the habit of fear and aversion and denial. But every time we go, "Can I rest? Can I just find the willingness to rest?" Or in the language we've been using, "Can I just meet this moment with kind awareness?" That seems like nothing much, but it is changing the whole habit of your mind. That is an actual manifestation and cultivation and development of the attitude of wisdom and compassion. That's why these moments are so important. It doesn't feel like much, but it's huge. It's huge.

And true compassion, karuṇā, really can only arise with connection. It's not an idea. I mean, we can have the idea, and that can help us have the willingness to rest in this painful and confusing situation. The idea can guide us. But the actual spontaneous compassion that arises—it only really comes with connectedness. We're just willing to be fully present with this without having any other reference point or assumption, just for an instant, just for a moment.

I want to give an example. This has kept going through my mind because it seems like a good example of how connection with a difficult, painful moment led to compassion. But I'm not 100% clear—I'm not sure it actually conveys it. So I'm sorry if it doesn't. But to me, it just happened recently and it really did.

When I was in Burma last month, several of us were visiting different places, offering some dāna, some support that many friends had given to offer. We had heard about a new school. Many kids can't afford to go to the government schools—I mean, there are so many, it's unbelievable. And many nuns and some monks have begun starting their own schools that local kids—both little nuns and monks, but also regular children—can attend for free.

It's amazing. We know some nuns who started a school three years ago just for the local kids, and they thought maybe a hundred would come. Now, three years later, there are over five hundred children. I could name you five schools in a ten-minute drive area that are like this. And they start with nothing. They do it on dāna.

They hire good teachers and pay them, just relying on receiving dana every month to cover the salaries. They don't even have decent buildings—just lean-tos. But anyway, there's a lot happening like that.

So we were seeking out some of these schools. We can't give a lot of money, but some—a couple thousand dollars at each place—and also perhaps tell some other friends who have greater resources. We heard about this one school that was way out in some remote area, and we went. The taxi driver we often traveled with knew us; he knew the monastery where we stayed.

We'd heard about this monk who'd started a school like this. We drove a long way, and it was really hard to find. The route took us through the poorest area any of us had seen so far—really crowded, way on the outskirts of Yangon. There were all these shaggy bamboo houses built over this really fetid, swampy water, just on stilts. The floors were bamboo slats with big holes in them. Even the taxi driver kept saying

in English, "Oh, they're so poor. They're so poor." It was just intense.

We got to the monastery and met the monk who was doing it. He was a youngish guy, early thirties, and he was one of these beings who just radiated goodness, you could say. He seemed like a bodhisattva. He had come from another area of the country because, he told us—one of us could speak Burmese, so we could talk with him—he just wanted to help the poor children. He was educated, with a Dhammacariya degree, which is what monks and nuns receive after studying the Pali scriptures for many years. To have one of those at thirty-three means he was really quite intelligent and quite assiduous in his studies. He'd come there and built this little school with a hundred kids.

We were really open to listening to him and talking with him because he was radiating so much sincerity and goodness and sweetness. But he lacked managerial skills, I must say, based on the state of his little monastery and school. It was right in this really poor area, and the place was so... I mean, we're used to poor, but this was just shabby. He told us how because of all this fetid swamp right around, in the rainy season—which is like three or four months a year—the water would rise this high.

He took us into the little shack where the young monks lived, the samaneras. They were like seven, eight, nine, ten years old. He would have these young boys become monks so they could stay there with him and he could take care of them because they didn't have anywhere else to stay. A lot of the other kids stayed at home. He said in the rainy season, the water rose up to the level of the beds they were sleeping on. It wasn't the rainy season, but it was just such a mess. And the latrine was nearby, and he said, "Oh yeah, in the rainy season, the water from the latrine flows..." You get the drift. It was just a mess.

Then he took us to the school, which was right there. The school was actually nicely built, and the kids were there, and he'd hired teachers. That was really where he'd put his first energy. But the whole place was just so pitiful. We all were—like I said, even the taxi driver was going, "Whoa, this is so much suffering."

But we were really somehow not shutting down to it. I think because we were so open to him, to his beauty, to his sincerity. And he was saying, "I'm out here and nobody knows I'm here. Please tell people about me." Because he, like all of these monks' and nuns' schools, subsists on dana. And he wasn't getting any. It was really at the end of nowhere. No one was going to happen on it by accident.

When we left, seeing again the state of the village, it really made an impression. We visited a lot of different schools and nunneries and monasteries, and we'd seen a lot of poverty. But this just really hit us all—both the goodness and the poverty and the lack of skill. Because some of it was just lack of skill. We've been to nunneries that were poor but neat and tidy. We've been to other nunneries that were poor and just a mess—like my friend said, "Some overwhelm is going on here."

So we left. And leaving, I could just feel it reverberating in me for a few days.

So that's just the openness to suffering. I'm not saying that's particularly compassion or wanting to help,

but just the openness. And I can see how that openness came from tuning into his goodness.

The next day or so, this is just a little thing, but I really noticed it. I don't think I would have normally been so open. I was in the monastery where we stay, and I needed help filling a big bottle of water—I can't carry it by myself. The guy who usually does it in the office wasn't there, so the nun called one of the workers. There's always construction work going on in these meditation centers. You might as well know that up front. If you ever want to go sit in Burma, there's going to be construction work going on, or loudspeakers, or both. That's just how it is.

So he was one of the construction workers. She called him over, and he came to help with the water filter—you have to do a certain thing, run the special filter and wait and do all this stuff. He was a young guy, probably early twenties. And I was just standing behind him, looking at him. I could see he was taking such care, because most of the time the locals there don't pay any attention to how the water filter works. They don't need it—they drink the water. But he was so meticulous and careful.

I was just standing there behind him, you know, because it's awkward. We can't talk and he's kind of shy with me. And I saw later that I was still really open from the experience the day before. Instead of just waiting or being lost in thought, I was tuning into him. That's the connection that allows compassion. And tuning in, I just saw how very simply he was really intelligent and really caring and really knew what to do. Then we had a little nice connection. He was a lovely guy.

And immediately, in a sense, I felt it—so many of the young people in Burma have nowhere to go. He's really smart. He clearly doesn't have any chance to go to university. He's working this crummy construction job, earning about two dollars and fifty cents a day. And he clearly has so much potential. Just that sense of connectedness, which on another day I wouldn't have really noticed. It would be like, yeah, another young guy who isn't really having much chance. It's a shame. But there wouldn't be that open-hearted connectedness. And I really credit that to really being there in the pain, in the sorrow the day before.

From that, we got the idea—I asked the nun about him, and she knew his whole story, of course. "Oh yeah, he's really smart. He's really good. He comes from this other state. He wants to learn how to drive." And then we thought maybe we could help him learn how to drive. Then they told us about another young guy who is only nineteen and really smart. He passed tenth standard. He should be able to go to university, but he has no money. He has to support his family. We had money that friends gave us. We could maybe support him to go to college. And it just kind of moved from thing to thing, just from the simplicity of being opened to suffering. We never know where it's going to show up.

I don't know if that communicates, but that to me was such a simple little act of connection. And it can actually have far-reaching effects, because then we just started looking around and seeing more young people. Some of them don't want the support. Some of them it's not feasible. Some of them it is. That one young guy—not the one I'm talking about, the one who was only nineteen—when we met with him and

talked to him about whether we could support him to go to college, the smile on his face was so wonderful. We all just were five feet off the ground, just from muditā, from sympathetic joy, that maybe some of our friends' money could help support him through college. Who knows what will really happen?

You never know. We never know. Compassion comes from very simple little moments of connection. It can come from very simple moments of connection with your own suffering, right here. That's really the point I want to make—because it doesn't stop with you.

When we're not, as Bankei, the Zen master from the 1600s in Japan, said, "Don't set yourself into confrontation with things, and then your primary being reveals itself in its true form." So just notice when you're feeling in confrontation with what's happening now. Instead see: can I find in myself a willingness to rest in this confusion, just for a moment? Just for a moment. And don't go looking for it, but you may find it happen. Looking for it—that gets in the way.

Notice how in that moment of real connection it opens up past your own particular story of suffering and begins to see that this is the particular experience of the universal experience of pain, or sorrow, or confusion, or loss. And that doesn't have to be overwhelming. That actually is the other side of seeing that we're not separate beings at all. We're not separate at all.

Vincent Van Gogh said once, "I wish that people could understand that the boundaries for compassion don't lie where the world draws them." And the boundaries for us don't lie where the world draws them. But it arises quite naturally, the sense of non-separation, just from touching our own suffering.

Tara Brach quotes Stephen Levine, who writes of a woman who was dying in terrible pain and feeling overwhelming bitterness. At the point at which she felt she could not bear the suffering and resentment any longer, she unexpectedly began to experience the pain of others—a starving mother in Ethiopia, a runaway teenager dying of an overdose in a dirty flat, a man crushed by a landslide and dying alone by the banks of a river. She said she understood that it wasn't her pain, it was the pain of all beings. It wasn't just her life, it was life itself.

And this is Pema Chödrön saying, "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." In the words of the 16th Karmapa, "You take it all in. You let the pain of the world touch your heart, and it turns into compassion."

Again, we don't have to try and hold all the pain of all the world. Our own pain is a representative of the pain of the world. And when we touch that, it turns into compassion. It naturally begins to move into the pain of the world.

I'll end with this one short quotation from Nisargadatta Maharaj—second only to the Buddha, and I don't disagree with that: "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."

Then the senseless sorrow of humankind—which includes you—becomes our sole concern.

Let's just sit quietly for a moment.

Thank you for listening.

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