Compassion: Natural Expression of the Pure Mind

Carol Wilson · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Carol Wilson · 58:35

So tonight, what I want to talk about is just sharing some thoughts about compassion—compassion as it is an expression of steady awareness, compassion as a natural expression of the pure heart, the pure mind, as we can explore it and experience it here in our practice.

What made me want to talk about this is mostly listening to people in the groups. Certainly a lot of what we all experience is difficult experience. That's at least fifty percent of most of our lives and a lot of the things that happen in practice. A couple of days ago in one group, the subject of compassion and metta came up. For those of you who aren't familiar with that term, metta is another state of mind and heart, translated into English usually as loving-kindness. It's a kind of friendliness, an open-hearted connection.

In the group, the discussion came up because one or two people were experiencing kind of spontaneous, strong compassion or metta just from the steady awareness. As the discussion revolved with all different people, there was a kind of surprise or finding it a bit unexpected that compassion was coming up so strongly in this awareness practice. For those of you who are sort of new to this style, one of the other kinds of practices that we teach, that we learn from our Burmese teachers, is the specific deliberate cultivation of metta, the loving-kindness state of mind, or of compassion. Those are specific practices that we do that are focusing, one-pointed practices. They work together with insight practice, with Vipassana, but they're not Vipassana. You can't do both at the same time.

I just got the impression—which could be completely wrong, as we all know; what we think we hear and decide it means often has very little connection to what was actually said or what the person meant—but anyway, I just wanted to talk about the fact that it's not like they're two separate things. It's not as if, wow, it's so strange if metta or compassion or appreciative joy or equanimity come up in the awareness practice when we haven't been really just cultivating that.

What I want to talk about, specifically compassion—just because you can only pick one, and it's very useful in terms of our experience here—is the natural expression of the pure mind, the pure heart, in the appropriate situation.

There are four attitudes of mind, attitudes of heart you could say, towards living beings that are often called the four divine abidings. They're these beautiful states of heart and mind.

One is metta, loving-kindness, which is just this open-hearted friendliness, connectedness—natural. It's

sort of like you'd feel if you go out and you're just in a nice space. You're not filled with aversion or greed. You walk out and say there's two little kids playing or two little puppies playing. It's just kind of like, oh, you just naturally feel a friendliness, right? Unless you're a real meanie. When you naturally feel that, that's just naturally metta. It's no big deal. It's normal and natural when the mind isn't clouded with greed, confusion, or all caught up in ourselves.

Compassion is that quality of connected mind, the response of the heart and mind—that same open heart and mind—when it meets the suffering aspect of a being. It's the empathy, the quivering of the heart, the openness and connectedness in the suffering.

If what we meet in a being with the same open, connected awareness is their happy aspect—they're having a lot of happiness and success—the natural response is mudita, appreciative joy. This is a great thing. You don't have to have great stuff happening yourself. Someone else can be really happy, and that can bring out the happiness in us. It's true. It's a great way to be happy.

And equanimity, which as an attitude Steve talked a lot about in terms of the subtlety of the mind, but also as a specific state of mind and heart in relationship to beings—it arises basically if there's something going on with a being, someone, that we really can't do anything about. Like knowing they have their own karma and we can't fix everything. So it's the mind that's really connected. It's not disconnected. Really connected but non-reactive in response to a being's situation.

As I say, they're all natural expressions of wisdom, natural responses of the heart and mind that is pure, even just pure in a moment.

The Tibetans have a way of talking about the nature of mind, dividing what doesn't really exist into three things that you can't really separate. But this is how it is that we talk, right? No wonder we're all confused. Anyway, the qualities of the nature of mind, you could say, depending on which angle you look from. When we're talking about whatever arises being known by awareness, and all objects being equal—awareness doesn't care, all objects are equal—that's looking at the emptiness aspect, meaning empty of a separate, self-existing, isolated self. It's all connected, the emptiness, all equal. But that doesn't lead to an indifferent disconnect, which is what our rational mind might think. Well, if everything's the same, and as we've been saying, awareness doesn't care...

Awareness doesn't care. What do you mean? I want to care. It's not a gray disconnected "who cares." It's that awareness doesn't get involved and reactive. So that side is looking at the emptiness.

Another quality is the naturally awake knowing aspect, sort of like that big mind we pointed to this morning where the sound arises and it's just naturally known. It's simply a natural quality of mind. It's not like you think, "Now I think a sound's going to come in a minute, so I better crank up the knowing so I can hear it." It just happens completely spontaneously. It's an amazing thing, but it's so common we don't even really look at it. So that's what we're examining.

And the third quality—the Tibetans say this third quality is called ceaselessly responsive. In other words, it's not just cooled out emptiness, whatever happens is known, never mind. But one of the four responses arises naturally in appropriate activity when met with the appropriate person. It's not like we have to go looking for it. And sure, most of the time our mind isn't quite in that pure state—we've talked about that a lot. But I just want to talk specifically about compassion as a kind of shorthand for all of these ceaselessly responsive beautiful states of mind.

Because it may seem sometimes like compassion is far away, like we're really having to work for it. And we're so overwhelmed when we experience a deeply loving or compassionate moment. It is kind of sad to me that it seems so far away and unfamiliar, and that we're much more friendly and at home with the big Ds, as we might call them—the defilements. We don't like them, but we're really at home with them.

And it just makes total sense, even in a rational way, that in any moment—not waiting until total awakening, but in any moment—when our mind is not clouded, when our awareness is not clouded by wanting, by aversion, or by "it's all about me," that relentless, obsessive self-referencing of almost every perception... Have you noticed that? And this isn't to judge. This is just to notice. You hear a sound and it goes, "Well, I hope people see I didn't do that." Everything. "Oh, the snow. Oh, it's going to affect me. It's going to be cold tonight." It's not a bad thing, but it's just the way our minds work.

And so this self-referencing often leads—not even in a big way, but in a little way—to a kind of calibrating, managing, figuring it out, making it comfortable for myself. It might come out of fear. It might come out of wanting. The first few days of a retreat—maybe you don't remember anymore, way back there with the dinosaurs, the first few days of this retreat—but you're kind of trying to manage it. Where are you going to sit in the dining room? Where's the best place? And who's going to sit near me? And who can I stand to sit near? And who do I not want to sit near? And what's the best time to eat? And what about my job? And where am I in the hall? Getting it all sorted out. It's little stuff, right? But how much air time does it take up? Everything is calibrated in terms of what does this mean about me and my comfort and getting through the retreat.

So when that drops away, even for a moment, it's such a huge relief. And there's all this energy that's bound up in that management that becomes available for connection with life.

for recognizing the bigger picture. You don't even have to think about it. It's just naturally the heart, the mind is more open, more connected, free from resistance and self—this kind of sense of self that separates us.

This isn't some big thing now: go out and get rid of sense of self. I'm not saying that. Just notice the moments, which I'm sure you have, when you hear a sound and the first thought isn't "what does that mean about me?" You just hear a sound. And we can see the big picture, respond from wisdom. That's what we mean by the steadiness of awareness. We see the big picture.

There's a story I heard on the radio. I guess it's true—it was on public radio. I mean, you never really know. It's like too good a story; I have trouble believing it's true. But I told it last year in Switzerland, and someone came up and gave me more detail, so at least someone else heard it too.

Apparently in London, when they were building the big Millennium thing, they built this Millennium Bridge, a new footbridge over the Thames River. When they first opened the bridge and several hundred people were walking over it, this story was talking about something called enlightened self-interest, which they thought had been like a financial policy. They believed if everyone acts from enlightened self-interest, everything would be okay. This was around 2009. Something about that didn't really work. What could it have been?

So they were using this example. Hundreds of people are walking over the bridge, and the bridge starts shaking. The bridge starts really wobbling over to one side—quite embarrassing, having just been built. Everyone on the bridge acted from enlightened self-interest, but with the focus on "me." So it's leaning this way, so everyone stepped over the other way. That didn't really fix things. It just made the whole thing worse.

You get a sense of that. Even when we're trying to act in a helpful way, when it's this obsessive self-referencing, we can't see the big picture.

So that's how it is for us a lot of the time. No blame, just starting to recognize that's how it is. And this is what our practice in all its forms is for—not to get rid of it, but just to see, "Oh, that's what's happening." And we start to see through it. Everyone's experienced moments of that.

I read from Dilgo Khyentse Rinpoche one night. He's talking about three fundamental attitudes of the path, just from his point of view. The first one is renunciation—seeing through, getting exhausted, giving up, having a weariness, a disillusionment with some sorrow with the endless quest for gratification. Just saying, "Oh, this doesn't really work." And we've talked about that a lot.

The second attitude he talks about is compassion, which he describes this way: it is born when one realizes that both the individual sense of self and all the appearances of the phenomenal world are actually empty of any intrinsic independent existence. That's that *yathā bhūta*, all conditions coming together. When one sees the suffering that comes from one's own and from others' fundamental ignorance about this—which misunderstands the display of appearances as being composed of separate, permanently existing entities—that's not perceiving impermanence, as Steve talked about last night.

When one sees how much suffering comes from this misunderstanding, one who has even for a moment understood this absence of independent existence naturally acts from the boundless compassion that you feel for those who, under the spell of ignorance, are wandering and suffering in samsara.

You get that sense when you're having just an insight and you really see, "Oh, it's just like this. What's the problem?" And you see someone else who's so caught in that moment, so caught in the fear or the wanting

or the anger that we were caught in yesterday, but now we're seeing through it. That can elicit not "the stupid jerk," but real compassion. Compassion, that empathy with: wow, this suffering is so extra.

And that's really the seed of compassion.

The third essential quality he calls pure perception. He's talking about this at the most ultimate, highest level, but I'm going to refer to it at a moment-to-moment level. Pure perception recognizes the Buddha nature in all sentient beings and sees the primordial purity in all phenomena. Every sentient being is endowed with the essence, the potential of Buddhahood, just as oil pervades every sesame seed. Ignorance is simply being unaware of this potential—in us, in others—like a poor person who does not know there is a pot of gold buried beneath his hut. The journey to enlightenment is thus a rediscovery of this forgotten nature, like seeing the ever-brilliant sun again as the clouds that have been hiding it are blown away. The same metaphor.

So it's not a one-time rediscovery. When I talk about a moment of pure mind, pure citta, where there's awareness—maybe the five faculties present, but not the kilesas—this potential for accurate recognition, for seeing the wider view, for the natural arising response of compassion or metta, appreciative joy or equanimity, it's just nature. It's just the natural response.

What we're hoping for in this retreat, in any retreat, is of course that the trust in the steadiness of awareness grows in each of us, and also that we begin to have more verified faith that this is the truer, the deeper response of our natural mind. Greed and hatred and confusion seem so much like our nature. They seem like the truest thing, but they're not. And we all see that in our experience.

Let me offer a composite example, not a particular one. When Steve talked last night about the first noble truth and all the difficulties of that, you get a sense perhaps of why—I get a sense anyway, the more I practice—the Buddha, when he had to distill all his teachings down and picked four truths as the hub, felt that pointing out this truth of dukkha was so essential. Steve talked all about it, so I don't need to repeat it.

But consider: what's our habitual response in the face of any of those aspects of dukkha that Steve talked about? When we're not paying attention, just in our normal mode, what's our natural response to the unpleasant, to uncertainty? The habit is anger, right? Or dislike, or aversion, or fear. That's just normal.

The anger can be outer blame or inner blame, some way of trying to push the experience away, keep it away. And if we can't keep it away, then another kind of natural response is a passive submission, a resigned attitude: "All right, I'll just accept it. This is what's happening, and I'll just stand it until it's finally gone." You can tell from how I'm describing it that this also has an element of aversion. This is not acceptance. This is not wisdom. But sometimes that's all we know—we can just endure until it's gone, holding ourselves separate from the experience.

Or there's outright total denial that it's even going on. And isn't denial an amazing faculty of mind? It's just incredible. Denial of suffering in ourselves, outside of ourselves.

I'll tell a little story. I was in the hospital a long, long time ago. I'd been there a few days, and there was a lot of pain going on, and they hadn't figured out what it was. So I wasn't in the most balanced, wonderful state—let's put it that way. They were trying to give me an IV, and my veins had sort of collapsed after a few days, and the nurse couldn't get it to work. That's not like horrible pain, but it's unpleasant, definitely painful. Then the nurse couldn't do it, so she ran out and grabbed a doctor in the hallway. And I thought—no offense to any doctors here—I thought, "Oh no." Because the nurses are the ones who do it all the time, not the doctors. Not a good sign. So the doctor came in and started working on it. I was just wasted. Little tears were rolling—I wasn't really complaining, but just a little tear rolled out.

He just looks at me and goes, "What's the matter with you? This doesn't hurt." Just totally dismissive, you know. And I can understand why, because the motivation was to help. But when it's so uncomfortable for us to be with our own pain—or any pain—then we can't be there for someone else. The empathy that becomes compassion isn't there because we can't be with our own pain. So I could really understand that. Not that I was analyzing it at the moment—I was just enduring. But I can really see that to be able to help, he had to cut off. So okay, fine. We all do that. Not on purpose, but our mind has that capacity. It's quite amazing.

What we start to see with the steadiness of awareness is that there's a whole other possibility, a whole other way of being, which is bringing this steady, non-judging awareness to whatever's happening. And sometimes when I'm talking about the compassionate aspect of awareness, when things are difficult, sometimes reminding ourselves that awareness doesn't care—but it can also be kind. It can kindly not care and just be with whatever's happening. And that can effect a complete change in our understanding of the situation.

Let me give an example. I'm making this up as a sort of composite. But if something's been going on, or someone here has been doing something that bugs you—whether they're making a noise, or you don't like the way they look, or they're breathing loud behind you, or you don't even know what. But you see this person, and there's aversion. You just don't want to be around them for whatever reason. Or you may know the reason, because they make this noise, whatever. And just being human, we can't help but make noises, right?

Our normal way would be either we just try and push the whole thing away and pretend we're equanimous and loving. That doesn't work, right? But what aversion does—the Buddha described it—what makes aversion grow is that aversion works by giving unwise attention to the repugnant aspect of something. Have you noticed that? Somebody or something's bugging you, really bringing up aversion. And it's their fault, of course. They're making you feel aversion. And the mind just can't stay away from that thing that's bugging you.

Thich Nhat Hanh gives the example: if you have one rough tooth, and all the rest of your teeth are fine, your tongue will go to that rough tooth like every five minutes. You're not running your tongue over the

rest of your teeth. And you feel it, you get upset. You feel it, you get upset. You feel it, you get upset. It can go on for days. That's unwise attention to the repugnant aspect of something. And we just get focused in on that.

So with our steadiness of attention, we say just keep noticing, let awareness just notice the whole process. Many people have given examples of where you start to see more of the whole process. First there's that person making that sound. Then you keep watching. Oh, that's a sound. It's just a sound, being with a sound. The sound's just the sound. Then you see the person. Well, the person's just a person. Oh, there's that thought—they remind me of my third grade teacher who was so mean to me. And you kind of see that.

And in the seeing of just the whole process—I'm making this up, this was nobody's story—in the seeing of the whole process, suddenly that aversion in that moment towards that person is gone, isn't it? And you see them with new eyes.

Perhaps there's just the connectedness of mettā, of friendliness. Or maybe there's compassion. You see whatever noise they're making, they can't help. And you feel compassion, quite naturally. It's not something you have to try and create.

It may seem like a small thing, but please do notice it. The effect of steady awareness meeting what's happening—not trying to push it away or figure it out—naturally opens out of the self-interest and aversion to seeing the whole picture more clearly. And the wholesome, pure state of heart and mind arises as a response. This can all happen in just a second. The next second it can be gone; we all know that. But that doesn't mean it isn't true and isn't real in the moments we're experiencing.

Compassion, generally one way of defining it, is the tenderness, the quivering of the heart in response to the suffering of another—this empathy with suffering. It's generally described as meeting suffering, and not just another's, but our own. And that's where I really am going to concentrate the rest of this talk: meeting what's arising, the difficult experience, with just this open, simple awareness presence, not pulling back, not shutting off.

In the big picture, compassion is generally spoken of as the motivation for action. Compassion is the movement, the action to alleviate the suffering of another, which is certainly in the world of action. In the biggest picture, in some of the Buddhist teachings, the strongest, most powerful expression of compassion would be bodhicitta—the motivation, the commitment, the intention to practice, to come to full awakening in order to awaken all other beings. This real sense of: my practice is all for the awakening of others. So that's the grandest expression of compassion.

But what I want to talk about here is recognizing that in the way the Buddha described all actions, especially of speech and of mind, the seed of all actions is in the mind. All actions originate in the mind. The intention that gives rise to any action is mental. Someone was talking about this in a group, just

playing with drinking tea and kind of waiting till the mental intention would arise to lift the cup. And you can play with that. You can just sit there, and sometimes when there's no time frame, you can sit there for two hours. You can play with this mental intention in the mind. It really is fun to play with this stuff.

The intention is just the little urge to speak, to move, even to think. And as with awareness, it comes together with whatever motivation, whatever qualities, whatever mental factors are in the mind. So compassion or hatred, saying something harsh or saying something loving, or just getting up and walking to the bathroom—everything comes with the intention that comes together with whatever particular mental states accompany it.

Compassionate action, the action to alleviate another's suffering, originates with this compassion, with this empathy, with this tenderness—for oneself, for beings—in the mind. And an action that might look like you're trying to alleviate suffering in others or even in yourself... you can't tell what someone else's intention is. Heck, half the time we can't tell what our own is, right?

So you could be trying to do something to help someone and really mean it, but the internal motivation could be a kind of fear. Have you ever experienced that, like being with someone who's suffering or seeing someone in a difficult situation? And you want to help, but actually what you feel is a kind of fear. In a small way, I sometimes feel this if I'm walking in a city and there's a homeless person, or someone who seems really mentally ill and wanting some money. I want to give, and I also feel a little bit afraid. And then I'm ashamed of feeling a little bit afraid. All this stuff is going on.

So I may go and offer something. In a way, that's a generous action. It's a somewhat compassionate action. But I can also see the difference between the times when it's just that movement of "Here, may this help?"—and it feels beautiful and connected—and other times when there's fear. Fear of being in the face of pain. That's a natural part of our humanness.

So here, on retreat, what we have the opportunity to explore is really the difference in our own mind, in our own heart, in the habits of our mind and heart, when the response to suffering—and here it's our own suffering—is aversion or fear versus when there's the potential for steady awareness to just meet what's happening with an openness that allows for the arising of empathy and wisdom and compassion. This is really what we can learn, what we can practice, what we can work with here on this retreat.

The Dalai Lama, as you know, is meant to be the incarnation of compassion. So how does he speak about how compassion develops in our mind stream?

How does it strengthen? The Dalai Lama says it's from deep insight into what suffering is—deep insight, which arises by opening to, by being present with our own experience. Where else can we start? And through this openness, which is precisely what we're practicing here, through this openness to our own experience, the compassion strengthens into a sense of empathy, connectedness with other beings.

Have you noticed, let's say if you're going through something difficult—whether you're ill or perhaps

going through a relationship crisis or just some difficult emotional or physical experience—and you have different friends or people who come to try to comfort you or help? We can feel the difference. There's someone who wants to help genuinely, but actually in themselves there isn't the ease. In that moment, awareness can't simply be with the pain in themselves. So the helping often takes the form of "you could do this to fix it, you could do that to fix it, you could do this other thing." And it's well-meant, but it doesn't have the same sense. It just doesn't feel quite like the same kind of compassion as when someone else sits down and they can just be there with you. It's not saying "oh, I know" or anything in particular, but they can just be there. The heart, the mind, the awareness can simply flow into that pain, whatever it's engendering in our own mindstream at that moment. And it feels so different. That's the sense of empathy, the sense of connectedness with other beings in terms of compassionate action, compassionate presence with suffering.

And so here, and through our lives, this is really the field where we learn that. As the Dalai Lama said, we're exploring for ourselves our own experience without judgment. This is exactly what we've been saying—just let the awareness come into the whole process and watch what happens when we come face to face with a difficult situation.

That's why, on retreat anyway, the difficult times are so important. We always say that, and people think, "Yeah, right, you just say that to shut us up and keep us here." But they're really, truly important. We don't feel like we're being totally mindful because we think if we were totally mindful, it would all clear up, don't we? Even though we've said it a million times, don't you really think if you're doing it right, this difficult thing is going to clear up? And it doesn't. And you go through a whole sitting or a whole day and you're in and out—there's awareness and then you're lost in aversion or fear, awareness and lost in it. You think, "What's the point of this?"

But then the next day, or two hours later, or the week later, a similar kind of thing starts, and suddenly the mind is just there, touching it, open to it. The whole experience is still unpleasant, but the insight of what's really going on arises out of it. And it's a completely different, freeing experience. Out of that comes compassion or joy or love, a kind of understanding we can't get except through the steady experience of awareness.

So in some ways, we could think of it this way—this is a little too simplistic, but you can consider it like this: whatever's arising right now in your experience, beautiful or difficult (and we'll stick with the difficult ones since we don't complain about the beautiful ones, although we do get caught in wanting), whatever's arising right now, or yesterday, or in the next moment, it's the result of all the previous causes and conditions coming together. *Yathā bhūta*—things as they have come to be right now. In this moment, it can't be any different. So thinking "it's my fault, it's wrong," and all of that—we do that, but it's useless. It can't be any different. That's like past karma.

But how in this moment awareness, our mind, is meeting this moment—that's the creation of

present-moment karma, of present-moment action. So the most confusing or horrific or boring or difficult stuff could be going on over and over. Yet every moment that there's that willingness to just meet it with clear awareness—even if you can't quite do it, but there's the willingness, or just to remember, "Okay, awareness can be kind. What's going on? I know this pain, this aversion. I can't do it. This is one big mess"—one big mess feels like this. In that moment, that's a cultivation, a development of compassion. It's how we're meeting the moment that these wholesome qualities are developed—and also the unwholesome ones. If you're meeting the moment with a hammer, if you're meeting the moment totally believing judgment and blame, then that's what's being cultivated. But as soon as you see that with kindness, you're back in a moment of compassion.

So it's always available. And whether it's difficult or whether it's beautiful, this is how we're cultivating compassion. And it's really powerful. We don't see it moment to moment until suddenly something that we've just been struggling against or fighting with or that seems utterly unbearable—suddenly the perspective shifts. Because we're able to just touch it rather than trying to run away from it.

So we start where we are. But it's really scary sometimes, isn't it? This isn't what I wanted to spend my time with. Or where I am is too mundane—that's another way you can get on yourself. I don't have big enough suffering. Does anyone here think they don't have big enough suffering? But it doesn't matter what it is. It's just the habits in the mind. We start where we are.

And it's hard because of the habits. I don't know about you, but I really see, as I said before, that the general habit to difficulty is aversion. It's as if we trust aversion and fear and anger to protect us. It feels right. We should stay separate from difficult and scary things. Of course, it's easier to believe that if it's someone out there. But that same habit of mine comes inside. So there's a pain or there's an unpleasant situation—better to stay separate from it. And all our strategies are like, how can I somehow hold myself separate?

But when there's anger, ill will in the mind, we can't see clearly. This is from the Buddha: "When one dwells with a mind obsessed and oppressed by ill will, dislike, aversion, and does not understand as it really is the escape from arisen 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."

So even when we're angry but trying to have good intentions, you can't see clearly your own good or the good of others. Yet somehow many of us have been, you know, raised and trained to believe that this is what's going to protect us from pain. We don't really trust the soft, kind awareness, the willingness to just be steadily with whatever's arising.

The Dalai Lama was asked one time about what looks like a lack of compassion in human society. He said, "Perhaps we just pay less attention to compassion and caring. We reinforce it less. Whereas in some sense, we fully embrace hostility and anger as an emotional state, fueling it and reinforcing it. If we were to give the same amount of energy, attention, and reinforcement to compassion and caring, they would definitely

be stronger."

So this is a question from Joko Beck, a simple way to just ask yourself when we're all caught up, when we can feel we're caught in some difficult situation: Can I find in myself a willingness to rest in this confusing and painful situation?

I think it's a great question. Some of you are trying to analyze and see clearly and note it and get it all straight—but what's the motivation? Get the heck rid of it. Can I find in myself a willingness to rest in this confusing and painful situation? Can you just hear the ease, the kindness, that lets awareness come into that and see the whole thing in a different way?

The wisdom, the compassion, the clear seeing—that's really natural. All we need to do is set up the conditions for it to arise. The aversion and the hatred—it's nature, but it's not our natural being. It's not our natural mind.

Bishop Desmond Tutu from South Africa, Nobel Peace Prize winner and one of the architects of the whole reconciliation process after apartheid came to an end—I heard him on the radio once. He was in Boston, talking to a group of young men, probably young adolescent men from some of the poorer sections of Boston. They were saying to him, "We live in the middle of a culture of violence. What can we do? How can we learn to love? We have to protect ourselves."

And Desmond Tutu said, "We learn to hate. It's not natural. We've learned how to hate."

The students said, "Well, what can we do?"

There's nothing we can do. We're in the middle of this culture of violence. And Bishop Tutu said—you could hear it on the radio, but you could hear that he was looking at each person very directly—and he said, "You. You. You. You can make a difference. One person can make a big difference. Start with you."

That's what we're each doing here—starting with us. Just beginning to explore, to see if it makes any sense that we learn to hate, that it's not necessary, that it doesn't have to be this way.

One of the other ways that aversion manifests—this trying to keep ourselves separate from experience—shows up particularly on retreat, though it's present in our lives too. So many of you have mentioned it already. It's this particular form of delusion, this confusion: aversion that manifests as self-judgment. A few of you have noticed the kind of self-judgment that comes up. Do you recognize that it's a kind of self-hatred, self-doubt, arising when we feel dissatisfied with what's happening?

Have you ever noticed how sometimes the thoughts of self-judgment masquerade as wisdom? "Well, this isn't right. This isn't going right. I should have more moments of clarity. This painful thing shouldn't be happening. It's happening because I'm not a good enough yogi. It's happening because I took that nap today. It's happening because I didn't take that nap today. It's happening because I ate too much food. I'm just investigating. I'm just seeing." But we're not really getting there because, bottom line, "I'm just no

good. I'm hopeless."

It masquerades as wisdom. We don't see the aversion. But the whole function of it is trying to hold ourselves separate from some experience we're perceiving as unpleasant, as not good enough. Sometimes it might just be the self-hatred itself. But that's another aspect I wanted to point out.

See if you can start to notice this, continue to notice it. We can't do it only through will. But we can start to notice. We've all been practicing waking up and noticing we're not aware—okay. But also noticing, if you can, the times when we think we're aware, we're sort of aware, we're pretty sure we're aware of what's happening—but there's still this feeling of disconnect. You feel like you're not quite landing with your awareness of what's happening. You're disconnected or confused.

I've noticed in myself, both on retreat and in daily life—sometimes in daily life it can go on longer—when I start to notice there's a feeling of alienation or disconnection, disconnected from myself, not connected with others, no empathy. I don't really know what's going on, but it's just somehow off. Do you know the sense I mean at all? Sometimes I don't know if I'm communicating at all.

When I finally notice this—after trying to figure it out and all the aversion masquerading as wisdom—I'll suddenly realize: oh, something's going on that the mind is resisting just opening into. We don't even know what it is sometimes. So I'll just stop and ask, "What's happening?" I let my attention, my awareness, just pour through my body like syrup and simply inquire, "What's happening?" Not trying to figure it out, but just landing here.

I may not get a verbal answer, but almost always I'll feel some tension, some tightness. I would say just about always, once I recognize that's happening and I simply ask, "What's happening now?"—there's something unpleasant or scary or just something I don't want to be with.

And in the being with it is the relief. Again, the empathy, the connectedness, the wholeness. Trying to hold ourselves separate from what's happening—which is impossible anyway—is the setup for separation and delusion.

Whatever it might be, even though you feel the pain, the sorrow, the grief, the fear, the sadness more fully, it's actually less suffering. There's more a sense of wholeness, of being alive. Again, a tenderness for life, a tenderness for being—including oneself, believe it or not. That isn't possible when we're trying to hold ourselves separate.

So we start where we are. Whatever we're experiencing here in our life—that's where we start. Just to touch this difficult experience: the aversion, the physical discomfort, the fear, the loneliness. We don't even know what it is sometimes.

Just to touch it with kind awareness. And then the next moment, and the next moment. Having the trust that the wisdom and compassion will naturally strengthen from this. Of course, you have to try it—you

don't trust it until you see it. But do notice when it happens.

And once we touch a difficult situation, when there's wisdom present, the response we make can be much more appropriate. Because as the Buddha said, our eyes aren't clouded by ill will and aversion. We can recognize our own good, or the good of another, more accurately.

I'll tell a personal story. Quite some years ago, over twenty years ago, I developed a physical condition, an autoimmune condition. It's basically fine now—that's why I sit in a chair—but when it was developing, the symptoms were much stronger than they are now. It took a long time for any doctor to figure out what it was. There was a lot of pain and stiffness, much more intense than what I experience today.

And so, just the normal stuff that one goes through: the fear in the mind, the resistance to unpleasant sensations. One thing I really learned was when the mind would start going, "You're never going to be able to take a walk. You're never going to be able to do this or that." I was so grateful for awareness practice, because that mind would start up, and I'd see it and say, "I have no idea. I don't need to go there. That's just fear." I really could do that with thoughts about future stuff—that was just unknown.

But learning to just be with the physical experience was harder. It wasn't excruciating pain, which is a whole other thing, but a kind of heaviness, a stiffness, pain that came and went a lot of the time. And when it's frequent, that kind of dull background discomfort, it's almost easier to pretend, "No, I'm just balanced with this. It's there in the background, we're present, it's all okay."

After some time, people were saying—cold really affects me—"You have to leave here, you have to go live in Arizona, you have to stop doing any kind of work." I was thinking I was going to go to Arizona and live in a corner and never do anything.

And I gradually realized there was quite some fear and sadness, but actually aversion towards my body. The body was letting me down. It wasn't supposed to do this. And it doesn't seem to matter what age we're at. I'm sure I was still feeling, "No, it's not supposed to do this. Not yet. Not till I'm ninety-five." But that was subterranean, not quite in awareness.

Then at some point, something happened, and I recognized that sense of trying to hold myself separate from this unpleasant experience. I didn't have that quotation from Joko Beck yet, but it was the same idea, this kind of compassion. First, compassion for the body, almost as if it was a separate being. I thought, "If someone sitting next to me—if their body was doing this, would I hate them?" No, you'd feel, "Oh, that's really hard." So I came back and could feel some compassion for the body.

And then that sense from Joko Beck: well, can I just let myself rest in this unpleasant experience? And I started to meet the sensations just as they were, with kindness. Not every moment, but it was a major shift from trying to hold myself separate while pretending I wasn't—which meditators, we get really good at that.

So just really dying into it with awareness, with kindness, without any sense that this was going to make it go away, or what healing meant, or whatever. Just being with it, being with it.

And I really felt like that changed everything. I don't mean changing the disease or healing the body, but it changed everything in my mind. From a sense of fear and victimization—not being able to decide how to live my life—to being able to say, with quite some clarity, "I can do this. I can't do that."

The body can handle this. It can't handle that. But I don't need to go live in Arizona. I can wear gloves. I can turn up the heat. I don't have to just sit in a room and never do anything. I think I'll go with my friends to India and travel around—which I did. I was with friends who could take care of me. It's true, sometimes I couldn't get up into the rickshaws—they were too high—so they pushed me. It was okay.

Because of that clarity, that steady, kind awareness that let me simply be with the unpleasantness over time, wisdom comes in. You see the whole situation much more clearly, and you can make decisions based not on fear and not on resistance either, but on the clear information that awareness lets us see. I've always been really grateful for that.

So we start where we are. Whatever's arising—what are the demons that are arising for you here on this retreat? Someone phrased it that way today, but it's a common phrasing. That's where we start. Can I find it in myself to rest, just to simply rest in this difficult and unpleasant situation? And if you can't, then you just rest in that—in the "I can't." That's the next arising thing. Just one moment at a time.

I really like the story of St. Francis. Maybe you know his story. It was just one moment at a time. We never know how it's going to go for us. He wasn't born St. Francis of Assisi, right? He was born to a rich merchant. Apparently as a young man he was quite wild, ran with a wild crowd. He was kind of the leader of it—the rich young guys drinking and carousing. And at that time, there was a house where people with leprosy lived below the town. Of course, they kept people with leprosy away. People were afraid of that. If someone with leprosy—now it's called Hansen's disease—was out walking, they had to ring a bell so that everyone could hear and stay away, because there was so much fear.

Francis was very afraid. That was something he was deeply afraid of—being even close to a person with leprosy.

So at least in the biographies I've read, one of the key moments of his life, this young dissolute man, was when he was passing on his horse someone with leprosy. The tendency—he wanted to just throw down some money, because he had money. But either that time or another time, he got off his horse. He stopped. He gave the money hand to hand. He shook the man's hand, he hugged him. And it was like this direct coming into contact with his fear, with his repugnance, that changed his life. Slowly, from that one thing after another after another, he turned into St. Francis.

We start where we are. Who knows? Maybe someone here is the next St. Francis, in whatever tradition. We start where we are, whatever's going on. Can we find it in ourselves to bring this kind awareness and

to see how wisdom and compassion are the natural response of the purified mind and heart? And when you forget it—never mind. There's again another moment.

Thank you for listening.

May all beings have happiness and the causes of happiness. That is metta.

May all beings be free from suffering and the causes of suffering. That is compassion.

May all beings never be separate from the highest happiness, which is free from suffering. That is mudita.

May all beings be free from delusion, attachment, and hatred, and abide in equanimity and peace.

Thank you for listening.

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