Awareness Imbued With Compassion

Carol Wilson · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Carol Wilson · 1:01:29

So, we've been talking a lot about the kleshas, the difficult, distorting habits, mental factors, states of mind that arise all too frequently and are so familiar. A lot of our moment-to-moment mindfulness practice is in learning to recognize, to really meet, explore, not take personally. Really the whole practice is about purifying the habits of heart and mind, the habits of citta.

But as we've been saying all along, it's not our personal effort that does the work. All we do is put in the willingness to remember: Am I aware? Am I aware? Am I aware? And the steadiness of awareness is what allows wisdom to arise. Wisdom does the work of purifying the heart and mind, the habits.

So what I want to talk a bit about tonight is one of the wholesome habits. Just to know that in the moments of pure mindfulness awareness, when wisdom is present, in that moment, greed, hatred, confusion aren't. It seems like the mindfulness, the awareness is noticing greed—it's like two quick moments together. But in that moment of mindfulness, the greed, the aversion, delusion is not being fed, is not really present in that quick moment.

There are wholesome qualities that actually arise naturally, that you could say replace them. Or more, when Steve read that famous sutta about the mind being radiant, and the radiance being hidden, obscured by the kleshas—you could think of these wholesome, beautiful qualities as being the qualities that naturally arise in response to the appropriate circumstances when the heart-mind is pure, in a moment.

One of the things I love about the way the Buddha talks about it, and our experience of how the mind works, is that it's just moment to moment. Every moment arising and passing so quickly that—this is the impermanence part that can seem unsettling. But it's what allows for change, for cultivation, for development. Maybe you've seen it: you've had some really rotten moments, long series of rotten moments, but it does change. And when we talk about purifying or noticing the wholesome, we don't have to wait until it's absolutely steady state, never going to change, and then we maybe acknowledge something wholesome arising. Just a moment, just a moment.

So, when delusion is seen through, wisdom obviously is there. It's wisdom that sees through delusion, the quality of mind. When greed is recognized with wisdom, the beautiful quality that's present in the citta is non-greed, which can also manifest as relinquishment. Sometimes I've said renunciation, but that's simply the putting down of wanting, of needing, which can lead into the ability of the heart to be really generous, because it doesn't need to hold on.

And then dosa, the hatred-aversion quality—this is how the Buddha talks about the second aspect of the Eightfold Path: intention, wise intention, wise thought. The thoughts of greed, seen through with non-greed, replaced by relinquishment, generosity. Thoughts of the aversive are divided into two, sort of. Thoughts of ill-will—instead, the mental quality is metta, kindness, friendliness. And thoughts of cruelty, or when really the awareness is meeting a difficulty, suffering—cruelty, aversion is what comes up in the habits. But when there's clear seeing, purity of heart, mind, citta at that moment, mindfulness, awareness with wisdom, then what naturally emerges instead is compassion.

Sure, we can cultivate metta, we can cultivate compassion, absolutely. We cultivate the conditions for wisdom, which is the steadiness of awareness. We can't make wisdom occur. But what I want to talk about tonight—I want to specifically talk about compassion as the natural arising, the natural manifestation of wisdom and non-aversion in a moment of mindfulness, wisdom, when the particular object is a suffering one.

So not to think this is some far away experience, and not something we have to create. Not "I need to be a compassionate person," because we know just deciding what to do doesn't work. The angle I want to talk about tonight is really hoping to encourage us to keep on going. The practice we're doing of moment to moment remembering awareness—the awareness that, as we've said a lot, that simplicity of connectedness, just totally surrendering into the moment without adding extra, without pulling away, without aversion or judgment or clinging.

That quality of awareness, when it is aware of a suffering experience, takes on the flavoring of compassion. Karuna. It's not an act of will.

How the habits of our heart and mind are purified—this is the point I'm wanting to make—is exactly through this practice. And so you may realize, since I want to mainly talk about compassion, it means I'm also going to be talking about difficult, suffering experience. Anybody had any of those since they came? Right.

Because as I think we said this morning, really appreciate the amount of commitment and at times, I think for all of us, quite some courage to keep showing up here. To keep showing up—not even the external showing up, but with your own heart, your own mind, the habits of your mind, the things that arise here. For everyone, there are times that it's enormously difficult, painful, scary, whatever your particular flavor is.

And the habits of our mind, of the world, of our life are so much telling us this is wrong, get out of here. Go in the opposite direction, fix it, fix it, fix it. Really aversion. So much the habit.

And so every moment—just the quick moment—that there's that sense of simple awareness... You know, we're waiting for the huge momentum that sees through it all, but just that moment of awareness that's willing to meet fear. No big thing happens, but that quick moment where the aversion isn't the go-to

response, where we call in the awareness instead—that's a little moment of purifying the habit, of shifting the habit.

So I just want to talk different ways about compassion in terms of our practice here. Ways to notice it. Why it isn't always our habitual response—it is natural, but not always habitual. Just in hopes of encouraging us all to consciously recognize this wholesome factor, because it's so amazing, really, how it works.

When wisdom recognizes the suffering aspects—greed, hatred, confusion—when it's just recognized by wisdom, that doesn't necessarily mean it goes away immediately. But wisdom just naturally doesn't feed the unwholesome. It's not an act of will. So when you really see something is causing you suffering—wisdom sees it, not just "I think I should stop," but wisdom sees it—let me just put that down. A few people have mentioned examples of that in their experience, just little things. That's the natural effect of wisdom: we recognize that greed and aversion don't work, basically, for what we think they're doing—to see reality as it is.

The other side is that when wisdom, when the purified mind-heart in a moment recognizes beautiful qualities—compassion, wisdom, metta, generosity—the attention of wise awareness actually feeds and strengthens the wholesome. Again, it's not an act of will. It's not like an act of greed: "Oh, this feels good, let's have more of it." That's not strengthening the wholesome. But just the awareness of generosity, the happiness it brings—it inclines the mind, the heart towards more generosity.

Being with a suffering, difficult experience with compassion, recognizing that compassion is a beautiful state of mind-heart, inclines the mind towards another arising of a moment of compassion. It's so cool. We don't have to do this as an act of will. We can't. But this is where, for me, so much trust comes in—really trusting the nature of how the mind and heart works. And it gives me the faith, the willingness to show up again when it's like not really where I think I want to be in that particular moment.

To define compassion: one of the definitions of karuna is the quivering of the heart when connected with pain or suffering. The tenderness. The tender quivering, the connectedness of heart and mind when we are connected with suffering. That's just the mental quality of it, the mental factor. When it strengthens into action, it manifests as the wish to alleviate the suffering of whatever beings we're in touch with.

And the vastest aspiration of compassionate practice would be the aspiration to practice our whole life, to awaken with the intention of using our practice in order to help alleviate the suffering of all beings. That's vast and beautiful and inspiring to me. But tonight I really want to talk in terms of our practice here, by and large.

The Dalai Lama, who's kind of the world expert on compassion—if we were going to look for one of the world experts anyway—when asked how compassion develops in our experience, he said it develops from deep insight into what suffering actually is. And guess how we get that deep insight into what suffering

actually is? Yes, by being really present, by focusing, by opening to the suffering, the difficulty in our own experience. Where else are we going to start?

In our own experience. As Alexis spoke about the first noble truth last night, it's really the sense that unreliability is one part. Another part is that all living beings at times suffer. Not all the time, every moment, but it's something that unites us as living beings, rather than something to be a cause of shame or alienation or feeling like it's a mistake—which I know is often the way I feel. Something's gone really wrong, we want to go hide until it's better, we don't want people to know. But actually it can be a source of recognizing our unity, our commonality.

The Dalai Lama goes on to describe that by opening to, focusing on our own experience of suffering—and obviously he doesn't say it explicitly, but it's with mindful awareness, not with aversion; we could focus with aversion, but we're clearly talking about the mind that's pure in that moment, that just recognizes it—he says it deepens, it strengthens into a sense of empathy, connectedness with other beings.

So beginning with this simple moment of being fully present, without agenda, without aversion or clinging, with a moment of our own suffering, in whatever way—big, little, doesn't matter.

Moment after moment, by itself, it starts to strengthen into empathic connection with beings. It's sort of like my particular suffering in that moment becomes an expression of the suffering of all beings. We can think our way into it, but I'm talking just in terms of our awareness here. This really can happen. It often does happen.

I remember many years ago I was in a hospital. I was in a room with three other women, and I was there for some days. One day, when I wasn't particularly feeling sorry for myself, I found myself looking around and saying, "Oh wow, look what I'm going through. There are these three women going through their own suffering. How many people are in this hospital? How many hospitals are in this town?" It was Northampton, not such a big town, but there are four or five hospitals around. And then just keep spreading out, spreading out. How many human beings at this moment are suffering some kind of real pain, illness? It's vast. Our mind can't comprehend it. But that sense of strengthening from "oh, poor me" to just "wow, this is the human condition"—that's a quality of compassion, of unity. It takes us out of our isolation, out of our self-involvement.

This is really why the difficult times on retreat are so important. I always think later, looking back, "Yeah, I learned a lot. It was so important." But in the midst of it, are you going, "Yeah, I'm so glad this is happening. I really know this is the important part, this is really the nub of the retreat. I'm so glad that I'm really lost in this total frustration for days"? But this is really where the rubber meets the road, you could say—of our practice, of awareness. I'm not saying we should feel glad, but this is where we can really start to explore.

Because what's purifying, what's arising in our present moment experience, is how things have come to be

in this moment as this moment's particular culmination of all the different conditions that have come together. There's no way we can know what all the conditions are that brought this moment into being. I love when I start thinking about this—don't start thinking about it, because there's nowhere to stop. If you start, it's like Thich Nhat Hanh holding up the piece of paper and saying, "What's in this paper?" and you can't stop anywhere. You start with trees and the water and the sunlight and the people that grew it and the earthworms that till the soil, and it goes on forever. Anything is like that. If you start thinking of the conditions that brought you to this moment, there's nowhere to stop. We're back at the Big Bang. There's really no way to know what is part of this particular condition.

So that's just arising. You could say that's our past condition, that's our past karma. To sit here and go, "I'm so bad because this is happening. I'm a failure because this is happening. I can't meditate, I'll never understand the pure mind because this is happening"—that's the habit of aversion, turned inward, turned outward. That's our usual go-to mode.

But what's really purifying the heart and mind isn't that that stuff shouldn't be arising—that's out of our control. It's out of our control. But the way in that moment that awareness and wisdom is receiving that moment—that's where, in that moment, the heart-mind, the quality of the *citta*, is being purified or not. That's the place where the whole practice of purification of the habits of heart and mind is occurring.

So you may not think it's much. You're frustrated. "Okay, frustration is like this." And there's a moment of just being with it. You think, "But nothing happened. It's still frustrating." Okay, that moment wasn't a moment of purifying the heart. That was an aversive moment. But the one before—"Oh yeah, frustration is like this"—that is shifting the habit of aversion of heart-mind.

So that is just so important to start to recognize and continue to recognize. I find that—not that you're expecting some big bang—but just to understand how this works. How do you recognize it? Nowhere else to go. Mindfulness, awareness of the next moment. How we pay attention, how the mind meets each moment, is important. This is the process of purifying the heart and mind. All the different practices, not just this one, are all working on that level.

As I was saying, the habit is so deeply ingrained in most of us when confronted with difficult experience. I like how Pema Chödrön describes it. She says, rather than talking about suffering or difficult or painful, why not substitute the words "unwanted experience"? I like that because it really describes the experience. The experience is: I don't want this to be happening. Or really, I want it to be happening, but to someone else, not here. I'd like to read about it and feel compassion for that poor person, but I really don't want it happening here right now. I like that because it takes it right down to what's actually happening.

It's so reflexive when something painful, difficult, unwanted comes up—there's just the cringe back, the pull away. That's the aversion. That's just the habit. Let's get out of here. Let's protect ourselves from it. And the fear can come. She says many people, when she's talking about compassion for all beings, tell her,

"I have so much suffering of my own, I can't even be with my own suffering. How can I open to the suffering of the world? It's too much to even think about."

So we're not saying that as a thought, what one should do. What we can do here on retreat with our awareness is really explore both the reflexive action of the aversion—the anger, the pulling away when that's occurring. When there's that klesha, that distortion in the awareness, we notice it. Just what we've been saying: notice the attitude in the mind when confronted with unwanted experience. Notice when that reaction is present, but notice when it's not present. That compassionate response of simply being able to be present with the unwanted without adding anything extra.

Pema Chödrön again—she talks about how really at core we have this tender heart, this real tenderness. That's the quivering of the heart when connected with the unwanted, with difficulty. But our training and our fear and the difficulty of it is such that we are going around as if we're trying to protect ourselves from feeling. It's scary. She uses the image of a sea anemone, an animal in the sea that has long tendrils and a very soft core, and if anything even gets near to touch it, it shuts down to protect the very soft heart. She says we're kind of like that. But we're using aversion to protect. And the very act of protection is what's increasing our confusion, our distortion, our separation.

She writes: "Kinship with the suffering of others—the inability to continue to regard it from afar—is the discovery of our soft spot." She calls it the discovery of bodhicitta. This bodhicitta, this tenderness for life, awakens when we can no longer shield ourselves from the vulnerability of our condition, from the basic fragility of existence. But when we protect ourselves so that we don't feel that pain, that protection becomes like armor that imprisons the softness of our heart. We do everything we can think of not to feel anything threatening. Does that sound familiar? We try to prolong feeling good about ourselves. But then we end up, she says—I love this image—spending our life all tensed up as if we were sitting in a dentist's chair our whole life. I can really relate to that.

But this is the habit. And this is the belief: no, this should not be happening. That's the misunderstanding of the First Noble Truth. I think someone was saying in a group today—I never know where I heard it. Did Alexis say it last night? Did someone say it in a group? Did I say it yesterday? I don't know where stuff comes from anymore. But these habits are really reinforced because that's really what's in the society around us. I find from the media in particular, when they're interviewing on the radio somebody who's just experienced something terrible—first they go up and shove a mic in their face, which is already strange, but it could be a personal tragedy or a disease or an earthquake—a really common question, I hear it so much, is: "Well, who do you blame for this?" Who do you blame?

Who do you blame? As if of course there's someone to blame. This bad thing happened, and the first thing we better do is figure out who to blame. And a lot of the time when we're sitting here, there's no one to blame but ourselves, so we turn that inward. It's really easy to say, "This is happening and it shouldn't be happening. So what am I doing wrong in my practice?" Has that occurred to anybody, ever, when

something was going on? Rather than simply, "Oh, this is difficult. It feels like this right now." Opening with a tenderness, a tender quality of mindfulness and awareness. But no, it's like, "Who do we blame? This is wrong, it shouldn't be happening." Immediately aversion comes in.

The Buddha, talking to some followers, says: "When one dwells, when one lives with a mind obsessed and oppressed by ill will"—and just so you know, he goes on to say the same thing about greed or lust and about delusion and confusion—but here we're talking about ill will. "When one dwells with a mind obsessed and oppressed by ill will, one does not understand as it really is the escape from the 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 explore that. Next time you notice some unwanted experience is occurring—thoughts, emotions, a sound, someone else's behavior, your body doesn't feel good, whatever it is—if you see that awareness is recognizing that immediate knee-jerk reaction of "this shouldn't be happening, what can I do to fix it?"—just notice the quality when the mind is obsessed and oppressed by ill will. There's no way to see clearly. Whatever we try to do to fix it, coming out of that ill will, just isn't coming from any kind of clarity. We can't see clearly what's good for ourselves, what's good for another, what's the good of both.

This is something that our steady awareness allows us to see. That's why continuity is so powerful. This tendency to think "this shouldn't be happening," to blame outward, blame inward—somehow we're going to be able to fix it. And "fix it" means, as in Joko Beck's words, somehow I can hold myself separate from this painful and difficult experience. Somehow I'm here and this is going to go over there. This is the way I think about it: it's one of the basic expressions of the delusion of understanding reality in ourselves that comes when the mind is obsessed with ill will, or with greed, or with confusion.

It creates this sense of separation. A beautiful experience we can't have, a difficult one we are with, confusion we don't know what to do with—this sense of the other, of me and the other. And if it's difficult, we think we can keep ourselves separate from the other. If it's wonderful and we don't have it, then it feeds this sense of insufficiency. Something else needing to be gotten. Something else is going to make me complete. Or this has to go away for completion, for ease.

This delusion of separation and inadequacy and insufficiency continues to be fed as long as the mind is obsessed with the *kilesas*, because it can't see accurately. That's why it's so important to take care of our awareness rather than getting involved right away and trying to fix things. Because we're trying to fix it through the lens of ill will, of blame, of not understanding, and that just keeps the whole thing going. It keeps us looking, as Krishnamurti said—to seek the truth is to deny it. Where else are we going to find it? As Dogen Zenji, the great Zen master from Japan, said, "If you can't find the truth right where you are, where do you expect to find it?" It's only right where we are.

And at least thirty-three percent of the time, right where we are might be an unwanted experience. And if we're wanting it to go away in order to see the truth, right in that moment, delusion is being fed and

increased. That's denying, not allowing, the simplicity of awareness and wisdom to simply recognize: this is what there is. This is reality. This moment is complete. There is no other moment.

So in a way, when I was talking the other night about the poignancy of thinking the only escape from arisen unpleasantness or ill will is to seek after pleasure—this is really the deep poignancy. It's what keeps our confusion spinning, our sense of incompleteness, inadequacy, loneliness, self-centeredness spinning.

The quality of awareness and wisdom that is simply present with openness, that tender heart in whatever unwanted experience—that's not only the arisen compassion, that's the wisdom, that's the freedom, just in that moment. But it's not necessarily the training of the habit of our mind, the way we naturally want to go.

So again, in our retreat here—a little microcosm of our life. The incidents that occur here may be rather small, although the reactions that come up in our mind may be rather large. Have you noticed that? It's just that they ran out of bananas! Why am I so distressed? Why are you having to forcibly hold your hand from snatching the banana off that other person's plate? It seems a little exaggerated. It is. That's okay. It helps us see it better.

Sayadaw Tejaniya has a line I really like. He says, "Concentration magnifies." When the mind's beginning to get a little more collected, it magnifies—we see things more clearly. But the kilesas exaggerate. So you might be really calm, really present, just walking to the meal, really present, and suddenly some desire comes up that we don't quite see. People have said suddenly they've turned around and they're halfway to whatever it is they're going to do without even noticing it. Desire gets huge because the kilesa exaggerates the importance of everything, and concentration magnifies that.

We call this, actually, in our parlance, "yogi mind." All of a sudden, something comes up that you need or that you hate or that has to be fixed, and it is life or death. We get these notes—you know, we're bursting into the office, but it's not office hours yet. You're standing there waiting till office hours so you can burst in and say, "Don't you know the kind of toothpaste you have in there is really not the best kind to have?" I'm not making up this stuff. This is the kind of thing that happens. You should see what goes on in a three-month retreat here. Just so you know, we're all in this together.

When you find you need to write a note to maintenance or the cooks or us—and it has this urgent quality of "my God, don't they know, for the benefit of all beings, let me write this note"—take a moment. Reflect a little bit. Just take care of the quality of awareness before you do that. That's for the good of all beings, especially us.

But anyway, that's just a little example—that was a sidetrack. In terms of our practice here, in terms of recognizing the difference between the kind of knee-jerk reaction of shutting down, protecting the soft heart through fear, aversion, and blame, and simply resting at ease in whatever arises—which manifests as compassion—the circumstances here are all we need. This is where we start. It's like a whole book:

Pema Chödrön's *Start Where You Are*. We start where we are. Each little or big thing that arises that's unwanted is, in this moment, the place of practice. And it's all that we need. The circumstances of our life are all we need.

I want to read this little story from Milarepa. He was the great Tibetan yogi, the most famous Tibetan yogi, from centuries ago. It's said that he lived up in caves for years and years. He's really considered one of the most awakened beings to come out of Tibet, and he wrote many, many songs from his practice. I'm just reading little hints of this one, but it speaks to this in a kind of mythical way.

So he's been up in his cave for who knows how long—years. He was out, and his mind became blissful, and he was carrying some wood back up to his cave. This is when you're having a good day. His mind's blissful, you're carrying wood up to the cave, everything's copacetic, the practice is going well. When he arrived there, he found in the cave seven metal demons with bodies the size of thumbs and eyes the size of cups. Okay, that's weird. Some were making fire, some were bringing water, some were grinding tsampa to eat, some sat performing various magical tricks.

What I get out of that is they've moved in. They've made themselves at home, these demons doing all different things. As soon as Mila saw them, he became frightened.

And this is our normal response. So he meditated on his deity. He uttered a subjugating mantra—you guys go away. He performed a gaze to scare them off. He aroused his deity's presence. We're doing all the things we can do to make those demons go away, right? Then he meditated on compassion and friendliness. That's the list. But he was still unable to pacify them.

Because that's how he thought—well, these must be local deities. I've been here for a long time, months and years, but I have not praised them. So then he sang a song of praise to these beings. But you can tell it's kind of half-hearted—he did all the negative stuff first. So he ends it: "You non-human demons assembled here are obstacles. Drink this cup of friendliness and compassion and be gone."

Does that sound familiar? We're trying. We start where we are. But we bring awareness to this whole process as we're doing it, so we see what we're doing. This is wrong, this is wrong, drink this compassion and get the heck out.

So three of the demons who were performing magic did go away. But Mila was unable to make the other four go away. Realizing that they were magical obstacles, he sang a song of confidence—really of faith in his practice. He's moved from subjugating gaze to faith in his practice, and the song ends: "It is wonderful that you demons came today. You must come again tomorrow. From time to time, we should converse."

Three of them did vanish like a rainbow. The remaining one, though, performed an imposing dance, and Mila thought, this one is very powerful. So he sang his song of the view, the pinnacle of his realization, which is long. I'll just share the ending: "A demon like you does not intimidate me. If a demon like you could intimidate me, the arising of the mind of compassion would be of little meaning. If you were to stay

here longer, that would be fine with me. If you have friends, bring them along. We'll talk out our differences. I feel compassion for this spirit." Then he prayed to his deity: "Grant your blessings so that this lowly one may have complete compassion."

Thus Mila sang. And with friendliness and compassion and without concern for his body, Mila placed himself in the mouth of the demon. But the demon could not eat him and so vanished like a rainbow from the Red Rock Agate Mansion.

You get a sense, don't you? With great compassion, we just open into the tender heart of *this is what's occurring now*. It doesn't necessarily mean that in that moment the demon vanishes like a rainbow, but the fear, the adversity, the sense of something wrong—that does vanish like a rainbow in that moment.

So we start where we are. Whatever's occurring—beautiful, great, difficult, unwanted—this is where the steadiness of awareness, allowing wisdom, purifies our heart and mind. And that's an idea, but it can be experienced. Because the difference between the blame and the unwanted and the adversity and the fear, and that tender heart just being present with what is—when we can't control, when we can't fix, before any of that—it's a beautiful, really nourishing state of heart and mind.

When we really are experiencing that openness to what is, there's no way we can confuse it with fear or disappointment or pity or blame. It's really obviously a beautiful state. Beautiful because there's no longer in that moment the sense of something else needing to be for us to be complete, to be true, to be at peace. Just what there is. Nothing in excess and nothing lacking.

So we start where we are. How do we meet our demons here on this retreat? It's not always possible to do something about them either.

He says metta—and I want to say compassion too—does not necessarily mean loving the difficult person or situation. Because sometimes when we have an idea in our mind, "I should feel metta, I should love this person," we wonder, "How can I love them? They're doing this horrible thing." And we're all caught up in thinking about it.

But he says—and see if you recognize what this sounds like—one is witnessing the unpleasantness in a situation, thing, person, or in oneself without creating anything around it. That's what I consider to be metta. To me, that's like a perfect description of mindfulness, wisdom, or compassion. Witnessing, really present with the unpleasantness in a person, thing, situation, or oneself, without creating anything around it. Simplicity of total presence without pulling back.

This sense of bearing witness, starting with our own suffering, can then expand out to the world. But this is where we really start. And whatever is occurring in your experience is a perfect place to begin, to continue.

Sometimes sitting here, worries may arise about some experience at home. There's nothing you can do

about it now. Just meeting that. Or times of being ill, having something going wrong with the body. If you've had experiences of chronic illness or serious illness, you know sometimes there are things you can do, but a lot of the time it's really a very rich field for exploring this quality of being present with the simplicity, just what is, without adding anything extra. And sometimes there's something to do, which we can see more clearly when the mind is not obsessed and oppressed by ill will, by fear. Sometimes bearing witness is all we can do. But that is a really powerful expression of compassion.

I've always liked to read about different people and different literature and periods of time in history. And a lot of poets and writers and artists who lived through really difficult, horrific times—part of what they do, I think, in their art, in their writing, is in a way bearing witness to something that's really incomprehensible or too awful to be with. But the power of just staying with, being present, bearing witness, telling it, is an enormous power for compassion in the world.

Maha Ghosananda—do most of you know who Maha Ghosananda was? He died a few years ago, not that long ago. He was a Cambodian monk who during the time of the Killing Fields of the Khmer Rouge happened to be out of Cambodia for many years, studying in Thailand, studying Buddhism. Millions were killed in the genocide in Cambodia. It was largely a Buddhist country, and basically Buddhism was wiped out. All of his family members were killed as well. And millions of Cambodians were living in refugee camps over the border in Thailand.

After it was so-called over—the war ended and a new government came in—he went to the refugee camps. And then he led what are called Dhamma Yatras, Dharma pilgrimages. He led lay people and monks and nuns back through Cambodia, which at this time was so-called at peace, but the landscape was littered with landmines from the war. There was still a lot of fighting.

He would go to the refugee camps, and instead of stirring up anger or saying, "This is so horrible," he would simply go to the people who had lost everything, who were in total trauma and shock, and start reading the Metta Sutta. He would go in and read from the Dhammapada: "Hatred is never ended by hatred. Hatred is only ended by love." It takes such a knowing to go into such a situation and say that, to really teach it. But because it's the truth, it would inspire. And people were coming from a Buddhist background.

In terms of bearing witness, he led many of these Dhamma Yatras through the mined land of Cambodia. Even soldiers with guns would stop, put down their weapons, and come to offer flowers or bow. The poor people still living there, who hadn't seen a monk or any kind of peaceful witnessing to what had been going on in so many years—it was really, really powerful, that kind of witnessing. He couldn't change it, he couldn't fix it, he couldn't take away people's pain, but he could just show up and be a witness to that. A really powerful kind of compassion.

We start by bearing witness to our own unwanted experience.

Maha Ghosananda said—I think it was at a big demonstration in Washington, D.C. during that period when people were trying to end the use of landmines in the world—he said, and he knew from landmines: "All the landmines in the world have been planted by the landmines in our own hearts." To understand and thus remove the landmines in our hearts is the way to begin to remove them in the world.

Really, we can only start where we are.

I've noticed in my own experience that in times when I feel the most alienated, disconnected, caught up, confused—not just something unwanted happening, but not even knowing what's happening, just disconnected, separate, lonely—I've been noticing this for years now, but I still keep having to find my way back to that balanced awareness.

when I get present again, I see that that alienation, that confusion, that loneliness is—I want to say always, though it's tricky to say always—but I can't think of a time so far when it wasn't the case that there's something going on, something unwanted, painful, that I've gotten caught into the habit of wanting to deny, avoid, repress, not feel, not be with.

It could be some painful experience in my own body or mind—my own habits, or a physical problem that I hadn't looked at for a while and it's back. And you go, "No, this isn't back. No, this isn't what's happening." But it could also be the pain of a family member who's suffering a lot, and there's actually no way I can fix it. And seeing how the mind, the habit of holding oneself separate, then thinks, "Well, I can't fix it and it's too painful to keep showing up for, so let's check out." Even in a subtle way. You see this over and over.

So-called internal, so-called external—but in this moment, some kind of confusion, some kind of suffering, some kind of difficulty, sadness, that I can't do something about. That not quite recognizing, not quite landing in the middle with a tender heart and bearing witness when that's not possible or I haven't recognized—that sense of separation, confusion just grows and grows. It's so unsatisfying. And it's so self-perpetuating.

And then that opening to the tender heart happens. Oh yeah. Yeah, she's really having one of her hard times again. And I can't say or do anything that helps, and yet still I can be present and listen. It's so painful. Can I be with this right now? And in that landing in it, just for that moment, there's a sense of ease, of relief, of wholeness, you could say. The next moment the aversion might pop up again. But this is, you know, we start where we are. It's what we can do.

It can be extraordinarily difficult, for sure. Even just as we see, bearing witness to our own suffering—never mind when it starts to expand in the world. As I said before, in *Planting Seeds*, it asks: How? People say, my own suffering is too much. How do we keep our hearts open, or keep coming back to that tender heart, when confronted with so much suffering? I'm not here to answer it. I'm here to say we start where we are. But it's the same dynamic of heart and mind. Practice bearing witness with

mindfulness, awareness, wisdom, with whatever unwanted situation is coming up here. Not just to make it better, but because this is really the path of purification, the path of freedom, the path of understanding the nature of heart and mind.

I did read somewhere—again, I don't know where, I don't have the reference—about the Dalai Lama, who, as you know, is so famous now that probably most, if not all, of you have seen him in various places. He's so joyful, so childlike. He jokes, he laughs, he's really so present with each person. And someone was asking him, "How can you do that?" Because he also, being the spiritual leader of the Tibetan people, meets with every person who escapes from Tibet—whether it's a monk or a nun or a lay person—they make their way to Dharamsala to talk to His Holiness the Dalai Lama, and they tell him their whole story. So how many millions of stories of loss and death and imprisonment and torture has he heard? And he's so present. He's so present with each person. If someone's reciting their story, he's really there with it, crying with them, feeling with them. One hundred percent present.

And then they ask, "How are you not continually overwhelmed?" But they watch him, and he's really there. That conversation ends, the person's gone, and he's really with the next person. And he could be laughing like a child with the next person. How can you do that?

And he's saying it's because when he's with that person, he's totally present, without the resistance, without the aversion, without adding anything around it. And so it's totally that moment, and when it's gone, it's totally the next moment. It kind of passes through. There's not the residue, not the clinging of fear, of me, of aversion. This is what it is. So fully present, without adding anything around it, the next moment could be a moment of total joy.

Okay, a lot of our experience isn't going to be quite like that.

Just watch it. Back to how Sayadaw U Tejaniya describes it—when we realize we're meeting an unwanted experience, we start to feel that rub. Maybe we don't quite recognize the aversion, but we start to feel that friction. We think, "I'm just bearing witness, I'm bearing witness, yes, I'm bearing witness." And we start to see that something is going on.

Or sometimes we know something's going on because it's so strong we're drowning in it. And that happens sometimes. The fear, the pain, the aggravation, the sorrow—whatever it is—just comes so strong that even though we're aware, even though we can name it, even though we know what's happening, the more awareness tries to meet it, we're just drowning. It's simply too much.

And so that's when, as Sayadaw U Tejaniya says, we need to really recognize that the aversion is taking over the mind state, and we really need to take care of the awareness. Shift the attention to a neutral object, or a beautiful object.

Thich Nhat Hanh used to talk about this during the time of the Vietnam War. Before he was exiled and couldn't return to Vietnam, he worked a lot with students—college-age students who were doing social

service work during the war. They were seeing horrible, horrible things. And he said, "I tell them, there's so much suffering and pain and sorrow that they're witnessing, so much violence. But I tell them: just be sure to notice something beautiful, something pleasant, even if it's little." Notice the smell of the herbs in the field at night. Someone was saying today, "Oh, there's so many robins around." You don't have to get into a whole big story, but just take in that moment—the robin, just a moment of ease. Or feel your breath, or open to hearing.

As Sayadaw U Tejaniya says, it's very important to adjust your attitude first, to take care of your awareness and how you're looking at the situation, before you start trying to adjust the environment. Because otherwise we're trying to fix things, but just out of aversion. We can be practicing trying to fix, but with that cloak of aversion coloring everything.

Shabkar was another Tibetan practitioner, much like Milarepa, but he lived in the 1800s. He said, "Meditating without compassion is simply inflicting hardship on yourself." So when the unwanted comes up, just think about that a moment. We're not here to inflict hardship on ourselves. There's enough hardship in life. But we don't have to create compassion. We can just take refuge in that simplicity of awareness without creating anything extra to meet the unwanted.

But we do have to meet the unwanted. We can't skip this part and move directly to total wisdom and compassion for all beings in the world. We can't skip this part.

So really, if we can appreciate the power of it—once we can take care of our own awareness, once we can adjust our own attitude—that's when we really can move into compassionate action in the world. I've been talking about this in terms of practice and looking inward, not so much about acting. But I do want to make a point. When we've taken care of our awareness, when we're able to be present and bear witness with our own unwanted experience, then unwanted external experience, painful and difficult experience, becomes something we can meet. We experience it while remaining present. We're able to be there, we're able to see what can be useful and act not from aversion, but from a clearer seeing of our choices.

Martin Luther King, talking about nonviolence, said, "Nonviolence means avoiding not only external physical violence, but also internal violence of the spirit. You not only refuse to shoot a person, you refuse to hate them."

So we're starting in the reverse way. We're starting by not hating the suffering we're experiencing, the unwanted experience in our own lives. When we don't hate that, when we're cultivating nonviolent awareness, then when the hateful is external, we have the grounding to be with that experience and meet it from wisdom and compassion. At least we have the grounding from which to start.

There was so much else, but I'll stop here. I just want to end with this, from Mingyur Rinpoche. He's another wandering Tibetan practitioner—living in caves right now. Right now. He wandered off two years ago on a three-year retreat. He's Sakyong Mipham Rinpoche's younger brother. He went to Bodh Gaya. But

then he just vanished in the night. He didn't take his passport. He didn't take any money. He didn't even take a toothbrush.

He went off. Just like Milarepa, you know. It's really quite remarkable.

So a couple of years into his wandering, he ran into one of his very devoted disciples who had been with him for a while and then left. I just want to read a little bit from the letter he sent out with this disciple. He has truly been wandering around in Nepal and Tibet with nothing. Just practicing.

He said:

I have experienced feelings of happiness and suffering, rising and falling like waves on the surface of the ocean. At times, food and clothing have been hard to come by, and I have felt cold, hungry, and thirsty. Even when I have begged for alms, I receive nothing but insults and harsh words. At other times I have received food and clothing effortlessly, without even asking for them, and in my mind it felt as though I were enjoying the pleasures of the gods.

While I have experienced both happiness and suffering, the most important thing is that a deep and heartfelt sense of certainty has arisen in the depths of my being—such that no matter what happens, I know that the true nature of these experiences, their very essence, is that of timeless awareness and vast compassion.

While all beings have great wisdom and compassion, this is not always apparent. And this is simply because they have not recognized what they already have.

So from my heart, I sincerely encourage all of you to practice diligently as well. Practice awareness.

So thank you for your patient attention. Let us practice awareness diligently.

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