Wisdom Needs Compassion; Compassion Needs Wisdom

Carol Wilson · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Carol Wilson · 1:00:20

Tonight I'd just like to share some thoughts on the topic of the unity of wisdom and compassion. You could say wisdom needs compassion and compassion needs wisdom for completeness. Luckily, they both naturally turn into each other, so it's not something to worry about.

The view, the understanding of emptiness, of non-separateness—that no thing exists with separate intrinsic existence—this can, just on its own as an idea or an incomplete understanding, converge into disconnect. It can start to seem like nothing matters, like nihilism.

And compassion without wisdom is when we just can't hold it, when we turn away in fear, drown in the grief, or try to act from compassion out of an idea of a "should" but without the deep understanding of wisdom. Even with our best intentions, the actions can start to come from our desperation, our fear, our anger. And so the two support each other.

I want to talk a bit about that, and then speak more about how our practice here is the most powerful way we are cultivating and developing compassion. We've talked about wisdom a lot.

When we say—a phrase I use often—that awareness or mindfulness doesn't care, it doesn't care what it's mindful of. I'll read a quotation that Winnie mentioned last night. You see how just hearing the sense of it is quite beautiful, but the mind that's just hearing it without really the gut-level understanding can think, "That doesn't sound so great to me." This is from Ajahn Chah:

"At some point the mind becomes so clear and balanced that whatever arises is seen and left untouched with no interference. One ceases to focus on any particular content, and all is recognized as simply mind and matter, an empty process arising and passing away of its own. A perfect balance of mind with no reactions. There is no longer any doing."

On one level that can be quite inspiring, on the wisdom level, as we're touching that potential of peace, of non-doing. But the old thinking mind can come in, or when it's an incomplete understanding—which it is, let's face it, for most of us most of the time—people often express, "Well, if nothing matters, what do we practice for? If nothing matters, when we awaken we're not going to care about anybody or anything. We're not going to be motivated to do anything."

That's a big question. If everything's all equal, we won't appreciate nature, we won't appreciate beauty. There won't be love, there won't be compassion—just some big, dull, empty blob of existence. "I'm not

really so interested in that." Or people quite seriously say this sounds alien, inhuman. More than just a little uninteresting: a cold, empty void. Indifference.

So that's one side—the mind thinking about it that's separate from the experience. Because in the experience you don't think, "Oh, this is just dull and blobby." You think, "Wow, this is really free." But thinking about it, these doubts can come up.

The other side is again the incomplete understanding. Padmasambhava talks about the view and action—where we fall into the view. Not the idea, but the gut-level, real understanding of the emptiness of separate me-ness, of things, of this non-interference, this ability to just be with whatever arises, with peace and spaciousness. But it can fall into what's called "falling into emptiness."

Padmasambhava says the view—this real understanding, this wisdom that frees the heart and mind—is the most important thing. However, do not let your action slip in the direction of the view. If it does, you will fall into the evil views of demons prattling on about how goodness is empty, evil is empty. That sense of "It's all empty. Awareness doesn't care. I can do whatever I want and I'm free and it's empty and I'm creating no karma, so it just doesn't matter." Have you ever heard or read that kind of thing? It can seem like a logical outcome, but that's not what the Buddha is saying at all.

Stephen Batchelor quotes Nagarjuna: "Buddhas say emptiness is the relinquishing of opinions. Believers in emptiness are incurable." When emptiness becomes a view that is held to—this is Nyoshul Khen Rinpoche describing it—"It is sad to see those who mistakenly believe in material concrete reality." In other words, sad to see those of us stuck in samsara. "But far more pitiful are those who believe in emptiness. Those who believe in things can be helped through various kinds of practice, through the ways of skillful means. But those who have fallen into the abyss of emptiness find it almost impossible to re-emerge, since there seem to be no handholds, no steps, no gradual progression, and nothing to do."

Now don't get scared. I know that sounds like some of what we've been saying. But it's a one-sided, limited view—it's when emptiness is taken up as a view, not as one's real gut-level experiential understanding. That kind of falling into emptiness is not the wisdom of seeing things as they are, not the wisdom of the Buddha.

But in my limited experience, and in everyone I've seen and talked to as well, if we simply continue with our mindfulness practice as we're doing...

In moments where we're really experiencing, touching, recognizing various aspects of equanimity of mind, as I read from Ajahn Chah, or in a moment when all thoughts, feelings, emotions, and sensations are arising and passing and there's no need to fixate on anything or pull out any one as important—when we really are experiencing that, not just thinking about it—in those moments, the natural response of the mind or heart, if a response is necessary, from the mind that's empty of the obsession with self, is the response of compassion, of metta, of appropriate response to circumstances.

Exactly because all of our energy is not bound up in the relentless, obsessive self-referencing that goes on. Again, I'm talking moment to moment. This isn't like we have to think about way down the road, one time, one big blowout. But moment to moment.

You can notice this for yourself over the days. In times when you're not *having* one of those moments, but one of those moments is occurring—and there's awareness, just presence with the is-ness of things, as we've talked about a lot—there's no big sense of "me." You're just sitting, drinking tea, taking a walk, looking at the leaves, whatever you're doing. Just present. Would a thought of harming arise? Does it make any sense? If someone comes by and you can tell that they're sad, and it's just this moment of pure is-ness, does any kind of resistance or aversion or blame come up? It just doesn't make any sense. It doesn't come up. It's not like we have to somehow manufacture compassion.

When in that moment the energy is freed from this need to protect, from this fear, from this relentless self-referencing—that's the natural response when faced with the suffering of a being or of ourselves. The real experience, the real understandings that come to us over and over in all different ways, of the emptiness of not-self, just deepen our experience and the mind's tendency to move into compassion rather than fear and anger.

A couple of quotations from Stephen Batchelor, from the introduction to his translation of verses from Nagarjuna's *Verses from the Center*. He's talking here about Shantideva, who was a teacher in India in the seventh century, the author of one of the most famous texts, *Guide to the Bodhisattva's Way of Life*. Stephen also translated that text, and he says that when Shantideva's closed sense of self dissolves—and this can just be in a moment, we all know this—he did not vanish into an abyss of nothingness. In fact, Batchelor says, to be empty, to know emptiness, is to no longer be full of oneself.

And when one is no longer full of oneself, that insight into emptiness does not only change the way one views the world and oneself; it also transforms the way one feels about the world and beings and oneself. The heart is open to the anguish of others, prompting a spontaneous longing to assuage their sufferings. And at the same time, there's the wisdom that can acknowledge the somewhat irrational nature of the idea that one could save all others as a limited human being.

So there's the sense of the wisdom of the vastness, and the natural deepening response of the heart that touches the anguish of others because it can no longer be afraid to touch the anguish of ourselves.

And so the famous quotation from Shantideva: "When I've done something for the sake of another, I don't feel amazement or conceit. It is just like having fed myself. I look for nothing in return."

That's really more the sense. One is no longer so full of oneself. And what opens up from that is actually the ability to be more tender with oneself and others. But with the eye of wisdom, we can recognize more clearly what needs to be done, if there's anything that can be done.

There's a story I use often that I heard on the radio, but I've been told it's true. A few years ago, when the

Millennium Bridge opened in London over the Thames River—it's a walking bridge—it was a big deal. The first day it opened, hundreds of people were walking across. It was a big celebration, quite a fancy thing. Anyway, so many people were walking across the bridge that it started shaking and wobbling, back and forth. They were telling this story as an example of what was called... well, it's gone. That's why I write things down. I think I know, and then it's gone.

But anyway, it's a kind of rational, enlightened self-interest—something like that. If you act out of enlightened self-interest, that will be for the good of all. And they were using this principle in relationship to economic policies that led to the 2008 "good-of-all" occurrences in the economy.

So anyway, all these people are walking across the bridge, and it starts to shake. Everyone acts from enlightened self-interest. It starts to lean to one side, so everyone steps to the other side. They all step to the other side, all four hundred people, which completely throws the whole thing off balance. Each single person meaning well, but from the limited view of my self-interest, you can only see so far. You all do the same thing, can't take in the big picture—which the wisdom of emptiness is more able to do. It's just a simple example, but that's kind of how it works.

And the other side of Padmasambhava's quote, where he says don't let your actions slip in the direction of the view—acting from the view that nothing matters. But on the other hand, if you let your views slip in the direction of actions—in other words, if you act without having the view, the understanding of emptiness—even when we're trying to act in the best possible way, like walking on the bridge, we can't see clearly. We can start acting from what we think is compassion, and it may be for a while, but the depth of the intention—we can't keep it up by willpower.

The Dalai Lama says—and he's Mr. Compassion, right?—compassion must be derived from our insight into the emptiness of inherent self. This is where the vast meets the profound. Without this unity, we can fall into despair. He says with wisdom, knowing that people's suffering is avoidable, that it is surmountable—now to me that sounds depressing, but he's saying knowing that from the wisdom of emptiness, our empathy for our inability to pull ourselves out leads to a more powerful compassion. Once we really see that there's no me to protect, there's nothing to do but compassion for all beings. That's just what arises. But without that wisdom—this is the Dalai Lama—although our compassion may be strong, it is likely to have a quality of helplessness or even despair.

Have you ever experienced that? Just in the sense of when we're faced with what comes at us every day here, never mind the world. It's something that is probably one of the ongoing questions and examinations of my life, part of my practice, my exploration all these years. I'm nowhere close to really getting it, but I keep exploring and being inspired by it. Really, the question of compassion to wisdom: How can wisdom help compassion? How can we continue to open again and again in this complex world of so much beauty and so much suffering, of so much tenderness and so much horror? I mean, that's my experience of the world—sometimes more of one and sometimes more of the other.

But how do we—just listening to the news any given day. I'm going to spare you the litany tonight; I don't think there's any need for it. We all have our own. But just listening to the news: huge world global horrors, small individual cruelties and violence and bigotry and ignorance. Take your pick. Yes, there are beautiful things too—don't get me wrong, I don't want to just be one-sided. But talking about compassion means we're talking about suffering.

And so some days it's like, how can I find the courage and the spaciousness of heart and mind and the wisdom just to sit here and listen for ten minutes? Some days I have it. Some days there's a real sense of connectedness, the heart's really touched. Some days it's just—oh my god, it's so overpowering and everything in me wants to shut down. And some days I don't turn it on.

And I'm not saying there's a right or a wrong, but that's the question that lives at the heart of this work: How do we keep opening? How do we find the courage to keep reconnecting with the tender heart—the heart that's willing to just drop into our own suffering with tenderness, without going to hatred or despair or fear or indifference?

Sometimes the mind will go there. That's not always in our control. We all know that. But there are times we can notice a little choice: Do I let myself connect with this or not? And really starting to notice—how do we keep finding that wisdom, that courage, that tenderness over and over and over again? To me, that's kind of the whole koan of practice.

The wisdom and the compassion feed each other and cycle around together. As one gets deeper and more powerful, so does the other. But as Winnie said so eloquently last night, it's not linear. We can't assess. And everything else she said, which I hope you remember.

So how do we find the strength, the wisdom to be with the difficult, to be with the unwanted? I want to talk a little about what compassion actually is in terms of a mental factor, a mental quality—starting in terms of our practice here together, not theoretical, really quite specific to what we're doing. And I'm sure this is not news to any of you.

The definition of compassion is really the state of heart and mind that meets suffering with empathy—any kind of suffering: physical, mental, emotional. One actual translation is "the tender quivering of the heart in response to suffering." Meeting the suffering with an open presence—not shut off, not pulled back, not judging. Sounds like mindfulness, right?

Now, often compassion is spoken of as more than just sitting there feeling sympathetic—"Oh, poor suffering"—but as the actual motivation to act, the impulse, that deep urge that Stephen Batchelor was talking about to alleviate the suffering of others. This manifests in that deep intention of bodhicitta that we talked about the other day—a very strong motivation in some traditions to go through the whole path of awakening in order to come back and be present to alleviate the suffering of all beings. A vast motivation.

We don't have to start there. But even if you think of compassion as needing action to alleviate suffering, in our understanding of the way the Buddha taught, all action—the seed of action—is intention. We've talked about this: that movement of mind and heart that leads to action, that little impulse that comes informed by whatever qualities are present in the mind and heart at that moment, motivating action. Since the seed of all action is intention, the seed of compassion is in the intentions.

So here in practice is the perfect place where we begin to recognize—and this is really the key—not so much what's happening, but how the heart and mind in any particular moment is meeting and responding to what's arising. When we're talking about compassion, we mean that open heart and mind connected to suffering. When some aspect of suffering comes, we don't have to fix it. Where we're really deepening in compassion is in how the mind and heart in this moment is simply meeting this particular suffering.

You don't have to evaluate: Is it a big enough suffering? Is it a stupid suffering compared to everybody else's in the world, so it doesn't count? No—that's dosa, that's aversion. This is not just a laboratory. This is the cultivation of compassion, just as much as wisdom.

The Dalai Lama, talking about bodhicitta and deep compassion and how it develops, said that real compassion, true compassion, develops through deep insight into what suffering is. Yes, there is no way around that one. Deep insight into what suffering is. And how does he say this arises? It arises by focusing, by opening to, by being present with our own experience of suffering. Nowhere else.

As this deepens, as this becomes a more natural response—opening, closing, opening, closing—you may find times when compassion just naturally strengthens. And this is the Dalai Lama again: it strengthens into a sense of empathy and connectedness with other beings. Through compassion—this is why compassion is a Brahma-vihara, a divine abiding, just like metta—all beings suffer at some point in their lives. All beings. And compassion is this quality of measureless heart and mind that, just by touching suffering with an open, tender presence, without judgment, without holding, our particular suffering opens into the universal.

This is why the difficult times of retreat—and life too, but we're talking about retreat, though it's the same in life, no different—why they're so important.

We cannot judge what's unfolding in the midst of difficulty. But it's not simply that we go through the hard times saying, "Okay, okay, I know I'm learning," just waiting for it to be over. You can't tell in the middle—we simply can't. But often, looking back later, you may see it clearly. I certainly can look back and recognize that the retreats where I learned the most, not in an intellectual way, but where the most change happened, the most opening, the most wisdom arose—these were always the most difficult times. Because that's where wisdom has to come together with compassion, meeting what's actually happening at that gut level where part of you is screaming, "I'm out of here!" But there's nowhere to go. So you can beat your head against the wall, or you can open. And we will beat our heads for a while, until we see it

doesn't work.

I'm quite serious about this—I don't want to make light of it. These parts of retreat, just as in our lives, are invaluable. This is really what it's about. And there's no way around it. We don't get to bypass it. I think Winnie said it humorously last night, but we don't get to simply declare, "Oh yes, I really get suffering. I'm open to suffering. I'm not resisting it. I really understand compassion"—just like that, the way I said it just now. It doesn't happen without this deep grokking of it. That doesn't mean we won't fight it. But that's exactly how compassion and attention develop, right where we are.

This takes tremendous courage and trust, and you're all doing it here. I want to keep supporting what you're doing and reflect that back to you. We start where we are. It's the only place compassion and wisdom can develop.

To me—and this is my own personal take, not from a Buddha—the essence of metta, and the essence of compassion too, where they truly begin, is with simple connection. The heart-mind openly, completely connecting, just sinking into what's happening without a "so that," without fear, aversion, or greed. This sounds very much like mindfulness—it's not so different. But that connection, when heart and mind meet suffering in that open way, is what blossoms into compassion.

Yet as we've all seen, for most of us most of the time, this is not our default mode. The Dalai Lama was once asked why there appears to be such a lack of compassion in human society. He said perhaps we simply pay less attention within ourselves to compassion and caring—we reinforce it less. Whereas in some sense we fully embrace hostility and anger as emotional states, fueling them, reinforcing them. If we were to give the same energy, attention, and reinforcement to compassion and caring, they would definitely be stronger.

So first I want to emphasize again: that's what we're doing here. Noticing anger is different from reinforcing it. But the initial shift involves recognizing our habitual patterns. When we're not aware, when we're operating from our automatic modes, facing really difficult suffering—whether physical pain, aging, grief, trauma, or external injustice—often it's as if, at least I see this in myself, unconsciously I trust aversion to protect me. Or anger to protect me. Or fear to protect me. That's where the mind goes.

What is aversion? The essence of aversion in any moment is that the mind pulls back from experience. It doesn't want to be there.

Whether it's fear and going away out of fear, or whether it's anger and aggression, it still pulls away from the experience and then blames someone else.

Whereas the essence of compassion starts with connection. As Joko Beck says, can I find in myself a willingness to rest in this confusing and painful situation? That's all. I don't have to do anything else. Can I find in myself a willingness to rest in this confusing and painful situation?

The answer might be, "No way." But you can be aware of that. That's already different—seeing the jumping away, the closing down, the shutting off, as if to protect.

Pema Chödrön has a lovely image. She talks a lot about compassion and how we really start where we are. Just this image of how we close to protect ourselves. We think we're protecting our vulnerable self from suffering. We shut down like a sea anemone—you know, those sea animals with tendrils that close up like that if you touch them. And she has this lovely image of us closing to protect our tender and vulnerable heart.

So we think, as best we know, that with the aversion and the fear, the shutting down, the tensing up, the resisting of suffering, we're protecting our tender and vulnerable heart. But we're not really. The more we protect, it takes an enormous amount of energy. It shuts out the potential of connection and tenderness. And again, Pema Chödrön says it's as if we spend our whole life walking around all tensed up like we're sitting in a dentist's chair. Something bad might happen, something bad might happen, something bad might happen. Compassion is not possible when it's like that.

How we meet this moment arising is the cultivation of wisdom and compassion. What's arising in this moment is, as I hope you're getting, out of our control. And for whatever's arising, there are valid causes and conditions. How do we know they're valid? Because this is what's happening. We can't change that because it's already happening. How our mind is meeting it is the place, the movement from the habit of fear and aversion to the tenderness of compassion.

So when you think you're sitting with pain—a pain, a pain—and it's not going away and you're always in aversion, but you really look, there are lots of moments that are not in aversion. It's just with it. It's just calm. It's just peaceful. But then the aversion comes, or then all the "how can I fix it" comes. But then there are some moments that are calm, peaceful. Those are cultivating, developing, learning to trust more the power of compassion. It may not look like much at first.

Let me read you a story from Milarepa. Remember, Guy talked about Milarepa, the Tibetan yogi with the calluses on his bum? He was really one of the most famous, and a great poet. I'm going to edit this severely, but there's like a thousand and one songs, many songs of Milarepa. This is one story of what went on all those years he was sitting in the cave developing those calluses. I'll read part of it and make my little editorial comments as we go along.

Mila's mind became blissful and he carried some wood back up to the cave.

So this is like you in meditation. You've become blissful and you come back in to sit.

When he arrived there, he found in the cave seven metal demons with bodies the size of thumbs and eyes the size of cups. Some were making fire, some were bringing water, some were grinding tsampa—barley flour—and some sat performing various magical tricks.

So you get it? You come home all blissful and here are the seven demons, and they've made themselves at home.

As soon as Mila saw them, he became frightened.

So just like us, he became frightened.

He meditated on his deity. He uttered a subjugating mantra—you know, a very fearful mantra—performed a gaze, aroused his deity's presence. He brought in all his protectors. Then he meditated on compassion and friendliness.

That's usually our order, isn't it?

Then he meditated on compassion and friendliness, but was still unable to pacify them. So he thought, well, these might be local deities of the place, and although I've been here for months and years, I have not praised them. In other words, we haven't even recognized they're here.

So he sang a song of praise—I'm cutting it short because it's very long—and it ends: "You non-human demons assembled here are obstacles. Drink this cup of friendliness and compassion and be gone."

Does that sound familiar?

So three of them who were performing magic did go away, which unfortunately only gives us the sense we can keep on trying like that. But he was unable to make the other four go away.

So then he sang a song of confidence—really a song that called up his faith: "It's wonderful that you demons came today. You must come again tomorrow. From time to time, we should converse." And then three of the demons vanished like a rainbow.

He's slowly softening, but you can hear, right? Not quite.

The remaining demon performed an imposing dance, and Mila thought, "This one is vicious and very powerful." So then he sang a song of view, the pinnacle of his understanding, really going to the depth of his practice. It ends with: "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. So demon, if you were to stay here longer, that would be fine with me. If you have friends, bring them along. We will talk out our differences. I feel compassion for this spirit." Then he prays to Lord Vajradhara: "Grant your blessings so that this lowly one may have complete compassion."

Thus he 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.

The pinnacle of wisdom and compassion. But it's always the last resort of what we're used to. Here we're learning it right, over and over again.

The essence really of compassion is connection. Just this simple willingness to be present, tender awareness as much as we can. You could call it bearing witness—bearing witness to our own difficulty, our own suffering, which opens into others.

James Baldwin has a line that I like very much: "An enemy is someone whose story we have not heard." And I think that starts with our own suffering. When it's an enemy, it's someone, something whose story we have not heard. Same when it's projected outward to someone else.

So we start here with our own personal dukkha in whatever form—physical, mental, emotional—just being able over and over to touch it, to be with it, to bear witness to it. Not to make it go away, but just to be there. And it does open into a sense of connection with all beings.

Whether it's grief, chronic illness, the fear of some new and life-threatening illness, loneliness, the sadness of those we love suffering—whatever your particular flavor is—when we're able to be with it, to stop making it the enemy, to hear its story, it may not seem like there's much compassion. But this being able to bear witness translates naturally into bearing witness, being present for others going through that same suffering.

You can really feel the difference. Compassion doesn't always mean we fix things. But it means we're able to stay there with an open, tender heart. Because we can be with our own suffering, we can be with another's.

I've seen this with sickness, with illness, with grief. You know when someone comes really well-intentioned, cares, wants to help, but doesn't have that ability to just touch with their own self the suffering? There's a little bit of fear in it. Years ago I had a chronic illness, and so many dear, wonderful people came with so many ideas about how to help. But I could really feel the people who wanted to help yet had this level of fear, this level of basically "get better so we don't have to be around this." That's crass, but you can feel the discomfort.

And then other people come—same with grief—and just know. It's just how it is. I know how it is. I can be here with you. I don't have to fix it.

You can feel that, that bearing witness. It's a powerful form of compassion. It doesn't mean we each have to go out and be Gandhi, but it starts with being present to whatever measure of suffering is arising in our mind and body right now. From there, it can move to a much greater scale.

For the remaining part of this talk, I'd like to read a few examples from others, because they express this much better and much deeper than I can.

This sense of bearing witness can move from our own personal realm—being able to be present with friends, with people who are suffering—to something larger. And when we're present with a calm eye and heart, if there's something to do, we can see more clearly. Sometimes there's not.

I think this bearing witness is something that often shows up in the realm of artists—bearing witness to large societal areas of horror.

One example I've always admired is the Russian poet Anna Akhmatova, one of the most famous poets in Russia of the twentieth century. She's mostly well-known because during the years of the Stalin terror, she could have emigrated. Many of the people she knew left Russia, but she chose not to. She chose to remain in her country, specifically to be a witness to the horrors of the Stalinist terror and the starvation, which she did experience. Her first husband was shot by the Stalinist army. Her second common-law husband and her son were both imprisoned in the Gulag for many years, and her second husband died there. So it's not like she was some disconnected witness.

I want to read a little snippet from one of her longer poems, *Requiem*, written between 1935 and 1940. It's a long poem about those years of Stalin's terror. Just this beginning, because it so touches me—the power of being able to be present with an open heart. It can really make such a difference. It doesn't fix things. But this is compassion as well.

She begins *Requiem*: "No foreign sky protected me. No stranger's wing shielded my face. I stand as witness to the common lot, survivor of that time, that place."

And then, instead of a preface, she writes: "In the terrible years of the Yezhov terror, when the most people were being arrested and sent off to the Gulag or killed, I spent seventeen months waiting in line outside the prison in Leningrad."

What this means is that anyone whose family member had been taken—they would just be disappeared in the night, you never knew where they were—would stand outside the prison in Leningrad all day, every day, with packages, hoping they could just get to the front of the line and give a package of food or something that they hoped would reach their loved one, whom they didn't even know was alive.

So she's not exaggerating. She spent seventeen months waiting in line outside the prison in Leningrad with hundreds and hundreds of other people. "One day, somebody in the crowd called me by name." She was famous by this time, so someone called her by name. "And standing behind me was a woman with lips blue from the cold who had, of course, never heard me called by name before. Now she started out of the torpor common to us all and asked me in a whisper"—everyone whispered there—"'Can you describe this?' And I said, 'I can.' Then something like a smile passed fleetingly over what had once been her face."

Just that power to be present and to communicate it, because she was so present to it all. And we can hear it because it's a natural aspect of our humanness to meet suffering with compassion. It's not some rarefied thing. When we're not lost in our own self-interest, that's what emerges.

Being fully present, bearing witness—that's one aspect.

Two other aspects I want to mention briefly. One is the complexity that arises when we do move into the

realm of action. We must remember to start and keep coming back to the motivation of compassion, of wisdom, rather than assessing ourselves solely by our actions. Because that's how we can act with the most wisdom amid the complexity of life, knowing—as we're starting to know—that we have no control over the outcomes of any action we perform. There are so many complications. We don't even have control over the outcomes of actions just about ourselves, never mind in the wider world, never mind other people's responses.

So how do we act from the most wisdom and compassion and then not take it personally when it doesn't turn out how we want? How do we not fall into despair or anger or hopelessness? Believe me, I'm not saying I have this one licked. I'm just bringing these up as what is involved.

One complexity, not simple but common for many people—at least at my age—is what happens when you're designated as the medical proxy for someone, say for your elderly parents. That entails all kinds of decisions. You'll have no idea what they'll be, and they had no idea what they would be when they asked you to take on this role. You can never figure out in advance what's going to come and what the decisions are going to be.

And you never know—you make the decisions as best you can. You don't know. Sometimes the best decision you could make leads to a lot more suffering for a longer period of time. Really. How do you stay with that? And stay open and present with the compassion, present with the suffering, and not fall into self-judgment or want to turn away because it's too painful to watch?

And I really see—I saw for myself, and I did this with both my parents—I saw for myself: when it's about me, there's no way to see clearly. If the decision is colored, tinged by "I'm going to be uncomfortable," or "That's what they think they want, but it's not what I think is best for them," or "I know more than..." or "I just can't stand to see that, so even though they wanted it, I can't do it"—all of that doesn't let you see clearly. It's not a simple example, but a common one that's very, very complex. And it's not like you say, "Okay, now I'll do it from compassion," and it stays like that. We have to keep reconnecting, keep seeing what's going on, and have compassion when we blow it. We will, because of course we won't have all the wisdom, and then we'll fall into fear, we'll fall into overwhelm, we'll fall back into the habits of aversion or blame or whatever our habit is. We stop suffering right there, and we start again. We start again. We start again. But life is complex, so just trying to do the right thing without wisdom—you see how we can get lost.

And this is just more from the news, but how attachment to view, combined with trying to do what's for the good of all—let's not even get into politics, but that's kind of where this goes—views for caring for life. This is a bit of a radical example, but where it can go: you have people who are anti-abortion and then end up wanting to kill doctors who perform abortions. How can you get there from compassion? Compassion to one side and murder on the other side, held by view. That's falling into views. Whereas compassion is coming back, coming back, coming back to see that the seed of action comes from our intention. And our

practice here, being with our own suffering, is how we keep on purifying the intention, finding the courage over and over.

So I just want to read from two or three people who have examples of acting in the world over and over in very difficult and threatening situations. I'm not saying these people are perfect or anything, but they have the deep wisdom of the power of compassion and love to counter terror and violence and fear—and then the need to keep reconnecting, repurifying. It's never a one-time thing. None of these people do I know, of course, but they have really inspired me over some years of reading about them.

The first is a man named James Lawson. Probably a lot of you know who he is. He's a doctor of divinity, still teaching now at 85 years old. He is even now considered one of the leading theorists in this country on nonviolence and nonviolent activism. He was really one of the leaders in the whole civil rights movement starting in the 1950s, doing huge trainings for all the freedom riders and many of the civil rights activists on nonviolent civil rights activism. Really powerful.

He was a follower of Gandhi. Even during the Korean War, he was a conscientious objector. He could have gotten out of going—he could have been deferred because he was a minister—but he said that wouldn't be fair. So he went to jail as an anti-war activist. I turned on the radio one day, and they were just interviewing somebody. I didn't know who it was, but I just started listening, and halfway through I thought, "Wow, that must be James Lawson." And it was. I got so excited just hearing him. He was saying—this is a quote—"I discovered a strength and power in me when I was in jail to live out of my own conscience." He continues to teach nonviolent workshops, working for immigrant rights, rights of Palestinians, workers' rights to a living wage, civil rights. He's involved in all kinds of causes and in teaching nonviolence.

I want to read a little example of the simple but incredibly courageous and powerful way that he brings a sense of connection into a really violent situation. This is a description given to the writer by a person who was involved, Bernard Lafayette. This was in Nashville in 1960 during a demonstration for integration. As the demonstrators were walking along, some young white toughs came and started beating them up. They grabbed the guy at the back and started beating on him. Bernard Lafayette, who's telling the story, threw himself over the man to protect him. All of these guys had been trained by James Lawson, who was there. While this was going on, Jim Lawson walked over. He didn't rush over.

He said he walked over very calmly, as if to a longstanding appointment. When he arrived, that shifted the attention of the guys who were beating to Lawson. Bernard remembered that he just seemed so confident, so relaxed, as if this was just normal for him.

The leader of the toughs, when he saw Lawson, became really enraged—obviously at his coolness—and he spit on him. Lawson just looked at him and asked him for a handkerchief. The man, stunned, reached in his pocket and handed Lawson a handkerchief. Lawson wiped himself off.

Then he looked at the man, dressed in this leather motorcycle jacket gear, looked at the man's jacket, and started talking to him. Did he have a motorcycle or a hot rod car? A motorcycle was the answer. Jim asked a technical question or two, and the young man started explaining what he had done to customize his bike. Amazingly, Bernard thought, these two men were now talking about the levels of horsepower in motorcycles. A few seconds earlier, they had seemed to be sworn enemies. By this time, the guys on the ground were up and walking, and the line was moving again. Jim and the young man were still talking about the man's motorcycle. In that brief, frightening moment, Jim had managed to find a subject which they both shared and had used it in a way that made each of them more human in the eyes of the other.

I just find that so powerful—the simplicity of that connection, finding the humanness in such a difficult situation.

The theory of this is explained further by one of his students at that time: John Lewis, who as you probably know is now a congressman from Georgia, has been so for many years, but he was one of the students, one of the original Freedom Riders. This is from his autobiography, where he describes the principles of Gandhian nonviolent action as he learned them from James Lawson:

"One of the most fundamental principles of the Gandhian notion of satyagraha, nonviolent action, is that it is not just a technique to achieve specific goals. It's not just a tool to achieve unity and freedom in the world around us. True satyagraha, as Gandhi taught it, is about a fundamental shift inside our own souls. It is rooted in the qualities of inner unity, of inner freedom, of inner certainty."

Inner unity is concentration, inner freedom is wisdom, inner certainty is faith. It's the same thing.

"And once found, that place is not disturbed or affected by the thousands of details of the world around us that bombard us every day."

Then, to bring in suffering, he says:

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

We are talking about love here—not romantic love, not the love of one individual for another, not loving something that is lovely to you. This is broader, deeper, more all-encompassing love. It is a love that recognizes the spark of the divine in each of us, even in those who would raise their hand against us, those we might call our enemy. This sense of love realizes that the emotions of the moment and constantly shifting circumstances can cloud that divine spark. Pain, ugliness, and fear can cover it over, turning a person toward anger and hate. It is the ability to see through those layers of ugliness, to see further into a person than perhaps that person can see into themselves, that is essential to the practice of nonviolence."

That is one of the most profound things I've read about compassion and wisdom.

I had one other story, a man from Burma, but it's a little long, and I think I'll just end here.

So, thank you. Let's just sit quietly with a graceful heart for a moment.

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