Wisdom and Compassion

Carol Wilson · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Carol Wilson · 1:01:16

Tonight I want to talk about the unity of compassion and wisdom. You could say wisdom needs compassion and compassion needs wisdom—which luckily happens naturally like that.

To talk about how wisdom needs compassion: when we talk about, and sometimes even experience, the wisdom of emptiness—emptiness meaning empty of separate, intrinsic self—it doesn't mean nothing's there, but there's no reliable separate anything to hold on to. We've talked about that quite a bit. The sense of not-self, the sense of everything coming and going. We say whatever thought occurs, awareness doesn't care. Whatever experience happens, just be aware of it. One isn't better than the other.

There can be at times a beginning sense of understanding this or experiencing it, but not fully. And so while a deep understanding of this, or even moments of it, is freeing, there's also oftentimes—I'm sure many of you have experienced this, I certainly have—when the idea of emptiness, of not-self, of awareness doesn't care, is actually felt or experienced as rather unsettling. To say the least, unattractive. I didn't really come here to find out everything's all the same and awareness doesn't care and whatever I think doesn't matter and whatever I do doesn't matter. It's not just to move everything into some dull grayness. People have used words to me like uncaring, alien, unattractive, inhuman. You get the drift. Sometimes even when we experience this it's kind of scary, because there's no reference point.

This is a kind of incomplete aspect of wisdom. It's true, all that, without the judgments about uncaring and alien and inhuman. The sense that there's nothing to hold on to, that in a way, in the purity of mind, it doesn't really matter what's arising—that's true. But if that's the only way we experience it, it can lead to a sense of disconnection, a kind of disillusionment. It verges into the incomplete aspect without the connectedness of compassion. It can sound as though emptiness and not-self is a very uncaring, disconnected state or experience.

This is from Nyoshul Khenpo, who was a great Dzogchen master: "The danger is that we hear too much too soon. We think we have understood shunyata, or emptiness, and we err on the side of the absolute—like everything's empty, nothing matters—in a nihilistic fashion, and we are obscured by concepts."

Nagarjuna said, "It is sad to see those who mistakenly believe in material concrete reality, but far more pitiful are those who believe in emptiness." Nagarjuna went on to say, "The Buddhists say that emptiness is relinquishing opinions. Believers in emptiness are incurable."

So you get a sense of the difference. The experience is one thing. The belief, the concept that it's all empty,

it doesn't matter—that's something else entirely. Back to Nyoshul Khenpo: "Those who have fallen into the abyss of emptiness find it almost impossible to reemerge since there seem to be no handholds, no steps, no gradual progression, and nothing to do." Which we've been saying, right? There's nothing to do. But knowing that from a deep understanding is very different from a little bit of knowing combined with the concept that it all doesn't matter, there's nothing to do. You know, the kind of crazy wisdom where two people are fighting over a cat—just cut it in half, it doesn't matter. That kind of thing. Nothing matters.

So that's wisdom, but not complete wisdom, because it doesn't have the compassion, it doesn't have the connection.

The Tibetans have a lovely way of describing the natural nature of mind, of heart, as threefold aspects—although all three come together, we split it up just because we have to talk about it. All mind, all experience has the quality of being empty, empty of any separate self-existence, what I was just saying. And at the same time, in those moments of spontaneous knowing, natural awareness, the natural clear knowing quality of mind-heart is always available, always present.

We've said that—the simple way we've been saying it—awareness is always accessible when you just remember.

And the third aspect of that, in the moment when there's the clear awareness which is always accessible, knowing with the understanding of the empty nature, the third aspect is that the natural expression of mind of heart is that it is—the Tibetans use the phrase—ceaselessly responsive. Meaning that in any particular moment of experience, if a response is appropriate, that natural response will be that of compassion or metta, whichever is appropriate, equanimity—of the brahmaviharas—but call it compassion for simplicity. This is the natural and ceaselessly responsive nature, the active nature, when the heart-mind of emptiness is called upon to respond.

And when you put that all together, that's where we really get a sense of the depth of the freedom the Buddha is talking about—this unity of wisdom and compassion.

Now, at the same time, compassion needs wisdom or we so easily fall into the vortex of despair. We get overwhelmed, we take it all personally, we just can't be there. You know all of that—or falling into righteous anger. So without the depth of wisdom of emptiness, we can certainly cultivate compassion. Of course, we don't have to be perfect in any of this, but the real depth of compassion needs both.

This is from the Dalai Lama, who says: without the unity of compassion and emptiness, we can fall into despair. Real compassion must be derived, must arise from our insight into the emptiness of inherent self. This is where the vast meets the profound. Otherwise, though our compassion may be strong, it is likely to fall into the quality of hopelessness or even despair.

Have you felt that sometimes? It feels like it's really compassion, but it so easily tips into the quality of hopelessness, of despair.

And so our practice, where we're cultivating wisdom through the steadiness of mindfulness, we're also naturally developing compassion. Sometimes one seems more up, sometimes another seems more up, and sometimes they come together in a lovely way. But they keep on developing—one and then the other, and then they come together.

One expression of this that I really like is the statues of Green Tara. I don't know if you've ever seen that—she's a Tibetan goddess of compassion. I have a little one at home that I really like because to me it depicts this blending of wisdom and compassion. So the statue—she's sitting there really in meditation, really at ease, totally relaxed, clearly in meditation, but the eyes are a little bit open. Not this sense of complete pullback from the world. And I'm sure if you've ever seen the Green Tara icon, you know that one of the feet is resting up on a lotus petal, ready to get up if action is called for. At that moment, action isn't called for. So there's the deep serenity of wisdom, of meditation, but always—not like, "Oh my God, I've got to do something!" No, that's hard, that's not it. Total serenity, but as soon as the appropriate action is called for, it naturally arises. Doing the obvious, as I heard one teacher say—not holding oneself in readiness. It's the natural response of wisdom.

Nyoshul Khen again: someone who realizes that all phenomena are empty and who realizes or recognizes the non-existence of self will naturally have spontaneous compassion for sentient beings who do not realize this and so continue to suffer through delusion and clinging.

And you don't have to think, "Oh, that's somewhere way down the road, impossible for me." Again, remember, everything is only moments—only this moment. To me, that's one of the most freeing teachings in my practice, because when I find my mind thinking, "Well, how can I ever be that compassionate? I was just having these horrible thoughts about this other person yesterday..."

Right now. Right now is all we have to work with. That's a huge relief, and it makes everything possible.

So, remember—last week I was talking about working to purify the habits of heart and mind. And I think I suggested noticing moments in your own experience when the heart-mind is pure, when it's not being distorted by greed, hatred, delusion. And I know another time I said: when there's no sense of self. Notice those moments.

Think back, if you can think of one. As I said, they're just simple moments. When you're really present and awake, just with this moment, just as it is—as someone was describing in an interview, just being totally present with what is—there's no problem in that moment, is there? We can't imagine why there would ever be a problem again. We don't have to wait long, but in that moment of the pure heart and mind, whatever it is—whether it's just walking, seeing the leaves, drinking tea, just standing—there's just that purity, that simple total presence, not thinking of me or other.

In that moment, could you imagine, if there was some being in front of you having trouble, that you would act from aversion or cruelty? The natural response of compassion would just naturally spring up,

wouldn't it? Can you imagine doing anything harmful or cruel from that space? It just doesn't occur in that moment.

And so in terms of some little chipmunk that needed help, you may not know, you may not have the information of what would be the most supportive, helpful thing to do. So we don't always have omniscient wisdom. But in that sense of the wisdom of emptiness, the wisdom of not about me and other, the movement to compassionate action would just naturally arise. You wouldn't have to think about it.

Later you could think about and analyze and beat yourself up when you weren't in such a pure space anymore. But at that time, it's just the natural way that the mind of wisdom and compassion functions.

And so wisdom needs compassion, but compassion also needs wisdom. Because we don't have the big picture. Even when we're not really taken over by greed or confusion, but just a little bit caught in the sense of "I" — even if we're meaning well, wanting to do good — our vision, what we can see, is going to be narrowed and limited in that "me and other" space, if you know what I mean. "I want to do something good for the environment," but somehow it's always coming from me. We just can't see. Instead of "me and other," the wisdom shifts it to "we." And out of that "we," a more appropriate, compassionate action can come.

I'll give you a very simple example — not even compassion, but just that shift out of "me" to "we" that lets one see the situation in a more holistic way. This is such a simple example. Some years ago when I was on retreat at Shwe Oo Min Meditation Center in Burma, there were a lot of people there, and I was doing some walking meditation. It's not so orderly, you could say, as here. There are no special walking rooms, just places outside to walk — a narrow walkway here, verandas outside of the meditation hall, anywhere outside you can walk.

So I was walking, and here, you know, if we start walking one way we assume everyone else will walk in the same direction, and we're all very tidy about it. God forbid someone should go crosswise. But there it's just kind of whatever. I had my little space, walking back and forth, and people are ambling this way and that, coming right towards me, and I'm... well, you can imagine. Maybe not, but... No one walked into me, but I was in a decent open space, thinking, "Okay, well, let's all try to walk for the well-being of all." I wasn't really aversive, but there was that sense of me trying to coordinate it, you know — psychically. I mean, I wasn't really talking to anybody, but psychically. "We're just walking here, we're just all walking together, one big mishmash."

But then something let go — which, as we know, can't be an act of will. Something let go and I quit seeing it from this perspective of how all these people were in my way. Actually, it's working. Nobody's actually walking into anybody here. It's working. I just walk back and forth, and someone seems to be walking — well, they are walking directly towards me, that's true. But when we get to the point, before the point of contact, one of us turns. Okay, what's the big problem? One of us turns. Maybe it's me, maybe it's them. But someone turns. Keep on walking. Actually, there was no problem. And I was there for weeks, and it

was always thus. As soon as it wasn't that sense of me having to take care of it for all of us — but especially for me — and I was just seeing the big picture, oh, it works. Maybe they move, maybe I move. One of us moves in the big "we," and it all works out.

It's simple, but it makes a huge difference. That's, in a little way, how compassionate response and clear seeing can arise when so much of our energy isn't caught up in this relentless, obsessive self-referencing.

Without wisdom, we can have wonderful ideas of compassion and act in great compassionate ways, but it doesn't have the real depth, the staying power, because it's not coming from the deep wisdom of not "me and other" but "us" — and that "us" includes everything. But when that obsessive self-referencing is just a little bit released, so much energy is available for life, for awareness, for appropriate response, for compassion. And that's how it naturally shows up, which is a nice thing.

So then, in a way, the question of compassion with wisdom — the one that comes up for me — I sometimes feel like this has been one of the great koans in practice. You've probably noticed how a lot of spiritual practice is really paradoxical: one thing's true and then the exact opposite is true, and they're both true, and you can't figure it out, but you somehow have to understand it. It's like that with this. For me, this balance, this dance of emptiness and compassionate action — cultivating wisdom to be able to really act in wise and compassionate ways from a depth, not just from an idea, and not then just getting into the wisdom that's so serene and removed — I feel like a lot of my life is kind of back and forth, back and forth. Trying to figure it out, which is of course hopeless, but dancing back and forth between those two, making teensy, teensy little understandings, and then I didn't understand anything, starting over. It goes like that.

But how, with the depth of wisdom and compassion, do we continue to open our hearts, our minds, in this complex world of beauty and suffering?

And these days, it's hard enough, I find, to find the courage—not just the willpower courage, but the courage of the tenderness of wisdom, of compassion—to keep opening in the face of even our own overwhelming suffering. Each of us, at times, experiences suffering that is overwhelming. Just to open to our own. And then the way the information world is these days, there are all the people we know, all the people we care for, our family and friends, and then just to be able to be present in the face of all of their suffering. And then there's the media. Just one day of listening to the news can—well, some days one can be somewhat present. Some days it's more than the heart can take in and it shuts down. At least that's my experience. It's an overwhelming amount of information.

So how do we continue to find the wisdom and the courage to open, and the courage to be present? And if we respond, how do we not go to the response of fear, of aggression, of hatred, of self-righteous anger—if we even have enough wisdom to have the choice? How do we not fall into and wallow in the internal space of despair, or feeling, as the Dalai Lama said, that it's hopeless, there's no way I can open to this, so forget it? It's like all or nothing.

Somehow, I notice in talking to different people, and I have the same tendency myself—we either have to do it all, and we have to do it all right now, and if we're not doing it completely perfectly, we're hopeless failures. I don't know if that relates to anybody, but I've certainly picked up that little tinge once in a while in interviews. And so it's like this: I should be able to open to all the suffering in the world right now, and when my heart shuts down, it shows what a selfish, deluded person I am. Right? Those are our two alternate choices. Not really so helpful.

But to see that we really need both—the inner reflects the outer. We need both. And that's why we have this practice.

There's something I read from Martin Luther King one time, just a short line, where he said, "Nonviolence means we not only refuse to shoot a person, but we refuse to hate them." I love that, because to me it gives the sense—it's not superficial. It's already quite profound that we refuse to shoot a person, we refuse to hurt a person with our actions. That's already wonderful. I mean, if that could just go in the world, that would be fantastic. But on the depth of all of our actions, our heart and mind really transforming, purifying, so that we're like the Green Tara—the spontaneous response in a moment is wisdom and compassion.

For this, the purification, the practice, the looking at suffering has to really keep coming in on a deeper and deeper level, deeper into our own experience, so that the transformation is real. Not only do we refuse to shoot, we refuse to hate. And we have enough awareness, enough self-knowledge, enough mindfulness to actually notice a moment when we have a choice. No, I'm not going to go to hatred now. And we all know there are plenty of times we don't have that choice. But that's why we're practicing—to even see that choice is possible, to see that there's another way, and to learn to trust that.

So how does this happen? I wanted to read something from the Dalai Lama in terms of opening to so much suffering without falling into despair. I read one time—I don't have the exact quotation, I just remember it because it went in, so this is a complete paraphrase, not his words. But the person interviewing him was describing how, as I'm sure you know, he is the person who receives the histories, so many suffering histories of so many people. Any Tibetan refugee who manages, especially in the past, to escape from Tibet could get to the Dalai Lama and would tell their story. It's endless histories of loss and murder and losing one's family, nunneries and monasteries destroyed, imprisonment and torture. Endless. If I read just one or two, it's like, oh my God, how can you live after that? How can you take it in?

And he'll be there, totally present for each person who comes. No matter who it is, whoever he's talking to, he's so present. All of him is there, like you're the most important, only person in the world at that point. Total presence, which is really an act of love, isn't it? An act of compassion.

So he'll be there, hearing this history, really in it, often weeping, really completely empathetic, as long as it's there. Then, when that person leaves and the next thing happens, he's totally there in the next thing. He could be with another person and they're laughing and joking, or he's going to another teaching in a

completely other space.

It's this sense of—not because he didn't care that such presence was possible, but precisely because he's so fully present, just in this moment, empathetic, crying, with no resistance. And so the next moment is just as total, and there's no residue.

So it's not "how can I open to all of it?" I can't. That's exactly it—"I" can't. The "I" is somehow the resistance, the limit. We do the best we can, but when there's no "I," experience is just passing through. So he's really there, really empathetic, completely compassionate—and with the next person equally so, even if that might be a joking, happy moment. Empty of separate self and yet totally connected and empathetic in the experience. This is the union of emptiness and compassion as it shows up in a person's activity.

Compassion is sometimes defined as the quivering of the heart. I like that because it actually feels like that, kind of—the quivering of the heart in connection with pain or suffering, our own or another's. The tender heart. When the Dalai Lama or Tibetans talk about it, they speak of bodhicitta, which is the most noble aspect of compassion—the noble or awakened heart. It's described as the great motivation to cultivate compassion and awakening this noble heart in our own heart and mind in order to bring all beings to awakening. That's a vast aspiration of compassion. But even just to talk about bodhicitta as the noble heart, the tender heart, this quivering of our heart in response to suffering, this kinship with beings.

So the Dalai Lama, saying that of course cultivation of this is possible, asks: how does it develop? He says—you can guess. Maybe you can guess. From deep insight into what suffering is. And how do we develop that insight? By focusing, being really present, he says, with our own experience of suffering. We don't have to have some giant, amazing experience. We all experience plenty of suffering—and happiness, as Winnie was reminding us last night. We got there in a circuitous way. But the suffering that we experience is exactly where we start to learn in a cellular way what compassion is, as we learn how to open into, to meet our own suffering, whatever form it takes, with this tenderness of heart.

This is the Dalai Lama. He says that compassion then begins to strengthen and becomes a sense of empathy, connectedness with other beings. And this is not like an intellectual thing where we should try to make this happen, because then it just becomes pushing some idea. So don't worry about it or push for it, but notice—because it really does happen that way.

Sometimes people think, "Well, my suffering isn't so much compared to..." and they'll name how much other people are suffering. There are always people going through far more horrendous things than we are, even though there are plenty of people here going through horrendous things. But that's a way of saying, "Well, mine is really nothing. I don't have the right to even worry about this, or even meet it as suffering, because it's so nothing." That's a pushing away. That's a denial. That's making it personal and sidestepping the whole issue. It doesn't matter what it is. Any kind of suffering that we open to with this tender heart, with this quality of mindful awareness—non-judging, totally present—can really move into this empathy, into this sense of connectedness. The expression of my particular suffering becomes the

suffering of all beings.

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

And Pema Chödrön says, "We awaken this bodhicitta, this tenderness for life, when we can no longer shield ourselves from the vulnerability of our condition, from the basic fragility of existence." In the words of the 16th Karmapa, "You take it all in. You let the pain of the world touch your heart, and it turns into compassion."

Again, this happens by itself. We don't have to be expert at it. But this is why—and I think Winnie said this last night—the difficult times in retreat are so important. They're so important. I've talked about this in terms of purification, but really, how we meet presently arising experience is the point of purification. What's arising in this moment? Someone said, "This shouldn't be happening." We always think this shouldn't be happening. But that doesn't make any sense, because it *is* happening. And if it is happening, it should be happening, because all the conditions have come together such that this moment is like this. It can't be any different.

But how the mind-heart of awareness meets this moment—that's the place where compassion and wisdom are cultivated. How we meet this presently arising moment, when we meet it with clear mindful awareness, is the arising of the compassionate intention, the wise intention, as Winnie talked about. Just to meet what's happening with kind awareness. It's certainly not our—in the world it may not be the main go-to modality. The Dalai Lama says someone asked him about what looks like a lack of compassion in human society.

And he said, well, maybe 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 or reinforcing it. If we were to give the same amount of energy, attention, and reinforcement to compassion and caring, they would definitely be stronger. And so, that's what we're practicing.

But have you noticed that sometimes when you're really in a difficult spot, all of a sudden metta or compassion arises, and it's like, whoa, where did that come from? Who was that? And that's lovely to notice. But do you notice how other times, when we're tired or it's happening again, the go-to thing is more a sense of aversion or judgment?

Here's a little story that exemplifies this. I was staying with a friend in an ashram in southern India, near Tiruvannamalai, but it wasn't Ramana Ashram. It was a smaller one. And in the middle of the night, like

one or two in the morning, we started hearing these incredible whacks. I can't even do it—so loud. Whack, whack! Just like some really loud, hard thing hitting the floor. And this went on for the rest of the night.

We got up in the morning and were walking out, and we could see into another room, the main center room in the ashram. There was a little bed, one of those charpoy beds, and an old Swami was sitting on the bed. Really old, with a long beard, in his orange outfit. He was sitting on the edge of the bed with this long, thick rope that looked like he'd made himself out of tying all kinds of rags together. It must have taken him years to get that many rags. So this thick rope about this long, and he was just sitting there on his bed with all his strength, just flapping it on the floor. He'd been doing this for hours by this point. Whack! Whack! Whack!

So we asked, what is he doing? We couldn't ask him directly—he was too engrossed. "What is he doing?" They said, "Oh, he's keeping the demons away. He's keeping the hindrances away. He's getting rid of them."

Isn't that what we do? Whack! Whack! Whack! Get rid of this ill will! Get rid of this sleepiness! Get rid of this doubt! Whack! Whack! That's not really the most useful approach. It doesn't really work, and it's exhausting. It takes huge energy to be fighting with all our experience.

Pema Chödrön gives another lovely image. I like it a lot. She compares our heart, our tender heart and mind, to a sea anemone. Do you know what that is? It's a little creature that lives in the sea, and because it has a very soft center, it closes around itself to protect itself. She says, you know, we think, "I have enough suffering of my own, I can't let in other people's suffering," or "I can't even let in my own suffering," so we close around to protect ourselves.

And she says, we think we're protecting ourselves, but really when we close off to anything, we're also closing off to ourselves. Notice that—when we can't be with some aspect of our own suffering, do you notice we don't get to be with the beauty either? We're just disconnected until we figure out what's going on.

I love that image. Instead of judgment, it's like, "Oh, it's a sea anemone closing down around the soft center." But then we see that's actually what shuts us off. And we start to learn—and this is what we're learning through practice—that the place of strength and wisdom and courage, that which actually gives the understanding and the natural response of compassion, is the softness. It's the wisdom that actually lets us just be with that tender heart, whatever it is that's occurring.

We don't have to take on the whole world. Just starting with our own experience here. Whatever it is that's going on in your practice.

So that's why these periods are so important. The difficult times—not just to get through and think, "Okay, they're important and I'm through it, thank God, we're on to the next thing." You'll look back, I'm pretty sure—I can't say for everyone, but I know for me—times that I've had retreats that were really difficult,

where you think, "Oh my God," and you come staggering out of it. None of you here will come staggering out. You'll all come out floating on clouds of bliss. But once in a while, I've come out kind of reeling, thinking, "Oh my God, that was so hard. What was that about?" But you find out later it was about so much. Those are the retreats where so much was learned, in my experience. The kind of learning that really makes the mind and heart stronger, more courageous. It lets go of a lot of confusion through being with the suffering, seeing how it's created, how the mindfulness and compassion being with it allows it to dissipate.

And then it comes up again. And we're like, "Oh no, I saw it once. That was enough." No, it wasn't. Ten million times will be enough. And again, and again, and again. And we think, "Oh my God." But instead of that, notice each moment. It's a deepening of the potential for this anemone to open. And for that moment of meeting it with just simple mindfulness, just simple acceptance—not in order for anything, not to make it go away, not to have a big "aha" moment, but just because this is the moment that life is presenting right now. There is no other moment of life than this one right now. And our choice is to shut down to it or to, as best we can, meet it with kind awareness and compassion. We don't always have that choice. But that's okay. Then we notice we're shut down. That's a new moment that we have an opportunity to meet again. But there's ever only this moment.

And so it's so important—we can't skip this part. It's like we want to cultivate compassion by really understanding it, but let's jump over this horrible part here in the middle where we have to keep on swimming back in this stuff. And it's not even like... sometimes it's really intense. Sometimes it's like, "This is such a stupid thing." Like when I talked about swallowing the other day. It seems like a stupid thing, but the amount of suffering could be huge. Don't denigrate it. Don't push it away. Really meet it.

Shabkar, who was a really amazing Tibetan yogi from the early 1800s—he wrote *An Autobiography of Shabkar*, it's a huge book, mostly in poetry—but he was a really amazing yogi. This is just one line of his. He says, "Meditating without compassion is simply to inflict hardship on yourself." I think that's worth remembering. I'll say it again: Meditating without compassion is simply to inflict hardship on yourself. And there's enough of that.

So we can't skip this part, because this is really where the depth of wisdom of emptiness meets the depth of compassion, and compassion moves from an intellectual idea—which is useful, that can guide us to do wholesome actions—but it moves from intellectual to really that cellular depth of wisdom, like the Green Tara. Because without that, I know there are times I want to do a compassionate thing, but if it's not really from myself, if I'm still caught up in me or in fear or protection or whatever, then if it comes to the crunch, when things get hard, sometimes compassion's not what comes out. We're back with the old swami hitting ourselves with a rope—or someone else, in the crunch. So it has to really be like a cellular understanding. Not just an idea.

And then compassion and wisdom of emptiness is not about not acting. Incredible response, incredible

courageous response and proactive actions are possible when it's really moving from this depth of transformation of heart and mind—that even faced with violence and possible death, the coming from compassion and wisdom is still accessible.

Just an example, back to Martin Luther King: you not only refuse to shoot a person, you refuse to hate a person. A few months ago, I saw on TV a special on PBS—it was a commemoration from a period of the civil rights movement in the 60s. This was a period from the Freedom Rides in 1961.

For those of you who are American, and also probably a lot younger than I am, at that period in 1960 and 1961, a group of young college students—African-American college students from a divinity school in Nashville—had formed a group they called the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee. They were really very active in the civil rights movement. They thought up and began, or maybe didn't begin it, but they're the ones who carried out what was called the Freedom Rides.

At that time, buses that went interstate were supposed to not be allowed to be segregated, but in certain states in the South, they enforced segregation anyway. They had separate waiting rooms at the bus stops and all. This was against the law, but the country wasn't enforcing the law. So these students came up with the idea of having these Freedom Rides—just having groups of their students, African-American students but also white people from all over, riding together on the normal buses, Greyhound and Trailways, getting off at the stops and just going into the waiting rooms together. That was it. That's all they were doing. And unbelievable violence came, especially in Alabama and Mississippi.

That's a whole long story, but the point I want to make is this: I saw an hour-long program going through it, and I'd read a lot about it, but it had some videos of some of the people and then interviews with some of the people involved. The video must have been made just a few years ago, because one of the people I know is dead now.

At one point, the video was interviewing a man named John Siegenthaler, who was a special assistant to Robert Kennedy, the attorney general. JFK was the president, and Robert Kennedy was the attorney general—the head legal person in the country. So it was really his responsibility to be enforcing the law, but also to be protecting these Freedom Riders because they were being subjected to horrific violence.

Kennedy sent John Siegenthaler down to Montgomery to talk to the governor of Alabama to get him to protect the people. The governor wouldn't even talk to him for a while. In one particular incident, Siegenthaler managed to bring it to an end. Those Freedom Riders were finished.

John Siegenthaler was talking now, remembering: "Good," he thought. "I really did something. I managed to get this particular incident done. I got the governor to agree to do something." He was feeling kind of proud of himself.

But then he hears from the young students in Nashville that they're sending more people. He's like, "What? What's the matter with them? I just managed to cool it out, and they're sending more people? This

is crazy."

So he got on the phone, and who he was talking to was this amazing young woman named Diane Nash, who was part of this group. They were using her as the organizer. She wasn't doing the ride herself. She would stay in Nashville and talk to everybody on the phone. She's talking to Robert Kennedy, and she's organizing the whole thing. If you read anything about her, she just seems to be the most amazing person.

First I need to read from the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee's statement of purpose, because this is the depth they're coming from. This was written by James Lawson, who was training them in nonviolence. He was a Christian minister, still alive, one of the main proponents of nonviolence.

He says: "The philosophical or religious ideal of nonviolence is the foundation of our purpose and the manner of our action. Nonviolence, as it grows from Judaic-Christian traditions, seeks a social order of justice permeated by love. Through nonviolence, courage displaces fear. Love transforms hate. Love is the central motif of nonviolence. Love is the force by which God binds man to himself and man to man."

This is very Christian language. "Such love goes to the extreme. It remains loving and forgiving even in the midst of hostility. By appealing to conscience and standing on the moral nature of human existence, nonviolence nurtures the atmosphere in which reconciliation and justice become actual possibilities."

So these kids—they're kids, nineteen, twenty, twenty-one years old—have been training in this depth of nonviolence based in love and forgiveness, in the face of violence. They've been training deeply in this, and it also meshes with their Christian faith. So it's not just an idea. They're going into incredibly violent scenarios.

They're sending more people on the bus. John Siegenthaler gets on the phone to Diane Nash, and he's thinking, "Well, here's this young girl. I just have to get her to understand reality."

He says, "I was trying to get her to call them off, and I was getting more and more frustrated." He said, "I said, 'Don't you get it?'"

Don't you understand? Somebody might even be killed."

And she said—she said, "You must understand. At night before leaving, we each made out our last will and testament. Yes, we know someone will be killed. But we cannot let the power of nonviolent protest be stopped by violence. So we must continue."

And he was—this is like fifty years later—he was in awe even then. He said, "I really, really learned from this young woman." And the last thing he said was that he had been talking to Robert Kennedy, and Robert Kennedy said to him, "I was just on the phone with Diane Nash. Who *is* Diane Nash?" She's like this amazing person.

So that's a huge depth, right? It's possible. I mean, that's one of the more inspiring examples I know in this

country. But that's like on the cellular level—that's how we're working here, on that level. It doesn't mean that we always have to act. I just want to show you that compassionate action and wisdom is not about passivity at all. But compassion doesn't mean that action is necessary, because often action isn't possible.

In a way, I'd say for me the essence of compassion, where it begins, is with connection. That's really the wisdom of a mindfulness that just connects with our own experience. The simple power of bearing witness—bearing witness to our own experience—allows us to be courageous and able to bear witness with another.

James Baldwin wrote once, "An enemy is someone whose story you have not heard." And I often think that about ourselves. When we're feeling like we're our own enemies, fighting against our own experience, it's just a story we haven't heard. Can we just listen into our own experience? Listening is an act of love, an act of presence, of bearing witness.

Here's another simple example of how just the willingness to turn our attention openly to something can be the wellspring of compassion in a very simple way—and how disconnect is what doesn't allow compassion.

It's very simple, but I was listening to the radio once a couple of years ago. There's all these stories, and you kind of half-listen. There was a story about a man—they were interviewing a man who was a BBC war correspondent, so he was used to talking on the radio—who was talking about a disease called Huntington's disease, which is a deterioration of the nerves that is genetic. It goes from father to son, and it hits in middle age. His father had died of it, and his elder brother had died of it. It hits in middle age, and you only live a few years. All the nerves deteriorate, and you die. There's nothing they can really do.

So he was talking about this. His father and brother had both died of it. He so far hadn't come down with it, but he was just at the age when his brother got it. It's the kind of story where you could be listening and think, "Oh yeah, that's a shame." You mean it, but sort of—that's a shame, on to the next, oh that's too bad. I was doing that, but then somehow I just put down my breakfast and listened. No big deal, but I just turned my full attention to it and listened.

He was just talking about how—very matter-of-fact—and you just think, what must that be like? He said, "Every day when I'm walking to the store to get the newspaper"—he lived in London—"I'm thinking, is this going to be the day when my leg just starts to tremble a little bit? Is this going to be the day when I notice the first symptom?" Knowing pretty well what the trajectory would be, having seen it in his father and his brother.

All it took was just listening. It went in so deeply, in a way of just—oh. The compassion, the empathy of what must that be like. And then the big picture, of course—that's true for all of us. He just had a more specific thing he was wondering about. But in a way, that does apply to all of us. It's not some big deal, some big world-changing thing, but just that willingness to connect—that's how compassion arises.

And without the connection, that disconnect is where atrocities are possible. I just read this yesterday—it's a horrible quotation from Stalin, who said, "The death of one person is a tragedy. The death of a million people is a statistic." This is the man who had twenty million people sent to the gulags and killed. But I thought, you know, it's true. That's why sometimes it's so important to tell stories—to get a sense of one image, like that man with Huntington's disease—and then I can understand, oh, that's what it must be like for those people.

You might get really involved with people who have that particular disease. We kind of need an immediate connection to get a sense of it.

So, we're not going to be perfect. We're not perfect in wisdom. We're not perfect in compassion. But the willingness to keep noticing, the willingness to just keep on reconnecting, to keep on cultivating, to keep on purifying—it's never going to be perfect.

This world, in my experience, life is so complex. Things are really ambiguous. Even with the best of our intentions and compassion, situations are complex. We often don't know what's the most useful, helpful thing to do. Can we be with that, not be frozen, and still act? And if we do the thing that doesn't lead to the result we thought would happen, can we meet that with compassion and equanimity?

A not-so-simple example: if you've ever had to be a medical proxy for someone—which I've been for both my parents and my sister—it's extremely complex. You can sit down with a person and go through every possible idea you could think of, what could happen and what they want. Guaranteed, what really happens won't be on that list, because it'll be some different combination of things. And so one makes the best decision one can from compassion and from wisdom. You really don't know. Making a decision to do a procedure that could really heal for some years, and it turns out that it just prolongs agony for two weeks and they die. Or you make a decision not to do a procedure and the person dies, and you never know what would have happened otherwise.

That's how life is. We don't know what would happen the other way. Can we just meet that ambiguity with the most wisdom, the most compassion we have? We're not in control. We keep saying that, and we're really not in control. Recognizing that makes it more possible to keep working.

Sister Chan Khong, the nun who is sort of like the closest companion of Thich Nhat Hanh, wrote an autobiography some years ago. She talks about being very committed to social action, very committed to mindfulness and compassion. At one point, she and Thich Nhat Hanh had been denied reentry to Vietnam during the war because they wouldn't take sides, and so both sides didn't trust them and kicked them out. After the war, the Vietnamese government was arresting a lot of monks and nuns and artists. Sister Chan Khong was quite involved in a letter-writing campaign. Whenever she'd hear one was arrested, she'd write letters to the government.

But this is from her: "Every time I received news of a new arrest, I became angry. And I knew I had to do

walking meditation." Is that what you do when you feel angry? "I have to tell them what's wrong," no? She said, "I needed walking meditation. Sometimes I would walk several hours in order to regain my calm. Sometimes I needed several days or even weeks to relax my heartbeat, knowing how unfairly the authorities had acted. I always waited until I felt serene before beginning any campaign. Thanks to this serenity, my words were gentle but firm, and people found it easier to listen, easier to cooperate."

I just love that. And this is from a woman who'd been a Buddhist nun and practicing really hard since she was sixteen. Just like, what's the reality of it? I'm angry. I choose not to act from anger, but I choose to act. So my job is to meet my own suffering here, this anger, with wisdom and compassion. And when the wise intention is available, then I can act with wisdom.

So we just dedicate our lives. It's the work of our whole lives. It's not about ever getting perfect. Something Ajahn Sumedho wrote years ago: the ordinary suffering of our lives—we don't need special suffering. The ordinary circumstances of our lives are enough to get enlightened with. The ordinary circumstances of life are all we need to teach us wisdom and compassion. It's everywhere we look. We don't have to go looking for anything special.

And I know for me, when sometimes my own particular story seems to be taking over my mind, I just keep on practicing with it. Even something as simple as being hungry—there's a way at some point you can be with it, and it can turn into empathy.

Wow, this is so nothing—and there are people who go to bed every night without food. You can turn that against yourself, or you can turn it into compassion and let it help you connect with what's going on in the world.

At other times, when I feel too overwhelmed in some particular story of my own, when the mindfulness isn't strong enough to be present with it, I turn the attention outward—to seeing, to hearing.

But also, the messages of wisdom and compassion are coming at us from everywhere. The Four Noble Truths are speaking to us constantly—in the animals, in nature, in the woods, in snakes dying on the roads, in little chipmunks storing their nuts.

When you hear a siren going by—whenever I hear a siren, I try to think: usually it's a fire or an ambulance, and somebody's life is really changing right now. I don't know how. I don't always remember to do it, but I just try to let that in. We are the world and the world is us.

We don't have to look for anything special. All we have is this moment, this moment—and it's enough. It's enough. It doesn't matter what's happening. How we meet it is the cultivation of wisdom and compassion.

I want to end with this line from Pema Chödrön, speaking about bodhicitta: "At the relative level, our noble heart is felt as kinship with all beings. At the absolute level, we experience it as groundlessness or open space."

Thank you for listening.

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