Wisdom and Compassion

Carol Wilson · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Carol Wilson · 1:02:41

If you may remember, Guy ended his talk the other night on emptiness by saying that the manifestation of emptiness is compassion. I want to offer some reflections on wisdom and compassion—the unity of the wisdom of emptiness and the manifestation of compassion.

I really enjoyed when Guy was talking about how the common way we think of the world here in the West is materialism. That's obvious, but I just hadn't thought of it that way. And it's been a conundrum, I would say, in my whole life of practice, phrased in different ways: how to find really the balance of wisdom and compassion.

When you're having some sense, some understanding of the fact that everything is really a dream, that everything's really empty of substance—how do we live in the material world when there's that understanding that it's all just a dream, just a phantasmagoria? How do we continue to function and care?

And then on the other side, when that isn't so apparent, how do we continue to open our heart and mind to the infinite beauty and the infinite suffering without either drowning in despair or grief or getting so identified?

I've often found that my practice, which is my life, kind of flips between trying to understand from those two points of view, both of which are limited. The sense of how do those come together?

Sometimes, for me and for people I've talked with, when the understanding of the emptiness of phenomena and the emptiness of self becomes clear—as Guy was saying, knowing it's not just like a dream, it is a dream—sometimes that quality is really how perception is shot through. It can happen deep in retreat from time to time, it can happen in life. And for me, when there's that sense, it's not complete, not finished. It's like living in this surreal space—someone used that wonderful word in one of our group meetings. It's so clear in one way that it's just this phantasm. And at the same time, we've got to walk and talk and function and eat, and we do, quite easily with no problem. So the material world is really here.

It can seem like one way of perceiving and being negates the other. How do we hold and understand both? That's a question that can let the thinking mind go wild. How can I reconcile? Have you spent a few moments of the thinking mind trying to reconcile how everything's just a dream, a lump of foam, but somehow my knee hurts and I hate it? It's a lump of foam, but I'm hungry. I really want something to eat. This lump of foam needs some food.

How do we hold both of those? It really does seem surreal sometimes. But the problem of the surrealness and the trying to reconcile is actually the thinking about it.

As Thich Nhat Hanh says, "Understanding does not arise as the result of thinking. It is the result of the long process of conscious awareness." I've loved that quotation for years because in my experience it's so true. Thoughts are the reflection of the material world and describe it really well. The fact that everything's a dream—thoughts can talk about that, but they can't touch the experience. Trying to reconcile with thoughts is never going to work. If we could just give that up, in that moment there's no problem.

But looking at it another way: the wisdom of not-self, of emptiness, is that sense of wisdom that really sets the mind free from clinging, the heart free from craving. And then living in the material world is the world of action and response. So what's the link between those two?

This is the Buddha's genius, right? Wisdom, action, right thought, intention. Sound familiar?

The Eightfold Path. Right there—right view, the wisdom of emptiness; the second step, wise intention, which compassion really is. You could think of that as wise intention, right thought, which is what leads to action and speech in the world. Somehow you can find everything in the Buddha Dharma.

So to talk about wisdom and compassion really in terms of our deepening understanding of the whole path and our life—they really have to come together. They have to support each other. Of course, this happens naturally. It's just the way things are.

So now we're in the material world, talking, using thoughts. That's what I'll be doing the rest of the talk—some exploration of wisdom and compassion, how they support each other, how we could get lost in one without the support of the other.

The empty nature, the sense of emptiness of things—that can be a really profound insight. But just by itself, it's incomplete. We have it many times, the insight, but incomplete. Often people talk about having seen anattā at a gut level, not just thinking about it but feeling it, or the dreamlike nature as I was describing, and really an intimation of the truth that, oh yeah, it really is like that. That's not just a metaphor. It can hit you in many different ways. It can be shocking. It can be freeing. It can give you a lot of energy. It can be scary as heck.

Some of the different things yogis have said to me over the years in describing their reactions to insights into not-self, emptiness—sometimes it's very fearful. I think some people even mentioned that to Guy after his talk, that it kind of brings up fear, this sense of the emptiness of things. Or—I've written these down, these are words people have said to me over time—"If there's not any self, if it's all empty," it has this sense of being uncaring, cold. Alien, someone said. Inhuman. Indifference, not caring, annihilation. You get the drift.

And that can really be what I think in Tibetan they call falling into emptiness—the sense of emptiness, of not-self, that isn't supported by the compassionate manifestation, which naturally comes. But it doesn't always... Just as with the seven factors of awakening, they don't all grow up exactly together. We're kind of flipping. Sometimes you might be understanding emptiness, not-self more. Sometimes you might be seeing

more compassion. Sometimes you might think you've never seen either one of them, and you'd give a lot for either one. But anyway, they're not always growing up together. It can tilt one way or the other.

In this sense of not quite seeing the compassionate aspect but just tuning into the emptiness, it can become embraced as a view. We get a hit of it, really a hit of not-self, but then it becomes a view—this is how it is.

There are various quotations I really like. One from Nāgārjuna, who as Guy mentioned is one of the best writers and teachers on emptiness. He said, "It is sad to see those who mistakenly believe in material, concrete reality, but far more pitiful are those who believe in emptiness. Buddhists say emptiness is relinquishing opinions. Believers in emptiness are incurable."

We can get caught in that. And so this is where compassion brings in the warmth, the connectedness to life, to beings, a sense that it matters what we do even when everything is empty.

But compassion also needs the support of wisdom. This is from the Dalai Lama. Because without the understanding of emptiness, compassion veers off into despair and overwhelm. From the Dalai Lama: "Compassion must be derived from our insight into emptiness of inherent self."

This is where the vast meets the profound. Without that unity, we can fall into despair. Because knowing from emptiness that people's suffering is avoidable can lead us to a more powerful compassion. But without the wisdom of emptiness also for ourselves, our compassion may be strong, but it is likely to have a quality of hopelessness, even despair.

You get a sense of that for yourself sometimes as we open up to become much more sensitive to our own suffering, the suffering of the world. There are times when the compassion is quite beautiful, but it's so easy for it to tip over—at least in my experience—into overwhelm, into a kind of despair, into a feeling of how can I possibly hold all this or be with all this? And that is when it needs to be balanced with the deeper understanding of not-self, of emptiness. These two always balancing, always coming together.

From Padmasambhava, the great founder of the lineage of Tibetan Buddhism: "The view"—which is really the understanding of emptiness, of not-self—"the view 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." Doesn't matter what you do, it's all empty. "But do not let your view slip in the direction of action either, or you will be caught in materialism and ideology. That is why my view is higher than the sky, but my attention to my actions and their effects is finer than grains of flour." That sense of how both aspects are true at the same time.

Another Tibetan teacher, Padampa Sangye, was once asked, "Once we have realized emptiness, does it still harm us to commit negative acts?" Again, that's like the action slipping in the direction of the view. And he said, "Once you realize emptiness, it would be absurd to do anything negative. When you realize emptiness, compassion arises with it simultaneously."

To me, ongoing in my practice, in my life, and in talking with so many people, we see for ourselves in our little ways—okay, we're not up there with Padmasambhava or even close—but in little ways, how as wisdom comes, more compassion comes with it simultaneously.

I want to talk a bit about our practice. Vipassana here is a wisdom practice, but compassion is being cultivated at the same time. When we realize emptiness, even for a moment, compassion comes with it naturally. And how can it be otherwise? In a moment of insight into not-self—let's keep this simple, insight into not-self—in that moment the heart-mind is free from clinging. That's really what a moment of not-self is. There's no clinging at that moment. Clinging is almost synonymous with an arising of sense of self. So much energy is released when it's not bound up—the energy for life, the tenderness for life, the ability to see clearly when the energy is not caught in this obsessive self-referencing.

The Buddha talked about the kleshas, greed and hatred, but really a sense of self, which arises from that, is a maker of measurement. As soon as there's clinging, a sense of self, there's a measurement: me and other. And with the obsessive self-referencing, even when we mean well, there's no way to recognize the vastness of the situation. There's no way to really see clearly the good of oneself or the good of others or the good of both. I'm quoting from the Buddha: when there is greed, when the mind is obsessed with greed, with hatred, with confusion, we cannot see clearly.

In a moment when that vanishes—just a simple moment, and you have many moments like that when the sense of self isn't arising—then all that contracted energy of mind and consciousness and heart is available for just pure presence in this moment in life, for just the tenderness, the vividness, the totality of "it's like this now." And we can see clearly. It's just a natural occurrence.

Without that, even when we intend to do well and we have a compassionate intention, we still can act. It's not like we have to wait until we're completely liberated before we ever do anything, because our compassion would be tinged otherwise. But we really can't see as clearly.

I've used this example often because I love it. I heard it on the radio some years ago. There's a bridge that was built in London over the Thames, the Millennium Bridge. This is a bridge that people could walk over. When it was first opened—I think when it was being inaugurated—hundreds of people were walking over the bridge. There were so many people that the bridge started to shake. It was leaning a little to one side.

So each person thought—or rather, didn't think, but simply responded—what can I do to help? And everyone moved to the other side. And that, of course, just made the whole thing worse. You get a sense of each person trying to do their right thing, but completely in their own little bubble, because you can't really see the vastness when we're caught in the self-referencing. So the wisdom of emptiness allows for a more appropriate, a more wise response.

And also, this question of how can I hold it all—all the suffering, even just one day of listening to the news. Sometimes I can't bear it. Yeah, I can't. That's exactly the point. *I* can't. And as long as it's *I* resisting or

drowning or wanting to do, but somehow hitting a sense of me, that subtle resistance—we can't. And that's realistic. We can't.

But in the moment when there's not that sense of *I*, and it's just passing through, like that story I told about the Dalai Lama a few weeks ago, where he can just be with people in their most immense suffering and really be crying and there with them. Then they leave and he turns to the next person and they're laughing and he's jovial and kidding around. And he's totally present, but there's not an *I* that's landing on and holding on to it. It moves through.

Not that we should hold that out as "this is how I have to be all the time." But play with noticing it once in a while when it happens here. With little things that happen here. That's what's so great about being on retreat—it's the little things. That's what we can do.

So our practice here, our simple moment-to-moment mindfulness practice here, is actually what is also developing the capacity for greater and greater compassion. As the Dalai Lama says—and since he's Mr. Compassion, we always use him when we're talking about compassion—how compassion is developed is through deep insight into what the nature of suffering is. And how do we get that deep insight? By focusing on, by being present with our own experience of suffering. How else? Where else?

And so then he says, as we're more present, without resistance, without judgment, with our own suffering, that insight into compassion begins to strengthen. It turns into not only compassion or being able to be with our own suffering, but it broadens into a sense of empathy with more and more beings until it really turns into the vastness of bodhicitta.

And this is really going on in the simplicity of our mindfulness practice. So we start where we are, wherever we are. And that's why the difficult—the really difficult moments and hours and days of our retreat—are so important. It's not just that we're developing wisdom, but also they're the ground, the seed for really developing compassion. Sometimes the wisdom shows up more, sometimes the compassion.

Whatever is arising in this present moment—mind, body, whatever is occurring, inner, outer—yathā bhūta, things as they have come to be in this moment. This moment is the result of all the previous conditions and can't be changed. But how the heart-mind, how the attention is meeting this moment, the quality in the mind and the awareness that's meeting this moment—this is the place that we are cultivating and developing. This is the place where wisdom and compassion can grow, where the old habits are being changed.

How we meet what's currently arising doesn't mean it should go away. But any moment that you're simply present with fullness of attention, without greed and aversion—that's a moment that actually has the seed of wisdom and compassion in that moment of awareness. We kind of, in the material world, get lost in looking for results. It's not that way.

Pema Chödrön writes: "If we begin to get in touch with whatever we feel with some kind of kindness,

some kind of tender attention, our protective shells will begin to melt. And we will find that more areas of our life are workable. As we learn to have compassion for ourselves, the circle of compassion for others—what and whom we can work with, and how—becomes wider."

Just what the Dalai Lama says. Can we begin to just have the idea, when we're in these difficult, really difficult times, and you can't—when you can't really be mindful of it, and it's not going away, it's not getting better—can we just have the idea to meet it with simple kindness, just to touch it as it is? This is so not our habit.

The Dalai Lama, when he was asked about what looks like a lack of compassion in human society, offers us something important to consider. For the moment here on retreat, each of us is a representation of human society. So if at times you feel a lack of compassion in yourself, even towards yourself, you could listen to this.

He says, perhaps we just pay less attention to compassion and caring. We reinforce it less. Whereas in some sense, we fully embrace hostility and anger as an emotional state, fueling 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.

Just think about it—and maybe this isn't true for you—but how often in our own internal experience on retreat, when something really difficult is going on, does it seem just natural that we have some form of self-aversive reaction? Some kind of self-blame: if I was doing it right, this wouldn't happen. Or: this is so bad, or I hate it. Or it's somebody else's fault—also a kind of aversive reaction. But just really beating ourselves up, going negative: all the instructions they give, and I can't do one of them, and it's because I'm useless and I'm hopeless. Does any of this sound familiar? Does it ever? And really, not just saying it, but totally buying into it.

And even more, have you ever noticed how the really self-judgmental negative comments about yourself and your practice masquerade as wisdom? "Yeah, you are really an egotistical, hopeless yogi. Look at how much the sense of self is arising. You are the most egotistical person here." Oh, that's egotistical. "I can't even criticize myself without being egotistical." It keeps on going and going. And that's masquerading as wisdom. Then a different voice, a different thought comes in and goes, "Well, that's really interesting. You're really seeing clearly." Oh look at that—that's really egotistical again. So the wholesome, compassionate voice? No, that's just weakness. The negative, self-blaming voice? That's wisdom. That's what the Dalai Lama is talking about. We don't really embrace compassion, we don't really see it.

So could we have the possibility? You can't force compassion. "Okay, goddammit, I'm gonna be compassionate now with this back pain. Compassion, compassion. Oh, I really love you." That doesn't work.

Just bringing mindfulness, coming face to face with the experience—this is one way Sayadaw U Pandita

would describe mindfulness. Coming face to face, just as it is. Beginning there and just seeing it as it is can also bring along a compassionate attitude. And it may be that you need to begin by coming face to face with the dosa, with the anger, with the judgment. That's the thing that's happening. Coming face to face, we see it for what it is.

This is from Dilgo Khyentse Rinpoche:

Thoughts and feelings have no intrinsic solidity, form, shape, or color. When a thought of anger arises in the mind with such force that you feel aggressive and destructive, is the anger in your mind actually holding a weapon? Can it actually burn things like fire or crush them or carry them away like a violent river, that thought? No, anger, like any other thought or feeling, has no true self-existence, not even a definite location. It is just like wind roaring in empty space.

I love that. So let that thought of anger roar, and it just roars and roars itself out. Instead of allowing wild thoughts to enslave you, with mindfulness you realize their essential emptiness. Examine the nature of anger, the nature of hatred. You will find that it is no more than a thought. And when you see it as it is, it will dissolve like a cloud in the sky.

The essential emptiness, even of anger, roaring in empty space. In that moment, that's the moment of emptiness bringing in—as soon as you see it roaring in empty space, any sense of judgment or anger goes away. It's just, "Oh, that's just what it is." That simple touching can allow for compassion to arise. Coming face to face then with the actual thing that the aversion was about, seeing it as it is, can completely change the experience and allow compassion to come.

An example, a daily life example. The public radio station over the last two or three weeks has been having a series of reports on various aspects of the refugee crisis in Europe.

And so this particular one I thought was very interesting. They were talking about in Calais, in France, where there's a really huge refugee camp called the Jungle. It has thousands of people, and it's been the center of a lot of agitation and anger. The refugees are really trying to get out of it and get over to England, but it's getting a lot of press.

A reporter went there, and some of the French residents of Calais were having big demonstrations, wanting the jungle to be gotten rid of, demonstrating against the refugees. The reporter was talking to some of the French people who were demonstrating, saying they hated them, they should go away—the usual.

He talked to a sixty-eight-year-old woman who was protesting, really angry, saying they should go, that she hated them. He said, "Well, have you ever been there?" And she said, "No, I never did go there." So she agreed to go with him to visit the jungle, just to see what it was like. Obviously she already had some openness that she would even do that, but she was afraid to go by herself.

So they went. And he was just describing—because there were so many people—she was first amazed by how many people were there, how many children, how tough the conditions were, and the incredible ingenuity she saw of how people were surviving and taking care of themselves and their families, washing themselves, how many children there were without their parents.

Then she talked to a young man who had been a law student in Afghanistan. His whole village had been destroyed, completely destroyed, and he had managed to get out and made it to Calais, to the jungle. They're all kind of stuck there. He was describing how, because some of the refugees were trying to get out and jump on trucks to get over to England, he felt—just going out for a walk—like they were targets of the truckers, and sometimes targets of the police, really feeling completely vulnerable and unsafe.

She was completely appalled. She left and said, "This is a free country—or I thought it was. I didn't know that people were being treated like this." And she went to the offices and said, "What can I do to volunteer and help?" That was the outcome of her one-day visit there.

I love that story, because it shows how the fear, the anger, the hatred comes simply from not coming face to face with seeing the situation as it is. That simple coming face to face, breaking through the preconception—*oh, it's like this now.* She didn't go hoping to be compassionate. It just naturally arose, a sense of, "Wow, this is really suffering. What can I do?"

That's really, I think, how our practice works, how simple mindfulness works.

The great author James Baldwin had a line that I really love. He said, "An enemy is someone whose story we have not heard."

Take that back to yourself. When our experience is feeling like it's an enemy to us, what's the story we haven't heard? We're like that French lady going into the jungle. Can I just put down my preconceptions and turn my gentle attention back onto this experience here, this experience I'm finding so unbearable or off or bad or whatever it is?

This is where we can also see that wisdom gives rise to compassion. I also want to mention Thich Nhat Hanh, who in one of his recent books, *Compassion and Emptiness in Early Buddhist Meditation*, analyzes some of the different suttas of the Buddha. He points out that in one sutta the Buddha mentions that penetrative wisdom, really penetrating wisdom, comes from insight into the Four Noble Truths. And vast wisdom finds its expression through compassion, through intending to benefit oneself and others.

I would like to point out that everywhere I've read, when the Buddha talks about compassion, he doesn't just say for others. It's always oneself *and* others. Sometimes I think when we're considering what compassion should be, it's like it's out there, and we forget we're also a human being in need of compassion. That's another way you get into compassion burnout—forgetting that this nama-rupa needs the same care as that nama-rupa, if you want to look at it that way.

So Thich Nhat Hanh is pointing out that when we meet an experience that seems like such suffering, when we're so caught up, and with steady mindfulness we suddenly see it through the lens of the Four Noble Truths, compassion might automatically arise.

Let me give a simple composite example. This is no particular person, but a composite of a lot of people saying a lot of things here. Simple things, when something is really causing you distress—like the sight of a person that for whatever reason triggers your judgment. You're comparing, you're unhappy, and you keep seeing them and it keeps triggering, and you're all balled up in that suffering. Or there's a sound that keeps happening and it's really triggering anger, despair, blame of oneself, blame of another, and we're really caught in it.

Can you relate to how that can happen? We can be caught in it and think we shouldn't be caught and try to talk ourselves out of it, but it's just still a big ball.

Then we bring our attention right in.

Say, well, what's actually happening here? So say it's a sound. Bringing the attention just really with the hearing. Noticing the unpleasant. Seeing the arising of all the aversion and the self-blame and the other-blame and the story and "it shouldn't be" and this and that. And then keeping us, oh, that's really the first noble truth: suffering. You may not say it, but that's what's happening. Seeing the second noble truth: the cause of suffering is the reactivity and the delusion in the mind. It's not the sound, it's not the sight, but it's all that reactivity and identification. And the continuing mindfulness, seeing this whole process start to break apart—and really it's the Eightfold Path saying, oh, just being present with what is. Hearing is like this. Aversion is like this. Sound is like this. Oh, and the whole thing drops away. And in that moment there's a sense of really cessation of that suffering. You get a sense, just like that—there's the whole Eightfold Path. That's the Four Noble Truths, right there. You don't think of it.

So many people have mentioned to me and to other teachers, through some experience like that—really quite simple, although it could have been a huge storm of suffering—when it comes to that wisdom piece through the Four Noble Truths, seeing it clearly, spontaneous and sometimes really profound compassion and metta has arisen. Sometimes it's manifested as metta and compassion for one's own self for having been caught in that. Sometimes, and many people say this, the sight, the person who triggered the response, or the sound, or whatever—there's just spontaneous waves of compassion and caring and non-separation that comes. Not self-generated.

It's different from when we're really angry at someone and we're trying to crank up the metta: "May you be happy, may you be peaceful"—you know, really trying to get over it. Maybe we get a little squeegee bit of metta going. But this is—well, thank God at least—but this is just spontaneous, because that sense of obsession with "me" is gone. And there's just the compassion that comes about from seeing the suffering in the world that arises from confusion. People are quite surprised by that sometimes, but this is the natural result of wisdom: the manifestation of compassion.

So just notice when that happens. And see how the simple mindfulness, the steadiness of mindfulness that leads to clear seeing, is the cause for compassion to arise. And when it's there, just explore it, feel it. You don't have to own it, but just see how that goes. And when it goes away, because it will, then we just meet the next experience face to face. No need to hang on.

And then another way: sometimes in our practice and in our life, the way into wisdom—this is how compassion came through wisdom—but sometimes the way into wisdom is through cultivating compassionate intention when we can't really come face to face with something.

I feel in my own life, I notice this all the time: when I'm feeling, I start to notice over some period—sitting, walking, on retreat, it doesn't matter—but I start to realize I'm feeling quite disconnected somehow. You think you're really present, you're trying to be present, mindfulness seems like it's there, but you have that feeling of disconnect. You don't quite know what's happening, but whatever's happening doesn't feel good. There's something going on; you don't know what it is.

And I find, almost always, it turns out that there's some difficult or unpleasant experience—it could be a little tiny thing, or it could be a strong emotional state, whatever it is—that there's a resistance, a denial, and trying to avoid, to not have to touch into. Maybe unconsciously. You know: "Oh yeah, I'm looking at that. Oh yeah, that's over there. Yeah, I see it." And you can't quite get there. That's always, I find, leading to this sense of disconnection, being out of touch. It keeps us locked in our little bubble of me and other and distance and separation. When we have that dosa lens on, back to the Buddha, we can't see our own good, or the good of another, or the good of both. And we can't make clear decisions; there isn't wisdom.

So just a personal example then of an experience where the resistance to the unpleasant was there, not quite recognized, but the mindfulness wasn't really connecting, and wisdom wasn't coming—but the actual cultivation of compassion allowed for the attention to settle into what was happening, and wisdom came.

This was quite a long time ago, years and years ago, and I've talked about this on other retreats. I started to develop an autoimmune disorder, a physical disorder. At that time it ended up being mild, but it had rather strong symptoms that were affecting me. I couldn't walk very well, and there was some kind of pain, and they didn't really know what it was—one of those situations where they don't know what, and even when they give it a name, they still don't know what, and they can't do anything anyway. But here's a name for it.

At that time, which went on for some months before I really knew what it was, it was worsening steadily. It had the potential—I've been really fortunate—but it had the potential to go in a direction that would have killed me. That was unknown at the time, but even just living with this, I was—I think I was here during part of that time, teaching a three-month retreat—just dealing with the physical body and the idea in the mind of what it could be.

So I was pretty aware. I wasn't in a big state of fear or a huge state of aversion or anything. It really felt like I was pretty present, just dealing, being mindful. But I really can tell you now, because I didn't see it at the time: there was this subtle background sense of, "You know, if you were really spiritual, you wouldn't have this." Have you ever had that thought?

If you really could think the right thing, then this particular thing would go away. Or this disease is caused by my lack of, you know, my holding on, my aversion, whatever. I just want to say—I'm here to say—these thoughts are really not helpful. True or not, I have not found them to be very helpful.

So that was kind of in the background. Well, if I was really spiritual, I wouldn't be having this, with all my practice, you know. Sayadaw U Pandita was here and talking about how when you're really giving, he gives all these examples of yogis developing the seven factors of enlightenment to this great degree of balance and curing themselves of all these amazing diseases. And we would sit around and go, how come we never get cured of anything? It kind of leads to doubt. Not helpful.

But anyway, that was going on. And at some point later, it dawned on me: you know what? Even the greatest masters, even the Buddha—he died. He died. Ramana Maharshi got cancer, you know? You think he could have thought his way out of that? Like, duh. But that wasn't the wisdom piece. That came later.

So there's this subtle thing, but I was trying to be mindful, trying to see this and that. And everybody I knew had advice. You should go live in Arizona because the cold really affects it. You should only eat non-wheat, non-dairy, non-caffeine. I did that for a while. That really cheered me up. All kinds of stuff. The doctors didn't know what to do, so you have to make a decision. But when you can't see clearly, the decision comes either out of fear or out of denial.

So anyway, at some point during that fall, a Tibetan lama, a really beautiful old man, just happened to come by here for the afternoon. That just happens here sometimes. And he gave me a little blessing on the head and said, okay, say this mantra—which I didn't even understand, it was Tibetan. I had no idea what it meant. I looked it up later and it was a compassion mantra. So I said, sure, what the heck, it can't hurt.

So I'd sit up here and once a day I'd just be doing that mantra. I wasn't trying to cultivate compassion or anything. I was just doing that mantra. Really, it changes the habit of the mind. And so, just without consciously making it happen, the whole inner weather system switched to this sense of compassion for the body. And I really felt the body not as caroling me, but just as—wow. I didn't realize I was holding this negativity, this kind of blame, this resistance toward a body going through suffering, you know. There's a body over there. Would you hate it? Would you blame it? You'd just do what you could.

It changed everything. There was just this sense of tenderness, and the resistance and the self-blame and all that just vanished. That was just aversion. With the compassion, the aversion was gone. And with the compassion, the awareness, the attention, the presence could just touch what was going on moment to moment in the body, in the mind.

And it was really—I had to make decisions about what to do. I could make much clearer decisions, not based on fear and not based on denial. Should I give up teaching and do everything differently and go live in a corner in Arizona in case it got worse? Or should I just pretend nothing was happening and carry on?

Anyway, just after that, some good friends—Joseph was one of them—were going to India for a short visit to Dipa Ma, which I'm so glad I went because that's the last time I saw her before she died. So I thought, they said, come on with us, it's only for a couple of weeks and you'll be with us. We can take care of you—which was important because I just had trouble walking, getting into rickshaws and stuff like that. So I thought, yeah, great. So I went to India, which other people thought was nuts.

You can't go to India. What if this gets worse? But it wasn't getting worse. I could see how it was. It was fine. And in India, I could drink chai and eat chapatis. I got so happy. It was really nice. And it was fine.

And then you just do what you have to do. You can see clearly. You can make choices. You can see your own good or the good of another. And that compassion intention then leads us into coming face to face with the development of wisdom. So both these aspects are going on in our practice here, in different ways, taking turns.

There are of course other ways we can cultivate compassion, like doing the compassion brahmavihara, just as with metta. I'm not going to talk about that tonight, but I want to point out that there's the wisdom of moment-to-moment mindfulness, and the compassion intention can sometimes bring us into that wisdom.

Another way, though, that compassion needs wisdom is wisdom in the form of equanimity. Because even when we have relatively clear seeing—I mean we're not arahants, but relatively clear seeing—and touch compassionate action with as much wisdom as we can, say when I was making my decision to go to India or whatever, you have to make choices, take action for yourself or for the good of another.

The wisdom of equanimity is knowing that no matter how caring we are, how wise we may be, without any action we can't ensure or control the results. We can act as best we can from compassion. The compassionate action may not be received at all. It may be thrown back in our face, and that's the least of it. But that's possible. Can we then cultivate equanimity—not either keep forcing it where it's not helpful, or take it personally and fall back into negativity?

This needing to balance equanimity and compassion is again present in some suttas from the Buddha's time that Anālayo pulls out and mentions in his book. Just a couple of quick examples.

One where the Buddha was called because the bhikkhus in a place called Kosambi were having a huge quarrel about some minor point of etiquette, but it had completely split the Sangha. They were brawling with verbal daggers, as it's described in the sutta. And the lay people were losing their faith—who are these guys, you know, just fighting over this stupid thing?

So the Buddha was called and asked out of compassion to come and talk to these bhikkhus and straighten them out, basically. So he came and he's essentially saying, "What are you doing, fighting? Come on, let's get together." And basically—you can tell I'm paraphrasing—they said to the Buddha, "Don't bother yourself with this. We'll deal with it. You just go off and abide in peaceful abiding."

And so the usual requisite three times he says, "Come on, get it together. What are you doing, you foolish men?" And they respond, "Don't bother yourself. We're dealing with it. We'll take care of this. You go off." And so after the third time, he did. He took his robe and his bowl and he wandered off.

So basically, with equanimity, you really see clearly: I can't do anything. These monks are hopeless. He basically went off—"You foolish men"—and found three bhikkhus who were living together in perfect harmony and metta, combining like milk and water, which is another whole beautiful sutta. But he really just accepted the situation.

Then there's another sutta, though, where the Buddha is pointing out that there are times when equanimity isn't appropriate and we need to have the wisdom to see when action is called for. This is also really hard to discern and we're not always going to be able to.

So again, very briefly, there was a point where Sariputta—I think it was Sariputta, one of the Buddha's main disciples—was giving a talk on a very profound and abstruse point of understanding. I read it and I thought, yeah, well, I really don't understand that. So I'm not even going to try and replicate it for you all. But anyway, he was giving this talk. And some of the other really senior bhikkhus were saying, "No, that's not true. You're wrong." They kept basically abusing him in that way. Then they went to the Buddha, and Sariputta explained what he had said again.

And the bhikkhus again said, "No, you're wrong." During this time, Ananda had been there—Ananda, who was very close to Sariputta—and had heard all this and had just kept silent.

So then the Buddha says—first he says, "Sorry, Buddha's right." Then he turns to Ananda and says, "Ananda, what are you doing when your senior bhikkhu, your well-loved bhikkhu, is being abused by his fellow bhikkhus, and you just stay here silent?" Basically, he was saying this is not the time for equanimity. You should stand up and support your fellow bhikkhu out of compassion.

This is very interesting. And so I find in my life, and in all of our lives—it's really complex, isn't it? The situations we find ourselves in are complex. Life is ambiguous. There are so many times when we're not always going to have enough wisdom or enough compassion. We have to do the best we can. But equanimity is so essential, in both ways.

Little things. One time, years ago, I went outside at a friend's house and their cat was just in the process of pouncing on a little baby bird. So without even thinking about it, I grabbed the cat and grabbed the bird. It seems like that was the spontaneous act of compassion that it was. But what was the result? The bird was going to die anyway, and I managed to prolong its death by about thirty-six hours. Not good or bad, but I

really needed equanimity to see that. We don't know what the effects are going to be.

And if you've ever had both the privilege and the responsibility of being a medical proxy for someone who's really sick—maybe even on the edge of life support—even when you know what they say they want, the situation is pretty much always going to be other than whatever you thought about. I know this from personal experience. You have to make decisions based on as much wisdom as you can about what they would want. But what they want depends on what the effect of that decision would be. And whatever the doctors say, they don't really know. You don't really know. You have to make the best decision you can out of compassion and wisdom. And then have the equanimity—for yourself, for your loved one, for the doctors—to stay present with that decision and with the effects, however it went.

So wisdom, compassion. Compassion needs the wisdom of equanimity to stay present in this world, to stay present.

And what about really the vastness of suffering—throughout history, but now—of war, of violence, of prejudice, of inequality, of poverty, of injustice, you name it. How do we respond? Sometimes we can do something, but whatever we do doesn't solve the whole problem. The Buddha couldn't fix the world. How can we do what we can and still stay present when we can't? How do we tell the difference? This vastness of compassion and the wisdom of equanimity—but still staying present. This bearing witness has such power.

So I want to read from two people who really inspired me, in very different ways, with the ability to stay present and bear witness, and maybe act, maybe not.

One, of course, is Martin Luther King. Just one thing he wrote in 1963, at the time of some of the most violent bombings—those church bombings where little girls were killed—and the violent, violent response of the police against the demonstrators, and the jailings. He said at one point: "I have come to see even more that as we move on towards the goal of justice, hatred must never be our motive. I refuse to become bitter."

How can we do that? To stay present. Really seeing with wisdom the suffering—enough wisdom and compassion to keep moving forward, and that vastness that allows us not to become bitter. It's mind-boggling to think of. But moments, moments.

And then this is very different, but there's also this sense of bearing witness when there's nothing one could really do—but just the bearing witness, and the being able to communicate it, had a huge effect on a whole people.

This is the very well-known Russian poet Anna Akhmatova, who lived through the whole period from before World War I through the entire era of Stalin's terror and the gulags. She was very, very well known for her poetry in Russia. People wouldn't know her to look at her, but her poetry—she would write about this, and it had a huge sense of support for the people living through that terror.

So I want to read a few short lines from a really long poem of hers, which she wrote from 1935 to 1940. *Requiem* is the name of it. This was at the height of the Stalinist terror, when people were just being arrested and thrown into the gulags or killed—anybody, anywhere, for no rhyme or reason.

She could have emigrated. She could have emigrated to France. And she chose not to. She chose to remain in the country to be a witness to the horrors and to record it in her poetry.

During that time, her first husband was killed by Stalin's police. Her second husband and her son were arrested and thrown into the gulag for years, where her second husband died. So she was not observing this at a distance. This was her life.

There are just two little lines I want to share:

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 at the beginning of the whole poem: "In the terrible years of the Yezhov terror"—Yezhov was the head of the secret police, so this was the worst period of time, of arrests and death—"In the terrible years of the Yezhov terror, I spent seventeen months waiting in line outside the prison in Leningrad."

That was when her son was in prison. Everyone who could even find out they had a relative in prison would go wait in line all day, every day, hoping to get a food parcel in. So she spent seventeen months waiting in line.

"One day, somebody in the crowd recognized me"—because they wouldn't have known her face—"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."

Nisargadatta said, "Listening is an act of love."

So however our compassion, our wisdom—however it shows up—the two need each other. They cannot exist without each other.

I'll just end with Pema Chödrön: 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 to the Dharma.

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