Compassion

Carol Wilson · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Carol Wilson · 55:33

What inspired me to talk about this tonight was a short article in the Sunday paper. It was about a program at the University of Virginia on Saturday where they brought together seven Nobel Peace Prize laureates to talk with the students. The article says the university hoped to inspire its politically apathetic student body and others into turning their attention away from material concerns for more than a moment to the world's victims of war, genocide, ethnic conflict, and starvation. It's actually beautiful that they did this.

In a rare joint appearance, they had seven Nobel Peace Prize winners: the Dalai Lama, Bishop Desmond Tutu of South Africa, and Jody Williams, an American who won it together with Bobby Mueller for their campaign to end world landmines. Also there were President Oscar Arias Sanchez of Costa Rica, Jose Ramos Horta of East Timor, Rigoberta Menchú Tum of Guatemala, and Betty Williams of Northern Ireland. Aung San Suu Kyi sent a delegate since she couldn't come herself.

Just that this even happened is so remarkable. That was the first thing—that it even happened, that there's a recognition of how apathetic and materialistic we can be. Now we know it's not just the students at the University of Virginia. I certainly can see in myself how easy it is to get caught up in my own affairs and just not quite pay attention, not quite remember that we are the world.

There are many aspects to this article. One is how just touching into the possibility of such openness and caring can really affect people. It's like we just need a touch of the truth and it really can affect us. One student said, "I feel so changed by this. You get so caught up with your life and then you see these people who are making so much of a difference."

And then what drew me in in the first place: there's a photo of the Dalai Lama standing behind Bishop Tutu, who's sitting in a chair, and he's cracking up because he's trying to pull Bishop Tutu's hat off. These two men, who together have probably seen more suffering than any of us can imagine, are clowning around. Not coming in heavy with the weight of the world. To be able to have one's heart opened in South Africa, Tibet, wherever—and they meet the world by clowning around as well as holding all this suffering. It's so beautiful.

That's what inspired me, both of those aspects of compassion. But that's really, in my mind, what we're doing here in our practice. We talk about how wisdom naturally manifests in compassion, but I still think it's easy to forget, to get even here so caught up in how's my practice going, am I advancing to the next stage, whatever you think the next stage is. We forget that it's really about understanding that we are the world and who we are affects and changes the world, and that we don't have to be so afraid of opening

our hearts to our own and others' suffering. It doesn't necessarily make for a dreary person. No one would call these men dreary. More lightness than I could imagine.

Opening to the experience of compassion, really incorporating that in our practice, in our understanding—first, just recognizing that it is the natural expression of wisdom, of clear seeing. Through our practice, the natural expression of oneness or emptiness or non-self or interconnectedness, whatever way your mind wants to talk about it, the natural manifestation of that is mettā and karuṇā, love and compassion. Whether that's a manifestation just on the level of thought, later moving to speech and action.

The Buddha described this in his Eightfold Path, how natural this progression is. Last week I talked about renunciation as being one of the three wise intentions, the second step of the Eightfold Path, the first stage being understanding, wisdom. Karuṇā and mettā are the other two wise thoughts or wise intentions. As we begin to understand ourselves and the world as it truly is, quite naturally our thoughts and intentions transform to renunciation or generosity, mettā and compassion. So in some ways, all we have to do is keep looking honestly. And whenever we see, be willing to connect with that in an open-hearted way. Compassion naturally becomes stronger and stronger in our way of relating.

The koan I find in a lot of my practice, of this whole practice, as we look at the world, is: how can we continue to open, to awaken, and to remain awake and open in a world that is so painful, that does have so much suffering in it, that is so confusing? No one's saying it's easy. As you know from being here, from looking at your own lives, it requires enormous courage and persistence and kindness to ourselves, enormous patience.

But the wonderful fact of our practice is that as we're willing to continue to open to ourselves through our own experience, we necessarily open to the world. You really can't separate the two, though we certainly try.

The definition of karuṇā, compassion, is often given as that quivering of the heart in response to pain or suffering. I really like that because to me it feels like a description of the physical, emotional state of compassion when I experience it. Quivering not of fear or of suppression, but of just being so touched. And then the response of the connected heart and mind to act, if there's a way to act, to relieve or alleviate that suffering. But if there's not a way to act—so often there's nothing one can do—that quivering of the heart in connection with compassion, with pain, we stay connected even when there's nothing one can do.

That's really the trick.

When we talk about the near enemy of compassion—the thing that compassion can often slide into or be confused with—it's sometimes described as pity, or sometimes as sorrow. There's a feeling that we're caring about the pain, and it might even come with a genuine motivation to do something about it. But there's that little bit of a quality of distancing, such as, "I want to do something about this so I don't have to see it anymore." There's that little bit of "I can't take it." Whereas with true compassion, when you can't do

something, you can still hang out there with it, whether it's yourself or somebody else.

It's such an interesting phenomenon, really, which we've talked about endlessly—how dukkha, or unsatisfactoriness, or just plain old pain, is a fact of life for all beings, certainly all human beings here on this planet. And yet, when we're in pain—if I'm in emotional pain or suffering, or some kind of really deep chronic physical pain—isn't it easy to feel sort of alienated or isolated instead of thinking, "Oh great, now this is a link to all beings"? Do you feel that when you hit into some of your pain? "Oh good, now I'm connecting with the world." Not too much, right?

It's more almost a shameful thing. "Oh, here I am caught in grief again." We're ashamed of it. "Here I am suffering from this chronic disease again. Here I am in lust again"—whatever it is. It's almost as if we have to hide it. And even if we don't think that, it certainly can get reinforced in the world.

We go out, especially here in America—I teach a lot in Europe and my partner's German, so I get reflected back certain aspects of culture that others see as perhaps particularly American. Franz is always telling me I'm so American it's unbearable; I could never pass for anything else. But our greeting of "Oh, how are you?"—we all know you're not supposed to really say. You're supposed to say, "Oh, fine, thank you," and then you move on. If you meet someone on the street—"Hi, how are you doing?"—well, gosh, to tell you the truth... No, they're gone. Two-thirds of the people are gone. It's not really reinforced that other people want to know if we're suffering. If you're going on vacation with friends and you're depressed, you've got to sort of hide it. You don't want to bring them down. It's in our culture to some extent.

And we're so conditioned, it's so ingrained really here, to either hide or feel ashamed of our suffering, or to try and protect ourselves from it first and others secondarily, that the thought of compassion can get linked with the thought of suffering—not in the way that compassion comes out of suffering, but that to be compassionate means we're going to drown in suffering. Compassion can be thought of as a suffering mental state. We forget it's one of the beautiful emotions. It's one of the four boundless, limitless, unfathomable openings of heart, these connections of heart. It's uplifting. It's tender. It's beautiful.

Why are we so scared of it? It's not really that we're scared of the compassion, but the only way we get there is through the pain. And that is something we have to really bring our courage to bear on—to be able to even remember and notice how much we're shutting down.

The first time I went to India, of course it was an assault on all the senses for quite some time, especially for one who has a tendency toward aversive reactions to unpleasant experience. It can take some time to settle into just being with the way things are in a culture like India. But actually it liberated something in me, being there, and it continues to do so when I go back—because there's no pretense that everything's fine. You can't walk down the street in India and think everything's fine. It's just all out there: birth and death, disease, craziness, happiness, joy, spiritual ecstasy. It's all there. Just walking down the street is fantastic.

And I'm not trying to sentimentalize it. It's painful as hell. What's really interesting for me, always, is to see how long I can actually stay open and connected, and when does the heart shut. Two seconds sometimes, all day other times. How long can I look a beggar in the face and really connect—whether I give or not, almost immaterial.

When I shut down, it took me some time to see that it's not their pain I'm shutting to—it's my pain. And that's really the key to our whole practice here. To see how in shutting down to pain, mine or others', I'm shutting down to the world. I'm shutting down to connectedness. I'm shutting down to the richest and most beautiful part of myself, of life.

Let me give an example on a more personal level of how, by thinking we're protecting ourselves from pain, we're actually alienating ourselves from connectedness and love.

My father, in the last few years, has developed Parkinson's disease. Not real severe, but it's progressive, it's having an effect. In the first couple of years that he had it, it wasn't diagnosed, and he hadn't gone to a neurologist. And he who had always been a very bright, very sharp, very athletic person—really on the mark—started getting a little clumsy. It seemed like he was just going vacant. He would just kind of stand around, wondering what did I come here for? Now, I'm like that half the time, so I don't know why that should have bothered me. But you could just see something was going, and it was really painful for him, having always been so present.

And it was really painful for me when I'd go home to visit. But I didn't really notice that because I didn't tune into the fact that I was going through the loss of the person I'd always known as my father—the one I could rely on to be a certain way. To see that disappearing before my eyes, to see him beginning to get less sure of himself, to have his pain coming so much out into the forefront, to see his fear—basically, I hated it.

And instead of opening, instead of really even allowing myself to feel my own suffering, I found myself getting really impatient with him. And of course I beat myself up mercilessly for that. But then the next time something would happen—he'd ask me the same question for the third time, or I'd be in the middle of a book and he'd come up and say, "What are you doing?"—what do you think I'm doing?

It took me some time to see. Instead of, you know how we do this, "Okay, I will not be impatient again"—we make these resolves, right? I will be a better person. But we're just doing it out of self-hatred. We're not really looking at what's going on.

And when I really allowed myself to feel the sense of sorrow and loss that I was feeling, to kind of grieve that—that connection with my pain was the key. The sense of impatience and almost pushing him away vanished. Because it wasn't his pain I was pushing away; it was mine. And after a while, we can't really separate the two very well, if at all.

What lets us connect again to this place of oneness, this potential for compassion, for caring, for kindness,

both to myself and to my father? It's just the simple willingness to open to what our experience is without judgment. It's not like I took a hammer to my heart and said, "You better open up so you can be kind to your father." It was more like, "Hey, let's look and see what's happening. Let's feel it. Let's meet experience directly and let awareness take care of the rest."

I heard a little snippet of news, I think it was last year, but it really spoke to me about how simple connection is what opens us to compassion. President Clinton was traveling in Africa, and all I heard—I didn't hear the whole story—was that he was in Rwanda and had been talking with some of the people who had survived that horrific period of massacres when millions of people were killed, people who had been wounded but survived. And you know how Clinton can be. He can sound and seem to genuinely be really touched face to face with somebody. And he was saying afterward, making a statement that regarding all those massacres in Rwanda, we—meaning we Americans, the Western world, whoever—were all part of that, that we are all responsible, that we didn't do enough.

And I reflected on that. I thought later, you know, that wasn't really new information. What made him say that two, three, four years later? And I really think it's the fact of coming face to face with a person, a living being rather than a sound bite or a talking head on television.

I remember Sister Chan Khong, who works with Thich Nhat Hanh, saying back during the time of the Vietnam War—they had been so active in Vietnam with both sides—that when she was out of the country and seeing, remember how much of that war was on TV, seeing horrific things, people holding wounded and dead children, she said she'd been in the situations that she was seeing on television. And she said seeing it on TV isn't the same as really being face to face, as really opening to what's happening.

And I think it was the same thing with Clinton. It's the same thing with us. It is really scary sometimes. It can be really difficult. Just to think about letting it all in—if I open to all this, I'm going to drown.

And we can't open all at once. You can try, but we can't. We open little by little. But we can begin to explore some of the ways that we stay closed. Some of the maybe unconscious habits that we get caught in that help us block or deny the suffering in the world, the suffering in ourselves.

I'll just mention a couple of these patterns, and you can keep exploring on your own.

The first is simple ignoring, denying—just your basic, flat-out getting so involved in our own scenario that we can't see beyond what we think are our borders. Sort of like those students at the University of Virginia. We all do it, and it's good just to be aware of it. But I can also see it on retreat. It's a good place to explore how, with all sincere good intentions—and we're really all here with good intentions—we can still get so caught in our own little scenario, or big scenario. The particular stories, the routine. And somebody or something intrudes on our scenario. They sit in our space in the dining room, or they cross our walking spot too close, or whatever. There's that moment when we can't see beyond our boundaries, and that person... we can't see their suffering. We just see how it impacts us.

As soon as we see beyond our own story, the whole story restructures. It stops being me and them and becomes we.

I'll give an example from my own practice. I was walking on a retreat here, downstairs in the gym, real early in the morning. I like to get up early and practice when it's quiet. So this one morning—I just loved that time—I was walking, really concentrated. It was so still, so peaceful, for however long.

And then the wake-up bell rang. It was always—not always fun, but interesting—to watch the transition from this pristine, concentrated stillness to the doors opening and alarms going off and the toilets flushing and the showers going and people stomping up and down, back and forth to their rooms and the bathroom. I was just watching my concentration crumble, thinking, "Ah, these people are ruining my concentration."

That went on for a few minutes, and then it just let go, and the whole story restructured. It wasn't my concentration that these people were ruining. It was simply that conditions had changed. There were conditions before, and there was concentration, and now they've changed. It isn't me or them—it's just we, all doing our dance in the big picture. And then it was fine.

This leads to the second pattern I want to talk about: how we can care, or open, to so much in ourselves or in people close to us, but then everyone else somehow becomes the other—because it's too much to let it all in. When I was walking there and people started coming out and going to the bathroom, everybody was the other. Everybody in the whole of IMS was the other, because they were in the way of my concentration.

Just to watch how we do that and how powerful it can be. Like the Clinton and Rwanda thing. Even though we think we care, it's easy just to read or hear and, without meaning to, everybody in Rwanda or Bosnia or Northern Ireland or Central LA becomes the other. The people in the house next door become the other. Aspects of ourselves become the other. And it's too hard, we think, to open to that.

I was having a great conversation with someone in an interview just about this. She was talking about visiting a hospital to see a certain person and really seeing the care that brought her to the hospital for that person. Then realizing, after some visits, how she was only there to connect with that one person. Everyone else was sort of beyond the realm of what we even notice. I've done that myself, of course—both being in the hospital and visiting. It's almost as if I can handle being with this one person and their pain, but if I really look and see how many people are in this hospital, how many hospitals there are just in this little area, and on and on and on... it's like, I can't bear it. I'll drown.

Of course, it doesn't work that way. But seeing how the other is like a repository of our fears, our sense of separation.

I read a great article in some newspaper—USA Today, I think—about aggressive driving. You know how "road rage" is suddenly a tag word that's all over the place. It was a whole article about aggressive driving

and how it's getting to be a real epidemic, what constitutes it, and they were talking to therapists who work with aggressive drivers, helping them calm down. Here's what one of the therapists said about how aggressive driving arises so easily: "Especially if we're in a car, if someone on the road upsets you, that individual's whole identity is encapsulated in this bad thing he did. He's not seen as a whole person. There's an urge to express your aggression on this anonymous other, to think, 'I can't let him get away with this.' The thin veneer of civilization is removed." They said it's like a car offers you anonymity, but if you were walking down the street and meeting face to face, there wouldn't be such a sense of otherness. You look each other in the eye.

It's a very common experience. Notice, as we go through our days here, how unconsciously or subconsciously, without realizing it, who here or who in the world has suddenly moved beyond the circle of kindness and become the other—either as a repository for our aggression or just because it feels like too much pain to open to.

Because when we look, even though it might feel like we're protecting ourselves by holding all that otherness at bay, it's our own potential to rest in our truest goodness that we're blocking. It's our own potential to really experience the deepest happiness and peace that we're holding away from ourselves by holding away someone else's pain.

Or by holding parts of our own experience. And that's something I think we might not always see clearly. What part of your own emotional landscape or physical experience or processes of thought somehow becomes the other that isn't okay to surface? What is the awareness afraid to open to, or doesn't even recognize as being openable to—something that we have to get rid of?

I find it helpful when I'm feeling locked, when I'm feeling like I can't, it's too much, I can't open—whether it's to the suffering in the world, one more newspaper article, or simply one more throb of the knee, one more twinge of head pressure. Thinking, I just can't do it. It's too heavy. The burden's too much. It's going to make me bent and heavy and withered. Forget it. Nobody could bear it.

And then I look again. This is a reflection, but it helps me to consider people like those seven I mentioned at the University of Virginia—to look at who really inspires me in the history of the world, or in literature, or people who are alive now. And it's the people who really have that greatness of heart to open to and bear witness to the immense pain of a particular culture or of the world. It doesn't mean they're perfect human beings. I'm sure the Dalai Lama and Archbishop Tutu are not perfect human beings. I'm sure Aung San Suu Kyi is not a perfect human being. But the thing I see when I look at these people is a sense of at-homedness with not being perfect. And that greatness of heart that allows them to be the loving witness to so much suffering—it's remarkably inspiring.

The more one opens to, the more love and compassion, and yes, lightness, is how we begin to hold the world, our own suffering and others. It's not that the more we open to, the heavier we become until we can't pick our heads up off the floor. There's more space, there's more lightness, there's more love.

And where does such greatness of heart come from? We don't have to start out being Mother Teresa. We don't have to start out or even aspire to being Gandhi or Bishop Tutu or anybody. This summer I was teaching in Switzerland, and one of the staff people asked what was really a heartfelt question. After reading the newspaper—which is like every day, you know how the newspapers are, so much suffering in the world—bombings, wars, famines, just the usual really, which is pathetic—she said, "It's so overwhelming. It feels like it's too late. There's so much to do, and what can I do? And of what earthly use can it be to sit here and follow my breath? To sit here and bring open attention to my knee pain and my hunger and my shame and hearing the tractors out there and my aversion?" It seems sometimes so insignificant, or even self-serving, or ostrich-like—sticking our heads in the sand.

And that's where, for me, the power and the wonder, really the miracle of awareness, of the light of steady, kind awareness, pure non-judging attention to just these little things that we're each experiencing through the day—that it really reveals the truth of ourselves. And that truth is the truth of all beings, the truth of the world: our interconnectedness, how we suffer, how we hide by trying to keep ourselves from suffering and create more suffering, how by doing that we create this false sense of separation.

And as we see this little by little, without even trying, the heart, the mind, naturally transforms and responds from love and compassion. It just can't help it. That's what's so nice. You might feel like you're the most selfish, uncompassionate person who ever lived. And it doesn't matter. If you just keep paying attention to what's coming up—that feeling of how unkind you are—the truth reveals itself.

John Muir, the great naturalist, once said, "I find that if I touch anything, it is connected to everything else in the universe." If I touch anything—that little niggling pain in your back, that's anything. Your self-hatred, that's anything. It's connected to everything else in the universe. And just the power of non-judging connection can reveal the universe in anything, even a painful experience.

I want to read this poem from Mary Oliver. It's a little long, but you're not going anywhere. It's called "Singapore."

In Singapore, in the airport, a darkness was ripped from my eyes. In the women's restroom, one compartment stood open. A woman knelt there, washing something in the white bowl. Disgust argued in my stomach, and I felt in my pocket for my ticket. A poem should always have birds in it—kingfishers, say, with their bold eyes and gaudy wings. Rivers are pleasant, and of course trees. A waterfall, or if that's not possible, a fountain rising and falling. A person wants to stand in a happy place in a poem. When the woman turned, I could not answer her face.

Her beauty and her embarrassment struggled together, and neither could win. She smiled and I smiled. What kind of nonsense is this? Everybody needs a job.

Yes, a person wants to stand in a happy place in a poem, but first we must watch her as she stares down at her labor, which is dull enough. She's washing the tops of airport ashtrays as big as hubcaps with a blue

rag. Her small hands turn the metal, scrubbing and rinsing. She does not work slowly nor quickly, but like a river. Her dark hair is like the wing of a bird.

I don't doubt for a moment that she loves her life, and I want her to rise up from the crust and the slop and fly down to the river. This probably won't happen. But maybe it will. If the world were only pain and logic, who would want it? Of course it isn't. Neither do I mean anything miraculous, but only the light that can shine out of a life. I mean the way she unfolded and refolded the blue cloth. The way her smile was only for my sake. I mean the way this poem is filled with trees and birds.

The light that can shine out of a life. We just have to be present with kind awareness to see that. Our life, your life, anybody's life.

Where does such greatness of heart come from? It starts right here, right now, with whatever is going on in your own experience. When we open to ourselves, to our own pain, we open to the pain of the world. You don't have to get fancy or romantic about it. You don't have to have a really big, gut-wrenching pain either. It can even start with the petty, the small petty pains. As someone said, we understand the universal through the specific.

Just a little example—it might sound petty, but it was really quite profound for this person. She told me a few years ago that she was here sitting and hungry one day. Clearly not starving to death, just hungry one day before lunch. And for the first time, she really opened to the experience of being hungry. Just that. I guess it had been a fearful experience for her. In opening to that finally, really feeling it and the pain of it—not a big pain, right?—she said she had spent months of her life in India over many years, never really connecting with how hungry so many of the people she met were. She just hadn't been able to. But by sitting here, feeling her hunger, she really felt her way into an appreciation and a connection with the people she'd met in India, the hungry people in the world.

That might sound facile, easy to say. We're sitting here, we know we get three meals a day. You could say that, but please don't just talk yourself out of honoring the path to our connectedness with the world by opening to our own sufferings, however petty they are. It's where we have to start, and it's good enough as a place to start. Just in one moment of opening like that, it's like reclaiming our wholeness, reclaiming the truth of what we really are.

I was reminded today in an interview of what a teacher of mine used to say. He'd say, "One spark of truth burns up a mountain of lies." So we can stay cut off, separated, in denial, fighting, keeping something or other at bay for eons. And one moment of wholehearted connection and all of that other is gone, because the truth is so strong. It's stronger than our denial. And we reclaim our wholeness not in spite of the pain and confusion, but through it. It becomes our avenue.

So as you go through the days and the nights and the moments, the endless sittings and the walkings and another hell realm in the dining room, really look with kindness at how you are meeting all of your

demons. All of our demons come up on retreat—the petty ones and the really, really scary ones. It's actually amazing, isn't it, how it seems that we each have had the retreat personally orchestrated? Some kind of interaction with a yogi or the staff or something happens that really triggers our deepest patterns. I don't know how this works, but it does seem to happen for us. You just can't imagine it would.

So, looking at how you're meeting your demons. I've read this before, but it's my favorite story about it, from Milarepa. Milarepa was Tibet's great yogi who lived for years and years in a cave, just eating pine needles.

In Tibetan iconography, Milarepa is often depicted as green because he was simply the most fantastic yogi. So this story goes: he's been meditating for who knows how long, and his mind became blissful. He carried some wood back up to his cave, and when he arrived there, he found seven metal demons with bodies the size of thumbs and eyes the size of cups. Some were making fire, some were bringing water, some were grinding tsampa—barley flour—and some sat performing various magical tricks.

Isn't it just like this? You go out walking, feeling so blissful, you come and sit down, and the demons are there. They've made themselves at home, and you don't know how it happened.

As soon as Milarepa saw them, he became frightened. He meditated on his deity, uttered a subjugating mantra, a controlling mantra, performed a gaze, aroused the deity's presence. You get the drift—he was trying everything to get rid of them. Then, after all that, he meditated on compassion and friendliness. It's usually the last resort. But he was unable to pacify them.

So then he thought, "You know, they may be local deities, and I've been here a long time, but I haven't praised them." Milarepa sings many poems, and I won't read the whole thing, but he sings a long poem of praise to the place, ending it with: "You non-human demons assembled here are obstacles. Drink this cup of friendliness and compassion and be gone." Sound familiar? And three of the demons who were performing magic went away. But he was unable to make the other four leave.

Realizing that they were magical obstacles, he then sang another song, this time a song of confidence in his understanding. So we keep falling back on our practice. This long song of confidence ends with: "It's wonderful that you demons came today. You must come again tomorrow. From time to time, we should converse." It's a little more of a "catch you later." And three of them vanished like a rainbow.

The remaining demon, though, performed an imposing dance. And Milarepa thought, "This one is vicious and very powerful." So he sang a song of the pinnacle of his realization, the absolute peak of his understanding. This one ends with: "A demon like you does not intimidate me. If you could intimidate me, the arising of the mind of compassion would be of little meaning. Demon, if you were to stay here longer, that would be fine with me. If you have friends, bring them along. We'll talk out our differences."

And then he says, "I feel compassion for this spirit." He prays to Lord Vajradhara: "Grant your blessings so that this lowly one himself may have complete compassion." And then, with friendliness and compassion,

without concern for his body, Milarepa placed himself in the mouth of the demon. But the demon could not eat him and so vanished like a rainbow.

Internal, external—it's our last fallback, the heart of compassion. But it's actually the strongest and most freeing way of meeting all the aspects of ourselves that we try to demonize. Ask them in for tea.

And then what starts to happen is that the sense of my suffering, your suffering, my boundaries, the world's boundaries, really starts to get mushy, starts to dissolve a little bit. It's just the pain.

Pema Chödrön quotes Bernie Glassman in a wonderful way. Bernie Glassman was a Zen teacher who ran a project for the homeless in Yonkers, New York. She said she heard him say something that struck her. He said he doesn't really do this work to help others. He does it because he feels that moving into the areas of society that he had rejected is the same as working with the parts of himself that he has rejected.

It goes both ways—the parts of ourselves, the parts of society that we reject. Working with one is working with both. And the intention of compassion that allows us to meet our sufferings here with kindness, the intention of open-hearted awareness, strengthens into the natural, deeper intentions of speech and action, so that there becomes a natural purification of how we act and who we are in the world.

To the point where it might not even be viewed as compassion. I heard this great phrase once: "just doing the obvious." What's the obvious thing to do in this situation?

An example that quite moved me when I heard it on the radio was a couple of years ago. A basketball player, a rookie in his first year in the NBA—you know how it is, for someone to finally make the NBA, it's the pinnacle of someone's dream. You couldn't go any further. They were interviewing him on the radio. His sister lived in LA, I think, and she needed a kidney transplant or she was going to die. He was saying that if he was a compatible donor, of course he would give her one of his kidneys. He didn't even mention this part, but the announcer was saying, "But doesn't that mean you'd have to give up your career?" Which I guess it did—I'm not sure why, but I suppose it's too dangerous, you could damage the second kidney. The announcer was going, "Oh, that's so amazing," and the guy was like, "It's an obvious choice." He didn't say "doing the obvious," but he might as well have. "There's nothing to think about. It's my sister. If she needs a kidney, I give it to her. What's playing basketball compared to that?"

It was so beautiful because it was so unselfconscious. It wasn't, "Aren't I a great being?" He was just doing the obvious. To me that was the perfect example of a life of compassion. Not holding ourselves as special, but just the natural transformation from—as Joko Beck phrases it—a self-centered view of life and practice to a life-centered view. We're part of life, but each of us is not the central core. We can look at the whole picture. And it happens naturally.

I know each of you has seen that transformation happening naturally here. In the times when your neighbor or somebody does something that's just aggravating you—anger, anger, anger at them, anger at yourself, self-judging. And suddenly there's this openness to the whole picture and the movement of

connectedness, compassion. You see the pain that caused that behavior. You feel the pain that caused your own reaction. And there's just a putting down of the story. It's a little thing, but it's the natural purification from awareness to the heart of compassion.

And besides it happening naturally, awareness gives us a choice. The times that we see—and it's painful, isn't it, to see how much of our actions, our thoughts, come from greed, come from aversion. But again, the willingness to open to that pain gives us that moment of choice. And we begin to see that much more often than we might have thought, we do have a choice where to let the heart and mind dwell. Quite often we do have a choice which response to choose. And if we're willing to face the pain of the times we can't make the response we'd like to make, then it becomes actually easier and easier to make that response we would like to make.

From Victor Frankl: "We who lived in the concentration camps can remember the men who walked through the huts comforting others, giving away their last piece of bread. They may have been few in number, but they offer sufficient proof that everything can be taken from a man but one thing—the last of his freedoms—to choose one's attitude in any given set of circumstances, to choose one's way."

It's not easy. We won't always make the wisest choice. But if we continue having the courage to look, we can really begin to choose our way. And in transforming ourselves, we really do transform the world.

Thich Nhat Hanh—someone asks him, "There are so many urgent problems, what should I do?" And he says, "Take one thing and do it very deeply and carefully, and you will be doing everything at the same time."

So let's do our practice very deeply and carefully. Let's meet ourselves openheartedly, deeply, and carefully. And in changing ourselves, we're changing the world.

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