Compassion

Carol Wilson · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Carol Wilson · 54:55

A metta retreat, a loving-kindness retreat, the way we're doing it here together for these eight days, is a kind of complex amalgam of different experiences that you all can go through. When there's a hundred of you, you can be going through different experiences, different ones at different times.

There's the strain of the loving-kindness that's being cultivated—the feeling of loving-kindness, the stuff that comes up around it, how you relate to the different metta subjects. There's the concentration strain, which may or may not come together with the loving-kindness. Sometimes you just feel really concentrated, no loving-kindness. Sometimes just loving-kindness, no concentration. And I know you're thinking you're in the third category, which is neither loving-kindness nor concentration, and sometimes it feels like that.

In deciding which strain to speak to tonight, after we spoke with only about half of you today, I thought maybe I'd speak to what happens in the times when there's a lot of difficulty coming up. Because what occurs when loving-kindness is turned towards difficulty, pain, suffering of any form, what arises is compassion. It's subtly different from loving-kindness, but it's really the face of loving-kindness in connection with our suffering.

In a couple of days we'll teach the specifics of compassion as another divine abode, brahmavihara, but in the meantime, we're all working with and experiencing compassion. And it's a wonderful way to begin to see that we can relate to the things we don't like, the things we're afraid of, including the fear itself, in a different way.

Compassion, just as metta is, as is empathetic joy and equanimity, is a so-called divine abode—vast, boundless, undiscriminating. In other words, compassion is another expression of our unitive nature. It's actually one of the beautiful states of heart and mind. It's a happy state, believe it or not. The heart of metta, in connection with suffering as compassion, is a beautiful expression of the truth of who we are. Not the way most of us think about our resistance, is it? Or the fear, or the pain. But it's really about unlearning our mistaken response to what is difficult in our life.

Compassion, karuna in Pali, has one definition which I really like because I'm sort of kinesthetic and that's how it feels to me: the quivering of the heart in response to suffering, in connection with pain. The quivering of the heart, sort of vibrating together—not the quivering of "get me out of here," but the quivering of vibrating together.

Instead of our conditioned response to ours or another person's strong difficulty—of "what can I do to fix

it," but fix it meaning so I shouldn't have to know about it or feel it anymore, or of judgment or self-judgment or blame—it can really become a way of opening more deeply into truth and connectedness. The quivering of the heart, connectedness.

At the end of April, I was leading a retreat in Colorado and it started just a couple of days after that massacre in the high school in Littleton. Though we were a few hours away from that, there were people at the retreat from Denver. And there was also the sense that the bombing in Yugoslavia was very strong. And there were people in the retreat, of course, going through their own deep sadness and fears and pain and suffering, just as people are here.

In talking with one woman who came from the Denver area and so felt very affected by the massacre in the high school—just knowing people who went to that school—she said she'd been really questioning not only the pain in the world, but also her own pain. What's the good of sitting here and just being with my sadness and my grief? She was in a lot of grief, but it felt personal at first.

But she said—and I thought it was really a beautiful thing—that little by little she came to be able to be with her own grief, and saw that it opened into really the grief of the world. When you really resonate with your suffering, it stops being just "me" and it moves into that boundless quality that connects us with all beings. We really see through compassion that we're not separate.

What she said was, "Okay, I was really struggling with: am I just being selfish? What's the point of just being with this difficult stuff? Is it worth it? Is it useful?" And then when we were talking, she said she had really come to see that by being able to be with what she was going through then, however big or little it might seem—she said, "I really get it. That will be that much less violence, that much less anger that I'll have to put out into the world." That by simply being able to be with whatever's arising in my experience, it really translates into more compassion, more kindness in the way I am in the world.

That might seem like a little thing. I think it's really huge. It's the beginning of true compassion. Where else can it begin? Where else can it deepen but here within our own experience?

I remember when I first started in practice, I was nineteen and, of course, quite idealistic. I would practice for a while and then I'd think, "Well, okay, now I'm feeling pretty good, I have to go save the world now." You know how long that lasts. I'd go out for a little while, go back to college, get all caught up again—never mind saving the world, I just want to function again in a happy way—and go back into practice.

It doesn't have to be quite such a dichotomy, but I really see that until I can be with my own pain and suffering—the pain that's elicited in me when I'm with someone else who's in pain—I can't really be there for somebody else.

So in our practice here, in the metta, when all these difficult things come up, it's not a mistake. It's not a sign of failure. It's not a sign that you're hopeless at this practice, or that the practice is going backwards. Have you had thoughts like that, just flickering through? You know, if you're doing it right, it should be all

bliss.

It's interesting—a couple of people in our group today have had retreats where it was mostly bliss. And it ain't happening now. That really can lead into the feeling of "I had it right, and now I don't anymore. Now I've got it wrong."

So I think where we have to start in beginning to see where we get so astray in our response to our suffering is really to come to a deeper understanding of the First Noble Truth of the Buddha. You remember that, most of you, right? The unsatisfactory quality of life—that there's pain, that there's old age, sickness, disease and death, that we have to spend time with what we don't like, that we get separated from what we like, that things change. That's just a fact of life. Not good, not bad. It's just a fact of life.

And what's so interesting is the way we don't quite take that in, which I think is why the Buddha made it the first noble truth. We say, "Well, you know, big deal, we know that." But do we? When we get sick, somehow it can feel like a sign of failure. If I really had it together spiritually, this wouldn't be happening. When your practice goes bad, when good practice goes bad, it's always something that you're doing wrong. And if you could just figure it out, only good things would happen from now on.

Or just in our culture—how much, when something difficult happens physically, emotionally, or you lose your job or anything, it's so easy to get into a feeling of self-blame or shame or figuring out what you did wrong or needing to hide it. It's a way we're not quite getting it—that difficulty, pain, sadness, sorrow, losing people we love, getting sick, the whole show, it's an inescapable part of our journey of awakening. Nobody gets away with it only being bliss, I'm sorry to tell you. Nobody does, because we're humans in this body. At the very least, somewhere along the way, we will die. So far, that's what seems to always happen, and it's not a sign of failure.

We're so ingrained to close down around suffering or push it away or hold back from it that to think of compassion—the quivering of the heart in response to pain—as one of several avenues into the boundlessness of our true nature, into the boundlessness of freedom, it's amazing. It's beautiful. Sure, if we had the choice between compassion and sympathetic joy, maybe we'd go for sympathetic joy, but we all have all of it.

So the suffering aspect is one of the things that we all have in common as humans. And it seems so sad to me that that's something we tend to feel like we need to hide or gloss over or move away from. That only keeps us spinning in more confusion and suffering.

Our society perpetuates this a little. Franz tells me, coming from Germany, it's a slightly different culture. Not hugely different, but some difference. And one thing he notices—okay, this is him, but there's some truth to it, right, about Americans?—is our tendency to, first of all, "How are you?" "I'm fine." That's just what we say. And mostly you're not supposed to—if you're not fine, and someone you meet on the street says, "How are you?" do you launch into a whole thing about what's wrong with your back and your

spleen? Probably not. "Oh yeah, I'm fine." Smile, smile, good, go on their way. That's what we're supposed to do. He says, "Yes, you're always smiling. How are you? Fine. I know you're feeling miserable. Why are you smiling and saying fine?"

Or, you know, if we're going on vacation and we're suffering, we'll say, "Well, don't tell anybody. You don't want to bring them down." We've got to hide it. And it's just another way of saying suffering is part of life, but we don't quite accept it.

The lengths we'll go to—this is true. Maybe you've heard of it. This kind of blew me away. Have you heard of Botox shots? This is a beauty treatment made from botulism toxin. I heard this on National Public Radio. They give you these shots in your face because what it does is temporarily paralyze—for a few months—certain facial muscles, the ones that let you frown. So if you're getting a lot of wrinkles from frowning, you simply can't frown for a few months, and you don't get those wrinkles. You can be happy, happy all the time.

And another twist that's being taken—this is true, I swear—is that because you can't frown, certain high-powered professionals like lawyers and bankers and stockbrokers have started getting shots before they go into important meetings, so their faces can't give them away when they're doing certain kinds of deals. It's scary but true.

So we come from a deep conditioning that suffering is wrong, and if we're suffering, it's shameful, or we're failing. Of course, we'd rather not be suffering. I'm not saying we're going to say, "Great! I'm so happy to be suffering—another chance to open into unity." Actually, there are times when, once you are suffering, you can say, "Okay, it's happening. At least I can use it to open into truth." But we don't have to have this shameful, fearful, keep-it-away attitude. That's what keeps us locked in separateness. That's what keeps us in this illusion of looking elsewhere for happiness.

And mettā, as we try to hold the suffering at bay, keep it away—mettā doesn't really let us do that. Because mettā is this outflowing, undiscriminating quality of heart. It doesn't say, "Yes, all of you except that piece." I mean, we try to say that, and that piece just gets bigger and bigger. And we see that by trying to hold the difficulty at bay, we're not holding the difficulty at bay—we're holding life at bay. We're denying ourselves the recognition of our wholeness, of our completeness. We're keeping ourselves artificially separate from life, from all sentient beings.

We think that by protecting ourselves from suffering, we're being kind to ourselves. The truth is, we only become more fearful, more hardened, more alienated. We experience ourselves as being separate from the whole. And this separation becomes like a prison for us that restricts us to our personal hopes and fears and to caring only for the people nearest to us. Curiously enough, if we primarily try to shield ourselves from discomfort, we suffer. Yet when we don't close off and we let our hearts break, we discover our kinship with all beings.

It's really true. When we don't close off, when we're not afraid of letting our hearts break, of that sorrow—whatever it is we're afraid of—in that we find again our connectedness. In little ways and in big ways. You don't have to think in terms of the Dalai Lama. In little ways.

Just a personal example. My father, in the last four years or so, has developed Parkinson's disease. When it was first coming on for a year or two, it hadn't been diagnosed. We didn't really know what it was. I'd go home to visit for a few days, and we have a pretty good relationship. He's always been very smart, very quick, very funny, very athletic. And I'd go home to visit and he was kind of moving very carefully. There's a mental aspect of Parkinson's where it just kind of dulls you out, and he'd have this kind of vacant stare. He'd go to turn on a light switch or something and just be staring vacantly for a while.

It was so painful. But what I found myself doing was getting impatient with him. I mean, we didn't have a name to call it—Parkinson's disease—didn't know what it was. But I found myself getting impatient, saying, "Come on, what are you doing? Turn on the light," or whatever. And then, of course, when I'd go be alone, I'd feel awful about it. As I just sat and explored my impatience and what was going on, I saw—and it took some time, because it's always like, "Why can't he fix it?"

What can we do to make it better? All of that dance.

And then I really saw the place in me where it was so painful to see him going through that, to feel his pain, and also my own—losing the father I had known, which is going to happen—but it was so painful. I could see that my impatience was actually my way of not feeling my own pain.

And it's so doubly painful to see that my father, who had always been kind of quick to anger, has turned into Mr. Mellow these last few years. He's much more open and affectionate. And here I was being impatient and kind of pushing him away. Miss Vipassana, right? Miss Metta, pushing my poor loving father away because I didn't want to be with the pain. That's what we do.

Seeing it, seeing it, is often enough. Let my heart break. Let myself feel it. Over and over—once doesn't do it. But not to be afraid of that sadness. And that's really all that has to happen, because once I wasn't afraid of it, then I could be there with him. I didn't have to make some big statement. I could just be there with him. It's a wordless thing. And I have to keep relearning that as the disease develops, as he gets scared. Can I be with my scaredness enough so I can be there for him when he gets scared?

It all starts with us. I can have great ideas about how compassionate I should be, but until I can be with my own pain about it, I can't really do it.

So it's a small example. We all have lots of them. But it's a hint, I think, of the vast possibilities—the strength, the unitive nature, and the real power of compassion—once we learn that we can trust enough to let our hearts break. And it just takes doing it over and over. And it's fine to start with little things. That's what happens here on retreat. They may not feel little. They're huge. Sometimes you'll think, "Well, this is really trite. What am I so upset about this for? I know in the big picture this is small." But here, the

big picture has gotten a lot smaller, and the energy that comes up around things is really deep. It's really profound. So honor it as a chance to see if you can move into this, let your heart break, just in this little instance. And we learn to trust that more.

I know one of the big fears—well, it comes up for me, and I know I'm not the only one—is saying, "Okay, my suffering is more than I can be with. If I step back and just look around the world, it's too much. We're going to drown. It's overwhelming." And from that stance, it is. And we all have moments where it's more than overwhelming. But what gives me real faith is first my own personal experience, just like that little incident with my father. And then looking out in the world, past and present, at the people—famous people, I guess, mostly—who really inspire me with their courage, with their compassion. People who have been witness to such a huge amount of suffering I can't even imagine. The Dalai Lama is a good classical example.

And looking at how some of these people are in the world, there's a lightness, there's a kind of joy. That really shows it's not a sense of being so burdened and disconnected that they're dying from it. The other flip side of compassion is the ability to really be present for joy. You're so present to life. Because we can't just hold off the pain—we hold off everything if we're shutting it out. When we're present with the pain, with that quivering heart, there are so many little moments of joy, of connectedness, because the underlying quality of our being really is love and connectedness.

I'm sure you can't really see this, but... Actually, you still probably can't see it. It's a picture of the Dalai Lama and Archbishop Desmond Tutu from South Africa. They both won the Nobel Peace Prize. There was a big conference at the University of Virginia last year where they called together all the winners of the Nobel Peace Prize from the last ten years or so who could come. They had about seven or eight of these people there, to try and inspire what they talked of as the apathetic, self-involved student body to think about something other than material things for more than a moment. Really, that's what it says. And these people really did inspire them. But anyway, what I loved about this is...

The Dalai Lama and Archbishop Tutu—these two men who together have been witness to and present for the suffering of all the Tibetan refugees and the people in Tibet, and all the apartheid in South Africa. As you know, Archbishop Tutu has been heading the Truth and Reconciliation Council that's been going on for the last year or two in South Africa, which just sounds heart-rending. People from both sides confessing the horrible things they've done and asking for amnesty—whether it's forgiveness they're asking for, I'm not sure.

But these two are clowning around. They get together, and in the picture, the Dalai Lama is trying to pull off Archbishop Tutu's cap, and Tutu is kind of holding it on, and the Dalai Lama is just cracking up, and the person behind them is laughing. It's this childlike joy. It's not this heaviness of "oh, the suffering of the world." When you're so present with the suffering, you're so present with the joy.

Looking at people like that is one of the things that really gives me the faith and the trust to dive in again.

The next time I'm going along happily doing my loving-kindness practice or my vipassana practice, feeling really concentrated, and a big wave of—take your pick—aversion, loneliness, resistance, fear, self-hatred, judgment, sorrow, grief, sleepiness, pain in my big toe, whatever it might be, comes along. The next time it comes, after I fight with it for a while, it's like, "Oh yeah, right." Diving in is the way to freedom, to unity, to connectedness. It's not what we're used to, it's not how we're trained, but it's the way to real peace.

And what's so wonderful, what I truly believe, is that the greatness of heart of Archbishop Tutu, of the Dalai Lama, of any of the people through the years—Martin Luther King, whoever, people that inspire me—you see they're not perfect human beings. We don't have to think, "Well, you have to be somebody special to have that greatness of heart." It really starts right here, in how we're meeting the difficulties, the painful things that arise moment to moment, whatever comes up.

What's so fascinating to me about meditation practice, both metta practice and vipassana practice, is that you can really see, moment to moment, how the heart and mind relate to experience. As the days go on and our world shrinks, you can get very specific in little moments—noticing when a fear comes up, when a painful sensation comes up, when that memory arises that last time led you into sorrow. We really can begin to see how the mind and heart relate. And guess what? Our whole life is only moment to moment. So the fact that it's all sort of exaggerated here gives us really useful, fascinating information to see how we can begin to shift, how the metta shifts the way our heart and mind habitually relates to difficult experience.

Let me give you an example. When in a moment of experience something unpleasant arises—say it's a physical sensation that's unpleasant, or a sound, or a thought, a smell, a taste, anything unpleasant, an emotion—it's happening right now, correct? Your knee hurts; that's an unpleasant sensation happening right now. Even if a mental memory comes up of something really sad and painful in your life two weeks ago, or fear comes up about something that's going to happen next week, that emotion, that thought is actually arising right now.

Notice what happens when we respond from aversion or fear. The aversion is that "get this away from me"—don't want to feel it, don't want to know about it, don't want to think about it, it's bad, my practice is failing, whatever—push away. And fear is kind of like imagining it into the future. "Oh my God, if I feel like this now and there's five more days to go, it's going to be absolutely unbearable." And it's not even going to be unbearable—it *is* unbearable, because we take the whole five days and put them on this moment. Or if it's just a pain, and you know at the end of the sitting when you get up that pain goes away, we might try to be doing metta, but really we're saying, "Oh no, oh no, forty more minutes, this is impossible, I can't stand to be with it." That's fear, taking it into the future.

But both aversion and fear, if you see the difference between them and metta—the aversion and the fear are as if the attention shrinks back from connecting with whatever it is, a sensation, an emotion, the sensation of fear itself. It shrinks back, it shrinks away. It's as if the mind is thinking, "Somehow I can hold

myself separate from this unpleasant or painful experience. I'll live a little ways away from it and hope that it goes away." And of course, that reinforces the experience of separation and disconnection, because that *is* the experience: disconnect. And because the attention isn't really connecting with what's happening, you can't see it clearly. We can't really respond with wise discrimination because we're not connected, so we're seeing it through a veil of aversion and fear, which tends to build on itself. We get more and more disconnected. It might manifest as stronger resistance, or as stronger aversion, or the fear goes into some other fear, and pretty soon we're in this whole huge web of all the fears of our life—and it might have started from something really little that the attention just disconnected from, flinched away from.

Look at how metta works in a moment of just friendliness. Don't think about even these vast, wonderful, unitive kinds of metta—but the friendliness, the spaciousness. It just flows as if the energy, the attention, the heart flows into whatever's arising without discrimination, without saying "yes this, no that." It just flows into, covers, includes. Compassion is the same. Although compassion would begin with the suffering aspect, it also flows out and includes everything. So there's this strong connection.

There's no flinching back, no pulling away. So every time there's a simple moment of friendly metta toward whatever is happening, that begins to shift this moment-to-moment habit of disconnecting from the difficult. And of course, when we disconnect, we feel separate. That's what the mind is doing in that moment. It's not the difficult experience itself that creates the separation, that keeps us out of peace, out of completion. It's that reaction of mind that seems to keep us separate. It makes us seem separate because we're pulling back.

The simplicity of meeting what's happening — it's the same in mindfulness, just meeting it. Metta is this flowing into. In the meeting of it, the fear can fall away. It's the holding ourselves separate that promotes the fear.

I want to read you one of my favorite stories about how simple connectedness breaks through fear. It's from Michael Crichton, a true story he tells. He was on a camping safari in Africa with his wife, tenting at night with guides. He was nervous and kept asking about lions and elephants, and the guides were kind of dismissing his concerns, saying there hadn't been any elephants or lions around — just go to sleep.

In the middle of the night, he and his wife both woke to huge crashing sounds outside. They lay there absolutely terrified, completely petrified. "It's an elephant, it's an elephant!" They were both in total panic. Finally, he said he just couldn't stand it anymore. Without thinking, he grabbed his flashlight, unzipped the tent, shone the light out — right into a huge brown eye. It was an elephant, immediately outside his little tent.

But here's what was interesting. He said, "Oh, it's an elephant." Zipped his tent up, got back in bed, and went right to sleep.

This is his musing about it, which I find fascinating. He slept well once he stopped worrying. He wrote, "I was quite impressed with the instantaneous flip in my own emotional state — from barely controlled hysteria to detached calm — once I saw the giant eye. How did that happen?"

After considering various explanations, he arrived at this insight: "We're all like that. We can all work ourselves into hysterical panic over possibilities we're afraid to look at, to really connect with. What if I have cancer? What if my job's at risk? What if my kids are on drugs? What if I'm getting bald? What if an elephant is outside my tent? What if I'm faced with some terrible thing I don't know how to deal with?"

That hysteria goes away the instant we are willing to hear the answer, even if the answer is what we feared all along. Yes, you have cancer. Yes, you're going bald. Yes, there's an elephant outside your tent. The question then becomes: what are you going to do about it? This is discriminating wisdom. Subsequent emotions may not be pleasant, but the hysteria stops.

Hysteria accompanies an unwillingness to look at what is really going on. It promotes an unwillingness to look. We feel we are afraid to look, when actually it is not looking that keeps us afraid.

And it's really like that in our metta practice.

It's not that everything becomes perfect, but with the outflowing, accepting, clear connection of metta or compassion, we can recognize: ah, this is what's happening. Again we're connected to the world, to ourselves, and there's wise discrimination. We can act appropriately without getting lost in the fear.

What's really interesting is that no matter how long we might spend lost in fear, no matter how long we might have spent conditioning ourselves to push away the difficult and unpleasant—it only takes a moment of real, open connectedness to cut through all of that.

We can have days of awfulness, and then we have this one moment of recognition: oh yes, it's really true, we're all connected. And that keeps us going for days more. Because the truth is so much stronger. One of my teachers used to say, "A spark of truth burns up a mountain of lies." And it's true. Truth is so strong. In that one moment we're whole, we're connected to life, and we know it's true. It keeps us going.

I'll give you a personal example of how this shift of attitude, this connectedness to suffering, changes everything—changes our life.

About ten or eleven years ago, I was developing some condition that no one could identify. Even after they diagnosed it, they still don't really know what it is—one of those situations where they can give it a name, and that's about it. At that time, I was developing symptoms that severely restricted my activity and were quite painful. Once the condition was diagnosed, it was one of those where nothing might happen, or you could die, or anywhere in between.

It was scary, of course. It was painful. I went through all of it—resistance, and more interesting, the levels of shame and blame, the whole sense of spiritual failure. A little bit of that New Age affirmation thinking:

if I could just think the right thoughts, this would go away. And all my years of meditation, I'm still not thinking the right thoughts. So somehow, subterraneanly, I felt like a spiritual failure.

Although I could watch my mind spinning into future fear—"Oh my God, I'll never take a walk again, I'll never..."—I could see that and bring myself right back. But there was still a level of really feeling that my body had let me down. It had abandoned me, failed me. There was a sense of betrayal and real difficulty with it.

At some point, I was living here, and I came home one day to find an old Tibetan lama in his eighties who happened to be visiting for the afternoon—which happens here sometimes. One of my friends grabbed me and said, "He's got to give you a blessing!" She dragged me over. He said something, bonked me on the head with his staff, and said, "Okay, say these words," some words in Tibetan that didn't mean anything to me, "and do this healing mantra."

So I said, sure, why not? What do I have to lose?

I would sit over there—that's when I started having to sit in a chair during the three-month retreat. Luckily the yogis didn't know I was sitting there saying my Tibetan mantra and doing my healing meditation. Really, I was just surrendering to it. I wasn't trying to get better. I wasn't doing anything. I was just doing it because what did I have to lose?

And I think it was actually that attitude of just being with it that allowed something to shift. What slowly began to happen was a real attitude of compassion toward my body—almost as if I were holding my body as a separate being, like a baby, instead of identifying with it so much. Instead of being annoyed with it, instead of being afraid. I realized I had been holding myself a little bit away from my body, because if I really sank into the sensations, it would trigger this whole level of fear and betrayal. So I stayed a little bit away.

It was simply the compassion of connecting. That's all. In my mind it became clear: wow, I've been so angry at you, poor body, and you're really hurting. It really isn't helping you for me to be angry. I just began to hold it with compassion, letting go. None of this was conscious—"I should do this." But in meeting it just as it was, with kindness, just that flowing in of attention without the pulling away, a whole different level of acceptance arose.

Again I felt whole, connected to life, not separate. And the whole sense of what healing means changed. It moved from doing a healing mantra to get better—some idea of "better"—to just really letting go into the unknown. Because healing can mean anything, really.

And if I died, I died. Now, I'm not saying I still feel like that—the capacity for denial remains huge. So now that I'm feeling better, you know, that was then and this is now, and everything is hunky-dory. Watch that in your mind too.

But really, in that moment, the sense of all the shoulds fell away. There was complete connection, and through that I was reintroduced to the sense of wholeness, the sense of peace, the sense of connectedness to all of life. And so that particular time, that illness became the doorway into my kinship with all beings—not something to fear anymore.

From that place, I actually began to have better discrimination about what to do. I didn't respond or make decisions out of fear. I was telling someone today, everyone kept saying—because the cold isn't good for me now—"Oh, you should move to Arizona. You should take care of yourself. You should stop teaching. You should do this and that." And I realized that for me to have done any of that at that time would have been entirely fear-based. It wasn't necessary.

Instead, some good friends of mine were going to India for a few weeks, and I said, "Yeah, I think I'll go to India with you." They're probably the only friends who would have said, "Yeah, great!" Everyone else would have said, "Are you out of your mind, going to India?" I'd been trying to eat a really pure diet—no wheat, no dairy, no sugar. So I went to India, where you live on grease, chai, sugar, and wheat. I felt better. What can I say? So who knows? Again, we never really know. It's opening into the unknown.

But that simple meeting of whatever's happening with kindness—it's our avenue into unity. And it doesn't really matter what level the suffering is at.

Pema Chödrön writes: "Learning how to be kind to ourselves, learning how to respect ourselves, is important. The reason it's important is that fundamentally, when we look into our own hearts and begin to discover what is confused and what is brilliant, what is bitter and what is sweet, it isn't just ourselves that we're discovering—we're discovering the universe. There's an interesting transition that occurs naturally and spontaneously. We begin to find that to the degree that there is bravery in ourselves—the willingness to look, to point directly at our own hearts—and to the degree that there is kindness towards ourselves, there's confidence that we can actually forget ourselves and open to the world. The reason that we don't open our hearts and minds to other people is that they trigger confusion in us, and we don't maybe at the moment feel brave enough to deal with it. But to the degree that we look clearly and compassionately at ourselves, we begin to feel confident and fearless about looking into someone else's eyes."

And so really, all this hard practice we're doing—there's no way it can only be for yourself. And don't worry if it seems like what's going on is kind of small. I've found, and I really believe it, that the specifics of our own experience that we can open to, of our own suffering, lead us into the vastness of the suffering and the unity of the world.

I imagine many of you have had the experience of sorrow, of grief, and when you really let yourself courageously open into it, the specific sorrow seems to move beyond itself. It seems as if we're crying for the pain of the world. It seems to be much more than whatever our specific story is, our specific grief. When you touch the heart of grief, you become all mothers, all fathers, all children. All people are united

in that. And there's a poignant beauty to it when we're not afraid to feel that grief, to feel that sorrow.

So we start small. We start with ourselves. And I know how much time in this metta practice it can really feel like absolutely nothing is going on. You're saying the phrases, you're not feeling metta, you feel like you're suffering and just lost and spinning in it, you throw out a phrase now and again, and you think, "This is really a joke."

I just want to tell you from my own experience—and remember the woman I mentioned last time who did it for three months and found her life really different—there are changes taking place on a level we really don't know. Sharon Salzberg likes to say, and I've led retreats with her so I've heard her say it over and over: "It really doesn't matter if you don't feel anything. It really doesn't matter. The changes are happening on another level that's often beneath our consciousness." Just that willingness to make that commitment of well-wishing—that's an intention that is strengthening the ability to move into the beauty and the suffering without holding back. It's reclaiming our wholeness, starting where we are. It's being willing and courageous and kind to ourselves, feeling whatever suffering we're going through, huge or small.

It's not about being passive. It's not about so-called deluded compassion. Compassion doesn't always mean we should feel good—I hope you're getting the drift of that by now. Deluded compassion sometimes sounds like, "Well, this is really hard. I'd better leave before it even gets difficult."

There are times when absolutely the pain we're going through—the fear, the grief, the sadness, the terror—is way too strong. We can't bring metta to it. We can't bring mindfulness to it. It's overwhelming us. Absolutely, at those times, the compassionate and wise action is to back off. There's no question. When you're working with a difficult person and you get lost in anger, we say, please go to where it's easy. That's wisdom. That's compassion.

But when beginning to move into practice with a difficult person, if you think, "Oh, there's that thing I don't like. It might get really unpleasant. I better not try"—that's different. That's acting out of fear before anything happens. That's deluded compassion.

And I think what happens even more commonly is confusing compassion with codependence. This is such a small example, but it popped into my mind today for obvious reasons. Some of us are really allergic to black fly bites. Yesterday, this little incident happened to me twice. I was outside talking to two different friends, and as we talked, the swarms started to gather. First you think they're not there, then they start swarming. When I get bitten by black flies, it doesn't bother me at first, but for days afterward I swell up and itch and get kind of feverish.

I noticed in both cases that the other person wasn't so bothered—some people aren't—and there was this tendency to think, "Oh well, it's an important conversation, and I need to stay here with them and talk. That's the compassionate, friendly thing to do." And I realized that's not compassion at all. It was just

codependence—not wanting to say, "You know what, I can't stand here anymore. Let's go inside." In one case, inside was literally five feet away. He was saying, "Oh no, stay here, it's so nice, we can have our tea out here on the porch." And I thought, "Oh yeah, he really needs me to be here." That's not compassion. That's codependence.

Compassion takes in the whole situation and says, "You know what, let's go inside." And if the person doesn't want to, fine—that's their choice too. Getting all bitten up to no purpose is not the same as compassion. There might be another time when that same situation would genuinely require staying. So compassion connects us and allows for wise choices—actually fearless choices. Codependence is largely based on fear. Compassion can be quite fearless.

I know this is such a small example, but I thought you could relate. I certainly did.

What compassion leads us to is the fearlessness that comes from knowing we're living in truth. We're living in our connectedness. We don't need to be afraid of fear itself. We don't need to be afraid of sorrow. Sure, we'll still tend to hold back. But as a friend of mine describes it, her grown sons are always trying to tell her how to be safe from waves when they go to Hawaii or somewhere with big surf. When a huge wave is coming, you have to turn around and dive into it. She says, "I know it's true, but I just can't do it. Every time, I turn around and run, and the wave clobbers me."

With the fearlessness of compassion, we really learn that we can trust diving in. You come to that smooth place of peace where the wave merges into the ocean and there's no separation anymore—and we're also part of that ocean. It's a whole different way to meet the difficulties.

I don't know if this sounds a little too nice to you, but it happens to be true. So play with it. Experiment with it.

Really learn to see that even the resistance, even your loneliness, even that backache—it doesn't matter what—when met with metta, which turns to compassion in the face of suffering, is again our avenue into the boundlessness of a heart that's free and connected.

So let's just sit quietly for a moment.

May our sincere practice be for the benefit and happiness of all beings.

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