Wise Intention

Carol Wilson · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Carol Wilson · 57:18

So in a few days, we'll be entering into the most challenging part of this retreat, which is the rest of your life. And I'm serious. That is the most challenging—it really is the rest of our lives.

A lot of the anxiety and expectation that starts to come up has to do with however you're feeling now, which is somehow different from how you were before you came to the retreat. Either we're projecting how it's going to stay like this in our life, or maybe we're going to get out of this and get back to something more pleasant. But really, when I say it's the most challenging part, what I mean is this: bringing the same quality, the same commitment to awakening moment to moment that we bring in a retreat is what we need to bring to our life.

While I do believe it's true that we don't need to leave our life behind to walk a path of awakening—that we don't need to go live in a nunnery or a monastery—I also think it's really important that we remember we don't need to leave the path of awakening behind in order to live our life.

In our Western dharma culture, we say, and we mean it, but it's almost become too easy to say, "My life is my practice." And we mean it, sort of. But you see how hard practice is. What makes us think it's going to be any easier when everything gets faster and more complicated?

We need to bring a quality of deep, openhearted commitment to the aspects of our life, because what seems so obvious now—it came up in some of the groups today, and I always experience it on retreat—won't stay obvious. Right now it's clear just how painful clinging is. It's obvious how everything changes. How can I ever forget that thoughts are ephemeral and have no intrinsic meaning? It's just so clear that we can't imagine it all getting so solid again. Of course it does, and then it loosens up again.

What I want to talk about tonight is one of many tools of mindfulness, a specific focus of mindfulness that has been quite helpful for me in bringing awareness to the more complex situations of everyday life. That's mindfulness of intention—right intention or wise intention or wise thought or wise aspiration, different translations of the second step of the Eightfold Path.

I want to talk about it because it's bringing the microscope into something that's such a subtle experience, as we've noticed here. But the subtleness can lead us into not respecting the fact that it's intention that gets us into both the beautiful things we do and also all the trouble that we get ourselves into. It all starts with intention. Incredibly important.

So consciously bringing mindfulness to intention, to why we're doing what we're doing in our life, in moments of choice big and small, is a key link in living a life of awareness. It's the way the Buddha placed

it in delineating the Eightfold Path, which begins with wise or right understanding. Right view, remember, is the view of how things are, which leads naturally to the second step: wise thought, how we think about the world, or wise intention, the intentions that lead to the next three steps—wise speech, wise action, wise livelihood.

Intention is the link between understanding or wisdom and how we manifest with ourselves, with other beings, with this planet. A very direct, immediate link.

As with all aspects we talk about on this path, it works in two ways. On one hand, intentions naturally transform in the light of wisdom. In one way, there's nothing we have to do but pay attention. On the other hand, of course, there's the commitment to cultivate and develop and pay attention. So in one way we don't have to do anything, and on the other side we have to pay attention every minute of our lives. Somehow those two come together.

I know for myself, probably for some of you, if I just don't really take care with paying attention to why I'm doing what I'm doing, even with having a good heart—and I'd say basically all of us here have good hearts relative to some of the stuff that goes on on this planet—we see what happens when left to its own devices without any commitment to awareness. The greed, hatred, and delusion just spring up, get in their old grooves, and run the show. All we have to do is pay attention for that to begin to transform.

Intention, sometimes called right thought or wise thought, is an interesting place because it's a place where we can explore how the completely empty, ephemeral nature of a thought can suddenly become so solid that we're doing and saying something that, given a little more attention, we really wouldn't have wanted to do or say. Or vice versa—a really kind, loving thought or intention can also strengthen into intention that leads to action. Sometimes you'll find yourself surprised doing a really kind or generous thing, thinking, "Oh, is that me? I'm not used to doing something like that."

So intention is the place where emptiness comes to meet the relative nature of life as it manifests in speech and action.

You know that quotation from Padmasambhava that Joseph read the other night? "Although my view is as spacious as the sky"—the emptiness, the ephemeral nature of all experience—"my respect for karma, for action, and my respect for cause and effect is as fine as grains of barley flour." How do we hold both? They come together in right thought, right intention.

We talked about in the instructions, and many of you were looking at in your practice, that very subtle expression of intention that's almost prior to thought. Just that subtle "about to," that direction, that inclination of the mind that leads to speech and action. Sometimes it's a little stronger, a little more clear, and it actually manifests as a thought: "I'm getting out of here."

And at the broader level, sometimes wise aspiration—you could think of intention really in the macro, like the aspiration for a lifetime. Remember when Marcia talked about back in the time of the Dipankara

Buddha, when the being who became Gautama Buddha, who was a mendicant then, had the great aspiration to spend all those eons and eons of lifetimes to become a Buddha? That was one mind moment that had a lot of power. It fed into succeeding mind moments, but that's the really broadest aspect of intention.

What's interesting about intention, as with everything, is that it's simply arising as an effect of previous causes and as a cause for the next effects. In other words, it's enmeshed in a whole series of cause and effects; it doesn't arise alone. For example, there's the intention to scratch your knee. That would be arising due to previous physical sensations that are unpleasant, maybe aversion—maybe it's noticed, maybe it's not—leading to the intention to move the hand and scratch. So intentions don't arise in isolation, and they arise as a result of and together with the whole variety of mental states.

And that's what determines, in the aspect of karma, in the aspect of the psychology as the Buddha talked about it, whether an action is wholesome or unwholesome, skillful or unskillful. Karmically, it has nothing to do with the effect, with the result of the action, because that's out of our control. Which is interesting, because mostly that's what we focus on. If we get the desired result, then good—it was a good action. If it doesn't turn out, it was bad. The Buddha is saying that's out of our control. The place of karma, of wholesomeness or unwholesomeness, is in the intention. It's in what states of heart and mind are causing this intention to arise, or what it's coming together with.

So this is one reason why judging other people is so completely useless. You can't tell from the outside why someone's really doing something. And we're lucky if we can tell why we're really doing something. That's really where we could put our energy in paying attention.

Just an example: if you take the same action of saying something to somebody that's a bit difficult to say, or that's hard for them to hear, that can come from such a wide range of intentions—both wholesome and unwholesome. It could be really scary for you to say, but out of really deep compassion, because you really think it will help that person to know, you say it. That would be a really compassionate, courageous action. You could say the same thing out of knowing that it's going to be hard for them to hear and kind of being glad that it's going to be hard for them to hear. You could say it out of revenge. You could say it out of real anger—it's going to be hard for them to hear, but at least maybe they'll stop doing this thing and leave me alone. You could say it out of a kind of pride, that you're able to point out to that person their faults. You could say it out of just complete delusion, complete obliviousness to how it's going to affect that person—it just comes in your mind and you say it. Or you could say it with good intentions, really trying to help, but with an obliviousness, a neglect of whether it's a useful and helpful time to say that to that person. So you come in, they've had a horrible day at work, they're really busy, they're cooking dinner, the kids are screaming, and you say, "I have something really important. I think you need to hear about your behavior last week." Not so helpful.

So you get the sense of what I mean. We can't evaluate even our own actions by how they look—forget

about somebody else's. And so intention is the key.

The Buddha specifically described what he means by wise or right thought, right intention in several suttas. He's quite specific. Right intention counteracts the unwise intentions or thoughts of greed, of ill will, and of cruelty. So he says, "What, friends, is right intention? Intention of renunciation"—which counteracts the intention of greed.

Intention of non-ill will—you could read that as metta—counteracts intentions of ill will. And intentions of compassion, of non-cruelty, counterbalance intentions of cruelty.

You notice there's not an intention of non-delusion, because the Buddha also says that delusion, *moha*, isn't counterbalanced by an intention, but by wise seeing, by wisdom. So we can't really say, "I will now have an intention of wise seeing." Rather, simply in the connection, in the doing, in the moment of mindfulness, clear seeing is there.

So that's right intention—very specific.

And first comes right view. The Buddha again: "Right view comes first. And how does right view come first? One understands that wrong intention is wrong intention and that right intention is right intention." That sounds simplistic, but it actually isn't. That is one's right view.

I think a huge amount of what goes on in our practice here is allowing us to come to understand wrong intention or unskillful intention as wrong or unskillful. And if those words catch the mind—if it kind of echoes of "I'm bad because it's wrong, right intention means I'm good"—think of wrong or unskillful intention as meaning intention that brings suffering to oneself or to another. Take away the blame and just think: it's wrong in that it causes suffering to myself or another when I think, speak, or act with intentions of greed, ill will, or cruelty. It's that simple.

And wise intention—intention of renunciation, of metta, of compassion—doesn't bring suffering. It brings joy and peace to ourselves or another. So it's basically back in the realm of the really practical. What brings happiness in our life? What brings happiness to others, and what doesn't?

And really, that's what we've been seeing like a hundred million times every day, isn't it? Sometimes. We don't quite notice it, but if we pay attention enough, we do. When we're acting out of greed, we suffer. Sooner or later, we notice that. When we act or speak or even spin in thoughts of ill will or cruelty, we suffer. And the opposite leads to no suffering.

That's really what the Buddha means by "right view comes first"—that we get this on some level. Not totally and completely, but we get it enough to motivate us to be willing to continue to pay attention, to be willing to cultivate wise intention.

So as I said, we need to cultivate. But our intentions, our attitude to life, our attitude to moment-to-moment experience—which is all life is—also transforms naturally through right view,

through understanding. When, for example, we notice that we're really suffering from the greediness of our mind, when we really see that, in that moment the heart naturally lets go. Because greediness comes from thinking it's going to make us happy. When we really notice it's making us miserable, at least for that moment, something lets go. That's wise intention of renunciation.

And at the same time it requires effort. Again, the Buddha: "One makes an effort to abandon wrong intention." He doesn't say one makes an effort to hate wrong intention. One simply makes the effort to abandon it, just let it alone, and to enter upon right intention. "This is one's right effort. Mindfully, one abandons wrong intention. Mindfully, one enters upon and abides in right intention. This is one's right mindfulness. Thus, these three states run and circle around right intention"—that is, right view, right effort, and right mindfulness.

So you see right there, he's brought in the whole Eightfold Path circling around right intention: right view, right effort, right mindfulness. And of course speech and actions are the direct result of right intention. He doesn't mention samadhi, but you need that to even pay attention, to notice the intention in the first place.

What's so powerful about noticing a moment of intention—whether it's the subtle moment you might see in a sitting here or a larger intention as we're making a choice or about to act in our life—is that that moment of mindfulness can be a powerful moment of transformation. Transformation of how we're living, how we're relating, how we're going to speak and act. Because in that moment of recognizing what's leading to what I'm going to say, what I'm going to do, there's a moment there, as if a moment of choice. And that's where wise intention can either arise naturally, or we can cultivate it a little bit.

An example in the walking meditation. I think I've used this before. You're walking, and suddenly—or not so suddenly—there's an unpleasant sensation in the feet, in the back, or you're tired. And without quite noticing it, there's the thought: "I've had enough, I'm out of here." Out of here might mean a cup of tea. Out of here might mean into Barry. Out of here might be on the Greyhound bus to New York City.

It really depends how unpleasant the sensation is and how strong the thought becomes. Unnoticed, well, at least you're having the cup of tea. But noticed, there's really a moment of recognition: "Oh, I see—that's aversion. I hate this. I'm going to go have a cup of tea."

And in seeing that, without blaming or judging, one can tune in: "Oh, aversion. I don't really want to be driven by that." There's just that stepping back. Mindfulness is again present. In noticing the aversion, we're meeting that intention with satipañña—with mindfulness and wisdom. The mindfulness allows us to connect: "Oh, that's aversion"—without judgment, with honesty, with clear seeing. And the pañña, the wisdom, the right understanding, recognizes: "I really don't want to be driven by aversion. I really don't want to act out of aversion. I'll just take another step."

Two seconds later, we've completely forgotten that whole scenario and things are fine again. It's a little moment. I know it's simpler—I'm not saying it's simple, but it's simpler here in a moment like that to see

how, with mindfulness of intention, we have a moment of choice.

Of course, in bigger actions, in more complex interactions in our daily life, it's a lot more complicated. But still, our whole life is nothing but this moment, this moment. Even when it seems really complicated, it can always be reduced to this moment, because really that's all there is. The rest is thoughts—past and future.

So no matter how complicated things are, what we've been practicing here—that willingness, that ability to bring satipañña to the moment of "about to" and honestly look at why—that is possible in our lives at times when we can remember. It really takes a commitment, and it takes the ability to remember to be present. And being present isn't as hard as remembering to be present. You know? That's what we've been practicing here. That comes easier. But in moments of presence, we see that we do have a choice.

It doesn't mean that the natural, wise, loving, kind, renunciate intention is always going to spontaneously arise the second we turn our attention on something. "Oh, I'm aversive. Oh yes, may I be happy"—immediately. Sometimes it does happen, and that's really amazing. But we can have the wisdom to know: "This is tough right now, but I don't want to act from this place."

One of my favorite stories about this kind of commitment comes from Sister Chan Khong, who works with Thich Nhat Hanh—the nun who's been working with him since she was sixteen in Vietnam. Quite an activist person, with a deep, total commitment to mindfulness and compassionate action.

In her autobiography, she was talking about how she was in a letter-writing campaign. She and Thich Nhat Hanh both haven't been able to go back to Vietnam since the middle of the Vietnamese War. But she was on a campaign where she would write to the government whenever she heard about an arrest—this was during a period when monks and nuns and artists were all being arrested.

But she wouldn't do it from a place of anger. And that took a huge commitment to cultivate wise intention, as she says: "Every time I receive news of a new arrest, I became angry. And I knew that I had to do walking meditation."

Now, is that what we do when we feel angry? "Yes, I know I need to do walking meditation." It's not a bad idea.

"Sometimes I would walk several hours to regain my calm." And she's not in a three-month meditation retreat either. "Sometimes I needed several days or even weeks to relax my heartbeat, knowing how unfairly the authorities had acted in arresting such a lovely monk, nun, or artist. I always waited until I felt serene before beginning any campaign. Thanks to this serenity, my words were gentle but firm, and people found it easier to cooperate."

There are lots of examples like that. And this is after having spent thirty years at least of her life in deep commitment to peaceful activism and mindfulness. It doesn't just become totally unthinking second nature. Our commitment is to the cultivation. Our commitment is to really knowing deep in our heart

what leads to happiness for ourselves and for others—and having the commitment to do the best we can to speak and act from that place.

And to know that a lot of the time we won't speak and act from that place. And be willing to pay attention then too, because each moment's a new moment.

So she's really angry, and I'm sure—although she doesn't say so—that she learned by writing from an angry place that it doesn't work, either for her or for the people listening. So it takes commitment, but we can do it.

And alternatively, if we're not willing to respect our intentions, respect the power of renunciation, of mettā, of karuṇā—if we don't want to pay attention—we can't get away with it. Because if we're not cultivating wise intention, guess what? We are cultivating. That's what's kind of scary to me. If I just let my mind run loose, we're cultivating greed, hatred, and delusion.

Says the Buddha, "O bhikkhus, whatever a bhikkhu frequently thinks and ponders upon, that will become the inclination of his or her mind." Obvious, isn't it? We talk about the grooves. Well, that's what he's saying. If he frequently thinks and ponders upon thoughts of sensual desire, he has abandoned the thought of renunciation to cultivate the thought of sensual desire. If his mind inclines to thoughts of ill-will, thoughts of cruelty, he's abandoned the thought of non-cruelty to cultivate the thought of cruelty, and then his mind inclines to thoughts of cruelty.

And of course, just the reverse. If he frequently thinks and ponders upon thoughts of renunciation, in that moment he's abandoned the thought of sensual desire to cultivate the thought—or the intention—of renunciation. And he's just talking on the level of thought here. It's really powerful.

So we know we can't control every thought. We do know that now, right? But to even get upset for a minute about a previous thought, for a minute to start berating yourself or hating yourself or blaming yourself because a previous thought wasn't good—again, you're falling into cultivating cruelty, thoughts of cruelty, thoughts of ill-will. So no matter where we can start paying attention, that's the place we start.

Can I cultivate even a thought? It doesn't even have to quite move into speech and action. There's one place where the Buddha says that. He says, "I say that even the inclination of mind towards wholesome states is of great benefit." He's not even saying you're in the wholesome state. He's just saying the inclination of mind towards wholesome states is of great benefit. So then what should be said of bodily and verbal acts that come from such states of mind?

So just the willingness to incline our minds to renunciation, to mettā, to compassion, is really transformative. Because the seed of intention in our hearts, in our minds, eventually flowers.

You know Ruth Denison's succinct description of karma. You must have heard it: "Karma means you don't get away with nothing, darling." The seed of intention will ultimately flower. Basically, it means we can't

hide from ourselves. We can't pretend we're feeling loving when we really hate our guts. We have to see honestly what's happening.

I've taught several retreats in New Mexico that were specifically for, quote, "burned out environmentalists." And it was really quite interesting to see—not always, but often—how some of the people who would come to these retreats for ten days, really being in the forefront of the environmental movement, working really hard for years with extreme dedication... and seeing how, in whatever way they began—being lawyers or advocates or whatever—basically from quite good intentions of caring for the planet, of really sensing, feeling, living our interconnectedness with all life, really wanting to make this a better world to live in. But meeting with what seems like a very intense life, meeting with enormous greed and anger and frustration day after day after day.

For many of these people, even though what they were doing still seemed like a very wholesome thing to do, they could even express it: they were loving life on the planet but living from a place of real anger and frustration. Loving the planet, but their heart was so closed that anger was spewing out all over their family, all over their life, all over themselves.

And it just shows that even trying to do something that seems really wholesome, we can't sidestep the moment-to-moment intentionality, the attitude with which we relate. And it's tough. Nobody's saying it's easy. It's hard. But we can just step back and notice on the moment-to-moment level. That's what I think is such a great gift of an intensive retreat time like this.

I imagine most of you have seen the intensity of ill will and cruelty and greed that can come up in our minds here—about what, when you stand back and look at it, seem like pretty insignificant things in the big picture. In the little picture, though, they're not insignificant at all. As one yogi said to me, "This is how world wars start"—over whether the windows are open or closed, or whether we step on the cracks and squeaks in the upper walking room when the rest of us are sitting.

Over the little things, so much hatred and anger and greed can be engendered. Somebody's sitting in your seat in the dining room—the seat you've sat in every day for the last five weeks—and they know it. They have to be doing it on purpose. They couldn't possibly not know that's your seat. And to watch what comes up!

I wouldn't denigrate it or say it's because we're all regressed, we're all so childish, our life has shrunk to this little place. It has shrunk, but that's okay. I think that's actually a good thing. That's what lets us see. When you're really working in the environmental movement, for example, it's easier to miss the suffering and the intensity of the anger, the really destructive aspect of it, because the issue is so big and complex and powerful. It's easy to skip over the intention part and focus on the result. But here, when it's about whether you beat that person ahead of you to get the last orange, there's some way that when you step back, you can't really convince yourself about how important the issue is. And we have to turn around. It might take a couple of days, but somewhere you have to say, "Maybe I need to look at how I'm relating to

the situation. Maybe that has something to do with the suffering here." In three months, we're bound to get that message. That's why long retreats are so good.

I'm serious—when this yogi said to me, "This is how world wars start," I actually don't think that's an exaggeration. When we see how strong the grooves of greed or cruelty or ill will are over little things, imagine if somebody destroyed our home, took our land, killed our relatives. I mean, imagine. I can't even imagine. So this is good. We start with little things. It's hard enough. But it's not insignificant. It's not unimportant. It's exactly the same mechanism for the difficult, complex situations that are going to come up in our life. It's where we start.

And luckily, hopefully, besides having that commitment to cultivate—as with Sister Chan Khong—hopefully we also begin to notice that as our understanding, our clear seeing, our wisdom develops, and it is developing. You can't measure it, you don't know, you're in the middle of it. We tend sometimes to see the so-called kilesas much more strongly than you can notice the wisdom. But believe me, a lot of wisdom and understanding and clear seeing is shining in all of you.

And you notice it in little things. Like someone described to me—they were having a kind of unpleasant, unhealthy experience. They didn't like it. And they noticed the mind's habit to go do something to dull out, not to feel it. And without getting into a big deal, as soon as they noticed that, another thought came and they said, "Oh, but I don't need to do that now. I can just be with this. So what if it's boring?" That's little, but it's huge, if you know what I mean. That's really a moment of the natural transformation of attitude, of intention. And it's happening here a lot.

It's really beautiful for us sitting on this side, getting to talk with everybody through all this time. Each of us when we're on retreat, we're right in the middle of it, and everything that's happening today is huge. You really can't have a very good overview, and you don't need one. Forget looking for an overview. But for us, just in the groups today, it was so inspiring to me—and probably the people in the groups wouldn't think what we talked about was inspiring—but to me it was inspiring to see these subtle shifts in attitude.

In one group, somehow we got talking about the hell realm of the dining room at mealtimes, and how really seeing... somebody was saying how they really liked it, how with the meals that this person really liked—the really good ones, the pizza or the ice cream or whatever—that seemed to hold the promise of so much pleasure and happiness. But then paying attention while eating, and noticing how much greed and how much grasping was going on even at the time of having the pizza or the ice cream, that actually by paying attention, it's like, "Wow, this isn't even pleasant." It really isn't worth it.

Now, if you don't add on top of it, "I'm a stupid jerk because I'm caught in craving"—that's extra. And that didn't happen in this discussion. It's just, "Wow, look at this. It isn't even pleasant." That's a moment of natural renunciation. That's the moment where the habit of greed simply lets go.

And notice, you could still be eating the pizza in that moment. Renunciation is about intention. It's not

really so much about the outward appearance. You could look like the biggest renunciate in the world and be totally attached to what people think of you or how you look. You might think, "I'm not going to break the eighth precept even if I'm falling on my face from low blood sugar and my medical condition clearly says I have to eat at night. It's bad for my health, but I still won't do it because then I wouldn't be a good yogi." I don't know if that's renunciation. I'd question if that's actually renunciation or a kind of conceit.

So renunciation is really the natural, joyful releasing of attachment. As Geshe Rapton used to say, renunciation is really the expression of love and compassion for ourselves, because we're renouncing the craving and attachment that keeps us in suffering. In that moment of letting go of the clinging to that pizza, you might keep eating it or you might not. It's really irrelevant. Renunciation is a relief, not a punishment.

I'm sure you've all noticed moments like this, even if you haven't thought of them as renunciation. Wise intention of renunciation is that moment of renouncing the craving, renouncing the clinging, renouncing the greed that keeps us bound to suffering. And keep it moment to moment. It's not that wise intention of renunciation means you now have to figure out how you're going to renounce pizza for the rest of your life, or how you're going to go back and live this really simple life because you've learned that craving leads to suffering—so you're going to set up a life that doesn't feed into craving. That whole approach becomes its own suffering scenario.

It's moment to moment. Wise intention of renunciation arises when you feel that clutching of wanting and the satipaññā is there. You tune into the wanting and recognize, "Oh, I really don't need this." It's the wanting we don't need. Whether you get the thing you want or not, who cares anymore? Just the wanting itself—I don't need that. And there's peace. There's ease. And incidentally, we're a lot nicer to be around, so it's good for other people too.

My favorite story about renunciation—the joy of it—is about Ananda Mayi Ma, who was regarded as a great saint in India in this century. Some businessmen were coming to her and, as is the tendency, were praising her effusively: "Oh, you're so wonderful, you live such a simple renunciate life," and on and on. She started laughing, and the more they praised her, the more she laughed. Finally they asked, "What are you laughing at?" She said, "Me the renunciate? It's you who are the renunciates. By living the way you are, you're renouncing the great joy of divine presence. I'm not renouncing anything."

That's really the spirit of wise renunciation, wise intention.

Similarly, with the wise intentions of mettā and karuṇā, counteracting ill will and cruelty—sure, there's enormous suffering in the world. And sometimes it can be easy, or one can fall into feeling, that there's been a lot of suffering here on retreat. A great deal of the retreat is coming face to face with our own demons in whatever way those manifest—physical, emotional, mental. It can just be sleepiness, whatever it is.

It's easy also, same as with greed, to fall into thinking that we're being a bit self-indulgent, so wrapped up in our own suffering. After all, there's nothing we've gone through here that can compare to the amount of cruelty, the enormous suffering going on in the world. And in a way, that's true.

But again, please don't denigrate the powerful possibilities that come from meeting whatever difficult experience you've gone through here, or are going through at this moment. Meeting it with mindfulness, with satipaññā, with wisdom—this is the place where our habitual tendencies of ill will, anger, hostility, and cruelty, whether directed at ourselves or just in our minds toward someone else, are truly transformed. Through mindfulness, through how you meet your own suffering with compassion, with mettā as friendliness and acceptance. I'm not saying you meet every moment of suffering with this beaming, suffusing sense of "I love every moment of what's happening."

And I know we can get into that—a kind of exaggeration of metta. But acceptance, simple open-hearted friendliness and patience are equally expressions of metta. And the expression of compassion is simply not exercising cruelty towards ourselves or others in the face of suffering.

It might be that the suffering seems small. Again, you didn't get that orange, or whatever. You ate too much ice cream. You can't really get behind the story. But the suffering is still the same emotions that are engendered in our life, that are engendered in other people. How we meet it here is where wisdom and understanding and our intentions begin to transform.

Sometimes I feel this really deeply, seeing it in my own experience and from talking to a lot of people. Some retreats—if you do a lot of retreats, they're all a little different, or a lot different from each other. And some retreats, when I look back, I would really dub in my mind as "that was a real dukkha retreat." That was a real struggling retreat, a real suffering retreat. And there are all different kinds of dukkha retreats. The dukkha could be that you never got into it, never got concentrated. That can be a huge dukkha retreat. That's one of the big ways we are really cruel to ourselves—because our experience didn't come up to some idea we made up of what it should come up to, and we hate ourselves for three months. Or it can be really old traumatic pain. It can be physical pain. It can be sleepiness. Whatever the range of a so-called dukkha retreat.

There are retreats that were kind of smooth sailing, really interesting, had really nice states. Of course, given the choice at the beginning of a retreat, probably most of us would go for the nice states. But when I look back at my whole history of practice—well, you can't ever really pinpoint "I learned this from that moment"—but I have a deep conviction that the retreats that were really a struggle, where a lot of hard stuff went on, those are the ones where my understanding really deepened, where the sense of equanimity and patience really got strong, and where compassion and metta were really, really developed.

It's easy to feel compassion and metta when everything's groovy, when you're shining in white light. Who wouldn't feel compassion and metta? That poor schlump over there—obviously they're not as happy as I

am. But when you're having a really lousy retreat, whatever that means to you, and you can feel, really feel kindness and compassion and metta for yourself, that's real compassion and metta. That's where it's really going to come through in the crunch. That's when our intentions, our understanding, are really transforming.

And it's only the attitude, the understanding, that's going to inform our life. All the groovy experiences are gone. As Jack Kornfield says, they're all back with Cleopatra. Even the ones that happened a minute ago—gone. But the inclination of our mind and heart, the strengthening of that understanding and propensity, that's what's going to inform how we meet the next moment, how we meet this moment, how we meet a difficult situation.

So you can be really happy if you're sitting there thinking, "This is the crappiest retreat I ever did." You can be really happy because you're going to come out of it a lot deeper and stronger. You think I'm kidding. You might not notice it right away, but it'll last longer.

And really, this transformation comes from the willingness to simply meet this moment of our experience directly. It's back to mindfulness again—kindness, just as it is. I really feel deeply that in the power of the direct meeting, the satipañña in the moment, the wisdom really does transform how we relate to things.

You've all seen it—see it on the news. A couple of years ago, I think, they were talking about how Clinton had gone to Africa, gone to Rwanda. This was a couple of years after the seeming end of all those horrible massacres there. He'd gone and was saying on the news how he'd talked with a lot of people. He'd met and talked with some people who had been attacked in the massacre but had lived, though they were quite wounded. He was publicly making a speech saying he really kind of got it—that we're all responsible. You can't just say it's about Rwanda; it's about all of us in the world. Which is obvious. But still I thought, what made him say that now and not two years ago, when it was actually happening? Not to get into what he should or shouldn't have done, but what made the change that he said it then?

In reflecting, what made sense to me is that really it was coming face to face with the actual suffering—seeing and talking with someone who was really directly involved. I remember Sister Chan Khong talking about during the Vietnam War and seeing how it's like a war on television. In Rwanda, we read about it. It's not the same as being there. Sister Chan Khong was saying you'd see this stuff happening in villages—a mother holding her wounded baby or something—on TV, and it's really powerful.

It really moves us. But she says, it's nothing like being there. It just isn't the same. We don't get the immediacy of the experience.

And so when we're really face to face—and now I'm coming back to here, and again, talking about huge suffering, and then we're talking about our self-hatred about back pain. But if you don't get into comparing, if you can bring that same immediacy of kind attention to the back pain and the self-hatred, that's the moment of potential transformation. From ill will, from cruelty, to compassion, to kindness, to

the ability to be present without flinching away.

I really believe that this is the capability that allows one to go out and keep finding the inner resources to do whatever we need to do—whether it's the environmental work I was talking about, whether it's just meeting your kids day to day when they're cranky, whether it's whatever it is we do. To keep finding the resources to meet the suffering, whether it's so-called mine or so-called yours, and meet it with kindness, meet it with compassion, with friendliness, rather than ill will and cruelty. It's huge.

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. When we discover the Buddha that we are, we realize that everything and everyone is a Buddha. When we regard thoughts and emotions with humor and openness, that's how we perceive the universe."

We're not just talking about our individual liberation, but how to help the community we live in, how to help our families, our country, the whole continent—not to mention the world and the galaxy and as far as we want to go.

"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, then there is confidence that we can actually forget ourselves and open to the world."

So let's sit quietly for a few minutes.

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