Self-Judgment and the First Noble Truth

Carol Wilson · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Carol Wilson · 1:01:49

Tonight I want to talk mostly about the habit of mind some of us share of judging, of self-judging. There may be some of you this doesn't quite apply to, so another talk will apply for you.

Really, self-judging is an aspect of aversion. And to talk about any form of aversion, I feel like the first place we need to start is to explore, to see that—at least as far as I can see so far—at root, our basic problem with aversion is our problem with really deeply understanding the First Noble Truth.

Just a refresher, I'm sure you know: the First Noble Truth is that there is difficulty, suffering. There's the dukkha dukkha, which is the pain of pain—basically what I'll be talking about tonight—that difficult, painful, unpleasant things happen. And there's no judgment of that; that's just the way it is. There's anicca dukkha, the suffering of impermanence, which I talked a bit about last week. And there's the sankhara dukkha, the dukkha of just the tedious, ongoing nature of day-to-day existence. We're not talking about that tonight.

But I feel the more that I practice, the more that I explore my experience, I start to appreciate the genius in the mind of the Buddha. When he had to succinctly begin his teachings, and he laid them out in this form of the Four Noble Truths, of all the ways he could have expressed it, he starts out by saying: the first fact of life is things are tough sometimes. That's just a fact we need to deeply integrate, understand, and accept.

It's interesting to see how really deeply difficult that is. On the intellectual level, of course, the degree of suffering, of real pain, of cruelty in this world, in this time, in any country you want to choose, including this country, in any past historical time that I've ever read about—the degree and the kinds of suffering, especially the cruelty that people use against other people, is almost unbearable sometimes to even read about, never mind to witness or to experience. And so on that level, it's certainly understandable to me why we have to at some point shut it out, shut down, divert our attention, because we drown.

We get lost in the habitual reactions to suffering—and we can really get lost in them. The habitual ones of fear, of anger, rage, blame directed outwards. Of total denial, disconnection. And directed inwards, the same things: either denial, acute self-blame, acute self-hatred, depression, despair.

Of course, the Buddha wasn't talking about the fact of difficulty in order to drive us into despair. That's why I think sometimes Buddhism from outside gets the impression of being a real downer of a spiritual path. People hear: the first thing, life is suffering. You can't want anything. Wanting things is suffering. You can't have beauty. There's no self. And people say, thank you very much, I think I'll go somewhere else.

I remember Sharon telling me once that in one of her interviews with Sayadaw U Pandita, Sharon was having a maha dukkha retreat, you could say. We all have those periods, and some retreats are more that way than others. Some periods are more that way than others. If you're in one now, it doesn't mean it'll stay that way. But anyway, she went in to him and said—you know how in the Theravada way of talking about awakening, there are four stages, four classical stages, and at each stage we awaken a bit more and let go of a few more of our confusions, our kilesas, see through them—she said to Sayadaw, "Is it true that the reason there are these different stages is because we can only open to so much suffering at a time? You can't just do it all at once." And he said yes, he really thought that was true, that this was an aspect of it: to open, to integrate.

That's what's so beautiful—it's a weird word but it's true—that when we begin to be able to meet the pain, the suffering, and it can be huge ones in the world, but let's start with the little ones we go through here. When we can meet them head on, we see that dukkha—and I'll use that word because "suffering" is a little too gross somehow—we often experience dukkha as a separation, either something to get away from, something there's too much to bear. Or if it's our own suffering, often we can feel a bit alienated, almost embarrassed. Or else another kind of aversion, which is poor me, poor me, but it's still a separating kind of experience.

What's actually true, when we're with it rather than pushing it away, is that dukkha is actually one of our unifying experiences as human beings together on this planet. Instead of experiencing it as something negative—I mean, we're never going to say, great, I love it, I'm not saying that—but instead of experiencing it as something that shouldn't be happening, that if we could get it right we could get rid of, we can see that when we actually open in a moment to things as they are, and that moment's difficult, we touch in a very profound way our unity with all other human beings. It is quite ennobling. It really opens us to a much deeper, richer connection with life.

I heard a talk by Ajahn Sumedho on tape recently where he was talking about this, how dukkha is really what unifies us rather than something we should hate and push away. He said in Thailand, where he was a monk for many years, often when Thai abbots would begin a dhamma talk to the lay people who would come to the monasteries to hear talks, instead of saying "Good evening, ladies and gentlemen," they would start by saying, "Dear brothers and sisters in old age, disease, and death."

Kind of levels it, doesn't it? We are brothers and sisters, and it cuts through our differences.

I read an article in a newspaper, just as a human example of this. I remember the bombing in Oklahoma City—I don't know, five years ago or something. And then maybe two or three years later, there was a bombing of the U.S. Embassy in Kenya. In both of those bombings a lot of people were killed and a lot of people were wounded, and also wounded maybe not physically but because people they loved were killed. Sometime in the last year, some of the people who had suffered from the bombing in Oklahoma City—I don't know who organized this—but some of these people from Oklahoma were flown to Kenya to meet

with some of the people who had suffered in the bombing in Kenya. This article was just talking to two or three people from Oklahoma.

They struck me as very Oklahoman—this is from an East Coast person who actually hardly knows where Oklahoma is. But the people were saying that at first their expectations were that this meeting would be kind of strange and weird. They were thinking, you know, our cultures are so different. What do we have in common with people from Kenya? It's going to be really awkward. It's going to be really strange.

But when they got together and began to talk, and they started to share their experience, it became so quickly apparent that they were going through just the same thing. The sense of difference was almost obliterated. The underlying sharing of experience through the pain led to a great sense of connectedness, appreciation of each other, openness to one another. The Oklahoma people could say, "Oh yeah, what you're going through now, that's just what we went through two years after the bombing. And now it's five years later, and now it's sort of like this." And the people from Kenya could listen and understand, because there was really this connectedness of common experience.

When we are able—and of course we're not always able—to actually touch the truth of our own experience when it's difficult, so often it brings us into a wider view of ourselves, of life, of humanity. It brings out the heart of compassion, the heart of connectedness. Really, connectedness in our pain, our difficulty, rather than highlighting the differences. We experience the underlying connectedness, and it changes our relationship to ourselves and to life.

I know in my heart that I'm fearful of pain, of loss, of suffering—the big ones, but also the little ones. How often it's new treat! I do all kinds of things not to feel the anticipated pain of my knee hurting, or what if, God forbid, I get a little hungry later in the day—I better have three helpings now. The pain can be huge or it can be small, but I see how much of my life can be built around trying to keep that away.

It's interesting that this can be so much our habit, because I know for myself—and I do feel this is true—that somewhere in us, as much as we have the habit or tendency to regard difficulty as always bad or wrong, and somehow our fault if it's anything personal, when I look over my life, over my readings, at the people who have most deeply inspired me and continue to inspire me, they don't have to be people I know personally—they can be, or people I've read about—it's almost always people who have somehow had the ability to hold their hearts open in the midst of great suffering. Whether it's their personal suffering, or they happen to be historical figures who are somehow caught up in the suffering of a particular time or age.

This ability to bear witness with a greatness of heart doesn't mean always open. We don't go right away to thinking we all have to be Gandhi or something. But to be able to somehow bear witness, and the greatness of heart is that you don't completely drown in it, but can still see—in fact, even more so—the basic goodness of our human heart, of our human spirit.

I remember there was a couple of years where I voraciously read everything Alexander Solzhenitsyn wrote about his time in the Gulag, or life in the Gulag. As I look back, I can see—well, even then I could see—it was horrific. I mean, horrific stuff. But somehow within what he wrote, in his experiences, there would emerge a sense of love and appreciation of humanity, an ability to recognize individual acts of goodness within just horror.

When I've read about Aung San Suu Kyi, when I've read a lot about Reverend Martin Luther King—who seems to me like one of the spiritual heroes of the age—the ability to make the choice to meet really unbearable suffering, violence, hatred, and make the choice, as I already said, that we can never let hatred become our motive. "I refuse to become bitter." It's a choice, you know. That choice is so powerful.

And not to let our hearts fall into the habit of saying, "Well, okay, he was really special. He could do that. I can't do that. Forget about it. I'm hopeless." We're all sharing the same human tendencies, and a lot of what I feel our practice can do is open up to us an understanding of the ways we get lost in our fear of suffering, or our reaction to suffering, or our going after desire—and using the small examples to see that there's really another possibility. That wanting to be present, to be alive in the midst of life, becomes more compelling than our habit or our need to deny.

I know for myself, I see this over and over, and then I forget. Well, we've talked about that before, but it keeps happening. Whenever I start to notice—it's probably been going on for a while before I notice it—that I'm feeling really disconnected, ill at ease, shut off from my heart, shut off from the world, or people will tell me beautiful things or suffering things and I can say the right words but in my heart I don't feel connected—that state. Almost always, every time I can remember, when I stop and look at my experience, there's some unpleasant thing that I'm trying to avoid. It could be something really difficult, like last year my sister was suffering a lot and it was really hard to be there and feel it. Or it could be something mundane, like I said, like a pain in the knee. But the dynamic's the same, in that trying to avoid it, the heart's closed. I'm shut off to life. I'm shut off to connection. It's like I'm living on the surface.

And when I feel, "Oh, that's what's going on—enormous sadness"—it's weird, but it's more connected again. It's more alive. The world feels whole once more.

In our practice here, what we are meeting day after day—we're meeting joys too. Because I'm talking about the First Noble Truth and our habit of judging, I just don't want to forget that that's only part of our experience. There's also plenty of experience that's pleasant, that's beautiful, that's peaceful, and that's also important to recognize.

Just as we don't want to completely avoid the way it is, which is sometimes painful and difficult, we don't want to get so fixated on "everything's painful" that if you happen to be having some calm days or some peaceful sittings or things are going well, you think something's wrong. That also arises in experience. Really, more often than you think, people will come in and say, "Well, you know, I'm not really suffering enough. I guess I'm not really getting anything from this. I'm not really learning anything." So this is just

one side of the picture.

In practice here, in a thousand small ways and sometimes in big ways, we're discovering—we're being brought face to face with the whole range of this First Noble Truth. Unpleasant sensations, perhaps. Deep pain from our childhood. Really strong patterns of how we relate. Maybe physical illness or limitations. The whole range. I don't have to enumerate them all. We each have our own.

And what we discover is that in little ways, we can see how just opening to what is becomes an avenue into connection with humanity. I'll give a small example. It may sound a bit trite or too easy, but please don't discount it for that reason, because I think it truly is an avenue in.

One woman was telling me once—a woman who had spent lots and lots of time in India. She said she was on retreat here, taking the eight precepts, and in the evenings was experiencing some hunger. She said, "I'm not starving to death here. In fact, it's not even hunger with fear around it. I know I'm going to get food the next day. But just the willingness to actually feel it—I guess it was the first time in her life she really let herself feel it." She said, "In just a little way, it kind of opened me up to think: Wow, all that time I was in India, I might have been with people who were really hungry, who couldn't know for sure they'd have another meal. And I couldn't really be there with that. I couldn't even really let it in."

So just in a small way, being with how things are can be a gift to connection.

Now, on the other side—because we are again, a thousand times a day, having this wonderful opportunity to open into difficulty and connection with all beings—there's the odd, you know, once or twice when we don't jump at that opportunity. And in fact, what we encounter is the whole range of our—I would say more or less unconscious—protection system, our denial system. All the ways that the mind has habituated itself, sometimes for survival, not to really let in the pain of what's happening.

I do want to say again: sometimes there's too much pain happening to ourselves or in another, and we really can't let it in. We would just drown. I actually think our protection systems have sometimes served us. That's their purpose—we don't need to hate our protection systems. But we need to recognize them. We need to get to know them.

All the habits of mind that come up—sometimes, as many of you have said, even before the knee starts to hurt, the mind has already gone into full gear, strategizing how to avoid it. Even before the food runs out. In fact, it's only eleven o'clock. Lunch hasn't even been served yet, and the mind has already gone into all its ways to make sure I get enough. You know what I mean?

On the aversive side, of course, there's blame, anger, rage, fear, the two-year-old tantrum mind—which gets to be funny after a while, which helps. And ill will, and turned inward: judgment, self-judgment, a sense of worthlessness or self-hatred.

Desire, of course, is also a protection system of choice. We talk about that a lot as well. I'm just not

focusing on it tonight, but it's an equally effective way to avoid being with how things are.

As our protection systems become more visible—and probably we're all getting quite familiar with our particular patterns as the retreat goes on, as our practice deepens—mindfulness becomes undiscriminating. That's really one of the beauties of choiceless awareness. It simply allows awareness to notice whatever's happening. And since we stop unconsciously directing it so much, the things we haven't really seen clearly begin to pop up more and more, and we get to meet them. We get to make friends with them. First we get to meet them.

One of these is the protection system—what the mind does in reaction to pain. Sometimes, of course, that's a little wearing. We get really tired of seeing our mind in judgment. We get really sick of watching the mind run off in desire.

We start to think, "I'm much more neurotic than when I started. I'm just getting more hateful, more desiring." But really it's because we're more mindful and we're seeing what often hasn't been quite noticed before.

And if you can look at it that way—I don't know if Joseph has said this yet, he says it a lot—that when he actually sees a *kilesa* in his mind, it makes him happy because he'd rather see it than not see it. That's really true, you know, because when we see it, we're not being driven by it so much anymore.

Self-judging is one of the strong habits we have when we begin to encounter experiences in ourselves that are in some way unacceptable, that are really painful. This is why I was talking about the first noble truth. If just the fact of suffering in the world is unacceptable—I don't mean unacceptable in terms of thinking we should never do anything about it, or we should never act for compassion. Of course, whenever we can, we will. But I mean unacceptable in terms of pretending it's not even happening, or believing that if we could figure it all out and have the perfect world then it would never happen anymore.

And I see how for me the mind can get into this perfection ideal. Then when in my own experience something imperfect arises that I can't control, that I can't change, it somehow becomes my fault. And what turns inward is a kind of self-hatred, a kind of self-judgment.

It's interesting to me, anyway, just to look at that tendency of my mind to like to have everything kind of neatly delineated in little boxes. It is sort of a perfection ideal. Somebody's a saint—they're all good, the perfect person, all open to suffering, noble heart. And then if you hear anything bad about them, you don't know what to do with that. It doesn't work. Or else someone becomes all bad. How can they be good and how can they be bad? The mind just wants these nice little boxes.

This popped in my head this morning in the sitting. I hadn't thought about this for years, but when I was a kid, like eleven or twelve, I used to read about people that would go into really suffering environments and try to help. Somehow I stumbled on these books by an American physician—his name was Dr. Tom Dooley, I think. He had gone to Vietnam in the fifties, and Laos, and started all these clinics. His books

were a little self-congratulatory as I remember, but about all the things he was doing to help people, and I was quite inspired when I was young.

Then in the late sixties, early seventies, I found out that he was actually a CIA agent. So that's why he was in those places. And I thought back, yeah, Vietnam in the fifties, Laos—that makes sense. And of course at that time, CIA agent in my mind meant everything that was unwholesome. I couldn't put those two together. So from being this hero, he went into—you know, totally wiped out, forget him.

When it popped in my mind today, I thought, that's so perfect. Because he still did do all that stuff. He still did go and start those clinics and do a lot of good for people. And he was a CIA agent. What can my mind do with that? It's just so perfect because I see how we do that to ourselves.

When we're having a good sitting or whatever, we're great, we're wonderful. Then we see the selfishness come out, or we get really greedy, or everything goes to heck and you can't be mindful for two minutes. All the other wholesome stuff is just blotted out, and we become this one painful, useless piece of experience. That's who we are, right?

More than one person has told me, when we say at the beginning of metta, "Think of something wholesome about yourself"—it's painful. They know it's not true, but they can't think of one thing. It's painful, isn't it? But that's our mental states—it's all good or it's all bad.

When we don't have a balanced perception, when we're experiencing the difficulty in our own experience that we somehow think we ought to be able to fix, or it's my fault—whether it's our personality patterns, whether it's behavior that we feel like we can't control, whether it's the body getting sick or being tired or being sleepy, whether it's memories of past actions that we really feel regret and remorse about, or you can fill in the blanks in your own experience—that response to that in the moment of aversion is like pushing it away, flinching away. It's so quick.

The function of aversion in the mind stream is that in a moment of something unpleasant, aversion pulls back from it and disconnects. Whether it's fear, whether it's anger, whatever it is, it disconnects. And so in that disconnection, there can't be a clear seeing, a clear experiencing of whatever's happening.

And instead, what takes over is either desire for something else, or in this case, a kind of turning back on oneself—self-judgment.

And oddly enough, you know how when you're spinning in hating yourself or self-judgment, you can't think of one good thing or one good thought you ever had in your life. Oddly enough, the self-judgment, which is generally so much more suffering than just feeling the darn thing in the first place, acts as a protection system. It keeps us spinning in it, but it actually keeps the mind away from just connecting directly with what's happening—which is, of course, where the sense of peace, the understanding of truth lies.

But when we can't connect, when we believe the self-judgment, identify with it, keep spinning in it, then the whole cycle just keeps going and going and going, doesn't it? And it becomes a veil through which every experience, for the rest of the time it's going, gets seen through.

There's a line from Carl Jung that the parts of ourselves that we do not accept will become hostile to us. It's a way we're becoming hostile to ourselves. And really, the simplicity of direct connection is the first line, I would say, in our mindfulness practice of moving out of believing the self-judgment and into the reality of how it is—the facts of life—which leads us into peace, into connectedness.

It's not always easy. I'll give an example.

Some years ago, when I was going through the onset of a particular physical condition, the body was getting more painful, symptoms were increasing, and there was also the sense of not knowing what it was or where it might go. So of course the mind gets caught up in wanting to know and getting fearful. But what was more interesting was seeing how the mind went into a whole kind of self-blame about it.

Part of it was the new age spiritual thing that if you really are spiritual and think the right thoughts, you won't get sick. I thought I was above that, but I guess I wasn't. So that was another way to judge myself because my body wasn't in good shape. And also a sense of judgment that the body was betraying me. And the mind was betraying me as well, because the mind should have kept the thing together, and in fact it didn't. It was much more weak-minded than I thought it should be.

It was an interesting cycle—now it's interesting; it wasn't so interesting then—a kind of downward spiral. And what I saw later, I'm telling you from hindsight to make my point, is that what kept the spiral of self-judgment and aversion, anger towards my body, going was the lack of direct awareness, direct connection to the actual physical experience itself.

What I saw after I softened into it was why that was. As soon as my awareness would touch, say, the stiffness in my hips or the pain somewhere in my body, it wasn't that the pain was so strong I couldn't be with it. It wasn't that kind of pain. It was that the unpleasantness of it would immediately serve as proof of the self-judgment, of the sense of failure. I failed. My body's sick. I failed as a spiritual person. And that sense of failure, actually, was harder to be with than the physical sensation. But from the physical sensation, the mind would bounce off—like when you throw water on a hot skillet, just jumping off—and then the whole spiral of self-judgment would start going.

What helped me see through it was, of course, mindfulness practice, where eventually you notice—duh—that's what's going on. But also mettā. And I'll talk a little bit in a moment about how mettā can really help our awareness open into what's happening when it's a little too strong, when the whole experience is a little too strong for simple direct connection.

I realized at that time it was like I was walking around a few inches away from my body all the time, until I finally connected with it. And of course, lo and behold, when there was just a simple sinking into—with

mettā I actually turned a kind awareness onto the body itself, stopped identifying with it as a betrayer, as me, and just turned mettā and compassion onto the sensations of the body itself. It really was like that. It was like holding a little baby and saying, "Oh, oh, you're really suffering. Why am I so mad at you? You poor thing, you're really in pain here."

And that allowed a deeper direct connection of awareness. Out of that, what actually happened was—it's not the surrender of "oh well, I'll lie down and give up, whatever happens happens." Out of that comes a clear seeing that allows us to respond in a much more appropriate manner. Whereas before the clear seeing, the direct connection, my response was out of either fear or denial. For instance, people would say, "Go live in Arizona because the cold makes it worse." I'd think, "Yeah, I'll go live in Arizona. It's 120 in the summer, and I'll never have to feel any of this anymore." Totally out of fear and denial.

And once I could just be with what was happening, it's like, okay, I can be with what's happening—and what's really important to do? And one can make choices from the bigger picture. The perception gets balanced again, instead of just being on "let me do anything not to feel this, not to know this is happening."

So I'll talk about how mettā can help with that in a moment.

But to bring this sense of judging, of self-judging as a way of denying, into our practice here: over time, ask yourself as you go through the days—what particular aspect of my experience, today, yesterday, tomorrow, when you notice the sense of struggle—what particular aspect of my experience is not okay? Can I not accept? Do I find myself in real judging, discrimination, saying this particular piece has to go? The first noble truth applies, I understand it, but in this case, no.

This isn't the first noble truth, this is me blowing it big time, and I've got to get back to where it's always pleasant. Just noticing that pattern is really helpful, because once we notice it, we can often make the counterintuitive move. Instead of moving away and saying, "Yes, this does have to change, how can I fix it?" we can make the counterintuitive move of asking, "Well, actually, what is this experience? What's happening?"

A friend of mine generously gave me this image from her life, and I've used it a lot because it's so apt. She describes being in Hawaii with her sons in the surf, where the waves can be really, really big. She said she knows, and her sons would always tell her, that when a wave is getting really big and you know you can't ride it, the thing to do is turn around and dive right into it. Then you just harmlessly go under it. She said that as much as she knew that, she could hardly ever do it. She'd know it intellectually, but then she'd turn around and run like heck, and the wave would just clobber her.

What our practice leads us to do is this: when you notice that impulse—"Let me out of here, this is wrong"—turn around and dive in, just to see what is actually happening right now. Whether it's a painful sensation, whether it's the self-judgment itself, whether it's a feeling of anger, whether it's a feeling of loneliness, whatever it might be. Dive in, not to fix it, just to meet the truth in this moment. And often,

under that wave, there's a lot of peace. Sometimes it's a little bumpy. Sometimes we don't quite make it under. Sometimes it really jostles us up a little bit. But it's almost always better than turning our back to it and running. It almost always clobbers us unless we're really fast.

Mark Epstein says, "It is our fear of experiencing ourselves directly that creates our suffering." It keeps us suffering. When we do experience ourselves directly, well, it's just how it is. Things are just how they are. We don't have to fight it, we don't have to fix it, but we can see clearly how to respond in a more helpful, compassionate manner.

So, metta. As we know, there are times when that wave is so big and we turn around and look at it, and there is just no way we can dive underneath it. Maybe it's too close, maybe it's too high, maybe we forgot how to dive in that moment. Whatever it is, there's just no way. So I don't want you to take what I've said and then increase self-judgment by thinking, "Oh, here's self-judgment. That means there's something going on I'm not accepting. I can't be with it. So that's a further reason for self-judgment." Believe me, I'm one of the many experts in this room on self-judgment, and it can just go into an endless spiral—judging the judging the judging the judging—instead of simply seeing it as a filter.

There are times when it's too much, when we're too tired, when direct connection just isn't possible. For a while when I was sick, I just couldn't even really see what was going on. I didn't even know what to directly connect with sometimes. It's just a big morass and you can't quite tell. I found that at those times, the practice of metta, or compassion—I'll speak of metta, though compassion is very similar since we've been practicing it here—can be enormously helpful.

Sometimes we think of metta in a kind of superficial way. Say, for example, we're hating ourselves or we're really angry at someone else. We think, "Oh, I'll do metta for them." And as we know, that's not what I'm talking about. "Metta, metta, I hate your guts, may you be happy." We're just trying to pretend we feel something other than we do. It's a genuine attempt, but it doesn't really work when we do that. I don't mean metta as an avoidance or an end run. Rather, it's a willingness to be present with suffering. Generally, when we're in self-doubt or anger or really suffering, the best place to practice metta is towards ourselves, because who's suffering? There's one person here who's really suffering for sure that we know about, and that's a good place to start.

It's really interesting. As I said, for aversion, metta is often given as the antidote. But it's not as straightforward as it might seem. I have this mind that likes everything in nice little boxes. So, you're feeling down on yourself, you're judging yourself, so do some metta and then everything's fine, you feel loving. It's not like that. It didn't work like that at all for me. But what happened was much more profound in a more simple kind of way. What metta can do over time—the practice of just bringing kind, loving wishes to ourselves—is begin to balance out the perception.

So again, a kind of superficial sense one might have – I know I had from a distance – is, well, with metta you're deliberately tuning in to the beautiful aspects of someone. And we say, do it in the easy way. So you

tune into what's good, you ignore the person's faults, and you just wish them well, and it's a kind of goody-goody, blind kind of practice. Which of course it's not.

And what happens with loving-kindness – I'm sure many or all of you have seen this for yourself – is that in the moment of the metta, just the simple friendliness, I'm not talking about gushing senses of unitive love every minute. I'm just talking about metta as connection, as simple friendliness, as simple openness. It's not always so intense. In a moment of metta, it's actually not one-sided or blind in the perception at all. It expands and includes the whole picture in a way that aversion or self-judging never can.

So, for example, back with my body and my mind spinning about it, when I began to just meet it with metta, the whole picture became much more clear. That's when I saw the pain of the body and the pain of the mind, because in the metta there's no judging. It's a softening of vastness that holds the whole thing in a field of kindness, in a field of undiscriminating connection. So I would see the whole picture – my body, my mind reacting, the pain in the mind – and just a sense of basic goodness and clear intention beyond that, that makes it much easier. It actually gives our heart the courage to directly face what is difficult, because what is difficult is not the whole picture anymore. It's embedded more in the vastness of the human mind and heart. It's held in really our basic goodness, which in my experience is ultimately what is true and what is vast.

The self-judging, the aversion – it comes out of delusion. The delusion that we are separate beings. The delusion that somehow we can keep ourselves separate from this unpleasant experience. And that aversion, that pushing away, that self-judging, perpetuates the delusion. Metta just dissolves it. Because in metta, the sense of separation – whether I'm separating this part of me from that part of me, or me from you, or someone who's being really awful in their behavior from me who doesn't try to be so awful – metta just dissolves those separations and gives the heart and mind the courage to directly connect in the midst of it.

And we don't have to look for such grandness when we're doing metta either. That's also what's nice. We just simply wish ourselves or the other each phrase without reaching for some kind of grand courage. And it comes. It comes. The strength of metta is the strength of truth, of the vastness of our connectedness, of non-separation.

Well, this story really inspires me. It's a little long, but it really inspires me. It's about a person's courage acting from the strength of love in the face of real hatred and violence, and the power of that love and courage.

This is from a book called *The Children* by David Halberstam, and he's talking about a man who, everything I've read about him, sounds like really another spiritual hero. His name is Jim Lawson. The story is about Nashville in 1960 – and if you remember, some of us were just little kids then, and maybe some of us weren't born then – but in Nashville in 1960, when the sit-ins at the lunch counters were starting, right in the early days of the civil rights movement in this country. Jim Lawson was teaching the

nonviolent workshops to all the college students who were actually the ones marching in the sit-ins, which became violent after some time.

A little synopsis of Jim Lawson: he was a Christian and very deeply committed to nonviolence his whole life, to the point that during the Korean War he went to jail as a conscientious objector because he was so strongly committed to nonviolence. He was also very inspired by Gandhi and at one point had gone to India for three years with his church, partly so that he could study Gandhi's ways. So he brought that with him and was teaching these nonviolent workshops. That is what was really fortifying the love and the courage of these young kids, really, who were marching in these demonstrations.

So this was one of the first demonstrations. I'll just read this description by Bernard Lafayette, who was one of the young students in the demonstration. They were marching in one of the early days, and at the end of the line Bernard Lafayette was marching with another man, Solomon Gort, right at the end of the line. A couple of young white toughs came and knocked Solomon down and started kicking them. Bernard saw this as his first chance to really try his nonviolent commitment, so he threw himself on top of his friend to distract the toughs, which he did, so the toughs started beating on him.

At this point, Jim Lawson walked over. He did not rush over like going to an accident. Instead, he walked over very calmly, as if to a long-standing appointment. Lawson's arrival shifted the attention of the toughs from Gort and Lafayette to Lawson. "The thing about Jim," Bernard remembered, "was that he was so utterly self-assured, so confident, as if he were accustomed to dealing with toughs beating up fallen demonstrators every day of his life."

The leader of the toughs was wearing what was the prevailing uniform of the day – black leather jacket, black pants, and the haircut they called a duck's ass. When he saw Lawson, he was enraged by Lawson's coolness, and he spat at him. Lawson looked at him and asked him for a handkerchief.

The man, stunned, reached into his pocket and handed Lawson a handkerchief. Lawson wiped the spit off himself as calmly as he could. Then he looked at the man's jacket and started talking to him. Did he have a motorcycle or a hot rod car? A motorcycle was the answer. Jim asked a technical question or two, and the young man started explaining what he had done to customize his bike.

Amazingly, Bernard thought, these two men were now talking about the levels of horsepower in motorcycles. A few seconds earlier, they had seemed to be sworn enemies, ready to maul each other. By this time, both Solomon and Bernard were back up on their feet, the line was moving, and Jim and the young man were still talking about the man's motorcycle. In that brief, frightening moment, Jim had managed to find a subject they both shared and had used it in a way that made each of them more human in the eyes of the other.

As they walked away, Jim waved to the man, and the man remained still—neither accepting the friendship nor, for that matter, rejecting it. It had been a marvelous example of Christian love for Bernard.

That's a powerful example. But we can bring that same quality of courage into our own lives. We don't have to compare ourselves and think, "Well, I'm not that good," as I said before. We can bring that quality of willingness to humanize our own self when we're judging, when we think we're useless, when we think we're worthless, when we can't abide what's happening.

There's one other point I want to address, and I mentioned this earlier: comparing. One thing we see in judging, as in all aversion, is that it stems from ignorance—because we're trying to pretend that what's happening really isn't happening. We don't want to know the truth of it, and this perpetuates that ignorance. The underlying source of all our ignorance is that sense of separate self, of separation—the feeling that somehow I am a being isolated from everything else.

What really keeps that going, and it's a very subtle, deeply ingrained habit of mind, is the habit of comparing. I don't know if any of you have noticed the mind comparing from time to time. The word in Pali is *mana*, often translated as conceit—which is nothing to get down on ourselves about, because it's one of the most deeply ingrained and subtle patterns of mind. This comparing with anything: they're better than me, they're worse than me, they're the same as me. Even "they're the same as me." It's endless. Have you noticed how totally exhausting it is?

What's really interesting about it is how completely self-referencing it is. Everything that happens, everything anybody does, in comparing mode is experienced as how it affects me. What does it say about me? It's me, me, me—the center of the universe. In fact, we see that judging and self-referencing, even when we're down on ourselves, is a huge ego trip, because we become the center of the world.

This is a little uncouth, but it's so perfect that I have to use it. Yvonne Rand once made the statement that when we're in this mode, each of us thinks we're the little piece of shit that the whole world revolves around. That's really it, in the comparing and judging mind, right? It captures both sides so perfectly.

Just notice how we compare to everybody walking by. We compare to our past experience. We compare to something we've read. We compare to some idea we completely made up, but we think that's what's supposed to be happening. We compare to the imagined experiences of others. How often do you see someone sitting there, make up what's happening for them, compare yourself, and start feeling horrible? It's really quite endless—and so painful.

So you might just begin to notice this comparing. Just notice it. I didn't say judge it. Just notice it. Notice the state of mind it comes out of. Notice the effect of it, the experience it engenders—that kind of me-centered exhaustion, the self-referencing.

Often it arises with seeing. Not always, but a really good place to explore is to bring your awareness to seeing. For example, it's good dining room practice. When you're walking into the dining room—which is, you know, judgment city, maybe not for everybody, but it can just open the floodgates sometimes. Or walking practice can do it too, if you're walking in a room with many other people. If you simply bring

your awareness to seeing, you notice how all that's happening is form and color going by.

"Wow, they really look focused. What the heck have I been doing all this time?" And then the next person walks by with hardly any food on their plate. "Oh my God, they are such a renunciate and I'm such a slob." And then the next person comes by and clatters their plates down and makes a heck of a racket, and you think, "Well, forget them. What have they been doing for five weeks? I've really got it together here."

Instead of going with all of that—it helps to laugh at it, though. I mean, a lot of times in my practice, I'm going around in my mind, letting it really say that, and just laugh. You know, just don't take it personally. Just laugh. It helps.

But come to seeing, and notice the difference between going out through the eye door all the time and just being there—seeing, seeing, seeing, seeing. You know, just back and forth, back and forth. It can be quite instructive and entertaining. Try it at your next meal.

And notice how when we're caught in comparing, it's as if—at least this is how it is for me—as if I think somehow I could compare myself into happiness. You know? That I can finally compare myself to the top of the pile, be the best around, and then everything's going to be okay. I guess I'm not totally alone in that. Until, you know, a new yogi comes who's better. Or you think you're doing good and then you go out and read about Milarepa, and you go, "Well, forget about it. I can't even start."

Instead of seeing that it doesn't make any difference. That comparing is completely deluded, senseless, and it doesn't have any bearing on reality. It just doesn't make any difference.

So just to end now, I'll simply say: remember, or notice when it happens again, a time when you're really present and there's no comparing whatsoever. It's kind of a timeless moment because there's no past or future. You're not thinking about how it was in the past or how it should be in the future. You're not reaching out to what's going on with somebody else. There's no looking outward for self-verification, for self-justification, for a sense of being anything. In fact, there's not much sense of self at all. There's just things as they are, whatever it is.

That moment—really these timeless, pristine moments—that's the direction of the peace of heart. That's really the direction of our connectedness. Not sitting there thinking, "I feel so connected to all beings." Just that timeless moment of no separation being created. Then the vastness of the truth of things, the awareness of our connectedness, can reveal itself.

I want to end with this poem, more because it gives me the feeling of what I'm saying than the actual words, by Wendell Berry:

When despair for the world grows in me and I awake in the night at the least sound in fear of what my life and my children's lives may be, I go and lie down where the wood drake rests in his beauty on the water and the great heron feeds. I come into the peace of wild things who do not tax their lives with forethought of grief.

I come into the presence of still water, and I feel above me the day-blind stars waiting with their light. For a time, I rest in the grace of the world and am free.

Let's just sit quietly for a minute.

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