# Aspiration and Compassion

Carol Wilson · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Carol Wilson · 56:29

The mind of non-clinging, the liberation of non-clinging, reveals to us the nature of mind. But it always has been, as it is now, the nature of pure awareness—empty, awake, and knowing.

There's a third aspect, you could say, in trying to talk about what is basically indescribable. As soon as we start talking, it limits. But that's our mode of communication, so we talk. This third aspect describes the nature of mind, the nature of awareness: the natural, spontaneous expression of the wisdom of emptiness, of naked awareness, is compassion—a tenderness for all life.

Joseph and I were talking earlier, and he reminded me of a Tibetan phrase that expresses this, describing awareness as being ceaselessly responsive.

So that's what I want to talk about tonight: this quality of compassion, of friendliness, of tenderness for life, which includes ourselves, as an aspect of our practice. I want to talk about some ways that the simplicity of our mindfulness practice cultivates, strengthens, and reveals to us the depths of compassion and connectedness that are possible in our hearts in this life—and that aren't really so far away from our own experience as that little judging mind in there might be saying. Just let that one roll on, but don't give it any attention for now.

Rationally, to me it makes a lot of sense that emptiness—this openness of non-clinging, of not fixating on any experience as being me or mine—would have compassion as its flip side. I know it doesn't always make sense to people. Sometimes hearing about no-self, emptiness, seems a little unsettling. But remember, that's the idea we have about it, not the actual experience.

Nyoshul Khenpo, who was a Tibetan teacher, said that someone who realizes that all phenomena are empty and who realizes the non-existence of self or ego will naturally experience spontaneous compassion for all sentient beings who do not realize this truth of emptiness and so who continue to suffer through delusion and clinging.

We don't have to wait until we are completely enlightened to experience this. Remember, our whole practice, our whole life experience is only this moment. It's only moment to moment. Anything that we talk about—any qualities we speak about developing, the seven factors of enlightenment, the qualities we speak about understanding, the five hindrances, compassion, non-clinging—it's all experienced only here and now in this moment. There's nowhere else to go.

This has been a very empowering and also comforting understanding for me. Because if I think I have to understand the complete essence of emptiness before I can experience compassion, it's a little daunting.

But if I can recognize in a moment that possibility through my own experience, just in a moment, then it really opens up the sense of possibility.

You can see it at times throughout our practice. Joseph spoke again about impermanence and how really opening to the ephemeral nature of our experience—whether it's thoughts or emotions or sensations, whether it's the ephemeral nature of our outer situations—when we open to that, we really have an access into recognizing emptiness because we stop clinging. But also you can recognize how in those moments, even if they're quite brief, where we really get that sense of impermanence, when you just really feel open to it—and opening to it means we're not in that moment resisting it or hating it or trying to hold on, we really just let go and see it as it is—we both appreciate in a very deep way the fragility of life.

Not in a kind of beating-the-breast way, but with tenderness, with appreciation. Because if life is so fragile as it is, the natural response is one of presence, of openness, of connectedness, of appreciation, just for this moment of life as it is. And that naturally extends to a sense of compassion, of tenderness for the suffering of ourselves and other beings that we come into contact with. Because we're so present, we're naturally open to that.

So we experience both compassion for immediate suffering—just the pains we all go through—but also the wider level of compassion that Nyoshul Khenpo was speaking of, what's really referred to as bodhicitta: that sense of poignancy, of compassion for looking at all of us beings here, keeping running in these cycles of samsara, trying to find happiness in places that cannot offer it, looking for ease in constantly changing situations.

Out of that rises a sense of connectedness, a sharing of our mutual situation, so to speak, but with a real tenderness of heart. Not a kind of "we're just such stupid jerks" attitude. More like, "Oh, look at this situation—we're together." And that tenderness then again opens us into further letting go. It's sort of a mutually supportive thing: the emptiness leads to compassion, the compassion leads to more letting go.

Another way you might notice, just keep a little eye out in your practice, how the wisdom of letting go can open us to compassion. Just notice in those moments when you're not really clinging to anything as me or mine—my experience, my pain, my great meditation, whatever. Those moments when there's none of this me-ing or mining, none of this clinging. Notice the corollary: it's as if the movement from tight, obsessive self-referencing opens into spaciousness, connectedness with life, with beings.

Have you noticed this relentless, obsessive self-referencing? Have any of you noticed that over these days? Those times when no matter what happens, the first thought in our mind is, "What does that mean about me?" Somebody slams the door—they did it to me. They woke me up from my nap. Whatever happens, it's all about me. It's exhausting. It's relentless. It's wearing. This, to me, is really what we're talking about when we speak of sankhara dukkha, the dukkha of just the ongoing wearing nature of life—this me, me, me all the time.

Sometimes I sit here and think I would be so happy not to be absorbed in this me-ness anymore. What a relief.

So notice, because we all have plenty of moments when we're not absorbed in this me, me, me. Sometimes we don't notice them. Sometimes there's nothing special happening except spaciousness, except peace.

It also allows the space, again, for connectedness and caring.

Nyoshul Ken puts it in a way I really like. He says the difference between the deluded mind and the enlightened mind is mainly a difference of narrowness and openness. In our present deluded state, our mind is extremely narrow—the more constricted and narrow the mind, the more it thinks only of itself, completely disregarding the well-being, happiness, and suffering of others. Conversely, the enlightened Buddha mind is one who considers the infinity of sentient beings rather than being concerned only with its own ego and individuality. Thus the entire path from an ordinary being to Buddhahood is the gradual opening of the mind. The concept of growth is used here for the passing from a completely narrow attitude focused principally on oneself to an open loving heart whose scope instinctively encompasses the infinity of beings.

I really like that—the concept of growth in practice is from this narrow, constricted sense of mind and heart that only focuses on oneself to a natural openness that spontaneously considers the well-being of beings. And that's important to really trust: that this compassion, this tenderness for beings, really is a spontaneous expression of our wisdom mind, a spontaneous expression of awareness of emptiness.

It's not that we can't consciously cultivate compassion. Of course we can, and we do, and the Buddha talks about that—wise intention, which is really important. But we must also really trust that if awareness is our true nature, our pure mind, then compassion, tenderness, metta, is also our true nature. And there are no exceptions to that. It's not "everybody but you." I know people say that—"Me, compassion? I don't think so." No, no. If it's how it is, it's how it is, for all of us.

So that's why often the practice, the Buddhist path, is spoken of as a bird with two wings—the wings of wisdom and compassion. You really don't have one without the other. At times in our life, in our practice, one or the other might be more obvious. One hint of awareness, so to speak, is more apparent to us, and at another time, another one. But ultimately it all comes together.

I want to talk now about really practical ways that we can begin to notice and work with and also help us trust the cultivation, the development of compassion in our life, in our actions, in our minds.

One way the Buddha spoke about this—the place where our understanding and our actions come together, the intersection—is in the second step of the Eightfold Path. I won't go into the entire Eightfold Path tonight because that's a whole talk. But it begins with wise or right understanding: how we understand ourselves, how we understand the world. That's the first step, not the last step. And that gives rise to the second step, which is what I'm talking about: sama sankappa, the word in Pali, variously

translated as wise intention, wise thought, or wise aspiration—those three different qualities.

Our intention or thought or aspiration is what gives rise to the next steps of the path, which are how we speak and act in the world—our speech, our action, our livelihood. So right here, in this step of sama sankappa, right intention, right aspiration, is the place where our wisdom manifests as compassion, as friendliness, as generosity. In fact, the Buddha's definition of wise intention is actually that: non-greed, friendliness or metta, and compassion. That's his definition of right intention.

The point I want to make is that this is what naturally develops and strengthens simply through the power of mindfulness, through the simplicity but steadiness, the committedness of our mindfulness practice.

This intention—that sense of motivation that leads to speech and action, that moment, that inclination of mind that gives rise to speech, that gives rise to action—is a really key concept, a really key experience in the whole understanding of karma. Karma, or kamma in the Pali, means action. And what's interesting for us practice-wise, in a way I find really helpful in my life: when we think about our actions, when we tend to evaluate whether that was a good or bad action—or to use more Buddhist terms, skillful or unskillful, wholesome or unwholesome—our tendency is often to evaluate by the result. How it looks. Whether whatever we wanted to happen happens. Whether everybody feels good about it. Whether we got what we wanted.

But as far as skillfulness or unskillfulness, as the seed of karma goes, all of the power of the action is actually in the intention. Because the result of the action is actually out of our control a lot of the time, isn't it? But why we do and say what we do and say, what states of mind and heart are motivating that—this is really where the power is.

This is the place where greed, hatred, and confusion manifest, leading us to speech and action that gets us in trouble one way or another. And it's also the place where metta, compassion, and generosity manifest—just here, in this movement of intention.

We can begin to notice this. Not always—God knows you'll make yourself crazy if you try to notice every intention before every word you speak, before every action you do. So please don't try. But we can begin to notice, in retreat and off retreat, before big things that we do, before big decisions.

The whole power behind skillful means—when we talk about skillful means in retreat, learning to do what helps keep your awareness balanced—the whole seed of that is in the intention. Because you can do the same action on succeeding days. Have you noticed that? Like, "I'm really tired now. I think I need not to sit and go take a walk." Now that could be motivated by a lot of different intentions, couldn't it? And one day it might be a real clear, balanced sense.

It's not wanting, it's not aversion, it's just seeing clearly—yes, I really am tired. Taking a walk refreshes the mind, brings some energy. You take the walk, that's the experience. That was a skillful action, a skillful intention.

The next day, the same sitting, and you have the thought: yesterday it was so helpful to take a walk, and I really just don't feel like sitting, but probably taking a walk would be really good right now. But the motivation and the whole surrounding circumstances are completely different. The motivation now might be aversion, it might be avoidance, it might be desire. And so the seemingly same action really is quite a different action from the point of intention. You see what I mean? This is a very simple example, but it has many ramifications.

So it gets really interesting—and I mean really interesting, not from a point of judging. You can't be looking at your intentions with judgment. Well, you can, and you probably will, but it isn't helpful. Because we're all going to have plenty of intentions that are less than sterling—that's why we're here, to learn, to see. If we were all completely free from greed, hatred, and delusion, we wouldn't be needing to sit here like this day after day, would we?

This is a fascinating and very powerful area of exploration in our life and in our practice. What I'm describing is on the micro level—a small action, like watching scratching an itch, or when you go back for seconds at lunch, or when you write a note or don't write a note, or think about writing a note and decide not to, asking yourself why you wanted to and why you didn't. Just watching all that stuff, seeing the play of intentions.

I'll come back to the micro level a little later in the talk, when we can begin to see how the power of mindfulness really begins to naturally shift the habit of our mind, the habit of our intentions.

But I want to move for a moment to the third aspect of sammā saṅkappa I mentioned, which is often translated as wise or right aspiration. I want to talk about aspiration and bring this into compassion. I was going to do so anyway, and then I was interested that it came up in a couple of questions this morning.

For the purposes of how I'm talking about it, right aspiration can be understood not so much as that micro, about-to movement just before we do something—brush our teeth or make some small movement—but rather as an overarching intention. You could say goal, if you will—we know that's not always a good word—but a sense of purpose, a greater sense of purpose or aspiration in our life. It's not just an automatic response to this moment, but having a clear sense of direction.

This is something I think is very helpful and supportive to take time to consciously reflect on in our lives. If you haven't already done so, if it's not something you do regularly, really tune in: What is my deepest purpose? What is my aspiration? It could be the goal or overarching intention, the conscious awareness of which we can use as a guidepost, as a reference point in the decisions we make and in how we live our life.

Now, if this overarching intention is unskillful, it might be that we become so focused on the goal that we don't use the overarching intention to come back and be present. For example, if your purpose in this life is to die with as much money as it's possible to accumulate—I don't suppose one would say it that way, but

that's what could happen—if one's goal is to earn as much money as one could possibly accumulate and that's all that matters, the way that would reflect in our moment-to-moment decisions is that each decision would be about which choice earns more money. The overarching purpose would affect our moment-to-moment intentions. Hopefully we will choose something more enlightening, more supportive, more inspiring as our purpose—but that's each of our own business, isn't it?

The way this can function in our life—and it doesn't have to be particularly dharmic—is that when we have a very clear sense of commitment to what our purpose is, to what's really important to us, tuning into that in moments of difficulty or choice, in moments when we're making decisions, has the function of collecting all our random, dispersed energy. It allows us to act sometimes from a strength or a commitment or an intention of depth that we didn't really know we had. It gives us courage, a strength we might not know we possessed.

Perhaps if you have children, you can imagine how you will do things for your kids that, if it was just for you, you would never have the energy or the courage or the gumption to do. But when it's something for the well-being of your children, that hesitation doesn't even arise. You just do it.

I read a book a few years ago called *Life and Death in Shanghai* by Nien Cheng. She was a Chinese woman who lived in Shanghai, a middle-class woman who had a pretty comfortable life. During the Cultural Revolution in the 1970s, she, like so many others, was denounced for her bourgeois lifestyle and thrown into jail. She was pressured in many ways to sign confessions of things she hadn't done, which would have included accusing other people. She was physically abused, placed in a very uncomfortable situation.

But she had this strength of purpose around honesty—honesty was simply what was most important to her. She refused for six years to sign anything they gave her because it wasn't true. She wouldn't accuse other people of things they hadn't done because it wasn't true. She went through amazing ordeals—a woman who had never been under any kind of physical stress, someone who hadn't had any preparation for this kind of thing. Finally, after six years, she became very sick, cancer I think, and they decided to release her because she was causing trouble. She would stand up to the guards and simply refused to cooperate.

So they were finally releasing her, leading her to the door.

And just before they take her to the door, they take her into another room and say, "Just before you leave, would you sign this?" And she refused. She said, "No way. It's not true. I won't sign it." And they let her go anyway—just get her out of here. She was living in the States when she wrote this.

It was very inspiring to me, both her personal story and courage, but even more the strength of a purity, a clarity of purpose that really is bigger than the moment-to-moment experiences. It allows us to let go of needing fulfillment just in this moment. It allows us to have a much broader vision of our life, of what's important to us, of what is possible. And by using this aspiration or our purpose as a reference point, we

can really make more intelligent, more courageous decisions in our life.

I see for myself, when I don't have a sense of purpose, or I'm not aware of it, I tend to respond to situations with knee-jerk reactivity—oh, that'll be nice, or no, I don't want to do that, or that'll feel good, or that'll be comfortable, or I'm in a bad mood so I say no. It's very robotic, very automatic. But when I tune into what's really important to me—which changes from time to time, so I think it's good to keep checking in with ourselves—to me, some aspect of loving and serving the Dharma, or of living an awakened life, keeps coming up as what's important. And then that really informs how and what I decide to do.

Not every minute, of course. Again, some compassion, some kindness. It's not like every time I'm going to get an ice cream I have to go into deep dharma reflection—is this going to serve the Dharma, whether I have chocolate chip or strawberry, or maybe I should have non-fat? Not like that. We can be normal human beings. But this sense of purpose can really strengthen us, support us, give us courage that we might not otherwise access. We can surprise ourselves.

Another aspect of tuning into this higher aspiration is that it's not always that we have a sense of "I want to be X, Y, Z" or "this is what I want my life to look like." Very much as with Nien Cheng, it was the sense of the importance of honesty. We often don't know where it's going to take us. When I realized quite some years ago that really I loved the Dharma as the most important thing in my life, I had no clue what that was going to mean. I never had the slightest interest in doing this teaching gig, but that's just how it manifested. It's not what I would have thought of.

Someone who also very much touches me in that way—I haven't met her personally, but whose life has been one of following what's really important to her without knowing where it would lead—is Aung San Suu Kyi. I'm sure you know who she is: the leader of the democracy movement in Burma, who won the Nobel Peace Prize in 1991. Her father was the Burmese leader of democracy in the late 1940s, and he was assassinated. Aung San Suu Kyi had been living in England, married to an Englishman, with two teenage children, and came back to Burma in 1988 because her mother was really sick. She came back to take care of her dying mother.

It just happened to be at the time when there were these big student uprisings against an incredibly repressive, violent government—still in charge in Burma today, really quite cruel to the people of Burma. She happened to be there when these incredible student uprisings and demonstrations were being put down by mass shootings. And she became the focal point of the democratic movement, to the point that when this repressive government allowed a free election, Aung San Suu Kyi and her party won in a landslide. Then of course the government wouldn't let them take office and put her under house arrest. She's been there, on and off, ever since—her movements completely constricted for over ten years. They've always said she could leave, but she knows she could never come back. And she's so important to the democracy movement that she really feels she has to stay, even though her husband has since died of cancer. She sees her two sons not very often at all. Years can pass.

But what's interesting is that she really seems, from what one can tell from reading and hearing, quite an amazing woman. This is what she's said: "I never set out to be the leader of the democracy movement in Burma. I have very ordinary attitudes towards life. If I think there's something I should do in the name of justice or in the name of love, then I'll do it. The motivation is its own reward." And somewhere else she said that her purpose is to purify her mind and heart.

So having a deeply felt but ultimately simple purpose, simple aspiration—we don't know where it's going to go. We never know anyway. But the power of aligning ourselves, when we can, when we can remember it, to what is really so deeply true for us, has the power to change how we live our life. And that's really what it's about: how we live our life.

The habits of mind with which we meet each moment of our life—this is where freedom manifests. This is where compassion manifests. Never mind how it looks to anybody else. Never mind achieving some goal that people can recognize.

And the good news, as I said before, the really good news, is that simply through the power of mindful presence—this awareness that is open, clear, connected, with no agenda, just what we're practicing here, moment after moment after moment—the natural fruit of this is the development of compassion, of friendliness, loving-kindness, of generosity, of letting go. If you really look in yourselves, in your practice, in your daily life, in little ways, I truly know that you'll see how our intentions, our habits of mind, do begin to purify. By purify I mean they begin to transform.

Our deep habits, the kilesas, as I know have been referred to—of greed, of hatred, aversion, fear, of confusion—that's not inevitable, although it may seem so sometimes. It's not inevitable, but they are like deeply conditioned habits in our mind. But that's all they are: habits. And as we practice, these habits really do begin to transform.

The Buddha said frequently, and I love this quotation: whatever one thinks about frequently, whatever we're in the habit of pondering on, wherever we let the mind dwell, that will become the inclination of our mind. It's simple but obvious, right? Wherever we let our mind hang out over and over and over, that becomes its natural inclination.

In one way that's a little scary. In another way it shows us how mindfulness works, as well as loving-kindness practice. I won't get into that because it's a whole other topic, but just repeating the loving-kindness phrases when you think nothing's happening—just consider what your mind might be doing otherwise. It's totally worth it. That's just a little aside, a little plug.

But through the power of mind—I was talking to someone today who was saying that over the last ten years or so of her practice, even though there are areas she doesn't feel so good about, areas where it's not good enough and all, which we can all find—she could absolutely see areas of transformation, of spaciousness, of change in how she lives her life and how she relates. This is just what I'm talking about.

The habits change.

In a place where you would naturally have said, "Oh, going through the food line, there's ten people behind you and there's one muffin left—great, I'm glad I got here for that muffin"—sometimes now, just naturally, without even thinking about it, you might say, "Oh, there's only one left, well, I'll leave it for someone else." And it's not like a big "Oh, aren't I great?" moment. It's just a natural expression.

Look for it in little things, because that will really increase your trust and confidence. If you're waiting to be Gandhi before you notice it, it's going to be a lot harder. Our habits change, and at the end of our life, what are we going to have left but how we've lived our life? The habits of our heart and mind.

Last year there was a big Buddhist teachers' conference here at Spirit Rock. Buddhist teachers from all the different traditions, about 220 or so teachers, and the Dalai Lama was here. The thing that was most inspiring to me in this whole conference was a Cambodian monk named Maha Ghosananda. He's sort of the Cambodian Thich Nhat Hanh, if you know Thich Nhat Hanh. He's been a leader of the peace movement in Cambodia. He's an old man now. He spent many years really working in the refugee camps with Cambodian refugees after all the horrors of the Khmer Rouge and Pol Pot regime—truly unthinkable suffering.

And now, last summer, he's a little bit senile. He's not really quite knowing what's going on. Someone would be delegated to stay with him through the day to make sure he didn't wander off. He would come and sit here in the room and not really say much.

So what was inspiring about this? He was just radiating love and happiness and compassion. You just wanted to go up to him and hug him. Of course you don't—he's a monk. But anyone who would come up to him, he would bow to you with this huge grin, like you were the happiest, most important person he'd ever met, that he was so happy to see you again. You felt like he recognized you, although I'd never met him really where he would remember me. Just this sense of all-embracing love. It was so beautiful, and I never saw that break.

At the end, as a closing, he was asked to come up and give the refuges and precepts.

So first he started off in French doing metta. It's sort of like something that was in there just kind of came out. But then he caught himself—okay, English—and he went and did the refuges and precepts in English.

I just felt so much... I don't know, just sort of *who he was*. That's how he'd lived his life, and at the end, that's what came out—so pure and beautiful. It was by far, for me, the most touching and inspiring moment of the whole four days.

To me, that's a sense of how our habits can transform. It doesn't matter so much what we achieve or what our life looks like. We can really begin to trust this. And again, it's not like you sit down and say, "I will now become like Maha Ghosananda." I think to myself—because I have that same kind of judging mind—*f*

*at chance*. But we'll each become our own person, manifesting through our own personality. Yes, I hate to tell you, it's going to be through your own personality. The sooner you get used to it, the better!

But again, as I was saying, we don't have to sit and decide, "I will now be compassionate." We learn to trust that out of the simple act of this connected attention, this letting go of our judgments, letting go of our preconceptions, overcoming our fear and holding ourselves separate—to simply connect with presence—the natural expression of that is a sense of our unity, a sense of mettā, a sense of compassion.

I want to read this poem because it really expresses this for me. It's a bit long, but it's by Mary Oliver, called "Singapore":

*In Singapore, in the airport, a darkness was ripped from my eyes. In the women's restroom, one compartment stood open. A woman knelt there, washing something in the white bowl.*

*Disgust argued in my stomach, and I felt in my pocket for my ticket.*

*A poem should always have birds in it—kingfishers, say, with their bold eyes and gaudy wings. Rivers are pleasant, and of course trees. A waterfall, or if that's not possible, a fountain rising and falling. A person wants to stand in a happy place in a poem.*

*When the woman turned, I could not answer her face. Her beauty and her embarrassment struggled together, and neither could win. She smiled, and I smiled. What kind of nonsense is this? Everybody needs a job.*

*Yes, a person wants to stand in a happy place in a poem. But first we must watch her as she stares down at her labor, which is dull enough. She's washing the tops of airport ashtrays, as big as hubcaps, with a blue rag. Her small hands turn the metal, scrubbing and rinsing. She does not work slowly, nor quickly, but like a river. Her dark hair is like the wing of a bird.*

*I don't doubt for a moment that she loves her life. And I want her to rise up from the crust and the slop and fly down to the river. This probably won't happen. But maybe it will.*

*If the world were only pain and logic, who would want it? Of course it isn't. Neither do I mean anything miraculous, but only the light that can shine out of a life. I mean the way she unfolded and refolded the blue cloth. The way her smile was only for my sake. I mean the way this poem is filled with trees and birds.*

So we don't have to go somewhere else or look for some special kind of situation in order to touch, to recognize, to come home to this sense of vastness, of tenderness, of compassion for others, for life, for ourselves. Really, the best place we have to start is right here, right now, with exactly whatever your own personal experience is.

We often think of compassion as so outer-directed that we forget it has to start—the only place it can start—right here in our own hearts, in our own immediate experience.

From Pema Chödrön: "When you wake up in the morning and out of nowhere comes the heartache of alienation and loneliness, could you use that as a golden opportunity? Rather than persecuting yourself or feeling that something terribly wrong is happening, right there in the moment of sadness and longing, could you relax and touch the limitless space of the human heart?"

"Next time you get a chance," she says, "experiment with this."

That's what's so great about retreats—you get lots of chances. And you might notice them more than when, in our regular life, we just kind of think, *okay, what to do about it*. But here there's not much to do. So that's a real blessing, because it gives us a chance to relax, to really touch with awareness our own experience of whatever's going on. And in that, we can discover over and over again

the limitless space of the human heart, of our own heart.

The difficulties in retreat are extremely important. I know you think we always say this, and we say it to keep you going, but really it's not just fine until you get to the pīti and the sukha and all the good stuff. Where do you think we're going to really open to tenderness and compassion? Just by having everything nicey-nice all the time? No. The difficulties that come up in retreat, and each time that we meet them face to face—this is really the place where we are touching the tenderness of our hearts, the vastness of compassion.

So really looking at it, as you go through whatever your demons are: How do you meet the pain in your body, the fear, your feelings of disappointment or discouragement, sleepiness, anger, envy, that judging mind, our irritations with others—whatever it is? We don't have to have some incredible, worthy kind of suffering. Sleepiness really will do very well if you're hating it. The pain about it, the resistance. How do we meet these experiences? This is really the place where our deep insights into the nature of suffering, our connectedness with all beings in this field of suffering, and the deep tenderness or compassion for ourselves and all beings arise—right here in the middle of these difficulties, when we can meet them with kindness, with openness, without judging.

And one way this is really important: first, of course, by not judging, by meeting it in the moment, we're at least allowing ourselves to see what's actually happening. So we learn compassion for suffering because we see how much of our suffering is extra. For example, there's that twinge in the knee, and then there's all the fear and aversion and future projection we create around it. That part's extra—extra suffering. What Joseph said his yogi friend called "the rope burn" of holding on when we could just let go.

But another way that meeting each arising difficult experience, whenever we can, with that clarity, that complete connection, that openness—it goes back to what I quoted the Buddha as saying before: where we frequently let the mind dwell, that will become the inclination of mind.

So you're sitting here, and these judging thoughts—you know how it is, it's just so common that we're just completely one after the other after the other with these judging thoughts, and then we hate them, and

then we hate ourselves for having them, and then we hate ourselves for not being kind to them, and on and on and on, infinite regression. Now the judging thoughts themselves, that they arise in a moment, is really the effect, the result of our past habits of mind. That it's arising now, you don't have a choice about it, because obviously if we had a choice, we would choose not to think that. But it's out of our control. So it's really the effect of past karma, the effect of past intentions, of past dwelling: "You're a stupid jerk, you can't do anything right, I can't believe you did that again." It's just what it is.

Now, in the moment that we meet it with "Ah, that's judging"—that's all, just "Ah, that's judging," noticing it—in that moment, what quality, what intention is being cultivated, is being developed? It's not judging. It's clear seeing and compassion. And so each moment that we meet a difficult experience, just fully and openly—you don't have to say, "Oh, may I be compassionate to this"—just meeting it with that kind, non-judging attention is in itself a moment of mindfulness. There's no greed, there's no hatred, there's no confusion. So simply each moment of mindfulness is shifting our habit, shifting the tendency of mind. Our mind is not dwelling anymore in the kilesas; it's dwelling in clarity, it's dwelling in compassion.

And so those times that you've gone through a long, drawn-out, difficult time, and you think you weren't perfectly mindful, you sometimes got caught, you think nothing's happening—mostly we can't recognize in looking back how much mindfulness, how many moments there actually were when there was just this pure meeting of it. Because we expect something to happen from that, other than just being with it. But something is happening on a level we don't notice right away. We're changing the habits, we're changing the way we relate to life. And compassion and wisdom are strengthening. It's like learning to trust that more, even if it's subconscious. So it's extremely powerful and important practice.

Once I was practicing in a long retreat with Sayadaw U Pandita, and I was in a phase where I could report—he does use the word "report," very clearly. It is like a report. You go in and report: this is what's happening. And so I would just say what I was noting. I didn't give any content, but what was happening was really heavy judging thoughts. I didn't even mention that. But he has this way—I know Steve told a story the other night—he has this way of knowing what's going on, even when you don't give the content.

And so he said to me, "You know, some yogis talk to themselves on retreat. Have you ever noticed that?" He can actually be quite funny. I said, "Yeah, yeah, I've noticed that." He goes, "Well, you know, it's supposed to be a silent retreat." Yeah, I laugh too. It was just his way of saying, you know, you don't have to do that. Silence really being the non-reactive mind. It was a kind moment. He was being kind.

So on the level of our moment-to-moment awareness, clear awareness is cultivating both our trust and understanding—the essential wisdom of emptiness—as well as our familiarity and trust in the heart of compassion. And the two really can't be separated.

Pema Chödrön again: "At the relative level, our noble heart is felt as kinship with all beings. At the absolute level, we experience it as groundlessness or open space." And they're both true—kinship with all beings, groundlessness or open space.

So we start where we are. Our highest aspiration, our deepest purpose, can inform our commitment, how we respond, the intentions we bring to our life, to our choices, in present moment situations. And our ordinary circumstances of life are enough.

Gandhi once said that almost everything you do will seem insignificant, but it is very important that you do it. And it's not like we're suddenly going to become Shantideva, who was the ultimate expression of the bodhisattva, author of the *Guide to the Bodhisattva's Way of Life*—very moving. We just start where we are.

One teacher I heard once referred to compassionate action as "doing the obvious." There's a situation, and given the whole of it, you do what's obvious to be done. There's no sense of amazement or major compassion—you just respond in an appropriate way.

I heard an interview on NPR a few years ago with a young pro basketball player in his rookie year. I forget what team he was on. You can imagine how for a young guy to make it to the pros, that's got to be the biggest thing in his life, maybe the biggest chance he'd ever have. They were interviewing him because his sister needed a kidney transplant, and he was going to give her his kidney if their types matched—which meant that would effectively end his pro basketball career. I'm not sure why it would, actually, but that's what the interviewer was saying. And the interviewer was so amazed, really trying to build him up: "What an amazing thing you're doing! You're so incredible!"

And this guy just sounded so grounded. He said, "What are you talking about? It's my sister's life versus playing basketball. I mean, what's to think about?"

Just doing the obvious. At this point we don't even think about it as being a compassionate person. It's just the natural expression of clear seeing.

And it can start with these small, insignificant actions and strengthen as we have more and more trust—in the power of awareness, in the power of connectedness, in the power of clear seeing. We don't need to fall back as much into our self-referential protections of fear and desire. We can trust that we can open to the world.

And then it's as Shantideva says: "Even when I have done things for the sake of others, no sense of amazement or conceit arises. It is just like having fed myself. I hope for nothing in return."

---

*Transcriptions produced locally using Swiss low-carbon electricity. Corrections and rewriting by cloud-hosted AI.*