Awareness & Compassion

Carol Wilson · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Carol Wilson · 1:01:25

Tonight I want to talk about emptiness and compassion.

As we've been exploring the wisdom of non-clinging, or as Joseph has been calling it, undistracted awareness, certain qualities emerge. It's difficult to talk about qualities of something that doesn't have qualities, but we have to use words.

For example, undistracted awareness has the quality of emptiness. In the simple hearing of a bell, if you're completely undistracted with that hearing, you couldn't really say what was the ear canal, what's the bell, what's the consciousness, what was me ringing it, what was the action. There's just the purity of the experience. It all comes together. You can't say anything is self-existent in that.

Emptiness also has the quality of spontaneous knowing, of cognizance, in that the sound was heard spontaneously. You don't plan ahead. You don't have to figure out that in three minutes there's going to be a sound and you need to organize and control undistracted awareness so you'll be able to hear it and not confuse it with seeing. And it always works, doesn't it? When we're undistracted, it's perfectly known. That's the quality—emptiness and cognizance, spontaneous knowing. These are two qualities.

But the third quality, when we're conceptualizing, that rounds out and really makes undistracted awareness complete, is what the Tibetans describe as ceaselessly responsive. You could also call this compassion or natural tenderness for life. That is the natural manifestation of empty and spontaneous knowing, of undistracted awareness.

Sometimes we have this idea of emptiness or anattā or no-self as being unattractive or a cold void, indifferent or even scary, a kind of annihilation. Or there's that sense of "Who wants it if it's just seeing?" In the seeing, there's only the seeing. So you go outside and there's a beautiful sunset and it's just seeing, seeing—a kind of disconnection from everything. And we think, "Well, who wants that?"

But that's missing the piece of the natural non-separation, a tenderness, the spontaneous response—ceaselessly responsive to whatever's appropriate. There's this natural response of awareness *be cause* of the fact of emptiness, not in spite of it.

In other words, non-clinging doesn't open into a cold, indifferent void. Non-clinging, instead of being the constriction of mind, of heart, of consciousness around me and mine—making you an other, leading to reactive responses—is ceaselessly responsive also. The difference is that when there's clinging, the ceaseless responses happen to be fear and greed.

The heart of non-clinging actually opens into something else. It releases energy; it encompasses everything. Non-clinging opens us from contraction into spaciousness. Ajahn Sumedho—I've heard him refer to awareness as "the point that includes." A spaciousness that encompasses everything, and in that, our constricted self-referencing releases into a natural tenderness for life, for beings, for the situation. A point that includes everything.

Let me give you two very simple examples from my own experience of how just the letting go of clinging moves from fear or greed to the natural, inclusive tenderness that's also empty of self-referencing.

One is a retreat example, very simple. I was walking on a retreat here some years ago, in the gym very early in the morning, which I loved to do before anybody was up. Deep into the retreat, in that silence, in some nice samādhi state—walking, walking, lifting, moving, placing. And then at some point, deep in the walking, somebody came out of their room, slammed the door, went into the bathroom, flushed the toilet, ran the water, came out, slammed the door.

The thought was, "They are ruining my samādhi." A little bit of aversion, and it was really that immediate self-referencing. Everything's about me, the sense of separation, me and other, my samādhi down the toilet. That all happened pretty quickly.

And in the next moment, there was an "Oh." I'm putting thoughts on it later, but it wasn't really a thought at that time. It was the sense that this is just a concept. Me walking, they slamming, my samādhi being disturbed—these are just experiences arising in the space of awareness. Walking, thinking, hearing, sensing, samādhi, no samādhi—whatever is happening is just experience. There's nothing to separate out as me or my samādhi or how it should be or how it got wrecked.

That's all concepts. And just in that moment of letting go—basically of clinging to me and my samadhi—there's no problem. And that tenderness for beings... it's not that I wanted to run up and kiss the foot of the person who made the noise or something. It's just that the whole sense of problem, of separation, of aversion, or even me and other, goes away. There was no other response that needed to be made. But had there been one needed in that moment—if the person, say, needed help or something—that would have been the natural response without thought, without a sense of me doing something.

Another non-retreat example: some years ago I was traveling on an overnight Indian train in India. I was in a sleeping compartment, second class, which is like four little benches against the two walls of the compartment with a curtain pulled over it. Somehow I was in a compartment with three Indian men. I don't know why, but that's how it was.

So we're lying there on our little respective shelves trying to sleep. They weren't doing anything—they were just lying there. But I felt completely unsafe. What are they doing in my compartment? They're bothering me. Because they were just lying there staring at me. That's not rude in India; it's just normal. You can't even consider it rude. I mean, I considered it rude because I didn't want it, but they were just

lying there. So I spent the whole night turned with my face to the wall, thinking, "These guys are bothering me."

Then at some point just before daylight, it suddenly occurred to me—the obvious, you know—oh, this is not *my* compartment. This is *our* compartment. That's all it was. I didn't leap up and have a group hug and say, "I'm so glad you're here." Just that shift in my mind is all that happened. I didn't actually act in any other way.

But when daylight came and we all got up—you close the top bunks and sit down on the bottom ones—they brought in, of course, their whole families and cousins and kids and wives. There were now twenty of us in the compartment. You could feel the whole energy change. They became really friendly. They were getting off at the stops and bringing me little snacks. "Oh, please taste these special treats from our country. Please try our specialty." It was really lovely. It completely changed. And all that shifted was that clinging in my mind of separation. It's really quite powerful.

Nyoshul Khen talked about describing the difference between the impure and the pure mind, the deluded mind and the enlightened mind, as being a difference of narrowness and openness. In a deluded state, our mind is extremely narrow. The more constricted and narrow the mind, the more it thinks only of itself, disregarding the well-being, happiness, and suffering of others. Conversely, the enlightened Buddha is one who considers the infinity of sentient beings rather than merely being concerned with his own ego and individuality. Thus, the entire path from an ordinary being to Buddhahood is the gradual opening of the mind.

And so undistracted awareness, you could say in that way of talking, is the mind, the heart, that in that moment is completely open, free from self-referential clinging, naturally cognizant, naturally knowing, and ceaselessly responsive. Compassion, tenderness for beings.

Now on a retreat like this, where a great deal of our time is spent in the sitting, in the walking, even in moving around—noticing very carefully all the arising and passing experiences, the mental states and thoughts in particular, sensations and body—a great deal of our formal training, so to speak, is simply to watch everything come and go. It's really an emphasis on the emptiness aspect. Whatever comes, we just notice it. It goes. It doesn't matter how horrible the thought. It doesn't matter how beautiful. Horrible emotions, beautiful emotions.

Sometimes by really focusing so much on that aspect, that's how we could form a mistaken conception that emptiness means basically nothing matters. And that's how we can come out of a retreat thinking, well...

If everything's empty, you know, either on the indifferent side—who cares about anything?—or I can do whatever I want because it's all empty. Both of which are missing or lacking the tenderness, the compassion, the metta aspect of non-separation.

So how does the Buddha talk about this movement from the view, this experience of all phenomena as being intrinsically empty, nothing really of more significance than another in the light of mindfulness, to actually responding with word or action? This ceaseless responsiveness—how does nothingness, emptiness, move into a connected response or action in life?

And that's where this aspect of intention comes in. This is where, on the conceptual level, the Buddha just... he must have been so brilliant. I mean, how he could ever break all this stuff down and make his lists—it's really amazing. So the Eightfold Path, the basic path of practice: the first stage being wise understanding, really understanding the three characteristics, the Four Noble Truths, things as they are. From that understanding, the next step is variously translated as wise thought or wise intention, sometimes aspiration.

As we know, intention is just that subtle, collected movement of mind, that direction or inclination of mind that leads to action. And so that link—intention—is the link between understanding emptiness and compassionate response of word or body. This experience, this recognition and understanding in ourselves of intention, is so important.

Just as you know, intention is like the collection of mental energy in a certain direction that gives rise to action. It's not us, of course. It's simply conditioned by causes. The body hurts. There's unpleasantness. There's aversion in the mind that focuses the energy to move the arm. That's the intention.

And again, the seed of karma, of action—the seed of wholesomeness or unwholesomeness, skillfulness or unskillfulness in an action, as the Buddha spoke of it—rests not in the result of the action, not in how it looks, never mind how other people perceive it. The seed of karma is in the intention that gives rise to that action.

That's always been so fascinating to me, given how much in the world we evaluate what we've done and what other people have done, their goodness or badness or skillfulness, by the results of the action. But that's the thing that's so out of our control, isn't it? The results of action. Now I'm not going to claim that intentions are all in our control either, but we can at least affect them through cultivation of mind.

When we talk about skillful means on retreat, the whole crux, the whole kernel of skillful means is really about what are the mental factors, the mental states that give rise to the intention, that give rise to the action. That's what really determines whether it's skillful means or not.

The same action that looks the same from the outside could actually be motivated by various intentions in different people, or different intentions in you on different days. For example, taking a walk instead of going to a sitting. You all know—I don't have to tell you—the range of possible motivations for that particular action. And probably many of you have acted on that from a range of motivations.

Sometimes we'll beg somebody in an interview to not sit so much and take a walk, and the next person who walks in, we'll say stop taking so many walks, sit more. It's really about what are the conditions at the

time, what would be skillful.

For you, it's about what's the motivation. You're just a little bit bored, you want some entertainment, and it's basically craving. So you go for a walk. What that's doing is cultivating craving—wouldn't call it skillful means particularly. Other times, all you want to do is sit, but in the sitting you're just forcing with willpower, getting tighter and tighter, and you're afraid not to sit. It's basically self-hatred taking you into the sitting. And in order not to sit and take a walk, it's really a letting go of some ideas you have about yourself or perfection, just a willingness to be present in the moment, seeing conditions as they are. Very different, yet the action can look the same. And it could be one way one day for you and completely different the next day.

That's why when people say they want to plan out how much to sleep, what time of every day they're going to take their walk—you can, but it's not looking at the fact that things are changing every day. Conditions are different every day. It's the motivation arising in the moment, the mental factors giving rise to that particular intention. You can't hold on to yesterday's intention. It's what's happening now.

So intention on that level of a momentary arising. And the good news—what I want to talk about for the rest of the talk—the good news is that even if all you did was mindfulness practice, never mind metta or karuna practice, through wisdom, through clear seeing, through our moment-to-moment mindfulness practice, the habits of our mind, the intentions that lead to speech and action, that just naturally spring up when you're not sitting there trying to force it, they actually transform in the light of awareness over our life of practice.

This is really one of the ways that the purification we talk about can actually be noticed. Those bad habits, just to use local language, of greed and ill will, hatred, cruelty in response to pleasant and unpleasant—those natural bad habits do begin to transform in the light of our ongoing steady awareness. The Buddha talked about three wise intentions. He has whole suttas about this. Greed naturally begins to transform to renunciation, to non-clinging, to generosity. Ill will naturally begins to transform to friendliness, connectedness, metta. And cruelty, real hatred, naturally transforms to compassion.

I'll give you a very simple example before you start down that road of, "Yeah, right." I know this wouldn't happen here because everyone is so mindful and polite, but say you're standing in the food line. Say it's bagel day, which I'm really getting the drift is a very confused and stressful time. So it's bagel day breakfast and there's the hubbub and the lines and all these decisions you have to make in the cafeteria. You're in line and someone in a wave of confusion gets in line in front of you, doesn't even notice, and goes. They not only get in line in front of you—they get the last sesame bagel that you wanted.

Now, our natural bad habit might be one of a range. If you're the greed type, you could really feel, "How could they take that away from me?" If you're the aversive type, it's more lashing out. But you get the drift—some kind of judgment, anger, upset, blame, and then blaming yourself for feeling any of those things.

But you might find this could really happen. I know it has happened in similar situations here, where you're just standing and the whole thing happens. Maybe your mind starts with a judgment, maybe it doesn't even go there. But instead, the mindfulness—you just really see the person. That spontaneous knowing without all the concepts in between. And in that seeing, you can feel either their confusion, or they're just lost in a craving moment, or their fear, or whatever. In that feeling, seeing their pain, there's the natural response of tenderness. Either renunciation—they need it more than I do today—or a kind of compassion: wow, that really must be a suffering state, needing that bagel so much, or to be so confused. And there's no patting yourself on the back, "Aren't I doing great?" It's just a natural moment of purified intention.

I know you'll notice lots of these small moments as you go through the days here, just springing up spontaneously. Of course, we can also practice it deliberately, but I just want you to notice that this transformation does begin to happen naturally through mindfulness, through presence. When awareness is undistracted, this is the natural response. It's not something we have to plan or think about.

The second step of the Eightfold Path, Sama Sankappa, is sometimes translated as broader aspiration, which we talked about quite a bit in the first weeks of the retreat—the sense of aspiration. It's intention, but it's a more broad-based intention, the overarching sense of what's really important to us, or the direction we want to go in our practice, in our life, in a day.

This sense of aspiration, which is often referred to as right intention as well, can be on the small scale, like at the beginning of a walking period. You simply have the aspiration to really be as present as possible in this walking period. Have you noticed when you do something like that? Of course you can't control that you'll be present every moment, but it brings a certain resolution, which is one of the paramis—a certain focusing of dispersed energy, a sense of more energetic commitment.

So it could be as simple as the beginning of a sitting or a walking period, or coming to a retreat, or the overarching intention for what's really important to us in our life. Or if you have the view of eons and eons and endless lifetimes, as the Bodhisatta who eventually became the Buddha did—he made the aspiration eons and countless ages ago, when he was an ascetic at the feet of the previous Buddha, to become a Buddha, to go through all these countless lifetimes of perfecting the paramis. Now that's a vast aspiration, a vast overarching intention.

But it can be very helpful to us to have a sense of how to use this broader aspiration in our practice, in our retreat, and in our life. Having the consciousness, the awareness in our heart and mind of what's really important to us as an aspiration can serve the purpose on the moment-to-moment level of collecting our dispersed energy, of giving us strength and focus and a capacity to do things we wouldn't otherwise have thought possible. You know what I mean? You may have noticed that.

I think probably you all have. You're still here, right? You've been through a lot. If you were just at home or didn't have a broader sense of purpose—whether it's freedom or whether it's just to get through the

retreat, I don't know—but some broader sense keeps you here, even in the difficult times. If it was just day to day, "Do I like it or not?"—you'd almost all be out of here by now.

I read a book quite some years ago called *Life and Death in Shanghai*—maybe some of you have read it—about a Chinese woman, a middle-class woman who lived in Shanghai during the Cultural Revolution in the seventies, when the whole culture was turned upside down and young people called the Red Guards were terrorizing the population. Anyone who had any money or connection with Westerners, or was too bourgeois, or part of the intelligentsia—many of them were simply taken and put in jail and accused of all kinds of things.

So this woman was basically a middle-class housewife, Chinese style, with no training for any of this, and she was thrown into jail. They told her that if she would just implicate different people whose names she was given and sign a confession, she would be released. But for some reason, her very deep commitment in life was to honesty. And she refused to sign a confession because she said, "I didn't do anything. I'm not going to confess to something I didn't do." And when they wanted her to implicate other people, even in very mild ways, she would refuse for the same reason. "This isn't true."

They kept her in prison for five or six years, interrogated her frequently, treated her quite brutally—even some forms of physical torture—always giving her the opportunity to sign these confessions and get out. And she just wouldn't do it because of her commitment to honesty, which was simply more important to her than anything.

You would think that the life she had led would have given her no preparation to go through what she went through. And yet, at least as she wrote the book, she was really gutsy. She would stand up to the guards. She didn't let herself get pushed around. Really quite amazing.

Finally, she developed cancer, I think, and they were going to let her out because she was sick. They were leading her out, about to release her, and just before they got to the final door, they said, "Just come in this room a minute. On your way out, just sign this. It doesn't mean much." And she wouldn't do it. She wouldn't do it. And they let her out anyway. She was writing this book from the States, where she was living by then.

I read that years ago, and I've carried it with me ever since—really from the sense of how a deeply held value or aspiration, really an intention, can give us a strength of purpose that guides our actions and decisions. It guides the motivation in the moment of our actions and decisions. It's not that we know what's going to come. But for her, honesty was so important that it would guide her decisions. It would become her motivation for action.

So notice that in your dharma practice—how sometimes a strength comes, a sense of motivation that we're not even consciously aware of. Suddenly you think it's time to go to bed, but something else, like the Dharma, takes over and says, "I don't think so." And you start doing walking meditation. You think, "Well,

I was going to bed now." And you get to the end of the row.

This happens to me all the time. I get to the end of the row and think, "I'm just going to keep walking until I get to my room." Then I get to the end of the row and the body stops and turns around and goes back again. Nope. It's almost impersonal, but the sense of commitment to simply being awake becomes stronger. So notice that for yourself.

Both here and in daily life, if a sense of what for you is a broader aspiration is either readily accessible—you already know it—or through a little reflection you can find that deep motivation, that aspiration for yourself... Personally, I find that really useful in difficult times or confusing times. On retreat, those times you just can't imagine how you're going to get through another day or why you would want to. Or at home. To recall, even if it's just in thought at first, and then let it settle into your heart—your deepest aspiration. It can be a great source of strength and also of clarity, of collecting our dispersed energy.

So we don't just go through life like a robot, like an automaton. I feel like when I'm not paying attention, greed, hatred, and delusion are running the show. It's just like a robot, responding out of habit. But when I can tune into a deep aspiration, it can redirect things. It really gives you strength and purpose.

It doesn't mean we have a clue how it's going to look or how our life is going to look. I'm sure that woman in China never had any clue where her commitment to honesty would take her. When you read about Aung San Suu Kyi, the leader of the Burmese democracy movement—you all know who she is, right? Her path of becoming this symbol, the rallying point for all the democratic people in Burma, all the Burmese people wanting to liberate themselves from the horrific violence of a really cruel military government—it was never her plan.

She went back to Burma in 1988 to take care of her mother, who was dying. And it just happened to be at the time that these vast pro-democracy riots broke out. Because of who she is—she's the daughter of a man who was the leader of the Burmese movement to free themselves from the British after World War II, a true martyr who was killed right after they got their freedom—because she was his daughter, she became the natural rallying point. And then through her own grace and wisdom and purity, she's been able to carry that.

But she just happened to be there then. And because she became the focal point, she didn't feel she could leave. She was put under house arrest. All these years, she's always been told she could leave at any time, but she knew she could never come back. By being there, she didn't get to see her children very much at all. In the ten years they've grown up, occasionally they could visit. Occasionally her husband could visit, but not much. And he died of prostate cancer maybe two or three years ago, early, in his fifties. The Burmese government didn't allow him to come visit after he was diagnosed. She knew he was going to die. She didn't leave. She's been through so much—health problems and more—and she just stays because she knows it's her commitment.

But this is what she says. She said it was never her life purpose to be the leader of the Burmese democracy movement. That wasn't her motivation. She said, "I suppose people think I'm extraordinary because I'm so simple they can't believe it. I have very ordinary attitudes towards life." I wish they were ordinary. But she said, "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."

That's really, to me, so beautiful—this sense of how powerful our aspiration is, and how the aspiration really centers on our motivation moment to moment rather than on "I'm going to get here and it's going to look like that."

So even if your aspiration is for full awakening—and that's a beautiful aspiration—I just want to say, if you feel that you have some deep aspiration like that and it comes up, honor it. Don't buy into that little personal identified mind that says, "Not possible for me." That really dishonors an aspiration that comes from the depth of truth, from our true nature.

But whatever the aspiration, it functions by informing our moment-to-moment intention. It doesn't mean we know where it's going to go. Just like in practice, our aspiration may be to get enlightened, but if you're sitting here every moment thinking, "Now am I enlightened? How close am I to being enlightened?"—it doesn't really work too well, does it? I'm sure you've all tried that. It's like, okay, come back. The motivation is to be awake in this moment, to what's happening in this moment. So the aspiration helps us align our intentions here and now.

And of course, what we discover in aligning or just noticing our motivations here and now is, yes, they do naturally transform. But I know what a lot of you are noticing at this point is what they're like prior to having naturally transformed—how much of the seemingly automatic intentions or responses that arise are those of confusion and greed and ill will and hatred. And that's okay to notice. Don't let that discourage you, because they do naturally transform in the noticing, just in the noticing.

Remember that line I read you before—it's one of my favorites from the suttas because I think it's so rich—where the Buddha said, "Whatever one frequently thinks about, whatever one frequently dwells upon in the mind or the heart, that will become the inclination of the mind."

So rather than getting discouraged because you're noticing how much your mind has been dwelling upon greed or hatred or delusion or pride or whatever the long list is—if you get discouraged, you're just still dwelling in the negative. Rather than that, notice that when we are with mindfulness aware of the habit of mind of ill will, say, or greed,

in that moment of sati, of mindfulness, of awareness, actually that unskillful habit of mind is not being reinforced. It's not being fed. In that mindfulness, we're basically disengaging from clinging to the greed or the aversion or the fear. And the mindfulness then is shifting the habit. It's shifting the inclination of mind to that of letting go, to that of seeing clearly, to that of non-hatred.

And this is really important. Every single moment of mindfulness is having that effect of transforming the habitual inclinations or intentions that arise in the mind.

These habits of how we've spent our life—it's both beautiful and a little scary to see how they can manifest as we get older, if we really have lived a very deluded life, if that's where we've taken refuge. If we've taken refuge in our life in ill will, well, what's going to come out at the end? Chögyam Trungpa's line when he's asked, "What's reborn?" And he says, "Your bad habits."

Ajahn Sumedho—I don't know if it was on one of the tapes, it's tricky to tell a story Ajahn Sumedho told because I'm not sure which tapes were playing here—but at a retreat I was sitting with him, he was talking about visiting a nursing home in England. And as you know, there's a whole range of people in nursing homes. He talked to a couple of elderly women who weren't really quite there—I don't know if they had Alzheimer's or just some kind of dementia—but not really quite there. But two of them, what was left really was their bad habits. And one woman, whatever you say to her, she'd just say, "You're not going to get my money. You're not going to get my money." And the other one—excuse my language, but this is what he said—whatever you say to her, she'd just go, "Shit. Just shit."

I thought, whoa. One does not want to discover that that's where one's taken refuge throughout one's life. All scary.

On the other hand, maybe two, two and a half years ago at a large Buddhist teachers conference—Buddhist teachers Asian and Western, all the different traditions, and the Dalai Lama was the main speaker—the thing that has stayed with me the most, I actually don't remember hardly anything the Dalai Lama said. I mean, he's far out and all. But what really moved me was Maha Ghosananda, the Cambodian monk who's been a peace activist for many years, worked in the Cambodian refugee camps after the genocide, and came back and taught metta, and has taught all over the world, led peace marches in Cambodia.

I actually don't know how he is now, but he was basically becoming senile at that point. And he was at the conference, and someone was designated part of each day to stay with him, just to make sure he stayed with us all and didn't wander off. But what was so inspiring to me was that he would just be sitting there, and anyone who approached him out of two or three hundred people, as soon as you would get face-to-face with him, he would connect with you and just beam with metta. Talk to you, bow to you, bless you with metta. And it wasn't a disconnected sense. It was totally connected. This man just beaming metta—that's where he took his refuge in life.

It was deeply, deeply inspiring to me to think about what's going to be left when we go. Nothing we have, none of our actions in the world—really it's about who we've been, where our mind and heart has dwelt, where we've taken refuge.

And I want to emphasize again: yes, practicing metta and compassion, that is a very powerful way of

transforming our habits, our intentions. But also simple, clear, direct connection of mindfulness brings out the natural response of inclusion and compassion.

I have to read this poem because I haven't read a Mary Oliver poem, and you have to read one before you're allowed to leave. But actually this is exactly what I'm saying about how simple, direct connection of awareness is all-inclusive.

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 is 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. And 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.

And so, simply by our willingness to be totally present, to pay attention without withholding, without

judging, without prior concept, this transformation of habits of heart and mind takes place. From a simple moment of tenderness, through our continuing practice, something we can cultivate begins to grow. Even naturally, our aspiration and our sense of compassion really begin to move in the direction of the vastness of bodhicitta. The vastness of our practice at some point truly does stop being just for ourselves and becomes a sense of wanting to awaken in order to help awaken all beings.

According to a talk I heard from the Dalai Lama, how does this bodhicitta develop? Just as I was saying—from deep insight into what suffering is. And how does that arise? By focusing on our own experience. As we focus on our own experience of suffering, compassion strengthens with the sense of empathy and connectedness with all beings. This happens naturally, really. We can help it along, I'll admit, but we start where we are.

That's why the difficult times in a retreat are so important. We say this over and over, and in the middle of it you can't really get a sense of it because you're struggling so much. But the difficult times in retreat are really the places where we're gaining that deep insight into suffering and that sense of empathy with all beings. It's so important to start where we are and to honor, to see how even the most seemingly trivial experience is transforming where we take refuge, how we live our life.

In one retreat that I was sitting with Sayadaw U Pandita, I went into an interview with him while caught in an extremely heavy bout of self-judging—very negative—which I didn't tell him. You don't go in and give him the content of your thoughts. He's not interested. You just go in and report what happens in the sitting: I noticed rising and falling, I felt these sensations, thought arose, I would note it.

But he knows what's happening. It's really quite interesting—he's such a master. So he could tell that I was in this really vicious bout of self-judging and a lot of thinking. And he said to me, "Some people talk to themselves on retreat. Have you ever noticed that?"

I said, "Yeah, yeah, I think I've noticed that."

He said, "Well, it's supposed to be a silent retreat."

People think he's not funny, but he can be really quite funny.

I said, "Yeah, I know."

He said, "Well, which do you think is better—to talk to yourself or to talk to other yogis?"

And I said, "Well, that's true. Given the way I'm talking to myself, it would probably be better to talk to other yogis. They would never be so cruel."

It was very helpful, just pointing that out. Start where you are. How we meet the difficult experiences—and I know I said this in a previous talk, so I'll just remind you again—how we meet the difficulty is what creates the transformation of intentions. All that vicious self-judging, that's the previous

habit of my mind. That's old karma, results coming up. When I can meet that with simple awareness, that's the transformation. That's the cultivation of compassion and wisdom.

It doesn't even mean that vicious self-judging stops. But that ability to recognize it is very different from agreeing with it—"Oh yeah, you're right, you are the worst person that ever walked the earth"—or believing "I should be past this by now. I shouldn't be having these thoughts. This just shows what a bad..." and then spiraling into the next round. Instead, there's simply: "Ah, self-judging is like this."

I know when you come into interviews and we say that, you kind of walk out thinking, "Well, that was really helpful"—perhaps a bit skeptically. But it's huge. Every moment of awareness like that is transforming the habits of mind. We just want too much too soon. How long have we been cultivating these bad habits? And just in this life, one pales to think of it. Three months of cultivating wise intention—that's good. That's great. Luckily, wise intention, I think, is really stronger than our bad habits. I don't think we have to cultivate one moment of wisdom for every one moment of confusion. But we do need to acknowledge it.

There's a quotation from Gandhi I really like where he said, "Almost everything you do will seem insignificant, but it is very important that you do it." I think that's a great description of our practice here in the hall, but also in our life. Every moment of awareness, every moment of kindness, every moment of clear seeing may seem insignificant if we're looking to results, if we're looking to goals. But if we're just willing to be there in that moment for it, it's very important that we do it.

And so we don't have to think that we're cultivating bodhicitta, that we're transforming the habits of mind from confusion to non-clinging and compassion. We don't have to be the Dalai Lama or Gandhi. Just be willing to do each insignificant moment of attention. Start where we are.

And then that ceaselessly responsive aspect of emptiness manifests itself effortlessly. It's not that in life we then have to think, "What would be the appropriate compassionate response here?" It just comes. One teacher I met once called it "doing the obvious." You just do it because it's the obvious thing to do.

Once I heard an interview on public radio with a professional basketball player, a young man in his first year. To make the pros—that's got to be really the high point of a young athlete's life. And he was having a good year. They were interviewing him because his sister needed a kidney transplant, and if his blood type matched, he was going to give her his kidney. The interviewer was rather breathlessly questioning him because that would mean the end of his professional basketball career, which I'm not sure why, but it would. And the interviewer kept going, "This is so amazing! You're willing to give up your basketball career!" On and on.

And this young man was so cool. He would just say, "What are you talking about? My sister? She'll need a kidney or she'll die. I have two kidneys. It's a no-brainer." Just doing the obvious. And he just wouldn't go there about how amazing he was or that there was even another choice to make. It was really quite

something. I wish I'd caught his name. It was really a beautiful thing.

Doing the obvious. And whether it's just picking up our foot and putting down the foot again, or giving a kidney, or just letting the person cut in line in front of you and have that sesame bagel and wishing them well—doing the obvious.

I want to end with something from Pema Chödrön talking about bodhicitta. At the relative level, she calls it noble heart bodhicitta: "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.

When we experience the soft spot of bodhicitta, it's like returning home. It's as if we had amnesia for a very long time and awakened to remember who we really are.

The poet Rumi writes of night travelers who search the darkness instead of running from it—a companionship of people willing to know their own fear. Whether it's in the small fears of a job interview or the unnameable terrors imposed by war, prejudice, and hatred, in the tenderness of the pain itself, night travelers discover the light of bodhicitta.

And then just the simplicity of it. She says bodhicitta is available in moments of caring for things, when we clean our glasses or brush our hair. It's available in moments of appreciation, when we notice the blue sky or pause and listen to the rain. It is available in moments of gratitude, when we recall a kindness or recognize another person's courage.

Whenever we let go of holding on to ourselves and look at the world around us, whenever we connect with sorrow, whenever we connect with joy, whenever we drop our resentment and complaint—in those moments bodhicitta is here.

Just doing the obvious.

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