Compassionate Intention

Carol Wilson · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Carol Wilson · 57:20

When I was walking around outside just now, and we get into those states of just that open awareness—not really any thought or any sense of differentiation from the environment—it's just so peaceful. There's just no problem. I'm pointing to that state of open awareness. In that state there's no problem and there's nothing to say, nothing to talk about. It's sort of hard to talk from that state, which is why I have seven thousand notes.

But in a way that leads into what I do want to talk about. In the way that the Buddhist teachings are described, they are said to have two wings, like a bird has to have two wings to fly. The two wings of the Buddha's teaching are the wings of great wisdom and great compassion. So mostly tonight I want to talk about compassion—how it manifests, how we can work with it, and how we notice it becoming stronger through our practice in the force of intention.

I heard a talk by Robert Thurman once, who is quite a Tibetan scholar and practitioner, and he was talking about the balance of wisdom and compassion. It really struck home with me when he talked about how the wisdom of emptiness, of non-self, of impermanence, can seem by itself kind of cool and removed. We touch it in silence, in samadhi, or like when I'm ambling around outside and it's just what it is—there's nothing else to say or do. But it can seem quite removed. Whereas compassion is a movement of the heart and it arises from connectedness: connectedness with others, connectedness with ourselves, connectedness with the world.

They really balance one another. Because just as the wisdom of emptiness can seem kind of off on its own somehow, compassion without the balancing force of wisdom, of understanding, can lead us into overwhelm. As some of you probably know, you can turn from compassion to frustration—you can drown in suffering. But compassion is said to be the link between Buddhas and beings. The wisdom awareness of emptiness finds its natural expression in the actions of compassion, so that in a way the two naturally go together anyway.

It is said that compassion is the link between Buddhas and beings. Think about it: the historical Buddha, what we know about him when he was about thirty-five is when he came to his great opening and understanding, complete enlightenment. He could very well have just spent the rest of his life sitting off in the bliss of Nibbana and been very happy. He didn't have any more problems. But instead, he spent the next forty-five years tirelessly walking all around India, teaching. It's the natural expression.

How we can begin to see this manifest in our practice here—and that's really what I want to talk about tonight, our practice here—is in the expression of intention, which we've talked about a little before.

When we're sitting, walking, just being, in the understanding of how things truly are, everything comes and goes. As Joseph was saying this morning, it just kind of moves through: happiness, sadness, compassion, hatred, boredom, pain, joy. It comes, it's there, it moves through. Nothing is more important than anything else.

But where what is arising does begin to have impact or effect is when it functions as the intention that leads to thought, speech, or action, which is arising all the time. That's how we live and move. What's really wonderful about this practice is, one, there are many specific things we do, many ways to work with consciously purifying our intentions. But what also happens is simply by seeing, simply by being connected, simply by letting awareness do its thing, intentions from which we speak and act naturally purify themselves. Lucky thing. And it does happen.

I know we've spoken some about intention. I just want to again describe it because it really is so key. We know that our tendency, for many of us, is to evaluate our actions or others' actions by the results or by how it appears to us, often forgetting to tune in to what the intention is, or imputing from someone else's action. It's easy to impute what we think their intention is, but we can't know.

In the Buddhist understanding of karma, of cause and effect, the seed of all effect—of all thought, speech, and action—is in the intention. It is so key, so powerful. I've personally been finding awareness of intention, the willingness, the remembering to tune into that over and over and over, to be a fantastic support in my daily life of really exploring what I'm doing and why, and effecting change in what I do and why.

This intention is like the volition, the subtle impulse that arises before a thought—well, that one's pretty hard to notice—before speech, before action. That particular volition in any moment can be accompanied by or driven by any of the whole range of mental experience.

It can be accompanied by love, by greed, by delusion, by generosity, by compassion, by hatred, by whatever.

There's a story told in the Buddhist suttas that shows the importance of intention and how we can't tell from the outside. It seems there was a monk who was practicing very diligently, doing his walking meditation, and he was blind. So he was walking in the forest, and as he walked, he was stepping on ants without knowing it and killing them. Now, he was supposed to be an arhat, which in this terminology means completely enlightened—which means delusion or hatred or greed would not be able to arise in him as an intention to action.

Some of the other monks saw this and went running to the Buddha. This actually happens a lot in the suttas; it kind of amuses me. They went running to the Buddha and said, "Well, he's supposed to be an arhat, but he's stepping on ants and killing them." There are many stories where things came out like that. And the Buddha—who supposedly had the power to see into the mind of all beings—said, "No, he is an

arhat. And because he doesn't know that he's killing the ants, and there's absolutely no intention, it's not an unskillful act." Which is very interesting. Now, once the bhikkhu knows there are ants there, if he were to keep walking anyway, it's a whole different story.

That's the crux of intention, from the way the Buddha described it. It's extremely powerful, and it's not the way we sometimes tend to look at or evaluate action.

The Buddha described a path of practice, of development, that we can cultivate in our daily life and our meditative life, called the Eightfold Noble Path—kind of eight different aspects. It starts at the beginning, one to eight, but it's really more like a circle, like a mandala. The first step or path is wise understanding. We wouldn't even begin a path of purification, a path of awakening, without some degree of wise understanding—just knowing somehow that things are other than they might superficially seem.

Each of these stages informs the next. The next stage is wise aspiration or wise intention, leading to the next three, which have to do with speech and action in the world: wise speech, wise action, wise livelihood. Out of those eight aspects, one of them is wise intention, wise aspiration—extremely important. What this says, at least to me, is that how we understand the world informs our intentions, how we think, which then leads to our speech and actions.

For example, if we're a psychopath and the way we understand the world is that it doesn't matter what I do to anybody, that it has no effect, then we do whatever we want. If we understand the sense of cause and effect, then we'll be much more careful with our speech and actions. Or if we understood as a small child that asking questions or questioning authority would get us a slap upside the head, then that's going to affect many of the ways we speak and act later in life—until we understand that it wasn't an accurate understanding.

The Buddha says that the mind is the forerunner of all action. Incredibly powerful. But so subtle. The movement of intention and the movements of our mind are so subtle and so quick that I think that's the beauty of taking a time like this—ten days—where it seems like we're not doing much, but we're really exploring these movements and actions of the mind and how they affect our actions in our life and how we deal with ourselves. We really need to give ourselves this deep inquiry in order to begin to understand on another level.

It's said—and it's my experience and also what I deeply have faith in—that the natural expression of our understanding is compassion: intentions of compassion in our thought, speech, and action. There are many levels of this. On the biggest, vast level, of course, is that sense of the intimation, or just the brief recognition, of the ultimate truth, of our true nature. Or as Sogyal Rinpoche puts it—no description is really accurate, so this is just one I picked—"that which we really are: unchanging, pure awareness, which underlies the whole of life and death."

Just touching that, in that moment when we come upon it, the sense of no separate self, of constant

change, of no lasting phenomenon to rely on—that can scare us to death. The fear of change, the fear of nothingness, the fear of emptiness: you can just start to come close to it, in or out of practice, and the mind goes, "No way, thank you, I'm checking out of here."

But what's so wonderful is the flip side of that. Just the barest instant of touching this ground of pure awareness, the knowing of no separation, of total connectedness—in that moment there's no sense of separation, and therefore nothing is lacking and nothing needs to be pushed away. The idea of wanting something or fearing something or needing something just isn't relevant. It doesn't have anything to do with what we truly are.

As Thich Nhat Hanh said, "You recognize there is no need to put something in front of you and chase after it, because you see that everything is already here in yourself." Total completeness. And the natural expression of that completeness is that it manifests as the movement of connectedness to all other beings and things, because there is no "me and them"—there is just "we are." The touching of others' pain and the natural response of compassion to it shines forth spontaneously in these moments.

And then on the other levels—and that's what I want to talk about for the rest of this talk—are other levels of practice. When we might have moments when we're not quite resting in the vast space of completeness. And as clear as our overall intentions might be, these old habits somehow tend to creep in. They tend to slip up on us. The habits of greed, of anger, of confusion.

And that's really, to me, why I practice. To keep rediscovering what is true and to keep discovering how the habits come in, to recognize them again for being as empty as they are, and to allow the natural purification of understanding and intention to again take place.

So I want to talk now on the level of working in different ways—how this practice, for me, helps with these habits in the area of intention and compassion.

To begin with, when I think about it, or in talking to people—and I teach a lot of retreats, so I talk to a lot of people in this particular mode—what's really painful and almost shocking to me, although I don't know why it should be shocking, is something I encounter often. If you look around at the world, it's kind of obvious. It's almost the way of the world. It's sort of expected, it seems to me in some ways, that the motivations for action of anger, of craving or greed, are perfectly fine motivations. I mean, they definitely get a lot done.

And sometimes people in talking to me on retreat will say, "Well, but if I don't act from craving, if I don't act from anger, what am I going to do? Just sit in my room for the rest of my life?" And that makes me so sad, because there's the underlying assumption that those are the only motivations for activity. And it's so powerful that I find myself, if I'm not paying attention, easily drawn into that myself.

But again, as intention is the crux, even though we can't judge from the outcome or the result, what I feel quite deeply and what I also notice when I look around is that at some point, when our intentions—or the

intentions of the bigger picture—change somehow and do begin to come from hatred or from confusion or from greed, something that might have very powerful and significant effects begins to get a little twisted somehow. It can't quite maintain the power.

And this is really big-picture examples. Remember when the Berlin Wall went down a few years ago? I think it was in the middle of a full three-month course. We were watching it on TV, and I remember just feeling such a thrill, this feeling of, "Oh, community and love and kindness is really triumphing."

I have some friends who live in Berlin, before and after, and they told me a couple of things about it. One, that big party that it looked like they were having on top of the wall that seemed so loving and ecstatic—a woman friend of mine was there, and she said it started out nice, but it turned into this kind of drunken revelry that was really scary and unpleasant. I said, "Oh, you know, another illusion I had destroyed."

And that, again—Germany, or we can see the same thing in some ways in all of Eastern Europe and the old Soviet Union—what looked like this great moment, this regime built on fear and oppression has fallen, and now there'll be this really good-hearted sense of working together. Some of the people, West Berliners—and I have really good German friends, and they make the distinction. They can tell right away if someone was from East Germany or West Germany, even though there's not supposed to be East or West anymore. And my friend Franz told me that there's this T-shirt that says, "Bring back our wall." Because they liked it better that way.

And of course I don't even need to talk about what's going on in the former Yugoslavia and Romania and all those countries where the one fearful oppression going away just made room for other hatreds and fears and greeds to arise—the hatred of the other. And it's so painful.

And I'm not trying to be naive and say, "Oh, if we just all have loving-kindness, everything will be okay." But I'm just trying to, in this context, say that what we can work with in the context of this meditation retreat is being very honest and very clear with our own intentions and what effect that has, and how easily we can be deluded about our own intentions. But also to begin to appreciate—which I'm sure all of you must. I mean, of course, I don't know specifically what you each do. But again, I'm convinced that the work that you do springs from compassion and real caring and interconnectedness. Or what would any of us be doing here?

So it's not to say that isn't so, but within it, to really continue to investigate on a moment-to-moment level and see how that can change. I know, looking at how compassion can be our prime motivation for something, but it can so easily—the other old habits can slip in. It can become mixed. Like, if we don't have the balance of wisdom, the equanimity of wisdom, seeing that with all our good intentions we can't control the results. And that, I know, over time can so easily lead to a shift from real open-hearted compassion to a kind of frustration, or a hardness, or a despair.

There's a story in the autobiography of Sister Phượng, or Chan Khong as she's called now, which I've just

been reading, and it's inspired me a lot. Because I met her, I don't know, in 1986, spent a few weeks with her and Thich Nhat Hanh. And at the time, not knowing too much of her history, knowing they'd worked a lot in Vietnam during the war and seen enormous suffering, but just meeting her and spending time, I was so impressed by—she's a dynamo—the enormous amount of energy that she had at that time, and seems like she still has.

And at Plum Village, she was constantly doing things to help people. Everything from spraying bug spray in somebody's room who was complaining about spiders, to working with all the children, to using her free time to send parcels back to Vietnam, to trying to raise money, to giving dharma talks. Just one thing after the other.

And I really felt—and again, I can only project a little—but I really felt the sense of the power of compassion as a motivation. It is ultimately so much stronger than anger or greed or confusion. It just seems to lend so much energy. I remember thinking, I'd be sitting there: "May all beings be happy. Wouldn't it be nice to do something?" And she would have run around and done thirty-five things in the time I was just sitting there going, "Oh, you know, it's great." There's something to be said for someone really grounded in compassion.

Reading her book, I find myself learning a lot. Here is someone who's clearly constantly working with cultivating the intention of compassion—not just assuming it's going to be there, but constantly working with it.

In this field of not being able to control the outcome, can we still come back to love and compassion? She told a story from 1967 when she was in jail in Vietnam for carrying one of Thich Nhat Hanh's books. The conditions were quite wretched. After some weeks, a high-powered person interceded and she was released. She had been in a cell with many people, and among them were two twelve-year-old girls who hadn't done anything. They were simply in the wrong place at the wrong time and got swept up with a bunch of other so-called guerrillas.

As she was being released, she spoke to the commandant and said, "About these two girls—prison is not a good place for twelve-year-old girls, and they've done nothing. Couldn't you release them?" A totally courageous and compassionate thing to do. And the response of the commandant was, "Oh, these prisoners have been talking to each other. That isn't good." And he made the conditions harsher.

It's horrible. And you can't know in advance. Just reading it, I tighten up, I get indignant—or I could move into a space of passivity, thinking it's better not to say or do anything because it might make things worse.

So how do we continue to open, continue to cultivate compassion—which is a soft and connecting quality—in the face of all kinds of harshness and ignorance? How do we maintain the openness, the motivation to continue to act from compassion when other people, even if they think they're acting from compassion, don't do the things we think are the compassionate thing to do? How do we balance the

motivation of compassion with the equanimity of wisdom—recognizing that our views, as right as we think they are, are still views? Other people will act as compassionately as they can, but from their own understanding, which might be different from ours. That might really be off—but who's to say?

I'll give an example. Once I mentioned Mother Teresa while talking about the amazing energy of compassion. Afterward, a man came up quite incensed and said, "How could you talk about her being compassionate when she must be homophobic given the way she treats AIDS patients? Not to mention her attitude on birth control in countries like India." These are valid points in a way.

Then, quite interestingly and having absolutely nothing to do with this, the next day an old friend came to visit me at the retreat. Apropos of nothing, she started talking about how she happened to be in Calcutta a few months before and had spent a day volunteering in Mother Teresa's main hospital. She described the unbelievable suffering there—something her mind and my mind in this culture can hardly take in. She gave vivid descriptions of the sick children, the undernourished children, all the suffering. And she spoke of the beautiful, serene quality of all the nuns—not the famous Mother Teresa, but all the anonymous nuns who have devoted their lives to serving.

I thought, that's just a really interesting balance. And who's to say? Who's to say what's right?

I myself often find that when I have some idea of what compassionate action should look like, and when it doesn't happen that way, my own intentions and responses begin to harden. They turn judgmental, or angry, or despairing. And so my work is to come back to my own intention—to act as clearly as possible.

One last area I think is really most important: when we're working, especially on the front lines as you all are—working so hard, trying to do so much for the environment, for people—sometimes we forget that compassion is undiscriminating. It has a boundless aspect, which means that it includes ourselves. Sometimes we forget that.

I'm going to read this from Thomas Merton:

"There is a pervasive form of contemporary violence to which the idealist fighting for peace by nonviolent means most easily succumbs: activism and overwork. The rush and pressure of modern life are a form, perhaps the most common form, of its innate violence. To allow oneself to be carried away by a multitude of conflicting concerns, to surrender to too many demands, to commit oneself to too many projects, to want to help everyone and everything, is to succumb to violence."

The frenzy of the activist neutralizes her work for peace. It destroys the fruitfulness of her own work because it can kill the root of inner wisdom that makes the work fruitful.

Again, an opinion—a powerful one. Something to keep looking at.

So in all things, and this is where we come back to this practice, which gives us, hopefully, the capacity to remember, to continue to bring mindful awareness to this aspect of intention. Without it, the old habits

begin to creep in. With it, it takes a real commitment to inquiry, a commitment to awareness, and a real kind of determination to stick with it. It's not like I can make the intention, "Okay, I'm really going to be aware of intentions from now on," and have it happen. It really takes being willing to keep waking up.

From Sister Chân Không again—now she's talking about more current times, where monks and nuns and artists and intellectuals are being arrested and tortured and killed in Vietnam:

"Every time I received news of a new arrest, I became angry, and I knew that I had to do walking meditation. Sometimes I would walk several hours in order to regain my calm. Sometimes I needed several days or even weeks to relax my heartbeat, knowing how unfairly the authorities have acted in arresting such a lovely monk, nun, or artist. I always waited until I felt serene before beginning any campaign. Thanks to this serenity, my words were gentle but firm, and people found it easier to cooperate."

She gives lots of other examples of times that she didn't do that—where she lost her calm and basically considers that she blew it, that things didn't work and people just resisted her. Very impressive. And this is after thirty years of consistent activism and consistent commitment to the path of compassion and understanding. It never just gets so automatic that we don't take responsibility for inquiring into our own intentions.

One teacher said once that our old habits of confusion don't just vanish, but they wear out slowly, like an old piece of cloth. They get thinner and thinner, and you can sort of see through them. There are some little holes. Maybe one day it's gone altogether. It's little by little.

So we do find that the intentions will begin to purify naturally. You might notice it even on retreat, in little things. And I think it's helpful just to look at little things—don't go for the biggest, most difficult situation.

I don't know, it doesn't feel like that's happening at this retreat, but at some retreats, food is like a major issue. Lunchtime becomes a very significant time of day. So, for example, someone might find that there's fear of not getting enough food. All that has to happen, say in a three-month course, is that one day there's not enough food and the last few people come and the casseroles run out. That's all that has to happen to set up this kind of mindfully quiet stampede. Everyone's trying to look nonchalant. There's this intensity five minutes before the bell rings for food.

People will often notice—and you can notice yourself—this particular example might not apply, but any other little thing—where one day you notice it come up: "Oh no, there's only five muffins and there's seven people in front of me. What's going to happen?" And then the thought arises: "That's okay. I'm glad they're getting the muffins, and I'll live." You kind of go, "Where did that come from? That doesn't sound like me." But it is. It's a little thing, but it's a natural purification of intention. It's an intention of generosity, or letting go.

Notice the little things. Sometimes we're so hard on ourselves—we want to be like this perfect,

compassionate bodhisattva—and we'll just put down these small shifts: "It's about time you gave up your greed." Honor the little things. Appreciate them.

So I want to talk about a couple of ways that we consciously, in our practice, cultivate and see how our intentions begin to change—from greed, from hatred, to compassion and kindness, to love. One big one is something Joseph spoke about last night.

And that's opening to pain. Simply the willingness to be fully present for pain has the effect of opening into understanding and compassion.

I want to give three simple examples of different kinds of pain from my own experience. One is physical pain. One time I was in the hospital, quite acutely ill and in a lot of pain. As you probably know, intense pain can have the effect of being very isolating. There's this sense—however painful it is and however nice people might be—it's really clear that I'm the one in pain, not them. It somehow isn't quite shared.

I was like that for a few days and also pretty out of it, not really knowing what was going on. At some point I sort of came to and realized I was in a room with three other women, really elderly women in their eighties or so. For some reason it was an orthopedic ward, which wasn't what was wrong with me, and I saw these really old, frail women all up in casts, their arms up and their legs up, unable to move. They were moaning and crying, and it was really sad.

I came to and saw that, and it just started opening up into this sense of not just me and my pain, but all of us here. What was going on with them was really intense, much more than me. And somehow this sense spread out where I thought: How many rooms are there just in this hospital? How many hospitals just in this little area, in this state, just in this country? It just kept going and going.

Out of that came such a sense of the interconnectedness of all of us in our pain. Even the people who weren't in pain at that time will be in pain at another time. This sense of compassion is a real active sense of connectedness to pain—sometimes defined as a quivering of the heart in response to suffering. It's active and connected. It has nothing to do with pity or sympathy or "that poor person over there." It's really a sense of togetherness, of sharing. And that grew for me very strongly out of that physical pain.

Another example is our willingness to open to emotional pain. This was ten or twelve years ago. I'd been in a relationship for about five years, and it broke up. For some reason, particular relationships can somehow trigger this enormity of grief and loss and despair, and this one did.

Before we broke up there had been this huge fear and denial—I had this image that we were in this perfect relationship. As soon as we broke up, the fear went, because what I had been afraid of was already happening. I began to see how much I'd been denying. This wasn't perfect. What are you kidding? This wasn't even that hot. And even seeing that, though—no longer living in this delusion of perfection—I went into such a state of grief and despair. The kind where I would wake up in the morning with this heaviness: I just can't believe I have to live through another day.

Of course there's a lot of resistance at first, fighting and wanting to make it go away. Well, the fact is it went on for two years. At some point, really within a couple of months—I was living my life, I wasn't just doing nothing. During this period of grief, I was in England and I came back and began a two-year stint of managing our meditation center, IMS. I was actually quite busy, and also felt like I was a basket case because I was really in deep emotional pain.

One time I was talking to Joseph about it. I said I was such a basket case, that I shouldn't be managing, shouldn't be in such a position of responsibility. And his immortal advice was: "So what else are you going to do? Go sit around and mope?" It was helpful.

Anyway, the point I'm trying to get to is that somewhere within a couple of months, I really accepted that this was a process that

I had to go through. I didn't like it, but I felt—and in retrospect, I feel this even more strongly—that I really deeply opened to and accepted this depth of grief and sadness.

It's not like the minute you accept something, it goes away. It doesn't always work like that. And I could see early on that this was a grief that had to do with—I don't know—lifetimes. It wasn't just about this one incident.

The process went in phases, like peeling away layers of an onion. There would be real deep grief, and I would allow it, sit with it, and then it would open up into this sense of love and connection with all beings that was amazing—certainly not something I was looking for. I was just trying to let the grief be there.

Over the period of two years, my friends got really sick of it. They said, "Okay, it's time to move on now, Carol." I wasn't going around talking about it all the time, but they knew it was there. And then there was a point where it just went. It was gone, really, really gone, and I knew it.

Looking back, I feel that was an incredibly valuable period of my life, because the outcome was both a sense of strong love and compassion. That man and the woman he got involved with—just two weeks after we split up—they're actually two of my closest friends now. I live with them for weeks at a time when I'm in California. And when I look, there's just no trace of that old pain. It's like a whole other lifetime we're in now. I really credit that opening to suffering, which allowed everything to purify in that way.

I've also found that by really allowing myself to know how heavy grief can be, without judging it too harshly or telling myself that it wasn't really so horrible compared to what others experience—that this has led me to true compassion for the grief and pain of other people in whatever circumstances they find themselves.

I really value that time as a gift.

A third way that I consciously work with opening to pain—and this isn't such a success story—is through what's called the pain of other people. Though in my experience, it actually isn't other people; it's my own

experience. I work with this consciously, often when I go to India, where we're simply confronted by so much suffering, so many beggars. Or New York City, or any of the big cities in this country nowadays—it's actually not as different as it used to be.

I just watch. How long am I able to stay really connected and compassionate? It's not really about whether I give or don't give, but more about the compassion—that touching of suffering, that touching of hearts. When I'm open, there's a connection. I can look at the person, smile, revere them.

And it's so painful, because I know I could empty my whole wallet, empty all the money I brought with me, and I wouldn't make a dent. So I observe: How long can I really stay open? And then I see myself start to shut down. If I look closely, the shutting down comes about because I don't want to feel the pain I'm feeling anymore. So I shut down.

The effect is a real separation. I'm not really able to have that eye-to-eye contact anymore. I'm looking away. I want to just get back to my hotel. And if I'm really honest, that's actually more painful.

So this is just something I work with. It's true that the suffering in this world is overwhelming, and we can definitely drown in it. In cultivating an openness to our own pain and suffering, and to the suffering in the world, it's very important to find skillful boundaries.

Whether you're on retreat here, whether you're in your work, whether you're traveling—don't expect that you have to be open all the time. If you're dealing with some painful experience here, whether it's a pain in your knee, a really difficult emotional experience, anger, grief, or just self-judgment that you're not concentrated enough—or some story you create about being sleepy—it doesn't really matter what the experience is.

This is where we come back to intention. How do we relate, moment to moment, to this difficult experience? And this is where we can consciously cultivate compassion toward ourselves.

As Thich Nhat Hanh writes: "I have to deal with my anger with care, with love, with tenderness, with nonviolence. We do not need to consider anger, hatred, or any other experience as enemies we have to fight or destroy. That would be like transforming yourself into a battlefield."

If you cannot be compassionate to yourself, you cannot be compassionate to others. And so our whole practice here is: can we work with deep compassion toward ourselves, just in these little mundane moment-to-moment experiences? Notice how you meet that self-judgment. How do you meet that sleepiness? How do you meet that agony, or that wishing that you could experience something deeper than what is actually happening? Do you meet it with resistance? Can we just gently allow it? Feel the emotion in your body. Let it be just as it is. We don't need to make up a story about it. We can almost cradle it in the gentle, loving field of awareness.

In some ways, the practice of metta, the energy of compassion, is actually the energy of open, accepting

awareness. They're really two aspects of the same thing.

Another way you can notice how you're greeting your experience is that intention often manifests as thought. Sometimes I know I'll think I'm just being with what's happening, but the little commentary—that little running commentary that comes up once in a while—can be incredibly vicious. I think I'm just being quiet, but the commentary is just one nasty comment after another.

Once I was sitting with a Burmese teacher, Sayadaw U Pandita, the one Joseph was talking about, who could be quite stern. He's actually been quite kind with me, quite compassionate. And he can really tell what's going on; you don't have to tell him much. I went in one time, and I wasn't even aware that I was having this really atrociously vicious running commentary. He just looked at me and said, "Some people talk to themselves. Have you ever noticed that?"

I said, "Yeah."

He said, "Well, it's supposed to be a silent retreat." Then he asked, "Which do you think is better, to talk to yourself or to talk to somebody else?"

I said, "Well, the way it's going, somebody else would probably feel a lot nicer."

It was very helpful. And that's where Joseph's mantra of "it's okay"—it might seem a little forced, but actually a deliberate thought substitution from "you stupid jerk, are you still getting lost in thought?" to "it's okay" is a huge difference. In that moment, you're developing the intention of compassion. It's just in these little things that it happens.

Again, I want to say that in very difficult experiences, compassion sometimes means backing off. That's a skillful means you learn to discern for yourself. It doesn't mean pushing relentlessly. For example, when I was going through that grief, it wouldn't have been wise to say, "I'm going to get to the bottom of it, I'm sitting here until it's gone," and push, push, push until you're just a basket case. Sometimes it means backing off, opening up, moving to hearing, going outside, refreshing your heart, refreshing your mind.

And then other times we make the mistake of saying, "Well, I'm really going to take care of myself. I'm just going to be kind to myself, so I won't look at this now." I think it was Chögyam Trungpa who talked about idiot compassion, where we say, "Just take it easy. I'm not going to push too hard." And basically what we're doing is avoiding. So I have something I say to myself often. When Joseph was talking about wanting to be comfortable last night, I really resonated, because it's one of the challenges I give myself. When I feel I'm falling into idiot compassion, I ask myself, "Do I want to be comfortable, or do I want to be free?" Sometimes you know. Not to be too hard on yourself when you choose comfort, but know what we're doing. That's all.

There are many other ways, which I want to mention briefly. Working with loving-kindness meditation, with the metta—that's actually a practice, a cultivation of intention. As we sit and bring up the wish, "May

I be happy, may I be free from danger," whatever the phrases are, it's not that we somehow have this naive idea that if I say it enough, everything's going to change, or that if I wish this person happiness, then all their suffering will go away. It's not that.

It's more that we are cultivating and strengthening the power of that intention in ourselves. And it's very interesting and quite powerful how it begins to surface spontaneously in our lives.

I used to think that in practicing metta meditation, if it worked, that meant we'd be kind of bounding around, filled with this boundless ecstatic love for all beings—that kind of outpouring. And sometimes it does feel like that. But actually, the way I've experienced it is as a broadening, a real expansive quality of meeting the world. What I've found happening more and more, quite spontaneously, is that I'll enter a situation where there's something difficult, I see that quite clearly, and where the first response is aversion—it's there—but then quite spontaneously comes up, "Oh, and there's this beautiful aspect of the situation as well." And it changes everything. There's a real appreciation and a broad acceptance of things as they are that allows for much more positive and clear action. It's been very amazing to me, actually, watching this effect in my life.

I use loving-kindness or metta a lot. I use it on planes. I use it in supermarkets when I'm just standing and starting to get impatient in line. It's me and them, and I wish they would hurry up and get out of the way. And I just start to send a little metta—just those simple phrases, not trying to make anything happen. And it's amazing. Within a minute or two, there's just this sense of us doing our thing, and there's not a problem. Very, very powerful.

Working with the bodhicitta that Joseph mentioned the other night, consciously reflecting on the fact of interdependence—sometimes this can be intellectual, but it can lead, again, into a real sense of "we" in a situation together, not "me and them."

I'll just give one example of that and then close. Once I was traveling on an Indian train in a four-tier sleeper, which is just four little platforms and a curtain that sort of closes it from the rest of the train, but not really. I was traveling by myself, and I got up to my little bench, and there were three other Indian men sharing this sleeper with me. I was quite uncomfortable. The men didn't do anything. It's just that being Indian, where our tendency as Westerners would be to give someone their privacy and turn away and not look, the guy lying on the bench opposite me just lay there staring at me all night. And that's just Indian—there's nothing unusual about that. But I was, of course, acutely uncomfortable and really negative. I wish these guys would leave.

Then in the morning they brought in their whole families, and there were like fifteen of us in this little compartment meant for four people. And I was just in this space of fear and separation—me and them. I wish they'd leave me alone. I wish they'd get out of here. I wish I could have my space.

And somehow I just flipped it. I didn't do anything, but I flipped it into, "Oh, this is our compartment. This

is us here in this compartment. It's not me and them." That's all I did. I didn't make any overt movement. I didn't open conversation. Just that flipped in my mind and intention.

And the whole thing changed. Whereas they hadn't been speaking to me at all, they suddenly became very friendly—not in a pushy way, just really sincerely friendly. They went out on the platform at the station, came back with little pakoras and chai, and said, "Oh, you must taste these Indian treats." And their wives were very friendly, and it was really just this sense of our little family there traveling in the compartment.

Very interesting, the sense of how the mind is the forerunner of all action—much more powerful than we might believe.

I'd like to close by reading from Thich Nhat Hanh about this: "The interdependence of all beings is not a philosophical game removed from spiritual and practical life. In bringing to light the interdependence of all phenomena, the meditator comes to see that the lives of all beings are one, and he or she is overcome with compassion for all. Seeing and loving go together. Great understanding goes with great compassion."

Let us sit together for a few minutes.

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