Adverse Circumstances Become The Path

Carol Wilson · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Carol Wilson · 54:29

Tonight what I want to talk about comes from a phrase I read in a book by a Tibetan master, Namkhai Norbu: turning adverse circumstances into the path. This phrase has stayed with me deeply, and I use it often in my practice. I'd like to share some thoughts about working with this teaching.

The first thing that comes to mind is that in working with adverse circumstances, the most helpful thing for me has been a strong sense of commitment to my path—to the possibility of our human potential for awakening. I want to share something that strengthens this commitment in me, something that makes me reflect and renew my dedication.

When I travel in third world countries, which I have occasion to do from time to time, this commitment becomes vivid. This past year I spent some time in South Africa, which presents a unique situation: the white people live very well, much as we do, while the black people live in truly poor, third world conditions in some of the Zulu villages. It's much the same as being in India. Seeing the conditions people live in—real poverty, near starvation, grinding work just to survive—brings to mind another Tibetan reflection on the preciousness of human birth. Or more particularly for me, the preciousness of the particular human birth I have this time around.

There are certain conditions essential for being able to practice, and I often take them for granted without even examining them. So part of this work is appreciating my circumstances.

Some of these conditions include, first, a certain degree of health. All of us in this room, whatever our physical condition, at least have enough health that we can give some of our energy, our time, to understanding what our life is about—not the near-starvation conditions where all one can do is struggle to survive. It's really appreciating that.

We're also alive at a time when the Dharma, the Buddha Dharma, is alive in the world. In terms of Buddhist cosmology, there are times when these teachings aren't present in the world, and we would each have to discover the path entirely for ourselves. While we each must discover our own truth, at least we have teachers, texts to read, people we can sit with, others to inspire us. This is a great gift, one easy for me to take for granted, knowing as I do so many people interested in practice, in awakening, whatever form their practice takes. But it's a rare opportunity in life.

Another condition is that we're all actually interested in waking up, in hearing the Dharma. This might seem obvious, but not everyone is blessed with interest, even when there's opportunity. I've spent considerable time in Bodh Gaya in India, a Buddhist pilgrimage site because it's the place where the

Buddha was supposedly enlightened. Many pilgrims come, but also many inspiring teachers of all the different Buddhist lineages—Zen, Tibetan, Theravada—and Hindu teachers as well come to Bodh Gaya.

We go there and visit, and we meet people. There's a family that runs a particular chai shop, a tea shop where everyone hangs out. There's nothing to do in Bodh Gaya but go to the Bodhi tree and go to the chai shop—and somehow those two things fill the entire day. The family is lovely, and they live there. They work hard but have leisure time. They're healthy. They're simply not interested. It's not where their attention goes. This makes me appreciate that I have this interest, that I'm willing and able to hear.

And then there's the fact that I have enough leisure time and the willingness to put the teachings into practice—that I don't have to work so hard at a subsistence level that there's not a spare moment in my life. Literally, many people in poverty-stricken conditions live this way. If you read *City of Joy* about Calcutta, it describes rickshaw pullers, men who pull rickshaws carrying passengers. They literally work every moment of the day just to earn enough money to buy food for that day. There's no way someone like that could have time to investigate the meaning of life the way we can.

When I reflect on these blessings in my life—and in all of our lives to some degree, or we couldn't be here—it wakes me up to a deep sense of urgency, of commitment. I start thinking: I have all these gifts. What do I really want from my life? What is my real purpose? What do I want to commit my time and energy to? How do I not lose sight of it?

As human beings, we have the potential to wake up, to know really deep peace, to come to freedom from this to-ing and fro-ing, this restless agitation of the mind. Sometimes it's almost frightening to really connect with this possibility in oneself, to truly commit to it. It's almost as if I think, "Well, yes, the Buddha could do that, or some Tibetan lama who lives in a cave, but not an ordinary person like me"—almost as if afraid I'm not good enough. To really, honestly get in touch with my purpose, my potential, is to acknowledge that I can awaken.

If I honestly commit myself to that, then I'll just spend the rest of my life being disappointed when I find out that I can't do it.

Again, a reflection that really helps me a lot is to remember that the Buddha was a human being, not a God. You can say, well, he was a really special human being, different from us. Anyone else who awakens is different from us. It's impossible. That thought holds us back. That thought is what limits us and keeps us from actually being willing to commit—only in this moment. Can I commit to really being present in this moment?

So the reflection that the Buddha was a human being, and we as human beings all have the same potential, can help me in times when I feel constricted by my fears. When you read some of the discourses of the Buddha, he often said, "If it were not possible, I would not ask you to do this." And from what I've read of what the Buddha said, or what comes down to us that he said, he didn't say things just off the top

of his head. He really said what he meant. And that's quite inspiring to me. Whenever it's something really hard: if it wasn't possible, I wouldn't ask you to do it. Again, it helps me to connect with what is my real purpose, and am I willing to commit myself to it.

Another fear that sometimes comes up in talking with people is the fear of really getting in touch with our desire, so to speak, to be free, to awaken. There's almost a fear just of that word—the fear of desire. Because the more we practice and study this meditation, and what the Buddha said in his Four Noble Truths, is that desire is the cause of suffering, right? And we can certainly experience that moment to moment. So there's this hesitation: well, what am I doing awakening another desire? There's something off about that.

Something I've found very interesting—I've been studying Pali a little bit, which is the language that the earliest Buddhist texts we still have are written in. In Pali, there are three different words that can all be loosely translated as "desire" in English. One of them is the word that more specifically we could translate as craving: *tanha*. And that's the one that is really referred to as the cause of suffering. It's that needing, grasping, "I've got to have"—the mind going out and clinging to something, whether it's an apple or anything. It doesn't matter what you're clinging to. This thirst, really—that's another translation of it. That's the cause of suffering.

There's another word that denotes a neutral desire, you could say. You're sitting, you know you're hungry, and there's the desire to eat. Not craving, not "I've got to have a certain food"—just to know: I need to eat now. I need to sleep now. I need to go to the bathroom. It's not a huge thirst.

And then there's another word that our rough translation would be "Dharma desire." What that really is, is this impetus, this yearning for understanding—for understanding our true self. In some way, if we didn't all have it, we wouldn't practice. It's what drives us. And this is hard. We wouldn't just be sitting here on our bottoms for two days, going through all this, if there wasn't some desire or yearning driving us. And it doesn't have to be negative. It doesn't have to lead to suffering.

This is a quotation from Nisargadatta Maharaj, from a whole different lineage—a Hindu Vedanta master—that speaks to this: "The desire to find the truth will be surely fulfilled, providing you want nothing else. But you must be honest with yourself and really want nothing else."

I think on a moment-to-moment basis—not that every moment of our lives we never want anything else—but that quality of wanting to understand, to be free, that level of commitment is what, as human beings, enables us to heal from our perceived sense of separation and isolation. I mean, it's not a reality anyway, but it's our perception. And this deep commitment of our hearts, of our energy, is what allows us to awaken—if we are willing to give our hearts, our minds, to this quest, this journey.

To me, that means not to be afraid to commit myself inwardly. Over and over. It doesn't mean I commit myself and then from now on, every moment, I'm incredibly present and mindful. It means I'm willing to

commit myself again in two minutes when I've spaced out or blown it or done something really stupid. That's okay.

I feel that this sense of deep inner commitment—and it can deepen and deepen—this is what can really serve to inspire us, or at least sustain us and uphold us on our path when we hit difficult times. In other words, when we hit seeming obstacles. Which is all the time—a lot. As you've no doubt observed, it's our tendency.

It seems to be the inbred tendency of our human minds, at least our deep, deep conditioning, that we perceive or interpret difficult situations that arise—whether it's a pain or a really difficult situation in our life—as obstacles. This is something that's in the way. It's either in the way of my being happy, in the way of my getting what I want, or in the context of our growth in understanding, it's in the way of my awakening.

So as long as I have this sickness, which keeps me from sitting cross-legged and doing this and that, and keeps me tired—that means it's in the way. When I get rid of it, then I can really practice in the right way. There's some ideal of what right practice looks like, and this is keeping me from it. It's an obstacle to be gotten rid of. The same goes for as long as I have this tiring, boring job that takes all my energy—I can't possibly give any energy to awakening. As long as I'm in this difficult, conflictual family situation, how can I possibly work to come to peace and harmony when I'm arguing with my relatives all the time? Substitute anything. It's our natural tendency to interpret this as wrong, something to get rid of, and then I can really begin to commit myself to practice.

Flipping it around, when we have a sense of commitment to investigate, we begin to see and learn that these so-called obstacles are not just something we can put up with. They actually can become part of our path, a very intrinsic and helpful part of our growth in understanding and awakening. We grow because of these difficult situations, not in spite of them.

There's something I like in the Buddhist cosmology, which talks about all these different realms of existence. It doesn't matter whether one believes it's literally true or not, but what I appreciate is how it describes why human birth is so precious and how obstacles can be helpful. They say that in the human realm—which on a level of thirty-three is about six up from the bottom, and it gets nicer the higher you go—there's enough suffering that we can use it to wake up. It's not, for most of us, so much suffering that we're completely crushed and overwhelmed. Though for some people in this world, it is too much. And in the higher realms, it gets so pleasant that there's not enough impetus to investigate. You just kind of groove and hang out in these really nice sensual realms or formless realms, whatever. So the human realm is supposedly the perfect balance of pleasure and willingness to investigate, with enough pain to keep giving us a jolt to wake up. Take that for what it's worth.

So how does one go about working with this, turning adverse circumstances into the path? How does it work? There are many things to say about it. I'm just going to offer some thoughts.

I feel deeply from my own experience that it comes down, really very simply, to our attitude toward this difficult situation—or pleasant situation as well. The pleasant ones we don't tend to fight so much when they arise. The Buddha, in his first discourse after he was completely awakened, talked about four truths of our life in this world, truths whose deep knowing would liberate the mind. The first truth was that there is unsatisfactoriness—sometimes translated as suffering, but more accurately unsatisfactoriness. He was speaking not only of the actual and obvious difficult situations—the painful, the emotional, the grief, the outward difficulty—but also the sense of unsatisfactoriness and pain that comes from pleasant situations that are continually ending. Which is everything. Everything is continually ending. And the cause of our suffering is not just that there's pain and pleasure; the second truth tells us the cause of suffering is this thirst, this clinging of the mind toward the pleasant and away from the unpleasant.

I used to think about this first truth—that there's unsatisfactoriness—and wonder, why did he have to proclaim that as a truth? It seems fairly obvious on the surface. I don't think—I mean, there are people who will dispute it, but mostly if we really look, we don't have to look that hard. It's clear that there is suffering in this world. But as I've reflected and observed more, I'm actually continually amazed by our ability to deny, resist, and avoid this in our own lives. And I see it in others.

The most obvious example that comes to mind is when I was once in a hospital and a doctor was doing a procedure. They were trying to put in an IV and not doing a good job of it. It had been going on for some time—they'd tried it five times, and finally they called in the doctor. Then I knew I was in trouble, because nurses can usually do these things better than doctors. Anyway, he was digging around, and I was really at the end of my rope. I'd been there some time, and I started crying. He just looked at me and said, "What's the matter with you? This doesn't hurt."

I thought, whoa. And I really could understand. Because to open to the fact of the pain I was in would mean he had to feel that in himself, and also be aware that in some way—out of good intentions, but still—he was a part of inflicting it. And that's too hard to open to sometimes. We can't feel someone else's pain because we can't open to our own. That's a kind of strong example, but in little ways we do that all the time.

And then on a more subtle level, I've been noticing that somehow acknowledging that many things just don't carry the satisfaction I like to think they do has been a huge relief in my life. It was like acknowledging my actual experience. Somehow I thought I should be happier than I was, because I have so much.

My life's so good. How come things aren't really blissful? There's something wrong with me.

Here's another example, very mundane, and I think we could all see this all the time. Once a friend of mine and I, it was during the fall, and we were working at the meditation center in Barre. It was very intense. We were very tired. We decided to go to this health club and go swimming. And we were looking forward to it all day. It'll feel great. We'll relax. We'll have a good time. We'll go in the sauna.

So we got there and split up—he was a man, so we were in different dressing rooms. It was freezing, and I'm really susceptible to cold. I was hurrying up, getting in my bathing suit, thinking, well, I'll get in the pool. It'll be great. I got in the pool. The water was really, for me, quite chilly. So I was dashing back and forth thinking, God, I can't wait till I get out of here. This is really nice, but I can't wait till I get out of here and get in the sauna. I ran into the sauna, and for a couple of minutes—oh, this is great. Then the bench got hard, then I started to sweat too much, and then I went out of the sauna and it was freezing again, and I went back in the sauna—oh, this is really great—for two minutes, then it got too hot, I was sweaty, I had a headache. I went out, took a shower, went up and met my friend, and said, "That was great."

And then, for some reason, we sat and talked about it, which is why I remember it in so much detail, and it was hysterical. There were a few really nice moments. But in being able to see that, it wasn't demoralizing, really. It was kind of, oh well, no wonder I don't feel completely blissed out. Some of it was nice, and some of it really wasn't very nice at all. So it was a relief for me, acknowledging that there's a certain degree of unsatisfactoriness in much of my experience—not all of it, but much of it—and not having to pretend that it's otherwise.

And then again, the cause of the suffering isn't that the water's cold or the sauna is hot. It's that movement of the mind, that compulsive, conditioned, often unconscious movement of the mind towards anything pleasant and away from anything unpleasant. So the water's cold, my body contracts, my mind says, I don't like this, I want to get out of here. The sauna is hot. It's pleasant. There's a total relaxing into it. As soon as it gets a little unpleasant—I don't like this, I want to get out of here. That's the cause of the suffering, not the cold, not the hot.

This is from Nisargadatta again: "Our true self is peace. It's only the mind that is restless. All it knows is restlessness with its many modes and grades. The pleasant modes are considered superior and the painful ones are discounted. What we tend to call progress is merely a changeover from the unpleasant to the pleasant. Changes can't bring us to the changeless."

Changes can't bring us to the changeless. And as long as we're unaware of this tendency of mind—we merely need to be aware of it—as long as we're unaware of it, we continue to be caught in this maze of denying, discounting anything that's remotely unpleasant, waiting out the unpleasant, trying to hold on to the pleasant so that then things will be okay.

I call it, or some of us call it, rearranging the furniture. It's like we're in prison and the door's open, and it's unpleasant, but we figure if we can somehow rearrange the furniture, everything will be okay. As long as we continue doing this, trying to find the exact right arrangement that's most pleasant, it's this movement away from the unpleasant towards the pleasant, trying to control everything, that distorts our perception, that clouds our heart. We can't know reality as long as we're caught in rearranging the furniture.

And it's not necessarily the situation itself that needs to change. It's our attitude. It's our willingness to come back and be with the furniture, no matter how it is—whether it's incredibly peaceful or really

discordant. It's that attitude of being willing to be fully present, fully here with it, allowing it just as it is, and bringing our fullness of attention to be there with it. That allows us to begin to see what's really true in this moment.

It's this shift in attitude that turns obstacles from being obstacles into being a very important part of our path. Adverse circumstances aren't necessarily a curse, because sometimes that's what wakes us up from all this to-ing and fro-ing of the mind.

Ajahn Chah, the great Thai meditation teacher and abbot, once said that there's suffering that leads to more suffering, and suffering that leads to the end of suffering. So what's the difference? Again, it's the attitude.

Here's a very simple example. You're sitting here and your knee starts to tingle a little. Soon it turns into a throb. If it's suffering that leads to more suffering, the mind goes: "Oh my God, I'm never going to make it through this sitting. What am I doing here? I'm sitting wrong. Why don't they ring the bell? What's the matter with me? I should be able to sit better than this." Your mind starts spinning. You start judging yourself, judging the retreat. You're getting tenser and tenser, your mind screaming. This is suffering that leads to more suffering. It's our relationship of believing there's something wrong, that this pain shouldn't be here—and all the extra we add on when we're not aware of it. Pretty soon we're really over the edge.

The same pain in the knee. The shift in attitude is simply to give it attention just as it is. There's a throb in the knee. We notice it. If it's really mild, we just acknowledge it and go back to the breath. If it's really strong, then we move our full attention into that throbbing, simply because that's what's there. Not with any agenda, not to get rid of it, not to make it go away, not to prove we're such a great yogi—simply because that's the experience in this moment.

It's a real gentle, compassionate kind of attention—open, but really clear and firm. It's not just "Oh yeah, there's a pain," and then back to the breath. That's what's there. We bring the attention out of the whirling thoughts into the sensation, noticing the tightness in our body, noticing the resistance in our mind. That whole train of dislike can happen, but we're noticing it. Not to change it or judge it or place blame—just because it's there. To know for ourselves what's really happening in this moment.

This shift in attitude can change that pain from being the source of our future hospitalization and disability into a chance to observe how much extra suffering we're creating through resistance to experience. This is the quality of openness, of investigation, that changes our whole experience because we start to see reality.

Has it ever happened that you have a pain you think you're going to die from, and then the bell rings and suddenly it's just gone? What happened to it? It's all extra. Because we stop fighting the experience enough to simply be with it and see what that pain actually is, what's the experience of it.

Out of clear seeing, understanding can arise. Understanding, in this case, the nature of that sensation—its

impermanence, its coming and going, its changeable nature. Understanding of the extra suffering that resistance and fear add on, how our fear of the whole hour is adding an immense amount of suffering onto the pain in this moment.

And because we understand, we have a choice. We can act appropriately in a situation rather than just responding out of blind reactivity. So you have, say, the choice of seeing: yes, I have a bad knee, and this pain I recognize.

It's the prelude to really hurting myself. It's appropriate to move. But it's not just a reactive "I hate this, I'm going to move." It's not coming out of aversion at all. It's coming out of really clear seeing and compassionate action. This is quite different from our usual pattern of denial and avoidance.

Because this reactivity is so strong, when something's unpleasant, we're usually unable to give attention to the actual situation. And we don't even know it. We don't even know what's happening. We just stay lost in confusion and resistance, and things get more and more painful.

The Buddha talked about unsatisfactoriness and suffering a great deal. But he said that there's suffering that ripens as confusion and suffering that ripens as search. Again, the difficult situation can serve as a signal to investigate, and a whole new understanding can come out of this.

The most powerful example I've had of this in my life was a period of time I spent in Thailand, practicing as a Buddhist nun in various temples. When I first went there, I had a hard time adjusting during those first couple of months. The conditions were very unpleasant. You just have to adjust to Asia, and I hadn't done it yet. It was very hot, with lots of poisonous snakes and insects, huts with tin roofs that baked—I mean baked, 120 degrees during the day—with holes so all the insects came in, and food that was making me sick.

I was in a really negative frame of mind, to say the least. I was committed; I didn't want to leave. But the suffering was ripening as confusion. I was just spinning in aversion. Every new thing that happened bummed me out more. I was in a kind of blaming mode: Why don't they do this? Why isn't the food better? Why couldn't they make the huts better? Why do I have to wear these seven layers of polyester in this kind of heat? On and on. I was really nursing my aversion without realizing it.

Finally, it got to the point where it was insupportable. I either had to shift my attitude or leave, which I didn't want to do—if anything, just because my friends would say "told you so."

The shift was to take back my energy from throwing blame outward, from nursing aversion, and bring attention back to the situation. Not to figure out how I could make it better, because I couldn't change the conditions, but just to start looking directly at my experience. In other words, to be in my experience rather than continually trying to get out of it so that I could practice. This was my practice—only I wasn't letting it be.

So, physically hot? Be hot. Feel the hotness. Quit fighting it and thinking about air conditioning. Just be with hotness. Be with the taste of the food, whether I like it or not. Be with insect bites. Be with my fear of ants and see how much of it is fear and how much of it is reality. Stop sending all my energy into useless complaining and just watch the aversion. Feel the aversion in my experience.

That willingness to come back over and over to my experience instead of trying to avoid it—it was amazing, really, over a period of some months. I saw pretty soon that what I had been doing was cultivating aversion, really feeding it. Just that acknowledgment of the aversion, that recognition of the movement of the mind away from the unpleasant—just seeing the power of that tendency allowed me to be much more present with the unpleasant.

And the whole experience changed. By the time I left, the conditions were no better. In some ways they had changed, but they weren't really worse or better. My sense of being there was completely different. It was one of the most joyful times I remember in my life. Really quite wonderful.

I'd spend half an hour a day brushing out the ants. That was just part of what I did each day. It wasn't a problem. And I learned so much from that experience—that in the very same conditions, there can be tremendous joy and contentment. The real suffering was my resistance, this movement away from the unpleasant, thinking I ought to be able to rearrange the furniture instead of just sinking into things the way they were. The unseen and unacknowledged resistance to the situation.

So far from being something I just learned to live with, that seeming obstacle has been a vital part of my growth in equanimity, in opening and understanding. I really learned a lot from that.

And I'm not saying it's easy for any of us, or at any time. This tendency of mind, this to-ing and fro-ing, is so subtle and so pervasive, often really unconscious, that it can be very hard to be aware of it. I sat for a couple of months with that situation, and it was pretty obvious, before I could actually recognize—oh yes, right, aversion, that's what's going on.

Also, I don't in any way mean to imply that all we have to do is see, "Oh, my mind is moving towards the pleasant and away from the unpleasant," and then everything's fine and we're filled with this glowing peace. It is not so simple. Even when we're very aware of this tendency and really committed, deeply committed to our willingness to be present for both the pleasant and the unpleasant, and we truly know we can open to difficult situations—we can't open all at once to many things.

For almost all of us, certainly almost everyone I've met including myself, there are many times when, given our conditions, the state of our mindfulness, the state of our being at that moment, there will be difficulties, sufferings, pains that are simply too much for us to open to in that moment.

The Buddha also spoke of skillful avoidance as a great help on our path, knowing when to use it. He gave the example of when a mad elephant is charging at you, you step out of the way. We can all really benefit from paying attention to this. Sometimes the mad elephant can be a strong physical pain. Sometimes it's a

deep emotional grief or memory or something happening in our life.

Many of us, at least here in the West, have a tendency to be really hard on ourselves. Once we enter into this path with the sense that we're opening to everything, when something comes up, no matter how overwhelming, we think, "I should be able to open to this right now. And if I can't, it means I'm doing something wrong."

Mindfulness is very attentive, it's energetic, but it's not strident. Mindfulness is not forcing ourselves to open no matter what. It doesn't work, for one thing. And it can lead us into a lot of pain and confusion and self-blame.

So for each of us, it's finding in each situation that delicate balance. Some pains, physical or emotional, arise and we can really be there with them. It doesn't feel good. We might feel lost in it, but there's some mindfulness. There's feeling the grief in the heart. There's letting ourselves cry. There's feeling the heaviness. There's seeing the memories. And then we can gently, gently be with it.

Sometimes it's so overwhelming that there's no sense of being able to be mindful and we just feel totally drowning. That might be a time to gently back off. It's not the same as repression. It's not shutting that down and pretending it's not there, going in the opposite direction from anything that reminds us of it. But it's for a time. We touch it. We open a little. We see we're getting overwhelmed and gently back off.

If you're sitting, you can move your attention to hearing. You can go back to the breath. You can go elsewhere in the body. If it's in our life and we're running up against a brick wall, you don't keep running into the brick wall. You try and move up to it, see if you can push it a little bit. It doesn't move. You back off. Come back again. Do something to nurture the heart and the mind. Take a walk.

Do something in your life that's nurturing. Be with somebody you love. Talk to a friend. We can't simply be over and over and over again with agonizing pain without some break. It's a rare person who can do that without being really overcome.

When we know in ourselves that we have the commitment to understanding and growth, we can trust ourselves enough to know that we're not just repressing, we're not just manipulating—we're using skillful avoidance. And if you find that every unpleasant situation suddenly calls for skillful avoidance, that's when you know: wait a minute, I think I need to look at this again. We learn to trust that balance and find it for ourselves.

Practice here in retreat can help a great deal because we can practice with the little situations. You can practice this with the small pain in your knee. Watch moving into it. Watch the mind wanting to run away. Feel all that fear and tension. Soften around it. Move back into the pain. Something little, but it's the same tendency of mind.

I'm sure we've all had experiences where something difficult—either in our outer life or our inner life

here (I actually don't even like making that distinction, but just as a way of talking)—where there's been something we thought was nothing but difficulty to be gotten rid of. And through our willingness to just experience it as it is, through our attentive, present, non-judging being with it, it transforms, and we learn something very valuable. That kind of experience strengthens our commitment, our trust in the whole process.

I find it gives us a sense of courage. I've found that deepening in myself over the years—that whatever does arise as my path, as my karmic path, I know in this one moment I can be with it. I don't have to add, "Oh no, but what's it going to be like if this goes on for a year?" That's extra. I know in this one moment I can be with whatever is arising as my path. And as I was thinking this, I realized: ultimately, there's not much choice anyway. I don't really get to choose what's coming in the next moment. So I can simply know that I've understood—in this path I have the strength to be with only this one moment. And if that moment means backing off for a little bit, that's okay too.

It's this attitude, this willingness to be with whatever arises as our path, pleasant as well as unpleasant. We're not looking for the unpleasant in order to grow, and not denying the pleasant either. There are plenty of pleasant, joyful experiences—being fully present with that. But not this clutching: "Oh no, it's going away!" It comes, you really appreciate it, it goes, the next thing comes later. It's this willingness to be present without the to-ing and fro-ing, to see the to-ing and fro-ing, that allows understanding to arise. We're then beginning to know what's really going on instead of being lost in our distortions and confusions.

Thich Nhat Hanh—in case you haven't heard of him, he's a Vietnamese Zen master and peace activist, and I find him quite inspiring—says that without understanding, we are unable to love. When we understand what's going on in a situation, love and compassion naturally arise out of that. Because we're there with no preferences, understanding becomes possible.

Robert Aitken, a Zen master from Hawaii, says: "Practicing compassion goes hand in hand with practicing realization. On your cushions, you learn first of all to be compassionate to yourself. We vow to save all beings, but how do you save the roughnecks in your own mind? Treat them as neighbors who come to the door when you're meditating. Take a moment to acknowledge them. They're closer than neighbors, after all."

If we can take that moment to compassionately acknowledge the roughnecks that show up in our mind—the anger, the self-blame, the hatred, the wanting, the grief, the remorse, the guilt, the list goes on and on—that moment of clear mindfulness allows for clear seeing, for understanding to arise. And it is, in a way, an actual practice of loving-kindness and compassion. Because that quality of attention really is the quality of compassionate loving-kindness, acceptance of whatever roughneck appears in your mind.

It's been my limited experience that true compassion, really deep compassion, arises when we're able to be open to and present for what is difficult and fearful in our own experience. When we can open to

deeper levels of pain in our own experience, we're able to be more present with the same pain in others. It's where the real sense of our interconnectedness emerges. In sitting here and practicing and opening to our own pain, we're really opening to the pain of all others, to the pain of the world.

The compassion that begins to arise when we see our own suffering—and how it's compounded by our not understanding what's going on—that compassion extends to every other being we encounter. We see that everyone is in the same predicament. And opening isn't selective. When we open to our own difficulties and compassion arises, so also does joy.

You find that in the opening, we have access to much greater depths of joy and love than when we're so busy trying to avoid anything unpleasant. We end up avoiding a lot of what's really beautiful as well, without knowing it.

Just one other thing I want to say, because it comes up a lot when we talk about opening to difficult situations. Just as mindfulness is not strident or forcing but very attentive and alert, so also it is not passive. Often, in the same way of being hard on ourselves—thinking "I've got to open to anything"—we can interpret this as meaning that anything difficult that happens, we just have to sit back and let it occur. This can really turn into a kind of victim mentality.

Mindfulness is not a passive quality at all. Mindfulness is very alert, inquiring, energetic. There can be a difficult situation where we don't close to it but meet it with real clarity of attention. Accepting the situation also allows for clear seeing. It doesn't mean we just sit around and let ourselves be abused. In the clear seeing, appropriate action becomes much more possible. We can act much sooner and more emphatically to get out of a situation that's causing us harm—one we don't need to stay in. But our motive is really one of compassion for ourselves and even for the people in the situation, rather than just blind hatred or fear.

This is not at all about "whatever happens that's unpleasant, I can't do anything about it." Compassionate action—that understanding that comes from clear seeing—can be very active. Much more appropriate action than when we don't see clearly.

The people who come to mind as embodiments of compassionate action and understanding—I think of the Dalai Lama or Mother Teresa. They've seen incredible suffering. Just sometimes to walk through a street in India brings up so much pain. Sometimes it's hard for me to be with it. And someone like the Dalai Lama, who has seen so much suffering in Tibet, or Mother Teresa, who spends her time going out picking up dying people off the streets in Calcutta—they've seen incredible suffering. Yet the Dalai Lama is one of the most inspiring people to be around. He's light and filled with humor and kindness, and they're both incredibly energetic. Definitely not passive. Mother Teresa is eighty years old and she's just traveling all around the world doing things—ten times more energy than I have.

All our energy that's going into resistance and denial gets released for compassionate action, for the

actions that come from clear seeing and understanding. So we're not talking about getting heavy and lost in suffering, but in fact just the opposite.

Really, even sitting here, we have plenty of opportunity to work with this. Even the simplest pain in our back, a simple feeling of "I'm bored and I wish I could go home"—it doesn't have to be some big, dramatic form of suffering. When we can summon up our sense of commitment and meet whatever it is that's happening with mindfulness, full attention, compassionate caring attention, whether it's pleasant or unpleasant, we find that in that one moment the whole world can begin to open up for us. Our whole heart begins to open up.

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