Renunciation, Goodwill, and Compassion

Carol Wilson · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Carol Wilson · 56:34

The Buddha spoke often and quite eloquently about the power of mind to shape our reality, to shape our experience of reality. I want to read the first pair of verses in the Dhammapada, which is a group of verse sayings of the Buddha.

All mental phenomena have mind as their forerunner. They have mind as their chief. They are mind-made. If one speaks or acts with an impure mind, suffering follows one just as the wheel follows the foot of the ox that draws the cart.

And then the second verse, using a different translation: Our life is shaped by our mind. We become what we think. If one speaks or acts with a pure mind, happiness follows one like a shadow that never leaves.

Very powerful, the effect of our thoughts, the effect of the mind.

Sylvia spoke briefly the other night about the Eightfold Path, the path of practice that we're engaged on now. I want to speak about the second aspect of the path. The first one, right or wise understanding, really speaks to how we understand life, the world, ourselves. And then the second path factor, variously translated as right or wholesome attitude, right thought, or right intention—this really grows from our understanding. How we understand ourselves and the world then informs how we think about the world, what our intentions are.

This second factor, intentions or thought or attitude, is the crucial link between understanding and action. Because how we think is how we then act in the world. And in fact, the next three factors of the path deal with right speech, right action, and right livelihood.

A very simple example: there's a sense of understanding that perhaps there's more to reality, to my own life, than is apparent on the surface, in a superficial glance. That kind of understanding that there's something more tends to give rise to some thought or intention of, "Let me investigate. Let me try meditation. Let me try some spiritual path of learning more." And that intention, that thought, then gives rise to action—and here you all are, sitting here for nine days. Beginning from understanding, the understanding leads to an attitude or thought that leads to action.

And then, of course, the action that has you all sitting here leads to deepening of mindfulness, concentration, and energy, which are the last three of the Eightfold Path. And that in turn leads to deeper seeing into the nature of who and what we are—more understanding. It's a circle. We're back at the beginning of the mandala again.

So tonight I want to talk specifically about the factors of wholesome attitude. What are they? What does it refer to? These are attitudes, wholesome attitudes of mind, intentions that shine through our awareness more clearly as our wisdom develops.

I use this language quite deliberately—"shine through" rather than "manufacture" or even "develop"—because it's not as if these wholesome attitudes of mind are something foreign to our being, or something that we need to go out and manufacture and try to artificially graft onto ourselves. They're actually part of who or what we already are. They begin to arise spontaneously. The more that we bring our attention to this moment, the more that we investigate and come to see what we actually are, these wholesome attitudes of mind, intentions of mind, become more and more spontaneous expressions of our understanding.

Again, I love to use the metaphor of the sun as being the luminous nature of mind. It's always there. The more that we pay attention, the less we get so involved in the clouds that we think they're all there is. The more we're aware of the sun. But the sun is always there. We just become more aware of it.

Classically, speaking of right or wholesome attitudes, thoughts, and intentions includes three broad areas, and I'd like to speak a little about each of them—more as a reminder, to bring up in each of us a reminder of what we are, how we can be.

The first is the attitude of non-greed, or renunciation. It balances the confusion of greed. The second is that of goodwill, or mettā—friendliness, loving-kindness—obviously balancing the inclination of mind toward aversion and ill will. And the third is the attitude of harmlessness, of compassion, balancing cruelty or harmfulness.

And a tendency to be in touch with these attitudes of mind, for these attitudes to arise in a moment as a response to a situation, is strengthened naturally, simply through our mindfulness practice. I promise. It may not feel like it. A lot of times in sitting, it seems like what we're seeing is just more greed, more ill will, more negativity. Sometimes you discover you're a much nicer person than you thought you were before you started sitting. But I promise it's really working the other way around.

A very simple example of how mindfulness is really working to strengthen these wholesome attitudes: When there's no understanding, no clear understanding of the process whereby desire brings suffering, and we don't understand that, whenever a thought comes up of "I want this" or "I want that," we naturally spring into action to try and achieve it. And that's how most of this culture spends most of its time. This can be something really minor—from wanting seconds at lunch, wanting a better little foam pad under your cushion, wanting cherry Life Savers—it can be really mundane. Or it extends all the way up to what we see happening in the world: wanting more land, wanting more oil, wanting some sense of national safety.

So from small to really large scale, when there's not this understanding that desire brings suffering, the

actions that manifest from the thought of wanting something come from confusion and can breed incredible pain and suffering and conflict. Or at its least manifestation, it can simply be increasing unsatisfactoriness. The seconds at lunch don't really do it, do they? The foamy pad really doesn't take care of it.

That's a kind of normal way of being. But as we're sitting here, day in and day out, watching the process of desire and watching our continued efforts to fulfill it—the ones that are somehow in our power to fulfill here—you'll start to get it. From paying attention, you see there's just no peace coming from this. There's no lasting satisfaction coming from fulfilling desire. And so as this understanding comes in—that fulfilling desire is not bringing happiness—from our mindfulness of just watching this, quite naturally, our thoughts change.

When the thought comes up, "I think I should get up now and have a cup of tea," another thought arises: "No need to do that." And just quite naturally, our actions change. It's not some big deal, but it actually is a big deal. We find there's a natural sense of renunciation. No forcing, but growing out of our understanding that's coming from this mindfulness practice.

Not necessarily dramatic. But I feel it's very helpful and important to notice and acknowledge these little moments, these little actions of thought, of speech, or body that are coming from intentions of kindness, of non-greed, generosity, compassion. I see it as a sort of positive reinforcement—just the noticing of it. Sometimes we get so focused on seeing the greed and the ill will and the self-judgment that we let a moment of sensing "I really don't need that" pass by. Not that we want to hold on to it, but it's important to acknowledge: "Oh, there was a moment of non-greed arising in the mind." It's very helpful.

So these attitudes arise quite naturally as our mindfulness increases, as our understanding deepens. But I want to say now that it's very important not to set up these attitudes, or any other, as some ideal. It happens a lot in spiritual practice that we have some ideal—"I should be this loving, compassionate, generous person"—and then try to force ourselves to fit that model when it's not what's really genuinely arising. I'm not talking about forcing ourselves or denying what's actually arising in a moment. What's important is to be really honest. True wisdom demands absolute honesty with ourselves, with whatever's arising in the moment. And I know that we can trust that honesty, that willingness to be with whatever's arising. Through that will come the understanding, and of itself these beautiful qualities of mind are able to manifest. But it can't come through forcing or pretense, trying to make ourselves pretend to be other than we are.

I feel that's important to understand—that you don't have to pretend to be anything at all. Non-greed, friendliness, mettā, compassion do arise from our understanding quite naturally. It is a genuine manifestation of our being. You don't need to force it.

Having said that, I'll flip to the other side, because everything's a paradox. What's quite interesting is that at times we actually do have a choice as to where we let the mind dwell. We might not have a choice as to

what situations come up, what immediate thought comes up, but we often do have a choice as to how we respond to the situation and whether or not we want to let the mind dwell there.

The Buddha said that whatever one reflects upon frequently, towards that the mind will naturally incline. It's fairly obvious. If we sit and daydream for an hour about something that we really want when we leave here, the longer we stay lost in that daydream, the easier it is for the mind to go back to that place. We have a choice more than we think. We really don't need to feel enslaved by the habits of our mind. They're not set in concrete, though it might feel that way at times. We can't deny the arising of the habits of mind when they're arising in a moment, but we can choose very often how to respond.

A quotation from Nisargadatta: "You cannot escape from your obsessions, but you can cease nurturing them." I think that's quite lovely.

So instead of denying them, you simply cease nurturing them. I don't mean it's easy. The force of habit is really quite strong, especially the habits of mind I'm talking about now—the movement towards greed, towards aversion, towards confusion.

I once cut out a little comic that I think illustrates this beautifully. It shows how easily habits are ingrained through six little episodes. You wander alone down a crowded city street, jostled in the bustle, solitary yet surrounded. You think, "These people are..." Multiple choice: A) My brothers, my sisters. B) Perverts, probably pickaxe murderers. C) Sure could go for a chili dog.

Episode two: Amid the crowd, a stranger slowly turns. As his eyes meet yours, you muse... A) I know what he feels. He feels fear. He feels hope. B) Why is that pervert looking at me? C) Maybe a pepperoni pizza with olives.

Episode three: Down the street, construction workers are tearing the pavement to rubble. How symbolic, you marvel. It reminds me of: A) The path of life. B) The highway to hell. C) Rocky Road, my favorite flavor.

You see, these habitual inclinations just come up when you're not paying attention. But we do have a choice. And it's not like one grand life choice—"Okay, from now on, I'm going to stop being an aversive type." I tried that a while ago. It didn't work.

But in each moment, there is a choice. In each moment there's a choice of whether to go along with the aversion that arises, or whether to just let it be. Whether to go along with the greed, or to see the desire arise and recognize, "I don't need that right now."

Working with right attitude is about a willingness to greet each moment of choice as a chance to learn, a chance to grow out of the dullness of our habits of mind. It's not about expectations of perfection. It's not another standard to judge ourselves against. It's about opening to this moment as a learning possibility. And that's quite vital, quite rich. The learning never ends.

So I'd like to speak a little about each of these three attitudes. First, attitude or thought guided by non-greed, or renunciation. I know renunciation has a bit of a bad reputation in our culture, but here it doesn't mean enforced asceticism. To me, I experience it much more as a sense of inner contentment. Renunciation means not being so caught up in needing, in acquiring, in wanting. And when we're not caught up in searching outward for something, there's so much more capacity for appreciating what's right here, right now. There's a sense of ease, of contentment, of simplicity.

I would imagine that most or all of you will have experienced simple moments of that, perhaps on retreat. Nothing dramatic. Just a moment where you're sitting with a cup of tea and it feels so fulfilling. There's such a sense of appreciation. Or looking at a sunset, feeling the wind, feeling a little lift inside. Something not specifically dramatic.

But there's a sense of real inner contentment, appreciation of that momentary experience. It's not because that's the best cup of tea that was ever made, or the most beautiful sunset you've ever seen in your life. It's that in that moment, the mind and heart are quiet. There's no desire in the mind. There's no reaching out. And so with this sense of inner contentment, this simple being in the moment, there's great appreciation for whatever it is that we happen to be experiencing.

This sense of renunciation, of non-greed, really—at least in my experience—runs quite counter to the input, the information that comes in from our society. Just the word itself, *renunciation*, often brings up connotations of forced asceticism, intentional suffering, a kind of grimness. And it's not that at all. In our society, giving things up in many people's eyes means suffering.

Just looking at the ads—I was reading the New York Times Magazine the other day, and the ads in that are amazing. Full-page ads for two-thousand-dollar watches and perfume that costs hundreds of dollars for a little bottle, and just on and on. The intention, I know from the effect, is to make one say, "God, I really need that." Or just looking at it, you feel a lack because one could never afford it. Really, most of the media input goes along in that direction, creating new needs, making consumers feel that we need more and more.

Often, talking to people that I meet whom I don't really know, or even my family sometimes, they'll say, "Well, you don't have this and you don't have that"—something that would never have occurred to me to want. There's a sense of, "Oh, that must be really hard not to have such and such." Well, it never even occurred to me. But not having, living simply, is equated with suffering in this society. And it's just not true.

Suzuki Roshi says, "Renunciation does not consist in giving up the things of this world, but in accepting that they go away." Accepting that whatever we have is going to go away, and that's okay.

I'd like to mention a couple of reflections which I find arise quite naturally as practice continues, reflections that really help the mind incline towards non-greed, towards its natural sense of simplicity.

One is an understanding that we inevitably come to, on deeper and deeper levels—which I've already mentioned—the understanding of the unsatisfactoriness inherent in desire itself. Not saying, "Oh, desire is bad, I should eradicate it," but really understanding how unsatisfying it is.

This retreat is a really good setup for that. In a space of somewhat forced outer renunciation, this form takes away a lot of things that you could normally do or get to satisfy desire. It's by choice, but it's also by force. Once we've got you in here, you're forced to renounce a lot of things. But it's a fantastic chance to explore the nature of desire, because most of the desires that come up here, you can't gratify—not if you want to stay. Most people say, "Well, once I'm here, I'm going to stay. I'm not going to run out just to have a pizza." So since you can't gratify it, this kind of enforced renunciation helps us, through our experience, sift through this barrage, this maze of desires and ways to pursue them that we're greeted with on a daily basis in our normal life. We really start to experience the futility of all that. You have to try really hard not to notice that desire is suffering.

Two quotations I love about this. One is from Isaac Singer: "Hell is made up of yearnings. The wicked don't roast on beds of nails. They sit on comfortable chairs and are tortured with desire."

And this is from Bashō, the Japanese poet—this captures so beautifully the endless nature of craving: "Though I'm in Kyoto, when the cuckoo sings, I long for Kyoto." This is so nice. This is desire for the sake of desire. Desire breeds desire, and that's what keeps us in this sense of bondage.

Sayadaw U Pandita said once that consuming sense pleasures is a form of self-oppression because it's tiring and insatiable.

So the more we really notice, the more we're mindful of desire and the futility of it, quite naturally the mind begins to incline towards renunciation. By renunciation I mean a turning away from craving and its demand for gratification. Turning away from craving does not necessarily have to mean turning away from the things of the world, but turning away from craving itself.

I've found in my life that this leads quite naturally to a greater sense of simplicity—both outer, in the things of my life, and inner, just in the things that I want. Yes, I still want plenty of things, but they're fewer.

And it's easier to say, you know, tomorrow I won't care, and let it go.

I learned a lot about this sense of simplicity and the beauty, the real joy that can come from living in a simple way. Some years ago, for a period of several months, I was living in Thailand as a Buddhist nun. One lives quite simply, and the first few months were quite difficult, with massive aversion attacks, real kicking and fighting against wanting to be more comfortable, wanting better food, wanting not to be hot, not wanting bugs—just really wanting things to be different from how they were. And the inevitable culture shock of giving up all the comforts that we have in this culture.

But after two or three months, it really started to shift. And by the end of the time, my situation was no more comfortable. I had no more things than I had in the beginning. But in that simplicity there was such a sense of appreciation and joy for stuff that I would normally not even have noticed in my comfort-surrounded normal life. And I remember—I know I'm not remembering this through a haze of memory because I was writing about it at the time—but it was really one of the happiest and simplest times of my life. Really joyful, not because anything fantastic was happening. Just get up, go get food, sit a little, walk in the woods, wash my clothes. Very mundane on the outer level. But in that sense of not wanting, I really understood in some ways what the purpose of a renunciate life in that form could be: to really get a sense of the joy that can come from a mind that isn't so engaged in getting and having.

And as I mentioned before, we all have moments like that. We've had moments like that here in practice. We have many moments like that when we're not here, still in our life practice. Acknowledge those. It's important. It's an important counterbalance to our ingrained habit of thinking more means more happy.

In a way, the whole practice is a process of deepening letting go. And actually, enlightenment is the ultimate letting go. It's not about getting something. You cannot get enlightenment—a contradiction in terms. It's about the ultimate letting go.

So, non-greed.

The second intention, or thought, or attitude that becomes more manifest is that of goodwill or friendliness—mettā, loving-kindness, thought guided by goodwill. And in a way, that's infiltrating our experience here, simply as an openness to whatever circumstance presents itself, which in effect is what this mindfulness practice is.

I've often felt, actually, that the cultivation of mindfulness in a moment is, in a way, an expression of goodwill, of mettā. Because when, in a moment of experience, whatever arises—a breath, a pain, a sound, whatever—when the attitude in that noting moment is one of openness, acceptance, "Fine, this is here, let's deal with it," whether it's in a noting moment or in a situation in life, that really is, in that moment, the intention, the attitude of goodwill, of kindness, of friendliness, openness to whatever's presenting itself in this moment.

And all the times that, instead of meeting something with friendliness—which is often—we meet it with resentment or ill will or wishing it was different, lack of self-acceptance: again, this obviously comes from aversion, the flip side. And one moment of acceptance, just one moment of acceptance of what's arising, is the attitude of goodwill. It's not like we have to do it over and over to cultivate that attitude. In that moment, that is the expression of friendliness, of goodwill.

It's important to recognize this as a possibility, as a living expression that we can manifest and experience over and over, no matter how difficult our experience might be in a moment.

This is Thich Nhat Hanh speaking about our relationship to anger, though it could apply to anything:

"I have to deal with my anger with care, with love, with tenderness, with non-violence. We do not need to consider anger, hatred, as enemies we have to fight to destroy. That would be like transforming yourself into a battlefield, tearing yourself into parts. If you struggle in that way, you do violence to yourself."

So with this attitude of goodwill, rather than doing violence to ourselves, we might be more open to a situation. Again, we sense that no matter how difficult a situation, we can use it as a stepping stone rather than an obstacle. And some people would say, well, we need difficult situations because that's how we grow.

There's a story I love about Gurdjieff, who had a community in France, I believe, with quite a lot of people living together under his guidance. And there was one man who was extremely difficult and drove everybody crazy. Nobody liked him or liked to be around him. And I guess people weren't very nice to him either. He just got fed up one time and left. Everyone said, "Thank God he's gone. Now we can really get down to what community is about."

And Gurdjieff went after him and tried to talk him into coming back. And the man said, "Forget it. I don't want to come back there. People aren't nice to me."

Who wants to live here?

So the Jesuit said, "I'll pay you to come back."

And so he came back. People said, "What's he going to do that for? It's so nice without him."

And the Jesuit said, "No, you need this guy. He's a very important part of the community."

My belief is that we don't need to go out and look for trouble in our lives—enough of it comes to us—but this story kind of makes the point.

Another example, a key example that I really love, is about the possibility for transformation from extraordinarily difficult and debilitating circumstances through the power of this attitude of mind of goodwill, of friendliness. I cut this out of a paper a few years ago, about a woman whose story was titled "In Triumphant Return, Ex-Patient Takes Post at Mental Hospital."

It's about a woman who says she was seventeen and clinically depressed when she was misdiagnosed as schizophrenic and placed in a state mental hospital. She remained inside for seventeen years. Now, fittingly for a woman whose antidotes to adversity are perseverance and forgiveness, she has returned as a full-time administrator at the same hospital.

She says, "I wouldn't have grown one bit if I didn't learn to forgive. If you don't forgive your parents or your children or yourself, you don't get beyond that anger."

And then it goes on about many other difficulties in her life—the death of her husband from cancer, deaths by fire of some other people in her family—and just her deep sense of not blaming. It's not a false

forgiveness, you know, but a deep sense that to learn to forgive and not dwell in the pain of the past, one can really reach out to a brighter future.

I find it quite inspiring because it's true. It's not a phony sense of pretending to forgive, but the actual experience over many, many years of the strength of this attitude of mind of goodwill. She's a woman who is not stuck. And nor are we. None of us is stuck and needs to be stuck.

I do want to emphasize, though, that it is a gradual process. Again, not to set up an ideal that no matter how badly one might have suffered and been hurt, well, one ought to forgive this tomorrow and move on. We must really respect and be honest with what's arising in our experience. And then from this truth, the attitude of goodwill, of mettā, will arise. A whole other way of being becomes a possibility.

I love the saying from the Carlos Castaneda book: "A warrior sees everything as a challenge, while an ordinary person sees everything as a blessing or a curse."

A challenge. Goodwill is not equal to passivity or non-action. A lot of times people ask about that. They say, "Well, if we just be open to whatever happens, does that mean we just accept abuse and don't act appropriately?" That's not the case at all. Actually, in meeting a situation with openness, without anger, without blame, you can see so much more clearly what appropriate action is in that situation. And the energy is actually much more available to then act in that appropriate way. It's not so bound up in negativity or fear or self-blame or outward blame. So the attitude of mind of mettā is not at all passive. It leads to quite appropriate action—not just for ourselves, but for all the other people involved.

The third attitude or intention, quite closely related, is that of non-harming—of thought or intention guided by compassion. In many cases, the action of compassion is a natural outflow of the thought of kindness, of mettā, the thought of non-harming.

We don't have to go looking for a field to begin experiencing and observing both what the intention or thought of compassion in the mind can feel like, and also the power of that to affect our actions. We can start right here in this moment, in this sitting and walking and the rest of the day's practice—with compassion for oneself, with compassion for what one is experiencing.

I can't overemphasize the importance of allowing and acknowledging and developing compassion for oneself. It's not selfish. Thich Nhat Hanh again: "If you cannot be compassionate towards yourself, you will not be able to be compassionate to others." And just in my experience, this is so true.

What we're doing here is often extremely difficult. I know from talking to many people in interviews—this is really hard, you know, to sit with oneself. Stephen Levine said once, "We experience many forms of hell as we watch the mind and body." And it's really true. We're meeting all our demons just sitting here quietly on this cushion. Every day—our anger, fear, loneliness, self-hatred, lust, resistance, boredom, on and on.

And how are we greeting these difficult experiences? What about compassion for this suffering? Start to notice how the intention of mind, how the thought of mind, expresses itself just in one noting moment.

Notice the tone of the note. Is it stinging? It tells you something. Notice the tone of the commentary, the running commentary. Maybe you don't have running commentary—I have endless running commentary. Notice the quality of that. Is it, "What's wrong with you? You're off the breath again. David, what, you're having another pain like that? Can't you learn to sit right? You were angry already half the day yesterday, and you're angry again. Get over it."

Notice what's going on. So often we experience these really painful, difficult states and then blame ourselves for experiencing them.

Something I do a lot, besides softening the tone of the note—instead of "thinking," "I'm thinking," it's more mutual: "*I'm* thinking"—is to notice the commentary. Would you treat someone else that harshly? I'll often imagine, when I'm in a really knotted-up state, hating myself, blaming myself—"You knew how to do this right, for God's sake, after all these years; this wouldn't be happening"—I think, if the person next to me was going through that and I knew it, would I think that? Is that how I would relate to that person's suffering? I wouldn't be in this job for very long, I'm sure. And when people share these struggles with me, I always respond, "God, that's really hard. That's really painful." So turn that around to oneself.

Soften the tone of the notes. Notice the running commentary; soften that as well. I used to have one really harsh running commentary that I started to note as "traffic cop," but actually "drill sergeant" would have been much more appropriate. It was like, "When you get back to the breath—you didn't feel that sensation closely enough, go back and do it again." On and on. I softened that one, and you start hearing, "It's okay. It's okay." It helps a lot.

It's a little conscious, you know, but to notice the lack of compassion, the negativity and ill will toward oneself, and intentionally soften it, bring in a feeling of compassion—it changes the whole tone of practice. And after a while, it's not this sense of "Oh, I should be compassionate." But as the Buddha said, what the mind frequently thinks about, that's where it dwells. The compassion begins to arise quite naturally.

I want to read this one personification of working with our demons and compassion. It's a story about Milarepa, a great Tibetan yogi who meditated for years up in caves in Tibet. It's really about how to greet our demons with deep compassion for the suffering engendered. It's quite personified.

So Milarepa was up meditating in his cave, and his mind became blissful. He carried some wood back up to the cave, and when he arrived there, he found seven demons with bodies the size of thumbs and eyes the size of cups. Some were making fire, some were bringing water, some were grinding tsampa, and some sat performing various magical tricks. It's kind of like what happens when you come back from lunch, sit on the pillow, and seven demons spring up—and you were just blissful, you know, minding your own business.

As soon as he saw them, he became frightened. So he meditated, he uttered a subjugating mantra, he performed the gaze, he aroused his deity's presence. Then he meditated on compassion and friendliness, but was unable to pacify them. He thought, "Well, they might be local deities of the place, and I've been here for years, but I've not praised them." So he sang a song of praise to the place. Three of the demons went away, but Milarepa was unable to make the other four go away.

Realizing that the four demons were magical obstacles, he sang a song of confidence, saying: "It's wonderful that you demons came today. You must come again tomorrow. From time to time we should converse."

Three of them vanished like a rainbow.

The remaining demon performed an imposing dance, and Mila thought, "This one is vicious and very powerful." So he sang a song as his view, the pinnacle of his realization, ending it with: "A demon like you does not intimidate me. If a demon like you could intimidate me, the arising of the mind of compassion would be of little meaning. Demon, if you were to stay here longer, that would be fine with me. If you have friends, bring them along. We'll talk about our differences. I feel compassion for this spirit. Let me pray to Lord Vajradhara. Grant your blessings so that this lowly one"—meaning himself—"this lowly one may have complete compassion."

And then, with friendliness and complete compassion, without concern for his body, Mila placed himself in the mouth of the demon. But the demon could not eat him and vanished like a rainbow.

So out of great compassion for ourselves and our demons, can we just place our heads in the mouth? We might vanish and we might not.

There's one other thing I'd like to share from my own experience of compassion—of experiencing a slight dose of compassion. As we allow compassion, non-harming, towards ourselves, towards our own pain, quite naturally it opens up our hearts and minds to compassion for others in the world, for others who we come in contact with. I find that when we don't need to shut off to our own pain, then we don't need to shut off to others' pain. We really can be there for it. And this is really the arising, that quivering of the heart in response to pain, that is sometimes given as a definition of compassion.

Another thing I found so interesting: when we're working with pain and compassion, with our own strong physical or emotional pain, when we're caught in resisting it—which is natural—it seems so separated, so isolated, like we're really alone in our pain, really disconnected. But as compassion comes in towards ourselves, towards this experience, a sense of empathy and connection with our own pain grows to include others. What had been a very isolating experience turns into one that dissolves the seeming sense of separation that we have.

Often in practice, many people talk about it and I've experienced it myself: what has been quite a personal pain that we're fighting, when we open to it with compassion, turns into an experience of universal pain.

And a strong sense of our interconnectedness grows out of it.

Just one last example. Once I was in the hospital, lying there, wishing I wasn't there, lost in my pain. I was in a room with three other women, and something just kind of opened out my attention from my own experience. I softened to it and became aware of how much pain was going on in the two ladies around me. And then the awareness just kept spreading. How many rooms were there in this one hospital? How many hospitals? There were five hospitals just in the town I was in. And how many towns? Just on and on.

Rather than that seeming overwhelming, being able to acknowledge with kindness and compassion my own pain allowed me to open to the others, and to the others' pain, in quite a deep sense of the universality of all of us. And that, from being overwhelmingly painful, can actually bring quite a sense of peace and joy and acceptance.

So these three wholesome attitudes of mind—non-greed or renunciation, the nature of good will, and compassion or non-harming—they develop naturally as we continue to investigate in each moment the nature of our mind and body, the nature of what's arising. More and more they become natural modes of thought, of intention, natural modes of being—not some forced idea.

And again, it's so important to realize that this reach extends far beyond our individual self. How our mind is inclined, the thoughts, affect our actions, and that really does affect everyone we come in contact with.

One last story, showing the power of one person's clarity of intention and action. Thich Nhat Hanh has written about the boat people, those who escaped from Vietnam, all crowded onto small boats. Many of them had trouble with storms—aside from the pirates, these were small, under-equipped boats facing rough storms at sea. He said that in talking with hundreds or thousands of refugees, together they've come to see that the boats with the best chance of survival, the ones that made it through the best when there was a storm or difficulty, were the ones where even one person remained calm. Even one person remaining calm had the thoughts, the intention of inner peace that could lead to appropriate action, and it infects, inspires other people.

So our actions, which are informed by our thoughts, which are formed by our understanding, have great power in the world. As one teacher of mine said to me recently, as a paraphrase: never underestimate the value of what you're doing here.

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