Intention

Carol Wilson · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Carol Wilson · 1:00:03

The main theme I want to talk about tonight is this area of intention, which I think is a really key area of understanding and freedom. It's the link between understanding and action. In my life in the last couple of years, it's becoming a focal point of my practice. By practice I don't mean just sitting on the pillow. I mean the waking up, or attempting to wake up, from moment to moment throughout the activities of our life.

When Buddhism is spoken of in the big overview, it's spoken of as having two wings, the way a bird needs two wings to fly. The wings are that of great wisdom and great compassion. And just as a bird can't fly with one wing, true freedom and deep understanding do not arise without both of these aspects.

I was listening to a talk by Bob Thurman once, who is quite an interesting Tibetan scholar, former monk, kind of a wild man actually. He said something that I found very interesting. He was talking about wisdom and compassion, and he said the wisdom of emptiness—which is what we speak of, the sense that everything is empty of a separate self—this wisdom that we look at as we notice that all thoughts, all sensations, all emotions arise, we're with them, they pass, none has any more intrinsic importance than any other as we sit here on the pillow. This wisdom of emptiness can seem quite cool, quite removed. We generally, at least at first, touch it in silence with concentration in our formal practice. I think that coolness of touching in silence is what often can lead some of us to think, "Well, what's this got to do with the rest of life?" or to feel like being a bit self-absorbed in this practice.

When wisdom is imbued with compassion, met with compassion, the compassionate aspect comes from the heart. Compassion is an energy that connects. And in fact, compassion only arises from connection—with ourselves, with our own pain, connection with the world and with other beings and the pain of other beings. So compassion does not arise just from the coolness of emptiness. The two need to go together.

Luckily for us, that's the natural way it works. The natural outcome, the natural manifestation of wisdom, of understanding, is that of compassion. It's been said that compassion is the link between Buddhas and beings. Buddhas don't just, when they're fully enlightened, turn their back on the rest of us poor souls and go off and sit in the bliss of emptiness for forty-five years until their life peters out. But they spend—and you notice it today because there are these whole worldviews of eons and eons, not just our little minuscule one of this life—Buddhas don't just go off and sit alone, but they really spend their time helping others, and that's through the enormous power of compassion.

So compassion is the link, you could say, between wise understanding and wise action. And how this link

is observable, or how it manifests in our experience, is something we can explore more easily in the silence and simplicity of a retreat. The way compassion—or anything else for that matter, which I'll get into in a minute—manifests is as intention, in this quality of intention. And that's why intention can be so important.

For example, when we're just sitting, as I said, the wisdom of emptiness: everything comes and goes. Greed, hatred, anger, rage, self-love, pain in the knee, murderous feelings, total feelings of unity with the world—the whole litany. And this could all be in an hour. You sit, you watch it, it comes, you notice it, very nice, it goes, okay. The same attitude this practice brings to whatever arises, no discrimination whatsoever. That's the wisdom of emptiness.

And then we can say, well, but that doesn't work so well in the world when we have to act. Where these states of mind and heart, where the way we understand things begins to make a difference, is when these murderous impulses or these feelings of great love and unity manifest as an intention giving rise to speech or action. Then it does matter. It's fine for the murderous feelings to arise. We really note it with acceptance. It passes. That's really fine. But if it manifests as an intention and you get up with a hatchet and go to the person next to you, it's not so fine.

It's really important to incorporate both of these aspects in our practice. Padmasambhava, who is seen as the person who brought Buddhism from India to Tibet—he's revered in Tibetan Buddhism as the father of the whole lineage—said once, "Although my view is as spacious as the sky, includes everything, the view of ultimate truth, my respect for cause and effect and my actions are as fine as grains of flour." Both aspects are necessary.

So I see intention as a key factor for how our understanding, our insights, transfer to the way we are in the world. And this was, at least the way I interpret it, what the Buddha said. You have to realize it's all coming through little veils of not complete clarity always. But how I interpret what the Buddha said in speaking about intention: he gave it really strong importance in the Eightfold Path that Jack spoke of the first night. The first aspect is wise understanding, how we understand the world. And this gives rise to the second aspect, which is often translated as wise aspiration or wise thought. It's also translated as wise intention. And then the third, fourth, and fifth aspects are how we move and speak and act in the world: wise speech, wise action, wise livelihood.

Just by the ordering of that, you can see really clearly that how we understand the world gives rise to our intentions, to our thoughts, which then inform how we act. So if our understanding of the world, for example, is that the only thing that brings true happiness is having as many material possessions as possible, that's going to inform our intentions of how we act.

We will act to get more things, and that will be seen as the greatest good. If our understanding as a small child was that speaking up, saying how we really feel, or asking for something we need would result in being beaten, then we truly learn our view of the world. Our understanding becomes: don't ever open

your mouth to say the truth because you'll get creamed for it. And that informs how we speak, how we act, how we live our lives.

So you can see how, as our insights into what is true arise—on or off retreat—it quite naturally informs how we think, what our intentions are, and then how we act.

To say a little bit about what intention is: we talked about it this morning in the instructions, noticing that basic sense that informs a movement—a feeling of "about to." About to move, about to get up, about to open your eyes. Sometimes it manifests as thought, a thought of "I'm going to do this now." Sometimes it's just a little sense. But it's the link between the mental and the physical.

In the way the Buddha described how things work in the world, in the big picture, I'm sure you've all heard of karma. The word karma translates specifically as "action." And the teaching of karma is really a teaching of action and result, cause and effect. Whatever we do, there is some effect that arises from that. That effect in itself then becomes the cause for another effect, and this whole chain of dependent origination goes on and on.

Many of us, when we're not really thinking, tend to look at whether an action is good or bad—or the terminology is more "skillful" or "unskillful," which is a little less loaded—by examining what the effect or result of that action is, or what that action looks like from the outside. But in the way of looking at karma, in the way that the Buddha described our life, what really determines the skillfulness or unskillfulness, the karmic result or feedback that we'll receive from a particular action, has nothing to do with what it looks like from the outside. It has everything to do with the intention.

The intention that informs an action is what seeds both our own karmic result and how it manifests in the world. This is in some ways a very subtle point, but it is so key because it's so easy to overlook.

The second factor is that an intention that arises in the moment—like everything else—arises, has its effect, and passes. Another one arises, has its effect, and passes. But as an intention arises, take for example the intention to leave the hall. That intention can arise from a whole variety of mental experience. It can be accompanied by any of our whole palette of mental states that we're getting familiar with. Intention can come from greed, from hatred, from self-loathing, from generosity, from boredom, from compassion, from wise seeing, from mindfulness. So intention can have a whole range. Someone pointed out this morning that it seemed like there were different kinds of intention—that's absolutely true.

Take the example of someone in the hall having a coughing fit who gets up and leaves. From where we're sitting on the outside, there's no way to really know what the intention behind that action is. That can only be known to the person themselves, and that's really what determines for that person the skillfulness or unskillfulness. I could leave the hall coughing out of acute embarrassment, out of fear of what other people think, out of self-hatred and just not wanting to stay and submit to that, or out of real concern and

compassion for other people's silence, or fear that I'll give them a cold. It can run the whole range. We can't tell from the outside.

So you can see how important and how valuable mindfulness is for our own experience, because it really takes the ability to bring our awareness back to the point of intention to have some clue for ourselves about why we're doing what we're doing. And this is really the key of all our actions in life: Why am I doing what I'm doing? This is how we find out so much about ourselves.

Often we just look at the results of our actions and wonder why our experience of the results isn't matching what we think we want to happen. But we're often not really clear about what our intentions are, which is understandable because they're often quite mixed. It's very subtle.

We've been talking about, in the instructions this morning, just that sense of "about to"—the intention before movement. Even that can be very complex, but it's the most simple to notice. Sometimes it can manifest as thought. And in a broader sense, which I'll talk about a little later, we can look at intention as manifesting as our purpose in life or in bigger situations—not just a momentary movement, but our larger intention in some of the big decisions we make, in some of the choices we face.

I want to go back to this point of saying that the natural fruit of understanding is compassion. This is something Thich Nhat Hanh says often. And I can't say how many people I've spoken to here on retreat who have described some little annoying experience they had. I don't know if you recognize that what you're talking about is just this: the experience you had that was so unpleasant, the way you were able to deal with it in a mindful way, was really showing how understanding leads to compassion.

Just for example, there have been innumerable little stories about difficulties in the hall. This person's too close, this person's too far, this person took my place, this person's coughing—whatever. And it's great. It's great to have so many people in the hall. It's great to have these little bumpings and rubbings coming up. There's a Korean Zen saying, I believe—I'm not exactly sure—that the way they clean potatoes is to put them all into a big vat of water and then just bump them all against each other. That's sort of how our...

I don't think I need to say any more about that.

For example, someone will say that another person near them was just driving them insane—all the anger, all the rage. And they were aware, as we're all aware, that this reaction was a little bit out of proportion. But we're also aware that it doesn't just evaporate. We try to say, "Oh, it's okay," but it's not okay. We hate it, and we know that. Yet something in us keeps us from either running out in total frustration or getting up and yelling at the person. We choose the middle way, and that's the whole path of Buddhism—the middle way. And you sit with it.

At some point, much like I was talking about with fear, you stop just sitting and hating, and you start sitting and hating but with mindfulness of hating. Now that's a huge difference. We always think the hating has to go away first, but it doesn't. It's just that mindfulness of hating is what arises. And that in

itself is a natural purification.

So often it happens that at some point, the person says, "You know, it went on for an hour, it went on for a day, it went on for a week"—it doesn't matter. At some point you say, "I just started really softening. I saw how the suffering was for me, and I really realized that person was just doing the best they could." This is the natural arising of compassion from understanding. Understanding not intellectually, but understanding that arises from our willingness to bring our attention, our mindful awareness, simply back to the present moment experience. That's all we have to do. The understanding of what's really going on arises by itself.

This happens over and over and over. I'm just trying to point it out because I think often we know it happens, but in a way, later on, you don't give yourself credit. You think, "Oh, you're talking about practicing out of compassion for all beings. Forget it. I have no compassion. That's too much. I don't even know what compassion means." But we do know what compassion means. It arises often for ourselves and for others. Just that little feeling of, "Oh, that must be hard." Or, "Oh, this is really hard. I'm doing pretty good to hang out with this." That's compassion. It doesn't have to be a big show. You don't have to join Mother Teresa's nuns. It doesn't have to be grandiose. We can start little.

I think one of the reasons compassion is the natural outflow of understanding is because in that moment, whenever we really touch or even have an intimation of what is true, of our true nature—that sense of luminous clarity, whatever you want to call it—there is in that, whether we're conscious of it or not, no separation. In that place of knowing what we all are, there's no more sense of separation or incompleteness. And in that total completion, in that sense of unity, the idea of craving or of anger or of needing to pull something in or push something away doesn't even arise. It's irrelevant.

Even though that might not be what we're consciously knowing, I think intimations of this truth are what arise. And in that, there's the melting of separation—the ability in that moment, in feeling my own pain, to feel another's pain. Or just the sense of, "Yeah, we're both here together trying to fit into this space." Instead of my space, your space, it's our space. That just arises quite naturally. It is, I think, in a very simple way, how wisdom gives rise naturally to compassion.

Okay, that's the upside. We can't just talk about how nice it is, because we all know that's part of our experience, but it isn't the totality of our experience. At least not mine—I'll say it's not the totality of my experience. Compassion and love, I think, are our truest expression. As the Dalai Lama once said, he thinks compassion is the truest expression of a human being.

That little children, he observes, show compassion more naturally than other emotions. So yes, of course hatred is also an expression of human beings, but not our truest one. Our truest one is compassion.

But when we're not touching understanding, when our habits of mind are predominating, when those clouds I talked about the other night are really obscuring the sun, when all we can see and recognize are

the clouds, when our experience goes unexamined—the habits that commonly arise in many of us, deeply ingrained habits, are habits of wanting, of greed, desire, fear, self-protection, anger, just spacing out and wanting distraction. The three basic so-called poisons, and they really do poison our understanding: greed, hatred, and confusion. They're deeply ingrained habits. They're not our truest nature.

Something I've been becoming more and more aware of in the last couple of years is how often, in the world at large, the force of these habits of mind serves as intention. Habits of greed, or of anger, or hatred, or indignation with a tone of judgment—they are very powerful forces for action. And what I've found interesting is how often these particular habits of mind go unquestioned as the most valid or useful intentions that give rise to action.

This is why intention is such an important aspect of how we act, not just the result. Think how many really valuable and important things come to be—how many people work for the environment or work in science or work for peace—and the motivation is really anger, rage, and fear. It's a huge motivation for action. It's very energizing. And it seems to get a lot done.

But if you pull back and look at the big picture, at some point it goes slightly awry. The results seem to go slightly awry. Last summer, for example, I was at a retreat specifically for burned-out environmentalists. People very active, for many years deeply active in the environmental movement—lawyers, scientists, doctors. Some had a spiritual practice and some didn't. And it came out in many of the discussions that what had motivated them most deeply, what had kept them active all these years, was anger. And why were they so burned out? That was a lot of it. This wasn't my observation; this is what people were telling me. Anger kind of burns up the ground that feeds it. It can't sustain itself as a reliable and balanced motivating force for action, even though it seems to get so much done.

It's painful, but I've been fascinated to watch what's been going on in Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union. When some of the totalitarian regimes first started to break apart, there was—at least from here, at least as it was reported—some sense of euphoria. The good is finally winning, fear and despotism is falling apart, now everything will be flowers and beautiful. And look what's happened. It's incredibly painful, but what we're seeing is that one fear, the fear of the totalitarian regime, was just keeping a lot of other really deep fears and greeds submerged. Now, rather than fear of whoever the dictator is, it seems like every little group hates every other little group. There's a great fear of the other, the stranger. And there's also a lot of greed that arises. The purification really has to come in our own hearts, in our own intention. We can't just rearrange how things are outside and then everything will be okay.

The suffering, the immense suffering in this world—it's unthinkable, absolutely unthinkable. But we're not that different. The suffering all arises from human action. And human action is driven by intention. Without investigation, without a willingness to look, the deepest habits of intention are those of confusion and greed and anger and fear—all with the deep, somehow thinking that this will make me happy. That's the confusion.

So in some ways it might seem self-serving to sit here on a pillow, to be in this idyllic environment while there's so much suffering going on in the world. But I feel deeply that if we have the willingness to keep bringing our attention back, to really be honest and accepting of whatever we see in our experience, to really notice our intentions—they will begin to purify, to change, and it will have an enormous effect in our lives. It really ripples outward to everyone we're connected with.

And I'm not exaggerating to say that what we experience here matters. One yogi said to me, after some pillow wars in the hall—who sits where, this is my turf, fighting over who gets first in the lunch line—we have all kinds of wars during the three-month course. Wars of turn on the light, turn off the light, turn on the light, turn off the light. It's really intense. Can you imagine something that's been blown out of proportion, and you're sitting with it for two months, and it gets aggravated each day when you see the person who turns on the light? Once in Burma, two monks—foreign monks, really committed people—came to blows over whether the fans should be on. As one yogi said to me once, this is how world wars start. Luckily all we have here is pillows.

What strikes me, and what's actually kind of sad and amazing, is an underlying assumption that often comes up in conversations: well, but if I give up desire and anger...

How will I ever do anything? Someone said to me once, "Well, if I don't have desire, what will I do? Just sit in my room all day?" You see, the unconscious assumption is that desire and fear and anger are all we have to act from. It's really kind of sad. But it gives us a chance to really open up and explore other possibilities.

And it isn't so easy, necessarily. Last summer I took a self-defense course called Model Mugging, which is very intense. Honestly, the conscious intention I had to take it was as a way to cultivate compassion. I know that might not make sense, but that was really why I went. I thought, well, if I really confront my fear of being attacked, then I won't be so afraid to move into what I perceive as dangerous situations, and I can be more open to the fear and respond with compassion. That was my thinking. Whether that was self-delusion, I don't really know.

The way this course works—this is just for women, the men's course is different—they have guys who are all padded, I mean really hugely padded, with these huge helmets and pads and everything. Because you're taught to defend yourself full strength when they come and attack you. It's not just that you do this move and this move. You really have to practice doing it with your full power. There were five sessions, each one five or six hours long. It was really intense and exhausting.

I found out pretty soon I actually wasn't going to confront my fear, because even though these guys would come to attack me, I knew they weren't going to hurt me. Still, the whole point is to encourage you to get up your energy and really do the techniques they teach you with all your strength, with all your power. And the way they cultivate bringing up that energy, of course, is anger.

In many cases I can understand this. I'm not saying anger is not important to feel. Many of the women in the class had been raped or abused, and the fear had been so paralyzing that they could not even say no or defend themselves. To get in touch with the anger and free the energy and let it out—I think that's extremely important. So I'm not saying that isn't a valuable part of it.

But what struck me was there was never any intimation that there could ever be any other motivation than that. I remember the first day, after all the group work where they're trying to rev us up, keeping us screaming all the time—well, it breaks the freezing, actually; it's a helpful technique; if you ever need to fight, screaming really gets your energy going—at the end of the group, one of the assistant instructors stomped over to me and said, "Great, let's go, kick-ass." And I thought, oh, I don't know if I'm in the right place.

So I spent my time really challenged to get my energy up, because I never got angry. I also don't have a history of being attacked or abused, so I didn't have something like that to draw on. But I consciously kept asking myself: can I bring up this level of energy to repel an attacker out of some other motivation? Can we have clear, direct action just out of clear seeing? No, I'm not going to let you punch me in the face—but without hatred, without fear. Can it actually come from compassion?

I can't say I got to that place. I got to where I could act without feeling angry and really bring up a lot of power. I can't say I actively felt compassion. But it was very interesting for me as a way to begin discovering how to act without it having to be only from the so-called negative force of intention.

And if we look around—again, we can only know from the outside—some of the people who seem most driven by the intention of compassion, whether or not you agree with their viewpoints, demonstrate how that intention can lead to much deeper and more long-lasting action and effect than rage or fear ever can.

Take someone like Mother Teresa. Again, whether you agree with how she does things, that little lady has done an incredible amount. Or Gandhi. Or Sister Chan Khong, who works with Thich Nhat Hanh. She is, to me, an amazing woman, just a powerhouse of energy and commitment. She's involved in ten million different projects and seems to have very deep understanding, and a lot of compassion—what you'd call tough compassion, not "oh, you poor thing." It seems to me that she acts from a strong intention of compassion. I just want to read something she wrote once, if I have it here somewhere.

I don't seem to have it. Something... oh, here it is.

This to me is an expression of the real strength of compassion that greed and anger can never have. This is part of a eulogy she wrote for some friends during the Vietnamese war, some close friends who had been killed by grenades that were thrown into their school:

We cannot hate you, you who have thrown grenades and killed our friends, because we know that people are not our enemies. Our only enemies are ambition, jealousy, hatred, and the misunderstanding that leads to such acts of violence. Please allow us to remove all misunderstanding so that we can work together for the

happiness of the Vietnamese people. We must share the responsibility for the poverty and injustice in our country.

I think it takes an amazing understanding and greatness of heart to even write something like that, much less mean it. And I believe there's a strength from that, a strength that none of our confusion and delusion can ever come close to matching. It's just that the habits are so strong we sometimes forget there's another possibility.

That's the beauty of this practice of mindfulness. By our willingness to simply look, first it wakes us up to our habits. By even remembering to notice the intention, it can give you a moment of choice. Some people reported just kind of playing with that in movement today—noticing an intention to move arising and then not moving. Noticing it arise and then not moving. And getting to the place where quite a few people said, "Well, what will ever make me move?" It's fun to play in. But then suddenly some intention arises that is somehow powerful enough, and you move. That's on the simple level.

But we can notice that, and it is the noticing that gives us choice, that purifies naturally the intention. Again, the time when you're so filled with rage at someone here and you don't do anything about it and you just stay—that's the purification, noticing the intention, and it purifies naturally. It changes to care, to compassion.

Or when you see there's one last piece of cake and everything in you wants to throw the person ahead of you out of line and grab it, and you restrain yourself. And maybe real joy comes up: "Well, isn't it great? They look so happy to get that piece of cake."

Now, the noticing of the intention with mindfulness—that might have seemed like something you did. You noticed it. You made a deliberate choice not to act. And then the intention sort of purifies, changes quite naturally. It's not always that we have to work so hard.

And sometimes I think we can get discouraged because we think, well, once we see that this intention of greed isn't so helpful, that attachment brings suffering—once we see it, that should be it, right? It's clear. I've really felt the suffering. The habit should go. And it can get quite discouraging at times when it doesn't.

Last summer I think I heard an analogy that I really love. Our old habits don't just vanish—I'm sorry to tell you, but they don't just vanish. This person said it's sort of like they slowly wear out, like a piece of cloth. At first you can't see through it at all, and you use it and use it for years and years and years—I don't know how many years, a lot of years. And it slowly gets thinner and thinner, and it's sort of translucent, and you can see through it, and it gets some holes in it, and then it's really clear. It just slowly, slowly wears out. And in the end you hardly notice that it's gone. It's been so gradual. That really fit with my experience. That's a lot what it's like.

Nisargadatta Maharaj said once, "Do not be afraid of freedom from desire and fear. It enables you to live a

life so different from all you know, so much more intense and interesting, that truly by losing all, you gain all."

So just notice sometimes the tendency: if I let this desire fade away, where will I be? Who will I be? Who will I be without this self-hatred? Who will I be without constant judging? And I love it so much.

You know, it's as if anything would be preferable to freedom from desire and fear. It's really quite wonderful.

Our intentions do purify naturally, quite a lot, through our willingness simply to be with them. But the Buddha was so practical—there are also ways we can consciously, gently help to guide our intentions, to incline the mind toward compassion, toward loving-kindness, just in gentle ways.

That's actually what we've been doing with the loving-kindness meditation. Sometimes people find themselves confused about this. They'll say, "I don't get it—you're telling us to just be with whatever is, and then you turn around and say wish that people's suffering may go away, wish that things can be different." But we're not doing loving-kindness as some kind of naive wishing, like rubbing a magic gem—if I wish, then everything will be okay. What it really is, is a cultivation of intention. Each time we say, and truly mean, "May I be free from suffering"—that's an intention. We can't control the result, as you well know. You can't even make the feeling of loving-kindness come up, much less can you declare, "I will no longer have suffering."

But in this working with simply feeling—not just repeating the intention in a rote way, but tuning into it and meaning it—it has a profound effect. Often, again, one that's not noticed at first. The Buddha said once that what you think about, what you reflect upon often, toward that the mind will naturally incline. Which is sensible. It makes sense. In continuing to reflect upon and arouse the intention of loving-kindness, that begins to manifest in a much more spontaneous way.

It's quite interesting because very often, especially if you've been doing an intensive loving-kindness retreat, practicing a great deal, many people have said—and I found this to be true myself—you can say it and feel it, but it doesn't really feel like that much is going on. Especially if we have the idea that strengthening the intention of loving-kindness means from now on I'm just walking around in this bliss of unity and love, with love spontaneously arising, a sense of oneness with every being we encounter. It's not like that.

But I found, and many people I've talked to have found, that on leaving a retreat and coming back to your everyday activities, your everyday relationships, you might think, "Nothing happened. I don't feel any different. I don't feel any more loving." That's because we're looking too big, looking for something too significant, too noticeable a change.

But what you begin to find—and it's really very profound—is again, it's on the level of intention. You walk into a little situation that before would have just made you crazy, and you start to get crazy, and then all

of a sudden will come up: "Oh, that's okay. This is hard, but that's okay." And the whole situation just broadens out. It's okay to feel the difficulty, and in that there's a breadth of feeling—it's also okay for the other person or for the other situation to be just as it is.

I've noticed this happening in myself over and over and over. Loving-kindness and the intention of it doesn't jump over the difficulty. It opens to that and then has a much broader range, a much more all-inclusive range of intention that really lets everything be as it is and is okay with that. And it's really fascinating to notice how this arises. It's not like saying, "I think I'll make things be okay." It comes by itself. What we reflect upon frequently, toward that the mind will naturally incline. And so it does itself. You think you're just sitting here feeling like a stone, saying, "May I be happy, may I be happy, may I be happy." But if there's an intention to meet it, it's having an effect. It's having an effect.

So it's not just what I call a pillow practice—something you do on your pillow that doesn't have anything to do with the rest of your life.

Another way I've been working lately with conscious cultivation of the intention of compassion is borrowing a little bit from the Tibetans—cultivating the intention of bodhicitta, which translates as "enlightenment heart" or "enlightenment mind." Citta is a Sanskrit and Pali word that shows the split we have—we distinguish between heart and mind, but that word means both. They don't make the differentiation.

The cultivation of bodhicitta—again, it's intention, not looking so much for the result—is to clarify in oneself the intention to awaken in order to help all sentient beings awaken. Now this might sound very grandiose if we look at the big picture. People might think, "I can't do that. I can just barely be here for my own pain. I can't be here for the pain of all beings in the world. That's just too grandiose for me." But that's jumping over the intention and thinking that somehow we've got to go out and save all beings.

This has been a very wonderful practice for me this last year or so—simply cultivating that intention at the beginning of a sitting. The way it was recommended to me is simply to move my attention inside, get in touch with what's my purpose, really what's my purpose in practice, and tune into just the suffering in the world, the suffering of beings. This is not a guilt trip. It's just tuning into what is. And in that tuning in, it's so easy for just in that one moment to arise a sense of, "Yes, I'm really doing this difficult practice so that I may awaken to help all beings awaken."

Just that simple. And it has a profound effect—it can. Again, the intention comes, it goes. You don't try to hold on to it through the whole sitting. But that intention can give rise to a real vastness of mind, of heart.

It's said that that vastness, that all-encompassing nature encompassing the pain of all beings, the willingness to practice for all beings just for that moment—that vastness is akin to the vastness of our original nature. It approximates, the same way that the unlimited quality of metta approximates that spaciousness.

So notice, if you're interested, try it for yourself and see how the quality of the sitting can change. I don't mean you get better experience. I don't mean you get all pleasant. I don't mean anything like that. But the quality of our intentions that keep arising in the sitting shifts.

If I'm just sitting down and I don't really check in and clarify my intention to awaken, to help all beings, and I sit and I start to hurt, it's easy: "Okay, I've had it. I think I've got something else to do. Who needs this? What's the point of sitting with this pain? It's too difficult."

When there's that intention, that vastness of connection with the suffering of all beings and that intention to somehow be of service, it's a lot easier to be here for what's happening. It's not nearly so self-confined. And I'm not talking about some grandiose idea of "I'm so important." Actually, we're not important at all individually. But in the whole scheme of things, what else is there to do? At least finish the sitting and be as present as possible, because it's not just for me. It really is a connection with all beings.

As I say, it's been a wonderful practice for me. It gives one much more energy, less discouragement. You can act without so much fear, without so much hesitation. When your actions are not just for yourself, it's like a mother with her child. If the child's in danger, you don't think, "Well, I don't know, I'm a little afraid. I don't want to go talk to that weird guy talking to her. What if he doesn't like me?" You don't think about stuff like that. You go over and you do what has to be done.

Working with the intention of metta, intention of bodhicitta, of compassion, can have that same effect. We can act much more directly. We still have our stuff, but we don't have to be so limited by it. It's quite powerful. At least I've been finding it that way.

I was going to talk a little more about other aspects of compassion, but I'm not allowed to tonight. That's okay—I could go in two directions here and there's not that much more time, so I'll continue.

This isn't so much on the compassionate aspect of intention, but again, another way I have found in daily life that our ability to tune into intention, to notice it, can be an extremely helpful and valuable tool—in broader aspects of our daily life, in areas of activity where we need to make a choice, where we need to make decisions. The ability and willingness to tune into intention I've found extremely helpful in this area.

This is an aspect sometimes called clear comprehension. It's taking the microscopic aspect of mindful awareness that we cultivate here—really looking at intention, that little moment before you stand up, before you move your finger, before you turn around. It's a little hard to do that at work, or when you're in a busy conversation, or when you're taking care of your kids. But the same quality of attention, the same understanding of how intention works to link our understanding with our actions and decisions, can be used in a more macroscopic way of looking at things, at our larger activities.

And again, the fact of being aware of our intentions, of our purpose, gives us a little space of choice. It might close up again the next second—that's okay—but it gives us a little space of choice where we might not have to just act blindly from habit.

So in this larger area of working with clarity of purpose, it's the same inquiry: What's my intention in this action? Is it skillful? Is it not skillful?

Am I taking this cake out of greed? Or is it okay? Am I just hungry? These are simple things.

But there's also, on a larger scale, a kind of tuning into: Is this action, is this decision—and again, this isn't every little thing you do; you go and take a shower, you don't have to do this—but is this action, is this decision in accord with the most important purpose, the most important intent that I hold for myself, that I hold for my life?

This I've also found extremely valuable over the last few years. Of course, this necessitates reflecting and really looking at yourself, at your choices, and what you hold to be most dear, what's most true for you, what's most important in your life—really consciously clarifying that for yourself, for now. Of course it can change. Everything can change. Hopefully it just refines and refines.

But in our lives, in this culture anyway, most of us are so bombarded by choices. It's not like in the old days. We all have endless choices about where to live, what job to have. So many people in this culture change jobs every couple of years. My father had the same job for forty years. He's lived in two houses in my whole lifetime. And for me, hardly the longest I'm in one place in the last some years is three months, and that's because of the three-month course.

Our lives are really different. We're bombarded by choices and actions—should I get married, should I have kids or not have kids, should I adopt? We have untold choices, on and on.

The point I'm trying to make is that without some kind of reflection, without some kind of clear intention of what really is our deepest purpose, it's easy to just drift from one thing to the next. We wake up and years have gone. We wake up and our whole life has gone. We think, wait, but what about what was really important?

So I find it valuable to take some time to really reflect, or just notice when it arises spontaneously. And I would encourage you to really honor yourselves and honor that purpose—not to get into some kind of self-judgment or self-denigration, thinking "I'm not good enough to have such a noble purpose," or whatever.

When this first ever arose as an issue for me, I was on some short retreat some years ago, and it just spontaneously came out of nowhere, but with real resolve and clarity: my purpose in this life is to serve the Dharma. I thought, "Oh, who said that? Where did that come from? What does that mean?" I didn't know what that meant.

But the tendency that next followed was, "Well, who do you think you are? Who do you think you can ever help? How do you think you can serve the Dharma?" But if any of us aren't the Dharma, that's all we are. And whatever we do can be a service to truth and a service to other beings. There's no way it has to

manifest.

I'm not saying that should be your purpose. Whatever is really true for you, whatever is really at core, what's most important—honor that in yourself. Don't let yourself get beguiled by all those little matterings in the back of your mind: "I'm not worthy, I'm not good enough, I don't know what this means." No, you don't know what it means. But I found it to be a beacon, a really powerful kind of guide in times of decision.

When I first started teaching, I would never have done it had it not been for the clarity of that intention arising in me. This is my purpose. It was within two months of that arising that I was kind of nudged into teaching. I would never have done it without that. I hated the whole idea. I was petrified. I would have done anything to get out of it—which I could have done by just saying no.

But I was nudged and nudged, and a couple of good friends who usually, if I said no, would just go "okay"—they wouldn't take no. At some point, like a light bulb went off, and I said, "Oh right, that thing that came up before: my purpose is to serve the Dharma. This is where I have to apply it."

I'm not looking for this. It just came. And all the fear and all the dread and all the unpleasantness—that just becomes part of our practice. It's not a problem. I mean, we don't like it, but to have fear of being uncomfortable make my decisions in life isn't really how I want to live my life.

Let's close with this from Thich Nhat Hanh:

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 she or he is overcome with compassion for all. Seeing and loving go together. Seeing and loving are one. Great understanding goes with great compassion.

Thank you for listening.

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