Mettā With Compassion

Carol Wilson · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Carol Wilson · 1:02:14

I want to start tonight by sharing a short expression of what might be called joy in the practice or the Dharma from Shantideva, who was a Buddhist teacher at Nalanda University in India in the 8th century. This isn't actually so connected to my talk, but since we've been playing with joy today, and this really makes me happy—hopefully it will you also:

As a blind man feels when he finds a pearl in a dust bin, so am I amazed by the miracle of awakening rising in my consciousness. It's the nectar of immortality that delivers us from death. The treasure that lifts us above poverty into the wealth of giving to life. It's the tree that gives shade to us when we roam about scorched by life. The bridge that takes us across the stormy river of disturbing emotions. The cool moon of compassion that calms our mind when it is agitated, the sun that dispels darkness, the butter from the milk of kindness made by churning it with the Dharma. This awakening mind is a feast of joy to which all are invited.

So if you can't think of any other reason for mudita toward yourself, even one moment of the awakening mind arising in our consciousness is all of that. It's really quite wonderful.

Buddhism as a practice, as a path, is often described as having two wings. In the way that a bird needs two wings to fly, so our opening into liberation has to include both of these aspects: great wisdom and great compassion. As we've hopefully been exploring over the weeks, they're not really very separate, and just as it's natural for both wings to balance each other, so also is the case with great wisdom and great compassion.

Once I was at a talk by Robert Thurman, the Buddhist Tibetan scholar who works in New York. He said something that really struck me, and I've noticed it in my own experience. He was talking about how the wisdom of emptiness, that understanding of anatta—the emptiness of no inherent separate self-existence—can seem, just on its own, kind of cool, kind of removed. We tend to touch it in silence, in samadhi. We come to silent retreats. And while it's quite liberating, when not balanced by compassion, it can seem to be quite freeing, but it lacks a certain sense of depth or connection.

Compassion is a movement of the heart that arises through contact with the world, with ourselves, with other beings, contact with suffering. But again, compassion can get quite unbalanced if it's not balanced with the wisdom of emptiness, with the wisdom of equanimity. And so the two wings really support each other.

What I want to talk about tonight is one way in which we can begin to discover and explore how compassion, metta, all the Brahmaviharas form the link between our understanding and our actions and

speech in the world. It's been said that compassion is the link between Buddhas and beings. The Buddha didn't just spend the last forty-five years of his life sitting in the bliss of emptiness in a cave. He could have. But he spent it tirelessly meeting with people, trying to share, trying to awaken people to the joy of the freedom that he discovered. This is the action of compassion, the tireless energy of compassion that can't be discouraged by our perhaps feeble responses to such wisdom.

This compassion as the link between Buddhas and beings, as the link between our own understanding and wisdom and how we act in the world—it expresses or manifests in the function of intention. That's what I want to speak about tonight, this quality of our experience that we call intention.

In the way that the Buddha describes our action in the world, a key element in action, in coming to understand what is skillful and what is unskillful in the way that we speak or act or even think—whereas our tendency is to look for the results. And that's something that we've run up against as a hurdle in a lot of the questions, or in speaking with people in interviews, in cultivating this practice of loving kindness, compassion, and mudita: our tendency to look for the results or to focus on the results or to get confused because we can't see the results. In fact, the whole crux, the whole nub of speech and action, of what determines whether it's skillful or not, is in this quality of intention.

In a Vipassana retreat we pay some attention to intention. It can be seen before any action. It's easier to see before a large action. It's the sense of the impulse, the impetus that gives rise to the action—just a little "about to" feeling before the action. It's the impetus that gives rise to speech. And there is even intention before thought, although often intention is unconscious and we don't recognize it.

Working with noticing and paying attention to this quality of intention is, I think, key when we begin to wonder: How does this practice that I'm doing move from the pillow into the world? And what good is it if I sit here and think loving thoughts and then just continue to sit here? How does it translate? The place that our understanding moves from the cool remove of emptiness into the connectedness of action and compassion is via this area of intention.

An intention to move, an intention to get up and leave the hall, an intention to eat—the impulse will arise to do it, and arising with it is any of our whole vast array of mental states, mental and emotional experiences. This is where it's really interesting, because whereas we tend to judge by results, you can't actually tell by the result or the action. You can't necessarily tell from outside what was the intention that informed that action.

And that's really where the heart of skillfulness or unskillfulness lies.

An intention could be accompanied by greed or fear or hatred or boredom, compassion, loving-kindness, sympathetic joy, equanimity—the whole show. For example, someone in the hall starts to have a coughing fit and leaves, which happens all the time. We sitting here can't tell which of a variety of intentions gave rise to their leaving. It could be true compassion, not wanting to disturb other people. It could be a sense

of self-centered embarrassment—what do people think of me? It could be a sense of total relief and desire: finally, I have a reason I can get up and leave this sitting. We can't tell from outside.

In the same way, something that came up in the question periods the other day is that the same intention of compassion could manifest in vastly different actions, because it will be filtered through the particular understanding a person has, their particular view of the world, or their idea of what compassionate action is. You may remember the question about an inchworm on someone's hand. For her, the sense of compassion moved the intention to act, to get up and leave. That is compassion forming as an intention that leads to action. The intention that gives rise to thought is actually not as strong as the intention that gives rise to speech, and stronger still is the intention that gives rise to action. Someone else said that with that same intention of compassion, his response would have been to do something different. So again, by the outer action, we looking in from the outside cannot assess what that person's intention is.

You see how subtle this can be, and how our tendency to leap over intention and focus on results can get us into all kinds of confusion, leaving us out of touch with where the real heart of the matter is.

The Buddha, to me, really pointed to the powerful and important linking nature of intention when he laid out his Eightfold Path. I'm not going to go into the whole Eightfold Path, but it's his main outline of the qualities we cultivate and develop throughout our life to continue in our practice of awakening. The first stage of this path is wise understanding—seeing things as they are. Since it's the beginning, it doesn't mean we start from perfect wise understanding, but at least there's some little glimmer somewhere that things are not as they superficially seem, or we wouldn't begin practice or a whole life of inquiry or spiritual development anyway.

The second step is translated in various ways, but one of them is wise intention. Understanding gives rise to intention; how we understand the world informs our intentions, which then lead to speech and action. The third, fourth, and fifth steps deal with wise speech, wise action, and wise livelihood. To me—and this is just the way I look at it—by putting wise intention between understanding and action, the Buddha is making it really obvious how important this particular aspect of our experience is.

He says in one part of the Dhammapada that how we understand the world colors how we act. Someone who is a psychopath, completely self-centered with no sense of connection or cause and effect, will just do whatever they want with no sense of remorse or understanding of the pain they are inflicting on others. This is in the opening of the Dhammapada, one of the books of sayings of the Buddha: "We are what we think. All that we are arises with our thoughts. With our thoughts we make the world. Speak or act with a pure mind and happiness will follow you as your shadow, unshakable." And he gives a similar refrain saying that if you speak or act with an impure mind, trouble will follow you as the wheel follows the ox that draws the cart. "How can a troubled mind understand the way? Your worst enemy cannot harm you as much as your own unguarded thoughts. But once mastered, no one can help you as much—not even your father or your mother."

Intention often manifests in our experience as thought. The practices of the brahmavihāras—one way you can look at them is that what we're doing is a very conscious purification of thought, a purification of intention. Each time we sit with "May you be free from suffering," or affirm "I care about you, I care about your suffering," that is a conscious reconditioning of intention. We can't control the effects, as we know, but we're working on this much more subtle level.

In a moment when there actually is that intention—"May you be free from danger"—just that there's that intention in the mind, in that one moment, is quite a deep purification. Because in that moment, we're not strengthening the habit of greed or hatred or delusion. In that one moment, there's the purity of the intention of loving-kindness or of compassion. You might not really notice so much about that at the time, again because we're so keyed to results. But each moment of that purity of intention, of that willingness, that commitment to again come back and condition that pure intention—it has an overall powerful purifying effect on our own being and our experience.

Just as the wisdom of emptiness—that there is no separate self, no lasting substance I can call "me"—just as that understanding, whether we touch it in a meditation retreat or in our life, gives rise to its natural expression of compassion and love, the brahmavihāras are all of them a natural expression of emptiness. And so the other way around, through the deliberate cultivation of loving-kindness, compassion, sympathetic joy, and equanimity, we might begin to find that the reverse is also true.

Through the cultivation of these pure intentions, we move again into the same truth of emptiness, only on its flipped side of interconnectedness. In touching these boundless, limitless states, we see that there is no way—in that moment of metta or karuna—to say this is separate, I am separate from you, your pain does not affect me, my pain does not affect you. There is no way in the moment of compassion to think that the pain of any one being is somehow isolated, that we are somehow separated from it. And in that boundless, limitless aspect of the Brahmaviharas, we again have a doorway into the liberating understanding of no separate self, of total interconnectedness.

Whichever doorway we want to take—emptiness or love and compassion—we end up at the same home, the same potential for liberation. In a moment when we're touching that boundless connectedness or that boundless emptiness, whichever way your mind later wants to conceive of it, in that moment the caring, the love is just natural. When we're seeing that there is no separation, the sense of inner completeness is total. In that moment, greed, aversion, hatred, clinging makes absolutely no sense.

It's not that we have to somehow hate ourselves or get rid of clinging or give up everything we've ever wanted in order to touch completion. In that moment of completion, there's absolutely nothing to want, and there's no need to push anything away. The natural outcome, the natural intention giving rise to speech and action from that understanding is going to be connectedness. It can manifest as metta, love. It can manifest as compassion, when faced with suffering. It can manifest as mudita, when faced with joy. It can manifest as equanimity when faced with any of it.

Through the depths of our practice, whether it's Vipassana or Brahmaviharas, our intentions are going to be purifying spontaneously. This purification is happening even in those moments where you think not much is going on.

But also, at least for myself, there are many, many moments where this particular purity of intention is not manifesting quite so obviously, shall we say. We've talked before about the deeply conditioned and ingrained habits of our mind—confusion, aversion, greed, longing, fear. When we're not paying attention, or when we're not cultivating love and compassion or wisdom, what so often arises and forms the intentions from which we act are these habits of mind, especially greed and hatred and anger and fear.

What I find—and I've been really exploring this in my practice the last few years—is that it's kind of scary to me, and also very sad, that unexamined, it's almost as if we accept the validity of anger, of fear, of greed as motivation for action. They certainly can be incredibly strong motivations, and a lot gets done out of the intention of greed, of wanting things, or of fear, or of anger. How much of our economic progress and all the comforts that we enjoy in this country comes from these motivations? Some of it might be done out of compassion, out of caring. But a lot of it, I would venture to say, comes out of greed.

It's almost as if we accept that these are the strongest motivations for action, and we get confused—as people often do—at the idea of giving up desire. "Well, if I give up desire, what am I going to do? Just sit in my room?" People have asked me that very seriously. "Without anger, how can I protect myself?" That's a more complicated question, because at first we might need anger as a protection. I'll speak about that in a minute.

But it's this sense of looking at the results. So many peace demonstrations over the years seem to have good intention, but actually the momentary intention is one of anger or rage or even self-righteousness, which has a tinge of anger. If you want to just look pragmatically at what doesn't work about these, even if we're only looking at results and not tuning into intention, it's that if the intention is unskillful, at some point that begins to taint the action and the results. It's as if anger kind of eats itself up—it eats up the ground that it feeds on.

There's a passage from Thomas Merton: "The rush and pressure of modern life are perhaps the most common form of its innate violence. To allow oneself to be carried away by a multitude of conflicting concerns, to surrender to too many demands, to commit oneself to too many projects, to want to help everyone in everything, is to succumb to violence. The frenzy of the activist neutralizes their work for peace. It destroys the fruitfulness of their own work because it kills the root of inner wisdom which makes the work fruitful."

It might seem more difficult or hard to trust that as our intentions purify, we can be just as effective—even more effective. But I deeply believe it's true. Last year, Joseph and I were teaching a retreat billed for burned-out environmentalists. There were some who had practiced a lot and some who had never really done any kind of meditation practice—a whole range. In talking to some of the friends

there who had done a lot of practice, they could articulate for themselves that the burnout, the stress, the problem came from two things: how hard they were working, and that so much of their energy was fueled by anger and rage. Anger cannot sustain itself as an intention or motivation for fruitful action—hence burnout, and somehow needing to find another inner source, another inner wellspring of energy from which to act.

We can also see in the larger world how something that from the outside might look wonderful tends to break apart when the intentions really aren't as skillful as they seem. One of my favorite examples lately is Germany, because I have a lot of German friends and I've spent some time there. I remember the fall when the Berlin Wall came down. Even here, there was this feeling of euphoria, a real sense that love and connection was winning, that it was really getting stronger. Since then, my friends who used to love Berlin don't like to be there anymore because the whole feeling of the city has changed. Between East and West, the people who lived in the East with different cultures and different economic needs and backgrounds, there's a sense of competition, a sense of struggle, a sense of antagonism.

And my friend Franz told me there's even a T-shirt that says, "We want our wall back"—on the West side, not the East.

But it's not all that it seems. In fact, I had a friend—I remember seeing on TV when the wall went down that first night, it looked like this beautiful, loving, euphoric party. But I have a friend who was in Berlin, and she said it was like that for a few minutes, but actually it was horrible. People got really drunk and it was really wild. She said, "I was really scared. I left." I thought, oh, that's really interesting.

And so even the most helpful or seemingly wonderful things—when our own intentions, our own understanding isn't purified, the hate and the fear might make way for greed. Or the greed gets more evened out and it makes way for hatred of the person who's different.

To take it back from the larger world, I'm sure many people here have seen—and it's said almost every retreat—in looking at how some sense of anger or some sense of desire built up in the mind about some petty little thing, this is not any different from how world wars start. And it's not.

We've had in three-month courses here what I call "light wars"—people want the light on, other people want it off. I was just talking to a friend who remembers it from five years ago: people unscrewing the light bulbs, people putting tape over the light bulbs, people hating each other because some of them want the light on and some of them want the light off. And we have friends who were practicing in Burma when two Western monks actually came to blows over whether a fan should be on or off in the meditation hall. This is true. Scary, right?

I'm sure most of us can think of at least some incident where we could relate. If you can't, then good for you.

This is why, even if we think we have the vast wisdom of emptiness, we can never think we're so far

removed as to disdain the very fine level of intention that gives rise to our actions. This is from Padmasambhava, who is the father of Buddhism in Tibet. He said, "Although my view, my understanding, is as spacious as the sky, my actions and respect for cause and effect are as fine as grains of flour."

So this is the work with intention—really beginning to explore in ourselves: Can we trust? Can we find a way to come from the intention of loving-kindness, the intention of compassion? Can we see that it is an even more powerful force in the world, or in our own lives, than greed and fear and hatred? It is hard to trust.

Last year—it seems like a couple of years ago now—I took a self-defense course called Model Mugging. Actually, Michelle did it too, though not at the same time. We had different kinds of experiences.

What it turned into for me—it's a very intense kind of course where you go five times and each session is about five hours long. It's set up so that for women, they have a separate course from men. In the women's course, the men who are called the "model muggers" are padded with these huge helmets and pads because the idea is you learn ways to deflect certain kinds of attacks, and you have to practice at full strength. You have to really be able to kick and hit and gouge eyes. It's very down and dirty—there's nothing too clean or elegant about it.

My personal motivation in going might sound crazy, but somehow I felt that my motivation was this: I saw how fear was preventing me from acting out of compassion. I saw that over and over. For example, if I was in a city and there was some disturbed person or a beggar, someone who wanted something but looked really kind of off, I would see that the fear got in the way of my being able to go over and connect—whether I gave money or just connected human to human. The fear was in the way. So somehow that motivated me. I don't know how that link happened, but anyway, I found myself in this class.

And I saw that, at least in the way the instructors in my class taught it—and other instructors might have done it differently—what was assumed as our joint motivation was anger and rage and fear. Now, in many cases, women who have been raped or abused or really hurt or damaged in some way, and who had been frozen and paralyzed, unable to contact the energizing quality of anger—for them it can be very appropriate to get in touch with that anger to break the paralysis and act. So again, I'm not saying anger is never a helpful or appropriate emotion, necessary to contact.

And they really taught how to do this. They scream a lot. I mean, you run up and down the room screaming. I'm serious—a lot, just to get the energy moving. And you always say "No!" right at the beginning to bring up the sense of anger.

But what began to strike me was that there was no even idea that there could ever be any other motivation than anger or fear. And I actually wasn't very angry because I don't have a history of having been abused, so I couldn't contact that in my own experience. And the guys who were the muggers were

so clearly getting beaten up over and over and over. They were clearly such nice guys—who else would come and do a job like that? I really couldn't work up to getting angry at them.

So for me, it became a kind of koan, a riddle. Can I find a way to access the energy? And it also became clear they were never going to hurt me. They might not let me win, but they weren't going to hurt me, so fear just didn't happen. I didn't really get to work with that aspect. But it really became a koan: Can I access an energy of deep action and response and protecting myself out of some other intention or motivation than anger or fear? Can I really come from a place of compassion and loving-kindness? I'm not saying I achieved that, but it was a very interesting area in which to explore.

And I think that's when it really began to sink into me how much it's assumed that if we've got to do something really active and really energetic, the best source is anger. I just don't buy that. But it's more subtle, and it's less what we're trained in, and it's less what's supported—to see how much energy can come from compassion, can come from loving-kindness.

If we look around in the world, in literature, in the newspapers, or if I look in retreats, you can always find people who are achieving amazing things who, from at least as much as we can tell from what they say and their way of being, seem to come from compassion.

One of my big inspirations—Steve mentioned Aung San Suu Kyi last night—one of my big inspirations is Sister Chân Không, who has been working with Thích Nhất Hạnh for years and years and years, since the early sixties. Even when I first met her in 1986, I didn't really know anything. I'd never heard of her. I knew nothing about her. But even then, spending some weeks with them, I was really blown away by her. As far as I could see, everything she was doing—and I'm not exaggerating—was coming out of taking care of people, both at Plum Village or when she was on retreat here, or taking care of people in Vietnam. And that would take her to any action that needed to happen, from bringing in bug spray and clearing fleas out of somebody's room, to sending money to orphans, to digging in the gardens, to whatever.

I really deeply felt that the motivation for her energy was true compassion. And I have rarely met a person more filled with energy and who gets more done than Sister Chân Không. I tend to sit and go, "May all beings be happy." Meanwhile, she ran around and did five hundred things, all while at the same time genuinely wishing people could be happy.

Recently I've been reading her autobiography, which is probably why she's more in my mind tonight, because there's just stuff on every page that shows the depth of her willingness to work with compassion—and that it doesn't just come totally naturally. It's something we need to meditate on, to get ourselves attuned with over and over and over. And it's so powerful. This book is filled with events of friends getting killed in the Vietnam War, on and on and on.

This is one particular eulogy she wrote after some dear friends of theirs at the School for Social Work were killed. These were young people just trying to help the poor villagers in the midst of the war. Because

they wouldn't take either side and worked for peace, both sides feared them and killed them and bombed them, so they were in constant danger. This is the eulogy she wrote after some of her dear friends were killed:

We cannot hate you, you who have thrown grenades and killed our friends, because we know that men are not our enemies. Our only enemies are misunderstanding, hatred, jealousy, and ignorance that lead 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. Our only aim is to help remove ignorance and illiteracy from the countryside of Vietnam. Social change must start in our hearts with the will to transform our own egotism, greed, and lust into understanding, love, commitment, and sharing responsibility for the poverty and injustice in our country.

The thing is, I get the impression that it's not just an idea—that she has the idea and writes the words of what would be a compassionate thing. Because she mentions later another eulogy she wrote for four other friends who were killed simply for belonging to their social work group, where she said she had to spend three days and nights, hardly able to sleep, in deep grief, just coming back over and over and over with mindfulness to meditate on compassion and love and interconnectedness. Until she could finally hit the point of true love and interconnectedness for the people who had murdered her friends—only then could she write another eulogy.

So it's not that for some people it might be more natural, or that these people who truly have dedicated their lives to such action are simply different from us. It's the willingness to continue clarifying and recommitting and restrengthening the intention of compassion, of connectedness, of mindfulness. That's what gives it the strength. And that's actually what we're doing here, even though it might not seem quite so dramatic in this particular setting. But that commitment, that strengthening, that clarification is, to me, what our brahmavihāra practice is about.

Again, sometimes people, in thinking about purification of our understanding and intention—another thing people sometimes ask besides "If I don't act from desire or hatred, will I just sit in my room forever?" is "Does it mean I won't care about anything anymore?" Like some sense that if I'm not acting from desire and hatred, everything's just this dull, blobby gray and boring. You don't care. "I don't care what's for lunch."

I don't care if it's burned. I don't care where I go for the movies. Anything's fine. We could have kasha every day for breakfast for the next year, and it wouldn't matter at all. I haven't reached that point yet, by the way.

Again, it's not so. Two quotations I'd like to read. One from the Buddha, who said, "What is beautiful in the world remains so, but the wise one no longer strives after it." You get that? Things are still beautiful. All that goes away is the striving after it. It doesn't mean we can't tell what's beautiful. It doesn't mean you can't tell if someone sticks a pin in you. You'll feel it. You won't say, "Is that pleasant or unpleasant?" You'll

know. But there won't be that sense of, "Oh my God, someone stuck a pin in me! How could they do that?" with all that suffering. It's just, "Oh, okay. Unpleasant."

Nisargadatta Maharaj says, "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."

The mind of desire trying to project out into the rest of our life—how is it going to be without acting from desire and fear—isn't going to be able to figure it out. You cannot trust the mind of desire. You cannot trust the intention of anger and hatred and fear to give us an accurate sense of what life would be without it.

So what we do is begin to notice when our intention is colored by desire and fear and anger, and when it is not. And this is where the equanimity and the balance of Vipassana come in. Because it's not that we should begin now judging ourselves: "Uh-oh, I acted with the intention of greed. No good, I'm a bad person." Just to notice it and to notice the difference.

You'll also see when you go home that you might not have noticed the impact of the purification of intention here because it happens in little things. But when you go home you might begin to notice it in little things as well.

For instance, here you might be standing in the food line wanting that piece of blueberry coffee cake, and you see that there's only four pieces left and six people in front of you. And the sense of greed that could arise—suddenly everyone else is not a being with needs and wants but something in your way, because that's the effect that greed has on consciousness. And it might not be this particular example, but many others. And suddenly there's a moment of, "Oh, that's okay. I want it, but I can live without it. And isn't it nice that these people get to have a piece of cake?" Just a little shift like that. Sometimes we're looking for the big explosion and we don't notice the little moments.

Or similarly, so many people report on retreats, and on this one too, where someone in the next room or someone in the next seat is somehow doing something that is just unacceptable behavior. Unacceptable, why? Because we don't like it, of course. It bothers us. And we can go through the range of righteous indignation, of self-judgment, of hatred of the other person, of all kinds of murderous fantasies. And if you've had any, you're not alone. It's really normal.

And suddenly there's this sense of, "Oh"—really connecting either with, "I can stand this unpleasantness," and immediately there's a sense of spaciousness and caring for the person. Or it might turn out, "Oh, they're really suffering." And the sense of connection with their suffering gives us the space to really be okay with what's going on and connected.

Again, it's a small moment of shifting of intention, giving rise to thought and our response to a situation. But it's powerful, important to notice.

And so there are different ways that we can consciously cultivate this strengthening of a pure intention. It will arise spontaneously the more that we practice, and we can also cultivate it consciously.

A large part, and perhaps the most powerful way I know, is just what we've been doing here. The practice of metta, the practice of karuna, of sympathetic joy, and equanimity—which we get to tomorrow—is really that, as I've mentioned: a conscious cultivation and purification of intention.

And again, it's not naive wishing, or affirmations. "May such and so happen because I want it to." It's really coming back over and over to that intention that wishes well for someone with no attachment at all to the results. And this is really what gives it the purity. As soon as there's an attachment to wanting something to happen, the metta or the karuna has gotten mixed with some attachment, has gotten mixed with some wanting. Not bad, but just to notice that there are now several things going on at once. But each time we come back, that pure intention is strengthened.

The Buddha said once that whatever one reflects upon frequently, towards that the mind will naturally incline. And that's what's happening. It's not that we can sit here and make ourselves feel loving-kindness, connected to all beings, radiating outward. You know by now you can't make that happen. All you can do is say, "Okay, I'll come back. May I be happy." That's all we can do. But with the mind reflecting upon it frequently and frequently, that's when suddenly you'll find that little blip of, "Oh, so what? Let them have the cake. It makes me really happy." And you think, "Where did that come from? Somebody else must have said that. That's not the voice I'm used to."

We can't control the outcome. And this is where our compassion, our metta, really gets boundless—because it's balanced by equanimity.

Again, a story from Sister Phong. She was talking about one time, sometime in the sixties, when she was in jail in Vietnam because she was caught traveling with subversive literature, which was some of Thich Nhat Hanh's peace writings. She was in jail for quite some time under very horrible conditions. A lot of high monks and people knew her and agitated for her release, so she was freed after a few weeks, not very long.

She was writing in her book about how when she came out, she said to the head of the police or whoever released her—she talked about two young twelve-year-old girls who were in the prison under these really bad conditions. She said they had just been arrested because they happened to be around when some guerrillas were arrested, and because they were just in the vicinity, they were also arrested and thrown in jail. Out of compassion, she was saying, "Thank you for releasing me, and these two young girls who've done nothing are here. It's clearly such bad conditions for young minds—maybe could they be released?"

And her words, which were pure intention, had the effect of the police officer saying, "Oh, they've been talking to each other, the prisoners. We have to make the regimen more strict."

We can't control the outcome. With all the best and clearest intention, that's out of our control. And

without the balance of equanimity—of really seeing that we are not in control of any results, of really seeing that things are as they are, and that all beings will have joy and all beings will have suffering—without that, we can just drown in the pain as we open with compassion, with love. Or we get so hooked on judging by results that we say, "Well, compassion is clearly too weak. I should come in here with an Uzi and blast them out of jail."

It's really a way of such strength and courage. It's unimaginable to me, actually, the courage of people like this who can continue to face such responses of ignorance and hatred and continue to come back with the courage of compassion and love. It takes far more courage than it takes to be angry. Because it takes really taking in, opening to the seeming unfairness of the world, to the pain that there is, and still finding some way to connect—even to that police officer who responded in that way.

Equanimity again with ourselves, for all the times that we can't do that. Not to have unrealistic expectations that from now on all my motivation should come from love and compassion. We know how hard that is. We know how hard it is even to be compassionate with ourselves for ten minutes sitting here in relative comfort and ease, being so hard on our experience. How then can we expect that we're going to be able to bring that to others?

But it's in just this way—working with your knee pain, with your judging voice, with the anger at someone who's making noise during tea time or whatever. It's our willingness to see and accept our own difficult responses, our own lack of compassion for others and ourselves, that brings this practice, that makes the link from what is just a pillow practice to real action in the world. And it's just these little times when you notice the intention shifting that can maybe give you the strength to keep going.

In our daily life, not only the formal practice of metta, but bringing it up in situations where you feel a little difficulty or even just separation. I'll use it a lot in the supermarket line when I'm impatient and somebody with seventy-five things and seventy-eight coupons is trying to write a check and wants it to be more, and I only have three minutes. That's the time to bring in metta. It's astounding. Just a couple of phrases, a little dropping in, and instead of me and them and in my way, we're just all together. It's us in this situation.

Or on planes—I do it on planes all the time. I go on a plane and I don't want to talk to anybody. I don't want to even look at the person in the next seat. It's kind of my time alone. And within a couple of minutes, I notice how completely isolated and fearful I've become, because if I don't want to talk, that leads to fear. I'm sitting there cringing, my head under a blanket. And I just begin to send metta to myself and everyone on the plane. It's astounding. It's never failed that within about ten seconds, there's this really happy sense of being family together for this little period of time in this little metal shell in the sky. It's very amazing.

Another way we can consciously cultivate intention aside from our formal silent practice—and I've heard this from both a Tibetan teacher and also Sister Phong—is simply having the thought, as you do particular

activities, of using that activity as a way to remind you to cultivate compassion. So, for example, as you're going to rest, saying, "May all beings rest in the peace of understanding." Or Sister Phong mentioned again that time when she was three days and nights coming back to mindfulness in order to connect with the people who had killed her friends. She'd be washing her hands and she'd say, "May my heart be cleansed of anger and hatred. May the hearts of the people who killed my friend be cleansed of ignorance and violence."

It's very simple, so simple. It takes no time. You're already doing something. And what I found interesting is how easily resistance can come up to doing it. It might feel effortful. I'd rather think about what's on at the movies. It's interesting again just to see that this is the conditioning of habit—the mind's used to running on in its own little distracted way or amusing itself way. And just to notice that and make that little commitment to open to the potential for compassion, to wishing all beings well.

One other practice I wanted to mention because it's actually becoming more and more powerful for me. And again, it's a conscious cultivation of the intention of compassion. It's what's called in the Tibetan tradition the aspiration bodhicitta, to develop the wish of bodhicitta. Bodhicitta, very briefly, could be translated as "heart of awakening." And the cultivation of this wish is simply the generation of the aspiration or the intention: I want to awaken to freedom in order to help all suffering beings to awaken.

Again, stay with the intention, not with the thought—"Who am I? How could I possibly help all beings awaken? This is too much. I couldn't..." Just let all that stuff rest. Come back, and it's simply at the beginning of a sitting. At the beginning of almost every sitting, I'll just sit and form that intention. Notice the different quality it brings to our actions, or sitting, or life.

This aspiration of compassion—of wanting to awaken in order to help awaken all beings—lends such a vastness, such a spaciousness to the compassion, to our practice, that it's a vastness that approaches the vast emptiness of truth. And the intention of compassion lends so much more courage, so much more strength. It just expands us beyond our separate little self and our self-concerns, just in little ways. You're sitting and you really connect with a sense of the suffering of beings and the intention that may my practice be for the awakening of all beings. It's a lot easier to sit with knee pain. Or when I'm sitting and it's unpleasant and there's some unpleasant emotion—ah, why should I stay with this?—and it comes up: well, you're not just doing it for yourself. There really is this intention to help awaken all beings. The sense of "why should I stay with this?" just vanishes.

There's so much more depth and breadth and joy that comes from what we're doing. And the question of silent meditation practice or sending compassion to yourself or sending love to yourself—the question of that being selfish, of that being limited—just vanishes when our whole life and practice is put into this broader context. I'm not saying one should do that. I'm just giving that as an example of how the conscious cultivation of connection and compassion adds a whole depth and breadth to our experience that can't be imagined when we're coming from our own wanting and fear.

You've probably heard Thich Nhat Hanh speak about, or write about, how our own practice, our own purification of intention and action and speech, affects all with whom we come in contact. He gives the example of one calm person in a boat. He talks about some of the boat people during the period when there were many refugees leaving Vietnam in boats, really packed into these rinky-dink fishing boats. And a lot of them were pirated, but a lot of them also ran into very severe storms. From talking to hundreds of refugees, they found out that in some of the storms, everybody on the boat panicked, and a lot of people didn't survive.

But they found out that in the really bad storms, if just one person on the boat stayed really calm, that calm communicated itself to the people around, which then affected the people around them. One calm person on a boat seemed to make enough difference that the rest of the people calmed down and they would survive through the storm.

You know, we tend to want such large results. But if we can just send enough compassion, enough loving-kindness to ourselves—that's all we do—the natural purification of intention that happens will mean that we will be, in some ways, that kind person, or the courageous person, or the loving person, the connected person, whatever it happens to be, however it manifests through our own personality. And that can have an effect on all with whom we come in contact that we can't imagine sitting here trying to envision it. And we don't need to.

So I just like to encourage us all to honor the difficulty that you're going through. Honor each moment that there's a spontaneous transformation of intention.

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