The More You Love, The More You Know

Carol Wilson · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Carol Wilson · 1:04:26

Tonight I want to speak about the ways that wisdom and love and compassion work together, supporting one another. Or you could say they're the same thing.

It's said generally that the natural fruit of understanding, of wisdom, is compassion, is love. That's the way we would naturally be in the world. Sometimes in doing these Brahmavihara practices, the question comes up, and several people have posed it to me in different ways: Aren't we doing it kind of backwards? Trying to cultivate metta and compassion without necessarily having the base of wisdom, of understanding. Another way people have brought it up is: How can I expect to generate pure metta or pure compassion without pristine understanding? It's bound to be somewhat tainted.

There was a time when I used to think like that. But I really know now that that's not so. It's not a case of it having to move always in one direction—that you have to start with wisdom and then maybe, by some grace, touch love and compassion, or vice versa. They both arise together, like two sides of the same wholeness, the same spiritual wholeness.

Either way, it seems to me, practiced quite sincerely, each leads into the other. For example, the insight, the wisdom of emptiness, of unity, of interconnectedness—quite naturally, as soon as we touch that sense of total completeness, it naturally expresses as love and compassion. It makes complete sense. But on the other hand, as we deepen in loving kindness, as we deepen in our cultivation and experience of true compassion, we can find that this also becomes a pathway to deeply knowing and experiencing the truth of non-separation, the truth of emptiness of a separate self, the truth of total interconnectedness.

So in a way, either aspect—the practice of insight, the practice of the Brahmaviharas—both become gateways to truth. And either way, you end up with the other one. You can't really separate them. You can't just practice one. You can't stay lopsided, really, if we're practicing this sincerely.

A Hindu teacher that I know, using slightly different language, said: To be on a wisdom path, such as insight practice, is to know. And the more that you know the Dhamma, the truth, the more you love. To be a bhakti on a devotional path is to choose the path of love. And the more that you love the Dhamma, the truth, the more you know. It works both ways. After a while, you can't really separate it.

I feel quite deeply that a true, authentic, full spirituality is going to be deeply rooted in both insight and in love and compassion. Really, in my mind, it's inseparable.

So I'm going to talk a little bit about some of the ways that these two aspects—divided for the sake of our rational, sometimes linear minds so we can talk about things—can develop and support each other. How

can compassion, how can love open us into that heartfelt, intuitive understanding of truth beyond words, beyond any concepts?

One Tibetan teacher, quite a high Lama, wrote in one of his books that in his opinion—and it's probably not just his opinion—the supreme method, the supreme way to become quickly and deeply at home with the radiance of our true nature, to recognize this pristine truth and to really become more and more familiar with it, is that of devotion and compassion.

He explains it in this way: In a moment of pure love, pure compassion, when the mind and the body and the speech are just filled—just think, if you've had a moment, it just has to be that amount of time; we're not talking about dwelling here unchangingly, we're just talking about a moment—when the body, speech, and mind are filled and overflowing with unconditional love, with unconditional compassion, in that moment, if you were to look inwardly, the way he describes it, it would be as if the radiant nature, the pristine true nature, would be shining like the sun when it's unobscured by clouds. It just shines in the center, so to speak, of love, of compassion. Or as he puts it: in the moment of love, the empty nature dawns nakedly. It's just there. Nothing we have to do. In fact, there's nothing we can do. It's because in the moment of love and compassion, for that moment, somehow we've managed to stop trying to do. That allows this unobscured nature to shine, to dawn nakedly.

In that moment, in all these different moments when they happen—it might be quick—but in that moment, we're really vividly awake. It's not a dulled-out sort of "this is nice, but I don't know where I am or who I am." We're vividly awake, and the heart at that moment is completely free from any attachment or any aversion. Just in that moment. So there's vivid awakeness, no attachment, and no aversion. That's what allows this knowing, this connection, this potential to open to freedom of heart, freedom of mind.

So through the practice of the Brahmaviharas, through moments of love, of compassion, we begin to discern the wisdom of non-attachment through the vehicle of joy, through the vehicle of love, which you've got to admit is sometimes a lot nicer than through the vehicle of suffering, which is also a way that we discern quite profoundly the wisdom of non-attachment. Both are useful. I think we need both.

But as a lot of people here have said, "Something has to be wrong because either this feels too good, or it's feeling easy. It's not supposed to be so pleasant. It must not be the right feeling. I'm cheating." All of those things somebody has said, because we're so inured to thinking that only through the depths of suffering can we discern truth. And we need to be able to discern truth in suffering—we can't only discern it through joy either. But we can sometimes. It helps. It's really quite powerful.

One of the ways I feel that my understanding of the peace, the joy that comes from non-attachment, has been strengthened through metta and compassion practice, and the other Brahmaviharas too, is because these Brahmaviharas, in that moment of just touching the pure state, we really experience quite profoundly and unmistakably a peace or a happiness or a connectedness that is so much more peaceful, so much more happy than the happiness that comes through attachment. It's so much more profound a

happiness or a connectedness or a unity than the feeling of completion that I get when I get what I want.

On the general level of life in our culture, when we haven't really been investigating, it's so easy to associate happiness with getting what we want. And so attachment itself comes, in a funny way if we're not really looking, to be associated with pleasure. Attachment or grasping or wanting can almost carry a sweet delight in the longing for something. Do you notice yourself sometimes going back into a fantasy that is total longing? And when you wake up from it, it's just so clear that whatever you were longing for isn't here. But we get seduced back into it over and over again. If we really look, what's so pleasant about it? What kind of fulfillment is coming? But we keep getting seduced by that unclear association of longing with happiness, present or future.

So it is important to begin to understand more and more deeply the nature of attachment. And this is where our wisdom practice, our insight practice, is a very important balance and tool. With the loving-kindness we might have experienced intuitively such a profound peace and happiness that when we're back in the attachment, we can sort of feel how washed out that kind of happiness is by comparison. But to bring in some investigation, some insight, will really help us to see more clearly, to understand more clearly what's going on. And perhaps we won't get so seduced so often by attachment.

As I said with aversion the other night, the attachment is the same thing. When there's a feeling of clinging, of grasping, of wanting, it's arising in relationship to something that's happening right now, in this moment. It might be that there's a pleasant sensation in the body, or a pleasant emotional experience that's happening, a pleasant meditative experience. Or, and this is more subtle and we're more likely to miss it, a pleasant thought about a future pleasant experience that might happen, or a past pleasant experience that happened once ten years ago and it might happen again.

We don't often, without paying attention, notice that the thought itself is the pleasant experience that's keeping us, that's leading into this feeling of attachment. It's easy to bypass that and get really involved in: How can I make this experience happen that's so pleasant? How can I get back to that experience that happened before? We get sucked into whole worlds of desire and making things happen and trying to change behavior, not noticing that it's just the mind, the heart, pulled towards something pleasant that's happening right now.

Just as in aversion the mind cringes away, in pleasantness it's like, "Yes, yes, this is the one, this is it! Let's just dive right in and hold on to this as long as possible. Obviously this is how things are supposed to be and it'll never change. And I'll do whatever I can to ensure that it never changes." And of course we all go, "Well, that's a setup for suffering." And of course it is. But without paying attention, how often is that how we behave? Quite a lot.

So when we begin to notice when attachment is present in the mind, not to hate it—

Not to say, "This is evil and I'm an evil person," or "I'm hopeless because so much attachment is arising."

It's our human condition. The mind is drawn towards the pleasant. It's just how it is. But we can begin to be a little more aware of the experience of attachment when it's happening. Because when we really pay attention to it, a lot of the pleasant, seductive aspects can really drop away.

So when you're really wanting something to happen, when you're really attached to a thought, a sensation, an emotional state—what's going on in relationship to any sense of connection with yourself, with life, with other beings, with anything else that's happening in experience? Attachment gives us tunnel vision. This thing is good. Other things are generally in the way.

Even something so simple as having a certain place you like to sit in the dining room at lunch. You're really happy if you get to sit in that place. So how do you feel if you're a little late and you see someone heading towards your place? Just something really stupid like that. But we're attached to it. The people ahead of us in line are in the way. The person sitting in our place is really a villain. We might be able to work up some sense of loving-kindness toward ourselves and them, but it's not the first reaction. And other places are dismissed. Somehow that place is glowing golden and everywhere else is just down in the dumps.

That's a silly example, but our mind—as I said the other night—craving puts feathers on the object. It distorts our perception so there's a sense of separation, me and other. There's also an unreliable perception of whatever the craving is leading us into as being so beautiful. And we can't trust that perception at all.

I had this experience this spring. I did a month-long self-retreat, and it was difficult. A lot of fear, a lot of difficult stuff was coming up. At one point, longing was arising, craving, and the object that would incite the craving—what my mind would grab onto—was an image, a thought that kept coming up about a particular street corner in Bangkok. It would bring up this longing. And even with that happening, my mind was saying, "There is nothing—this street corner in Bangkok is a pit. There is nothing about this street corner in Banglampoo that is remotely attractive. I never hoped to be back on that street corner in my life." That's how I felt at the time. I had just come through Bangkok on my way to this place. And my mind is going, "What? What is looking so enticing about this street corner?"

But then the image would come up and my heart would go, "Oh, to be back on that street corner in Banglampoo," and it would start adorning these little shops that sold locks and electric sockets. I mean, really, it was very interesting. This kept happening over and over, and it got very amusing to me because it was so clear—there would be that moment when the image would arise and that street corner would just be so beautiful, so attractive. And then the next moment I'd go, "Oh no, not again."

Well, that's what craving does. Only a lot of times it's not so obvious to us how really out to lunch it is. And so we get sucked in.

In that moment of attachment to whatever it is—the attachment doesn't make the thing we're attached to

bad, or mean that we have to reject it. We'll be attached to our friends, we'll be attached to our families at times. It doesn't mean that therefore I should never have anything to do with my family because attachment comes up. It's more looking at the attachment itself in the moment that it's there and seeing the effect it has.

In the moment of attachment, there's no freedom of heart. There's no freedom of mind. There's not true love or compassion in that moment of attachment—which can also be just as short as that. But the moment of attachment is a moment of separation. It's a moment of positing me and other. A moment of positing incompleteness and needing something else to find fulfillment.

But it's not to be hated. It's just by accepting that we begin to see through it. As Krishnamurti said once, unless the ways of desire are understood, illusion is inevitable.

So on the side of understanding, of wisdom—and our Brahmavihara practice helps us in this—it's just our challenge to begin to understand more and more deeply the ways of desire. With insight we see the impermanent nature of everything that's desired. We begin to feel more deeply the suffering nature of desire itself, of attachment—that attachment that's craving, clinging, I'm talking about—itself.

And we can see how the sense of grasping, the blindness, follows so closely and quickly on an experience that's simply beautiful and pleasant that we can easily begin to confuse having any kind of being able to enjoy and really appreciate the beautiful, the pleasant, the wonderful in life. Because the tendency of mind is that so easily that can turn into attachment, sometimes it turns the other way and you think, "Well, I shouldn't enjoy beauty. I shouldn't even practice loving-kindness because I'm just going to get attached to it. So forget it—just stay away from anything pleasant."

I'm certainly not talking about that. It doesn't mean to live a life of fear of beauty or fear of love. It doesn't mean no joy. But it really is seeing the difference between deep love and appreciation of an experience or what's happening and how it switches over to attachment. And if we can do that with interest rather than with aversion or self-blame, it can be really fascinating.

Another small example from my retreat this year: I was in a beautifully landscaped retreat center in South Africa. It wasn't a wild landscape at all, really sort of an English garden kind of landscape. And along the paths, they're lined with huge bushes of white irises—bush after bush after bush, quite a beautiful vista. For the first couple of weeks, there weren't many blooms on the bushes. For a few days, it was very rainy and cold, and my experience wasn't exactly cheery to go along with the weather.

Then one day the sun came out really bright, and everything was so green and beautiful. Suddenly, on just about all of these iris bushes, lots and lots of these very delicate, beautiful white blooms came out—white with a little center of violet. So many on these vistas of bushes with blooms. It was just so delicate and exquisitely beautiful. It matched the kind of delicate happiness that was beginning to come into my experience. So the two together kind of blew me away. I was filled with this delight and joy and a real

sense of just love of being.

I was appreciating it for a few minutes. And then it sort of switched to: "This is so beautiful. And I know it won't stay this way. It would really be good if I could take a picture of this, because it's so lovely. And my mother—I know she would love to see this, she loves to garden." And this went on. "But I don't have a camera. How can I get a camera?" And it went on and on for quite a while, maybe ten minutes, until I suddenly realized that here I was standing—the beautiful thing I was appreciating hadn't even gone away yet. It was still here, and already I'd moved from real joy and happiness into suffering, because it was going to go away and I didn't have a camera to capture it.

It was funny, sort of funny, but really clear—how easily it can slide from one to the other, how easily we can confuse it.

So mettā, muditā, even compassion give us an experience of a much purer connection, joy, peace, a unity of total presence that, as we experience it over and over in varying degrees—even if you're not conscious of it—will begin to loosen our bonds of attachment, our inclination to always respond with attachment to what is beautiful. That's one way that wisdom of non-attachment and the practice of the Brahmavihāras work together.

Another way that brings the two practices together shows that without this joining, there's a sort of incompleteness to our spiritual being. Sometimes I've felt that the wisdom of emptiness, of non-attachment, of no-self, without a practice of the Brahmavihāras, without the compassion, without the love—the wisdom of emptiness can seem to me a bit aloof, sort of removed. We sit, we walk, everything comes and goes, we see very clearly. It's all impermanent—whatever emotional state, whatever physical state, whatever thought arises and passes, terrifying, beautiful, whatever. It's all impermanent. It's not self.

It comes and goes. And we're saying that in this practice too—there's nothing that's going to last.

So in this wisdom of impermanence, of emptiness, without it being connected to life with compassion, with love, it's kind of easy to wonder: what matters? Who cares? What difference does it make what I do? Because everything's coming and going, as am I. In fact, I'm not even here to come and go anyway. What difference does it make?

And on the other side, I'm cultivating the Brahma-viharas without awareness of a sense of wisdom. Sometimes I would, in a kind of dull moment, feel like this as well. It's a wonderful feeling of being connected—it's lovely, it feels really good. Or maybe it doesn't feel really good; I'm just repeating these phrases over and over. And on the other side, we're accepting whatever comes up in our experience with compassion. That's okay. I'm acting like a jerk—that's okay. I'm really angry—that's okay. I wrote a horrible note—that's okay. Everything is to be accepted. So what about any kind of response in life?

Are we just either going to be cool, removed, distant, untouched by things? Or do we become these really

moist, compassionate wimps that can't really respond in any clear way? These are like an exaggeration of the two sides when they don't come together, or when at a moment practice can feel out of balance, not always rounded all the time.

So one place I want to talk about where they do come together is in the aspect of our experience that is intention. We've talked about this before—that what we're actually developing and cultivating in our Brahma-vihara practices is a strengthening of the intentions of mettā, of karuṇā, of muditā, and of equanimity, tomorrow.

I want to talk a little about what that means and how intention is really the coming together of wisdom and compassion. It's really the way that we then act in the world.

Intention, as many of you have experienced, is the impulse of mind that gives rise to speech, gives rise to action, and even to thought—although that's really hard to notice. Sometimes people sitting here will notice the impulse before they stand up. And if you feel it, then you can choose to stand up or not. Or the impulse before you move your arm to scratch an itch. If you notice it, sometimes there's a moment of choice to scratch or not.

These intentions, these motivational forces to act, are arising due to conditions, of course. They don't just arise out of nowhere. They arise from conditions and are accompanied by certain mental states. So an intention to stand up could arise from aversion. It could arise from fear. It could arise from a pain in your leg. It could arise from hunger. It could arise from just kind of clear seeing—the bell rang and it's time to go walk. There's a whole range. And you can't tell from the way an action looks, or even from the result of an action, what the intention is. The same action could actually have sprung from many different kinds of intentions.

The way that cause and effect, or karma, is understood in Buddhism is that the seed of whether an action is wholesome or unwholesome, skillful or unskillful—the seed of that action is determined not by the result but by the intention. All the motivation and all the effect that will come from that action karmically, whether we'll suffer or not from it, is in that seed of intention. This is a little different from how we might normally evaluate our actions. I might do something that I feel sort of angry about, but I say something to someone and it doesn't seem to have a bad effect. I say, "Well, even though I was coming from anger, it worked out okay. They didn't really get it, or the right thing happened."

It doesn't work like that in this understanding of cause and effect. If I speak with the intention of anger, even if the seeming effect looks like it's okay, it really is an unskillful action, and at some point I'm going to suffer from that anger.

Which actually, if I'm paying attention, I suffer as soon as I say something from anger. I'm speaking quite personally now—as soon as something angry comes out of my mouth, I really feel a lot of pain, even physical pain, but definitely emotional pain and separation. And that's not from judgment. That's not from

hating myself. It's from the actual effect of the anger in my experience.

So this seed of intention is extremely powerful. Because how we understand things is what gives rise to our intention, which can manifest as thought. And it's the intention that leads to how we speak and act in the world, how we connect who we are, how we respond to situations. It all comes out of intention. It's really very crucial.

What we're doing moment to moment here in our Brahma-Vihara practice is working on the level of conscious intention. Each time we manage to remember, each time we have the energy and commitment to come back and say "may I" or "may you be safe from danger, may you be free from suffering"—whatever phrase we're offering—we're working deeply at the core of our habits of response, at the very intentions that shape how we're going to be ourselves and how we're going to be with other beings.

Far from being a passive practice where we're just sitting here like mummies saying things over and over—"may you be happy, may you be happy," what's the point of this?—we're really, whether you're aware of it or not, engaged in crucial reconditioning. We're beginning to soften our habitual responses and allowing the intentions of kindness and compassion to surface more naturally, more spontaneously.

When we're unaware of our intention, when we're not really paying attention to what's going on, our habits of mind—which often are aversion and confusion and attachment—give rise to so much speech and action in the world, even from the smallest experience.

So back to my experience with the irises. Even though I saw the suffering being created, even though I recognized I was missing something still present, that attachment still continued to arise in the mind enough to give rise to an intention to actually see if I could borrow a camera. This necessitated calling my one friend in South Africa, who wasn't there. The phone kept being hit by electricity and was out for five days at a time. You know how it is on retreat—a simple phone call should be easy, but you end up putting so much energy into walking to the place, finding a time when no one's there, then the phone doesn't work or the line's busy, and you go back. It can occupy so much energy and so much mental time to do one simple thing.

Now, each of those actions, each time I went back, each time I thought about it, each time I actually made a call and couldn't get through and then tried again—each of those is a separate intention. It's not like just one intention arose, "Oh, I'd like to get a camera." It was being strengthened over and over and over. And the intention of action is stronger than the intention of speech. So in a way, in all that little scenario, I was quite unconsciously—sometimes somewhat consciously—strengthening and cultivating the intention of attachment.

We can be quite good at cultivating attachment, cultivating aversion. We don't really think of it that way, but it's a habit. Even with our overall best intentions—my overarching intention to go on retreat certainly

is to cultivate more freedom of heart, more understanding, more compassion—I certainly don't go thinking, "Let me see how many different ways I can cultivate attachment." And I don't go thinking, "I want to hate myself because I will cultivate attachment and then I'll hate myself for wasting my time." No.

I'm sure whatever your conscious intention was in coming here, it's something very beautiful, very skillful. You didn't come here thinking, "How many ways can I abuse myself for the next ten days?" But the habits pop up. They're going to pop up. And that's okay. Part of our process here is being able to see them.

That's why in every retreat we have space wars. We have conflicts over rooms. We have battles over who wants the lights on and who wants the lights off. Every retreat this happens. And we all have the best overarching intentions, but the habits that give rise to thought, speech, and action are just really deeply ingrained.

The Buddha said that that which the mind dwells upon frequently—towards that the mind will naturally incline. In other words, if we're thinking about aversion, if we're sitting here hating ourselves frequently, then in a moment of unawareness, that's going to be the easiest slope for the mind to go down.

So it might seem a little rote sometimes, cultivating love for yourself, cultivating compassion for yourself. But where do our minds dwell if we just leave them to their own devices?

This is from Ramakrishna. He says, "In effect, one is constantly repeating, consciously or unconsciously, 'I am not free.' The conditioned person obsessively repeats, 'I am worthless. I am superficial. I am incapable of transcendent insight.'" So the more we repeat this, the state of illusory bondage becomes increasingly vivid and convincing.

Does that sound familiar to anybody? It just doesn't seem like so much work to keep saying this to ourselves over and over because we're so used to it. And it seems like so much work to keep coming back to something different because we're basically going against the grain of habit. So many of you have seen just how difficult it has been or can be—how coming back and saying, "Yes, I really do care about myself. Yes, I really do accept myself just as I am"—how that can almost raise the sleeping demons of all the ways we've been used to speaking to ourselves, describing ourselves, affirming ourselves unconsciously for so much of our life.

This is one reason that loving-kindness, karuṇā, muditā can seem so difficult. Another is simply that concentration practice is difficult because it means disciplining the mind, and the mind is rather undisciplined. But it's also because we're going against our deeply habituated intentions of thought, speech, and action. Where better to start strengthening these intentions of mettā and compassion than with ourselves?

It makes us really happy to see that most people here have been quite okay, willing, and even eager to spend a lot of time with themselves—to really begin to see that this is not a cop-out, that this is not selfish.

What better place could we start to cultivate and strengthen these intentions, even just the intention of thought, than by bringing it into how we relate to ourselves and into our moment-to-moment experience here? Not trying to be grandiose. Not expecting that after ten days here we'll walk out and meet everything that comes our way with wisdom and love. Just starting in little ways with our simple practice.

But you can really see how it begins to bear fruit—not only in that the ability to come back to our conscious intention via the phrases gets easier, not only in that the feelings during formal practice might become stronger or more accessible at times, more flowing—but also in the seemingly other aspect of the practice: all the so-called difficulties, the demons that come up and rear their heads. That's just as important, in fact sometimes even more so, both as feedback that perhaps even a tiny, tiny bit, the intention of caring, of compassion, is actually becoming easier to arise, and also as a way to more consciously practice not just in thought but also in action.

That's why we speak so much about really paying attention to how you meet the difficulties that arise in your time here. How do you relate to yourself when you're filled with petty irritation at someone else's behavior? Rationally you know it doesn't make that much difference. But inside you really want to kill. It happens to all of us at different times. How do you relate to that in yourself? How do you relate to the sleepiness? How do you relate to the intensity of judgment because your mind wanders off more than you want it to, or because you want to feel loving and instead you feel bored, or to a really powerful sense of self-judgment or self-hatred or lust or fear or restlessness—any of the demons that come up, whether they seem petty or whether they're truly overwhelming?

Still, this practice of compassion, of mettā, is giving us the opportunity over and over again to respond from an intention of caring. And amazingly enough, at times it actually happens. Sure, then we fall back into habit, of course. We tend to be impatient. Once we've been able to accept that we get irritated very easily at people who are doing nothing except clomping their feet a little loudly, we think, "Okay, now I've accepted it. That's it. I've accepted it. That's it for that particular demon." And of course it doesn't work that way. The next moment we might be irritated again. Okay—another opportunity to cultivate the intention of compassion toward myself, because irritation is suffering.

And it happens. It's really quite amazing to see that by cultivating intention as it manifests as thought—the thought of the phrases that we're saying, which seem so rote, so dry—suddenly stuff really starts to happen.

Now, do you feel like you're actually making any of this stuff happen? Do you feel like you could, if you wanted to? For me, this whole practice is one of very powerful experience of the uncontrollability of experience, of no-self. As much as I say, "May I be free from suffering," I don't actually feel like I can make myself feel compassion for myself by saying that. I feel like I'm just saying it and trying to mean it. And then suddenly I'm really suffering and—poof—up comes this spurt of real caring for myself, where another time I would have really taken out the whip.

So try not to be too cynical or think that even if you don't feel anything much going on except that you can say the phrases a little more easily than you could eight days ago—please don't think that that's all that's happening.

There's a lot happening on a very deep level. Really learning to meet our demons as they are, however huge or however small, is very, very powerful. Love and acceptance for the demons and for ourselves.

And it's not, as you know, compassion and love is not necessarily the easy way. It sometimes might sound like it—oh yes, accept everything and everything's really nice. But especially if you started with compassion yesterday, you find that quivering of the heart in connection to pain. It's not that it's a painful practice. Ultimately compassion is very beautiful, very connected—this soft, quivering heart. But I wouldn't say it was the easy way. It's really very difficult, what we're doing here.

But this true compassion grows and strengthens from the way you're relating to yourself in even these littlest demons that come to visit. I want to emphasize that because so often we pass that over and think that nothing's happening, the big stuff isn't happening. It's in these little moments that these intentions are being more strongly cultivated.

But true compassion, as soft and tender and quivering as our heart is in response to our own or another's pain, actually gives so much strength and so much courage. Somehow, again, the softness of the connection—it's not about wimping out and not being able to act. It gives the strength and energy and courage of a warrior, so to speak.

This is from Chögyam Trungpa. He's talking about how compassion gives us the strength to be very connected, to be with great difficulty:

"At the awakened heart of the warrior, there's nothing there except for tenderness. Your heart is completely exposed. Even if a tiny mosquito lands on it, you feel so touched. You would like to spill your heart's blood, to give your heart to others. For the warrior, this experience of sad and tender heart is what gives birth to fearlessness. Real fearlessness is the product of tenderness. You are willing to open up without resistance or shyness and face the world. You are willing to share your heart with others."

To me, I just love that as an expression of the exquisite tenderness and connectedness to others' pain. But this connectedness, rather than causing us to shrink back, gives us fearlessness and courage. Because of the connectedness, compassion when met with wisdom will spontaneously lead to clear action. It's not at all about cultivating some sense of total acceptance of everything that then does not lead to any kind of clear action or any kind of relational connection in the world. Just the opposite—it gives us the courage to act.

You can see this from role models. As Steve mentioned last night, talking about Aung San Suu Kyi—just how amazingly fearless a woman like that can be on the strength of the tenderness of heart, of compassion and love. When we really feel that quivering of pain and the clarity, the clear seeing that can

come from wisdom, then there's the fearlessness and courage to act in a way that's appropriate. But that is also acting from intentions of compassion, not confusing the result. In other words, knowing that you can't control the result, but doing whatever is clear action coming from compassion and not anger.

So often when we're not deeply rooted in compassion and wisdom, it can be so painful. We're opened with some compassion to the so much suffering in the world of others or in ourselves, but there's still either that pain that is so overwhelming that we don't know how to balance it with equanimity, or we're still attached in some way to a result, somehow thinking we can control the outcome. And this can lead to so much frustration. Action that begins out of compassion is continued in anger and frustration, and it starts to burn up its source.

I taught a retreat the last couple of years for—in quotations—burned-out environmentalists who want to connect or reconnect with their spirituality. Some of them have told me their hours are grueling, the work is endless, the cause just goes on and on and on, and the work itself can be totally maddening and frustrating. They say it's difficult, almost impossible, not to fall into frustration and anger, which can be a really energizing emotion—but it's exactly what leads to the sense of being burned out. At some point we lose the tender heart of the warrior, because it's so tender. It's so tender that without the balance of equanimity, we almost can't bear it. And so we've got to do something to change this.

This is how compassion and love really must, as we deepen and deepen in this tenderness, be balanced with the wisdom of equanimity. With knowing that deeply as we care, deeply as we're connected, we can only work from our intention. We cannot in any way think that we can control results.

or think that somehow with our best intention we're going to be able to end all suffering.

Someone here was telling me that she has friends who work with the homeless, and they've said the way they can continue their work without getting burned out is by knowing they're not going to be able to help everybody, they're not going to be able to end the problem of homelessness, and they may not, with all their caring, be able to help specific people.

I'm sure you've run up against this in your metta, in your compassion practice, where we feel so much caring for a particular person and wish that if we could just care hard enough, we could change perhaps self-destructive patterns, or outer events in their life, or health that we have no control over. And how to be able to stay that connected in compassion, in love, not flinch away because we can't always change things.

This is the real dance of wisdom and compassion, of equanimity and knowing we can't control, but at the same time not giving up because we can't control. How to act from compassion and with wisdom. It's quite a delicate dance that we do. But it doesn't have to mean that we just shrink back and say, forget it.

Another role model for me, much like Aung San Suu Kyi, is Sister Chan Khong, Thich Nhat Hanh's colleague. Ever since I met her some ten years ago, she was just this amazing dynamo of energy. And of

course one can never tell looking from outside, but as far as I could see, so much of what she is doing really comes out of caring for other people and trying to help—trying to help people in prison in Vietnam, trying to help the boat people. When I was at Plum Village, it was trying to help anybody who had a problem, whether it was spiders in their room or wanting to stay in a nicer room or needing some kind of special food or organizing whatever needed to be organized. No drawing the lines that this is too mundane or this is really great, but just doing whatever needed to be done to help people, with a tremendous amount of energy, a tremendous amount of courage.

When I read her autobiography recently, what touched me very deeply is that she really does seem quite motivated by compassion, and she very openly acknowledges that in her whole thirty or forty years—since before the war in Vietnam and during the war in Vietnam—she was in situations of enormous suffering that I can't even begin to imagine. Seeing friends killed by grenades from either side in the war, and somehow finding an ability to care deeply for her friends, to say eulogies at their funerals without blaming people. Saying, you know, "I see our enemies are hatred and ignorance, but our enemies are not the Vietnamese people."

What touched me even more, though, is that this wasn't something that just came naturally to her, that she's just always connected and always loving. Starting back when she was young and even now, she has to really continue to work at it, continue to cultivate how to come from an intention of caring, an intention of compassion. Even now, she says, when she hears of new nuns and monks or artists being put in jail in Vietnam, she's initiating whole letter-writing campaigns and trying to speak to people in authority to try and get them out of jail. But she says even now she'll get really angry when she first hears about it, and she will not do anything as long as she's angry. She'll meditate. She'll consciously cultivate compassion. She'll consciously cultivate mindfulness and loving kindness until she can find some way to feel a connection of some kind with the people she's going to write to. And only then will she actually write a letter. Sometimes, she says, it could take weeks.

I'm just very touched by the depth of that commitment. It's an inspiration to me, both in that compassion doesn't turn us into weaklings—I think just the reverse—and that it must come with the wisdom of not just expecting it to be automatic, being willing to really look and see what our intentions are. And if we have that moment of choice, to say, okay, let me see. Can I go back to the karuna practice? Can I go back to the metta practice? And if I can wait until I act until I can come from a clearer intention, I will. Of course, there are times when we can't wait or we don't wait or we don't have that clarity to see. And that's when we bring in the compassion and the kindness to ourselves, not expecting that we're somehow going to be perfect. Our life isn't perfect.

So our start here may seem kind of modest. We're starting with ourselves. The results might not be what you had hoped for or expected. They might be much more than you hoped for or expected. They might be totally different from what you hoped for. But even if you're having some really beautiful, peaceful experience now, that'll change. It's nice, it's wonderful, but the experience itself, as you're experiencing it

now, will change.

But on a much more profound and subtler level, a much deeper change is going on—a real shift in our understanding of who we truly are, our understanding of the world, of what the potential of true happiness is. And somewhere in each of you there's a little seed of knowing

that that potential for true happiness is your birthright and is part of who you are, and that we all have access to it.

And whether you're feeling that or not right now, I don't think that's the main point, because these changes in how we relate to ourselves, how we relate to and connect with others, and how we will be and can be in the world—both connected and effective—are going on at the often unconscious level of our habits of mind, our habits of belief, of really knowing what's true.

And I think you might be surprised. I know I was, to find that once I was no longer in retreat—and not even consciously necessarily thinking "I want to be really connected to all beings"—this would just start to come up spontaneously. I would say or do something out of metta or compassion without thinking I was going to do that. Whereas before, I could do something out of aversion and attachment without thinking that I was going to do that.

And even though it might seem like it's still pretty conditional love right now—to ourselves, to people we care about, maybe sometimes to all beings or an enemy—often people hear themselves saying, "Well, it still feels quite conditional." Don't worry about it. Because it just will fill up and fill up and spill over by itself.

And even if you never have the conscious intention to want to have compassion for all beings, or to be practicing for all beings, it sort of starts to happen anyway. Because in this connection of this tender heart with yourself and others, in that moment of connection when someone's pain is your pain, you can't tell the difference. In that moment, it's so clear that we really are all beings. All beings are us. And even if we don't put that into a conscious thought, we have a profound effect on all beings we come in touch with.

This is from the Dalai Lama:

Through inner peace, genuine world peace can be achieved. In this, the importance of individual responsibility is quite clear. Peace must first be discovered within ourselves, then gradually expanded to include our families, our communities, and ultimately the whole planet. Developing such attitudes as love and compassion between human beings is not merely a source of personal happiness, but has become a condition for human survival.

Let's sit for a few minutes.

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