Our Highest Purpose

Carol Wilson · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Carol Wilson · 1:01:32

Tomorrow our practice changes form. And it's an interesting time. It can be easy, actually, in all the different things that come up in this change of form, to at times get into various spaces of clinging to the particular form of practice we've been cultivating these three months.

I know I've spent a lot of my practice years mistaking the form of the practice for the heart of the practice, for the heart of awakening, and feeling that when one retreat was over I would madly begin planning when I could do the next retreat and forget that this whole part of my life that's not called formal retreat is actually practice. There's no such thing as a moment that's not practice time. It's just about changing the form.

It's easy to mistake the kind of glittery, microscopic, really precise, really far-out qualities of mindfulness, concentration, clarity—it's easy to mistake those for wisdom. They might help awaken our heart and mind at certain times, but if we try to hold on to these particular conditions, we're just getting stuck and clinging again.

And so part of the grace of our shift of form is to see what practice is about. What's the heart of the practice about for you?

The two aspects that helped me the most in my life are very basic and simple: the aspects of wisdom and compassion, the Dalai Lama's statement that my religion is kindness. Couldn't be more simple. And to meet every aspect of my life, each situation, holding the question: How can I awaken in this moment?

Not to try and hold on to whatever insights have arisen in some form so that then I can click through the roster in my daily life and haul out the appropriate insight at the appropriate time and apply it in a given situation—but to trust that when we meet each moment with a presence of heart and mind, all the wisdom and understanding arises in that moment to meet that situation. Whatever we've understood, all of our wisdom and love is present, arising in a moment of our life. We don't have to hold on to it, which is good since we can't, because there's only arising moments. There's only our daily life.

I want to read from Bo Lozoff, who started the Prison Ashram Project quite some years ago. He does a lot of wonderful spiritual work, not particularly Buddhist. This is from the newsletter he sends out from the Human Kindness Foundation, called "A Little Good News."

"Everyday life is all we've got. The deep, wonderful secrets of life, the mysterious presence of the divine, the joy of cherishing each other, the beauty of nature, the satisfaction of helping out, our journey into the ageless wisdom—all exist only in our everyday life. There is no bigger ball field on which to find meaning.

It's either right here today or it's nowhere."

And he quotes Jesus as saying, "The kingdom of heaven is within you. I tell you, the kingdom of heaven is at hand." At hand—not after the revolution, not when the next golden age brings worldwide peace and harmony. Here, now, you, me, our kids, in the middle of the ghetto, in the middle of prison, in the middle of our endless details, our ceaseless worries about the future.

"How many simple, peaceful, truly happy adults do our kids get to see? How many adults are deeply content with their lives and enjoy what they do? How many are happy about getting older and unafraid of dying? How many are relaxed and calm, with time to take off from work every now and then in order to mentor a young person? We seem to be knocking ourselves out in pursuit of a vague image of success and meaning, while the real quality of our everyday life with our families and communities steadily declines. We're asleep at the wheel, swept up in a fitful agitated dream, and we're missing some gorgeous scenery which only passes by once.

"When the Buddha experienced his great enlightenment, he got up from where he had been sitting and walked toward the village. The first person who saw him was awestruck by his radiance and power. The man approached him and said, 'Sir, what are you? Are you a god?' And the Buddha said, 'No.' And he kept asking questions. And the man said, 'Well, what are you then?' The Buddha replied, 'I am awake.' And then he spent the rest of his life making it clear to us that we can awaken too. The joy is right here. We just need to wake up to it."

I think that's a beautiful expression of the purpose of practice. Not to be some incredible yogi.

I just heard on the radio that the oldest standing record in the Guinness Book of World Records dates from the time of Jesus—some monk in Syria who sat on top of a pillar for forty-five years. They don't have a record of why.

That's the potential for our life. I don't think that's what practice is about.

The form practice takes might be becoming a monk or a nun. It might involve doing an awful lot of intensive practice. It might involve not doing much intensive practice at all. But the form isn't really the point. The point is waking up. And through our awakening, we touch and communicate that potential of living in truth to every person we come in contact with, whether we know it or not. If we are really committed to this in ourselves, it truly has an effect on the world.

So in some ways, this changing form that we're entering is the most important aspect of our practice. And I know for me, for years, it's been so easy to not give it the quality of care and attention that I give the rest of formal practice. Why? Because in some ways it's difficult. It's not an easy time.

I want to talk about the broader aspects of mindfulness that can help us—intellectually help us—to stay awake in this period. Also to let go of, as we constantly must, the ideas we're still holding about how

practice should look, what it means. Because when we find we can't hold on to them, does that mean practice is gone? We can see that practice can be broader and broader and more vast. It's just a constant letting go into the vastness.

Much of what we've discussed regarding mindfulness on this retreat—*sati*, the Pali word—has been the precise mental factor of mindfulness: knowing fully what's happening. We've worked a lot in this way of moment-to-moment continuous mindfulness, and we've developed it very strongly.

Have you ever noticed in your own practice here when you felt really, really mindful and at the same time completely oblivious to what was going on around you? This is what we call mindful, but lacking the broader element of clear comprehension.

I'll tell you a really embarrassing story. I wish it didn't come into my mind just now, but it did. Years ago, I was practicing here, a long time ago, walking very carefully, very present, really inward, really noting. I came to the coat room, took off my shoes, bent down to pick up my zafu—that's how long ago it was—and started to walk into the upper walking room. I completely didn't notice there were steps. I just walked right off the top step and fell on my face at the bottom. Of course, there were a lot of people walking in that room. I didn't hurt myself, only my self-esteem.

That's a good example of mindfulness that lacks clear comprehension. I think we do it a lot. We wonder why we come out of retreat and literally cannot do two things at once. I remember my first three-month course—I was working in the kitchen, and one of the teachers had just been sitting for a while and came in to get something to eat. They made such a mess all over the place, didn't clean it up, talked a mile a minute, and walked out. I thought, my goodness, is that what we're heading for?

I realized we can get so concentrated, so into the microscopic mindfulness, that we skip the fact that we're not isolated. We're part of a bigger picture always. We're never separate.

On the conceptual level, there are ways of talking about clear comprehension that help us understand how practice is much wider. Clear comprehension comes into play when there are choices, when we realize we're in relationship to experience and other people, when we have decisions to make. There are four areas, which I might not get to all of them.

The first is called clear comprehension of purpose. I have found this to be one of the most helpful aspects of attention, of inspiration, of really forming a guidepost in my life. It has a lot to do with what Kamala was talking about last night—aspiration.

Clear comprehension of purpose on one level is about intention. We've talked a lot about the importance, when making choices and decisions in our life from little ones to big ones, of bringing our awareness to the intention, the motivation for that action. Obviously this requires mindfulness—remembering that there is an intention, and that if we looked, we might notice it. The awareness that noticing intention often gives us a moment of choice, in little things and in big things. Do I need to go get an ice cream now? Maybe

yes, maybe no, but we can notice why.

That's the micro level. On the macro level, clear comprehension of purpose is aspiration in a much larger sense—what Kamala was speaking about last night. Getting in touch with what is your deepest aspiration, what is the deepest purpose in your life? As Bo was writing about in his letter: What is your life about?

By consciously bringing this into our heart, into our mind, by affirming it to ourselves consciously, it has an amazing power of consolidating our restless, diffuse energy. It gives us a real sense of focus, a light, a beacon to refer to when we have important decisions to make.

It's really a very powerful thing. Often, in talking to people—and it was like this for myself for a while—we can tend to just not even think about this at all. Or if we do, it's on an intellectual level, still coming from a place of identification with our worthlessness or our sense of "I don't really have any skills" or "there's nothing I can offer the world"—whatever our story is. Which is all an ego trip.

By holding on to this belief—"I'm not a person who's worthy enough to have a really deep intention to guide my life, that's for other people"—we're denying the beauty and truth that each one of us is. In our own unique way, we all have something completely different to bring to the world. And we don't have to be somebody special to get in touch with that. It's true for all of us. We don't have to deny that to ourselves.

Although often, I know when I first began to feel a sense of this arising in my heart, the first time it came to me, I think the way it was phrased was, "I'm here to serve the Dharma, whatever that means." And immediately, the critical mind comes in: "Who do you think you are? Give me a break." You don't have to listen to that. It'll do its thing, but we have a choice. Do we want to identify with the small fears and limitations that we're used to identifying with? Or do we want to say, "Okay, thank you for your opinion. The Dharma is greater than me or my little fears, and I don't have to know how my purpose or aspiration is going to manifest." Not only do I not have to know—I don't know. And we won't know. We never know what's going to happen.

So it's being willing to simply honor the depth of each of our commitment, in whatever form that takes for you. There isn't a right form. For some people, bodhicitta—the sense of one's whole life being practiced in order to awaken the heart of enlightenment, in order to help awaken all beings—that's a wonderful aspiration. But it might not be your aspiration. What's important in this is not having a sense of should, another intellectual overlay: "That sounds good, and I should live up to this ideal, and I should want to awaken in order to awaken all beings." That's not what I'm talking about. I'm talking about really honoring the deepest truth in your heart and mind—what brings you to practice, what guides you in your life.

Give it some time to tune in, to intuitively see what arises. And when it comes up, like that time it came up for me, it was out of the blue. It was so not my usual train of thought that it really caught my attention.

Once you know—and it might be changing—but if I hadn't had that particular conscious acknowledgment of a sense of my deepest purpose, I know I would never be here now. I never would be teaching.

Because that sense of honoring one's purpose is what will take us through difficult decisions in our life—when we come to crossroads, when we come to turning points and we're trying to make decisions. It comes up often. People will say in retreat, "I have to either take this job or move here. I have to either sit for another year or go back and visit my parents." The choices are endless. And they'll say, "How can I decide? I list the pros and the cons—they're all just thoughts. I have emotions about them both ways—they're all just emotions. They come and go. How can one make a decision that has any kind of basis?"

And it's true, it's hard. What I found is that the sense of one's deepest purpose comes in thoughts and emotions, but it has that deeper intuitive feel, that sense of trust that somehow moves beyond thought and emotion. And then, when one is faced with a decision—should I do this or should I do that?—that sense of purpose can guide us.

The first course I ever taught, I wouldn't have done it. I was dragged kicking and screaming. Going by my habits and by what kept me comfortable and what I felt at ease doing—what would we do? We would never grow. We would stay in our own little limits. I never would have gone to be teaching meditation in a million years, sitting up in front talking to people. It's totally not my personality. I like to go hide in the corner.

I would say, no, no, no, no—until this popped into my mind: "Oh yeah, that's right. My deepest purpose is to serve the Dharma." I don't necessarily get to choose what that looks like. It doesn't mean I'm always going to like what the choices are. But once it's clear to ourselves and we have a sense of alignment with that—as soon as that came into my mind, there was no more wavering. It was clear that's what needed to happen.

It really helps, because otherwise we just stay in our habit patterns. It might be comfortable, but it's not necessarily about freedom. One teacher said once, "In every moment of activity, we are committing ourselves to something." It's a question of what. Are we willing to really look?

This isn't with a heavy judgment. It's just with the honesty of mindfulness and wisdom—of satipañña. Really look at the choices we make day to day, the big choices, and what we're actually committing to with those choices. We have to be willing to look with honesty and with love. Because otherwise we'll go, "Right, you're committing to greed. Once again, you've blown it. You thought you were here for the Dharma, you thought you were here for awakening, and all you're doing is feeding your face." Then, "Now I'm committing to aversion because I'm filled with self-hatred"—and you can really get into that cycle.

So this willingness to look has to be with satipañña, with wisdom, with mindfulness, with compassion for ourselves. But once we're willing to meet our life like that, willing to honor—an intention to honor—our

deepest commitment, not expecting we're going to do it every time, but once we can let that light shine... we really are shining our heart, shining our mind. Once we can honor it to ourselves, it strengthens the depth of our commitment in a really profound way. And I found it helpful to keep bringing that into consciousness over and over, this willingness to look. Because things change. The commitment changes. And our life changes to go along with it.

So on the macro level, clear comprehension of purpose is getting in touch with your deepest aspiration and honoring the depth of it, and then bringing in our mindfulness practice of remembering to see why we're doing what we're doing—but to see it with kindness.

From Nisargadatta Maharaj: someone asks him a question about mental suffering, how to set right a tangle which is below the level of consciousness. And he answers, "By being with yourself, with the 'I am,' by watching yourself in your daily life with alert interest, with the intention to understand rather than to judge, in full acceptance of whatever may emerge because it is there. This is the great work of awareness. It removes obstacles and releases energies by understanding the nature of life and mind. Intelligence is the door to freedom, and alert attention is the mother of intelligence."

That one line I love: "By watching yourself in daily life with the intention to understand rather than to judge." If we can meet ourselves with that attitude, notice our intentions on the micro level and on the macro level, in order to understand, not to judge—I found that once I could bring that attitude in, my actions, both big and little, began very naturally to harmonize more and more over the years with the deepest level of what's most important for me.

Now, when I was scrutinizing my life with the intention to judge rather than to understand, that didn't happen. For years, way before I had this first sense of my deepest purpose, I was really quite devoted to practice, to the Dharma, but my attitude was: every time I did something that I didn't consider dharmic—which, let's face it, is most of the time, because my idea of dharmic was pretty narrow—I'd get out the whip. Any time I turned on the TV, or went to a movie, or read a mystery novel, or just sat and zoned out. In other words, if I wasn't reading the Dharma, or practicing the Dharma, or being the most loving bodhisattva on the planet—and most of the time I wasn't—I was a failure. A dharmic failure.

This makes it really hard. Dharma almost becomes our enemy, and there's this sense of just being a failure all the time. And most of life comes outside of practice. When I quit trying to force myself to always live a so-called dharmic life and just paid attention—as Nisargadatta says, with the intention to understand rather than to judge—I'd see why I would so-called deviate, with a lot of understanding. And actually it got to be not such a problem.

So if I watched some stupid TV program, okay, that's not the end of the world. It doesn't mean I'm a failure in life. And I could see the conditions. I was working in this sheltered workshop I mentioned before. I was completely exhausted mentally and physically every night by the end of a day working there. I was basically useless for any kind of human activity that required energy or intelligence or communication. I

was a vegetable. So every night I'd just sit there like a vegetable, beating myself up for being a vegetable—until I could finally see: "Oh yeah, cause and effect. You spend a day like this, what do you expect?"

And then the softness comes in. There's no sense of judging, and it becomes the practice. In that, I found that what had felt like a struggle to try and make my choices fit some ideal—which is another way to use our aspiration against ourselves—instead, quite naturally, extraneous things began to drop away.

For example, if I was watching a really stupid TV program without judgment and just paying attention, after five minutes I'd go, "This is really stupid," and turn it off. It didn't really take any struggle; it was just obvious. I know this sounds funny, but somehow accepting what's happening makes it a lot easier. And we have a real multiplicity of possibilities in this life, in this culture. Our practice becomes more inclusive. Everything becomes included rather than shutting things out.

This is from Izumi Shikibu: "Although I try to hold the single thought of Buddha's teaching in my heart, I cannot help but hear the many crickets' voices calling as well." We can appreciate the crickets' voices calling. Sometimes they're beautiful. We don't have to hate them. We don't have to try and make ourselves deaf.

When we have this inclusive attitude, when we're in harmony with our experience, then our deepest aspiration comes to the surface more and more easily. It becomes a joy to live from that rather than a duty.

It's true that sometimes when we get in touch with our aspiration, when we feel it almost reverberating through our heart, through our body and mind, there are times it can be a little fearful. Often the thought will come up—and it would for me—"This means my life might have to change," or "It means I might have to give something up." And that's true. Our lives will probably have to change. But you think they wouldn't change anyway? They're going to change no matter what we do. Still, there's definitely a sense of, "Oh, what about..."—whatever your particular "what about" is.

Over the years—it's been some twenty-five years now since I was first introduced to the Buddha Dharma, to this practice—there have been amazing changes in my life. A lot of activities that I thought gave me pleasure, a lot of dreams I might have had about what I thought would be the happy life for me, or what I thought would make me happy, or what I thought life was worth living for—maybe a lot of those things never manifested.

For some reason the other day, I was reading a few little notes I took during a retreat I was sitting six or seven years ago. There was one page that quite surprised me. I had been teaching for three or four years at that time, and I could see in reading it that there was much more of a sense of struggle still going on—trying to find my relationship to teaching and to the demands that this lifestyle was making on my ideas of what I thought would make me happy in life.

I wrote in one place that I saw my idea of renunciation was really changing. It's easy for me to think of renunciation as living a simple life, or being a nun again, or a monk—we give up a family and sit a lot. Renunciation going in the direction of simplicity. What I was seeing at that retreat was that what I was really having to renounce was my ideas about what I thought my life should be about and what I thought would be a happy life—which actually meant my life moved towards more complexity, not towards more simplicity.

Could I find a balance with that? Could I give up ideas of having just one place to stay in and not traveling, or having a family, or choosing a location that wasn't quite so cold, or whatever the particular idea was? But I thought it was quite poignant that renunciation can take a different form from what we think. Little deaths all along the way to my particular idea of what Carol is or how Carol should manifest. And then in that, the surrender to one's aspiration has space to manifest in ways one could never imagine.

So yes, our life might change, but it's little by little over time. There is no way that I could look back and say, "Oh, I wish something had happened differently." Every falling away, every sense of renunciation might have a little sadness, some grief in it at the time, but it's always been an opening into something so much more connected, so much more alive in the truth—something we can't imagine from where we are now. So it's really a lot about trust. And it gives us a power to concentrate our dispersed energy—not just floating here and there—but to really focus our energy, just like concentration does, and do things one could never imagine.

Think of ten years ago. Most of you—did you imagine you could sit a whole three-month course? Forget it. Impossible. And now it's like nothing, right? You could start another one tomorrow. So that's working with purpose, with aspiration.

The second aspect of this clear comprehension, this broadening of our mindful awareness, is to see that we're not acting or existing in isolation—which of course isn't news, but it's easy to forget. And even with this sense of purpose, everything has to be adapted to the particular situation, to the particular moment. This is what we've been hammering at when we talk about skillful means. What is skillful means one moment, we just do out of memory the next moment, and it's totally inappropriate.

So this second aspect of clear comprehension is called clear comprehension of suitability—really seeing cause and effect, recognizing that conditions change, that what's suitable one moment is different. Something else is appropriate in a different moment when the conditions change. It's what Ram Dass calls "knowing your zip code." And if you don't remember your zip code, if you're American, then tomorrow it's time to start putting it back on again, knowing where you live.

This is another piece that we're often missing when we feel like we're so mindful. Sometimes people say, "I feel like I've been practicing a lot and I'm really mindful, but I feel like I'm getting more self-centered, more self-involved than when I started practice." And there can be phases like this, you know. We're so engrossed in the sensations in our big toe or in our particular emotions, and that's totally appropriate

deep in a three-month retreat. But then we have to expand and realize that we are always in relationship with the environment, with other people, with the weather, with animals, and that our clear comprehension, our mindfulness, has to include all of this—what's appropriate.

A friend who went to acupuncture one time, and the acupuncturist was burning moxa. You know, they burn moxa down to your skin, and then when you just begin to feel it burn, you tell him and he takes it off so it doesn't hurt. So this friend was lying there in his mind noting, "burning, burning, burning," but he didn't say anything. So he really got a burn. This is lacking this particular aspect of suitability. What's happening in the bigger picture?

This takes us out of our sense of separation—to notice impermanence, to notice cause and effect, to notice that there's no separate independent individual self ever. We can never act independent of circumstances. We can't exist independent of circumstances. We're affected by the weather. Have you noticed that? It's really amazing, isn't it? As if somehow we're separate from the weather. I used to get on retreats really annoyed. "I don't want to be depressed just because the weather is so gloomy. It's got nothing to do with me. I'm stronger than that." Forget it. We are the weather. There's no difference. We can't really expect it to be otherwise.

You notice, I'm sure you've noticed this, in the last two days as it comes close to the end, that you pick up each other's energy? Have you noticed that at all? It's like moving through the building. Actually, it's a little less this year than some years. Some years it feels like the windows are going to blow out of here by this day. But it's sort of circling. The staff feels it very strongly and we don't always realize what it is. And just talking to different ones of you, just feeling the energy as I walk through the dining room, there's no way one can be immune to it. We try, you know, but it doesn't work. So it's simply acknowledging that we are in the middle of a bunch of causes and we're feeling the effects at this moment.

So, for example, when you start talking, it's not that we just say what's true, but also what's useful. And that takes having a bigger view of the whole situation. Saying what is not only true and useful, but tuning into the receptivity level of the other person. And you'll see that a lot when you leave here and someone says, "How was your retreat?" And you start out on a three-hour discussion of the first week, and after two words, you can see they're gone. That's really where we pay attention. What does this person really want to know? What's really the level of receptivity here? What's skillful?

Or the kind of deep discussion you might have in a relationship about some difficulties. I learned a long time ago that starting one of those discussions at midnight was not a very skillful idea. And in the morning some things can be discussed in a very helpful way. So it's really paying attention to cause and effect. The behavior that's appropriate here will get you in a lot of trouble walking down the streets of New York City. Maybe not in New York City. In some places.

So this is just noticing cycles of cause and effect, cycles of change, that who we are affects everyone else, and everyone else affects who we are. You know Thich Nhat Hanh's story, although I've often wondered

how he knows this. The story of the boat people during that period when there were so many people escaping from Vietnam in fishing boats, just really packed fishing boats with a couple hundred people on little boats.

And a lot of those boats were attacked by pirates. Many would run into heavy storms, and of course they were way overloaded. What Thich Nhat Hanh says is that from talking to so many of the boat people, he found that the boats that came through the difficulties the best were the ones in which there was just one calm person on board—someone who could stay calm and meet the situation with clarity, with centeredness, with presence. That calm would affect other people and begin to radiate out, and there would be enough centeredness and balance to come through the difficulty.

What I wonder is, how does he know that if the other ones didn't come through the difficulty? But I think the point is well taken. If we can, in a difficult situation, be that one calm person—if we can meet a situation seeing it as it is—then we have the intelligence that comes from awareness, the adaptability, the skillful means that arises out of being so present in that moment to meet the situation appropriately. That's exactly what we've been practicing here with our practice all along. What's skillful in this moment? It might have been skillful yesterday, but we can't just do it from memory. We have to look fresh in this moment. The conditions are different. So that's the clear comprehension of adaptability.

And when we have these two—the overarching sense of aspiration, of purpose, commitment to that, commitment to look; and the presence of mind of suitability, of adaptability, that ability to be fresh and aware in each moment—then the other two aspects of broader awareness, of clear comprehension, follow naturally. This is really about our life becoming our practice, the whole of life becoming a domain of meditation, our whole life becoming lit up with wisdom, with non-delusion. These two naturally follow from the others.

So really, can we bring in the attitude of meeting our life as practice and see what aspect of life we somehow hold outside of being important or necessary to be present and awake for? When I hold the question in my heart, "How can I awaken in this moment?" then I need to look: what particular moments do I always forget to ask that question?

In one of Alexander Solzhenitsyn's books, *The First Circle*, he has one of his main characters talk about what he calls "the final inch." I haven't read this for years, but it's always stuck in my mind. *The First Circle* was a gulag prison for hotshot scientists who were set to work on very esoteric projects. This character's premise of the final inch is that people work really hard, really diligently, with a lot of care on something that's very complicated until they're just almost finished—just that final inch to go. And then somehow the care or the attention or the constancy falls down and we tend to get a little careless.

It's so easy to do that. It's easy to see how we do it on a retreat. Someone today gave me a great example in an interview of how we do it in daily life. She was describing being so mindful while eating and then noticing how the last couple of bites she'd really hurry through, and the mindfulness would fade away.

Really seeing with wisdom that it's because the pleasantness, somehow she knew the pleasantness was about to end, and there's a clinging there and it's painful, so we hurry through it and don't really pay attention. That's how I think of this final inch.

What are the things that are a little difficult, a little uncomfortable, or maybe so pleasant that we really don't want to have to bring in mindfulness? That's where I fall down. Things will be really smooth, really equanimous in my mind, and I think, "Well, I don't really have to pay attention now. I'm just cruising. Equanimity is firmly established." Which maybe it was for a couple of moments, but not for two weeks without attention, I don't think so.

Just look in your life. What are the areas that are somehow outside the domain of awakening? And again without judgment, just bring some awareness to them. Remembering that our practice is not an activity; it's an attitude with which we meet our lives.

This is from Geshe Raptin, and it really inspires me—his way of meeting his life: "All actions, even the most simple, are for the purpose of developing the awakening mind of wisdom and compassion and for the service of all beings." Not a should. But if I can imagine washing the dishes with that attitude—all actions, even the most simple, for the purpose of developing the awakening mind of wisdom and compassion and for the service of all beings—there's no action that cannot be used for the purpose of developing the awakening mind of wisdom and compassion. I mean wholesome actions, okay, I don't know about really unwholesome ones. But with that intention, it doesn't matter how we manifest in our life—whether we're, as Kamala said, changing the diapers, whether we're washing the dishes, or vacuuming, or working for seva, or teaching school, or raising a family, or meditating in Burma. It's not about there being some right way to manifest.

But can we bring this attitude? This is one way of expressing it. I'm not saying it should be expressed for anybody else in this way. But when we can meet the actions in our life, even the most simple, with the question, "How can I awaken in this moment?"—that's the attitude of our deep practice. The form it takes has many, many possibilities.

And when we meet our life in this way, everything we do begins to be shot through with wisdom, with truth. The aspects of impermanence, of the unsatisfactory nature of things—they become more apparent at times. Also, the fact that we're not separate autonomous beings, as I was saying in the area of adaptability, becomes more obvious. Sometimes we might bring it in consciously, reflect on impermanence, reflect on suffering, reflect on anatta. But if we're just meeting each action of our life with this intention to awaken, then without it being such a formal thing we have to try and make happen, just by itself the truth begins to shine everywhere. It shines in your heart. You notice it in other people—and not just in so-called spiritual people, but we see it everywhere, because that's really what life is. And as we begin to wake up to it in ourselves, we see that it's always been everywhere. It's just somehow our own shutting down to our own pain, our own fears, that keeps us from seeing that truth is everywhere.

You might notice when you leave here that we're a lot more open, a lot more sensitive. So the truth is beautiful. It's also a lot about seeing impermanence and suffering and having an open, compassionate heart. I remember after my first three-month course, for some unknown reason, a couple of days after it ended, I went to a big mall in Worcester. Worcester's not a cheery city—I don't know if you spend much time there. I'm sure there's happy people in Worcester, but it's not one of those cities that lights me up to go into. And I remember walking through this mall just wide open, and it's just something... you could feel the kind of suffering in people's faces. That kind of numbed out look was really what I remember. In some ways it was devastating. It was devastating because I wasn't locking around it. In other ways, it was really connecting. We're so much more sensitive, but we're so much more alive. We're so much more present in life.

That didn't lead me to hate Worcester or hate those people or think I can never go out in public again. It was just a sense of the poignancy of our life and a much deeper connection. And I find when I'm willing to at least have the intention to meet life this way—of course we don't do it all the time—but I find that the situations around me really become tools to wake up. This I can do consciously if I'm feeling shut off, or it happens spontaneously when I'm more open and vulnerable, as in that mall.

So for example, when I go to see my doctor in the teaching hospital in Worcester, I really like going because it's a huge hospital and all kinds of people come there with all kinds of problems. Poor people, a lot of people who don't speak English, little kids in wheelchairs—just the whole range. And I love going there because it wakes me up. Because I really just try to be open and try to look at people and try to just let it in. And I come away feeling so much more alive in my heart and connected to the world. It might sound kind of weird, but it's really a way of waking up.

The hunting season here, this deer hunting season—I think it's amazing that it happens every year during the three-month course because it touches so many different aspects of life. We tend, well, many of us tend to get really identified with the beauty of the deer, their helplessness, and the hunters going out shooting always feels so violent and so harsh. I remember once I was driving with a good friend who was very intense and very exuberant and very expressive. She was driving the car and we're going down Pleasant Street out there during hunting season, and some hunter was crossing the road. She goes, "Oh, those hunters! They make me so mad. I just want to take this car and run them right over." That's just how she is.

And I said, "You know, I wonder about the quality of the energy you're expressing—how different is that from the hunters going out killing the deer?"

And she said, "Oh my God, you're blowing me away!" It was so funny. She had never thought of that. But it's true—can we take in the whole picture?

There's pain and there's fear—and can we have compassion? Many of the hunters actually need the meat to eat. And in fact, we need equanimity because this is how the world is, even as we still have our

opinions. Can we be connected with the whole picture? Feel the suffering, feel the beauty, feel the compassion, balance it with equanimity. I think it's a great practice, and it can wake us up.

Notice times when you're feeling really separate. Sometimes we can consciously extend our awareness to include the whole picture.

An example of this: one time I was riding on a train in India, on a sleeper—a second-class sleeper where there were just benches, really, two on each side of a little compartment. I mean, you just pull a curtain over it. For some reason, I had one top bench, and usually they try to put women together, but I had three Indian men in the other three spaces. I was traveling alone and I wasn't particularly comfortable.

During the day, of course, there are forty-five people sitting on the benches. But at night, when you own the bench that you bought with your ticket, the other people have to leave—which it turns out were all the men's families, their wives and children and in-laws. God knows where they went to sleep, but the men each got a bench, and me.

So I was lying there. They were perfectly nice; they didn't bother me. But I was feeling such a sense of separation. *These guys, leave me alone. What are they doing here?* It was me and them. It was a very uncomfortable night.

Then in the morning, I noticed what my mind was doing. Without actually saying anything, I just shifted it and said, *Okay, why don't I think of us in the compartment instead of me and them.* That's all I did.

The day comes, we all sit back down again on the bottom benches, forty-five people come back in the compartment. But because I was thinking *us*—that's all—something shifted in my vibe, and it really turned into an *us*. They started being very friendly, went out and bought me little snacks. I got to taste chai and little pakoras. They wanted to show me Indian snacks, and we had very nice conversations. The only difference was my inner attitude—that this happened in the morning and not the night before. Just the shift from *me and them* to *us*.

We can do that consciously at times, and it's amazing the power it has. So just in little ways like that, using the situations in life to wake up rather than just reacting—*this is a curse, this is a blessing*—no, this is a chance to wake up in this moment. And that's all we have, just this moment. And then the next moment, in case we spaced out the last moment. Here we are again, this moment.

So just in these days in your life, please don't undervalue yourself. Know that you, just as you are, are a unique manifestation of truth, of Dhamma—however you express it in your life, and we'll all express it differently. You know that verse from Rumi: "Let the beauty you love be what you do. There are hundreds of ways to kneel and kiss the ground." Each of us will do it differently. So find your own way to kneel and kiss the ground.

I want to close with this quotation from Nyoshul Khenpo: "Those who recognize their true nature are

enlightened. Those who overlook or ignore it are deluded. This recognition is the borderline between Buddhas and beings."

And this recognition is the great crossroads at which we find ourselves every moment of our lives. Every moment of our lives, we can recognize our true nature.

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