Compassion

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Bodhichitta, as many of you know, is a term in Pali and Sanskrit that means awakened mind or awakened heart—the wisdom mind of enlightenment. In the Tibetan tradition in particular, it refers to that aspiration to awaken, to purify our own minds and hearts in order to benefit all beings.

Bodhichitta can be understood on two levels. On one level, relative bodhichitta is compassion. On the ultimate level, bodhichitta refers to emptiness. And it's said that when these two are both present—compassion and emptiness—enlightenment is unavoidable. So it's good to have that framework.

Over the past weeks, we've discussed in some detail and in different ways the empty, selfless, insubstantial nature of phenomena. We've talked a bit about emptiness. Tonight, I'd like to talk more about compassion, the heart of compassion.

The Buddha emphasized the importance of this quality of mind and heart in different ways. He emphasized it in the teachings of the Brahmaviharas: loving kindness, compassion, sympathetic joy, and equanimity. He also taught it in the context of the Noble Eightfold Path. In the second step of that path—it starts with Right View or Right Understanding—the second step is called Right Intention or Right Aspiration, sometimes called Right Thought. This Right Aspiration includes the aspiration or intention of renunciation, of letting go of defilements. It includes the intention or aspiration of loving kindness. And the third aspect of Right Aspiration is the aspiration for compassion—that is, freeing the mind from thoughts of cruelty.

Here, just in this step of the path, we can see so clearly the dichotomy of skillful and unskillful, of wholesome and unwholesome. Cruelty, as a mind state, wishes to cause harm to people. That's its nature. It's the disposition in the heart and mind to cause pain, to cause suffering. Many of us might tend to think of this mind state as something rather rare in the world, arising infrequently. But when we open our eyes and pay attention, we can see the manifestation of cruelty in so many places of violence throughout the world.

Sometimes this quality of cruelty becomes so contagious that whole populations become involved in killing fields of destruction. We've seen it so many times—the killing fields of Cambodia or Rwanda or Darfur and many other places—where it just seems to spread among a whole population. We see this same manifestation of cruelty in the destruction of so many native cultures all over the world, indigenous cultures. We see it in the violence and cruelty of slavery and its legacy of racism. We see it in the very targeted cruelty of homophobia or violence towards women. The range and the force of this mind state is extensive and very far reaching. It shouldn't be underestimated. It's the cause of a huge amount of

suffering in the world.

But there is also an antidote to this great destructive power, and that is the feeling of compassion. Compassion is precisely that feeling in the heart, in the mind, that wants to alleviate suffering rather than cause it. It's compassion which wishes to bring suffering to an end. When compassion is present within us, it opens our hearts to the suffering that is actually there, and it overcomes our indifference, overcomes our inaction. Compassion is that strong and deep feeling that is moved to act. Thich Nhat Hanh expressed this so well when he said, "Compassion is a verb." This is the very nature of compassionate energy—the implication of it is that we act.

It was precisely this strong feeling that motivated the Bodhisattva over countless lifetimes in his quest and striving for Buddhahood. His Holiness the Dalai Lama said that compassion and love are precious things in life. They are not complicated. They are simple but difficult to practice.

That's a very interesting statement. It's worth investigating why such an uplifting and ennobling quality like compassion should be difficult to practice. What makes it difficult? As we investigate this, it may reveal to us...

even small and unnoticed moments of cruelty within ourselves. Because it's not just out there. We can see it in our own minds, in our own hearts.

Compassion arises out of our willingness to come close to suffering. The problem is, and why it's difficult to practice, is that even though we may want to be compassionate, and often are in our lives, it's not always easy to open to the suffering that's there. We see that in our own practice—all those times when it's difficult to open to the suffering within us, to acknowledge it, to be with it. And just as it's difficult at times to be with our own pain and suffering, we don't always want to be with the pain and suffering of others.

There are very strong tendencies in the mind that keep us defended, keep us withdrawn, indifferent, apathetic in the face of suffering. And this indifference, which is often unacknowledged, is a great barrier, a great obstacle to the arising and manifestation of compassionate response.

There's a wonderful poem by Mary Oliver called "Beyond the Snow Belt." In it she describes a very destructive storm that has taken place, in the poem, two counties north. She describes the destruction. Then the last lines of the poem really capture the problem. She said, "Except as we have loved, all news arrives as from a distant land." We are faced with this situation all the time. We're getting so much news of destruction, of pain and suffering. But except as we have loved, except if we can make some connection to those people or those events or those situations, the news arrives as from a distant land.

As an experiment, so we can begin to explore this within ourselves, watch your mind, watch the response of your mind the next time you come close to some situation of suffering. It might be some pain in the body. What's your first response? "Oh good, let me be with it"? Maybe by now that's beginning to arise, but more likely the first response may be, "I don't want to be with it. I don't want to open to this." It may be

some emotional distress, the suffering of afflictive emotions that are arising—of discontent, of fear, of unworthiness, of jealousy, of loneliness. There are so many painful emotions. What is the response? Are we willing to open? Are we willing to come close to it? Are we willing to feel it, to be with it? Or do we pull back in some way? Are we defended?

It might be a situation of suffering when we are involved with a person who's difficult for us, and we're in some kind of conflict. It could be a situation of suffering in the world. What is our first response? Maybe it's racial injustice. Maybe it's political or religious violence. Maybe it's natural disasters. What do we do with this information as it comes to us? What is our response? We need to take an honest look to see, because it's only if we see that response in ourselves and how we've been conditioned one way or another that we can begin to practice opening to that suffering and allow for the natural arising of compassion.

When we face these situations of suffering, whether interpersonally, in ourselves, or very often now through the very vivid impressions of the media, we're really inundated. What happens? Do we feel uneasy? Do we withdraw? Do we numb out? Or do we let it in?

I could see all of these different tendencies in my mind in one very particular and quite ordinary situation during my time practicing in India. For those of you who have been there, you know that the condition of just the village dogs in India is horrendous. They're not pets. Nobody takes care of them.

Often completely covered with mange, no fur—you can just see that the suffering is so apparent and close.

It was interesting. Often we might be sitting in the bazaar having a cup of tea in one of the tea shops, and these dogs would be around, wanting food. And depending on my own particular state of mind at the time, there could be a wide range of response. Sometimes when the heart was open and I was really present, I could truly let it in and feel this tremendous compassion for these animals. At other times, I just wanted my tea and cookies. I didn't want to see it. I didn't want to deal with it. It was unpleasant. And so I could feel a kind of hardening of the heart. There was just this range of response. At that time, I wasn't particularly noticing all that. It's only now, in looking back, that I can see—oh yes, it was all there.

So the question for us is: how can our hearts stay open given the magnitude of suffering that exists in the world? Is it even possible to open to it all with compassion and diminish the subtle cruelty of indifference?

This challenge is not a theoretical one. It's not enough for us to admire the qualities of compassion and kindness from afar, to admire them in other people as noble ideas but removed from the practice of our daily lives. And it's not enough to simply cultivate these qualities in the silence of a meditation retreat. Our practice is the transformation of consciousness that makes compassionate responsiveness the default setting of our lives. What do we have to do so that this becomes the natural response in the way we live?

As has been mentioned a few times, compassion requires both openness to suffering and also equanimity—letting things in without drowning in the difficulties, without being overcome by sorrow. It's learning through our practice here and in our lives to simply be with the truth of things as they are, to be

with things, pleasant and unpleasant, as they're presenting themselves. And this is the great gift of mindfulness to compassion. It's mindfulness in this regard which allows us to be with things as they are, which allows for the arising of compassion. It's what we do every time we open to our own pain and our own difficulties.

I came across an interview with a Zen teacher from California, a Zen priest and teacher named Lou Richmond. Quite an extraordinary story. As an adult, after he was ordained as a Zen priest and teaching, he came down with viral encephalitis, a devastating and often fatal disease. He was in a coma for two weeks, and when he came out of it, there was significant brain damage and other disabilities. He said in this interview that it took him three or four years to recover. He was very fortunate in that he did recover, but this was a massive change in his life.

This is what he said in that interview—a very interesting description of the truth of dukkha, the truth of suffering. He said, "Sometimes when I'm asked to describe the Buddhist teachings, I say this: Everything is connected. Nothing lasts. You are not alone."

This is really just a restatement of the three characteristics of existence. Non-self—everything is interconnected. Impermanence—nothing lasts. And suffering. Now this is where it gets interesting. He said, "I don't think I would have expressed the truth of suffering as 'you are not alone' before my illness. But now I find that talking about it that way gets at something important. The fact that we all suffer means we are all in the same boat. And that's what allows us to feel compassion."

Perhaps you've had this experience, but it's something that has come up for me in times of particularly great physical pain or suffering in my life. It does create this tremendous feeling of compassion because it's so easy then to relate to the suffering of others in the same situation. We know what it's like because we're feeling it ourselves.

So it would be interesting, at times at least, when we're contemplating the three characteristics, as we're trying to understand dukkha, the truth of dukkha, to frame it in this way: You are not alone. We are not alone.

Everybody shares in this. And to see how that can give rise to the feeling of compassion. As we practice coming close to the suffering in our own lives and open to it with compassion, we then have much greater strength to open to and be with the suffering of others.

Now the beginning of compassion is empathy. And empathy happens when we take a moment to stop and really feel what is going on with another person, in a situation, or with ourselves, before rushing on with our lives. This stopping, even for a few moments, is its own practice. Because how many times have we been cognizant of another person's pain, another person's distress? We're aware of it, but we don't take the time, even for a few moments, to stop and really feel it. We're just so busy, caught up in the forward momentum of our lives. Do we stop, even for a short time, to open to it, to come close to it, to feel it in

ourselves?

So we could think of empathy as the heart-mind of inclusion. It takes others in. It takes situations in. It's really a sensitivity to the world around us. And it's beautifully expressed by the Zen master and poet Ryokan. In the 18th century—you probably have heard of him, read some of his poetry—he lived as this wandering monk up in the mountains of Japan, very free, wandering around the villages, playing with the children. And his poetry is wonderful. There's a great book translated called *One Robe, One Bowl*. One of the poems in this collection just really struck me, because it illustrates the feeling of empathy in the most unlikely context:

I've forgotten my begging bowl, but no one would steal it. How sad for my begging bowl.

I love that. It's like loving what is unloved. "How sad for my begging bowl. No one would steal it."

So we can practice developing empathy in different kinds of situations. It might be feeling the distress of the restless person sitting next to you. Instead of getting lost in aversion and reactivity—"this person is disturbing my meditation"—would it be possible to stop for a few moments and to open to and feel the discomfort, the suffering, the unease of that person? It might be opening to the difficulties and suffering of people who are very close to us, or to a stressful situation in the world. Empathy has the power to take us out of our self-referential perspective.

Some time ago, I had been in a situation where there was some conflict going on with another person, strong differences of views and opinions, and I was quite involved in my own point of view—irritated and annoyed. I tried everything. I was seeing the suffering, I was really trying, I was noting it, but I was caught by it. And then I happened to overhear a remark by a third person about this other person, mentioning that they were suffering too from this conflict. And it was amazing. That's all I had to hear to let go of the self-righteousness and the indignation, whatever else was going on. "Oh, they're suffering too." And it was amazing—just in hearing that and opening to it, all of that identification fell away and there was just this compassion for the whole situation. It was remarkable to me: something that had been going on for quite a while dissolved in a moment. And it dissolved by opening to the suffering that was there, in myself, in the other person.

The Zen master Bankei captured this so well. He said, "Don't side with yourself." We're always siding with ourselves. So that could be a good little mantra to practice with when we're caught up in some kind of conflict or divisiveness, when we are closed off: don't side with yourself.

There might also be situations where people really are behaving very badly, causing real suffering for other people, causing suffering in the world. When we see this, when we come up against a situation like that, what is our usual reaction? It's usually, again, some judgment about how bad they are, feeling righteous in ourselves, anger towards them. But there's another possibility. It is possible to stop and to open up, even in those more extreme situations where the harm is real—to stop and open up and enlarge

the context of our understanding.

This was talked about very powerfully by one of the physicians to His Holiness the Dalai Lama. His name was Dr. Tenzin Chodruk. He was imprisoned by the Chinese, imprisoned and tortured for over seventeen years—a horrible, horrendous situation.

And he described what made it possible for him to survive not only physically, but also with a heart that remained open and compassionate, not drowning in hatred and fear.

This is an intense situation. Hopefully we'll never find ourselves in such circumstances, but it points to something very powerful we can learn. He saw that his torturers, his enemies, were human beings just like himself, and that his guards and tormentors were people who were also caught up in an adverse situation. They were doing the actions which were planting the seeds, which were creating their own future suffering—and doing all of this out of ignorance. He never forgot the commonality of the human condition, understanding that all actions bring consequences.

But what's so remarkable is that Dr. Chodrak held this understanding—that all actions bring consequences—not as a vehicle of revenge, not thinking "these people who are torturing me, they'll get theirs," but as an understanding, a vehicle of compassion.

There's a writer named Claude Levinson who wrote about Tenzin Chodrak. He said: "An appearance almost of timidity on first meeting, a voice so quiet it might be a whisper. Dr. Chodrak could easily pass unnoticed until you meet his gaze—a gaze filled with the perception of one who has seen so much that he has seen everything, seeing beyond the suffering he has experienced, beyond all the evil and abuses he has witnessed, yet expressing boundless compassion for his fellow human beings."

That's pretty remarkable. And I think it points to a possibility, it points to a direction. We can enlarge the context even of very difficult situations.

But it's also important to know and understand that in these situations, where it's possible, we do need to take appropriate actions. This is not about inaction. It's not about passivity. Sometimes we have to set appropriate boundaries, to work to stop harmful behavior, to redress injustices. But can we do this with a wise attention to our own motivations? Is it anger? Are we responding with hatred or resentment? Or is it out of compassion for the suffering of everyone involved?

This takes practice. This is not an easy thing to do. It goes against much of our conditioning. The great lesson here is that how we feel and respond to situations—whether on a very individual basis, in the ordinary activities of our lives, or in very big things like Dr. Chodrak experienced—is up to us. Nobody makes us feel a certain way. That's the great potential we have within us.

Empathy brings us close to suffering. We're willing to be with it, to open to it. Compassion takes a step further. It's not only feeling what others are going through, but being motivated to act on that feeling. This

is the particular strength and power of compassion—it motivates us to act.

As compassion grows in us, we begin to practice an active engagement with the suffering in the world, responding to the various needs of beings in whatever way is appropriate, in whatever way is possible. Sometimes we act in very small and unregarded ways. It might be a small gesture of friendliness or of generosity or forgiveness—no big dramatic display of compassion, just a small gesture in response to some suffering. We shouldn't overlook or underestimate the effect of these small movements.

There's a writer named Pico Iyer who spent a lot of time with the Dalai Lama, traveling with him as a friend and a student. And this is something he wrote, having observed His Holiness in so many different situations. It's a beautiful description of compassion in action:

"One of his greatest and most mysterious gifts is a kind of radar that alerts him to whom in a crowded space is most in need of help. He'll walk into a jam-packed school auditorium and in the midst of greeting his hosts and shaking hands with everyone eager to say hello to him, making eye contact with each one, he'll notice through a kind of peripheral vision or intuition someone on crutches and walk instantly over to that person and offer a blessing, a reassuring touch. While going through an almost unimaginably busy schedule on a typical day of touring, he'll be hustled toward his next appointment and then suddenly, alone among a crowd of fifty or so, he'll veer off because he's seen a child in a wheelchair by herself, ignored over in one corner. Often he'll respond warmly to even the pushiest person trying to make contact with him on the street. And that is perhaps not only because he tries to live without aversion as well as without attachment, but because he sensed that that person is in need in some form—lonely or unsure of himself—and the pushiness is just an expression of deep pain."

It would be wonderful to practice living like that. As we go through the day, just to sensitize ourselves in small ways—not necessarily in big, grand gestures, just in small ways. How are we responding? Are we open, are we sensitive to all the different kinds of suffering that people go through?

I recently saw a documentary film called *A Small Act*. Maybe some of you have seen it. It was about a Swedish woman named Hilda Bach. In the mid-1970s, she participated in a scholarship program sponsored by a group of Swedish nationals who were committed to helping Kenyan children—bright, very bright Kenyan children who couldn't continue with their education because of poverty.

One of the beneficiaries of the program was a man named Chris Maburu, whose school fees were paid for many years by this woman in a faraway place in Sweden. So here's this young boy from a poor village in the hinterlands of Kenya, with almost no opportunity to continue his education. He was very bright. Through her donations, he was able to go on to high school, to college. He went to the University of Nairobi Law School. He got a Fulbright scholarship to study international relations at Harvard. He graduated in 1993 with a master's in international human rights law. Then eight years later, he went back to Kenya and set up a foundation to sponsor other children—these bright kids with almost no opportunity to continue.

The documentary shows so beautifully how this one very ordinary middle-aged woman in Sweden, making a small monthly donation, affected the lives of hundreds, maybe thousands of people. We shouldn't underestimate these small acts of compassion and responsiveness. They can have a huge effect.

Sometimes compassion does manifest in some pretty amazing ways, dramatic ways. Sometimes it manifests as acts of tremendous determination. You may be aware of Dr. Paul Farmer—there's a book written about him called *Mountains Beyond Mountains*. He was a public health doctor who worked for years in Haiti, in just the poorest regions, with AIDS and tuberculosis patients. He was incredibly dedicated, and his work has now spread around the world to many places.

One time he had a clinic in one small city, but he would often go walking for many hours just to serve a couple of families. He was criticized for that. People said, "Why do you spend so much time doing that?" And this is what he said, and it's incredibly inspiring: "If you say that seven hours' walk is too long to walk for two families of patients, you're saying that their lives matter less than some others. And the idea that some lives matter less is the root of all that's wrong with the world."

He just got it. He encapsulated it in one sentence: The idea that some lives matter less is the root of all that's wrong with the world. This is the working of compassion. This is the potential of compassion.

Sometimes we see compassion manifesting in acts of great courage. Think of Martin Luther King Jr., at the head of these marches, surrounded by people filled with violence and hatred towards him, and resting in that place of love and compassion. It's amazing. Or think of Nelson Mandela. There are so many people who have been striking examples of this quality.

What's important for us to realize and take in is that there's no particular prescription for what we should do. There's no hierarchy of compassionate action—that some actions are somehow more compassionate than other actions. It's not like that. The field of compassion is limitless because it is the field of suffering beings. Wherever we come close to it and open to it, on whatever level, that's an opportunity to practice this quality.

It can take the form of very active engagement with the world. It could take the form of living in a mountain cave for years, practicing to awaken with the motivation that our awakening be for the benefit of all. It's said that before his enlightenment, the bodhisattva spent lifetimes as a renunciate. Just imagine what his family and neighbors were saying.

What are you doing? I can hear it with a Jewish accent. "You're wasting your time off in a cave." But that was part of his path—lifetimes as a renunciate before the great energy of his enlightened compassion flowered in the world. And his aspiration was not just to alleviate the suffering of particular situations, but really to see and understand and uproot the very causes of suffering, the forces of greed and hatred and delusion in the mind. And 2,600 years later, it's quite remarkable—we're here because of that awakening.

So compassion takes many forms, and we can't judge its outer look. It all depends on the motivation. Is the motivation to alleviate suffering?

We can practice compassion from two sides. First, we work to purify our own minds and hearts as a way of more effectively taking care of others. It's like two people caught in quicksand—if you're both caught in quicksand, it's very hard to get out. But if one person is on firm ground, they can help the other person.

This principle is such an obvious one, and every time we get on an airplane, we hear it in the announcement about loss of cabin pressure. The oxygen mask will come down. Please put it on yourself before you assist the people around you. This is our principle. If we're in a position of safety, of stability, then we can be of help to the people around us. If we're gasping for air, we're not going to be much help to anyone.

Likewise, if we go into situations without clarity of understanding—even with a desire to help, but without some wisdom about the situation—we often just add to the confusion. So that's one way: we purify our own hearts and minds as the foundation for helping others.

The second way we develop compassion is through the practice of putting others before oneself. This practice was beautifully expressed by the seventh or eighth century Indian adept Shantideva, who wrote *The Guide to a Bodhisattva's Way of Life*. He expressed this in some stanzas known as the seven-branched prayer. The Dalai Lama is a great devotee of Shantideva, finding great inspiration for his own practice in these words:

Like the earth and the pervading elements, enduring like the sky itself endures, for boundless multitudes of living beings, may I be their ground and sustenance. For everything that lives as far as the limits of the sky, may I provide their livelihood and nourishment until they pass beyond the bonds of suffering. For all those ailing in the world until their every sickness has been healed, may I myself become for them the doctor, nurse, the medicine itself. For sentient beings, poor and destitute, may I become a treasure ever plentiful and lie before them closely in their reach, a varied source of all that they might need. My body thus and all my goods besides and all my merits gained and to be gained, I give them all away withholding nothing to bring about the benefit of beings.

We may hear this and become inspired by this possibility. It's an incredibly uplifting and ennobling aspiration. But we could also hear it and feel a little daunted by it. This is big—that our whole life and everything we do and everything we have be dedicated to the welfare and happiness of all beings. This is a huge aspiration. Could we ever live with this degree of compassion? Is this really possible for us, this great generosity of spirit?

If we're inspired by the possibility, we need great humility. Howard Cutler, the person who co-authored *The Art of Happiness* with the Dalai Lama, collaborated very closely with His Holiness. In one interview, he said, "I'm not a very compassionate guy, but at least I have compassion about not having compassion."

So we start small. We can have this aspiration, and it's beautiful—it can set a direction, inspire us, and provide a huge amount of energy for how we live in the world. But we also have to have great humility about where we are.

Issa, the great Japanese haiku poet, wrote one of my favorite haikus: "New Year's Day, everything's in blossom. I feel about average."

Yes, we feel about average. So we simply plant the seeds of this aspiration.

Know that our practice and our lives be for the benefit of all beings. And maybe we're even planting the seeds of the aspiration to have the aspiration. We start just where we are, but we open to the possibility—know that our practice, that our lives be dedicated to the benefit of all.

The great naturalist Thoreau captured the potential of this aspiration. He said, "Though I do not believe that a plant will spring up where no seed has been, I have great faith in a seed. Convince me that you have a seed there, and I am prepared to expect wonders."

Yes, that's so beautiful. Each of us in our own way can plant and water and nourish the seeds of a kind and compassionate heart. And slowly they will grow and become the guiding principles of our lives. So we do it very slowly, very patiently, but with dedication.

And even at those times when we're not acting from a place of wisdom or a place of compassion, this aspiration can still be the reference point that reminds us that there are other choices. So we keep coming back to it in the same way we keep coming back to the breath or the body or the present moment's experience.

I'd like to close with a wonderful reminder by quite a wonderful young Tibetan teacher, Mingyur Rinpoche, who really embodies so much light and so much kindness and so much compassion. He said:

"But the best part of all is that no matter how long you meditate or what technique you use, every technique of Buddhist meditation ultimately generates compassion, whether we're aware of it or not. Whenever you look at your mind, you can't help but recognize your similarity to those around you. When you see your own desire to be happy, you can't avoid seeing the same desire in others. And when you look clearly at your own fear or anger or aversion, you can't help but see that everyone around you feels the same fear and anger and aversion. When you look at your own mind, all the imaginary differences between yourself and others automatically dissolve and the ancient prayer of the four immeasurables becomes as natural and persistent as your own heartbeat."

May all sentient beings have happiness and the causes of happiness. May all sentient beings be free from suffering and the causes of suffering. May all sentient beings have joy and the causes of joy. And may all sentient beings remain in great equanimity, free from attachment and aversion.

This is the natural fruit of the very practice we're doing.

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