Unity of Emptiness and Compassion

Carol Wilson · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Three-Month Retreat (IMS 2012) · 1:01:47

So tonight I'd like to just share some thoughts and reflections on the unity of the wisdom of emptiness and compassion—like two sides of the same coin, you could say.

Sometimes in our practice, not only here but all through our life, it can seem like what we're seeing or learning or hearing is more focused on the emptiness, the anatta, the wisdom side. Sometimes it can seem more focused, or we need to give more energy, to the compassion side. And sometimes, just being the way our minds work, we can set these two things up as somehow separate from one another—some kind of dichotomy, some way they're in conflict or they don't go together, as if we could separate them, as if they were two separate things.

So just my reflections, only my reflections: of course, they're not.

The Tibetans have a wonderful way—I'm sure you're quite familiar with it—of describing the threefold aspect of the nature of mind. First, that it's naturally empty, empty of self, of any separate individual self-existence. Second, that the nature is naturally aware, naturally awake—the simplicity that knowing is the natural function of the mind, as we've been exploring. And the third aspect: that it is ceaselessly responsive.

This would mean, I interpret, that faced with any need to respond in the world, it isn't just hanging out in the emptiness of nothing matters. But what spontaneously arises in the mind of wisdom is the appropriate response. In terms of quality of mind, you could say it's one of the four Brahmaviharas. Faced with difficulty, with suffering, it would come out as compassion. With joy, mudita. With a complex situation or something out of control, equanimity. With simple connecting with this moment, metta.

There's a saying Guy often quotes, which I just checked with him—he didn't use it yet. He said I could, since it's the end. A Zen Master, being asked, "What's the result of a lifetime of practice?" And the answer is: an appropriate response. Ceaselessly responsive.

So in some ways, just to talk in very simple ways about our practice, compassion and paññā, wisdom, the deep insight into emptiness—just because we have to talk, we talk about them as two different understandings. But they support and interweave with one another, and each needs the other for freedom, for deep understanding.

In terms of compassion, it needs wisdom to be able to open, to be with the vastness of suffering, not to drown, to be able to bring in the vastness of equanimity. This is from the Dalai Lama, talking about compassion. He said it must be derived from our insight into the emptiness of inherent self. This is where

the vast meets the profound. Without the unity of compassion and emptiness, we can easily fall into despair. Because though our compassion may be strong, without this wisdom, it is likely to have a quality of hopelessness, even despair. I certainly experienced that. I imagine maybe you do sometimes. How can we possibly open to all of this? Or even just this knee pain, never mind all of this.

And on the other side, the wisdom of emptiness, of anatta, of nothing separate, inherently me, or anything inherently separate or self-existing—that can verge into disconnection. It's incomplete. It can go into this kind of view of nothing really matters that doesn't have the quality of life, of tenderness for life that compassion has.

This is from Nyoshul Khenpo, the Rinpoche that Guy spoke about last night that he met in Nepal. He's talking about the danger of what we could call falling into emptiness:

"The danger is that we hear too much too soon. We think we have understood shunyata, emptiness, and we err on the side of the absolute in a nihilistic fashion and are obscured by concepts. Nagarjuna said, it is sad to see those who mistakenly believe in material concrete reality, but far more pitiful are those who believe in emptiness. Those who believe in things can be helped through various kinds of practices, through the ways of skillful means. But those who have fallen into the abyss of emptiness find it almost impossible to reemerge since there seem to be no handholds, no steps, no gradual progression, and nothing to do."

That's how it feels.

Now, I love it that Guy talked about Nyoshul Khenpo last night, because you get it—he's not just some namby-pamby. He knows what he's talking about in terms of the vastness of emptiness. You get that he's someone who's talking from experience, not from view.

So just to talk a little about each—these are just my reflections, certainly not comprehensive. This is the vastness of our whole path, in my opinion, exploring both of these and how they come together.

I thought about the question of the incompleteness of emptiness, the incompleteness of the wisdom of anatta. These are words that people have said to me at different times on retreat, about either the idea of anatta—which is very different from the experiential knowing of emptiness—or sometimes about the experience itself. You have an experience of not-self, and it can be a little freaky sometimes. People say it's fearful, unsettling, alien, inhuman. Basically unattractive, all same grayness. Disconnected. Nothing matters.

If we say we talk about awareness, doesn't care what happens—well, why bother with anything? Why not just go sit in a room and do nothing if nothing matters anyway? You know, that kind of falling into emptiness is part of delusion. There's a sense of disconnect, of a kind of emptiness in a not-good way. Not something that's really onward leading when we think about it, because that lacks the ceaselessly responsive, connected quality.

So the question arises: if it is true that there's no inherent self-existence in anything, that every arising is really empty, just as empty as any thought when you look at it and watch it poof away—everything has that quality of insubstantiality—what's the point? That's the question, the incompletion of emptiness as a totality of view.

But the experience, as we begin to and continue to experience it and understand it, is really—as I hope you already know—this isn't like... I mean, the vastness of it may be way beyond where we are, but moments of experiencing this we all know. That time when the sense of the energy that's bound up in this obsessive, relentless self-referencing, this undying relating everything back to me as the center of the universe... I don't know if you've noticed, but it's exhausting. It takes up so much energy. Have you ever noticed that sometimes when you have some insight, not even a big one, there's often a lot of energy and enthusiasm? The energy that's all bound up in me, me, me gets released.

But we can't think our way out of that. It's really a misunderstanding. And so when we think, "Well, how would it be?" it doesn't make sense. It has to actually happen over and over and over.

Without that understanding of emptiness, we can think, "Well, we act in a way that's for the good of beings and all." But when it's still coming from that ongoing self-referencing, even with our best intentions, we can't see clearly.

I've used this example before, but I love it. I heard on public radio a couple of years ago a discussion about various economic theories, of which I know nothing. But this one—it sounds ridiculous—the so-called generalized theory, not really scientific, that this program was talking about, was sort of behind the way banks and things were working up until 2008 (although I don't think it's changed), before everything crashed. It was called Acting in Rational Self-Interest. The theory being that if we each act in rational self-interest—what's good for me, but rational—that will be for the good of all. So yes, we can laugh, but do we even know, right?

The example I gave, and this is what I love, is that apparently in London they built this bridge called the Millennium Bridge when they were having this big Millennium celebration. It was a big footbridge over the Thames River, a very fancy thing. When it first opened, the first day when all these hundreds of people were walking over this new fancy architecturally designed bridge—several hundred people on it—there were too many people and the whole bridge started shaking and wavering from side to side. They said on this program that each person there saw how it was leaning to one side. So acting in rational self-interest, each person stepped to the other side to balance it. All four hundred people stepped to the other side, and it just made the whole thing even worse. Because it's my rational self-interest rather than being able to see the big picture. Even with the best intention, without wisdom, our perception is skewed.

So much energy for life is released when this falls away. And the ability to recognize so much more clearly is released. It allows for clear seeing and appropriate response.

And then again the question comes up: okay, so there's not me and I'm not acting in rational self-interest, but... This is from Padmasambhava. Someone once asked, "But once we've realized emptiness, can it still harm us to commit negative acts?" And he answered, "Once you realize emptiness, it would be absurd to do anything negative. When you realize emptiness, compassion arises with it simultaneously."

So just think, in your own experience, of a very simple moment, which I trust in six weeks you've had at least, and maybe can remember. One simple moment when nothing particular was going on, but there was just that sense of real presence, you know, when the mind kind of clears and suddenly the wanting or the aversion or the confusion that was clouding it just goes away. Someone was even mentioning today some experience where they said, "Oh, that's the aversion"—and then everything just cleared, just from awareness noticing what was happening. Maybe you're outside taking a step, or seeing a leaf, or hearing the rain. Or you've been caught up in feeling judgment of somebody and they walk past and your eyes just meet and all that falls away and you're just there with this clarity. Not comparing to past or future or congratulating yourself. Just the is-ness of that moment. Do you have a sense of what I mean? Very simple.

In that moment, could the thought of harming someone even arise? In that moment, if someone fell or needed help, would you even have to stop and think, "What's the compassionate thing to do?"

Or what about me? It's the appropriate response there, so simple. It's not a big view that we have to cultivate and adhere to and think about. It's just the natural response of the mind in that moment that's not all bound up with a sense of self-referencing. So simple, but as we know, not so easy. Not so easy.

It's absurd to do anything negative. And what naturally arises—now we're switching into the way the Buddha speaks about in the suttas—is that with the arising of wisdom, the link between paññā, between wisdom and our actions in the world, is this second factor: right intention, wise thought. What naturally occurs with the moments of clear seeing, with the moments of this freedom—just this freedom from the contraction, from the clinging, from the self-referencing, just for a moment—is that the habits of thought that lead to action naturally purify.

And it's our old friends: the habit of greed, of clinging, naturally purifies. It begins to shift to renunciation and then to generosity. Renunciation not being a life of hardship where you have to push away everything pleasant. Renunciation is an inner attitude. This is all on the level of intention. It's the natural releasing of the clinging. Renunciation is an experience of the joy of simplicity. It's not the hair shirt where you can't eat and whatever. Renunciation is when the clinging drops away, and there's just this appreciation of space and simplicity. It's a beautiful quality, which naturally then leads to generosity.

Ill will, the habit of ill will, naturally transforms into the habit of mettā. And that of cruelty naturally transforms to compassion. And ignorance changing to wisdom isn't an act of intention, but arises from the insight, from the clear seeing. So that's the link that the Buddha makes here in terms of how wisdom leads to action and how the action shows up as compassion, mettā, non-clinging.

This is from Stephen Batchelor talking about Shantideva, who wrote *A Guide to the Bodhisattva's Way of Life*, which Stephen translated many years ago. He says, when Shantideva's closed sense of self dissolved, he did not vanish into the abyss of nothingness. It's not that, "Oh, I realized emptiness and poof." Rather, he realized that to be empty means to no longer be full of oneself. And then Stephen says, for Shantideva, insight into emptiness does not merely change the way he views the world, but it also transforms the way he feels about it. The heart is opened to the anguish of others, prompting a spontaneous longing to assuage their suffering. This is a more emotional way of talking about the movement into compassion. And yet he can also acknowledge the irrational nature of the passion to save all beings, because as a limited human being, that's impossible.

So how to hold the two, realizing even the Buddha couldn't fix the world. He couldn't even fix all his relatives—they went to war and killed each other. That isn't what we can do. And yet, that movement of feeling, being open to, letting the anguish of ourselves and the world touch us and turn it into compassion—this is the movement from the wisdom of emptiness.

So if I was to ask, how does the wisdom of emptiness open into compassion? But also, how does compassion need the wisdom of emptiness? This has been an ongoing question in my life, these two balancing.

One way I put it is: how can we continue to open over and over—because there's never a one-time anything—to open to the beauty and the suffering in this complex and beautiful world? There's so much. Just sitting here, not talking to each other, in our own mind and body, there's so much beauty, there's so much confusion, there's so much suffering. How do we continue to find the courage to connect, to not turn away, to respond in the face of sometimes overwhelming amounts of information, of suffering externally, in the face of external enmity? Or to find the courage internally not to just go to the automatic habit of response—hatred or aggression or fear? That's the work, in some extent, that we've all been doing here together. It's amazing, ennobling work. And as you find, probably at times, it needs enormous courage. Enormous perseverance. And not to think we're ever going to be perfect in it. But how do we find that faith, that internal wisdom?

As Martin Luther King described, the practice of nonviolence means not only do you not shoot a person, you also refuse to hate a person.

This is really the depth of compassion, and that's not possible, as the Dalai Lama said, without deep wisdom—without the deep wisdom of emptiness. Because as Stephen Batchelor says, talking about Shantideva, it changes the way we feel about the world.

There's a quote from Nisargadatta: "Once you can say with confidence, born from direct experience, 'I am the world, the world is myself,' you are free from desire and fear on the one hand and become totally responsible for the world on the other. The senseless sorrow of humankind becomes your sole concern."

How can I possibly open to all of that? And that's the answer—I can't. As long as it's "I," of course it's limited. Of course. And much of the time that's going to be our experience, sure. That's why we keep on practicing.

So the wisdom of those moments of not-self, of not-separation, of insubstantiality, of emptiness—this allows some opening into the vastness of both the beauty and the suffering. And also the natural purification that comes from our moment-to-moment mindfulness practice, the natural purification that results in changing the habits of our mind. So that even at times when there's a sense of "I," when that natural response of aversion or aggression or hatred arises, sometimes we have the mindfulness, the clear wisdom, and the courage not to at least act from that. It wasn't a natural wisdom that sees through it all immediately, but there's enough wisdom that we can see what's happening and come down on the purification, the wholesome side. That's what we're doing a lot in our practice here. And that counts. It counts.

I hope this doesn't bum you out too much, but I thought—in terms of what we all are in this culture, in this day and age, where there's so much information—the question of how do we continue to open, not shut down, not go into such overwhelm that we just can't take in any more information. I think this is a really crucial thing these days because we have so much information.

I just wrote down what came through today, listening to the news, checking the BBC. Just my normal day's routine—I didn't go out of my way. Liberia: just a mention of how this horrible civil war ended in 2003, and now they're estimating that over one half of all adults in Liberia suffer from some severe form of post-traumatic stress disorder. There was a whole story about teenage girls being kidnapped for sex trafficking in the United States. A story about Holocaust survivors living in Israel, and when they died, their grandson found that they had remained really close friends with some Nazis in the SS in Germany—and the whole thing the grandchildren were going through, trying to understand how this could be, how this friendship could cross these borders. Eight people killed in a huge car bomb in Beirut. Anything about the election campaign—and that one, believe me, is a lot. A young girl in Pakistan who was shot by the Taliban because she was advocating education for girls, now in a hospital in the UK recovering very well. Other journalists in Pakistan threatened by the Taliban. Gold miners' strike and violence in South Africa. More wildfires than ever this year in the States. Chaos and war in Syria. Violence in Yemen. The EU thinking they might come to some agreement on bank supervision legislation at some year in the future—and also possibly coming to an agreement on aid to Spanish banks. It's a great thing there is an EU working together; if you read European history of the Hundred Years' War and such, that wasn't so long ago. Or World War II—that was even less long ago. Various murder investigations, various sexual abuse cases around the world. Peace talks in Colombia between the government and the FARC rebels. The UN still exists.

And then we have our personal stories. A great friend of mine just took her first steps on her new prosthetic leg and sent me a picture. That's wonderful. And there's suffering in it.

That's really a minimal little thing. I didn't even go into my emails. I didn't look hard. This is the kind of stuff we're flooded with. And how can we find a balance? That's one question. I'm not even going to go much into that, because that's the whole question. But not to either just say, "Well, it's all too much, so I'm just not going to listen to the news"—though we may go through times like that.

I've gone through times where I'll hear everything and see how I'm hearing it and go, "Yeah, that's a shame." It's not entirely superficial—it's not knocking the stories away—but you just can't let each one in. You can't die on the ground with each new news story. You wouldn't get through ten minutes like that.

But I've noticed how I'll be going through story after story, listening, and then one will just really hit me. And I don't mean in a bad way. I see that the difference is that somehow the mind, the heart in that moment wasn't preoccupied with pouring the right amount of milk in my tea—because I'm listening to this while having breakfast—or thinking about what I'm going to say today, or doing something else. In that moment, I was just sitting there, open, receptive, not so self-concerned. And the story goes in. You really get it in its beauty and its suffering and all of that.

You see, it's that sense, that willingness to connect with an open heart and mind, which is the way I like to describe metta. When that connection touches suffering, you get compassion. When it touches a being, however they are, it manifests as metta. And in that moment, even what sounds like a suffering story, you feel that tenderness of compassion and you can hear the beauty in it.

I'll tell you another one I heard a couple of days ago. It was a lovely story, and I just happened to be open at the time of hearing it. They were talking about a hospital in Boston that was about to perform one of the world's first leg transplants. They were going to transplant one or two legs to this woman, and they were interviewing her. She sounded so upbeat, but her story—I just thought, ah, so much going on in this world. She was in her early forties, I think, had three children. Happily married in Texas. But after her third child was born, she got some kind of horrible infection. They didn't go into details, but the only way they could save her life was to amputate both legs and both arms. This was about three years before the story.

So she was talking, and it wasn't like goody-two-shoes, but she had this spring in her voice, just talking about how supportive her husband had been. She had prosthetic devices, but her husband knew that she really wanted more of a living, wanted to be able to hold her kids. He'd been so supportive in searching this out, and she spoke about how wonderful her children were. There was just something about listening to her that was filled with life and vibrancy, love and suffering—just kind of all of humanity in a way. It was like, whoa—I can see some of your faces.

But when I think back on it, what went in, what I really heard, was the courage and the love and the life about it in her particular case. And that's just a moment. I'm not always open like that. But in that moment, the quality of compassion is not depressive or self-referencing or overwhelming. Compassion, like metta, like equanimity, like mudita, is one of the illimitables—unlimited. It's a beautiful emotion, one of the brahma-viharas. It is, in a way, an expression of the vastness, of emptiness, where the vast meets

the profound. It's not a suffering state. It arises through the wisdom of the open heart and mind that's in connection with life, that isn't just for whatever reason in that moment needing to block, that isn't colored by fear, by aversion, by "how does this affect me."

So one of the reasons—and this moves us to the Dalai Lama, right? Let's go to him rather than me. He says things better. Talking about how compassion develops through deep insight into what suffering is. And guess how that arises? By being present, by focusing on our own experience.

I know Susie talked a couple weeks ago about self-compassion and how profound that can be. And it's also about opening into our own experience. In that moment of self-compassion, that quality of mind isn't colored by aversion, by self-referencing, by greed. So the practice of self-compassion isn't just to make ourselves feel better and accept what's happening. It's actually the practice of wisdom that opens into the vastness, into the profound.

As the Dalai Lama says, compassion develops by deep insight into what suffering is, by being present, by opening to our own experience. And then this strengthens into a sense of empathy, a sense of connectedness with other beings. So we start with what we're presented with in this mind-body—as the Buddha said, in this fathom-long body. I'm paraphrasing; I don't remember his exact words. But something about in this fathom-long body is the whole world. It's the beginning and the end of suffering. We can discover it all right here. And it does open into empathy.

Pema Chödrön quotes Stephen Levine, writing of a woman who was dying in terrible pain and feeling overwhelming bitterness.

And at the point at which she felt she could not bear the resentment and the suffering any longer, she unexpectedly began to experience the pain of others—a starving mother in Ethiopia, a runaway teenager dying of an overdose, a man crushed by a landslide and dying alone by the banks of a river. And then she understood that it wasn't her pain, it was the pain of all beings. It wasn't just her life, it was life itself.

Then Pema Chödrön says we awaken this bodhicitta—she's calling bodhicitta "tenderness for life"—when we no longer shield ourselves from the vulnerability of our condition, from the basic fragility of existence. In the words of the Sixteenth Karmapa, you take it all in. You allow the pain of the world to touch your heart, and it turns into compassion.

Maybe not right away, but this is really the natural movement of this practice we're doing. How do we let the pain of the world touch our heart? By simply allowing the sadness, the physical pain, the loneliness, the fear, the arrogance—whatever it is this mind-body is experiencing—by allowing it to be in the light of mindfulness, in the light of awareness, to let it touch our heart. And it's already turning into compassion.

That moment of how our awareness, our attention meets this moment—this is what that teacher was talking about with kamma and result. The creation of kamma in this moment is the way the mind is meeting what's arising. So however terrible or scary or annoying or beautiful what's arising is, that's the

effect of previous conditions. The way the mind is meeting it right now is the creation of present-moment kamma. And so all these moments of simple mindfulness, non-judging, non-clinging—it doesn't seem like such a big deal. But this is the cultivation of non-clinging, and also of compassion, also of non-ill will, of mettā.

And really, in a way, our own particular experience can open to the universal. I remember hearing Ajahn Sumedho say once: you don't need any special experiences to get enlightened. You don't have to have special extreme suffering. The circumstances of our own life are all that we need as a vehicle for awakening and for the cultivation of compassion—when we're sitting here suffering, when we're caught in traffic, when we're having difficulty with the landlord.

And not to think in the other direction either, that our circumstances are so difficult there's no way we can experience happiness or wisdom. Really seeing it's not about the circumstances. We're not limited or defined by our circumstances in either a positive or a negative way.

I was watching a little documentary the other night called *Happy*, about all the research going on these days into the creation of happiness in our minds. It was from researchers like Richie Davidson and others, though it was short on the science, I have to say—they'd show a little chart and say, "Studies have shown fifty percent this and forty-nine percent that," without going into the details at all. But what I loved about it was these little vignettes of different people in different circumstances, exploring what makes people happy.

The very first one is the only one I want to mention here, because it really shows that any idea we might have that our happiness or suffering is defined by external circumstances just isn't true. It started with this man who, in whatever way they were measuring, came up as really, really happy. They were interviewing him, and he seemed genuinely happy. He lived in Kolkata, a very poor rickshaw puller—he walks, pulling a rickshaw that people ride in. These men are really poor; they work incredibly hard in the slums of Kolkata.

And he was so happy. They showed him with his wife, with his kids. He was so happy to come home, and then they showed the little shack he lived in. Coming from our culture, it's easy to look at it and immediately go into this kind of pity—not compassion, but pity. "Oh my god, how can someone live like that, the poor man." But he was so happy to come home, and his son was there waiting, and he was so happy when he saw him. There with his wife, showing all the neighbors, describing how they all support each other. They showed him pulling his rickshaw and describing things that I would hear and think, "Oh my god, how can you bear it?" And he'd say, "Oh yeah, that's just how it is, you know." Really happy. He described himself as really happy.

It was truly so uplifting to see. But it also revealed how easy it is to take a view about ourselves or a view about others—about what's possible, both in terms of happiness, but also when we're feeling overwhelmed by suffering. How we can relate to something as suffering that may not be experienced that

way at all by the person themselves.

So opening this question of compassion—how do we continue to find the courage to meet and open to our own suffering and that of others—is supported by these moments of clear-seeing wisdom, but also by our steady practice, our willingness to explore: What intention, what motivation of mind am I landing on in this moment?

Years ago, I read one line that stayed with me from a teacher—I forget who it was, it wasn't a Buddhist teacher—but he said: in every moment of activity, activity of mind, body, and speech, we are committing to something. The question is: to what?

So that's not a judgment, but just a looking and seeing. As Geshe Rapten, who was a wonderful Tibetan teacher, would ask: How do we meet this moment? And so the cultivation of compassion with wisdom, wisdom with compassion, is looking and seeing. Seeing there are times when we can make a choice to act from non-ill will, from compassion, rather than from cruelty, rather than from ill will, rather than from clinging.

There was a very ongoing, difficult sangha political situation at his meditation center monastery. I don't want to go into it, but there was a lot of name-calling and power-grabbing, and he was really being kind of ostracized. It was an extremely weird, unpleasant situation that went on for quite some months.

I was visiting there in the middle of it, and the whole vibe of the place was really unpleasant. There was another abbot who was basically trying to push Sayadaw U Tejaniya out, although Tejaniya was the teacher and not this other guy. And this other guy was trying to get all the money and trying to work up the lay people who were in charge of running the place, saying all kinds of bad stuff about Sayadaw.

That's how it kind of works in Burma. Everything seems nice on the surface, but in the background, you tell bad stories until someone's shamed and has to leave. It kind of works like that. So that's what they were trying to do.

Anyway, I was there visiting and talking to him, and he was just saying, "Well, I'm not going to leave because I'm here because of my teacher"—who he reveres, Shwe Oo Min—"and he asked me to be here. This is his center, and I owe that to him, so I'm not going to leave."

And then there was all kinds of bad stuff about this other abbot who was doing this, and I said, "Well, why don't you at least tell the lay community this other stuff that's going on? It's not gossip. It's just true."

He said, "No, this is a really interesting situation for me. This is like an examination for my mind—to see how my mind reacts in this really horrible situation. And what's really clear is I'm not going to add more akusala, more unskillfulness, to this situation."

So even though it would have been helpful to give this other information, he didn't want to do it because to do it would come from an unskillful place. He said, "I'm just committed not to add more akusala to this

situation."

And it was really great to see. It went on and on for months. And then, of course, it all kind of righted itself. That was a couple of years ago, and it's completely different and fine now. But to just see that quality of wisdom that meets the situation head on and really sees: what's going on here? It's not the external situation that's ever the problem, the source of our suffering or happiness. It's right here. We don't need to let ourselves become a victim of any circumstance or to think we need anything in order to cultivate happiness or compassion.

Oh, that lets me read this quotation from Dilgo Khyentse that I really like. I've been trying to work it in—I try to work it in every talk. So I don't know if it fits here, but you're going to hear it.

He's talking about ego clinging. He said:

"The 'I' is just a thought. Thoughts and feelings have no intrinsic solidity, form, shape, or color. When the thought of anger arises in your mind with such force that you feel aggressive and destructive, is anger brandishing a weapon? Is it at the head of an army? Can it burn things like fire or crush them like rock or carry them away like a violent river? No. Anger, like any other thought or feeling, has no true existence, not even a definite location in the body, speech, or mind. It is just like wind roaring in empty space. If instead of allowing wild thoughts to enslave you, you can realize their essential emptiness—when you see through the hatred within, you will discover that there is not a single enemy left outside. Otherwise, even if you could overpower everyone in the whole world, your hatred would only grow stronger. Examine the nature of hatred. You will find that it is no more than a thought. When you see it as it is, it will dissolve like a cloud in the sky."

That's the wisdom of emptiness brought to bear on an experience of suffering, with an attitude of compassion. I'm not saying that's always possible, but when there is that wisdom of emptiness, we really don't have to be afraid of anything that we experience. And when we are afraid of it, that's okay too, because that's when we're cultivating, through the moment-to-moment mindfulness, the shifting of our habits. That's what's been happening here over this time. They both kind of work together.

So compassion needs, though—

the wisdom not only of emptiness, but you could say another way, the wisdom of equanimity—the wisdom of knowing the uncontrollability, the vastness of experience.

Now, Susie also talked about equanimity the other night. She mentioned the eight worldly winds, knowing that this is the nature of the world. Like I said, the Buddha knew that even with his vast wisdom and compassion, he couldn't make anyone else wise if they didn't want to open. He couldn't stop the violence even in people that he knew, never mind in the whole world.

And if we have a view of compassion, which I imagine most of us do, and we don't recognize it as a view, it

either becomes a should—"this is how I should act in a compassionate way." I mean, that's better than not caring at all, right? But don't we often have that? "I should be more compassionate to myself, to others." And there's a sense of not quite knowing what that means, or how to act, or what's right in this situation. Or we do what seems totally compassionate and wise, but then the result is completely other. And we're so thrown off. We're upset, or we blame ourselves, because we didn't have the big picture.

But mostly we're never going to have the big picture. Life is so complex. It's so ambiguous. We can never control outcomes. We can never control or even predict, most of the time, others' responses, or know what all the situations will be and make all the potential decisions ahead of time. Have you tried doing that about some things here? Figure out every single thing that might happen to cover all the bases? Forget about it.

Even in the little things, like walking into the cafeteria for lunch—where will you sit? You can't even control that. You think you can, but someone else comes and sits in your seat. It's all over.

But take something really more complicated. Have you ever been the medical proxy for somebody who's ill and dying? I have. And even if you go through all the possibilities and you think you know what they want, believe me, the situation that arises will somehow be different from all the things that you went over. They're not able to tell you, and you have to make your best choice as you can. The choice of what you're acting for them, what they would want. As someone told a friend of mine, "You're not making a decision for them—you're being their voice when they can't speak."

But to be able to do that with all the compassion to really be present for the suffering, and as much information as you can have about the whole situation—the medical ramifications, what will happen if this happens, what will happen if that thing is done. Will they get better or will they not? Will this increase the suffering? Will this make them get better? And no one really knows. And you have to make a decision, and the next, and the next.

And then it doesn't go the way you'd hoped. You make a decision thinking things are going to be better in two weeks, and instead, it just prolongs for two months in agony. And to still be open and present and not be beating yourself up for that the whole time. I'm not saying I could do that in that clear of a way, but that's the union of compassion and wisdom. We never know. And then not to back out. And then to turn around and look and see what decision we make the next time, from as much compassion and as much wisdom as we have.

A story I've often told about Sister Chan Khong—she used to be Sister Phong—the nun who's the associate of Thich Nhat Hanh. They both were quite active social workers, peace activists in Vietnam during the Vietnamese War, before they got kicked out of Vietnam. Because they were peace activists, neither side trusted them. That's how it is, and they got kicked out.

But at one point, Sister Chan Khong—she was only sixteen at the time. I mean, she's a firebrand anyway, if

you meet her, but totally committed to mindfulness first and then action. She was thrown into jail by the South Vietnamese for distributing peace leaflets or something, I don't remember what. And so she's in jail in a cell with a bunch of other women. There were two young girls, eleven and twelve years old, who were in that cell as well, along with hardened criminals and prostitutes and her. They had been just swept up in a raid—the South Vietnamese army had done a sweep of the village, and anyone they thought was Viet Cong, which was the North at that time—

They threw them into jail. And these two little girls were part of that sweep.

So Sister Chân Không—because her parents were well-connected and knew the police—was released soon. And so she was being released and having a talk with the chief of the prison. It seemed friendly, so she said, "Oh, I just want to tell you, these two young girls are in there, and they're just innocent. They didn't do anything. And with all these hardened criminals, it's really not good for them." Out of compassion and wisdom and action, just communicating this.

And the response from the head of the jail was, "Oh, I see the prisoners are speaking with one another. That's not good, so we've got to really tighten up the conditions here. This won't do." And that was it. That was the effect.

So if we go into anger, if we go into resentment, if we go into hatred—that's not the way of wisdom and compassion.

How vast is this path? How can we do it? If it's trying to do it all, we can't. But one moment—one moment to find the courage not to land in the resentment, in the aggression, just for that moment, even against yourself. "How stupid was I?" That's the way we would go, right? "How stupid am I?" No. We had as much information as we had, but we didn't have it all. The movement from compassion, and now this next situation is complex. We can't control it. How do we keep finding that?

A few weeks ago I read from John Lewis, one of the founders of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee and one of the original Freedom Riders in 1959, 1960. I just want to read this because he's talking still again about the practice, the way of life of nonviolence. And I read some of this before, but just again—how do we keep doing it?

Jim Lawson was the man who was training these young students. He was a bit older than they were, an African-American minister from Ohio, I think, who had been a disciple of Gandhi for a long time and was a conscientious objector. He went to jail during the Korean War, so a long time ago. And he was giving many workshops to these young students on nonviolence, satyagraha, as a way of life based in Christian love.

So this is John Lewis again. One method of practicing this approach, when you're faced with an aggressive, even despicable person, is to visualize them as an infant, as a baby. If you can see them as the innocent child she or he once was, it is not hard to find compassion in your heart.

He says, "When you can truly understand and feel"—and to me this is the emptiness and the compassion together—"even as a person is cursing you to your face, even as he is spitting on you or beating you with a stick, if you can understand and feel, even in the midst of those critical and often physically painful moments, that your attacker is as much a victim as you are, that he is a victim of the forces that have shaped and fed his anger and fury, then you are well on your way to the nonviolent life."

That's one of the best descriptions of the understanding of emptiness that I could offer. Emptiness is understanding just the causes and effects—yathā bhūta, things as they have come to be.

And it is a way of life. This is something Lawson stressed over and over again: that this is not simply a technique or a tactic or a strategy or a tool to be pulled out when needed. It is not something you turn on or off like a faucet. "This sense of love, this sense of peace, the capacity for compassion is something you carry inside yourself every waking minute of the day. It shapes your response to a curt cashier in the grocery store or to a driver cutting you off in traffic, just as surely as it keeps you from striking back at a state trooper who might be kicking you in the ribs because you dared to march in protest of an oppressive government. If you want to create an open society, the means of doing so must be consistent with the society you want to create. Means and ends are absolutely inseparable."

From a whole different angle, but I think that's the unity of wisdom and compassion.

I want to end with something very different, from a very different culture and training, but expressing the same thing. This is from Ajahn Mahā Bua, one of the most renowned Thai forest meditation masters of the twentieth century. Really very revered, but also very tough. No one would have called him warm and cuddly.

I remember when I first went to Thailand, before I became a nun, I met several Western monks who had come into town after practicing with Mahā Bua. And they were scared to death of him. They respected him, but they were convinced that he could read their minds—which actually, I think he probably could. And in Thailand in general, he was one of the ones really considered to be an arahant.

But he's not like the Dalai Lama. Everyone goes, "Oh, the Dalai Lama!" Mahabua is more like, "Yeah, he's great." Just to give you a sense—there's a book, I think someone may have mentioned it, called *Straight from the Heart*, which is really fantastic. He was tough, rigid, a fighter.

So this is from him. You needed that background to hear this.

He's talking about *yathā bhūta ñāṇa dassana*, which I've talked about—the knowledge and vision of things as they have come to be:

"The mind knows and sees things as they are, within and without, through and through, and then it stays put with purity. Whatever it thinks, it simply thinks. The khandhas are khandhas, pure and simple. The body is simply a body. Feelings, labels, perceptions, thought formations, and knowing—cognizance or

consciousness—are each simply passing conditions that we use until their time is up. When they no longer have the strength to keep going, we let them go in line with reality.

But as for the utterly true nature of our purity, there is no problem at all. Those who have reached full release from conventional realities of every sort—they don't assume themselves to be more special or worse than anyone else. For this reason, they do not demean even the tiniest of creatures. They regard them all as friends in suffering—birth, aging, illness, and death—because the Dhamma is something tender and gentle. Any mind in which it is found is completely gentle and can sympathize with every grain of sand, with living beings of every sort.

There's nothing rigid or unyielding about it. It's the defilements that are rigid and unyielding—proud, conceited, haughty and vain. When there's Dhamma, there are none of these things. There's only the unwavering gentleness and tenderness of mercy and benevolence for the world at all times."

Let's just sit silently for a moment.

Thank you for your attention.

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