Equanimity and Compassion in Challenging Times

Joseph Goldstein · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Joseph Goldstein · 1:02:00

The question I'd like to address this evening is how we can stay open and responsive to the many challenges both in our own lives individually and collectively in our society in these rather challenging times—without becoming overwhelmed or drowning in the difficulties that are arising.

As we start paying attention to the situations we face, the difficult situations, again both collectively and individually, two qualities of mind emerge as being particularly effective in working with these difficulties. These are the qualities of equanimity and compassion.

Usually in meditative circles, and probably in the larger world as well, we hear more about compassion than equanimity, because almost all spiritual traditions value compassion and its cultivation. Equanimity is a more subtle and perhaps often invisible quality of mind, an invisible practice in our lives. And yet these two together, equanimity and compassion, in perhaps a not obvious way, are very intimately connected.

So what is equanimity? It's the mind space of impartiality—a non-reactive easefulness of mind that is open to seeing the whole of different situations and experiences. The poet Rilke wrote some beautiful lines about this possibility of seeing things as a whole. He was talking about interpersonal relationships, but it really applies to all of our experience. This is what he wrote:

"Once the realization is accepted that even between the closest people infinite distances exist, a marvelous living side by side can grow up for them, if they succeed in loving the expanse between them, which gives them the possibility of always seeing each other as a whole and before an immense sky."

I find the image of that so beautiful—that possibility of stepping back and seeing the other as a whole before an immense sky. We might say that equanimity is like that expanse, like that space that holds everything, that holds all the world. It gives us the opportunity to see each other and all situations as a whole before an immense sky, before the immense space of our minds.

Now you're going to have to pay particular attention because the next sentence has a triple negative—this is a trigger warning. This non-reactive spaciousness does not imply non-discernment or a state of vague confusion. Equanimity is a mind state that is open, that is clear, that is bright, and in its non-reactivity, it helps us see things clearly. When we're caught up in reactions to things, we're not seeing things as a whole. We're seeing things through the lens of partiality.

Because equanimity allows us to see, to hold the whole of another person, the whole of a situation, it's the basis then for investigation. Equanimity is the basis for discernment, for wise discernment and skillful responsiveness. It's precisely because we're seeing things clearly and as a whole that we can really assess the situation with tremendous clarity. And it's the understanding—this is a phrase from the Taoist tradition—that non-action is not inaction. Non-action means that we're not reacting to things, but that does not imply inaction. It doesn't imply that we don't respond.

So the question then is how do we cultivate equanimity, both in our meditation practice and in our daily lives, with all the busyness and challenges of them—realizing how quickly, as you undoubtedly have seen, our minds can become reactive, whether to pleasant things or unpleasant things.

There are a variety of practices and reflections which I have found particularly helpful in establishing and coming back to this mind space, this open space of the equanimous mind. One way of exploring this is through different ways of reframing our experience. In difficult situations, whether with a person or a larger situation in our lives, there are a couple of questions which might extricate ourselves from the quagmire of our conditioned and habitual reactions. And it is like a quagmire—we're kind of sunk in these habit patterns.

I'll give you an example of possible reframing. Quite a few years ago, I was at an IMS board meeting, and it was particularly contentious. I even forget now what the issue was, but I do remember the contention. People were really attached to their views, and I was really attached to my view, which was of course the correct one. But at a certain point I was feeling the tension in the room and the tension and suffering in myself. This prompted a kind of interest in my mind: Well, what's going on here? And I simply asked myself the question: Why do the other people feel the way they do?

It had never dawned on me to ask. I just knew their view was incorrect. But when I asked the question—well, there must be a reason they're holding that view—it's like the mind expanded a bit, and I began to see things from their viewpoint. It really eased that sense of polarity, of conflict. And then the following question came: What can I learn from this situation?

It's a very simple reframing of what had been a really difficult experience into a vehicle for opening my mind, for becoming more equanimous, for understanding other points of view—from two simple questions. It's not difficult to do; it's simply difficult to remember to do in the heat of our attachment to our own views.

We can also begin to explore the connection between thought and emotion, which I find so fascinating—to see how a thought arising in the mind can so easily trigger a quick emotion, instantaneously. A certain thought, and there's often some kind of emotion associated with it. It's exploring the relationship between thought and emotion and also the exploration of the very nature of thought itself. What is a thought?

So again, as just an example of all this, later this year I'll be teaching a short retreat at Garrison Institute in

New York. Sometime when I was on retreat myself—a self-retreat—they sent an email saying, would you please write six or seven hundred words describing the retreat? I didn't really want to do it. It felt like just extra work. The course was already full; it's not that they needed to publicize it. But there was an out-of-office response on my email, you know, that messages were not being saved, contact me afterwards.

Sometime later, I got another email from them: please write the six hundred words. So then I was sitting in meditation and I thought of this and I was getting really irritated, annoyed. I was writing this response in my mind, conveying my annoyance. But then, because I was meditating, I also became interested—well, why am I getting caught in this? So I just started looking, looking into my own mind. And I realized that the thought about what they were asking and my response were just thoughts. That's all—they were just empty thoughts. I realized that I could respond very simply: "I'll pass on this one." That's all. I didn't have to write an email telling them what jerks they were. Just, "I'll pass."

As soon as I kind of just settled into seeing this as just a thought—they're just asking for something, I don't want to do it, I don't have to get involved in that annoyed reaction—because who was suffering from that? They weren't. I was the one who was suffering.

So sometimes just this investigation of our own minds when we find ourselves reactive can become an invitation for us to look back inward rather than to keep operating in the blaming mode outside, because the freedom, the liberation is going to come from unhooking our own minds. It's not necessarily going to come from changing the world.

When we're feeling uneasy or reactive in some way, it can also be helpful to experience what the emotion is that's underneath the reaction. A good example of this was Devin's angst about not getting the gold medal. And just so you know, I did give him a gold medal when we went to the teacher room—he got his medal after all. But the mind state underneath, you know, what was feeling the resentment and the annoyance and the irritation of seeing somebody else get the gold medal, was really a very strongly conditioned mind state in all of us, which in Pali is called *mana*. It's usually translated as conceit, but conceit not in the way we use that word in English. Conceit here, or *mana*, means the comparing mind.

Every time we're comparing ourselves with others, it can be that we're comparing ourselves feeling inferior, feeling equal to, feeling superior to the other person. Any comparison at all is the *mana*, the conceit of "I am." I am relative to someone else. I'm better than, I'm worse than, I'm equal to. It doesn't matter, because in each of those cases we're reinforcing that sense of self, that sense of "I."

It's helpful to know that this defilement, this comparing mind—which I'm sure you're all familiar with—is very deeply rooted. In Buddhist psychology it's said that it's not uprooted until the final stage of enlightenment. So even after desire is uprooted, even after aversion is uprooted, which would be huge things, conceit is still there, *mana* is still there. That tendency or habitual pattern of comparing, this sense of "I am," goes very deep. So it's going to come up and be there probably for quite a while.

A transforming attitude with regard to both conceit, *mana*, and all the other defilements is when we go from seeing them arise and then either judging them or judging ourselves for the fact that they're arising, to a certain point in practice where we actually can feel delight in seeing them—because we would rather see them than not see them.

And so now when I see conceit, this *mana*, arise in the mind—it can be about some very little things or sometimes some big things, but any kind of comparing at all—"Oh, *mana*, so glad to see you." But this is with humor, not with aversion. It's the seeing of it that brings the joy, because we're no longer caught up in it, we're no longer identified with it. So it's going to come, but it's our relationship to it, our attitude about it, that either entraps us or liberates us.

Another reflection that helps support greater equanimity is realizing that much of what happens in our lives is outside of our control. Although it's hard to believe, we are not actually the governing center of the universe.

I know, it's a shock. But there are a lot of things outside of our range of influence that we have no control over. Everything is arising out of a very complex multitude of causes and conditions. And sometimes it's an arena in which we can exercise some influence, but many times it's not.

A very simple example: you go to the airport, check in, and the flight is delayed one hour. Then two hours. Have you been in that situation? It's very interesting to watch people's reactions, because there's a whole range. You can see some people taking it very personally, as if the airline is targeting them and delaying the plane. But it's a completely impersonal situation. It's outside of our control. Why get upset? But we do. It's a common response.

Yet that's like holding on to a hot burning coal. We think, "Well, I should be holding on to this because they're doing something to me." But meanwhile, who's burning? We're the ones who are burning. So just to realize in various situations, to investigate and to see: is this something that I actually can influence in some way or not? And if it's beyond our range of influence, can we rest in equanimity? These are the causes and conditions which gave rise to this. There's some mechanical problem with the airplane—do you really want to get on it? This understanding allows us to settle back into a more equanimous, non-reactive mind. We're more at peace.

This is a simple example, but it's the same understanding that we can apply to more challenging situations—when we begin to understand the causes and conditions behind even bigger things in our lives or in society, and see where we can interact meaningfully and where we cannot, where it's beyond our capacity.

There's a very interesting implication of this realization: the more we let go of the illusion of being in control, the more clearly we see what causes and conditions will give rise to that which fulfills our aims. When we're seeing something clearly, then we can see whether there is something we can do in this

situation or not. If we're caught up in our reactivity, thinking that we should be able to control things by our will, we're not going to understand really what will be effective.

Another great support for equanimity is, of course, mindfulness itself—when we become mindful of our reactions, mindful of the ways we're responding to different difficulties.

Here's one example. Quite a few years ago, I was teaching a retreat for law professionals—law students, law faculty, I think maybe even a couple of judges. One second or third year law student said something really interesting. He said the law can often be a litigious process, oppositional. And he said that in the intensity of that process, he needed to get angry in order not to feel fear.

I thought that was really interesting. It points to one of the basic teachings of the Buddha, which is to look at all the strategies we've developed for avoiding unpleasant feelings or emotions or pain. The mind defaults to whatever patterns we've developed. For him, it was defaulting to anger as a way of avoiding fear.

So we had a discussion. I suggested the possibility of learning to accept the feeling of fear—that, as we talked about, it's okay to feel. It's unpleasant, but it's okay to feel it. As we come into acceptance of that, then we don't need the anger to help us avoid it because we're already there. And then we can employ a more useful strategy for the situation. Sometimes it's just that mindfulness of what's underneath which helps us come back to equanimity.

This points to another possibility: once we are actually accepting and mindful of the difficult emotion—in this case fear, but it could be any other—when we're mindful and accepting of it, we realize that it's possible to act even as we're feeling it.

Years ago I was in Hawaii, on the island of Kauai. On the North Shore, there's an eleven-mile hike into Kalalau Valley. It's a remote valley and extraordinarily beautiful, but a very intense hike—up and down and up and down, steep.

So we get to the valley, and I'm with some friends who grew up in Hawaii, and there are big cliffs. This friend who lived there says, "Oh, let's climb the cliffs." I looked up. That was not the first thing that occurred to me. But I was much younger then, and he wanted to climb the cliffs.

There was a lot of fear. I mean, I was really afraid. It was a cliff—handholds and footholds—and I didn't really have a lot of experience with that. But as I say, being young, and he wanted to do it, so I did it. And it was very interesting to see for myself that even though the fear was there the whole time going up—it's not that it went away—but even in the face of fear, I was okay enough with feeling the fear that it didn't have to stop me.

And so that's a big lesson, because when we're accepting of it, then it no longer is a limitation. We say, "Yes, this feeling is here, it's unpleasant, I don't like it, but it's okay." And in the okayness, we can act in

whatever way we choose to act. So that was really an important life lesson. Fear and other emotions like that do not have to limit us.

This is a little side point, but it comes out of that Kalalau hike. For eleven miles we were going up with these very expansive views of the coastline and the ocean—it was fantastic. And then down steeply into basically the jungle, the rainforest, where it's all dark and enclosed and you couldn't see anything. And then up. And then down. It's eleven miles of this. It was extremely rigorous for me.

This is an example of our meditation practice. Because people sometimes come to the practice with the idea that it's just going to be a straight line up to bliss and liberation. I'm sure you're disabused of that idea by now. It's up and down and up and down. But just as in the Kalalau hike, the going up and down and up and down was always moving forward. I was getting closer to the goal of the valley, even in the going up and down.

Practice is just like that. There are ups and downs and ups and downs, but if we stay mindful through it, the slope of that curve is going up. Any one experience may be in that open expanse or down in the dark rainforest of our minds, but if we stay mindful, even as we go through the ups and downs, we're proceeding towards the goal of liberation. It's very helpful to remember this so we don't get caught in attachment to the big expansive view or aversion to the times when it's difficult. Mindfulness is what carries us forward through those ups and downs, and then we're always heading towards liberation.

Equanimity also grows—and there are so many ways of developing this—from an increasing awareness of impermanence. Of course we've talked a lot about this, and we all know intellectually that things change. This is not an esoteric truth. However, we often are not living from this place of understanding. Even though conceptually we know it's true, we're not acting, we're not living our lives as if it's true, because if we were, we would not be clinging at all.

Awareness of impermanence can happen on a lot of different levels, and on each of these levels, it helps bring us back to the equanimous mind. In meditation, sometimes the impermanence can be seen very microscopically. As we get more concentrated, we just see the process of change happening in a microscopic way, moment after moment. This rapid flow of changes is always taking place.

As an example, you hear—what is that? Oh, it's the sound of the bell. As if the sound is one thing. Is it one thing? How many vibrations and overtones and undertones and whatever else is going on? So many changes, microscopic changes happening all the time, and that's true of everything. The breath is not one thing. A step is not one thing. How many different sensations in one in-breath? How many different sensations in the movement of a step? The more we see this impermanence, the more we see this change, it helps us be non-reactive to what's happening because we see it's just continually changing.

For many of the ordinary decisions in our life, awareness of impermanence can help free us from attachment to our preferences. I've found this to be a tremendous source of ease. Just for example, you're

going out with some friends. What to do? Where to go? Which restaurant to eat at? I found that remembering that whatever we decide will soon be over—five minutes after it's over, it's gone—makes it easier and more joyful to simply do what makes other people happy. I realize, for me, it's not going to be the source of my everlasting happiness if we go to this place or that place. Just remembering this, it becomes, "Okay, whatever you'd like to do, I'm happy to do." And so it becomes a very joyful way of relating.

I want to share two stories in this regard. The first happened when I was practicing in Bodh Gaya in India. I had been practicing for quite a while by then, and so my practice was in a really nice space—very still and quiet. Munindra, my teacher, had the habit of coming by with every Western traveler who came to Bodh Gaya, people not interested in meditation, just travelers. "Oh, come meet Joseph." So I'm sitting in my room, really in deep practice and quiet, and this kept happening. He kept doing this. I could hear Munindra's footsteps. This is my teacher. Don't be coming to see me. But he kept coming.

At a certain point, I realized I was getting all upset by this, and the upset was what was disturbing the practice. When I realized that, something shifted. I'd be sitting in stillness and quiet, hear him coming, get up from my seat, interact with this person, be friendly, they'd leave, and I'd go back to sitting. No problem. It was just interesting knowing that this was simply an impermanent situation arising out of my control. Finally realizing that these were just a few momentary little bumps in terms of activity—not a problem at all. We don't have to be disturbed by these kinds of difficulties if we realize it's all part of the passing show.

I'd like to read a few lines from the French essayist Montaigne. He's talking about the nature of a profound friendship he had, and it really has to do with how the friendship was so deep, the love was so deep. This is how he described it. I find it quite remarkable:

"In a truly loving relationship, which I have experienced, rather than drawing the one I love to me, I give myself to him. Not merely do I prefer to do him good than to have him do good to me. I would even prefer that he did good to himself rather than to me. It is when he does good to himself that he does most good to me. If his absence is either pleasant or useful to him, then it delights me far more than his presence."

That's an extraordinary expression of love and equanimity—where we really let go of attachment to our own wants and see that our happiness can truly be in the happiness of others.

This is expressive of a famous line from the Zen tradition, from the third Zen ancestor: "The great way is not difficult for those not attached to their preferences." We all have preferences about things. But are we attached to them or not? If we're not attached, they happen—fine. They don't happen—fine. And it really creates a tremendous spaciousness and ease of mind.

So the last way I'll mention for developing equanimity is expanding our time and space perspectives. And this can happen on different levels.

There's the expansion of historical time. An example which I've used very often over the years—and I could think of others, but I love this one, so my apologies to those who have heard it five hundred times. Some years ago, I read a book about Genghis Khan, and it was extraordinary. I found out things I didn't at all know about. He was a remarkable person, and he ended up conquering most of Asia and some of Europe. His impact on the world was huge. How many times today did you think of Genghis Khan? I'll bet not once. And we don't even have to go back to Genghis Khan—go back a hundred years. These things which are so intense and so problematic, in the long sweep of history, there's a very different relationship to it all. And we can hold what's happening with greater equanimity.

If historical time doesn't do it, think of geologic time. In four and a half billion years, the sun's going to collapse or explode or whatever it's going to do, and goodbye Earth. From that perspective, your knee pain doesn't mean much. We just give our minds a larger perspective on what's happening.

There's also a cosmic perspective, and this has more to do with space than time. I want to read something which I just find so beautiful. I don't know if you're familiar with Carl Sagan's little writing on the pale blue dot, but this had to do with pictures taken from the Voyager spacecraft four billion miles away from the Earth, taking pictures of the Earth. And all that can be seen in this picture is this tiny, faint, pale blue dot. From that perspective, that's what the Earth is.

This is what Carl Sagan says: "Look again at that dot. That's here, that's home, that's us. On it, everyone you love, everyone you know, everyone you ever heard of, every human being who ever was, lived out their lives. The aggregate of our joy and suffering, thousands of confident religions, ideologies, economic doctrines, every hunter, forager, every hero and coward, every creator and destroyer of civilization, every king and peasant, every young couple in love, every mother and father, hopeful child, inventor and explorer. Every teacher of morals, every corrupt politician, every superstar, every supreme leader, every saint and sinner in the history of our species lived there—on a mote of dust suspended in a sunbeam.

"The Earth is a very small stage in a vast cosmic arena. Think of the rivers of blood spilled by all those generals and emperors so that in glory and triumph, they could become the momentary masters of a fraction of a dot. Think of the endless cruelties visited by the inhabitants of one corner of this pixel on the scarcely distinguishable inhabitants of some other corner. How frequent their misunderstandings, how eager they are to kill one another, how fervent their hatreds.

"The Earth is the only world known so far to harbor life. There is nowhere else, at least in the near future, to which our species could migrate. Visit, yes. Settle, not yet. Like it or not, for the moment, the Earth is where we make our stand. It has been said that astronomy is a humbling and character-building experience. There is perhaps no better demonstration of the folly of human conceits than this distant image of our tiny world. To me, it underscores our responsibility to deal more kindly with one another and to preserve and cherish the pale blue dot, the only home we've ever known."

It's so beautiful. And if we can enlarge our perspective and not be so caught up in reactivity to the things

that are happening moment to moment, just that vastness of perspective inspires us to treat each other more kindly, to take care of the planet. This is a reflection that we can all engender in ourselves. It's not some esoteric, great meditative insight. In fact, you could Google "Carl Sagan pale blue dot" and see the image of it, and it's quite something. It's tiny—you can hardly distinguish it. And this is all we know.

As we develop and practice equanimity in our lives in all of these different ways, we also need to be aware of a hidden danger, because there is one embedded in all of this. That is to be aware of what the Buddha called the near enemies of wholesome states. Each of the wholesome states has a corresponding quality of mind that looks like it, but is not it. The near enemy of equanimity is indifference. The feeling of indifference can look like equanimity, but it is very different. Indifference is a withdrawal from experience.

It's a non-caring attitude. When you're indifferent, you don't care about things, about other people. It's a non-responsiveness to life. This is very different from equanimity, which is an open, clear awareness of all the various causes and conditions that give rise to our current experience. In this clear seeing, we're better able to discern where we can be effective, what wholesome states should be cultivated, what unwholesome states should be let go of, should be abandoned. When there's equanimity rather than indifference, we begin to see where we can engage in a meaningful way.

So the question for us is: how do we mitigate tendencies toward indifference? Because they will come up. Equanimity can sometimes slide into indifference unbeknownst to us, and we end up feeling very detached and disinterested, thinking we're still practicing equanimity. It's really helpful to see this clearly.

It's precisely in this investigation, in seeing what can help prevent us from sliding into indifference, that compassion plays such a critical role. With equanimity, we have enough stability and openness of mind to see the whole of a situation and have the willingness to come close to whatever suffering may exist. Equanimity gives us the foundation, the ability to approach suffering without reactivity. And compassion arises precisely out of this willingness to come close to suffering.

But this is a challenge very often because we don't like to come close to suffering. There's some kind of pain, either in ourselves or in other people, and the tendency is to avoid it. I'm sure you can see this in your own practice. Something painful comes up—is the first response, "Oh good, let me come close to this, let me feel it"? Hopefully you get there pretty quickly, but it's not often the very first response. Difficulty arises, and we want to pull back, which is sliding into indifference. Equanimity is precisely the foundation that gives us the strength, the stability, the evenness, and the willingness. We think, "Okay, my mind's in a pretty open, clear space. I can come close to this. I can feel this." And that's precisely what gives rise to compassion.

It's really important to watch our conditioned reactions. To do this on retreat will help you do it when you're out in the world in your daily lives—to really watch your response to difficult situations, difficult experiences that arise. Do we stay open and investigate? Or do we pull back, withdraw, close off, and

contract? I'm sure if you're noticing carefully, you'll see both responses at play. It's very helpful to get clear about this so that we know when we're contracting in the face of some suffering or difficulty and can really feel what that's like. And to see very clearly when our heart and mind are open to difficulty, willing to come close to it, and to know what that experience is like.

Out of this ability to come close, quite naturally we develop a greater empathy for the person, the situation, or ourselves experiencing suffering, because we're willing to be there, willing to stand in its presence. And out of this empathy, two compassion-inducing questions can arise.

The first question is: in the face of suffering, how can I help? That was the title of a book by Ram Dass and Paul Gorman, way back in the 1970s. I love that title because it so captures the essence of compassion. We're close to a difficult situation of suffering, and there's enough equanimity allowing us to be close to it. Out of that arises the question: how can I help in this situation? The other question is: what can I do to help alleviate this suffering? These questions prompt the compassionate response.

Thich Nhat Hanh summed this up really well. He said, "Compassion is a verb." Empathy is the feeling of what somebody else is going through—it's attuning to whatever suffering may be there. But compassion implies action. It implies responsiveness. I like this articulation because very often we create some ideal of compassion as a heart-opening feeling that is splendid and vast and magnificent. But very often we may not feel that at all. The responsiveness to suffering isn't necessarily even a feeling, or a particularly strong feeling. We're simply in a situation, and if we're open, if we're close, there can be a natural responsiveness. If somebody's hungry, you feed them. It doesn't have to rest on having some big emotion about it. It's just the natural response of an open heart.

And that openheartedness is possible when there's equanimity, when there's no reactivity to the suffering. Do you see the connection between these two? Equanimity provides the stability of mind and heart to come close to suffering so that the heart can be naturally responsive.

One way I sometimes express this is that compassion is the natural activity of emptiness. And emptiness in this sense means emptiness of self.

The more we can take the self out of the picture, compassion becomes the natural response to suffering.

Just as equanimity can slide into indifference, compassion has its own near enemy that we really have to be careful of because it's very easy to slip into. The near enemy of compassion is sorrow. That's often the response we have to big suffering in ourselves or in the world. But it's helpful to distinguish between the sorrow and sadness that can open the heart to the suffering that's there, and the overwhelming sorrow that simply leads to despair. In the face of big suffering, if we slide into the near enemy of sorrow and it becomes overwhelming, we become despairing about the situation. That doesn't help anyone. It's not a skillful state; it's not a wholesome state of mind. But sometimes we experience it masquerading as compassion. As we're feeling this, we may think we're being so compassionate, but actually we're being

overwhelmed. So this distinction is really very helpful.

Especially with people engaged on the front lines of social action who are dealing right at the edge of great challenges and great suffering in society, one of the ongoing problems is burnout. I've taught retreats for social activists and environmental activists, and one of the most common comments was about exactly this. People are engaged, their motivation is good, and their heart is in the right place, but they get burned out. Why? Because the compassion has slipped into overwhelm, then despair, and then it's not helpful.

This is very interesting. Compassion is extremely interesting because even though it comes from drawing close to suffering, the feeling of "how can I help" is uplifting. It's not a despairing mind state at all. It's an energizing and uplifting feeling. So it's really important to track our own responses and to watch the danger of equanimity sliding into indifference. We want to watch compassion and the danger of compassion sliding into overwhelming sorrow. That becomes the signal that we've moved out of that ennobling quality of compassion.

Compassion can manifest in many different ways. There's not just one route for compassion in action. It can manifest as generosity—just taking opportunities to be generous. When a thought of giving something arises, this is a practice I've really undertaken for years now, and I love doing it. The thought to give something arises, and my practice is to do it, instead of second-guessing. "Oh, that would be too much, I may need it"—or whatever the rationale is for pulling back. If the thought comes, do it.

And it's really interesting what I've seen. Sometimes the thought is just a little thing. It could be a phone call or helping in some small way. Sometimes it's been big things. I see this thought come up in my mind—whoa, this is big. Do I really want to do this? But because I've taken it on as practice, I do it. And I've never regretted it. It's always been a source of happiness. So that's one way of expressing the compassion that comes quite spontaneously in these thoughts.

Sometimes compassion really manifests with tremendous courage and determination. Some of you may know—probably most of you know—of the young Pakistani activist Malala. An incredible story. She was a Pakistani activist for female education, and in 2012, when she was fifteen years old, some Taliban terrorists, because they're very opposed to female education, tried to assassinate her and shot her. It was actually very serious. She was in a coma for eight days, unconscious. Then she recovered enough to go to the UK for treatment, and she recovered mostly. This became a worldwide phenomenon. She created the Malala Foundation, really supporting education—education for all. That was the mission.

This is one of the things she wrote, as a demonstration of tremendous courage and determination, because she was the recipient of continual threats to her life as she was engaged in this work:

"The terrorists thought they would change my aims and stop my ambition, but nothing changed in my life except this: Weakness, fear, and hopelessness died. Strength, power, and courage were born. I am not against anyone. I'm here to speak up for the right of education for every child. I want education for the

sons and daughters of the Taliban and all terrorists and extremists."

And since then, she's done all this incredible work. In 2014, at age seventeen, she became the youngest recipient of the Nobel Peace Prize. This is a seventeen-year-old girl who transformed that intense situation of suffering and violence into a worldwide movement helping young children get an education. It's quite remarkable.

We can see that compassion takes many forms—sometimes it's small things, sometimes it's really big things. And it's important to realize that there is no hierarchy of compassionate action. The field of compassion is limitless because it is the field of suffering beings. There's no one way. We will all find our own way to be of help. How can I help? It depends on our interests, our inclinations, our talents, our abilities. Sometimes it is being on the front line of social action. And sometimes it could be sitting in a cave for your entire life with the aspiration to help awaken all beings. I think of the Buddha before his enlightenment, his many lifetimes as a bodhisattva sitting in a cave. But we're sitting here as the result of all that work. So it's really important to understand and not create a hierarchy of compassionate action. We'll all find our own way and contribute in whatever way we can.

As we learn to navigate the challenges in these times—the challenges of our lives and all the suffering that's there in so many domains and arenas—it's very helpful to really deepen our exploration of the meaning and experience of equanimity and compassion. We also need to recognize their near enemies so we don't unknowingly fall into them. And we can see how compassion and equanimity mutually support each other. They're inextricably connected.

We need great humility on this path. The Dalai Lama wrote, "Changes in attitudes never come easily. It's a wide round curve that can be negotiated only slowly, not a sharp corner that can be turned all at once. It comes with daily practice." We realize that as we understand, at whatever level we do, the value of these two qualities of mind, we must have humility in our practice of them—recognizing that it's a gradual process of developing these qualities in ourselves.

This is expressed in a short haiku by Issa: "New Year's Day, everything's in blossom, I feel about average."

I love that. Because "average" reminds us that at some basic level all of us are average. We're just people going about our lives. But it's understanding that the potential for growing equanimity and compassion and wisdom—that potential exists in all of us. And that becomes the basis, the foundation of our aspiration and our practice.

Transcriptions produced locally using Swiss low-carbon electricity. Corrections and rewriting by cloud-hosted AI.