Map of Wisdom, Part 2 (Retreat at Spirit Rock)

Joseph Goldstein · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Joseph Goldstein · 1:09:04

So tonight I'd like to continue the talk on the unfolding map of wisdom.

Just to recap a little from the first talk: we talked about some of the profound implications of the basic truth of impermanence, of change, of things continually becoming otherwise, and how attachment to that which in its very nature is change results in rope burn. It results in some kind of suffering. If we're holding on to something which in its very nature is going to change, we suffer in one way or another. To use the example that I gave in the first talk, with the axle in the axle hole—it doesn't fit very well. If we're attached, we go on a very bumpy ride through our lives.

We also talked about how, because of the truth of change, we develop a deeper understanding of the ultimately unsatisfying or ultimately unfulfilling nature of conditioned impermanent phenomena precisely because they don't last. That's why they're ultimately unfulfilling. We all know this just from our own experience, looking back at our past.

We also talked about how when we understand and look at the rainbow-like nature of experience, of self, we see that the self, like a rainbow, is a designation for the appearance of certain causes and conditions coming together. Just like the rainbow appears because of moisture and sunlight and air, so this appearance of self arises because of the workings, the interrelationship of all the mind-body elements. In both cases, the key point is to understand that the rainbow is not a thing in itself, but a designation for an appearance. Self is exactly the same process as the rainbow. The sense of self, even though we misunderstand it a lot, is basically a designation for the pattern, for each of our individual patterns of mind and body. It's not that the self is a thing in itself; it's rather a designation, a concept describing this appearance.

The Buddha expressed the importance of seeing this so clearly when he said, "Nothing whatsoever is to be adhered to as I or mine." Nothing whatsoever is to be adhered to or clung to as I or mine—not the body, not thoughts, not emotions, not any part of our experience. And then he went on to say something quite interesting. He said whoever has heard this has heard all the teachings. Whoever practices this has practiced all the teachings. Whoever realizes this has realized all the teachings. He really simplified it for us in terms of understanding the essence of what we're practicing. Through all the methods and all the different insights, it's all leading or pointing in the direction of a mind that is not adhering to anything as being I or mine.

Now I'd like to continue with the experience of the real, but not really real, experience of the rainbow. Just as a kind of fun experiment, we might consider what the rainbow might look like to a being or other

animals with a very different sense structure, very different sense apparatus, particularly with the eyes. If the eyes are constructed differently, clearly what is being seen is going to be different.

I was watching a nature program on TV—it was actually one of the series that Obama was narrating on national parks around the world. The last one was a national park in Indonesia, and they had these fantastic shots of tigers, showing the tigers hunting. Their prey was some impala-like animal, and the program pointed out that one of the reasons they are such good prey for the tigers is that the eyes of the impalas don't see orange. They showed through the photography what it looked like through those eyes, and it was so striking—such a reminder that everything we think we're seeing accurately or definitively is simply a function of how our eyes and other senses are constructed. If they are constructed differently, what we take to be the real world would look very different.

It's helpful to remember that our perception of the world is conditioned by the structure of our sense apparatus, and to remind ourselves that it's not as if there is some fixed, definitive reality that we're perceiving out there. Our perception is completely conditioned by the apparatus through which we are perceiving things. This is what the Buddha called the magic show of consciousness. In some way, our consciousness, working through the sense apparatus, is constructing the world, our view of the world.

Perhaps for some of you, a question might be arising now: besides all this being of some philosophical interest—which for me it is, it's kind of mysterious—how does this understanding help us in our lives? I think that's really an important question for us.

is attachment to our views. We have lots of views about almost everything—even things we know nothing about. That does not stop us from having views about them. And we get attached to our views because we think we're seeing the world accurately. We forget that what we're calling our accurate perception is a function of seeing things through the filter of our own particular individual conditioning.

This attachment to view operates in almost every arena of social intercourse. It is the source of a lot of conflict because, quite unbelievably, other people might have other views. Imagine that.

There's a book written by the famous newscaster of bygone years, David Brinkley. He wrote this book with a wonderful title: *Everyone is Entitled to My Opinion*. And that's basically how we go through life. Of course we come into conflict, because everyone has that view.

The antidote to this is really very simple, and it was expressed by a sixteenth-century Zen master named Bankei. His wonderful book of teachings is called *The Unborn*—he was a very iconoclastic Zen master, and his teachings are very pointed. There was one line in his book which jumped out at me. I resonated so much with it as a practice. He said, "Don't side with yourself."

It's a good reminder. Even when we're engaged in conversation, when we have different opinions and views, can we remember not to side with ourselves? This doesn't mean that we don't have views or opinions, which we all do, but can we hold them a little more lightly? This gives us at least an opportunity

to slide into the other person's mind, to see things from their perspective. In that way, it might alter our views a little bit—or not. But at least we're open to taking in different perspectives, understanding that everyone's perspective is the result of their own particular conditioning. It's not as if someone has a channel to absolute truth.

But even given all this—the conditional nature of how we perceive things, phenomena within ourselves, the mind-body, and in the world—things are not arising chaotically. Despite the fact that we all see things through our own particular filter of conditioning, there are basic laws governing the unfolding of phenomena.

We know this from the laws of science, which have achieved increasing accuracy over the centuries—and I'm sure this will continue into the future. Science provides a pretty accurate description of cause and effect relationships, whether in chemistry, physics, biology, neuroscience, or whatever it may be. There are laws governing how things unfold, and this gives us a lot of information.

The Buddha described the lawful nature of how our lives unfold. So not only the physical laws of science, but there's an understanding in the Buddha's great wisdom about the laws governing the unfolding of our minds—what mind states lead to what results. This understanding has tremendous consequences for the experience of happiness in our lives. If we're not aware of the causes of happiness, then we're kind of just moving blindly through the world, hoping for the best.

But the Buddha was very explicit, clear, and incisive. Having looked so deeply into the nature of his own mind, he saw so clearly what leads to what. As you probably know, one of the most important and far-reaching descriptions of how this works is the law of karma—that actions bring results. But it's not only actions. What determines the karmic result of our actions is the motivation behind them.

This is a very important point. If we want to understand the causes of happiness for ourselves and others, and if we understand that it's the motivation behind actions that determines those results, it suggests very strongly that we have to learn and practice becoming aware of the motivations behind our actions—our actions of body, speech, and mind.

When our actions are motivated by wholesome states, skillful states like generosity, love, compassion, or wisdom, that's like planting seeds. Those motivations behind each of our actions are just like planting seeds that will germinate and flower in happiness. That will be the karmic result of those wholesome motivations. And if we plant the seeds of greed, hatred, and ignorance, that's like planting karmic seeds of what will bring about, in future results, different kinds of suffering.

This understanding, even in this most general way—and the law of karma could be broken down in tremendous detail—gives us a very general picture of how it all works.

It's tremendously empowering. When we understand it and reflect on it and begin to experiment with it in our own lives, when we see for ourselves whether in some way or other it's playing out in this way, it's

empowering because then we can really shape the unfolding of our lives. It's as if we can become artists of our lives, creating those conditions that are desirable and not creating those conditions that are going to cause distress or suffering for us.

So we might ask ourselves the question, as we're about to act in one way or another—and I'm going to give one example of an arena that's very powerful to work with, but it really applies to everything we do. Whatever act we do, understanding the importance of motivation in this whole unfolding of the karmic law of cause and effect, the first step would really be to see: what is the motivation now? This takes a lot of mindfulness. We really have to pause a bit and just check in with ourselves. What is motivating this? And understanding what results will come—where is the action leading? Then most importantly, asking the question: do I want to go there? If we see that we're about to act based on greed or hatred, and we understand all this and realize this is leading to suffering, that's a tremendously powerful reminder. Maybe I don't want to do this. Maybe this is a time to restrain this action.

I want to share a short teaching from a Tibetan master. His name is Jamgön Kongtrül. He wrote: "The potential for realization is universal and present for all of us. True benefit will come from your own efforts and realization. For your efforts to bring benefit, you must take your life into your own hands and examine your mind and experience. From this point of view, nobody could be kinder to you than yourself. Nobody could have a greater effect on you or actually do more for you than yourself. The Buddha said, 'I have shown you the path of liberation. Now liberation depends on you.' This is really true. If you don't take your life into your own hands, not even the Buddhas can make a difference. It's up to you."

That's a very strong and direct charge to all of us. We need to take responsibility for our own minds, for our own actions, for our own motivations. Nobody can do that for us.

So how can we begin to practice this? How can we really apply it in our lives? There's one particular arena of activity that I will use as an example, but it really applies to everything we do. In this one particular arena, it contains actions which have a profound impact on our lives, and mostly we don't pay attention to it. This is the area of speech.

Of course, here on retreat, it's not so much of a problem. However, we do speak a lot—generally, in the course of our daily lives, it's the main form of communication. But are we really paying attention to the motivation behind our speech? Or do the words simply tumble out? My experience is that more often than not, unless we really undertake it as a practice, they're in tumbling mode. We find ourselves stimulated by something and then the words come out.

Paying attention to speech and the motivations behind it becomes a very powerful way of integrating mindfulness into our daily lives because it's such a prevalent and common activity. The Buddha was very big on lists. It may have had to do with the oral tradition—creating things on a list is a good mnemonic device. Anyway, there are lots of lists. One of them is the ten unwholesome actions. This ties into the law of karma, and it's one of the reasons I feel such gratitude to the Buddha. He just laid it all out. We don't

have to figure this out for ourselves. These are the ten unwholesome actions—don't do them. Sometimes I think the Buddha's teaching, especially teachings like this, it's as if he's talking to two-year-olds. Okay, don't lie. Don't steal.

There are ten unwholesome actions, and of the ten, four have to do with speech.

I find that quite remarkable. The Buddha singled out, of all the kinds of unwholesome activities we can engage in, four of the ten have to do with the words we use. To me, that suggests he felt this is a really important arena for practicing and developing mindfulness. This is a major part of our path, particularly living the Dharma in our daily lives.

So the four kinds of speech that are unwholesome, that should be avoided—again, this will be very obvious to you. First is lying, just saying that which isn't true. Second is harsh speech. Are we really paying attention to the tone, the energy of our words? Third is gossip and backbiting. With this, the Buddha gave a wonderfully simple directive for understanding and applying it. He said that we should use speech that unites people rather than divides them. Just that.

I find it remarkable because in this category of gossip and backbiting, sometimes it's just social, not particularly harmful, and not trying to divide people. But not infrequently, that kind of speech, either consciously or unconsciously, sets people apart. Because very often, we're speaking out our judgments. So just having that in mind—when we speak, is it uniting people or is it dividing people? That's a tremendous gift if we can really apply it.

And then the last kind of wrong speech—it's a little strange to say "wrong speech," but this is my favorite. I think it's my favorite because I love the Pali word for it. So this last kind of unwholesome action of speech, beyond lying, harsh speech, and gossip that divides people, is useless talk. And the Pali word for useless talk is *samphappalapa*. It sounds just like what it is. *Samphappalapa*.

When I read about this and really tried to practice it and see how it was working in my own life, it was amazing to me. I could be hanging out with friends in a social kind of environment, just in conversation. And from time to time, I would notice that I would say something that was totally useless. It had no bearing on anything. Really the only purpose of it was kind of saying, "Here I am." That was the only reason I could even think of for talking like that.

So it became really interesting, and this became a practice for me—and still is. When I'm mindful enough to see that I'm about to utter some completely useless speech: No, I don't have to say that. I really just restrain. And it's amazing, even in that moment, in this very small example, we can feel different things. First, the power of renunciation for shaping our lives when we use it in a really skillful way. Another word I like better than renunciation is *non-addiction*. Instead of being addicted to our habit patterns, it's like: No, I don't have to do that.

When I do catch that impulse and refrain from that kind of speech, it tangibly feels like a conservation of

energy. Instead of just the energy spilling out, the enervation of that—no, it's like everything feels stronger.

So this is just an example, this arena of speech. It's a very powerful arena for beginning to check out our motivations before action and really beginning to see the karmic effect. I'm sure you know people who in your experience generally are very truthful, and don't gossip and backbite, and don't have a lot of useless talk, and speak gently. How do you feel about those people? You probably have some appreciation for them because it creates a beautiful life. But it's up to us. Nobody can do that for us. We have to do that for ourselves.

But there's one more part of speech that I just love talking about. It's not actually so much speech—it's right listening. What's the mind like when it listens?

This teaching from the Buddha sets a very high bar, and that's why I really like it. Because it's such a high bar, it really is aspirational, but it points to a direction. This is what he said:

"There are five courses of speech that others may use when they address you. Their speech may be timely or untimely, true or untrue, gentle or harsh, connected with good or connected with harm, spoken with a mind of love and kindness or with a mind of inner hate. Here you should train yourself thus: Our minds will remain unaffected. We shall utter no unskillful words. We shall abide compassionate for their welfare with a mind of loving kindness."

So just imagine the scene. Somebody speaking to you in a very untimely fashion. What they're saying are lies, spoken in a very harsh, angry tone, with an intent to harm you, filled with hate—and our minds will remain unaffected. We shall utter no unskillful words. We shall abide compassionate for their welfare with a mind of loving kindness. That's, as I said, a high bar.

But I like it because it's a reminder that in the intercourse of communication, our minds are affected as much when we're listening as when we're speaking. And we can't control how other people are going to be speaking to us. So are we just giving our minds over to them and having their particular way of expressing influence whether our minds are wholesome or not? That's not such a good idea. The Buddha is simply pointing out that even in those most extreme circumstances, if we're being mindful, we can stay centered and just acknowledge that that's how they are speaking. It's not pretending that they're not, but it's not causing an unskillful reaction in our own minds.

This would be an amazing practice. I like talking about this because sometimes people think that the real Dharma insights and practice happen on retreat only. But it's not. The Dharma is a whole life. And the area of speech is just a common aspect of how we live. We can get to the depths of understanding our minds and our own reactions—what's wholesome and what's unwholesome—in this arena.

There's one other law governing our unfolding process beside the law of karma, and this is one of the deepest aspects of the Buddhist teachings. You may be familiar with it to some extent: the law of

dependent origination. I'll explain just a few links of it because it really brings together everything we've been talking about over these last days.

It's obvious that we're all born into a body with different sense organs. If the body's healthy, there are eyes and ears and nose and tongue. The body feels sensations. And the mind—that's the sixth sense object. Because there is the body with the sense organs, and we're surrounded by sense objects like sights or sounds or smells or tastes, when they come together, that's contact. Moment after moment, there's contact between the object and the sense organ. This happens automatically—it's just a given. Every moment of our experience, there's contact with something.

The Buddha then went on to analyze exactly what happens out of that contact. Contact is a given. And then he said: based on contact, conditioned by contact, feeling tone arises. That feeling tone—pleasant, unpleasant, neutral—that we've been talking about a lot. In Pali it's vedana. This feeling tone also happens automatically. We can't stop that from happening.

This feeling tone is the taste of each sense experience. And I don't mean literal taste, but the taste of whether it's pleasant or unpleasant or neutral. All of this is just going on by itself. We have no control over that.

But the next link is what's truly crucial. This feeling tone arises, and here's where our reactive conditioning comes into play. We've been talking a lot about this. Because things are pleasant, because we experience them as being pleasant, we get attached. We cling, we desire, we want them. So it's the feeling tone that conditions the desire. If it's unpleasant, our reactive conditioning is that we don't like it, we want to get rid of it, we want it to go away.

This is the normal way of life for most people. And I think most people who don't really look at their lives consider this just normal. Of course I want what's pleasant and don't want what's unpleasant. But it's not a free way to live, because we're not in control of everything that happens to us. Perhaps it would be acceptable if we could arrange things so they're always pleasant. But that, as we know, is not the case.

So how can we find freedom given this alternation, this change between pleasant and unpleasant? Can we find some equilibrium? Can we find some ease, some peace, regardless of what the feeling tone is? Can we be at peace when it's pleasant? Can we be at peace when it's unpleasant? That's really where the freedom lies.

This points to the fact that we need to be mindful, as we've been discussing particularly in the morning sessions. We want to make the feeling tone, when it's strong, the object of mindfulness. When something is being felt as particularly pleasant, it's very helpful to practice at times noting: pleasant, pleasant, pleasant. The note here can be especially helpful because in the moment of noting, particularly if it's done softly, we are not identified with the experience. We're not reacting to it. We're being mindful of it. And so there's no desire, there's no grasping, there's no attachment in that moment.

Likewise with unpleasant feeling. I'm sure you've noticed that our immediate reaction to unpleasant feeling is usually not, "Oh good, let me explore this." Our instinctive reaction, probably for most of us, is: painful feeling, I don't like it, I'd rather it went away. So again, this law of dependent origination lays out how important it is, if we want to experience some inner freedom, to be mindful of that feeling tone: unpleasant, unpleasant, unpleasant. In the moment of noting in that soft way, we're not identified, we're not reactive, we're not aversive.

It's very illuminating to begin practicing so that you have a real experiential understanding that we actually can be mindful of pleasant without the craving, and mindful of unpleasant without aversion. Even if it's for a short period of time or within a certain range. We might be able to note "unpleasant, unpleasant," and then perhaps at a certain point of pain, it's beyond our capacity. Fine. We've reached an edge, and we play around that edge a little bit, then come back to a more easeful place. But we're practicing it.

Particularly with unpleasant sensation, one of the ways I coach myself, remind myself, motivate myself to work with it, is to see it as practice for dying. Because we don't know the circumstances of our death, but it's not unlikely that it will involve some discomfort. The body is falling apart in whatever way it does. How do we want to be? Will we be to some extent at ease in that whole process? If we wait until then to practice this, it probably won't be that successful. But if we undertake this practice now, when there's discomfort or pain, we really understand this is a powerful training. Can I just learn? Unpleasant—it's okay. It's okay to feel unpleasantness.

But we have to train ourselves in that because it's not generally our conditioning. This is where the Buddha's teaching on dependent origination is really pointing—to just that place in the whole unfolding process where we can experience a real sense of freedom.

So the last aspect I want to talk about tonight, the last aspect of the teachings, is the experience and the development and the cultivation of compassion. Compassion is the natural outcome of everything we've been talking about during this whole week.

I want to read something to you which is quite an unusual way of understanding some of the basic Buddhist concepts. It was written by, or was in a conversation with, Lou Richmond, who's a Zen teacher, a Zen master, who lives in the Bay Area. I'm not sure whether he's still alive or not. But he came down with a very severe disease—viral encephalitis. It's said to be a devastating and often fatal illness. He was in a coma for two weeks. There was brain damage and other disabilities, and he said that it took three to four years to fully recover from it.

But this is what he learned from that ordeal. He said, "Sometimes when I'm asked to describe the Buddhist teaching, I say this: Everything is connected. Nothing lasts. You are not alone." And this is him going on: "This is really just a restatement of the traditional three marks of existence—non-self, impermanence, and suffering. 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 in that way gets at something important. The fact that we all suffer means that we are all in the same boat. And that's what allows us to feel compassion."

So there's a very direct relationship between our ability to feel the suffering in ourselves, to see it in others, and to understand the commonality of it all. We are all in the same boat. We're all subject to aging and illness and death.

As many of you know, there's a very classic Buddhist reflection on these aspects of life. And I love this reflection. It's very simple: Whatever has the nature to age will age, and I am not exempt. Whatever has the nature to grow ill will grow ill, and I am not exempt. Whatever has the nature to die will die, and I am not exempt.

I think we're all pretty easeful with the understanding that what has the nature to grow old will grow old. But it's the tagline that I find particularly powerful: "And I am not exempt." Because at least I see in myself that of course I know this intellectually, but I don't believe it. Deep down, I do believe it—but there is that feeling that it's really about other people.

So sometimes I'll use that just as I'm going through my life and some aspect of not feeling well arises, or I hurt something, whatever, and I'll remind myself: and I am not exempt. Because the previous thought probably was, or might have been, "Well, why did this happen?" Of course it's going to happen. We have a body, and the body goes through this, and we are not exempt.

To take that in—the Buddha suggests reflecting on this daily, to use these reflections, because it takes that repetition to really make it part of oneself and to grok it.

So what is compassion? It's really the strong and deep feeling that wants to alleviate suffering, whether it's our own or others'. And one of my favorite expressions, a phrase which expresses for me the essence of compassion, is the title of a book by Ram Dass and Paul Gorman. They wrote it together way back, maybe in the seventies.

The name of the book is *How Can I Help?* It's a wonderful title, and for me it captures the essence of the compassionate attitude. As we go through life in different situations and different relationships, can we make that question the foundation of how we relate in situations of suffering? How can I help?

The Dalai Lama, who is such an embodiment of compassion—we use him as an example so often because for those of you who have seen him, either live or through some media, he exudes compassion in the most wonderful way. He said, "Compassion and love are precious things in life. They are not complicated. They are simple, but difficult to practice." I found that very interesting.

It's worth considering why such a beautiful and ennobling state like compassion should be difficult to practice. Why aren't we just drawn to being that way?

Compassion arises when we're willing to come close to suffering. That's the condition for compassion to

arise. The problem is that even though we may want to be compassionate, and perhaps very often are, it's not always easy to open to the suffering that is present. There are strong tendencies in the mind that keep us defended from it, or withdrawn, or apathetic, or indifferent to the suffering that is around us. The indifference that we may feel is often unacknowledged. We're not even aware that we're being indifferent, but we're not coming close. We're not experiencing the suffering with an open heart.

As an experiment, the next time you're in a situation of suffering—and it could be right in this retreat—perhaps you're sitting and your body starts hurting a lot, or there's some kind of interaction, maybe somebody sitting next to you in the hall is very restless and disturbing your meditation. It's a minor kind of suffering, but suffering nevertheless. What's your first reaction to the pain, to the difficult circumstance? Very often we can see our first tendency may be not to want to open to it, to try to block it out or not experience it.

So it might be difficult feelings in the body. It might be difficult emotions. How are you relating to that? Are you open to the suffering and feeling compassion for it? Or not? With different kinds of emotions—fear, loneliness, jealousy, unworthiness, shame, discontent—there are so many afflictive emotions that are the cause of suffering. What's our relationship to them?

And of course there are all the many situations of suffering in the world, so vast: racial injustice, political and religious violence, homophobia, sexism—on and on. Climate change, with the huge amount of suffering that's unfolding. What happens when we face these situations, either directly or through the media? When we really come face to face with it, do we feel uneasy? Do we withdraw? Do we turn away? Or do we open to it?

I'm hoping when you hear these words, you're really taking them as an invitation to look at all this in your own life and experience. Because you can hear it as concepts, and you could agree or disagree. But the real understanding of yourself and how your mind and heart function will come when you apply and really look in real-life situations. What is going on? How am I relating to this? Am I open? Am I closed? Without judgment.

I saw these tendencies so clearly in myself during my India days. This goes back many years. Those of you who have been in India know there are lots of homeless dogs wandering around, and they're often in pitiable condition—starving, full of mange. It's terrible. I would be there practicing, and then in between retreats I'd often go into the village, sit at the chai shop, have a cup of tea, some sweets, and of course these dogs would be all around.

It was so interesting for me to watch my mind. There were times when, for whatever reason, I didn't want to deal with it. It's unpleasant. Just seeing it all—let me just enjoy my sweet. That was my mind. I could sense myself withdrawing, pushing against it. Then at other times, when perhaps my mind was a little more relaxed and open, I really let it in. I really opened my eyes to the suffering that was there. And not surprisingly, in that openness, the feeling of compassion just came spontaneously.

I didn't have to practice compassion. It came simply from being open to the suffering that was right in front of me.

So we need to look at all of this in ourselves. When we open to the pain and suffering in our own lives, in our own experience—and you can do this right here in retreat as you're dealing with difficult situations—the more we practice being open and coming close here, the greater strength and courage we have in being open in this way when we're out in the world.

Ryokan was a great Zen master of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century in Japan. He was beloved—this wandering monk who lived up in the mountains, a poet. Basically, he would just wander around. The stories tell how he would spend his days playing with the village children. He had a great, great open heart. And his great open heart extended even to inanimate objects. He just took everything in.

One of his little poems illustrates this, and I love it. He was this wandering monk, very poor, possessing almost nothing. He had this old beat-up begging bowl that he carried around for food. So he wrote: "I've forgotten my begging bowl, but no one would steal it. How sad for my begging bowl."

This points to an attitude that we can really cultivate—both toward the inanimate objects in our lives, but of course more importantly, toward everyone we connect with. This feeling of connection and openness and compassion.

Again from the Dalai Lama: "I try to treat whoever I meet as an old friend. This gives me a genuine feeling of happiness." I just want to repeat that: "I try to treat whoever I meet as an old friend." Imagine for a moment that you're doing that. That's an extraordinary level of presence and open-heartedness. Strangers—whoever I meet—can we treat them as an old friend? He said this gives him a genuine feeling of happiness. It is the practice of compassion.

As compassion grows, we can begin to engage very actively with the suffering in the world, responding to the various needs of beings in whatever way is appropriate and possible. Sometimes we respond in very small, unregarded ways, and sometimes with tremendous determination and courage.

You may know who Paul Farmer was. He was this great health worker doing fantastic work, first in Haiti and then around the world—amazing public health work. He was building clinics in Haiti, but on some days he would just walk to remote villages to see a few people. He was criticized for that because more people were coming to the clinic, and why was he taking all this time to visit these few people out in the mountains?

This is what he said: "If you say that a seven-hour 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 in the world."

That's it. The idea that some lives matter less.

It's not just about hearing this and taking it in in some abstract way, but really looking at our own lives and the way we relate to people. It's not uncommon—I think it's probably common for all of us—that we privilege some people over others. This is the normal, conventional way of being in the world. But the Buddha in his teaching on compassion is pointing to something different.

And that's why it has been mentioned in all the Brahma Vihara talks—the universal quality, the immeasurable quality. They don't leave anybody out. We need to remember that, and just practice. It is a practice. We want to see if we can take advantage of the different situations in our lives to open our hearts in this way.

I think it's really important to understand, in listening to all of this, that we don't have to be saints or some special being to practice compassion. We can take advantage of the situations in our own lives if we have this in mind, if we really understand that yes, it arises from being willing to come close, to open to the suffering. And then the compassionate response, in whatever way—sometimes it might be big things, and sometimes just a gesture of friendliness. Generosity can be very small things. We don't have to be some special being in order to practice this.

This was expressed by another famous Japanese haiku poet, Issa. He was a wonderful poet: "New Year's Day, everything is in blossom—I feel about average."

I feel about average. And still appreciating New Year's Day, everything in blossom. Just as our ordinary selves, we can engage so fully in all of these practices.

And we each find our own way. There's no hierarchy of compassionate action. It may be the front lines of work in the world. It may be sitting in a cave for ten lifetimes or a hundred lifetimes. Think of the Bodhisattva—how many lifetimes must he have spent in a cave before the energy of his full enlightenment flowered? And we are here 2,600 years later because of that energy. Yet at the time, you can just imagine his family and friends when he was off in a cave: "What are you doing? You're just wasting your time. Why don't you get a job?"

So be careful not to judge or create this hierarchy of what you think is compassion. We will each find our own way, our own interests, our own inclinations, as we respond in this way in the world.

We're planting the seeds—planting the seeds of compassion. And they may be small seeds and small actions. This is what Thoreau had to say about seeds: "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."

I think that's a really useful reminder to us all. We're planting seeds of wholesomeness, of goodness. And those seeds are going to germinate and grow and have tremendous impact in the world. That's really what our practice is all about.

Let me close with a teaching from another great life master, John Lennon: "When I was five years old, my mother always told me that happiness was the key to life. When I went to school, they asked me what I wanted to be when I grew up. I wrote down 'happy.' They told me I didn't understand the assignment. And I told them they didn't understand life."

As Thich Nhat Hanh said, "Happiness is available. Please help yourselves to it."

That's our undertaking.

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