Compassion and Equanimity in Difficult Times

Joseph Goldstein · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Joseph Goldstein · 1:53:28

Good evening.

My name is Daryl Lynn Ross, and I'm one of the founders, a guiding teacher, and a member of the board of True North Insight.

I want to warmly welcome each one of you, and of course, a warm and grateful welcome to Joseph. Thank you so much for coming.

You know, when you welcome a guest into your home, you welcome them by their name, which is personal and particular. I can't do that here, but I do want to express True North Insight's warm welcome to each one of you. Whatever your reason for coming, your personal history, religious or ethnic background, the color of your skin, socioeconomic status, sexual orientation, gender identity, age, education, physical ability, and any other characteristics with which you might identify, please know you are warmly welcomed here.

We of True North Insight are so delighted to have Joseph Goldstein with us tonight and tomorrow. Joseph is one of the founders of the Insight Meditation Society in Barre, Massachusetts, which recently celebrated its fortieth year. True North Insight has come about in many ways because of Joseph and the Insight Meditation Society. Some of the founders—Pascal, who is on the other side of Joseph, myself, and David Shuella, who I think is somewhere in the audience—met at IMS when we were practicing long retreats and volunteering back in the nineties. Inspired by IMS, we wanted to create a Canadian retreat center like it, one that could offer retreats in French as well as English and be grounded in our unique Canadian culture. We wanted to grow the Dharma on our soil, and we wanted to support the maturing of people in practice and train teachers who could speak to the experience of Canadians.

So in 2003, we decided to create TNI here in Canada, and we offered our inaugural retreat in 2006. After fourteen years, we've accomplished a lot, and yet we feel that our organization is very young, vibrant, and growing. Although we have not established a dedicated retreat center and we're using rented spaces in different parts of Quebec and Ontario, that's actually given us a lot of flexibility for more diverse offerings.

Just to name a few things we're doing: we now have seventeen retreats a year in different retreat centers; we have regular daylong retreats in different parts of Montreal, in French and in English; we have long-term study and practice programs, for now offered in English, but we hope to expand that; there are nine weekly sittings in French and English in Montreal, Ottawa, and near Guelph; we have a prison meditation outreach program, which is growing and supporting inmates in their practice while in prison

and also after they leave; and we have a Circle of Giving campaign, which we're inviting you to join to support our growth. If you want to learn more about that, if you want to speak to one of the board members, please look for a person wearing a little tag who will be a board member or somebody closely associated with True North Insight and speak to us either tonight or tomorrow.

So again, thank you all for being here.

My name is Pascal Auclair. I am one of the teachers of Voix Boréale, one of the founding members as well. A few words in French to warmly welcome you, as it is the tradition in Voix Boréale. We really like to welcome everyone, whatever your story is, the story of your people, the mother tongue that you speak, whatever your sexual orientation, gender, your socioeconomic situation, your weight, your level of ability or your physical abilities. Whatever your age. With hair and without hair. On the way.

The birth of this non-profit organization called Voix Boréale took place in large part because of the Insight Meditation Society that Joseph founded himself several decades ago. We met there and we wanted to offer similar services, the same quality of teaching, in Quebec, in Ontario, in this region of Canada. And so now, today, and for several years already, we offer many retreats per year—seventeen retreats this year. We have a program in prison that is always growing, weekly sittings in different cities including several in Montreal. We also offer daylong retreats. There are a lot of things going on with Voix Boréale, so you are here tonight to hear from Joseph and to support this organization. Thank you for doing it.

There will also be, after tonight and tomorrow, the sale of books.

Joseph has written several books, and if you are interested, you can purchase them. He will even sign them—something like that will happen. Suspense.

We ask you, please, to turn off your cell phones. Very important. They're going on retreat.

At the end of the evening, please return the equipment used for simultaneous translation. And also, Gilbert will be taking some pictures for Voix Boréale. If you don't want to be in the picture, please raise your hand, and Gilbert will identify you and not point the camera in your corner. It's just for tonight, and there will be very few pictures taken.

If a friend of yours has a translating device, please help them bring it back at the end. That's a way to support our organization.

I am very happy to welcome Joseph, who perhaps many of you know through his voice and his teaching. He has been teaching since 1974. We are fortunate to have here in Montreal someone with deep knowledge of what he is going to talk about, and who is also here to support us and our organization generously.

We have entered a field of generosity. You offer—you pay to come here—and it makes the organization grow. Joseph offers his time generously. So that's what's already happening. We are already in the Dharma, in the teachings.

It is a real honor. We're very lucky. There aren't many groups who get him this year. And so he's here.

Joseph, all yours.

Merci. Thank you, Pascal. We had a lovely afternoon at Bota Bota, so if I'm feeling a little too relaxed this evening, forgive me.

I thought we might start with a short sitting meditation. I'll guide it a little for those of you who may not be familiar with the practice—just for ten or fifteen minutes.

Sit comfortably, but not too comfortably. It's best if your feet are flat on the floor, sitting somewhat upright.

And often in this tradition, we sit with our eyes closed, but it's also possible to sit with the eyes slightly open, so whichever you prefer.

Simply settling into the awareness of the body, the body sitting. Just sit and know you're sitting. It can be that simple.

And as you sit and know you're sitting, you might become aware of some background ambient noise or sound. Simply be aware of that in the background. You'll be aware of my voice. Settle into the awareness of the body, the body sitting, the body posture—the awareness that there is a body.

As you know the body's sitting, feeling it, you might become aware of your body breathing. Quite a natural process. There's no need to narrowly focus on the breath. Rather, feel the body breathing within the framework of the whole body sitting. No need to force the breath or breathe in any certain way. You simply know you're sitting and you feel the natural rhythm of the body breathing. As the body breathes in, know you're breathing in. As the body breathes out, know you're breathing out. It's that simple.

As you sit and know you're sitting, you'll be aware of different sounds—the background ambient sounds, the sound of my voice, other sounds in the room. You'll be aware of the body breathing, simply staying relaxed and alert at the same time.

When the mind is attentive, you may notice different thoughts or images pass through the mind. See if you can notice the thought or image when it arises. You might even make a small acknowledgement—*thinking* or *seeing*—silently in the mind. If the mind gets carried away in a train of thought, a train of association, as soon as you become aware, simply come back to the body sitting. Sit and know you're sitting. Feeling the body, feeling the breath.

Let the mind and body be relaxed and also alert. Aware of the body sitting, aware of sound. Aware of the

body breathing. Aware or mindful of different thoughts or images as they appear and disappear in the mind.

Well, you just attended a ten-day meditation course. It's basically that simple—just practicing that. And of course, as we do, it begins to deepen into different levels of understanding.

So this evening I wanted to talk a little bit about compassion and equanimity in challenging times. It seems these times are rather challenging on many levels—what's happening in the various political realms, the tremendous upheaval in the Middle East, the refugee crisis, and so many different kinds of suffering in the world.

The question really is: How can we hold this? There's so much, and especially given the immediacy and intensity of the media these days. I'm sure you feel, as I often do, that it's easy to just get overloaded with all the information, and it doesn't stop. So is there some balanced way to both be open to it, to feel responsive to it, and not get overwhelmed by it all—or to withdraw from it?

That seems to me the challenge of basically what our meditation practice is about, but it's really about applied meditation in the world. How are we using our hearts and minds in the face of all of these challenges?

It seems to me that there are two really key elements in learning how to be with all of this in a skillful way, in a wholesome way. And it has to do with the balance of equanimity and compassion.

Now, we may hear more in our lives about compassion. A lot of people are engaged in very compassionate response to situations and doing a lot of great work. We probably hear less about the importance of equanimity. Just as a word and as a value, it seems to have a somewhat lesser presence in our consciousness. And yet understanding equanimity, I think, is the key to being able to respond compassionately in all kinds of situations without going to overwhelm, without being overcome by it all.

So what is equanimity?

In the way that we use the term, one might think of equanimity as that mind space of impartiality, where the mind is simply open to see things as clearly as we can in their totality—the good, the bad, the difficult, the challenging, the easeful. In that way, it could be likened to space. Space holds everything. Space doesn't discriminate between this and that. It's just the space that contains everything. Equanimity has that quality in the mind—that quality of spaciousness that is non-reactive. It doesn't jump to conclusions or to conditioned reactivity in ourselves. It's that space, and it's really an easefulness of mind that's open, spacious, seeing as best as possible the totality of what's going on.

Now, this does not imply non-discernment. It's not a kind of vague settling back, a deluded sense that everything's okay. That's not equanimity—that's just fog. Equanimity is very alive, bright, clear, balanced, open, and it can discern what's what, because it's seeing everything. It's not one-sided, not coming from a

partial point of view. In that respect, equanimity is the absolutely necessary groundwork for wisdom, the foundation for wisdom.

As we're facing or confronting difficult situations—whether personally, in our own lives, in our relationships, in our work, in the world, politically, socially—when we're confronting difficult situations, really the key question we need to ask is: what is the most effective means for addressing this situation, for addressing this problem? We could be moved by compassion to do something, but if we're not clear about what needs to be done, or what can be done, or what we're able to do, then very likely we can just go in and muddle things even more. It's equanimity which gives us that first stable platform within ourselves from which we can see, assess, and discern. There's this situation that needs addressing—maybe some injustice or inequality or political mess, whatever it may be. We're seeing it, seeing the totality of it, and we ask the question: what's the most effective way of responding? Do you see the importance of this before jumping in?

One question is: how do we find this space? I think most of us who have been somewhat introspective in our lives are not unaware of how quickly reactive our hearts and minds can be. We see something or hear something on the news, some political situation—of which we now have many south of the border—and it's so easy to just jump right into a reactive judgment. "I hate this." Or whatever it might be. So the question is: are there some tools, even little tools, remembrances, little reflections, that can help bring us back from that quick reactivity to a place of greater equanimity? "Okay, this is what's happening. Can I see it? Can I take it in? Can I understand it in its fullness?"

There are two little tricks of the trade that I've found helpful in even remembering what equanimity is about. In the moment, it's very easy to just get caught up in our initial reactions. One thing that's very important to remember, in general in life, as we navigate all the many ups and downs and twists and turns and challenges and difficulties of our lives: we need to remember that a vast majority of what happens in our lives is completely outside of our control. We would like to think that we are the center of the universe, and that what we want and desire and what we'd like should be how things are—because it's obvious that they would be the right things to do. But as you've probably noticed, the world is not quite organized that way. We actually are not at the center of the universe. We are simply a part of this great mysterious whole, and things happen on every plane, every level, and in every circumstance through a vast multitude of conditions. In Buddhist terminology, it's always talked about how causes and conditions give rise to things happening.

Just a very simple example: yesterday, flying up to Montreal, I get to the airport—plane delayed an hour. An hour's not too bad. An hour goes by, then it's delayed another hour. Meanwhile, the flight afterwards was canceled. The weather was quite bad in Boston yesterday.

Another hour goes by, delayed further. And there were people making connecting flights to Europe and out to Calgary and going all over the place. It was just very interesting to watch the different reactions.

This was a very impersonal situation. No one had any control of it—it was the weather. They said there was one runway under construction. It was just causes and conditions.

And it was very interesting to see the difference between getting stressed about it and having at least some measure of equanimity. "Okay, this is happening. It's outside of my control. There's nothing I can do about it. Okay, sit back, relax, breathe." Huge difference. And this is about a very small thing. So just imagine being able to apply that same principle in much more challenging situations—to remember, to realize, whatever our feelings may be about it, very often it is outside of our control to do anything about it. We don't have the capacity to do something about it. And so that just helps us understand the bigger picture, to relax.

But right here is a key point in understanding equanimity, and it's what leads into compassion. Very often, people will make the assumption or will somehow make the inner move from the understanding, "Yes, the world is not ordered the way I would like it to be. A lot of things are happening that I don't like, often for good reasons. I don't have control over what's happening." So right here is the key point, because very often people will move from that understanding to indifference. "Oh, I can't do anything about it." And so we kind of retreat into just a kind of indifference about what's going on in the world. And they confuse indifference with equanimity.

So it's extremely important to see that these are two very different things. In Buddhist terminology, indifference is called the near enemy of equanimity, because it looks like equanimity superficially, but it is actually a completely different state. Indifference is withdrawn—we're pulling back. Equanimity is like space. Equanimity is holding everything with discernment. So be watchful of that. Developing equanimity is essential, and we have to realize a lot of things are outside of our control. And yet we don't need to fall back into indifference.

Just another element which I find extremely interesting, and I use this a lot in my life in terms of strengthening equanimity: when I find myself caught up in some drama or other, some reactivity or other—it could be personal, it could be organizational, it could be societal, global, on whatever level—one of the things I really love to do is read history. And I just find it very interesting to look back historically.

One of the examples I give: some years ago, maybe five years ago now, I read this amazing book about Genghis Khan—thirteenth century or something like that. He ruled most of Asia and into Europe. He was probably the most powerful person on Earth at that time, controlled the lives of millions and millions of people. Cities were destroyed. A huge force on the planet.

So I'd like to ask you a very pointed question now: How many of you have thought about Genghis Khan today? Probably not too many of you. Because in the long sweep of history, even given the immense influence and power—and some of it was for good and a lot of it was for destruction—but huge, huge influence. In the long course of history, it was there and powerful and impactful, and a lot of suffering involved. And now we hardly even think about him.

And then you might even think of geological time. When we expand our view of time, of history—whether it's individual history, or of countries, of civilizations, of the Earth itself, of species arising and passing—we get a really big picture. Really big. Four and a half billion years, the sun's going to explode. Goodbye Earth.

I don't know—I just find that it enlarges everything. And it doesn't mean going to indifference. I'm going to explain a little bit about how we don't go to indifference. But it provides a frame, a very big frame, for holding it all with balance and with connectedness and with greater ease, where we don't get so tight or contracted or stressed in the face of these very real challenges.

The avenue for not getting caught in indifference, for not falling into indifference, is compassion. And what does compassion mean? Compassion is that feeling that is aware of the suffering going on and wants to do something about it. It's that feeling that wants to alleviate the suffering.

Equanimity actually opens us to the full range of what's there. We let it in, we see it, but from a place of balance, not from a place of our own contracted reactivity. And then what we can notice is that out of that equanimity, the heart and mind begin increasingly to respond quite spontaneously with compassion to the suffering that we see, that we're involved with.

Compassion actually comes when we're willing to come close to suffering. And our tendency is not to. I think it's important not to assume that the totality of our conditioning is compassion. There may be a lot there, but there's also a lot in our conditioning that pulls away from pain. We can see it in our own bodies and very clearly in meditation practice.

Those of you who have been involved in meditation of some kind will know this very well. How often, when you're sitting and you feel some strong pain in the back or the knee or the shoulders, how often is your first response, "Oh good, this is a chance for me to be with pain"? That's probably not the first reaction. Maybe we'll get there. But the first conditioned reaction to pain is "I don't like this." We have aversion to it. It's a pulling away.

We can extrapolate that to all the suffering in the world, of which we hear so much. Often there is an immediate compassionate response, but sometimes it can just be too much. We can feel the aversion, not wanting to come close, needing to protect ourselves a little bit. It's really helpful just to become aware of all this—without judgment, without self-judgment. We're simply watching the conditioning of our hearts, of our minds, in the face of suffering, knowing that compassion arises from a willingness, a practiced willingness, to come close to suffering.

Just as with the pain in meditation, we may have an initial reaction, but then we remind ourselves: okay, it's okay. Let me just feel it. It's okay to feel pain. It's okay to feel unpleasant. And so we can feel the heart and mind soften, settle into it, feel it. We can do the same thing with the suffering we come face to face with in the world. Even if at first we feel a little distant, we can remind ourselves: let me open to this, let

me feel it, it's okay that I feel this suffering.

What happens from that is a very powerful inner transformation, a development. The more willing we are, through practice—this does not happen just in a moment; we need to undertake it as a practice—but the more willing we are to open to the suffering that's there, what happens is a tremendous development of empathy. We actually begin to feel the suffering of another because we were willing to come close to it. If we remain at a distance or just know it intellectually, it often doesn't drop into the heart. We may know that the suffering is there, but we don't necessarily have that empathetic feeling for what that person or people or group are actually going through.

It's a very beautiful process. Equanimity, developed to some extent, gives us the balance. It creates the spaciousness in our minds, in our hearts, to see the totality of what's there—and the ability then to begin practicing coming closer to the difficult. Sometimes what's going on in the world is really painful, and sometimes what's happening in ourselves or with people really close to us. The equanimity gives us the strength to actually be able to come close, to open to it, to see: yes, this is what's here. The coming close to suffering, in a very beautifully transforming way, opens the heart empathetically to what the other person, the group of people, or ourselves are going through.

And then out of that empathy, the key question of compassionate action arises. I think this is where compassion and equanimity come together so beautifully. Because really, the question that crystallizes compassionate response is a phrase that comes from a book title written years ago by Ram Dass and Paul Gorman. It was a book on compassion, and the title, which I loved, was *How Can I Help?*

How can I help? I find that phrase just captures everything I've been talking about. It's like the equanimity of discernment.

The equanimity allows us to come close to the suffering that's really in our lives. We feel more empathy. And then we ask that question: Well, how can I help? Is there something I can do?

If we hold that question and are really motivated by compassion, by wanting to alleviate suffering, many unexplored possibilities begin to open themselves—things we may not have thought of, ways we might be able to help. Just holding the question itself becomes transformative.

Are you familiar with the term *koan* in Japanese Buddhism? It's a little phrase or a problem that's held in the heart. You hold it and hold it, and it doesn't seem to have a very specific rational answer, but it contains within it the seed of really great wisdom. So "How can I help?" becomes almost like a compassionate koan. This is what we can bring to the world—just holding that question. And then seeing, because opportunities present themselves all the time, in big ways and in little ways. How can I help? I've found this whole practice to be tremendously enlivening.

Just as equanimity can slide into indifference, there's a key point with compassion that needs our attention. It's very easy for compassion to slip into its near enemy, where we think it's compassion but it's

really not. This happens first when it goes to sorrow. In the face of seeing so much suffering in the world, it's very easy to become overwhelmed by the sorrow of it all—especially given the immediacy of the media and the images we encounter. Sometimes it's heartbreaking what we're seeing and becoming aware of, and it's very easy to go into sorrow.

But sorrow is not compassion.

What I'm about to say is really a subtlety of discernment, and you would need to investigate this carefully for yourself, test it for yourself. Don't necessarily just believe it. But I've found it very interesting that in this quality of sorrow overwhelm, there is a thread or an element of aversion to the suffering. We don't like the suffering so much. There's so much aversion to it, and to feeling it, that we just go into overwhelm. That's a very different feeling than what arises in our heart when we hold the question in the face of suffering: How can I help?

Can you feel the difference just now? If "How can I help?" is what's present, even in the face of suffering, that's uplifting—because we're engaged, and we're engaged in a positive and discerning way. Being overwhelmed or going to aversion just leads to despair. And it doesn't help us, and it doesn't help anybody else.

So this is basically the framework I wanted to present this evening. I hope you've gotten some sense of both the importance of equanimity and compassion, how the one supports the other, and the dangers in each—that equanimity doesn't go to indifference, that compassion doesn't go to sorrow—and that we use both of these qualities to really help us engage in our own lives and in the world in a meaningful way, in a way that can be of service.

For the rest of the evening, my intention was simply to open it for discussion or comment. The theme of how to live in these challenging times seems very relevant for all of us, and I would be interested in any questions or comments you may have.

A participant named Elaine speaks: I'm from Ottawa, and I'm very happy to be here today. I'm really grateful for your words. I'm wondering if you could provide some guidance on the question "How can I help?" in the sense of how we can help ourselves before helping others. As an action-oriented person, I find myself helping all around the city, always, sometimes to the detriment of my own personal energy. It becomes a deteriorating process. I often hear about the importance of public service, which is something I wholly embrace—and potentially a little too much. I would love your insight and guidance.

That's a very common situation and a common problem. Years ago, I was teaching quite a number of retreats for environmental and social activists—intensive meditation retreats. They weren't an easy group. I thought it was... I loved doing it. But the biggest problem that people had in their lives was burnout. They were so engaged and so active and, just as you said, not taking care of themselves. It wasn't sustainable.

So it became very clear to them, being on retreat and taking that time for themselves, that this was an essential piece of self-care. You absolutely have to take some time—some quiet time in one way or another—to relax, to let go, to recharge. Of course, meditation—I'm a little bit biased—but I have found it to be an amazingly effective way to clear out and to recharge.

Another key piece of this, and it's what I referred to when I was talking about compassion: it's really important for you to watch your mindset when you're engaged in social action. It's not uncommon at all for people to respond to all kinds of injustice—whether it's environmental or racial or economic, injustice on so many levels—with anger. It's so easy and natural to respond with anger at the injustice. But that anger is not a sustainable energy to effect action. It can be a powerful initial charge for engagement, but it became very clear, and to these people on retreat also, that anger just burns one up.

So we need to find another motive for engaging in action. It doesn't have to be anger at the injustice. And this also takes some practice, because we have to really understand the conditioning of our own minds—how our minds are working, how they've been conditioned to react to situations. And the fact that conditioning is not fixed in stone. We can see that conditioning which is serving us and see that conditioning which is not serving us.

If we begin to see, "Yeah, my response, even past the initial kind of outrage—I'm just being fueled in all my work by this anger"—if we can begin to see that and realize this is not healthy for us, and in the long run it's not going to be effective for what we want to do, then we can begin to move. We can begin to change our conditioning more to that place of "How can I help?" "How can I help?" is not an angry question. It's really a question of compassion.

There are so many outstanding examples of people who were able to do this. The iconic figure in certainly American culture for this is Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Watching some of the videos of the marches, the civil rights marches—surrounded, both in North and South, by people filled with hatred towards him—it was amazing to see. And somehow, he could do all the work he did from a place of love. It was amazing. So it's an example of what we can be practicing.

That's the other part of it: taking time to take care of yourself is not taking time away from your work. It's making your work possible. And then to see the quality of your heart and mind, how you're engaging in the work. So those are the two things that come to mind.

A participant asked about fear: if anger is a flashpoint, it's often a substitute for fear or a transformation of it. But anger can burn itself out a lot faster. Fear can simmer. And the world is a fearsome place. Given that fear may be more hardwired into us, what can you suggest in the face of that?

Also another great question. At least in the meditative realm—this may be putting it too boldly—but I'm an expert in fear. Of all the various afflictive emotions that came up in my practice, that was the one that was by far the most difficult and the most pervasive. So I worked a lot with it over many, many years.

I learned a lot from all those years of practicing with fear. The key learning, which will hopefully save you many years, happened in a moment—though that moment was the fruit of many years of practice.

There were times when the fear was so strong in me, so irrational, that I was afraid to go from sitting to standing. Completely irrational. But that emotion was, for whatever reason—my conditioning, past lives, whatever—that's what was coming up. It was debilitating fear. And then I saw it played out in less dramatic ways in many interactions, where fear would be the first response.

After practicing with it for a long time across many retreats, at one point—and many of you who have heard my talks may have heard this story—I was just doing walking meditation on retreat, and something shifted in my relationship to fear. The shift was expressed in a sentence that arose in my mind: "If this fear is here for the rest of my life, it's okay."

That "it's okay" became my magic mantra with fear.

What I realized in that moment was that what had been making fear such a powerful force in my life was my aversion and non-acceptance of it. Because it's a very unpleasant emotion. And just as with physical pain, our initial reaction is "I don't like this, I want it to go away"—with fear even more so than physical pain. It's such an unpleasant emotion that the tendency is always "I don't like this, I want this to go away." Even when I thought I was being mindful, because I'd been practicing with fear for so long—noting "fear, fear, fear"—underneath it was always "go away."

What was so interesting, and I learned this the hard way, is that resisting something or having aversion to something actually feeds it. So all that time I thought I was being mindful, I was actually strengthening the fear through my aversion to it.

When I finally—and this took a long time—could say "it's okay," when I could recognize it as an unpleasant feeling and still say "it's okay, it's okay to feel it," when my heart really relaxed into the okayness of the feeling, it was amazing. The whole congestion of fear broke up and passed through.

This does not mean that fear never arises again or disappeared forever. But since that time, I've been much more skilled in simply allowing it to be there, feeling it, letting it come and go. Because like everything else, fear is an impermanent, changing mind state, an emotion that is not always there. It comes when conditions create it and then fades away.

So I would suggest this: the particular gift of this magic mantra comes with its price of admission. "It's okay. It's okay. It's okay. Just let me feel it." Your relationship to the fear is what unlocks it.

"First of all, thank you for the teaching. I really appreciate framing compassion in terms of equanimity, this idea of discernment and what is effective. Especially as a Buddhist, or as someone wanting to be helpful, the question of 'how can I help?' doesn't always have an obvious answer—especially to the person

or being you might want to help. And tied to the first question and your answer that touched on this: one of the real challenges we have right now is there's so much aggression in the world, and there's a lot of aggression reacting to that aggression. Very aware, educated, rightfully angry aggression. I find myself balancing wanting to understand that with the flip side—Chögyam Trungpa used to talk about idiot compassion, doing the thing you think is going to help that doesn't help at all. How to actually find that space of equanimity is, to me, the biggest challenge. I mean, the person who probably needs the most help in the world right now is in charge of it, so to speak. And there aren't many people who seem to want to help him. How do you find space for him in your heart?"

There's a lot in your question, and it is a very pressing question for many people. Taking it down a level—relating to people in your life who perhaps represent that viewpoint, and noticing that tendency of anger or aggression toward an aggressive worldview—I think the first step we can take is really to listen. Because it's so easy to go to immediate reactivity and not even begin to try to understand: "Okay, how in the world can these people be supporting this person, these policies, whatever?"

So instead of closing off right away, I think that's the challenge—and sometimes it's really challenging. Can we just try to listen and try to understand? What's behind it? Because nobody's going to change because of your aggressive reaction to them. Aggression just builds aggression, and it doesn't go anyplace.

So that's in terms of not the big guy at the top—probably you won't have an opportunity in that one-on-one way. But maybe there are some people in your life you can practice with. Because even in small ways, to actually practice that possibility of listening to people you profoundly disagree with, people you think are doing really harmful things—I don't know—at least see if there's a possibility of establishing some level of connection just through listening. "Okay, what's behind this? Why does that person have that view or way of thinking?"

In terms of relating to the top guy, it's a challenge. But years ago, when I was first teaching—this was in 1974, 1975, at Naropa Institute in Boulder, Colorado—it was a Buddhist institution, now it's a Buddhist university, but at that time it was just a summer school started by Chögyam Trungpa. So I was teaching there, and I remember this one Hindu yogi was passing through. His name happened to be Ram Dass, but not the American Ram Dass. He said something—I didn't know him beforehand, I've never seen him since, it was just a passing connection—but he said one thing that has stuck with me all these years. It landed somewhere deeply.

This will be a paraphrase because it was that many years ago, but he said something like: when he looks at the world, he doesn't see war, he doesn't see violence, he doesn't see injustice—he sees ignorance. What struck me was that just reframing it in that way changes our response. We can get really angry at the manifestations and the people doing all these things, but when we really drill down to the root of why people are doing such harmful things, it's all coming out of a profound ignorance of the effect of their actions.

But what is the response to ignorance? Does it make sense to get angry at ignorance? Or does it make sense—in whatever way is possible, and sometimes it's beyond anything we can do—to awaken people from their ignorance? That's what's going to be effective. That's a very different inner standpoint.

So just one more story, somewhat related to this. Just after 9/11, I was teaching a retreat in New York—not the city, upstate—but there were a lot of New Yorkers on the retreat. We were doing the loving-kindness meditation. Most of you may be familiar with it: the practice of mettā, starting with oneself, then a benefactor, a friend, a neutral person, then the enemy—somebody who's difficult—and then to all beings.

This was just after 9/11, and of course the question came up as we got to spreading loving wishes to the difficult people, to the enemies. Many people were saying, "There is no way that I can send mettā, loving-kindness, to these people who just flew those planes into the buildings." That was not even a remote possibility.

So that became very interesting to me as a teacher trying to understand. The Buddha talked about mettā as being universal, that it really can be and should be extended to everyone. So how is it possible to understand that universal application in a situation like this? That was a koan—a real inquiry. It took me a little while. I was reflecting on this for quite some time, and then I realized there is a way, and it's related back to the seeing of ignorance. There is a way to send mettā even in that situation, to the terrorists.

It's still going on in terrible ways. But wouldn't it be possible to extend the wish to everyone: May you be free of hatred? Is there anybody we would exclude from that wish? May you be free of hatred. May you be free of ill will. May you be free of greed.

When you get to the root causes of all these destructive actions, it's always some unwholesome mind state that's driving the action. So the metta is not "Oh, may you be happy, may you be well." Those words, those phrases are not going to cut it. But if you get to the heart of it, the metta is absolutely appropriate. May you be free of hatred. May all beings be free of hatred and all the actions that come from hatred.

I think that's the level we have to approach this. May all of our leaders be free of ignorance, be free of delusion. And if that's the space we're coming from in ourselves, and we practice that, then it might open possibilities of ways of responding that would not be clear if we were just consumed by anger.

As I said, equanimity and compassion in challenging times. A questioner wanted to bring this to a more personal level where it feels like it's maybe even harder to work with. The question had to do with how to deal with great grief in the suffering of people you're close to, like your children. When the equanimity phrase that they were hearing was "May I accept things just as they are," their first reaction was, "There's just no way." There's just a deep grief. So how do you work with that situation where equanimity seems theoretical or cold, and yet there's a sense that there's a solution there, but it just doesn't seem immediately available?

That brings one right to the edge of one's practice, that situation. It's a profound question. What came to mind as they were speaking was that it would be really interesting to observe the energy of your relationship right in those moments when you're with the suffering. What's the quality of your energy? What's the quality of your heart when you're not accepting it, versus when you've come to some level of acceptance, to "Okay, this is how it is"?

I offer this not as a conclusion, just as a possible investigation. But the non-acceptance of whatever the situation is—the feeling I got was that the non-acceptance was in some way an energetic closing off or pushing away from the truth of what was actually there. Understandably so, just as we're talking about fear. It's a profoundly unpleasant, distressful feeling. So the tendency is, "No, I don't want to accept this." But the non-acceptance—you can almost feel the contracting away from the situation.

What would be the possibility? Experiment with this in yourself. What's it like, even for a few moments, if the heart actually can say, "This is how it is"? There's a lot of suffering here, and there can be a huge amount of love and compassion. My sense is that that love and compassion will actually be manifest and expressed more on the energetic level—not through words or what you're doing, but just through the energy within you. That love and compassion will flow much more freely in the acceptance rather than in the non-acceptance. Does this make sense?

The questioner acknowledged there's a level of aversion, and that it's tight and closing off. But the question remains: How do you actually get there when it seems almost like an idea? And then: What do you do with grief?

In a way, it's the same question, and the same process. And it is a process—it's not necessarily immediate. But in the face of really difficult, unpleasant, painful experiences, whether physical sensations or emotions, the process is reminding oneself, almost coaching oneself: "It's okay, just let me feel it." It's getting okay to feel the pain of it. Because the conditioned reaction is not to want to feel the pain of it—it's too painful. So it's a practice, but it's a practice that you can do.

And for me, there is a difference between sadness and sorrow.

Sadness is a natural feeling about conditions. When we see suffering, there is natural sadness. Sorrow has, in my experience, a self-referential component to it. It's about me. It's my sorrow.

And so I'll just share my own experience of how I work with that, which may be relevant or it may not be to your situation.

When I feel sad in seeing the world, the wars, the conflicts, the injustices—there's tremendous sadness about it. But when I can feel it as just the sadness of the human condition, without making it about me, without making it about my sorrow, it doesn't become depressing. It's a natural human response to suffering, but it doesn't pull us down into the despair that sorrow can.

What you described in the corporate world is such a prevalent situation. The amount of suffering that's created in work environments by people who are, as you said, themselves wounded. And the challenge is—and I think this is what you're pointing to—how do we hold compassion for those who are creating the suffering?

This is such a hard practice. It's relatively easy to feel compassion for the obvious victims. But to feel compassion for the one who's doing the harm—this requires a kind of seeing that goes beyond the behavior to the pain that's driving it.

In my experience, what helps is to remember that nobody harms from a place of genuine well-being. Nobody who is truly happy, truly at peace, causes suffering to others. So when we see someone inflicting pain, we can know with certainty that they are in pain themselves. They may not know it. They may be completely unconscious of it. But the behavior itself is evidence of the suffering.

And really understanding that difference has been helpful for me, because I experience sadness as something—I don't even know the right words—it feels like an authentic and true response to many situations. Many situations are sad. And that feels like just a very human response and emotion. That's really how I'm defining the term, so people may use these words differently than I'm using them. Keep that in mind.

But in the way that I hear and use the word sorrow, there's much more a feeling of what I was talking about before—aversion to the situation and overwhelm. Even the phrase "overwhelmed by sorrow." Whereas sadness... I've been in situations that have been incredibly sad, and maybe this is going to sound a little strange, but sometimes it's like I almost find the beauty in sadness, in the emotion. There's something—you may know what I'm talking about—there can be something just deeply meaningful and poignant and beautiful in the experience of feeling sad about something. And it feels like a very different emotion than sorrow.

So that distinction may actually allow you to feel the sadness and not think that it shouldn't be there, without falling into the overwhelm or the heaviness of sorrow. And again, it comes back to: in the situation, is there something to do? Is there something I can do in this situation or not? But in either case, I think the sadness is often a very appropriate response.

What about the compassion towards the people inflicting the pain?

The compassion would take the form—well, it could take many forms, it can take different forms. One is just as I was saying with the mettā and the suicide bombers: may you be free of hatred. That really is a compassionate wish, because the hatred is the cause of their suffering. Not only the cause of their suffering, but the cause of them acting in ways that cause so much suffering. And so when we have that wish for them—may you be free of hatred, may you be free of ignorance, may you be free of all the causes in the mind that cause these actions, that result in these actions—that's a compassionate wish. And it's the

only one that really makes sense. Do we want to say, "Oh, feel more hatred. Feel angrier"? It doesn't make sense.

And so that's why when we understand really how compassion works, it is the only appropriate response to these situations. And it has nothing—it has zero to do with condoning these actions. That's not what it's about. It's: how do we get to alleviate or uproot the causes of these actions? And that's the challenge for us.

The Buddha expressed one very well-known phrase which we can see play out all over the world. The truth of it is so obvious, and yet we get caught in it again and again and again. He said this 2,600 years ago, and many people have expressed similar views since then: hatred never ceases by hatred. It only ceases by love.

And we can just see it. If there's a lot of hatred and then other people respond with hatred, what happens? The whole thing just keeps escalating and never comes to an end. So there has to be a way of, in the face of hatred, coming at it from a different angle—coming at it from underneath, so to speak—not just meeting it with more hatred, because that just inflames everything.

But this is challenging. There's a reason all of this is called practice. This is not easy. We are confronting the deepest patterns of our conditioning—not only our personal psychological conditioning, but the conditioning of our culture. There are whole cultures based on revenge. That's the cultural norm. Or cultures based on greed. We're all very familiar with that.

So as we're dealing with these challenging times, these are not easy matters. But the response, the appropriate response, is also not complicated.

As my first Dharma teacher would say very often about many things, it's simple but not easy. It's not complicated once we understand how the mind and heart are working and can see what's skillful and what's unskillful, what's helping and what's not helping. But to change the habit patterns of our conditioning—that takes practice. That's not an easy thing to do, and that's why it requires a certain amount of dedication. But I really feel that this is what is going to help the world.

Question: You've spoken several times about the impact of aversion, and I'm very sensitive to that, resonating with it personally as you talk about it—how central working with aversion is to working effectively with these challenges. I'm wondering if you could say more about what gives rise to that. If compassion is such a natural thing, if we're social animals who naturally feel empathy, yet it gets so easily hijacked by an unwillingness to feel certain things, and the consequences can be so deep. Perhaps you could speak a little more to that and offer some more wisdom about how to deal with it.

First, there is a good side to aversion. It's helpful to know and recognize that. Because each of these mind states—and again, this is within the Buddhist way of understanding the mind—each of these unwholesome mind states of greed, hatred, aversion, and delusion have a positive flip side. And the positive flip side of aversion is discernment. We have a phrase for aversive personalities: generally, they

are seeing things pretty clearly. They have a very discerning mind.

So the question then is first to value that. Don't dismiss the clarity of what you're seeing just because that aversive conditioning is there. Do you follow? You really want to value it. "I'm seeing something pretty clearly. My mind hates it, but I'm seeing it pretty clearly." You're valuing that.

And then, really, the core—which I've mentioned a few times now—the very core conditioning for aversion is our unwillingness or non-acceptance of what's unpleasant. This goes very deep. We all like what's pleasant and don't like what's unpleasant. And most of our lives, this is what we're doing. As best we can, we keep going after the pleasant and trying to avoid the unpleasant.

Well, that is a very tiring, ultimately unsatisfying life strategy, because there is no way as human beings of avoiding the unpleasant. Our life is a mix, and it is a mix for everybody. This is so clear in terms of the process of this aging body. I just turned seventy-three five days ago. First, it's unbelievable. Two, who asked for this? All of this stuff is going on outside of one's control, and aversion to the unpleasant aspects of it only adds suffering. It's like attachment and love—the aversion doesn't help the situation in any way.

So it's realizing that the aversion can see clearly—yes, this is what's going on. You value that. But then comes the practice: it's okay. It's okay to feel unpleasant.

A teaching that the Buddha gave, which I've found very helpful, addresses the nature of the body, but it could apply to many circumstances of our lives. This teaching is like a diamond—if we really get this, it will save us years of suffering. This is a core, pith teaching. It's a reflection:

What is subject to illness will grow ill, and I am not exempt. What is subject to aging will age, and I am not exempt. What is subject to death will die, and I am not exempt.

For me, the startling revelation of that reflection was that even after having taught this stuff for forty years, I still feel like I am exempt. Or if not that I am exempt, that I should be exempt. And it is such a powerful reminder: this is just the nature of things. It's not personal. This is the Dharma.

But our tendency is to have aversion to this because it's unpleasant. That's the deep conditioning. So we need all different ways in practice to counter that conditioning, because that's the conditioning of delusion.

I love that I can just be walking, going for a walk, and all of a sudden—oh, my knee. And I am not exempt. It just reminds me, okay, this is what's happening. And then I take care of it the best way I can. It doesn't mean not taking care, but it's a different level of understanding and acceptance.

I want to set a very high bar for what the practice is really about. This is a teaching of the Buddha that always makes me sit up straight. We can be going along and doing our practice and getting, hopefully, a lot of benefit from it. But he said one thing that just... He said, "As long as there's attachment to the pleasant and aversion to the unpleasant, liberation is impossible."

That is a powerful statement, given the strength of conditioning of attachment to pleasant and aversion to unpleasant. But rather than it seeming like, "Oh my God, I'll never get there," I take it more as an instruction for the little moments. Just little moments of pleasant, little moments of unpleasant. Can I remember that? Okay, can I practice with pleasant? Great, just be with it without the grasping. Little moments of unpleasant—I am not exempt. Can I just be with it? In that way, we're actually practicing liberation all along the way, rather than seeing it as just some far-off goal.

I don't know whether you get the sense, but everything we've been talking about this evening is huge. It's just huge. It's the entirety of our lives and the lives of everybody on the planet—how our hearts and minds are working, the subtleties of the conditioning and habit patterns. You could call them neural pathways that have been established. And really seeing: what are the ones that are just causing more suffering for ourselves and others? What are the ones that lead out of the suffering?

This is meditation in this larger sense. You can almost substitute the word *understanding* for meditation. This is our lives. It's not a hobby. It's not, "Oh yeah, I'll meditate for half an hour a day and then go on and just live my life not paying attention." That's not what this is about. This is really about the transformation of our lives and our consciousness. And through that, hopefully, it has tremendous impact in the world.

May all beings everywhere have hearts at peace.

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