The Birth of a Bodhisattva
Lovingkindness and Compassion as a Path to Awakening
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In the tradition, in the Buddhist tradition, the Dharma traditions, there is the concept and the idea of the bodhisattva. And that's been actually around since the beginning. And about 500, between 500 and 1,000 years – my maths isn't very good, but *a while* after the Buddha died … [laughter] It gained quite a central significance and a slightly different meaning. And what it came to mean in the tradition was someone who aspired very highly with two central aspirations. And one was the aspiration of compassion, of boundless compassion, and serving life, serving other beings. And the other was – and sometimes this is, interestingly, neglected – to fully understand the emptiness of all things, of all phenomena. And those two together – so it's the compassion and the wisdom together – make up that aspiration to live that way, to fulfil both of those potentials, make up the bodhisattva. And actually it was originally meant as someone who vowed to become a Buddha in a future life. But this came about historically – and historians are a little bit unclear when exactly it emerged and how it emerged and where it emerged in the tradition. But it was felt among, obviously, certain practitioners that a while after the Buddha's death, there was not quite a full enough understanding of what the Buddha originally said – and so that's where the emptiness piece comes in – and also that somehow the emphasis on compassion had slipped a little bit, and a lot of people were practising just for themselves. So this rebirth of the emphasis on compassion and fullness of understanding on emptiness.

So a bodhisattva is really someone who is totally devoted to compassion, who lives their life with compassion at the centre, at the core of their priority. Their whole life is kind of revolving around compassion, revolving around the wish, the desire, to serve others. There's a text by Śāntideva, I think eighth century, quite some years after the Buddha's death, and in a way, it's the epitome of the sort of expression of this aspiration. There are a few extracts from this I'd like to read. Has anyone read from this on this retreat – no, one of us teachers on this retreat? It's expressing this yearning, this wish, this surrender to the centrality of compassion, and the movement of compassion in one's life.

> I am medicine for the sick and weary. May I be their physician and their nurse until disease appears no more.
>
> May I strike down the anguish of thirst and hunger with rains of food and drink. May I be food and drink to them in famine and disaster.
>
> May I be an inexhaustible treasure for those in need. May I be their servant to give them all they desire.
>
> My body, my pleasure, my merit, now and forever, everywhere – I care nothing for them. I cast them aside to accomplish the aim of beings.…

> May I be a protector for the unprotected, a guide for wanderers, a boat, a bridge, a causeway for those who desire the other shore, a lamp for those who need a lamp, a bed for those who need a bed, a slave for those who need a slave for all beings.
>
> May I be a wishing gem, an inexhaustible vase, a magic spell, a great medicine, a wish-fulfilling tree, a cow of plenty for all beings.
>
> As the elements of earth and water and fire and air are for the use of all beings who dwell in all of space, in many ways may I be the means of sustenance for the realm of beings in all of space until all have passed into *nirvāṇa*.…
>
> By my merit … May the blind see and the deaf hear … the fearful cease to tremble, the afflicted be consoled and the weary be made content.
>
> May the sick be made whole again, those in bondage freed. May the weak be strong and loving to each other.…
>
> And as long as the earth and sky shall last, may I remain here to heal the sorrows of the world.
>
> I take upon myself the sorrows of the world. May the world be happy.[1]

It's very, very powerful. Very beautiful passage. When Śāntideva, in the *Bodhisattvacaryāvatāra* (that extract's from that) where he puts these ideas forth and this aspiration forth, the chapter before that, it comes, it bursts – he describes it *bursting* into his consciousness as a kind of explosion of this aspiration for compassion, very sudden. But I wonder, you know, alongside – with the language being extremely ornate and extreme and colourful – I wonder if that's also an exaggeration, and if this aspiration towards compassion necessarily needs to take birth in a sudden way. You know, sudden equals dramatic, and people like that because it's like, "Ooh!" But I wonder if this movement towards making compassion central can actually be a gradual movement. Does it need to be sudden? Or both?

And the question I want to go into today is, what allows that kind of compassion, first of all to be there, to arise, but second of all to actually stay, to stay there? Compassion like that, a huge compassion, to have compassion be central in one's life, to have love and compassion be central, it needs – the compassion needs an unshakeability to it. Somehow in the compassion there needs to be a real sense of, yeah, unshakeability, that it will stand up in the face of whatever suffering and all suffering. So the bigger the compassion, in a way, the bigger the unshakeability it needs, the bigger the foundation. So this is really what I want to go into today. And this is where the fourth *brahmavihāra*, equanimity, comes in. How does that come into compassion, to allow the compassion to be stronger and more stable?

So, there are these four *brahmavihāras*: *mettā*, compassion, *muditā* (joy, which Catherine talked about yesterday), and equanimity. And I'm sure Catherine said this, but just to say, *muditā* oftentimes

gets translated as ‘sympathetic joy,’ joy in the joy of others. But really it’s something much broader than that. It’s, you could say, spiritual joy, joy that doesn’t depend on the ego. So joy that doesn’t depend on me getting something, you telling me how wonderful I am, me getting anything. It’s not about the ego. It’s joy that’s coming from an openness, being touched in life.

And so, there’s *muditā*, and there’s this last *brahmavihāra*, equanimity, or *upekkhā*. Now, when the Buddha talked about equanimity, most of the time he meant equanimity in relation to all things and all conditions. So it wasn’t just in relationship to the suffering of beings. So in a way, it has two meanings. One is a very broad meaning: just stable, steady, remaining open in the face of whatever happens, whatever conditions there are, whatever conditions arise. And then the almost like ‘smaller’ meaning, which is actually what I want to go into more today: equanimity in its relationship to compassion, the way that equanimity needs to be there at the base of compassion to make that compassion really, really unshakeable.

So that, in our lives or in our practices, we give compassion to beings. Or we help beings – we work in service or whatever it is. We work to help others. And oftentimes that helps. What we do helps. It’s a factor that helps. But sometimes we’re wishing compassion, we’re meditating, we’re actively involved in helping, and it doesn’t help. It’s just, the person is still suffering or getting worse. So this is really where the equanimity needs to come in.

So, questions: how does that come into the practice? How do we bring that in, in a very deep way, to the compassion practice, this equanimity? This will be the last time I say this piece, on this retreat at least, if you can stand it one more time: this balance, balance in the practice that I talk about – when we talk about compassion in the meditation, there’s the taking in, the empathy, the tuning into the suffering of another, letting the heart resonate, letting that sorrow resonate in the heart, the receiving of the suffering. And the balancing of that with the healing energy that goes out, the balm, that which soothes, that which helps. And feeling that energy on its way out, the balm, the healing, because it bathes oneself on the way out, and it’s actually pleasant, and it’s actually happy, even if it’s just quietly happy, and it’s actually nourishing.

So this is really, really crucial. And as I said, the balance won’t be a set point. It will be dynamic. It will be moving back and forth. But we can develop this skill where we’re actually aware where the balance is at any point in time. Am I too long in the empathy side? Too long with the grief of it? Do I need to sit more in the other side, feeling the nourishment of it? There *will* be grief. There will be. And it’s a beautiful thing when the heart opens and there are tears at the suffering in the world, the huge amount of suffering in the world, or those that we know. And the heart resonates with that. And it’s a beautiful, precious treasure of what it is to be human, to live in the fullness of our humanity, that we *will* feel that, and we *will* shed tears, and we *will* feel that grief.

But unless, in a long-term way, unless we get this, take care of this balance, the compassion won’t have strength and sustainability to it. And that’s what we’re really talking about: sustainability. What gives compassion – just that it lasts, it can really last? It’s really, really important. Now, I’m talking in terms of very specific nuts and bolts of technique with this. But the beautiful thing is it *translates*. Develop the skill on the cushion, in the meditation hall, of this balance, and it translates when you’re sitting opposite someone, listening to them. You’re holding their hand. You’re with someone. You can actually take that same skill that came from the meditation practice and translate it into the personal,

when you're talking, when you're listening, etc. It's just a skill. But this is really, really fundamental, and it gives the compassion a sense of buoyancy. So as I said, how common it is for people to do the compassion practice and then just feel sunk under it, *burdened* by compassion. Often doesn't take very long. Come on a retreat like this, a couple of days, and it's like, "*Phew*! Can we move on to the next one?" So it gives it a buoyancy, a balance, a steadiness, and this unshakeable quality, all of which are factors of equanimity coming in.

And then – again, also to repeat something else I've said a few times – the *samādhi*. So I'm just harping on and on about *samādhi*. In its most fundamental sense, *samādhi* as non-distractedness – or *less* distractedness, put it that way – because, again, please remember it's a continuum, *samādhi*. And I can't remember if I said this the other day, but there's such a tendency to think, "Oh, I have it," "I don't have it, and if I don't have it, then I'm a failure," and the self-judge comes in. It's a continuum. But generally speaking, *less* distractedness – there's actually more steadiness in the mind. You can actually see that. So it's a simple equation: less distractedness, more steadiness. And that steadiness begins to absorb into the being in all kinds of ways. So not to neglect the power of the *samādhi*.

And it's very common for people to say to me, "Well, it's better for me to practise where there are more disturbances and my *samādhi* is actually worse, because that's more similar to what I live with outside. And therefore it will have a greater carry-over effect when I leave the retreat." Now, there's a certain amount of wisdom in that, but don't neglect how much the *samādhi* can actually come into the being and affect the cells and the whole consciousness that way.

Yogi: How does it affect the cells?

Rob: Because *samādhi* is a very – there's a big *physical* sense in *samādhi*. As you go deeper into *samādhi*, the body sense is more and more involved, and the sense of the body. And there's a sense that the body is being more and more steeped or bathed in something that's very, very nourishing and ultimately very, very still. And that literally becomes the more common way that the body feels in life. That openness, that lightness, that sense of strength and steadiness comes into the body, and then that sense is with you more and more of the time.

Yogi: You say it heals. How does it heal differently from compassion? Same?

Rob: Slightly differently, but there's also a relationship there. We can come back to it at the end if you want.

We didn't really go much into *samādhi* on this retreat, but just to say, there could be another retreat where we spent a month just on *samādhi*, or three months, or whatever it is. And as the *samādhi* deepens, it actually brings with it joy. It goes through a whole range of territory where joy comes, and joy comes very fully into the being. And that joy, the *muditā*, is also a basis for equanimity. When we have joy, when we're familiar and have familiar access with a sense of joy in our life, we have enough. And then we're less shakeable in this life and in relationship to our suffering and the suffering of others. So the *samādhi* naturally actually goes on a journey, long-term I'm talking about, naturally goes on a journey through joy and then naturally actually ripens into equanimity.

When we're doing the compassion practice, it's very common and very normal to have a sense of the self doing the compassion: here I am, sitting and walking and kind of flapping as much as I can and trying to generate some compassion. And that's very normal. It's very natural. The self is doing the compassion. And sometimes, *sometimes* – and I'm sure some of you have tasted this to some degree or other – again, as the practice deepens, as the *samādhi* deepens, there can be a sense that it's less the self doing it. There's just a sense of almost effortlessness, or less effort, less self behind it and more just compassion *present*. There seems to be less *doing*. Now, it can be common, if one gets a taste of that at times, to neglect kind of the doing of the compassion and to think, "Well, the really proper compassion is when I don't feel like I'm doing it, or when it doesn't feel to be much self in it." But the whole range is important. And this is really, really important to keep in mind. The whole range of compassion and how compassion feels is important to us.

So sometimes, it *does* feel like, "Here I am, flapping and huffing and puffing and trying to get the compassion going." There's very much the *self, this self* giving compassion to *that self* – very much about self and other, absolutely necessary and fine, and important. So this doing *is* an aspect of compassion. Compassion wants to alleviate suffering, and there's a doing in that. There are also the other aspects of compassion, receiving and holding suffering, definitely. But there's also a doing involved. So, you know, if we are in the presence of a child that's starving, we don't say, you know, "I'm feeling really receptive. Tell me all about it. I'm all ears." [laughter] Silly, obviously. You *do* something. You *act*.

But this is delicate. Sometimes when we do more, or *feel* we're doing more, actually, in the doing, the sense of self gets built up because it becomes the doer. The self becomes the doer, and with it, a sense of attachment to results. The more doing – not always, but oftentimes – the more doing, the more self and the more attachment to the results. And with that attachment to the results, the less equanimity in the compassion. Do you see that?

[20:08] I remember, five years ago or something, being on retreat here for three months and at some point getting ill (I can't remember when it was) at some point in the retreat. And getting ill with a flare-up of Crohn's disease, which is something I suffer from, from time to time. And this is a disease – some of you may know – where they haven't really figured out a cause for it. They don't really understand it. And so, my particular personality, what happens to *me* when I get it is one part of my being tries to figure it out. And I start experimenting with diet and this alternative and that, and sort of taking notes, and … [laughs] And I just, you know, it's just my personality. I can't help it. Well, I probably could. But anyway … [laughter] What I noticed at that time was there were two modes:

(1) One, I was on retreat, which is a very 'nothing to do, nowhere to go' mode. And I could just sit with the discomfort of it and the pain of it and the fear, etc., and just hold all that in compassion and non-doing – just being with that, just letting that be held. And that was one mode, which was a very beautiful way of being with something very difficult.

(2) And then another mode was very much about doing and trying to take care of myself and trying to figure out what the best thing – what would bring healing.

Both are necessary. Just to watch – sometimes, what I noticed was the more that I got into the 'figuring out' mode, out of wanting to heal, oftentimes it felt the more removed I was from the kind of holding of the compassion and the sense of that, the sweetness of compassion, in a way.

Both are necessary though. It's really important to acknowledge that with compassion, it really is a range, and *all* of that is compassion. Even when it looks like one is just tearing one's hair out trying to figure something out or trying to help someone, it's still the expression of compassion – very much so.

Sometimes, as has been mentioned, the compassion practice can seem, at times, for some people, can seem as if it opens out or drops into a whole other sense. There really is a spectrum here. And it's almost like a space of compassion opens up, a space. And in that space, suffering is held, that whatever suffering arises is held in that space. It's a space of compassion. And it could feel like it's a space within us, or it could feel like it's a vast space (and we've touched on this before in this retreat), a space that's actually the size of the universe. It's infinite.

This is a very real perception that can arise for different people at different times. Spaciousness is also a quality, an *aspect* of equanimity – very much so. When there's suffering, a spaciousness around that suffering is a colour, a face, of equanimity. In this practice, the more that we can actually encourage and dwell in that spaciousness, where whatever suffering there is or whatever suffering could possibly arise in the universe, it actually is effortlessly held. And we can begin to get glimpses of that experience and then actually nurture it. We can learn to nurture that experience as a very real perception that begins, again, in a very real way, to change our whole relationship with suffering in the world and in ourselves and in this life. That it moves more and more from 'little old me' who has to hold this suffering to a kind of – it's just held, and one knows it's held, and one feels it's held. And in that vastness of holding, there's equanimity with the compassion, mixed in with the compassion.

And sometimes, for some people, this can be a very – well, almost always is a very beautiful sense, even a mystical or a religious sense, and that's very much a part of it. The perceptions can change. They can open out. And something very beautiful is born there which we can then … not *snatch* at and not try to *keep*, but encourage, nurture, nourish that opening of the perception. And it's a gradual thing, but it's definitely possible. A lot of transformation comes from that.

Someone wrote me a little note with a poem that she'd found from Rilke.[2] It's very lovely. It speaks to this sense of the holding being something almost religious, or simply religious.

[25:39 – 26:18, poem]

Very beautiful, speaking about this holding, which for some people takes a very personal flavour. And in Tibetan traditions and other of the Buddhist traditions, very much the relationship with the bodhisattva, the relationship with the guru or the root guru, as someone one prays to, as someone who's actually holding, in the vastness of their consciousness, one's own suffering. And you get the same thing in mystical Christianity, that the cosmic Christ or the energy of Christ is actually holding the suffering in the universe. That could be personal, but it could also be impersonal – don't need to necessarily introduce any figure into it. And people are different, and they have different tendencies. This is a tendency that can open. It brings a lot of equanimity. One possibility.

When we speak, when we use the language of 'bodhisattva,' and especially when we hear Śāntideva and this kind of thing, it's an incredibly high aspiration. I mean, it's almost like mind-blowingly high, *almost* unreal. When we hear it, it's almost – I mean, that's the flavour that comes off, is a kind of mind-boggling unreality to it. And yet there are people who take it on. It comes to become something

real for them. It translates in a way that becomes something real. But whether we're moved by that or repelled by that, that's actually not what I want to so much dwell on. I want to go into, what allows *our* compassion – wherever we are in that – to become unshakeable, or more and more unshakeable?

So we can have a sense of 'bodhisattva' being a very high aspiration. We also need to respect: "Where are we? Where am I in all this? How is it for me right now, when I'm in a situation with someone that's suffering, someone I know or don't know or I care about? Where am I *really* in my humanity?" And sometimes – you know, this is really something, I think, to give very careful attention to in our life – sometimes we neglect ourselves and our needs. Sometimes we're *too* cautious perhaps. And perhaps there *is* a place for stretching ourselves, stretching our limits, just saying, "To hell with myself and my self-concern," and just a kind of abandon. Maybe that has its place. Or rather, it definitely has its place, but it needs to be approached with wisdom. And stretching the limits of one's stamina and one's endurance in serving and in giving – there is the place for that. And I'm not necessarily talking about something, you know, like literally giving up one's life. I'm just talking about little ways. Just letting go of the self-concern. Sometimes – and you must have come across this – you're doing the *mettā* or the compassion practice, and something's not feeling quite right for *you*. Either the body's niggling, or something's not right. It can be very skilful to just drop in, "It doesn't matter how I feel right now. It doesn't matter. I'm just giving the compassion to you." You can just play with this kind of abandonment of self-concern – not all the time, but just sometimes.

[29:49] But this is a very delicate area and needs a lot of careful attention. Sometimes we need to ask, "What are my needs, what are *my* needs, in this situation? What are my desires too?" I'm sure many of you have had a situation, or have situations, where we are in a relationship or a friendship or a situation with someone where they are suffering. The other is suffering. And perhaps it's going on for quite a while. It's chronic. And we are in a caretaking role in some form or another. So maybe it's just a friendship. And sometimes, even in a friendship or relationship with a person who is bringing suffering on themselves, and you can see that because of the choices they're making towards, whatever it is, alcohol, drugs, the way they're living – you can just see, and yet you care about this person, and you want to live with compassion there. And one can very understandably, very naturally feel in that situation, "Here, in the ongoingness of this relationship, my needs are not being met."

And so this is, I think, very common when one finds oneself in this situation with a friend or any kind of relationship where this is going on in. And especially difficult when the person seems to be bringing it on for themselves, if you've ever been close with an addict or something like that. It's a very difficult relationship to keep and keep healthy. And the question, am I taking care of my needs in this situation? Am I taking care of my needs? Not easy. Because there will be in that – if there's friendship, and if there's a history of friendship and relationship – there will be loneliness that comes in. Sometimes it can feel like the person is just not available. Either they literally don't have the energy to be there, or they're just checked out. And there can be loneliness come in. We don't feel met. We don't feel seen. We don't feel like there's a flow of love and friendship there. We don't feel loved.

So this is all really important stuff to be aware of. What are my needs? What's going on here? And what's it important to take care of? And it can also be complicated by other factors. Sometimes we're with someone who's suffering, and we actually, if we're honest, we look inside, we notice, or we may notice, we want to be needed. We want to be needed. And so, in a way, this is a very weird one.

Something in us actually has an investment in keeping the other suffering because – and this is a horrible word, but in some psychotherapies they call it 'co-dependency.' It's actually a mutual investment in someone suffering and the other person kind of wanting to keep them down.

We have to ask, "Do I want to feel needed? Do I need to feel needed? What's going on there if I do? Do I want to be recognized for my efforts, for the efforts of service and care?" So these are not easy questions. And in a way, some of that is just human. When we give service, when we give, when we're compassionate, there is a part of us, a very natural human part that wants to be – wants our efforts to be recognized. So the question is, or a question is, is it possible to get what we need in a healthy way – in a *healthy* way, that it's not coming into the relationship in an undercurrent, undercover way, that we're actually conscious and getting what we need in a healthy way? Not easy, not easy territory at all.

And sometimes when there's compassion and love and a situation of service to someone, and we feel frustrated, and we feel it's difficult, and we feel aversion is creeping in, and we feel judgment is creeping in – especially if they are not handling it well, or causing it for themselves, making wrong choices – again, compassion, *mettā* to oneself, not to neglect that. It can be so quick to rush in to give to the other.

Oftentimes, though, we don't have that same kind of self-interest. It's not a friend or a relative or a partner or whatever that we're working with. There isn't that self-interest. But still the question, what is it that allows, that helps, the compassion to stay strong, to stay steady, to stay tender? So when I say 'strength,' I really mean to stay open, that the heart stays open, and stays soft and tender. What allows that? Often in the world we do see – it's clear. We look at another, and we can see. We look at others, and we see they are, you could say – one way of putting it is they're causing suffering for themselves or others, and out of ignorance. They're just not seeing the consequences of their actions or their way of being. And it's clear, and we look and we see that. And this is partly why equanimity is – why I want to speak about it. It's so important. The equanimity needs to come in.

Remember we talked about near enemies? And near enemies of loving-kindness and near enemies of compassion. A near enemy of equanimity – something that *looks* like it but on closer inspection is really *not* it – the near enemy of equanimity is indifference. It's just, the heart's actually shut down, cold, disinterested, disconnected, whereas equanimity is actually open. It's still tender. It's still soft. It's interested. It's present. So oftentimes, indifference can even be dressed up in spiritual language. But it's not equanimity. Spiritual language in different traditions, you know, we have the notion of karma. And how often people – the temptation is to hear, "They're suffering" – the attitude – "It's just their karma. It's their karma, and they need to go through it." That's an Eastern concept. Or in the West, it's, you know, "God's punishing them," or something. These are taking spiritual concepts and using them in immature understandings. Rather to ask, "What is my responsibility to suffering, with suffering?" This is a huge question: "What's my responsibility? What's my response-ability, my ability to respond? What is my response?"

[37:39] So compassion, and particularly compassion with equanimity in it, has two factors which I want to say a bit about and talk around for a little bit. Compassion needs to have wisdom in it, and it needs to have faith in it. I want to talk around this for a little bit; it needs to have wisdom and faith. And this is at all kinds of different levels. So at a very sort of, I don't know, is it mundane level, perhaps, one aspect of wisdom is just realizing the limits of our actions. So very easy to see this in the context of

a political context, the limits, even in a democracy. You know, the tendency is to think, "What difference does it make if I vote or not?" Or certainly to see it very clearly with globalization. To realize the actual limits of one's actions and just to see: we are limited. Or even in other contexts, you have to see that here, one may be giving service or acting compassionately or trying to alleviate the suffering, and it's only one strand in a web of conditions. So what we do, what we choose to do, how we act and speak is just one strand in a web of conditions, in a web of interdependence.

For example, I mean, it's interesting giving talks, for many reasons. But one gives a talk, and one wants to help. One wants to offer something to help. And it's important, you know, for me to reflect, and I think for everyone who's doing this kind of thing, or any kind of act, to reflect that one gives a talk – there's so much going on. Like right now, there's so much going on making up this talk. It may seem to me or to you that *I'm* giving the talk. Now, of course, at one level, I am. But actually, and if anyone has ever been involved in any kind of performing art, what you become aware of is, the talk is actually a collaboration. I'm actually doing most of the talking. [laughter] Although this group's interesting! [laughter] But anyway, it's actually a collaboration. So I still have this piece of paper and the notes and what I want to get through in the course of the talk. But there's something in the way everyone is present or not present, wakeful or not wakeful, interested or not, *everything* – you know, if you ate too much for lunch, that's going to affect this talk. Thank you very much. [laughter] It's a totally collaborative effort. So what comes out of the mouth, the whole energy, the whole feel of it is actually a dependent arising. It's a web of conditions.

If I, in wanting to serve, in wanting to give something, am too much seeing it from the self – there's just one strand there. It's just one strand. And then the words come out, and *some* of them are heard – let's be honest – *some* of them are heard and some not. And its effects also, a whole – where's it landing? It's landing in a lot of different mind states. It's landing in a lot of different practice histories. It's landing in a lot of different life situations. And one will leave this talk, this retreat, and go out and meet a whole set of other conditions. So a talk, or a Dharma teaching, or whatever it is, an insight, is actually just a seed. And then it needs to meet a lot of other conditions. Now if I, in willing compassion, in giving, see myself as *too* much of an instrument, or *too* significant of an instrument, that's where my compassion is going to get too wobbly. It's not going to have that unshakeability to it. Have to see the web here, in this moment, and certainly in the future.

So, you know, we talked about emptiness the other night – *very* hard to understand subject, very difficult subject to understand just intellectually, and then to really absorb that understanding. For me, it's much more helpful to see something like that, a talk like that – "It's just a seed. It's just a seed." And then perhaps it will meet other seeds, and there will be growing. But if I think, "Right, by starting the talk at 7:30, by 8:30, everyone in this room needs to …" [laughs] It's too much! Beings that we are helping, we need to remember, after this interaction, after this giving of the compassion, they go on, and they meet, they will meet, other conditions and other influences. I am not the sole provider of conditions and compassion.

There are a few very interesting passages from the suttas, from the Buddha. I'm not quite sure where to put them in. I'll put them in here, in terms of conditions. He's talking about karma, and he's talking about the ripening of karma from the past. So this could be, we've done something that we regret, and then we feel the pain of that regret, that remorse or guilt. Or it could be that something bad

has happened to us, and we have that memory. Something from the past is having its effect in the present: karma. He says something very interesting in a few different passages. When the mind, when the heart, is small, restricted, that karma ripens – the memory of what we did, or what happened to us or whatever – ripens in that context of the restricted, the constricted heart. In the unrestricted heart, the immeasurable heart – so one that is either immeasurable through loving-kindness and compassion, or joy or equanimity, one of the *brahmavihāras*, immeasurable that way, or unrestricted through *samādhi* or through insight – in the unrestricted heart, when that karma ripens, when it comes up, when the memory comes up or the effects from the past come up, memory or otherwise, it's in a very different context. And the Buddha said it will barely be noticed. The pain from the past, the karma from the past will barely be noticed when the heart is really, really open like that. So this is a very powerful, very striking and powerful teaching.

Yogi 2: Is that a continuum then, Rob? So you're kind of saying, the more constricted the heart, the smaller the space in the mind, the bigger the karma will be, the wider?

Rob: Absolutely, very much, yeah. So it's a real – all this that I'm talking about is a continuum. Yeah, very important. So the smaller the heart, at any time, the karma comes up – extremely massive effect. The Buddha gives a few analogies – one of them is a salt crystal in a cup of water. How does the water taste after that? Pretty salty. Salt crystal in a huge lake, barely noticeable. And the Buddha says it will come up, but barely noticeable, barely making an impression when the heart is really … So even when beings are suffering, there is the condition that they meet of what the heart is at any time in the future. Another analogy he gives is – and this just says something about the sort of judicial system of his time, but also at this time in different countries – that if you're a poor man, you can be thrown in jail for a long, long time, and no one cares, and you just get stuck in jail. But if you're a wealthy man, it doesn't happen. You don't get stuck in jail for a long time. You don't get thrown in jail. Not a very nice analogy, but the riches of the – again, what we're nurturing inside and the openness of the heart, the cultivation of this as a real wealth, *real* wealth.[3]

So compassion has, as I said, wisdom and faith in it. Compassion has faith in it, and I want to go into this a little bit, what this might mean. This faith gives equanimity to the compassion. Has anyone heard of Maximilian Kolbe? I just remembered his story the other day because I remembered telling you about my trip to Auschwitz. And when I was there, I came across the story of Maximilian Kolbe – hope I remember it. He was a Polish man who became a Franciscan priest and monk ('Franciscan' is a denomination of Catholic monk and priest), I think in his early twenties, and lived in Poland and some time in Asia. And then the Nazis overtook Poland, and he was thrown in jail immediately just as a suspect, because of being a monk and a Catholic. And then released.

He went back to his friary and hid – some way or another – hid 3,000 Polish refugees there, 2,000 of whom were Jewish. And he hid them there, obviously under great danger to himself, great threat to himself. After a while, it was found out, and he and some of his colleagues were sent to Auschwitz, in the early part of the camp's existence. And after he'd been there a few months, just a couple of months, one day in his block, in his cell block, a prisoner went missing. And so the assumption on behalf of the Nazi guards was that this prisoner had escaped. It actually turned out that he had drowned in a latrine

either by suicide or accident. But anyway, the assumption was that he had escaped, and the punishment if a person escaped from a cell block was that ten men were chosen at random and executed from that cell block. And so, ten were chosen from his block, and one of them, one of these ten, on being chosen – he was actually a Polish resistance fighter who was in Auschwitz. There were a lot of political prisoners in Auschwitz at the time. And one of them immediately broke down. He was picked as one of the ten. He immediately broke down: "How are my wife and children going to get on without me? You know, I've got young children. I've got a wife." And he immediately broke down. Didn't make any impact.

But then Father Kolbe, Maximilian Kolbe, stepped forward, and he said, "I will take the place of this man." And miraculously the commandant, the Nazi commandant, actually agreed to let this happen. So the punishment – this isn't very nice to hear, but the punishment was that they were thrown into a little room. I've actually seen the room. It's a tiny room, I thought. It was so tiny, I thought they must have died from asphyxiation, but actually they were left there to starve. And so just thrown into this little room at the bottom of the stairs and left there to starve. And usually people would last a few days before, basically, the body starts to decompose. After two weeks, the camp authorities needed to put more victims in the room, basically, so they went down to clear it out and found four of them still alive. Three of them were not conscious but still alive, and there was the last one still alive, which was actually Father Kolbe. And they killed – well, the camp executioner killed them with lethal injection. That's how they killed them. And he was completely conscious at the time of his death.

So, not a very nice story to hear. But one wonders, hearing – so what's going on? What was going on for him? And you know, that's just one story. One could pick out countless stories in the history of humanity where that kind of level of self-renunciation, self-abandonment is going on in the service of others. What's going on? There's another lovely … Do you know who Damien the Leper is? Have you heard that? Just briefly, he was also actually a Catholic monk in the Dominican order. At one time, one of the Hawaiian Islands was a leper colony. So they would just use it to keep lepers. No one else lived there but lepers because of the fear of contagion. And he volunteered to be a minister to the lepers, to go and live out the rest of his life on this island with nothing but thousands and thousands of lepers. And he volunteered to do that. And he was a doctor, and he ministered to them, and he also was their religious minister. Eventually, I think it took twelve years, but he eventually contracted leprosy and eventually died.

And you think, what's going on? Compassion has faith in it. I'm just picking those, I mean, random. What's going on in a being's consciousness that allows something like that? So we talk about faith, and we could talk a long time about faith. Faith is a very interesting quality. And again, there's a real spectrum to faith. So the beginnings of faith, and particularly if we talk about – we haven't talked much on this retreat about a sort of devotional faith, and too much about relationship with Kuan Yin and that kind of thing. Immature faith, or the beginnings of faith, the faith that "It will turn out how I want" – or we hear, "It will be all right," but what that really translates as, "It will turn out how I want." And that's the beginnings of faith, but it's actually an immature faith.

A path of faith and devotion – and this is a real path for people who tread it – it actually deepens. It deepens, and it matures. And there's a maturing of what devotion means and what faith means. And so it moves – it leaves behind 'what I can get,' 'what can I get,' 'what I am asking you for' – I am asking

God or bodhisattva or Christ or whatever it is, what I'm asking for – it moves away from that. And someone said, not on this retreat, but just a week or so ago, I was meeting with them, and she said to me, "It feels like the gods have abandoned me." And we explored it, and what she really meant was "I'm not getting what I want."

It transforms, and it deepens, and you know, the beautiful words of Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane – he knows what's coming, and he says, "Thy will be done."[4] *Thy* will, not mine, be done. As I said there's, again, this turning upside down of values, turning inside out: *thy* will, not mine, be done. And so powerful and so beautiful. There's this movement into – as much as there's a movement of a path of wisdom into depth, there's a movement of path of devotion into depths. And people write about this. St John of the Cross is perhaps one of the most famous ones. Moving away from the kind of sense of consolation one gets from God or bodhisattva or whatever it is, away from that to *thy will*, and actually into the dark night of the soul, where one feels one isn't getting anything. There's something in that darkness, in that not getting.

[54:16] So it deepens, but I think, when I reflect on what must have been going on – we don't know what was going on with Father Kolbe. What must have been going on? Something happens in the deepening of faith and devotion. And this is what's perhaps important: the view of suffering changes. The view that we have of suffering changes. And in this case, it was through faith. So you can be – *I* feel pretty sure that Father Kolbe was seeing that situation differently. There was something in the depth of his faith and devotion and sense of, in this case, sense of God, or whatever you want to call it, something that allowed him to see that situation differently, so that the suffering is not the whole of reality. This is very interesting. Or that suffering is not as real as it seems. Or that the suffering, again, is held in something else. It's held in something else. All of these are different views of suffering. They're different ways that the suffering is seen and related to.

If we talk more in line with sort of typical Buddhist practice, more Theravāda and that sort of – more what we're familiar with, and we say, "What is Dharma faith? What does Dharma faith mean? What does it mean for us to have faith and bring that faith into compassion?" Again, this is something we could talk so much about. There are perhaps two qualities that are really crucial, two aspects.

(1) One is, the first aspect, I think, of faith is that beautiful – it's also an insight – beautiful qualities, cultivating beautiful qualities, cultivating this openness of heart and everything that brings that (generosity and equanimity, and *samādhi* and *mettā* and love, all those qualities), **cultivation of beautiful qualities brings well-being and happiness and security**. That's what brings – I think I said this in another talk – that's what brings security in life. There's a wisdom in seeing that, and there's a faith in it – faith in that, and also faith that it's possible for me. It's possible for me to cultivate – wherever I am now, whatever lack of beautiful qualities I seem to have when I look inside, however impoverished I feel – it's possible for me, it's possible for this being, this heart, this mind, to cultivate beautiful qualities and grow, let them grow. The first aspect of faith.

(2) The second aspect of faith, in a more Dharma sense, strictly Dharma or *conventional* Dharma sense, is that **freedom from suffering is possible**. This is at the root of any kind of Dharma understanding. But it's interesting, because different Dharma scenes are different, and this is a particular one, sort of typical Gaia House scene. But one could say, "Freedom from suffering is possible *generally*." In other words, it is possible, awakening is possible, freedom from suffering is

possible in a very general, complete sense. And it's interesting how many practitioners and even long-term practitioners believe that. And I know people who have been practising decades and actually don't believe in the possibility of awakening or enlightenment. I'm not going to get into that now.

What's more important, I think, is also, in the moment, freedom from suffering is possible. Or it's possible to, at least in this instance, whatever it is, whatever's going on, less suffering is possible. A degree of freedom of suffering is possible. That's a real faith. That's a wisdom as well. And that's active. It does something. It means, here I am in a situation of suffering, and I know, I have faith that it's possible for me to suffer less, or another to suffer less.

And what that faith, kind of with wisdom in it, what it does is it brings an aliveness into the relationship with the suffering. It brings an aliveness, an openness, an inquiry, a responsiveness. And this is really, really – in a way, it's such a small shift, but it's so significant. It's what transforms a moment of suffering into a moment of potential and practice. Otherwise, how are we viewing suffering? If none of this faith and wisdom is there, how are we actually viewing suffering, our own and others'? I think nowadays that we live in a non-religious culture, a very secular culture. How easy it is, without us even realizing it, to view suffering as meaningless, and in that, to be actually overwhelmed with suffering. Again, how are we seeing it? What's giving the view and the context to the suffering that we see? Very easy in the modern culture to view suffering as meaningless, pointless, nothing can come from it.

[59:38] So compassion has wisdom in it. And fundamentally, what that means is that we begin more and more, or more and more deeply, to understand the causes and conditions that give rise to suffering. That's what wisdom or insight or *paññā* means: we're understanding the causes and conditions that lead to suffering. And out of that very understanding is born compassion. That very understanding will bring with it compassion. So one could never go anywhere near loving-kindness practice or compassion practice, and just the deepening of the insight will bring compassion naturally, effortlessly, organically, because we're going into the causes and conditions and *understanding* that.

Yogi 3: But Rob, when you say it's meaningless do you mean that – what is the meaning? The meaning is – the meaning of suffering is to be awakened from it?

Rob: Yeah, perhaps that's not the best word. Rather that it's not just a random thing that one has to just – either it doesn't have a meaning, or one just has to put up with, and one doesn't understand, and it's just there. So in the Dharma, in the strictly Dharma sense of faith, it's like, "I can understand something here that transforms it." So, just saying, it becomes a field of potential and a moment of potential. And other ways would be actually putting a different meaning on it which, for instance, someone like Father Kolbe might have. It doesn't matter. It's talking about changing views. But in a strict Dharma sense, it would be, what's the potential here?

We begin to see, when we understand more and more the causes and the conditions of suffering, we begin to see the commonality: that I am doing it, you are doing it, everyone is doing this. What's at the root of suffering? We're feeding suffering with the causes and conditions and through not understanding. And it's that seeing of the commonality that brings a lot of compassion.

Traditionally, with equanimity towards beings, there are phrases. There are phrases that we reflect on, like the *mettā* phrases, and I'm going to read them. So, traditionally, equanimity practice is introduced when one's been doing a lot of compassion practice and the heart is very open to suffering. And then, to balance that, one drops in these reflections of equanimity. So, the phrases:

> All beings are the owners of their own actions. Their happiness and their unhappiness depends on their actions, not on my wishes for them.[5]

So this is in the context of one wishing well-being for others through the compassion practice. Then one realizes there's a limit to that. There's another one. I'll put these up if it would be easier, because it's quite a long one:

> All beings are the owners of their actions and inherit the results of their actions. Their future is born from such actions, companion to such actions, and the results of their actions will be their home. All actions with intention, be they skilful or harmful, of such acts they will be the heirs.[6]

So in the context of a heart that's very open to suffering and touching the suffering directly, it's very sobering to reflect on that – the limits, and what it is that one's actually not understanding in terms of causes and conditions that lead to suffering. And as I say, there's no blame here. It's seeing a commonality. It's really not about blame. But there is this sense that freedom is possible, at least to some extent, and so we're seeing the suffering differently.

[1:03:56] As beings interested in compassion, interested in the openness of the heart, and living in the world, we find ourself touched by, confronted by, the enormity of suffering in the world. It's just there. And we see that, and hopefully we're open to that. And we want to be open to that. And we recognize the limits of what *I can do*, the limits of my actions, as I talked about earlier. And also, oftentimes, we look at the world and the situation in the world globally, politically, environmentally, and how little change often seems to be happening. And sometimes there are huge, massive changes that humanity has brought about. But oftentimes, we look, and there's very little change that seems to be happening. And yet, we might have that awareness – "Not much is happening here. There's an overwhelming amount of suffering" – yet living with love and compassion is the best way to live. It's the best way. So we can say, "What's the point? It doesn't make any difference. It's not going to make any difference." It's the best way to live, even when we're very conscious of the limits and the seeming pointlessness of it, out there.

So I remember, it's changed very suddenly, very quickly, this thing about climate change. You know, there was a relative amount of fuss, certain administrations, etc., Bush, and – "Oh, the science is still uncertain. It's not clear. And so we'll just procrastinate a bit more about what we do about climate change." And then very suddenly it's really an issue. But I felt, even when the science was uncertain, it's like, well, even if we don't know, or even now, if it's too late, what's the best way to live? What's the best way to live? To choose the acts that are actually difficult, that go out of our way, that maybe involve some renunciation. What's getting fed in that? So maybe it makes a difference, maybe it

doesn't. Maybe it's wrong science. Maybe it doesn't. What's getting fed if I just go with the "Maybe it doesn't matter. I'll just carry on as usual"? Maybe just this individual is not going to make a difference, but what's getting fed in this heart and the heart of others when I choose to renounce or whatever it is, or go without, or live differently because it *might* make a difference? What's getting fed? Maybe that's *more* important, or *as* important, a question as whether the civilization survives as we know it. What's getting fed?

Not doing very well with time, but it's almost there. Sometimes with this compassion and equanimity, we can feel as if we're walking a tightrope, and somehow we have to find this middle point. But actually, I think it's rather that a softening comes into the whole thing, a softening of the way one is seeing suffering and suffering that can't get resolved. Like, the whole view of it becomes softer and, again, more spacious. What is it that allows that softening? More than anything else, it's the understanding of emptiness. It's the opening to emptiness. It softens our view. And I would say, the more one goes into emptiness, and the more one contemplates emptiness and understands it, the more devotion comes into the being. And I mean that in a very broad sense. We're actually more and more then devoted to suffering. We can devote ourselves to that in a way that's not attached. So emptiness is not something that's dry or cold. It's certainly not nihilistic. It doesn't mean nothing exists, and it's just, "Meh, nothing matters." If it was nihilism, it would lead to indifference.

Contemplation of emptiness is very gradual. I've never met anyone who it was sudden for, no matter what you might read or hear about. It's very, very gradual. Very, very gradual. It's a very difficult thing to understand, and we contemplate it bit by bit. And slowly, slowly we start to – it comes together for us, and it starts to deepen. There are many levels of the depth of what it means, and that's a slow journey, and one has to respect that. It's very gradual. We need to see it over and over. So on this retreat, we're just touching on it in one particular way in the last week, but a few little ways. There are many ways of seeing emptiness. But the point of a practice like what we've introduced this week is that one sees it over and over. One does this over and over until, more and more, the coin drops. It's not a sudden – [snaps fingers] "Ah, I've got it now!" [rubs hands] "I understand now! That's it!" The habit of delusion, of not seeing emptiness, of seeing independently existing things and selves – extremely deep, *extremely* deep. So part of it is intellectual understanding, but that also needs to come down into the heart at some point. It's both. And just to remember that emptiness is one tool. It's a tool we pick up for freedom from suffering, for the release from suffering. So compassion is another. They're both tools. And there are times when they come together in one kind of flow.

[1:10:01] I remember being – I lived in Boston, and I was there when the September 11 attacks happened, and was actually – I think it was the night or the night after it happened, there was a big gathering in the meditation centre, and discussion, and a teacher was there, and this and that. And at some point, it came up, this thing about emptiness, and someone sort of said, "Well, it's all empty, and really nothing happened." [laughter] But totally the inappropriate tool at the time, because for the person who said that, and for, actually, at that time, everyone in the room, *everyone* in the room, they couldn't pick up that "nothing happened" in a way that compassion came out of it. Now, ultimately speaking, you *could* say nothing happened that day. Nothing happened *really*. But unless we can pick that up and really see it that way, unless our understanding of emptiness is so evolved that that really means something for us, in a way that it liberates compassion, then you put down the emptiness as a

tool. Forget about it. It's just words. It's just cleverness. And you pick up the tool of compassion, and you relate in terms of beings suffering and my response to their suffering. So it's one tool, and one has to see, when is it appropriate and when not?

Yogi 4: Is compassion and love not empty?

Rob: Compassion and love are empty, too, yes. I'm just concerned about time. [laughter] I'm almost done!

One actually eventually *does* see with this emptiness business: suffering, too, is empty. It doesn't exist inherently and independently. And as Jeanette was saying, compassion is empty. Love is empty. It's all empty. And somehow the very seeing of the emptiness of that liberates more compassion. It liberates more compassion in some completely paradoxical – mystery, beautiful mystery of it – way.

How is it that a bodhisattva can make such a huge aspiration and for such huge amounts of time? Because, in a way, they're holding the compassion with the emptiness of it all. It's all empty. I'm empty. The person, 'I' as the giver of compassion. The suffering is empty. The beings suffering are empty. It's all empty. At one level, nothing happened. At another level, I'm right there. That's what allows a bodhisattva to be a bodhisattva, is that the emptiness and the compassion are together. Without that, forget about it. I mean, it's just a monstrous thought.

I think I'm actually going to stop there. [laughs] I was going to say a little more about equanimity in terms of *all* conditions, but I'll stop there. So, we have a little time if there are …?

Yogi 5: I don't get it.

Rob: Should we sit just for a minute, before – sorry, Jeanette – just to have a little gathering?

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[1] BCA 3:7–10, 3:17–20, 10:15, 10:19, 10:21–2, 10:55–6. Cf. Śāntideva, *A Guide to the Bodhisattva Way of Life (Bodhicaryāvatāra)*, tr. Vesna A. Wallace and B. Alan Wallace (Ithaca, NY: Snow Lion, 1997), 34–5, 139–40, 144.

[2] Rainer Maria Rilke, "Autumn," tr. Jonathan Cott. Archived at https://web.archive.org/web/20201102174022/http://www.monadnockmama.com/poem-for-an-autumn-day/, accessed 2 Nov. 2020.

[3] The Buddha's words about the unrestricted, immeasurable heart, together with his analogies of the salt crystal and the poor man thrown in jail, are found at AN 3:101, *Loṇaphala Sutta*.

[4] Matthew 26:42.

[5] Sharon Salzberg, *Lovingkindness: The Revolutionary Art of Happiness* (Boston: Shambhala, 1995), 193.

[6] Cf. MN 135, AN 5:57, AN 5:161, AN 10:48, AN 10:216.