

The Practice of Compassion
Lovingkindness and Compassion as a Path to Awakening
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Okay, so I want to talk in a bit more detail about this practice of compassion that we're doing. One possible definition for compassion might be something, *something*, like: the natural response of the heart to suffering when that heart, when the mind, when the consciousness, is not preoccupied with self, when it's not kind of contracted around self, *what I want*, including a negative self-view, "I'm terrible at all this" or whatever it is. So when that contraction around self isn't there, the natural response of the heart when it meets suffering will be this compassion. That's one possible definition.

So compassion differs from *mettā* in that it's specific to suffering. It's oriented towards suffering. It's a response towards suffering, towards *dukkha*. And compassion as an energy, it wants to alleviate the suffering. It wants to heal the suffering. It wants to go out and to soothe suffering. It wants to free, it wants to free suffering. We could say, when there's loving-kindness, when there's *mettā*, and that *mettā* meets suffering, it kind of transforms into compassion.

Again, all these – *mettā* and compassion and equanimity – they're all just words, but the words can be really helpful pointers of what to cultivate. But in a way, compassion is a kind of composite. It involves a lot of different qualities, a lot of different aspects to it. It certainly includes what we would call empathy, or what I'm calling empathy – meaning the kind of resonance of the heart with the suffering that it touches, or we see suffering, we witness suffering in ourselves and others, and there's a kind of trembling of the heart, I think is the Buddha's words. So we see sorrow in someone, and somehow we also feel sorrow. This is, to me, a miraculous quality of the human heart – maybe some animals' as well; I don't know. The heart has a capacity to resonate, in a very beautiful way, with the sorrow that it encounters in the world. So that's a huge part of compassion. Maybe half of compassion is empathy.

But compassion also has this very active aspect. It wants to give, as I say. It wants to heal and soothe. It wants to do something. So it involves giving. But it also involves, it needs to have equanimity in it. It needs to have wisdom in it. It has a basis of kindness. It has kindness in it. The *mettā* is in it. It needs to have acceptance in it. Compassion often has humour in it. You know, it's not this very heavy, dry thing. It has listening in it. Holding. It wants to hold suffering sometimes. There's a quality of opening in it. It also has a quality of joy. Joy is running through compassion. That's quite important too.

So compassion is all of that and probably more. And again, like *mettā*, it's not just a feeling. Certainly the feeling aspect of compassion is important, but it's a whole lot more. It's a whole lot more than that.

It's interesting, we all signed up for this retreat, loving-kindness and compassion, and yet I still feel that most human beings have a somewhat ambivalent relationship with compassion. Despite our – everyone *here*, certainly – the spiritual aspiration to cultivate compassion, to want to deepen the heart that way and open the heart that way, there's still maybe a part of us that kind of is a little bit wary and maybe a little bit scared of it. We can tend to think of it or feel it as a burden: "I've already got so much stuff going on here. Now they're asking me to open to the suffering in the world." Or, "I've got so

much going on just trying to deal with my own stuff, and now I have to somehow feel burdened by the rest of humanity and beings.” But I think as we grow on the spiritual path, we really see that it’s not a burden. We’re not opening ourselves up to *more* suffering, actually. We’re not *taking on* more suffering through compassion. Rather, if the heart closes or remains closed to compassion, that’s a burden, that’s suffering. That heart will be small and dry and preoccupied with self, and there’s suffering in that. There will be a burden to that.

So there is, though – I mean, this is a human thing – we are ambivalent, often, about compassion. So we have this kind of unsureness about it, uncertainty about it, fear of it. And we also have this yearning for it. Very, very deep in the heart is a sense that this is something that really is profoundly fulfilling to the heart. The heart’s moving out in compassion, opening to compassion, opening to the suffering of others is something almost without which a life cannot be fulfilled. And so deeply we yearn for it because of the connection that it sustains, that it opens with ourselves. Our own heart is deeply connected with its own depth. And the connection, of course, with others. And you may also be having a sense, you know, at times there’s a real sweetness even in the compassion. It’s a very sweet quality. It can be, it should be, an energizing quality, something of it that’s actually sustaining, bright. It should also be – and this may or may not be the case, more or less, but – it should also be a pleasant quality. It’s something that the heart can settle into, and actually enjoy compassion. Not a burden, not something to be scared of. The warmth of it, the beauty of it.

And again, going way back to, I think, something I said in the opening talk, that compassion is an ennobling quality. It really gives a kind of beautiful nobility to the heart. And this is something which we can be genuinely proud of, our aspiration towards compassion. Perhaps on another level, too, it dissolves the kind of prison of self-interest that is our typical dwelling place. And this, again, is something that we’re ambivalent about. So again, oftentimes spiritual practitioners feel the constriction of the self, and that as a prison, and yearn to be free, and yet, “Whoa! Maybe not so fast.” It can be a little bit disorienting, or we’re actually not sure how much we want to let go of the self-interest.

But through the compassion practice, it’s moving that way, through the insights that come from the compassion practice and the *mettā*, through the kind of sense of oneness that sometimes opens up there. And slowly, over time, I really think we begin to sense that we cannot be fulfilled, we cannot actually find a really deep happiness in life if we’re self-centred. From the centre of self, to go out in the world searching for happiness, is doomed to failure, is doomed to limitation, is doomed to actually create suffering. And as these practices mature, I think, I would say there comes a point for people when one just says, “Actually, you know, I’m just not interested in living a life with self at the centre any more.” It’s just something has either gradually or suddenly just snapped. And that kind of life with self at the centre is no longer that interesting.

All this happens gradually, but there’s a deeper and deeper commitment to love and to compassion. And as I think John said, maybe in the opening talk, you know, the Dalai Lama, someone with tremendous years of practice and commitment says, “My religion is kindness.” It’s just moved to that kind of place.

For the Buddha, one of the really important things in his own search, in his own practice, and also what he tried to encourage others, was asking the right questions of ourselves, of life, of practice. We may think, “Okay, compassion. All right. I see it’s a good idea. How does it develop in my life?” So

this asking the questions. How can I develop compassion? How does the heart open more in compassion? Asking these questions – really, really important in life.

There's a story about Gertrude Stein, the writer. I know very little about her, but she was on her deathbed, in and out of a coma, and surrounded by a sort of group of acolytes – is that the word? Devotees, almost. And she seemed to sort of be slipping into this coma and entering the other realms or whatever, and then sort of coming back to this realm a little bit, in and out like this over a few days. At one point, one of her little entourage, whose name, I think, was Nancy something, said, "Gertrude, Gertrude, what's the answer?" Because it seemed like she was going to some place. So when she sort of emerged from her coma-esque state, she said, "Nancy, what's the question?"¹ [laughter] Which I think – well, she was an odd fish anyway.

But in a way, there was some real wisdom in that, because sometimes we have the sense of wanting answers, wanting answers in life, and yet we're not asking very specific questions. If you look back on the Buddha's search, something he was extremely skilful at was asking really particular questions of himself and of others. And when he got asked questions, after his awakening, when he got asked questions that he felt actually weren't really leading anywhere, well, he wouldn't hesitate to tell the person! [laughter] If it wasn't the greatest question, maybe they should rethink their question, or sometimes he would just ignore it.

So questioning is very important in our practice. And of course, we're dealing very much with the techniques here. And mostly the technique that we're working with is the phrases, and that's fine. That's one option. But there are many techniques. You know, if we just talk in terms of techniques, there are many techniques for compassion. There's *tonglen*, some of you will be familiar with from the Tibetan tradition. There's the taking of a bodhisattva, so Avalokiteśvara, or Kuan Yin, Tārā, Jesus, whatever it is, and just opening to that energy, and channelling that energy. Beautiful way of practising. There is the use of insight, what I talked about a little bit the other day: using the insight to just, in all kinds of different ways, to open up the compassion. But the development of compassion in our life is, of course, not just a formal thing. And we have to ask: "Okay, I'm beginning to understand the techniques. This is working for me. What else in my life, so that it can really be a deep current in our lives?" A question: "What is it that nurtures compassion? What is it that allows it to grow in the heart?" A hugely important question for our life.

So we may look, and the first thing, the sort of basis, in a way, is just a willingness to open to and to touch suffering. It's that simple. If we're out of contact, if we're not looking, if we're disconnected from the suffering in the world, there's no way compassion is going to arise, either for ourselves or for others. So it has this willingness to come close, to be intimate, to witness, to see, to feel. And that much may be obvious to people who have been practising a while, but I don't think that if we walk down Newton Abbot high street and took a survey and asked people, "Do you think it's a really good idea to open and to really experience intimately the suffering in the world, your own or others'?", I'm not sure. [laughter] I'm not sure what the survey ... So it's not obvious! [laughter] And even if we've been in these kind of circles, we need reminding. That's the thing without which compassion cannot arise, that willingness to come close and to touch.

And in so doing in our practice, we begin to develop a confidence that we actually *can* open to suffering, we *can* be intimate with pain, we *can* look it in the face, and we can be okay. There's a

confidence that comes into the heart, and that's huge. That's really huge. Because probably the reason that – I keep knocking Newton Abbot; it's probably the same – well, I don't know if it's the same in Totnes. Wherever. [laughter] I lost my track of thought. [laughter] Anyway, we develop the confidence by doing this, which is huge, because that's the one thing that would be lacking, I think, without the practice.

So this willingness. Insight. 'Insight,' meaning, again, how is it that human begins kind of create or co-create suffering? What are we doing that creates unnecessary suffering in the world, for ourselves and for others? That's what insight is – it's understanding how suffering is created, understanding it so deeply that we don't do it any more. When there's that insight, when there's that understanding of suffering, compassion comes automatically. Because we look around us and inside us, and we just see it's going on all the time through clinging, through ignorance, through misunderstanding. And with that insight comes compassion. As the deepening of the understanding of *anattā*, of this not-self, the emptiness of self, as that deepens, compassion is natural: less to protect, less barriers between you and me, less barriers between me and the world. A natural sense of non-separation. And the compassion is organic in that.

Also the importance of – the Buddha talks a lot about association with the wise in order to cultivate wisdom; as well as practice, just hanging out with people who are wise, talking with them, being with them, seeing how they live. I would add to that, association with the compassionate. Like really spending time with people who are really devoted to compassion, to service in the world. It kind of has a way of rubbing off. So a willingness to open, insights, the *anattā*, action. I haven't said that one yet: action, meaning actually doing stuff. We meditate, and hopefully we're transforming our intentions, we're transforming our hearts, so that spontaneously it wants to pour out into the world, it wants to pour its love out into the world, it wants to hold the suffering. We're transforming the heart gradually, reconditioning the heart at very deep levels. And so the movement is from inner to outer. But not to underestimate the movement from outer to inner. We act in the world out of service even when we're not feeling like it. We do something, we put ourselves in situations, and there are all kinds of opportunities in the world to spend some time devoted to service, to compassion. And that somehow transforms the inner as well. So action and association.

And the last one, right now at least, is some degree of happiness, I would say, or well-being, or joy, or something like that, whatever word is okay for you. That when we feel a certain amount of buoyancy it's much easier for the heart to move out, to be not preoccupied with self, not burdened by life. And that happiness is a kind of foundation, not only for the *samādhi*, as I said, but also for compassion.

So I have a friend, I think I mentioned the other day, and she really has an extraordinary capacity for compassion. She's just one of these people that has a natural huge heart. And she has in her, for all kinds of complicated reasons, she has a history of suffering from periods of depression. And when she's in that more folded-in place, her heart just closes down. I think she *wants* to be available, but she can't. She just doesn't have those inner resources. So taking care of our happiness, our well-being, is actually hugely important.

We might ask: what nurtures compassion? The flip-side of the same question: what actually blocks it? What's not helpful? What's kind of getting in the way a little bit? And so, remembering with *mettā*, we talked about the near enemies of *mettā*, the near enemy being attached love. Compassion has four

near enemies. Four things, four qualities, that arise – as human beings, they will arise for us – they can *look* like compassion, they can be mistaken for compassion, but they're not; they're kind of diversions. And again, not that they're wrong or that we want to judge them or that they shouldn't arise and we expect them not to arise. They're actually part of having a human heart, part of our humanity, part of the learning process. So really not to judge these when they arise, or shun them or anything. Actually to look into what the differences are. So they are – I'll go through them in a bit more detail – fear, anger, pity, and grief.

So fear. And oftentimes I've come across people practising compassion and they kind of have this relationship of fear to it. Again, fear of the suffering that they will open to, and it will be burdensome, or that they will be drowning in sadness and drowning in grief. We fear our own suffering. You know, this is very clear to us. There's emotional pain that we have or physical pain, and we have a response of fear to it. But that fear only compounds the suffering. It only adds to it. Now, we need to be very clear about this. Fear is actually not something very helpful in relationship to our own suffering, for the most part. And then in relationship to the suffering of the world, we can feel like little old me is supposed to open up to the, I don't know, maybe infinite suffering of the world, the infinite suffering of beings. And this little sense of self can feel overwhelmed.

So there's fear, there's anger. And this is quite common. It's quite a seductive one, the way that we can see suffering in the world and our compassion, what might be compassion, actually gets diverted into a kind of righteous indignation or anger at what's going on. It's extremely common. We blame: "If it wasn't for them, if it wasn't for you, this wouldn't happen." Or we judge others that we see to be causing suffering in the world. Or we judge our own suffering: "I shouldn't be suffering, I'm so stupid! I've been meditating for, you know, weeks or whatever, and I'm still suffering." [laughs] But this is really important: wisdom, and the wisdom in compassion, understands the causes and the conditions that give rise to suffering, understands what the Buddha would call the 'dependent origination' of suffering.

I think I mentioned it sometime. I did a couple of months' *mettā* and compassion retreat a while ago. And when I got to the difficult category, I had three people in the difficult category. And two of them were these two American politicians. It was quite challenging. [laughs] And just seeing the blame, the judgment, etc., come up, the righteous anger. But as I practised with it, actually beginning to take a little bit of a broader view and seeing that, okay, this particular politician was brought up in a certain environment, he had a certain family. I mean, his father ... [laughter] You know, where he was sent to school, all of it. There's no way – not *no* way, but it would be *extremely* a tall order to ask him, having grown up in that environment, in that family, in that education system, the whole works, to somehow extricate himself from all that and have a whole different way of seeing the world. That's not to condone some of the stuff that's going on, but this is what I'm saying about dependent origination, causes and conditions, actually seeing it. We tend to blame selves, and we don't see the bigger picture. Again, this web of causes and conditions that comes together and makes someone see something a certain way, someone do something a certain way, someone say something.

So there's that. There's understanding the causes and conditions and dependent origination. Really, really important when we see, when we're trying to be compassionate to those who are actually causing suffering in the world. The other part is also a reflection on karma. And this is not a kind of revenge

thing. It's seeing that whoever it is that seems like they're causing suffering, they are actually causing suffering for themselves. And I'm not talking about future lives and all that stuff. In this life, it may not seem that way, but by cultivating greed, by cultivating insensitivity, by cultivating self-centredness, self-preoccupation, they are actually contracting their heart. There's a very real limit to how much a heart caught up in all of that, acting from all of that, there's a very real limit to the amount of true peace, true well-being, true joy that that heart can open to, despite what else comes their way. When we talk about karma, it's not a revenge – we don't get behind it because, "Yeah! They're going to get it!" [laughter] It's really, can we use that as a compassion, as a doorway to compassion?

The last two years that I lived in the States, I moved out of the sort of inner city thing to – I wanted a bit more greenery around me, so I moved to the suburb. And it turned out after I got there that – it was really nice, actually, but it turned out to kind of be a suburb of the American dream, so to speak. And so a lot of people had swimming pools. I didn't have a swimming pool. [laughs] A lot of people with swimming pools and cars and this. And a lot of the cars there were these SUVs, sports utility vehicles, you know, those big kind of ... Do you know what I mean when I say SUV? Yeah, four-wheel drive, exactly. At that time in America, there was no emissions – they could have all kinds of pollutants in the exhaust, and there was no law against it, and they were also of course gas guzzlers, etc., like that. And I'd been quite involved with different environmental projects and movements and stuff.

And so I would walk around my otherwise very nice neighbourhood, and enjoying the greenery and everything, but actually fuming at seeing all these SUVs, and really getting quite bothered by it. I went to my teacher, and I explained what was going on, and she said – my teacher Narayan, she said, "Give them, send them *mettā*." And then she said, "And not only that, wish them *more* SUVs." [laughter] So I was like, "Hoo. Okay." So I left, and I could do the first part, I did the *mettā*, but I could not wish them more SUVs. It just seemed really not helpful. [laughter]

But what I think happened, something at a certain point shifted. Maybe it was from the *mettā*. And I began to see: most of these people were very nice. They were caring, considerate, friendly, etc. They just did not understand. They didn't understand. They just didn't see. They were uninformed. They just didn't make the connection. They were ignorant. One use of the word 'ignorance.' But that, I think what happened with the *mettā* softening it was, seeing that instead of *them* being ignorant, I was seeing ignorance does not belong to anyone. Many instances when *I* was ignorant, I *am* ignorant, of course. And it's like, ignorance is part of the human condition. And instead of belonging to them, it was just like, there is ignorance, and it doesn't belong to self. And somehow in that, there was the ability to be more soft with it, and the compassion could arise. I still thought that the SUVs were really a huge shame, and then, of course, you know, September 11th happened, and people not really even seeing the connection between the oil in the Gulf and all that stuff, but anyway.

There's a difference – I don't know if this corresponds to dictionary definitions, but what I would call 'judgment' and 'discernment.' And the Buddha talks a lot about discernment. Discernment meaning, what is it that's leading towards suffering? What is it that's leading towards the well-being of self and other? To me, you know, American – well, the world now; it's the same in London – all those SUVs, it's actually not leading to freedom from suffering. It's not helpful. Judgment would be when the self has wrapped itself around that discernment, and says, "You" or "I," "*I'm* different. *You're* doing this." Self is wrapped around the discernment, and it's come to be a thing about self, rather than just a

thing about discerning what leads to suffering and what doesn't. So there can be discernment and still compassion, and that's really important.

And so the third thing, when there's anger – (1) understanding the causes and conditions, the dependent origination; (2) seeing that ignorance doesn't belong to self, that ignorance is just ignorance; (3) third thing, what the Buddha calls – it sounds a little strange – remaining percipient of the beautiful. Which means, basically, when we see difficult stuff going on, or someone acting to create suffering, we're drawn into that, and that becomes all we see. I wandered around my otherwise very nice neighbourhood; all I saw was SUVs. [laughs] The mind gets sucked into that kind of perception. 'Remain percipient' means find something in this person that's actually noble, lovely, of good intention, something to balance the lopsidedness of the view.

Okay, so there's fear, there's anger. Oh, and actually, one more thing: when the compassion has gone off into righteous anger or we feel that kind of anger come in, it's actually painful for us. So sometimes this might happen in the course of your practice, if you're giving compassion to the difficult person. To take a moment and just give the compassion to oneself, recognizing there's some pain there. If I'm involved in judgment, if I'm involved in blame, in anger, in all that, my heart is burning, my heart is contracted and painful. Just to take a moment, and turn round, and feel that pain, and touch it with compassion to oneself, and then to go out again.

So it's important that aversion doesn't come into the compassion too much. Compassion wants to alleviate suffering, but it's not that it wants to push it away out of aversion – and there really is a difference, and to feel in our practice and our lives the difference between those two. Compassion is not pushing away out of aversion; rather, it's almost compassion *holds* suffering, it holds suffering, and then adds healing and understanding. So it's something quite different.

Okay, so there's fear, as these near enemies, fear, anger, pity. Pity. And again, this can be, this can look, very similar, but you can feel it in the practice. You can actually feel it and see if you can play with it. Pity towards others is when we're looking down at them: "Oh, poor you, down there suffering, worldling!" [laughter] It creeps in, and sometimes in very subtle ways, you know: "Oh, that's not the sort of suffering *I* get involved in" or whatever. Sometimes it's barely a thought, but there's just a stance of kind of looking down.

You can see it also, interestingly, in ourselves. We can somehow get into self-pity, and that's quite common. Maybe it's when we're comparing our state of suffering with others, and we're sort of down. But to see that self-pity is something *disempowering*. Compassion is something that's actually energizing and healing, and moves towards the alleviation of suffering. Self-pity will just keep it cycling. It's *disempowering*. It actually *keeps* suffering there. Compassion to self and other is empowering and not debilitating. So in the practice, you can see: when has pity crept in, and is there some way I can equalize things again?

All the near enemies, what they have in common is that there's too much self-view in the mix at that time. Whether it's anger or fear or pity, whatever, there's too much self, either my self or your self, their self. Too much selfing is going on. There's too much of that in the picture. Can we remedy that by beginning to see the commonality? See the commonality of suffering, of ignorance, of whatever it is. And so this happens as we're meditating, and sometimes we just need to make a little shift, see what's

common, and it can help. So suffering is suffering, and it's something that we all have. And delusion is delusion, and it's something that we all have.

Last one is a little bit more complicated: grief. If there's too much grief comes into the compassion practice – and it's quite common – we can feel overwhelmed. We can really feel tired and burdened, and the practice can become tiring and debilitating. It's a little bit complicated, because sometimes we touch on things and it's necessary to feel the grief and to kind of release grief. However, maybe just to add, sometimes to look into: how does grief sometimes spiral and feed itself? So grief, even if it's a very real and necessary grief, we actually feel quite tired afterwards; even if it's very real, I need to release this, there's a kind of tiredness to it. That low physical energy can then actually set up the conditions for more grief, and it can just keep going like that, because the physical energy has sunk. So just something to be aware of when we're working with grief. Some of it may be really necessary. Sometimes it might just be spiralling in an unnecessary way. For the practice of compassion, we don't want to be too much over in the grief all the time. For some, it's going to be inevitable and it's actually a beautiful thing, that the heart is touched by that. But you want it to be balanced.

That aspect of balance, we did talk about it the other day, and I'll just mention it again briefly, because it's really important. As we open to the suffering, there's the empathy, there's the trembling of the heart, the quivering of the heart, the sorrow that we feel at that suffering in the world, the sadness that we feel. That's natural. If there's too much of that, we *will* get tired and feel burdened, if we emphasize that too much in practice.

So we can be aware, as the practice is going on, of where the balance is. And you can just lean over a little bit more to feeling the energy that's more going out to heal, to soothe, to comfort. That has a kind of brightness to it. It has a kind of healing quality that's touching ourselves on its way out. And it will give the awareness, the heart, some buoyancy and some sense of well-being and happiness. And it's really, really necessary. So that the practice of compassion can be really sustainable. It doesn't feel like, "Ugh. I'm exhausted now. Can we move on to the next *brahmavihāra*?" It actually feels like one could just keep going with compassion, because it feels very lovely. And one can keep leaning the mind into feeling that loveliness, that nourishment of that, and feeling it in the body as well. This is really, really important. And it's not a fixed point of balance that we find; it's always going to be moving. But it's something that we can be responsive to.

As the practice of compassion deepens – so we're working with this balance, and we're healing, we're sensitive to suffering, and we're radiating out the healing – as it deepens, sometimes there's a possibility it deepens to, in a way, a third aspect. Not just the empathizing and the giving out, but a third aspect of what I would call 'spaciousness,' or 'equanimity' comes in, or a kind of 'holding' comes in. Sometimes it can be there really is a sense of space [that] opens up in the practice of compassion. And it's almost as if that space – the space of compassion, or could call it the space of awareness, or just the space of the universe, whatever you want to call it – somehow feels like it effortlessly and organically holds whatever suffering arises. The space feels like it's infinitely vast, and it's just there, just present. All the suffering that has arisen, that ever has arisen, all the suffering that ever will arise, all the suffering that is, is accommodated in that space.

And at this point, if the practice – and again, not to grasp at any of this – but if the practice deepens to that level, it's kind of like the self has gone out of it at that point. It no longer feels like I'm sitting

here *doing* the compassion practice, I'm *giving* the compassion, the self is cranking it and out comes the compassion. It's more like there's a sitting back and allowing the space to hold the suffering, effortlessly. And that too, of course, takes away from the sense of burden – I mean, *radically* takes away from the sense of burden that we have, or overwhelm or tiredness. It's not the self doing it. It's not even the self holding it.

And we could say, you know, some people *do* say, the true nature of the heart, the true nature of awareness, the true nature of the heart, is infinitely vast. We can begin to get a sense of that sometimes. Or it can feel like it's actually a quality of the universe. It's somehow woven into the fabric of space, of the cosmos. It's there. And sometimes people want to talk then in the language of God. It makes complete sense, and absolutely, why not? It feels quite appropriate. Again, it's just words, but. Or in the language of the energy of a bodhisattva permeating the universe, the energy of Avalokiteśvara, the bodhisattva of compassion, or Jesus or whatever, just permeating the universe. In the Christian tradition, they talk about the cosmic Christ. And one Christian mystic, Julian of Norwich said, "Love is without beginning." And sometimes the practice can just, by itself, just open up to that other space. It's a possibility. Again, not to grasp at any of this.

Okay, now the other morning, I talked briefly about compassion to oneself. And again, just reflecting how common it is for us to feel, "Well, there's so much suffering in the world, and I really don't suffer much compared to – I open the newspaper, and I see what's going on wherever it is, in Sudan or wherever." But it's hugely important to give the compassion to oneself, and it's not building ego. You might think, "Well, I'm spending all this time giving to myself. Isn't that just pumping up my ego in some way?" Ego gets pumped up through the *wrong* kind of attention to oneself, actually through *lack* of self-love. When there's the lack of self-love, then the ego has to go out and make itself big in the world, and make itself this or that. When there's *mettā* and compassion for oneself, the ego can just take its rightful place in the scheme of things. And it's tremendously healing, just that simplicity of the compassion practice to oneself. How healing that is to bathe ourselves, our lives, our bodies, our minds, in compassion.

And then, as I mentioned briefly the other day, and just to mention them briefly, possibilities of other, sort of more *insight* openings through compassion to oneself. When we're doing the compassion to oneself, and there's not a particularly strong suffering there – so not when there's really a lot of something difficult going on; one's just going about in one's usual, humdrum meditative day. [laughter] And there's nothing particularly dramatic going on. I'm in the here and now, giving compassion to myself, and I'm just not too absorbed in the feeling of compassion. So it's *there*, maybe, or just the phrases are there, or whatever, but there's a little bit more wideness to include what I see, and the sounds, and what I'm feeling emotionally, and the thoughts and the body sensations. Just a little bit more wideness. There's a climate of compassion, and some degree of *samādhi*, which may mean that the phrases have got very sparse, or not using the phrases, or it's just one word or whatever.

In that climate of compassion, with a little bit more broad awareness, it's like a lens of looking at the present moment, the present experience, through the lens of seeing suffering and the end of suffering, in the moment. So we begin to see little sufferings, little ways that we're creating suffering. And organically somehow, because of the compassion practice, we can just unhook. It just unhooks. We don't really need to do it; it's just organically unhooked. You *may* find this. You may find it.

We become conscious of what we're clinging to in the moment. And it could be, "Oh, when is this walking period going to end?" It could be we actually feel ourselves, the consciousness, move out of the here and now, and we feel with it the kind of contraction and the subtle suffering of that, in the climate of compassion, in the awareness. And it just, "May you be free." And we realize where the freedom is. It's *not* from moving out of the here and now. And we let go of that impulse. Or we may just realize the heart is closed down a bit, and that's not where the freedom is, that's not where the healing is. And it's almost like we're not really thinking about it. It's just happening. And the heart can open again when we see it. There can be a natural letting go there. Or something we're grasping at, or we're aware of how we're building things with the self-story. So there's actually some suffering, and then we're piling on, you know, decades of history and decades of future, and mother and father and grandparents and everything. It's all piled on there, and suddenly we've got this huge conglomerate of suffering. And we're actually seeing that in the moment: "Oh, this is what I'm doing." And I'm saying, "May you be free," and we see the freedom is actually just to let go of that, and just to be with the pain – which is probably considerably less than this whole mass of built-up stuff.

But it could be any level of insight. So, you know, it could be one's been working with emptiness a lot, and one sees: "Oh, I've just, I've moved back into making things seem really real. I'm out of the emptiness." Or "I'm giving things solidity in time." Whatever it is. Doesn't matter. This way of practising can have a way of, I feel, kind of consolidating whatever insight feels fresh. So we feel like, you know, you're on retreat, and I'm understanding this or that about how suffering gets created, and this way of practising can actually keep it being used, keep it active, keep it fresh, consolidate it.

So that's one possibility, and you don't have to go anywhere near that if you don't feel like it, but I'm just putting it out there. And the second one that I mentioned the other day was also: compassion to self, there's some degree of calming that happens, and in the calmness there's a little more sense of just inner space. And I begin to see – don't even ask – "Who is this self I'm giving the compassion to?" And I just see mind moments of experience. A moment of an emotion, a moment of a thought, a moment of a sight, a moment of a feeling, a moment of whatever it is – suffering, a moment of ease. That's all I can find, mind moments. I actually can't find anything else.

And so the compassion practice, as it calms, can begin to feel like I'm just actually giving compassion to these mind moments. There's nothing else there. There's a mind moment, and it's being touched with compassion. So this really does begin to free up the sense of self, and free up the compassion with it. Less sense of self, more compassion. And then we can take that level of insight and actually do it the same with others. I see there's nothing *here* but mind moments, nothing *there* but mind moments. We give compassion to someone else and, again, the calming, we see: "I'm just giving compassion to their mind moments" – in a way, their *ownerless* mind moments. There's no owner. They're just mind moments arising. Can give a real sense of softness and space, and emptiness, too, in the practice. This is bringing the *anattā* in.

So like I said, these are just two options, and really not to worry if they're not – if you're not including them, they're just options. Really not a big deal. Sometimes when we are suffering – in fact, a lot of the time – we tend to regard it as *my* suffering. *My* loneliness, *my* heartache, *my* tummy ache, *my* confusion, *my* grief, *my* sadness, *my* loss, *my*, *my*. And although we know it intellectually, we

actually lose sight in the moment that my suffering is not different than the suffering of others. It's really not different.

So I remember being in a class with my teacher, and one of the exercises we had as a homework one week was: whenever suffering comes up, especially in meditation, seeing if you can reflect for a moment, "Someone somewhere is either going through this exact same thing right now or has." And actually bring that as a conscious reflection into the being with the suffering. Can have quite a strong effect. When we begin to see the humanity – our suffering kind of is human suffering – it can begin to soften, it can begin to open, and compassion for ourselves can begin to come in. Oftentimes with our own suffering, we're actually adding to the suffering by sort of adding an extra layer of isolation, and we don't even realize that we're doing it. We're just contracted around *my suffering* and we don't realize the commonality, and we've added that extra layer of isolation.

We've opened up to all the categories now, or you can take them in order or whatever you like. But sometimes when we're in the compassion practice, we notice, "Well, I'm giving compassion to this person. They actually don't seem to have much suffering in their life, and there's really not much there." That's valid, and we don't need to kind of imagine scenarios for them or imagine that they're sitting on some repressed volcano of suffering that needs to come up from their unconscious. You know, it may be the case, but ... [laughter] The compassion practice doesn't need that. When there's no obvious suffering, we can just bring to mind a kind of sensitivity, a quietening, a sensitivity. Bring to mind that it's not easy being human. It's not easy just being alive. We share a kind of vulnerability. We share uncertainty. We share the challenges of being alive. We don't need to create suffering for someone. Or just to admit: I actually don't *know* what suffering you have in your life, what suffering you have had. I don't know what suffering is going on right now, maybe that I'm completely unaware of. I don't know what will befall you in the future. And it's that kind of "I don't know, but I know that being human, you need and are going to need compassion."

Again, bringing in this commonality, this sense of oneness. So you can actually reflect in the practice: you know, we *are* one, we are one in all kinds of ways. At a very mystical level, certainly we are one. But in the level that we're all vulnerable, we have bodies that are vulnerable to injury, to sickness, to decay, ageing, to death. Just to reflect that we share that; really bring it in in a conscious way, as a way of supporting the compassion. Seeing the commonality, seeing the oneness. And yeah, we share death. We share, as I said, an uncertainty, that life really *is* uncertain. And I'm sure we all know people that – or maybe ourselves – that some news or some thing has happened, and the life has been changed dramatically from one moment to the next, and we didn't know that was going to happen that morning. This is what it is to be alive, and to be in the field of the infinite web, in the field of dependent origination: that we live in an uncertain world that can change, and change dramatically, suddenly.

We're also one in that we share a kind of bewilderment with all of this. So what the Buddha calls *avijjā* – we don't fully, deeply, in our hearts, in our cells, yet, completely understand about suffering: why, how suffering arises, how we make suffering. And we share that until we're completely awakened. We share that, share that misunderstanding of life, of suffering, and also of what it is that *really* leads to happiness. So we can understand that intellectually, but actually, at another level, we're

not really that clear about it or convinced of it. And so we can see that oneness, and bring that reflection of oneness in, and allow it to find its outflow in the compassion practice.

We need, as I said, to touch the suffering of life with the compassion practice, and also to see the commonality and see the oneness. There's a beautiful poem that, in a way, speaks about this. Some of you may know it. It's by a poet called Naomi Shihab Nye. It's actually called "Kindness," but I think that what she's really talking about is compassion.²

[56:07 – 57:46, poem]

I just want to say one final thing about bringing emptiness of self into the compassion practice, another possibility. Sometimes when we talk about emptiness, and the very word, it sounds like there's nothing there, or it sounds quite nihilistic or dry or whatever. Another kind of angle is almost to regard a person that is empty, another way of saying it is: they are infinite. A person is infinite. The nature of a person is infinite.

So what do I mean? If we reflect on this body, the science tells us all of us in this room share molecules that make up whatever it is, our nails and teeth and skin and all the complex functioning of the body. The molecules were actually all created in the same supernova explosion of some star that exploded a long time ago and kind of drifted in this cloud to the earth. Those molecules were all in the same star at one point. And going back way further, the whole universe was kind of compressed into one little, very, very small – with the Big Bang. It was all literally one thing, one fabric.

And we reflect: in the present moment, we are breathing the same air. Just through the course of this talk probably we've all breathed – 99.9 per cent of the air molecules have been in and out of each of us. That means there are very few air molecules in this room right now that have not been in and out of every person. [laughter] And as someone told me, right now, there's something like a 99.9 per cent probability that your next breath contains air molecules from the dying breath of Jesus on the cross. Things like that, you know. But we are in a constant – the air molecules come in, and they become our body. The oxygen goes into the bloodstream. We tend to see barriers and walls and discrete entities. When we look deeper, there *are* no barriers. It's a very fluid, amorphous, non-separate thing, this body.

Food – so Stephen Batchelor has this example of eating a banana. You're chewing the banana, and then you swallow it. Bananas being very mushy, at what point does the banana become *you*? [laughter] When it's being absorbed, and there's sort of mush in there, when does it kind of become you, and when is it still 'the banana'? It sounds funny, I know, but it's really worth reflecting on this kind of thing! [laughter]

The poet Walt Whitman has this famous line, "I believe a leaf of grass is no less than the journey-work of the stars."³ He wrote that in 1855. I don't know what the kind of current astrophysical knowledge at that point was, but I don't think they knew about supernovas and that kind of thing. There's some kind of poetic mystical insight that he was having. And this actually *is* one system, in one way. And Thích Nhất Hạnh speaks a lot about this kind of way of seeing in his teaching.

There's another level, though: the oneness of the mind, the non-separateness of the mind. Minds have perceptions. So right now, there's colour, light. You're seeing these forms, whatever. There's a sound. There's the perception right now. Then there's body sensation, there's all of that, or inner

perceptions. No perception, no mind. They go together. To have a mind, you need to have a perception. If there's no world, there's no perception and no mind. The mind is inextricably linked up with what it perceives, which is the universe. Mind is not separate from the world. It *feels* separate. Self feels separate from others, from the world, from the universe. Mind feels separate. This is the great delusion. Not separate.

So all of this, at first, you know, it can sound like, "Well, that's a nice, cute intellectual idea. Maybe the next time I find myself at a cocktail party with nothing to say, I'll sort of strike up that as a conversation." And then watch the people wander away! [laughter] It's really not supposed to be just an intellectual idea. To begin actually inclining the mind towards that kind of reflection. It can begin to come into the practice on a very real level, and begin breaking the barriers.

Another way of saying emptiness – maybe it's someone's phrase; I don't know who, but – emptiness is fullness. There's a way that this being, these beings, you cannot separate them, mind or body, from the whole rest of the universe. There's no real place where it breaks and cuts off. Emptiness is fullness. We are not separate. It goes even beyond interconnectedness. There's a way that things are just interpenetrating when we really go deep into this. Interpenetrating. Beyond interconnected. Completely interpenetrating. Mind and the world are interpenetrating.

So over time we can bring these kind of reflections in. It's comes into the practice. It's a practice to reflect this way. But the outcome (except social ostracization!) is love and compassion. Looking this way, beginning to reflect this way, opens the heart to love and compassion.

Okay, I think I will stop there. So we have some time before lunch. I've said quite a lot. Are there any questions about either what I've said, or what's been said over the days? Or about the practice at all?

Q1: more difficulty with balance and near enemies when giving compassion to self

Yogi: I found what you were saying about the enemies of compassion –

Rob: The near enemies, yeah?

Yogi: I was sort of reflecting that, in a sense, the sort of enemies of compassion are more problematic when one's working, one's giving compassion to oneself rather than to someone else or the universe. Because, in a sense, there's more attachment, you know, to what comes up. And I was wondering if we could perhaps explore that a little bit more. Because, in a sense, I see the value in giving compassion to myself, but the possibility of then getting caught up in grief or sadness or whatever when things are seen ...

Rob: Yeah, it's true. I think that would be quite a common pattern to get more caught up inside. But not everyone. People are different in their patterns. Some people get more caught up with, "Everyone else is wrong, and I'm okay." So this is important. Firstly, I like to encourage people to give quite a lot of compassion to themselves because of the healing involved, but also because it really does open up as a very deep avenue of insight, as well, into one's own particular patterns and how one gets caught. So

there's that. So yeah, by all means, spend a lot of time on compassion to yourself if you feel drawn that way.

Going back to what I was saying about this balance between empathizing and the sort of healing or the kind of feeling the well-being going out: if one's taking care of that balance, one will also take care of the *samādhi* involved. Because you're tuning into what's nice, there will be loveliness to what's going on, in some quiet way, and there will be a settledness there. In that settledness, part of the result of the *samādhi* will be less tendency to create problems. That's what goes with *samādhi*. But also when there *are* problems, to see them more clearly and more spaciously.

So if you're practising compassion with the right kind of balance, it's good – you're actually opening up to the kind of things you would do in your life anyway, but seeing them more spaciously, more clearly, because they're less ... And as I said with the near enemies, not to think they shouldn't come up; actually they *do* come up. They *will* come up. It's human, and if we can just include that as part of the practice, this is very much in the field of what developing compassion *is*: actually looking at what's not quite compassion, and being willing to discern the difference and practise with it. So they're not problems to shoo out the door too quickly, necessarily.

Yogi: Yeah. I suppose one of the things that ... keeping that balance, as well, seems more difficult when working with oneself. That would be another thing that I'd be including in that question. And so in a sense there's also the issue of, if one has got caught, what would you recommend – to move to practising compassion to others, or maybe work in a more open way? What would you suggest?

Rob: Anything really. Sometimes you can just shift the near enemy. Like you notice, say you're blaming yourself for some suffering that arises, then actually seeing, taking a moment in the practice to reflect: it wasn't self's fault. It was all the conditions, and the past conditioning, and the present, and the situation, outer and inner, that actually led or are leading to what's happening. And just taking a moment to reflect, that can soften it, and then you can, in that softening, take up the compassion again. That might be one possibility. Sometimes it's skilful to actually go and work with someone else for a while and then come back. Sometimes you might want to open up the practice, as I know you do, and just open that and get that kind of letting go there, and then come back. If you can stay within the practice, if you decide I'm doing regular compassion practice and I'm within that, you can just kind of move to a sense of seeing the causes and conditions a bit more widely. And then the softening, and then coming back. That might be preferable. But they're all valid.

Yogi: There's certainly means to work there.

Rob: Absolutely. I mean, the near enemies *will* come up, and they're to be worked with – to be seen, to be understood, to be worked with. And as I said, it's part of being human.

Q2: compassionate action and attachment

Yogi: I wonder a lot about action that is born out of compassion. I can be in that space feeling very compassionate toward suffering in the world, and quite equanimous and spacious with it. But then when the question of action comes in, and this big thing in my life, actually, that's where the equanimity goes. Because how can you have action without attachment to results? Because if you're not attached to results, then how can you be motivated for the action? If you *are* attached to the results, that is when it becomes overwhelming.

Rob: Yeah, sure. Again, it's not that we find one static place with all this, and it's like, "Okay, sorted out my compassion and my equanimity. It's all kind of fixed there." It's more that the whole thing is going to be shifting. So in our practice it's going to be shifting, and in the world it's going to be shifting. Sometimes we decide we want to do something to help, to be of service, and there *is* attachment there. Sometimes we're aware of the attachment, sometimes not. But I would say, don't *not* act just because there's attachment there. It's more like over probably years of practice, one learns to practise with there being attachment there, and kind of softening the attachment, going back and forth, softening the attachment but still working or whatever. So the presence of attachment, it shouldn't hinder one from acting. One acts anyway, and then the attachment is in one's field of practice at that point.

It might be that then one's acting, and it moves between quite attached and then having to be quiet and regain and find less attachment. Even the less attachment, one can say, "Well, I want to do something to help." Less attachment doesn't necessarily mean indifference; there's also *that* that might come up. It's actually moving between attachment and indifference, can be. All of this is going to happen. And in a way, it's just like saying, "Okay, I'm going to act. I know it's all going to come up, and I'm going to practise with it as it comes up." At a very deep level, I actually feel that it *is* possible to act in the world, to want to help suffering, realizing that it's all completely empty. There's no me doing it. There's no person receiving it. There's no action. There's not even any suffering in a *real* sense. It's all completely empty. And yet what should come out of seeing that emptiness is the desire to act. Seems paradoxical. In terms of one's practice it will move, and then it's a question of practising with that.

Yogi: Yeah, I think I'm more concerned about keeping the awareness in the action, rather than how to deal with it sitting on the cushion, how to keep the energy, you know. It's just overwhelming. You try whatever, and there are more hindrances than anything else.

Rob: In the action?

Yogi: In the action.

Rob: Yeah, I'm not sure – is there a specific situation that you're thinking of?

Yogi: It just came into my head ...

Rob: Okay, what was it?

Yogi: The biggest hindrance is the sense of the self.

Rob: I think that what happens with these practices, and sometimes a lot of stuff that I've said today can sound completely abstract, you know – no self, no boundaries and everything. I think what happens is, after a while, it becomes something that's much more workable in a moment as we're moving through action, and more real. But, I don't know, that takes practice. It takes practice. Is there a particular – I mean, you don't have to say what it is, but is it a particular situation you're thinking of?

Yogi: No ... [?]

Rob: It's like my story of the SUV thing. It was coming up, but really trying to challenge it. Like saying, "It's not okay that I'm walking around like this with bad feeling and ill-will and all of that. It's just not okay."

Yogi: SUVs are still there.

Rob: They are. But it's also like, first of all, I don't know what the emissions law on SUVs is now in America. But I think one can come to a point in practice where it feels like some of the stuff that we care about and move towards changing is actually not going to change in the world. For instance, like climate change. Who knows what's going to happen with that? But still, to be in the world with compassion, acting out of compassion is the best way to live. There's just no doubt about it. And we don't know what will happen. This is where the equanimity comes in – we actually are not completely in control of what will happen. Again, it's an infinite web of conditions. It's not just in our control. Somehow, as compassion deepens, the equanimity comes more and more into the practice. But even if something's not going to change, it's still that being in the world, viewing the world, and acting out of a place of compassion is just the best way to be. There's nothing that comes close to it. We can be angry or we can be indifferent or we can be selfish or whatever, but compassion is the best. And we don't know what will happen. We'll be speaking more about equanimity a bit later in the retreat. It's a hard one. It is a hard one. I really feel that we have to challenge it, though. In the moment, we have to challenge it.

Q3: using *mettā* to connect with compassion vs straight in

Yogi: In the sessions, I'm mixing quite a lot of *mettā* and compassion. What I understand is that compassion is born from *mettā*. It's just *mettā* meeting suffering. So I feel I need to connect with *mettā* before being able to be in the compassion space. So in the sessions, there's quite a lot of time with *mettā* before going to compassion. Is that ...?

Rob: What happens when you *don't* do that?

Yogi: It just feels difficult to really connect with the feeling of compassion.

Rob: Okay. There are a couple of ways – it's fine. I think I would rather you could do just more straight compassion so you could be really clear about what the difference is. But it's fine if that goes on. You might want to just be aware of someone's suffering, kind of just sit with that, and see what the response is, and see what comes. Can be really skilful. Or, in the context of compassion, you're actually not getting so sucked in immediately to where the really strong suffering is. So you're thinking of the friend or the benefactor, whatever it is, and you're just aware of their being, and the fact that they're human and everything, and there's a quality of – it's almost like *mettā*, but you're just aware that life has suffering in it, too, and then you're giving it, and then you can turn a bit more and include what might be more obvious suffering. Does that make sense? But it's not too much of a big deal. If you can kind of whittle down the time spent on *mettā* and make it more compassion, that would also be good. Just get more and more used to the feeling of compassion, so that you can cue into that more readily. Yeah? Was that your question? Okay.

Q4: swapping and changing categories

Yogi: With the categories, could you start to sort of swap and change now? Or is it more useful to just stay day by day?

Rob: You can swap and change as you like. I mean, I think John said yesterday, hopefully, that you've got *this* much time to work through the categories. Did he say that?

Yogi: That's actually just what I wasn't quite sure [?].

Rob: *Ohh*. [laughs]

Yogi 2: Who are we working with today?

Rob: Sorry, maybe there was a misunderstanding there. Okay.

Yogi: It was a bit unclear. He sort of said both.

Rob: My understanding was that from yesterday the sort of message was, okay, until, on Sunday morning we're going to start another practice. So between yesterday and Sunday, you can go through all the categories at any pace or order or whatever that you like. And probably the usual order is better. But you can go through them.

Yogi: And what [?] at times if it feels right opening it up to all beings?

Rob: To all beings?

Yogi: Yeah.

Rob: No, not at all. Go for it if that feels more appropriate. And sometimes the *samādhī* does feel better, it feels there's more equality there with just openness and all beings, and do that. But do come back to particular beings as well. Is that clear?

Yogi 3: ... overlapping with the categories. For instance, the person I've been using as difficult in the *mettā* practice was the first to come to mind, the person who's obviously suffering.

Rob: That's fine. Again, you want to take care of making the practice easy. If it feels like I'm not really connecting with anything here ...

Yogi: That's why I'm asking, because that's what I've been doing, is overlapping and swapping. I can stay longer in that space.

Rob: Okay, that's fine. If it feels helpful, it's fine. It's just changing, doing that and then finding, "This is really hard work. This is not really happening." Then I would say it's not the wisest choice.

So again, if you go to all beings in the next few days, there are all those ways I said. You can just be in a space of compassion. Just random images of beings or what you might have seen on the news or newspaper or whatever, or beings that you know or don't know may just come in and go, and come and go. But the space is quite important. Just a space radiating compassion. Sometimes it can feel like you're just resting in that space, and there's very little doing, very little phrases. It's just sort of not doing much; it's just a space of compassion. That can be very helpful. Sometimes, again to emphasize, to be as much as possible in the body with it. So it's almost like the body becomes compassion. It's just radiating out compassion. You've become compassion. Can happen sometimes.

Q5: compassion for non-dramatic suffering

Yogi: ... swapping the categories. The categories I use for practising *mettā* might not be as suitable as other people practising compassion.

Rob: Because there's not enough suffering there?

Yogi: Yeah. Or it's a bit strained to imagine [?] a newspaper story, a very sad situation that I could work with.

Rob: That's a really important question. Take maybe two or three people in the very obvious suffering category, so that might include this newspaper story. But I would say you actually want to keep the others in the other categories, because what we're moving to is a kind of compassion that's universal in

the sense that it doesn't actually just restrict itself to very dramatic, obvious suffering. It's actually something just, there's a sensitivity that develops that – it's just realizing how subtle suffering can be, and that's also something that we have compassion for. And it might be a very beneficial spiritual stretch to actually stretch and just begin seeing this oneness, this commonality. That's actually a really good way of stretching the heart that way. But if you want to add maybe one or two more people to the obvious category, that's fine. Okay.

Yogi 2: When working with all beings, is it okay to exclude George Bush? [laughter]

Rob: Who? [laughter] No, it's not okay! [laughter] Any quick last ones before lunch? Okay, let's just have a minute of silence before lunch.

¹ Cf. James R. Mellow, *Charmed Circle: Gertrude Stein and Company* (New York: Praeger, 1974), 468.

² Naomi Shihab Nye, *Words Under the Words: Selected Poems* (Portland: Eighth Mountain Press, 1995). Archived at <https://web.archive.org/web/20201004093657/https://poets.org/poem/kindness>, accessed 31 Oct. 2020.

³ Walt Whitman, *Leaves of Grass* (New York: Knickerbocker Press, 1902), 70.