Kindness as a Way of Life

"Whatever obstacles arise, if you deal with them through kindness without trying to escape, then you have real freedom."

The Buddha's teaching is for each individual. He said that each of us should practise loving kindness, compassion and tolerance. When we have loving kindness and we are compassionate and tolerant, then we are helping others. Suppose the teachings said you do not need loving kindness or compassion. It is other people's job to have loving kindness and compassion. In that case the world could not be free of suffering. But the truth is that each of us has a responsibility for what we do. If I am free from anger and hatred and all the poisons, I am acting for the benefit of all beings. I no longer need to be frightened because I no longer have anger. If each of us were to be free from anger and hatred and mind poisons, that would be the biggest contribution we could make to the whole world. There would no longer be the need to lock things up. We would not need the police here any more. There would not be a need for education any more, or therapy. And we would give that same freedom to all other people, so they too would have no more fear.

It is very important that in our worldly lives we say, "We are kind and compassionate people and therefore we want to have peace." Now we are fighting with other countries in order to have peace. So many people want to achieve peace; but we do not have to fight to achieve that, we do not have to tell anybody what to do. If each of us could wake up to our compassionate nature, if the whole world could do that, then it would be a compassionate world. If you have a Dharma centre that you like, and you like the meditation practice, it is very important that your practice should not be confined only to the shrine room. When you go home you take that compassion and loving kindness and apply it all the time. Whatever obstacles arise, you deal with them through kindness, without always trying to escape. Then you have real freedom.

Sometimes people get addicted to drugs or alcohol and actions that harm themselves. Cause and result is very different for each individual. I do not think anybody wants to do harmful things deep down. Whatever harm they are doing is a matter of cause and result from their past lives. First of all you need to develop compassion towards them, rather than saying, "Oh, these are silly people, why are they doing all these things?" For the majority of people it is not what they want to do, they are just carried away. It is not because they want to live in that particular way - so you must have compassion.

The second thing to know is that it is not wise to try to help others until you are free yourself. If you see someone is taking drugs and you want to help that person, the first day you may help a little. Then you go ten or twenty times to see that person, and maybe then you also start to take drugs. It does not help that person; instead you pick up the habit, because you

are not mature yourself. That is why people go to retreat. It looks very strange: Tibetan Buddhists say we must help others, yet they run away from worldly life and go into retreat. It looks contradictory but it is not. You have to train your mind; once you have trained your mind your actions can be of help to others. You do not have to do anything special. When your mind is trained whatever you are doing is a help for others. You do not have to think," Today I am going to help other people." Whatever you say and do is always helpful. The important thing is to practise meditation and not to think of helping other people until you are ready.

In Buddhism it is always said that, even if people punish you and it looks like they are doing something harmful to you, your responsibility is to have constant compassion. You should develop kindness even to those people who are beating you up and do so many negative things. You should think, "It must be my past karmic pattern that is the cause of this. May I forgive those people so they will not have bad karma in their future lives." That is quite a high compassionate approach and maybe only a very compassionate person will be able to think that way. Normally people may not be able to think like this, but you can try to think more positively towards others, rather than having anger or taking revenge. A negative attitude will not be very useful.

There is a lot of fear and confusion in the world. When we think about how to help people who are frightened, first try not to frighten them even more! It is very much as if somebody is sitting in the corner and is very frightened of the wind blowing outside. Some people say, "I'm going to help this person," and then they thrust a hand in theirs asking, "What can I do for you?" Of course they will be frightened - it looks to them as if you are going to take them to a mental institution. One should have gentle kindness and be humble and act in a very simple way. One should not take the attitude of "I know all the answers for you." What frightened people need is comfort, soft words, kind words.

Try not to be very forceful, saying, "Look, it's terrible how you're living. You're living like a pig." Some people make others more frightened that way. That is not wise. Even if a person lives like a pig, what is wrong if they are happy living like a pig? You have to accept that person's way of life. You have to accept that you are not the giver of all the answers; you are just willing to listen to whatever difficulties they have, if they wish to share their experience. First you have to become a friend, particularly in the sense of someone who is willing to listen, willing to understand whatever difficulty is experienced. Patience is very important. One should not make immediate decisions - it may take many days, maybe years.

If you want to help others, there is another thing you should remember: do not fall in love with them! Loving kindness does not mean you have to fall in love with that person. As soon as you start falling in love you are no longer helpful. If you really want to help somebody you must have space between you and that person. Just be willing to listen.

If you want to help yourself and others, practising mind training is the best way, rather than trying to go round helping the whole world. If you do not develop kindness and compassion in yourself, then when you try to help other people or other countries your tiny compassion will disappear very quickly. It is as if you have a seed when what you need is a strong tree.

You need unlimited compassion; once you develop the tree of unlimited compassion everything you do is helpful. Whether you have the time or not, all your actions will be helpful. Until you develop that kind of wisdom I think that direct help may not be a wise thing to do. Whatever time you have, put it into practise instead.

I have heard His Holiness the Karmapa speak on numerous occasions. The message I remember most is, "Be kind to people and be kind to yourself." Kentin Tai Situpa's last words at the end of a Mahamudra course were, "Think happy and you'll be happy." "Be happy!" is his slogan whatever happens. If you learn that I am sure that you will always be happy.

Usually kindness is something like this: somebody has been sick, for example they have headaches every day, sometimes the family wonders whether this person really has constant headaches or whether it is a kind of excuse. Perhaps the person does not want to do any housework, does not want to do any cleaning or cooking and claims to have constant headaches. Questions arise and the person is still having headaches and pain. One day you try to help and are willing to go and get some medication. On the second day your words are a little louder and you say, "Eat your food and go to sleep!" The third day you will be louder still and on the fourth day you have no more kindness left. Instead you may say, "You're just lazy. Get up and do something! Then maybe your headache will get better."

The treatment for the headache on the first day compared to the fourth day is quite different. Out of sympathy on the first day one has a little kindness, but kindness sometimes changes. When it goes on for a long time you do not wish to see that person any more. You wish not to have to hear that "I've got a headache" person any more. It gives you a kind of pain in yourself. We call that kindness, but then it does not last.

In the Buddhist sense kindness is the same from the first day to the tenth day. It is the same thing throughout. On the first day you may think it is something to do with a headache and you go to get medicines. On the second day you might offer the same treatment and when the tenth day comes, you do not think that this person is very lazy. Rather you will think that this person's headache must be due to karmic conditions. Maybe it has nothing to do with this life, but with past lives. Thinking that way, you may have more kindness and sympathy for the person. Maybe that is called Buddhist kindness. You do not lose the kindness as time passes.

One of the most difficult situations that arises between parents and children is where you have parents that have been sick for many years. You have to clean the toilet regularly after them, you have to get up in the middle of the night, you have to give constant twenty four hour service to your parents.

For the first few days you enjoy this. You think, "This is my mother and this is my father and I'm responsible for looking after them." When this goes on for maybe four or five years, in your mind from time to time will be the thought, "I wish this person was dead. I have not been on holiday for ten years. I never go out and see my friends." All those thoughts and feelings arise. There is no longer the appreciation, "I managed to look after my parents no

matter what the condition."

Buddhist kindness means that even if I die looking after my parents there is still appreciation. I am grateful to my father or to my mother for giving me the opportunity to take care of them. Even if you have to look after them for twenty years you have enjoyment and appreciation. You are not looking for holidays, you are not looking for boyfriends or girlfriends, but only the full enjoyment of being able to serve your parents. That, I think, is real kindness.

In the West we have changed certain things, because nobody here can make you take care of your parents. I think this is a big mistake. If you really want to be a Buddhist, the first thing I want you to change is this way of thinking; and this is something simple to do: serve your parents, take care of your parents. Do not send them to an old people's home. Do not send them to institutions: that is not the place where your parents should end. If everybody gave up being monks and nuns and gave up living in dharma centres, I would be very happy if it meant they were taking care of their parents very nicely, very kindly and very lovingly. I would be much happier than if you put your parents in an old people's home, and then came to a dharma centre. In that case I do not think you are doing the right thing.

What is the real meaning of compassion and kindness? Compassion is something from which you are not expecting a result. Compassion is sincere and deep and from the heart. Compassion means that I hope, through my prayer and through my action and through whatever knowledge I have to offer, that I can share the merit to bring benefit to others. With compassion you have no expectations of others. You do not think, "I have done this thing for them, now they have to do something for me." It is based entirely on your wish to serve and look after others with no expectations of anything in return such as an improvement to your reputation. If you are offering prayers of compassion for somebody and that person kills or tortures you, you still have the same compassion.

Real compassion is limitless, but in the beginning you have to practise in a small way. You can pray, "May I have a little compassion, and may it be compassion with understanding." The key to compassion is non-expectation. It is not limited to people: compassion and kindness apply to animals and any form of existence, beings with form or without form. One needs to have constant practice, share the merit, give spiritual happiness to beings and wish that they may be free from suffering and from the causes of suffering. If one sometimes feels that an act of kindness towards one person may hurt another - that means that one has not developed proper loving kindness. You do not focus all your compassionate energy on one person - that is attachment, clinging. Compassion and kindness are based on non attachment, non-clinging.

If you have great compassion then all actions will be compassionate. You do not have to think, "Now I have to do a compassionate action," or "this is not a compassionate action." It is as if the quality of the compassion itself is action. A truly compassionate person does not have any negative actions because the action is a product of the compassion. If you have planted a very nice flower it will grow with nice petals. You did not plant each individual petal with its colour and shape, because these come from the quality of the plant itself. If you

work to make yourself a better person, and if each of us works to improve ourselves, then the world will be a better place.

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