

Violence and Emptiness

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There seems to be a question of like, *notes*. Whether you're meant to take notes or not, and I would say *no*. [laughter]. But I didn't write anything down. But if anybody really wanted me to I could, although it doesn't seem likely. But anyway don't write anything down; it doesn't matter that much.

I was trying to be all composed for this talk, 'cos I'm usually not very composed, and I was listening to Vidyamala's talk and I put my hand in my head and it was kind of sticky, and I realized that I'd left the shampoo in my hair. [laughter]. The only possible explanation... [laughter].

But that is not what I am here to talk about... [laughter]. So the name of this talk is 'Violence and Emptiness' which I came up with some time ago, but I think maybe a more accurate one would be: 'Violence and Non-Violence and Emptiness', possibly.

So, I was sort of focusing more on the last part of the verses, which are;

*"Like water and the water wheel, helplessly we circle,
I bow down to the compassion that arises for all beings."*

Which you could say covers quite a lot of territory in terms of what it's talking about. It felt very *big* to me. So, on the "water wheel" part – which is quite interesting – I'm going to say something about violence, which I'm sort of interested in; and then, I've sort of been into writing definitions lately for some reason. I'll probably get really attached to them later, but at the moment I find them kind of fun, and I've written some things about compassion. But I'm going to start off with a poem that was written by a guy called *Jimmy Santiago Baca* who's an American who was sent to prison. I don't know for what but I know that he couldn't read and write when he got to prison, and he's a fairly well known poet now. So I thought I would read a poem by him to start off.

*"The elegance with which
in the sweetest humility the
Lilac senses the time
to show itself –
fights adversity all winter,
coldest nights
blowing storms,
clinging to fence posts,
tossed and heaved,
trampled, pecked by crows,
almost eaten by insects,
pummeled by brute heat –
yet the whole time*

*still as a stone carved Buddha
meditating,
silently greets the world
in its vow of silence, birth to death alone, in the rain
weaving its being into a nameless red blossom
opening at dawn.*

*And its body
we preserve
in pages of books,
that have kept our belief in love,
next to poetry lines we love so much
where we place our dreams
for safekeeping
from the harmful world
that hurts us so much sometimes,
I place this flower.”*

So: ‘*where we place our dreams*’. So as I said, I didn't realize this for probably almost my whole life but I'm sort of interested in violence. And as this person there mentions... I occasionally meditate with violent people who are in jail. But I think I am primarily interested in violence in myself, and I'll say in a second what I mean by that.

But I was just recollecting a time when I was about five and I had learned to read (and I'm guessing that's how old I was), and I noticed a newspaper on a table somewhere, and I went and said, “*This is no longer a mystery of jumbles of symbols, I can read it.*” I was very excited, and I picked up the newspaper and I have no, (this would have been around 1968), I have no recollection of what I read. It might have been to do with Vietnam, it might have been to do with the Civil Rights Movement, I don't know. But I know that I was so shocked by the violence that was in this newspaper that I just started bawling, sitting on this couch, and I remember thinking, “*God I can't...Like how am I going to live. Everything's so horrible!*” And I still feel like that occasionally.

So I said I was interested in violence, but probably interested isn't really the right word – but I think that I was born with an intense sensitivity to all sort of levels of violence. I feel like that is my... almost like a karmic inheritance. And I suspect that other people have this sensitivity also, but I don't know about that actually. And so I'll just say what I mean by violence. I mean, you know the obvious things, bombs exploding on underground trains, domestic violence, which is what about half of the people I meditate with in the jail have engaged in; racism, sexism, which are like violent pre-characterisations of someone. And then also harsh speech, criticism, irritation, annoyance, addiction, being self deprecating, being bossy, the list is endless...

So there are many ways to talk about it. I was thinking of it earlier as a kind of immaturity... violence. But I think the the violence that I've been the most interested in lately is maybe a lot more subtle than all these ones I've just named. Which is, basically, experiencing my own subtle resistance in meditation, and having a very strong experience of just resisting really basic experiences. And I don't think that that is fundamentally different from any of the other kinds of violence that I named. I suspect that it's all the same thing.

And this is the wheel that we all hopelessly circle on. Or the wheel that the water circles in. And what I said about this kind of sensitivity to all these different kinds of violence – I'll also mention that I've also shocked myself with all these things like harsh speech and stuff. I remember when I first started going on retreat, I used to get off retreat and I'd be all mellow, and calm, and nice and everything – and then I'd just say something, and it would be shocking because it was just the way I was used to speaking, but it was really violent. And it still happens every once in a while, but it's not that often.

And I just wanted to make a general comment about how this has been my experience of myself; and also how with people in jail – people who are really, seem really, tough and scary are actually like little kittens on the inside; and the reason that they got so tough and scary is because they are so sensitive, and that's been my experience, over and over and over again with big, mean-looking bikers... I've had many people tell me they were afraid of me in fact. Which always really upset me. I'd be like, *“Why? What the hell's wrong with you?”* [laughter] And that didn't help... But it doesn't happen very often any more, which I'm grateful for.

So what does all this have to do with compassion? I guess I was thinking about compassion as something that comes from a response, or an action that arises from that kind of basis of not resisting (that I was talking about). Or of ‘not opposing’, or ‘oppressing’, or which ever word you would like. So my little definition that I wrote was;

“Freedom of response and unburdened response, that happens when resistance, or oppression or violence – whichever you want to use – on all levels and on all its forms and stories, is abandoned”

I also have:

“Action routed in a lack of resistance.”

And I also have:

“Action routed in awareness of one’s own, and other people’s, nakedness, or tenderness.”

In the jail they have this very special program that helps people actually stop being violent. And they look at their past a lot, as one must; and I went to one of these sessions where I heard a man who had been violent as an adult, and he was talking about his childhood, and he had also been a victim. So they had this thing where victims come in and talk about their experience. And he said a lot of stuff. He was very emotional, and his voice was shaking, he was this huge guy in this orange thing that everybody wears in the jail. And there were a couple of things that stood out for me that he said. He said that his mother had told him his entire life that it was his fault his twin had died when they were born. That was one thing. And the other thing was about being handed a crack pipe when he was not very old. And I was very upset by this guy's story for a few weeks, I think, after that, and thinking about how sensitive people are, and especially children. You know what a huge affect we have on children, and just that sense of, even though he was this big, mean-looking guy who could probably beat up his wife or something. I mean, I don't know why he was in jail...

Well, in a way, he was just sort of carrying on the *wheel*. And I guess it just struck me in a very personal way how important it is to not perpetuate... Or... Well, basically, to cut off the

violence that we are heir to. Which this guy had done to some extent, or he wouldn't have been there talking.

Tsongkhapa says;

“The human form is easy to lose.”

So, what else was I going to say? So, the other thing is – the strange thing was (this may be slightly similar to what Vijayamala was saying) but this whole thing about compassion is it seems so huge – the thing of saving all beings, and there are many beings, I just find that a bit frightening sometimes, and so I was trying to figure out, what is my experience of it? And it was difficult because I do things that you might say were, or would be, called compassionate activity, like going to the jail; or I work for the centre, give blood, whatever... And I've completely structured my life – I go on retreat – I've completely structured my life around being able to do these things, but I don't really think of them as being compassionate because it makes it so that I can have a life that means something to me, that's deeply satisfying. And I suppose sometimes I think of myself as a servant in a very positive way. I suppose sometimes I feel like one and it's not so positive, but anyway something of it... It depends on what I'm asked to do really. [laughter]

And I was thinking about all these sorts of grand ideas that we have – ‘grand’ is a lame word as it's used to describe them: *shunyata*, *compassion*. And, I mean, I don't really know what it is; and I also think since there is this element of (we all probably realize) having the self *not so there*; having the *self* kind of receding, or not there at all. It just makes things extremely difficult to talk about – but we talk about them rather a lot don't we... ? Which annoys me. [laughter] And then I have to work with that. I mean we have to talk about it because otherwise we'll just be talking about things that are irrelevant. So, we might as well talk about something that is worth something, even if you can't really describe it in words. Which I don't think you can. I don't know if you can say what compassion is. You could probably write a really good poem; or someone could.

It's awfully hot in here, so I think I'm maybe going to wrap it up, as we say. I was on retreat recently – I've done a lot of retreats recently – but about four retreats ago, which wasn't that long ago, I was in a room where we go in San Francisco meditating with about six people, and it was in the afternoon, and there were a lot of mosquitos in the room, and it was warm so we pretty much had to keep the doors open, and there were no screens or anything. So I was in this room with about six people. And this particular group of people, they're not what you'd call people who like meditating. They were sort of, like, [gritting teeth] *moving around*, [laughter] and I was sitting there meditating, and I could hear, I was really getting into listening to the [makes sound of mosquito] – listening to it, and it sounded great. [laughter] And I was thinking these mosquitos are really bothering these people, and what I'm going to do is, I'm going to summon them all to me because they are not bothering me at all. So I did that, and I could have sworn that it worked. Cause they stopped doing that... For a little while [laughter]. And then I looked round and I was like, ‘*Wow, God that worked!*’ And then I thought, “*God that was really great of me to think that wasn't it.*” [laughter]... And then I thought, “*Aw no, I'm not Enlightened, um...*” [laughter]

But the point of that story being just how important it is, I guess, for us to find ways to loosen up the grip on how we think of ourselves and how we're evaluating our experience, because

it's so violent sometimes; or if not *violent*, then at least inappropriate, I think, speaking for myself anyway.

So that's something that I indirectly try to work with in meditation. And I think the non-resistance thing for me, it feels is kind of going in that direction. So maybe I will just end it there. I'll just end with a sentence, something that Shunryu Suzuki said:

“When you do something, you should burn yourself completely, like a good bonfire, leaving no trace of yourself.”