Life As It Is
"Engaged Compassion"
Episode #55 with Lobsang Tenzin Negi
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Lobsang Tenzin Negi: I think that compassion, by seeing what we can do, even when we cannot make a difference in the total outcome, we can always find somewhere we can make some difference. That's engaged compassion. One call in compassion or engaged compassion for me is to see what you can do, however small it may be. You know, just giving a smile to a stranger or writing to some family members that you haven't talked to for a while. Something like that. Just small. Begin with that, and you can see how that makes a difference.

James Shaheen: Hello, I'm James Shaheen and this is *Life As It Is*. I'm here with my co-host Sharon Salzberg and you just heard Lobsang Tenzin Negi. Lobsang is the cofounder and executive director of the Center for Contemplative Science and Compassion-Based Ethics at Emory University. In his new book, *Engaged Compassion: Seven Practices to Cultivate Resilience, Connection, and a Joyous Life,* he builds on more than twenty years of research and laying out concrete practices for developing compassion for ourselves and others. In our conversation with Lobsang, we talk about how he came to develop a model known as cognitively based compassion training, why he views compassion as a trainable skill, and what he's learned from his work with His Holiness the Dalai Lama. Plus, Lobsang leads us in a guided meditation. So here's our conversation with Lobsang Tenzin Negi.

James Shaheen: Okay. So I'm here with Lobsang Tenzin Negi and my cohost Sharon Salzberg. Hi, Lobsang. Hi, Sharon. It's great to be with you both.

Lobsang Tenzin Negi: Hello. So nice to be with you. Thank you.

Sharon Salzberg: Hello.

James Shaheen: So Lobsang, we're here to talk about your new book, *Engaged Compassion: Seven Practices to Cultivate Resilience, Connection, and a Joyous Life.* That's a lot of promise there. This book is the result of more than twenty years of research and practice at one of the

world's most extensively studied compassion training programs. So to start, can you tell us a bit about the book and what inspired you to write it?

Lobsang Tenzin Negi: So as you mentioned, it is about compassion, and the impetus for this book was really a student. I was teaching at Emory University back in 2003, and one of my students, Molly Harrington, was leading an initiative at Emory for destigmatizing mental health. Emory University had suffered several suicides among students, and in those days particularly, mental health was still a big stigma.

So she was in my class, and it was a class on Buddhism, actually it was Tibetan Buddhism, with the subtitle "Psychology of Enlightenment." And we covered various meditation models, mindfulness, compassion, loving-kindness, and so forth. And she felt some of these practices would be really helpful for the students. And that's what led to the development of Cognitively Based Compassion Training.

James Shaheen: Well, first. to just get our terms straight, how are you defining compassion here? It can mean so many different things to different people. How do you understand it and how would you define it?

Lobsang Tenzin Negi: Yeah, you are absolutely right. You know, compassion means something different to different people. Some people talk about empathy as feeling and compassion as action. But in the *lojong* tradition, there is a Tibetan Buddhist tradition called the lojong, which simply means training the mind. From a lojong perspective, compassion is really a complex psychological state. But we can say that it has three key components. Number one, it has an affective state, an emotional state, which is probably the core of compassion, and that has to do with warmheartedness, a tenderness, how we connect with another with a certain degree of tenderness. And then there is the cognitive part, which has to do with a person that you connect to with a certain degree of tenderness, when you are aware of their difficulties, their challenges, their suffering. And the combination of these two is what is understood to lead to the

motivational aspect of compassion, that is to wish to alleviate their difficulties they're suffering. So in that sense, it's a warm-hearted concern unfolding from witnessing or understanding someone's suffering and feeling motivated to elevate that suffering. So that's how compassion is understood in CBCT.

James Shaheen: How did you find your way to researching compassion?

Lobsang Tenzin Negi: Yes. So as you may have seen in the book, I actually come from a very remote region called Kinnaur. And at the age 14, I was very fortunate to be brought to Dharamsala to study at a monastery or school called the Institute of Buddhist Dialectics that was founded by His Holiness the Dalai Lama in 1973. So in '74 I came to Dharamsala. I studied there and then eventually in other monasteries like the Drepung Loseling monastery. But I came to Emory in 1991, and my focus for my graduate work was looking comparatively at how the Buddhist science of mind, if you will, compares to or relates to the emerging understanding of mind and emotions in the scientific traditions. And that's what led me to my work on looking at the mind-body connection. I did my grad PhD work, and my dissertation was on emotions and their impact on well-being, looking from the two different traditions. That's how I came to when Molly Harrington encouraged me to create a protocol. That's how I leaned on that understanding from my own tradition but also what I was studying at Emory.

Sharon Salzberg: So, Geshe-la, you describe compassion as a trainable skill, which I actually find in the West is kind of a radical idea, surprisingly. You know, people seem to feel it's kind of a fixed quality or fixed amount that we have, and to see it as a trainable skill, we see that it can transform our relationships and our communities. And I wonder if you can speak some about compassion as a trainable skill.

Lobsang Tenzin Negi: Thank you, Sharon. I think that's true. You know, there has been a certain thought that compassion is something that you come with or without, and whatever level that you have, that's it. But I think in the Tibetan Buddhist tradition, and in the Buddhist tradition in

general, as you well know, Sharon, compassion is certainly seen as something you can train, and what may come at the biological level as quite limited or quite biased, as His Holiness the Dalai Lama says, compassion at a biological level can be unconditional like the mother's love or compassion for her newborn baby or the child. But that can be then expanded by using our intelligence.

And this is where I think that in recent decades researchers like Richie Davidson have been pointing out how compassion can be trained. And we see that there is a difference between novice meditators and adept meditators, somebody who may have spent 10,000 or more hours, clearly seeing the difference in terms of, for example, the gamma ray activations. And so from such studies also, it's pointing to that it may be a skill like language. You know, we are born with a certain disposition, but if we train, if we learn, we can get better at it. But the Buddhist tradition certainly has a lot of literature that presents a very systematic way to expand our compass.

James Shaheen: I just wanted to say really quickly that Richie Davidson studies and teaches at the University of Wisconsin, and among other things, he studies the effect of cultivating compassion on the brain, the neuroscience. Sharon, do you want to say more about that? I just want people to know what the reference is to Richie Davidson.

Sharon Salzberg: Yeah, I think it's interesting, of course, that the studies done at Emory and these studies done at University of Wisconsin, Madison, and really all over the country now have really pointed out things like the quality of compassion and the difference between compassion and empathy, and the question that I'm about to ask about compassion. I think one of the things that's been evidenced is that compassion, unlike the common myth, doesn't make us passive or weak, that it really is a strength. And I think that it's kind of incredible to have some scientific validation around that. And so I wonder if you can speak about that myth, that misconception, that compassion can make us passive or weak. You know, we live in interesting times, times that I sometimes describe as the rising tides of hatred, and people's idea that that makes us strong and that's desirable as a state. And Geshe-la, you clarify that compassion is not at all weak, that it's

not about making people feel comfortable all the time, and it's about being present in a way that that really matters.

Lobsang Tenzin Negi: Yes, absolutely. I think you're absolutely right. There has been this myth that if you receive compassion, it's an indication that you're being weak, or that if you are compassionate toward others, that you just condone whatever their misbehaviors may be. But I think that is a gross misunderstanding about compassion. Compassion, if we take it to be really anchored in our meaningful connection with another person, like a mother's deep connection to her child or the friends, a meaningful connection to another, there's a certain degree of warmth there. And instead of being weak, compassion, as His Holiness the Dalai Lama and others, as you yourself have said many times, is actually a sign of courage. It allows us to witness someone's suffering instead of recoiling from it. It brings us to reach out.

So if compassion allows us to reach out to do something instead of just ignoring or moving away from that, that certainly is an inner strength. And I think compassion is a sign of courage. And I think, as you mentioned, sometimes people talk about if you are too compassionate, then you can also get fatigue, like even the term used is compassion fatigue. But the research with some of the really advanced meditators and scientists like Matthieu Ricard, again, another leading figure in this dialogue between religion or Buddhism and science, someone who himself has gone through the rigorous scientific training as a molecular biologist doing his PhD, but then to go to Nepal and India and then study and practice with the masters there, with Buddhist masters, and teaming up with Tania Singer, a neuroscientist who studies compassion and empathy, to demonstrate that actually empathy, if you just sit with someone's suffering, it may make you fatigued. But when there is this motivational aspect to do something about that, that's where the compassion part is, and that does anything but make you feel distressed; rather, it gives you a certain degree of joy.

So it's even in the brain, seeing that when you're just sitting with someone, feeling someone's pain, that's kind of activating your pain centers in your brain. But then when you move from there to compassion and you want to do something about this, then the brain is activated there

and involves these reward centers in ways that feels good. And I think that again, to invoke Dr. Richie Davidson's work, they show that when someone is in a compassionate state, the brain involves those parts of the brain that are associated with positive emotions of joy and confidence instead of distress and fear and other emotions.

James Shaheen: You know, I think the science is great. I have nothing against it. I like science. But you know what I like more, I like the stories. Personally, they move me more deeply. And one of the stories you draw from here is the story of the thousand heads of Avalokiteshvara. Avalokiteshvara is the bodhisattva of compassion. It's such a striking image. So would you be willing to tell us that story and how it shaped your understanding of compassion? Because more than anything else, it shapes mine.

Lobsang Tenzin Negi: Thank you. Thank you for that question. Actually, I was coming from my workplace at Emory for this podcast, and I was just thinking about that particular story and Avalokiteshvara, the buddha of compassion, with eleven faces and a thousand arms and each arm with an eye, a thousand eyes. In Tibetan it's referred to Chenrezig, with each eye able to see the suffering of others.

So it's a striking image when you think about how this eleven-faced embodiment of compassion with a thousand arms and thousands of eyes captures the deep emotion of compassion. The story here is actually that, like for all of us, in life, there are struggles, and even when we want to be our best, there are struggles, there are challenges, and that's true for us, but it's true for someone who may be quite advanced in such training like Bodhisattva Avalokiteshvara, and so the story that is associated with this is that Avalokiteshvara had this pledge to serve all humanity, all living beings, all sentient beings, but if ever I dwindle from that, may my head split in a thousand pieces. That's the pledge that it is believed that he has made. So at some point, just seeing the enormity of the suffering around him for a brief moment, that kind of confidence, that commitment became shaken. And at that moment, it's said that his head split into a thousand pieces. But then the beautiful thing there is that even this bodhisattva had doubts. And so when

that happens, his connection to his teacher, and in this case it's Amitabha, the Buddha of boundless light, that's unshaken. So in that dark moment, he is able to recall, and that's what brings him back when his thousand pieces split and body split in a thousand pieces, head split in thousand faces, then assembled then into ten faces. And then that's how the ten faces, on top of that, the very top is Amitabha. That is to give a sense of stability.

So I think that the thousand arms and the thousand eye are representing this intention to see the suffering of all, and then the thousand arms to reach out, to help, to uplift. So that's the story behind Avalokiteshvara's thousand eyes and eleven faces.

James Shaheen: Yeah, I think what I found really interesting there is that it was in the breaking that he gathered new strength.

Lobsang Tenzin Negi: Yeah, exactly. No matter how dark the moment for us, for him, in that moment where his own confidence had shattered, having that deep connection or access to his teacher, that is what gave that stability. So I say this in CBCT to point out that for all of us in our own dark, difficult moments, if we have access to someone, a moment that for us is associated with safety, nurturance, kindness, if we can connect to that, we can find our body and mind back into more resilient, more well-being state.

James Shaheen: Yeah. I just thought it was so interesting that sometimes it takes for us to break before we make that connection. I thought that was very beautifully put in the book. You say that this story reminds us to experience compassion is a shift in perspective. So what are some of the ways of bringing about this shift?

Lobsang Tenzin Negi: So, of course, you know that we do have deep dispositions for compassion, but that's quite narrow—for our own loved ones, our children, and eventually maybe friends. But I think that when we are talking about expanding compassion, to bring in compassion to those where we don't naturally feel compassion, like certain strangers or people

who have different values, different ideologies, whose behavior we don't agree with, so-called adversaries, if you will, how do we ignite, how do we give rise to that tender feeling toward them? And that is where I think of perspective, if we find a way to see humanity in them, if we find a way to see our common humanity, meaning that just like us, they too are beings with deep needs, feelings, deep aspirations and vulnerabilities.

Just like us, in that identification, what one of the really amazing scientists, Frans de Waal, I'm sure that you have come across his writings and his talks, he talks about how identification is the key portal to empathy. That's when we see someone like us. That's where the difference between us and them begin to evaporate, and that's where they become us and that's where their difficulties matter to us. Their well-being will be important for us. So in that sense, the perspective shift instead of just seeing someone as just other to using our intelligence, our capacity to see beyond what may what we see superficially, and that is to the underlying kind of equality, the fundamental equality of us and those people. If we can do that, then that's where there is a sense of connection, and compassion can come there.

Also, His Holiness has written a lot about this. When he talks about compassion and expanding compassion, he talks about two pillars there. Number one has to do with common humanity and seeing our shared human reality. The other one is really our interdependence. We depend on others. For every comfort, every skill that we have, every comfort, resource, we depend on many others. Of course, most immediately those people who are around us. But then if you really look at indirectly how so many people are involved even for us to have a sandwich that we can eat for breakfast. This is what Martin Luther King says in one of his writings. He talks so beautifully when he says that before you have finished eating your breakfast, you have depended on half the world. This is the inextricably interconnected reality that we live in. He talks about how if we can embrace that, if we can recognize that, then we can see the peace.

James Shaheen: So let's turn to the practices of CBCT. Again, that's Cognitively Based Compassion Training. The first practice is tapping into what you call nurturing moments. So can

you talk about this step? How can it facilitate the psychological safety that seems to be so essential to cultivating compassion?

Lobsang Tenzin Negi: Yes. You know, I was talking about Frans de Waal. He has written and researched so extensively. He is an incredible scientist. In his book called *The Age of Empathy,* he presents the idea that the first and foremost reason for our ancestors to live together, this social life or group living, has to do with safety and security. Because as individuals we have almost no chance to survive, together, having others, we maximize our ability to survive and flourish. So that being the case, if you look at even the most basic of organisms like bacteria, the new findings today show that through microbiological studies, bacteria, when they are faced with challenges and threats, they clump together, become almost like one organism ball. The same thing is true of a school of fish. When they're in the ocean and they are spread around and then they spot a shark or another big animal, they become a big ball together.

The need to be together is such a primal need for us, and I think that that's where the sense of safety comes. So in compassion training, if you think about it for us also, when a child feels very unsafe, insecure, it's very hard for the child to focus. It shuts down a child's cognitive abilities. In that moment of fear that you shrink, it impacts your ability to learn and explore and things like that. So similarly, any other kind of abilities, if we think about it, as adults, when there's a deep sense of insecurity, it really kills our creativity and our ability to function, our ability to feel well.

Therefore, in CBCT, we come to the first module to learn to connect to that moment of safety or nurturance. That's what I was talking about in the Avalokiteshvara story. Can we learn to notice if we are regulated or dysregulated? It's that bringing our attention to our inner domain. But if we are dysregulated, if we are feeling anxious or feeling down, we don't feel good, we don't function. We don't think well. That's where we can bring our attention to a moment where we may have felt a certain degree of safety, maybe in the arms of our own parents, or when a friend was just there for us in a vulnerable moment to be with us, or if there's a certain need that we were missing and someone saw that need and extended that. If we can just recall that moment

and then as vividly with as much detail, immerse in that moment. The brain that elicits and releases that, converting the chemicals in our system when someone actually consoles us with that comforting hug, or when we recall, when we remember, it's activating the same parts of the brain and therefore bringing similar changes, chemical changes in our system, nervous system changes, and therefore this is a way to prime for security. We present this as priming for security, where by having easier access to those comforting, safe, nurturing moments and dwelling with those them for a few seconds, that often can actually tone our muscle memory, so to speak, to feel more safe.

Sharon Salzberg: So the second step, or the next step, seems to be developing clear and stable attention, which you describe as the capacity to return again and again to what matters most, which is an interesting phrase. Is that aspiration? Is that a vision of what life can look like? And I wonder if you can talk about how attention can help us stay grounded in that kind of clarity and love.

Lobsang Tenzin Negi: Thank you. So of course attention is a broad capacity, and it is needed for every aspect of our life, whatever we do. That's why William James, when he wrote *The Principles of Psychology* back in 1890, and an incredibly intuitive psychologist he was, when he mentions how education in training attention would be education par excellence. But he talked about how it's easier to define this faculty than to provide the practical steps for cultivating it.

I think that we know today how attention deficit disorders affect so many of us, so many people in our society. So attention, of course, is a broad skill capacity. But in terms of, let's say if we are talking about maintaining a certain degree of well-being or bringing our nervous system, our body and mind in a little bit more kind of well-being zone, a well-being range, what the health scientists may call the homeostatic range where we function well.

In life there are so many ups and downs, so many unpredictables, so it's easy for us, particularly in this day and age, to often be stressed, because the world around seems unsafe or unpredictable

and we end up responding or reacting with a certain degrees of stress, fight or flight response, which actually alters our bodily state, our nervous system and body. But if we were to learn to keep ourselves or bring ourselves more in what we call the well-being zone or the resilience zone emotionally, mentally, physically, where we are more resilient, where our nervous system is better regulated, if we were to do that, how important it is for us to have that lens that can allow us to see a little bit more clearly: Are we regulated? Is our nervous system regulated or dysregulated? Are we feeling a little bit anxious or feeling okay or feeling down? And then when we do have such awareness of certain stresses, certain emotions, feelings that we're feeling that are not really healthy or helping us, then how can we bring up our nervous system, body, and mind into a bit more regulated state? Can we train ourselves to have that choice to direct our attention to something that can make us feel a little bit more comforted?

The neurocognitive psychologists like James Gross and Kevin Ochsner and others, they have this beautiful model, what they call the process model of emotions, and then from there they're presenting what cognitive strategies we can use for regulating our emotions. One of them is what's called the attention deployment, our ability to direct attention where it's not emotion-eliciting, or let's say that it's not stress-inducing but rather something that we can bring to some place, some object, some event, some moment that has the association with comfort and safety and so forth.

So at the end of the day, attention training has to do with our ability to notice our impulses, thoughts, feelings, and so forth, having the choice to disengage or reframe what we want to do that at least, and if we have a choice there, to then disengage from what is making dysregulated or distressed, to bring that to somewhere where it makes you feel more comforted and calm or safer. For this ability, attention training seems very, very important.

Sharon Salzberg: You cite the Tibetan term for meditation, which is *gom*, which means to become familiar with, or I've heard it sometimes described as getting used to it. And that often brings up the question, what is it that we're getting used to, that we're getting familiar with? Do

you see it as a process of getting familiar with our minds, and how does this contribute to the development of compassion? What is it we're getting familiar with? In hearing you speak about attention, I think about also seeing more deeply, like remembering this person maybe who's not acting is also suffering, to remember that there's suffering there or that they're vulnerable to change. And what are we getting used to?

Lobsang Tenzin Negi: So meditation, the Tibetan term *gom* that means familiarization, or *bhavana* in Sanskrit, which has to do with cultivating. In CBCT, we explain meditation simply as a training, a process by which you are enhancing a certain skill. Very much like external skills like playing tennis or piano, you practice, and that practice helps you enhance your skill of playing and so forth, except in meditation we're talking about inner skills, like greater awareness, attention, greater choice, meta-awareness, for example, the awareness of what we are feeling, what kind of impulses are there.

So meditation is of many kinds. You know, they are different. So you can talk about the meditation on mindfulness of breathing. That is the kind of practice where you are training to have greater capacity to retain your attention with the breath. The meditation on impermanence would be that you are cultivating an awareness of impermanence and change, and then you can enhance that by sustaining that awareness, sustaining that reality in your awareness.

So compassion, when you are doing the compassion, what are you really meditating? How do you meditate on compassion? Not like meditation as compassion as an object. And then you kind of think about just sitting with the thought of compassion, not like that compassion meditation has to do with, like a gardener who is growing a beautiful garden will attend to till the soil and then plant the seeds and then put the fertilizer, remove the weeds, and all these different conditions that go into cultivating the beautiful garden. Same thing. When we think about compassion, the cultivation of compassion, one of the first and foremost in compassion, if it is

about expanded compassion, we have to, to some degree, go beyond our unconscious biases that we have, us versus others and those who don't care.

So in the compassion meditation, you are beginning with transcending those biases by seeing our common humanity, to the extent that you can embrace another person as just a human being with deep physical needs, emotional needs, and vulnerabilities and deep aspirations to be safe, to be happy, to be free from suffering just like me. It can just stay in the head, which is kind of received knowledge, content knowledge. But if we take that to our heart when it can become what we call the aha moment, then our personalized insight or the critical insight at that point, it's a conviction. It's not just a thought, a theory. If that happens, there is a certain shift in our feeling toward others. That's what it means that identification is the key portal. It opens our heart to others.

And then as I mentioned, compassion training has to do with deepening that endearment, that tenderness. And that's when you can begin to pay attention to what others mean to us, what others contribute to our well-being, our life. And in that awareness, there's gratitude. Gratitude has this quality of a warm feeling, a tender feeling. It's something that when you do have that, then you can train also to see what people are against, how they are struggling. Is it just the physical illnesses, the emotional struggles they're having, or can you even see people, a whole group of people maybe, struggling with certain structural inequalities, or organizational policies, the changing climates, so that when you see those who you connect with this tenderness, you train yourself to be better aware of what their predicaments are, and naturally compassion will arise. It's not pushed. It will arise this inability to see them struggling and therefore want to do something about that.

Sharon Salzberg: I wonder if you could say something about the ability to cultivate self-compassion and a little bit of tenderness toward ourselves, as we maybe see ourselves

struggling, and through the practice of attention we can begin to cultivate self-compassion. It's such a misunderstood term. I wonder if you could say something about it.

Lobsang Tenzin Negi: Thank you. Thank you. You know, Sharon, it's such an honor to have this conversation with you because I think I read somewhere, I think it may be in *The Force for Good* by Dr. Goleman. Is it true that you were the one who first brought this to the Dalai Lama's attention that in the West, one of our major struggles is that people are suffering with self-blame, self-hate?

Sharon Salzberg: That is very true.

Lobsang Tenzin Negi: Yeah, that's what I heard. So you're absolutely right. I mean, our society is really struggling with self-doubt, self-blame, this sense of lack of efficacy, that I'm not good enough. Whether you are a writer, whether you are a teacher, a doctor, a parent, a leader, whatever, we feel that we're not doing enough, not good enough. And that's the modern-day struggle for so many of us.

In self-compassion, for me, self-compassion or the seed of self-compassion has to do with, in the Buddhist tradition, there is a kind of practice called voluntarily accepting our vulnerabilities. It simply has to do with our inner strength. Compassion for others is the courage or inner strength to see someone suffering, not to move away. That brings us to do something about it. Self-compassion is the inner strength, the inner fortitude that allows us to accept our vulnerabilities, our adversities, with a certain degree of understanding and kindness, gentleness to oneself instead of beating on oneself.

So how does that happen? Again, drawing from this model of how perspectives can change our feelings, what kind of perspective we have of, if there's some different adversities, the challenges that we face in our day-to-day life, one of the things when we are emotionally affected by when some we make mistakes or when we feel that we haven't done enough, in those moments of

failure of shortcomings, it seems like I'm the only one that's going through this. We lose the perspective of this is a common human reality, that I'm not the only one who feels now.

There's a story that I tell in the book, which in the CBCT training we bring from the Buddhist tradition, of Kisa Gotami, this young mother who lost her child. In ancient India, you can imagine a culture where there's a deep gender discrimination, where a female is supposed to get married and give birth to a child, and if you don't do that, this is something of a character flaw. You can imagine that when Kisa Gotami lost her child, how devastating it would be. Just losing a child is painful enough. But then on top of that, all the projections of what society is going to say; I'm not a good mother, I'm a shame for my family, Will I ever be able to have a child, I will be excommunicated, all those things. And you can see how a little spark of sadness can bloom into a forest fire of emotions, and you see how in that desperate state, she runs to anyone who is understood as wise in the area for help to bring her child back to life. And so the Buddha doesn't say, "Just toughen up," or "This is it," but he tells her, "I will help you, but go get a handful of mustard seed from the house where they have seen no loss."

It doesn't make sense. But when you're emotionally distraught in that dark place, your cognitive abilities, you shut down. It doesn't register. And then she goes asking for the seeds only to find that there's no one who has not lost. It dawns on her eventually, "I'm not alone." That was what led to the release that it's not about her being a bad person. This is a shared human reality. And there are various perspectives on the human condition that we can connect to our human condition. If we can connect to our human condition, embrace that, then I think that we can find that inner strength to be gentle in the face of our failures and shortcomings.

James Shaheen: So again, the story of Gotami, the key is, again, identification. You've emphasized that a few times, and I think again, the story is what brings me to that.

Lobsang Tenzin Negi: That's what brings the belonging, the sense of belonging. I talk about belonging because when I get that connection, belonging, you are not alone anymore. You are part of others who are also having the same experience, similar experience.

James Shaheen: One thing we haven't talked so much about is an important component of compassion that you identify is actually moving into action. So could you talk about making this shift to action? Sometimes people might feel burnt out or overwhelmed and they don't know where to begin. But again, like Avalokiteshvara, we can break and then return. So where might people begin?

Lobsang Tenzin Negi: Yeah, that's a great question. Let me invoke His Holiness the Dalai Lama because I do draw so much from his wisdom, his teachings, his writings because he has spent his life certainly teaching and explaining how compassion can be learned and expanded in a secular context, not in a strict religious context, but compassion as a human value that can be practiced by anyone. He presents in his book called *Beyond Religion* an ethics for the whole world. He talks about how compassionate motivation needs to be complemented by discernment. Discernment is very, very important because we may feel a deep urge to do something, to relieve someone's suffering or something that is troubling. But if we find a way to do that, it can actually become quite overwhelming. So that's why discernment is seen as compassion and discernment as two complementary qualities, if you will. That is to say that often when we feel moved to address some injustice or some difficulty, whether it's climate or rising mental health problems or the growing social divide that we are seeing, we can often find that what can we do there? And this is where discernment, if we can map out what is contributing to the issues that concern us, some small thing that it may seem that we can do if we can focus on that.

This brings me to the story of the starfish story that you have heard. A grownup man is walking on the beach one morning and sees a little child picking up something and putting it back into the ocean. When he comes closer to the child, he sees that child is picking the starfish and putting it back into the ocean. And he says, "What are you doing? Don't you see how many miles this

beach is? There are thousands of starfish spread here. You're not going to make any difference." At that point the child bends down and picks one up and puts it back into the ocean. And he says, "I can make a difference to this one."

I think that compassion, by seeing what we can do, even when we cannot make a difference in the total outcome, we can always find somewhere we can make some difference. That's engaged compassion. One call in compassion or engaged compassion for me is to see what you can do, however small it may be. You know, just giving a smile to a stranger or writing to some family members that you haven't talked to for a while. Something like that. Just small. Begin with that, and you can see how that makes a difference.

James Shaheen: Well, the starfish, again, a story comes to the rescue. Sharon tells stories all the time. They're great, and they're an excellent teaching tool, I think. So Geshe-la, anything else before we close?

Lobsang Tenzin Negi: Certainly, just briefly, I want to first thank you for the opportunity, but I want to say that the work at Emory University, at our Center for Contemplative Science and Compassion-Based Ethics that we do is really work that is moving forward the shared vision of Emory University and His Holiness the Dalai Lama. And that vision is to educate the heart and mind. And that's what we do. We have social emotion and ethical learning for K–12 education. It's now in many countries. And then for adults, we bring CBCT. We see these two together as ways that can provide some kind of help, so I would like to invite your view audience to, if this is something that resonates with you, please do check our website, compassion.emory.edu.

James Shaheen: That's compassion.emory.edu. Okay. So Lobsang Tenzin Negi, it's been a pleasure. Thanks so much for joining us. To close, Sharon usually leads meditation, but she has requested that you lead the meditation. You're off the hook, Sharon.

Sharon Salzberg: That's correct. Thank you.

Lobsang Tenzin Negi: It’ll be my honor with all humility in the presence of Sharon to lead this. But I will take that with appreciation. So I'll just do the very first of the first module of CBCT. So please take a moment to find a comfortable posture. As you settle in this posture, feel free to stretch if you find any tensions in your shoulders or the chest and neck and so forth. And then if it is comfortable, let's place the body in a position that supports the clarity and stillness of the mind, bringing our back in the right position and just letting it settle. See this position, placing the body back in the right position. Does it give you a subtle shift internally, a little boost of energy that makes you a little bit more awake or alert?

As our body is nicely settled in our chair, bringing attention to the firm support of the chair, the floor providing our body this stable and still position. Does it lead to a subtle corresponding inner shift whereby we feel a little bit grounded, a bit settled? Please take just a few seconds just briefly to check in with your body and mind. Bringing our attention to the shoulder or the chest or neck, somewhere, see what the inner landscape feels like, what the body landscape feels like, if they're tight or relaxed or somewhat relaxed. Any other sensations there?

Beyond physical sensations, what else is provoked by our mind? Are there any lingering feelings of worries, agitations or feelings of joy and ease? Checking in with our body and mind, if we do notice some tensions in the body and mind, perhaps we can take one or two deep breaths to see if they can ease that. As we breathe in slowly with full inhalation, just breathing in, nourishing and refreshing, nourishing air rich with life-giving oxygen, oxygen that keeps us alive. Just pausing for a moment to just let it infuse with our whole being. And with exhalation, as we exhale, just slowly with full exhalation, letting go of those tensions of the body and mind, just allowing the outgoing breath to help us clear to a certain degree those tensions that we may be experiencing, that's allowing our body and mind to just come to settle any degree of this unfolding sense of ease and calm.

Here, any degree of ease in our body and mind that we are able to connect to, let me invite you to take just a minute or so to connect with another moment where you may have felt a similar

feeling of comfort, ease, perhaps safety in a moment when we may have received someone's kindness, when someone has seen our needs, whether physical or emotional, and extending what made us feel whatever comes to mind, however small it may be. Even just someone giving a warm smile to us that put us at ease.

Take a moment to just connect with that as vividly as you can. Bring it into mind with as many details of that moment. As we connect with that moment, notice if there are any shifts in our own body now in our chest as we become more relaxed, shoulders a bit lighter, face gentler perhaps, and internally do we feel a little bit more calm and settled, any degree of ease? Just know that this is a skill we can enhance with practice. So let's take a moment to dedicate this practice and any goodness that comes from this for peace, healing, harmony, and happiness for all beings. And let's conclude by setting an intention to extend any insights and abilities that we have cultivated here beyond this formal session, to bring this in our everyday life. Now and then we can just briefly check in with our body and mind. If we notice ourselves dysregulated there, we can choose to access those nurturing moments and stay with that for a few moments to help bring our body and mind in more and more well-being in a more regulated state.

Thank you. Thank you so much.

James Shaheen: Thank you so much.

Sharon Salzberg: It was wonderful. Thank you.

Lobsang Tenzin Negi: Thank you. Thank you so much. book.

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