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"Where Education, Experience and Compassion Meet."

Thank you all for coming this morning. The last time I spoke here, about a year ago, I gave an introduction to Buddhist Psychology, and we talked about mindfulness and compassion as tools for overcoming psychic pain. Today I'd like to talk with you more specifically about compassion, which I myself have found to be most challenging, both in working with clients and in my own personal work. After a brief introduction, I would like this to be an open forum where we can talk about your experiences working with clients as well as any personal material you might wish to share relating to compassion.

On a personal note of my own, a few weeks ago I thought about re-naming this talk: "Compassion: What to do when your heart feels like a big rock." I had just gotten married a couple of months prior, and the adjustment to this new life was proving to be more difficult than I expected. Often I found myself feeling fearful, defensive, cut off from myself and from Tom, and pretty much just miserable. Worse yet, with all my tools and years of professional training and clinical experience, I couldn't seem to get myself unstuck, which then added a lovely layer of self-loathing and recrimination to my misery. I couldn't seem to find a trace of compassion for myself, just a wall, and harsh internal assaults. This very unpleasant state of being got me thinking about the blocks to compassion, which I could only identify rather vaguely as fear. Reflecting further I realized that I simply did not want to feel vulnerable, did not want to feel the pain of old childhood hurts, which my dear husband, unbeknownst to him, was triggering. How ironic, I thought, since I've been studying this compassion stuff for a number of years and teaching others as well. But this was a new layer, and I knew there were probably

more layers to come, which filled me with even more fear. Going through this painful time left me with a deeper understanding of how difficult this work can be, and how we humans will do just about anything to avoid pain, or our “soft spot” being touched. I felt even more respect for my clients and their courage in coming to therapy and dealing with painful issues. Compassion for myself, of course, was harder to come by, and the best I could do in those moments was to try to have some compassion for myself for feeling so hardened, cut off, and utterly devoid of compassion. This did bring some relief, as I experienced moments of allowing myself to soften and tell myself, “I’m sorry that you’re feeling so stuck and cut off right now.”

Helping people to feel more compassion for themselves in particular is a tricky business, because we are in effect asking people to experience pain. Feeling compassion means allowing oneself to be vulnerable, which in turn means allowing old wounds to be touched, not simply by remembering them, but actually feeling them. There is simply no way around this. We want to foster compassion in ourselves and others, but at the same time I believe we need to have a great respect for people’s defenses and ask ourselves, “what is this person’s lack of compassion protecting them from?” Working with clients in this realm therefore calls for considerable discernment: being able to assess the level and type of defenses being used, and assessing the person’s ability to tolerate difficult feelings. The amount of support available to the person, both internal and external, must also be assessed. Chipping away at this armor will more often than not be a slow process, requiring patience (and compassion for impatience) on everyone’s part.