



have to be willing to surrender everything, and we have to realize there is no arrival and it is all an unfolding process. Easy to say, and takes everything to do.”

This instruction is what I return to throughout my days, and it was particularly pertinent with this new seemingly difficult situation and person. I myself have chosen to turn away from discomfort.

I felt tender toward this man for his willingness to engage in what could be a very difficult conversation. What is it that brings us to create and encourage gossip?

On the day we were to meet, I took some time beforehand to sit zazen and offer the merits of our meeting to all people who are harmed by rumors. When he arrived at the center, my feeling on seeing him was one of warmth and friendship. He was smiling; we shook hands and went into a private room to talk.

Immediately, he offered an apology for disparaging us and talking about things he had not himself experienced. I offered my appreciation for his willingness to even begin this face-to-face conversation.

I invited him to share his concerns with me. We spoke at length about how rare it is to actually engage in difficulty,

whether it presents itself as a challenging conversation, or lies solely in our own thoughts. We are filled with ideas, preferences, and opinions and very often they’re not based on direct experience.

Together we explored his difficulties, and I shared mine. What unfolded was the hurt he had experienced himself with two past teachers who had grossly crossed boundaries. He shared his feelings of not being heard by them. This was what had activated him.

In this conversation, what I could see happening was that together, we were cocreating the intimacy of courage. Of course, there are circumstances when this is possible, and others when it is not. This was what made this encounter so moving. It took both of us surrendering our old stories and hurts, and meeting each other in the moment.

This is what I call true courage: two people practicing the total willingness to let go of being right and meeting each other in the receptive ground of the dharma.

*KOSHIN PALEY ELLISON is the co-editor of Awake at the Bedside: Contemplative Teachings on Palliative and End of Life Care.*

## Difficult People Are Suffering People

Understanding that, says **MITCHELL RATNER**, is the key to responding with compassion and skill—even to that guy in the White House.

**A TEACHING I HEARD** Thich Nhat Hanh offer many times is that people who are difficult, people who say and do mean and offensive things, are not evil. They act that way because they suffer deeply and lack the understanding and skills to act differently. So rather than responding to them in anger, our responsibility as practitioners is to understand why they suffer, nourish our capacity to respond with compassion, and help them learn to transform the roots of their suffering.

I came to understand Thich Nhat Hanh’s teaching more deeply one day when I realized that the difficult people around me—those who were critical, judgmental, easily irritated, short tempered, and so on—were like that not just to me and others, but also to themselves. If they were being hard on me, they were making themselves suffer even more. I could separate myself, mentally and physically, from their meanness; they could not. It became easier not to take the mean things people said or did personally, and my compassion grew.

Some years ago, my wife and I walked a thousand miles of the Camino de Santiago from eastern France to western

Spain. Along the way, in a rain shelter, we met a Swiss man who unexpectedly lashed into us for fifteen minutes, blaming us for all the evils he saw the U.S. perpetrating in the world. We said little, the rain stopped, and we went our separate ways.

However, we were all heading west on the Camino and repeatedly encountered each other on the trail. My wife and I consciously decided to befriend him. After a few exchanges he opened up and shared his sorrows, especially his struggles with his ex-wife and teenage daughter, for whom he cared greatly. On the day before his return to Switzerland, he apologized to us for what he'd said in the rain shelter.

I try to use Thich Nhat Hanh's teaching also with Donald Trump, who has said and done so many things that seem to me to be cruel and offensive. Our sangha has started a weekly metta meditation in Lafayette Square, across from the White House. After centering myself, I bring to mind the mental suffering President Trump may have experienced as a child and still may experience. I feel compassion arise in me, and I send the energy of loving-kindness to the White House. My wish is that everyone in the White House might feel safe, loved, and accepted, and that the seeds of peace, joy, and true love within them will grow.

In my metta meditation, I also send loving-kindness to those who have loved and supported me, and to all people around me, those whose names I know and those whose names I don't know. In bringing these people to mind and sending them my loving-kindness, they become more real to me and I feel more connected to them. I truly want these people to be well, safe, and happy.

And, finally, I send metta to myself, wishing that I may be safe, loved, and accepted, and that my stability and inner peace may grow. My aspiration is that as my loving-kindness and compassion deepen, the childhood suffering I carry will lessen, and I'll act less often in ways that others experience as mean, offensive, or difficult.

Sending metta to the White House isn't the only action I want to take as a mindful citizen. However, the cultivation of open-heartedness and inclusiveness feels like a powerful antidote to the demonization of others that's plaguing American life. Endeavoring to practice the teaching that "no person is evil" allows me to hold the suffering and unskillfulness of those around me, as well as to transform my own suffering and unskillfulness. It reminds me that we're not separate, no matter how separate we may feel at times. ♦

*MITCHELL RATNER was ordained as a dharma teacher by Thich Nhat Hanh and is founder of the Still Water Mindfulness Practice Center in Maryland.*

**Contemplate that the one who is difficult, the difficulty itself, and the recipient of that difficulty are all happening as if in a dream.**

—PEMA CHÖDRÖN

