

# 2002-11-24: Compassion

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## SUMMARY KEYWORDS

compassion, suffering, peace, world, capacity, people, arises, feel, feeling, person, compassionate, meant, cosmos, practice, soft cotton, chapel, room, pillow, motivation, anxiety

## SPEAKERS

Gil Fronsdal

Okay, so what I'd like to talk about a little bit this morning is the topic of compassion. And I'm partly inspired by the fact that last few weeks I've been talking a lot about wisdom or discernment. and compassion and wisdom are the two kind of wings. The to Buddhism Buddhist practice, the two are meant to be meant and sparkly to balance each other out. That with without wisdom compassion can be can become sentimental and get sucked into the world of suffering in a way that's not helpful. And without compassion, wisdom can be too aloof and kind of removed intellectual or removed from the actual world and its messiness. Can you all hear me? Okay? Everybody hear us, okay. And the other thing that made me think about talking about compassion was I had to eat lunch today this week with Beth Goldring, who is she's taught here for us in the past wonderful Zen. Teacher, a Zen priest who's doing aids work in Cambodia. And she goes in and actually works with people who have AIDS and are dying and turns out people with AIDS in Cambodia are shunned quite a bit. It's very embarrassing, very shameful for the whole family and everyone to people die of AIDS and it's just very painful situation all around. And, and she doesn't know she doesn't intentionally doesn't really offer any medical help, because she's just not available. But she tries to be like a chaplain for spiritual counseling to the people who are dying and for the families and very intense work, going into hospitals and hospice kind of work. And she told me the little story of a Catholic nun that she met, who said, Who does similar similar kind of work and none said. I never go into to a room alone, meaning into a room, someone's dying or someone who's in great need or something, I never go into a room alone. I always make sure the Sacred Heart of Jesus is with me. I always make sure the Sacred Heart of Jesus is with me. So, we, you know, I was inspired by that the idea that somehow there's some kind of heartfelt illness that a person is committed to staying in touch with. And it's easy to lose touch with that, of course, but um, that, you know, she's not willing to go into that room unless through that sense of compassion or heartfelt newness, something is there. And so I was, you know, inspired by that little story. So then there was a kind of a chain of association that apologizes more like collage than it may be linear talk, but it reminded me of when I was 18. And I was traveling mostly alone, traveling around Europe, myself, and In France, and I went up to Monson Michelle, some of you might have seen it

kind of appears across the plains of Britain, the enormity, whatever it is, and it kind of looks like Disneyland. Suddenly this thing towers up. And, and so you drive up there and it's surrounded by a high tide. It's surrounded by water. It's an island. And I stayed. Most people don't stay on the island overnight, but it happened to be a little hostel named Pax Christi. That beautiful Catholic hostel I stayed in. And it was able to get up early in the morning and, and went into the monastery, the cathedral part. And what it is, is it's a hill and something like 1200 years ago or maybe more. Someone built maybe before maybe some pre Christian kind of spiritual place. Probably But anyway, they they had a little chapel built, they'll still in chapel and Catholic chapel. And then they started adding on to it, adding, adding, adding until it became this huge Cathedral monastery and ever going in, you go into the tour of the monastery of the cathedral, there's this you come into this huge, huge kind of vaulted or big hall of worship. I don't know what it's called. But you kind of ignorantly, if they take you as tour and you go up the steps and up you go, actually what you're doing, you're going up the hill, you've got these steps. And you're actually part of the tour was to take you into this little, little chapel, the original building from so long ago, it was still there. Everything else is built around it. And you go through this little door and it's two doors want to go in want to go out and build a door and you went to stone, stone, stone, probably chiseled stone, kind of very cold feeling and it's cold in a warm way cold in a peaceful way. cool, refreshing, very solid, very still inside. And maybe partly because of

everything else around or that contrast. Perhaps there's a power place. Maybe it's kind of very special place in and of itself, that's why they built it there. But I went into that little room little chapel by myself with with a little group and I immediately felt transformed and this tremendous feeling of peace as you know, depending on how you say say it, you can you can make other conclusions. I could say, you know, descended on me, you know, or bubbled up in me, or, you know, ascended then, you know, make conclusions. And but, you know, just suddenly I felt all this peace, tremendous amount of peace happened. There was a physical completing. And it seemed didn't seem to be just in my body but seemed to kind of radiate outwards or inwards or to me or away from me or, you know, who knows how these things work. And, and it seems to be part and parcel of the walls and the room there and the coolness and the stillness. And I felt very content, complete peace, tremendous. Expensive peace being at peace, peace, peacefulness. And the group left and I stayed. And I tried to stay as long as I could before I felt someone coming kick me out. I stay there just to kind of so compelling. I can't say why I stayed exactly but it was so compelling a sense of tremendous peace and nothing else need is need was needed or is needed. The moment was complete in itself. And then another going into a room story. The month when I was practicing in Burma, someone told us many times but I was on retreat there for eight months, and I was given this little room to was little it had two beds and it's just two beds in a sink. And that was kind of a walkway, porch, kind of in front of the Long portrait in front various of the rooms there, and that was exposed to the outside kind of terrorist kind of walkway or whatever. And I would do my do my walking meditation outside there and the mosquitoes weren't so bad. But all my sitting was done in this little room. It was an eight month retreat right in to really talk to anybody for eight months, except for the interviews with the teacher. And I just practiced by myself sitting and walking, going out going out in that walkway, walking and coming back and sitting. I spent eight months in that long run. I kind of knew that room really well. And I loved it. I was really happy in

that little room. And I would meditate on my bed and the bed was wooden bed and hence very thin kind of just like these beach mats you take you know, to the beach, you roll out to Bryce beach maps and stuff. I had one of those was you know there's a mattress for the bed. And I'd roll up a towel to sit on to meditate like pushing and very simple. I had a little way of making hot water, make hot water in cocoa but you wouldn't eat in the afternoon but have hot water. And you know, and hour after hour, day after day, month after month, just sitting there me in this room, but it didn't just feel like I was sitting me sitting there in this room. I had a sense regularly enough that as I sat there alone, I did feel very alone some ways but not lonely. I was sitting there kind of staring into the universe. Like the holly lock, I wasn't just this room just sitting in this room. This was a place because it was so secluded are so alone. And there's no input and no relationships going on. And just just me, it wasn't just me in the room or me and me, it was me and the whole cosmos. And I it was like I was attending, looking at the cosmos. What's it like, if you stand on the edge of the cosmos looking at it through you, you know, what is it like, you know, you probably all of you've kind of seen amazing photographs of you know what it's like when it's out like what it's like out there. And you know, we're just a little you know, speck in this huge, huge drama of the cosmos. And what is it you know, if you were out there kind of looking at the big picture of the cosmos, and who it is it to be a human being in the context of this immensity, the universe of the cosmos of stars arising and passing, and they think we only have another 5 billion years or so right? Before we get sucked up and spit a spit out, pulverized or whatever happens. 5 billion years, half, we're halfway there. And then what?

So who are we in the context of, you know, kind of naked, naked in the face of the cosmos? So that was kind of like the question or looking at kind of sometimes did there and, and again, I found myself deeply at peace. With that site that wasn't troubled by it wasn't afraid by it. It was somehow like Who am I? What's the point of life? What's the point of existence when you Sitting facing this immensity of the universe alone. And I don't have I didn't get an answer. What's the point of life? What's the point in my life? However, perhaps more importantly, where I discovered was it that could be a piece there? I could feel deeply at peace facing the immensity of the universe of life, and that that peace, that sense of well being, of being just here right now being peaceful, was more compelling than the search for an answer, what's the meaning of life, what's the purpose of my life. Now that meaning of life and purpose, a purpose of life is not important. But it was much less important than this, the immensity of the peace, their sense of well being, that a human being is capable of feeling. There are a number of capacities that we have there. capacities that could simply be their rise, descend who knows where they like where they come from. capacities we have, that we can get out of the way for and they can be there for us. And a lot of it is we interfere with it with being afraid or aggressive or assertive or ambitious or desirous or, you know, have endless projects. And there is a capacity that human beings have a phenomenally deep sense of peace, all pervading coolness, refreshing peace, like a cool refreshing peace I felt from that go Roman Monson. Michelle, Has anybody been in that room? Did you feel it at all? Yeah. And so what is it when we allow our capacity to mature and grow? Then what happens to some of the deep existential questions we have another capacity we have is for compassion. The connection to the talking about peace is that compassion often can arise naturally or is kind of a natural response or automatic response. When the heart or the mind is at peace, when

readies its capacity we have that seems to just bubble up and be there that can be as compelling as the peace. And the feeling that compassion and demotivation out of compassion is not a question of philosophically looking for the meaning of life for understanding what the point of existence is, or having some great overarching philosophy or religious point of view, whatever. It just simply, maybe we can say kind of simplistically, biological capacity, we all have to feel compassion. However, that capacity for compassion, just like the capacity for peace, is often covered over in compassion, sometimes it's covered over by fear or resistance. But it's also compassion, also capacity that can be very compelling. And I would, in my experience a, in some ways, feels, I wouldn't say satisfying. But it feels extremely right. That when compassion it flows freely, there's a feeling of rightness of it, even though it's painful. And again, it's a capacity we have, there's no reason it has to be there. I mean, it's not like you have to kind of talk yourself into it. It isn't like you'd have to kind of study all these books to kinda understand it. It's there. When the peace is there also the peace and the compassion. Some people would say that peace and compassion arise together. They're inseparable. So, compassion. The word calm is with passion. The old old way meant suffering to suffer with and that question Do something about compassion, which is not very pleasant is that it's to suffer with to certain degree. Compassion is not a pleasant experience. Compassion can be that we can feel. Compassion is a wonderful ideal to have the compassion of a Buddha, the compassion of Christ or whatever. But we can't avoid the fact that compassion arises in contact with the suffering of the world, with our own suffering with the suffering of others. And that's unfortunate that there's suffering in the world. I wish it wasn't there. And it's messy.

But compassion, for the most part arises there. And so there is a compelling capacity, compelling experience, a feeling motivation that can arise within us. If we allow it, in the contact with suffering in the world. We can we can also a lot of other things can be can be compelling, and that can't To the suffering, there can be fear and resistance, anxiety, horrified anxiety. And a lot of people, a lot of us, all of you probably all of us have all kinds of ways in which we respond to difficulty and challenges and pain suffering, which are not that healthy. And if it can be very helpful to begin studying, what are some of the unhelpful ways that you respond to suffering, your own and other people's and often the way that we, the difficulty we have with experiencing suffering in the world outside of us, is directly correlated to a difficulty we have experiencing suffering inside of us. And I've seen a number of times now, people who had really been deeply troubled by some kind of suffering out in the world, seemingly kind of out, you know, an imbalanced kind of way. You know, there's all this suffering in the world, and they pick out cats and you know, it's wonderful that people are screaming Knocking, not knocking This is great if you have compassion for cats, but they're just kind of downtrodden and oppressed by and it's so such anxiety arose one person I'm thinking of such tremendous anxiety around the suffering cats have. And they have a lot of suffering. You know, there's some good good good cat lives around here but But then, when I'm talking to this person, what came out was that the suffering wasn't really about cats was really the person has some deep unresolved pain inside herself. that had to do with horrible things that happened to her as a child in Europe during World War Two, that she was not willing to kind of touch or, you know, he was afraid of, and the horrified anxiety but suffering of cats was really a way of being horrified and anxious about really touching your own pain. I've seen a

search there several times. People who have real difficulty with compassion in the world outside. It has a lot to do with what's, what's going on inside. And I think, conversely, also, they have a really hard time with our with what's going on inside. Sometimes it has to do with their difficulty with the world around us. The inner, outer, inner and outer world are so intertangled intertwined.

So is it useful? Is it important? Is it appropriate, to cultivate compassion, to feel it to feel you know, what's going on in the world and in ourselves? And how can I answer that? I know that it causes a lot of suffering, to shut off our capacity to be open and be sensitive to what's going on in the world around us and inside of us, and it's deadening to do that. It's very unfortunate And if no other reason to feel compassion is not because of some moral requirement, it should be compassionate. But if you're going to, in live and awaken up the places that you're numb or closed, resisting the world. The other side of that is you'll start feeling sensitive and feel the compassion for the world around us.

Compassion I think for the most part arises with a sense of discomfort or uneasiness, something empathy, you know, feeling someone else's suffering. But it doesn't have to be met with resistance or anxiety or clinging, there can be a feeling of rightness about it. I've been in situations of tremendous being present for people who've deep suffering and there's a feeling of rightness about it. I've been present in my own practice with experiences inside of myself of suffering side of myself and the incense wish they weren't there. But knew that that's the point where a practice occurs. That's the door to deeper practice deeper freedom. And so there's kind of right feeling of rightness of being willing to be there for play times, when I feel my own fear or clinging or, or feeling, you know. And if I thought that spirituality was only about feeling, experiencing the beauty and the light and the rapture and the joy or whatever it might be emptiness. I think I'd be shortchanging myself. That spiritual practice has a lot to do with the practice it moves in that direction of peace. And we don't practice independent of delusion and clinging. So we have to meet that place of our inner selves. If we meet the place inside of ourselves, which is difficult. Is it possible to meet that with compassion, or with peace? And one of the things that I'm very grateful from my own practice is Learning to meet, having compassion for myself learned to meet my suffering my difficulties with a sense of compassion. And a part of that, to learn that part of it what it took was not taking myself so seriously. paradoxical isn't it? You know, seems like you and you're really compassionate for yourself, you're really taking yourself seriously right? But when I stopped taking myself seriously, then I relaxed enough to be able to kind of feel a sense of care or sense of kindness, a sense of forgiveness, a sense of acceptance. And it's all kind of, you know, connected to the idea of being compassionate. The it said that the near enemy, the far enemy of compassion and Buddhism, that which can't exist together with compassion for our enemies. cruelty, which makes sense right? But the near enemy is that which camouflages has compassion, and we mistake it for compassion. And there's a number of ideas of what's the near enemy. One is pity and pity is a kind of feeling kind of sorry for someone but third down there and you're kind of more aloof from them. This is the definition of pity that we have, you know, kind of removed or poor person. Compassion is really to feel equal with someone in their suffering, not better than them and kind of feeling sorry for them. And other near enemies, you know, horrified anxiety. You know, if you're really compassionate really you kind of have been shattered by it and knocked over oppressed by it. And the

word compassion is interesting. In Pali, I liked a little bit roots of words, and I only discovered this recently.

I'd never occurred to look up in the dictionary what the root of the word Karuna is. Bali Sanskrit word for compassion. And it's one of the many words that has its root in the, from the word occur Cree, which means to do or to make. And apparently, Karuna originally in ancient Vedic times, meant holy action to like karma, same kind of route to do to act. And so Karuna is not to simply experience a feeling as to do some action or doing. So it's also not only not simply empathy, but it's the motivation to act and do something about the suffering in the world. And so in English, we separate I think, a little bit good, I suppose, separate from empathy, from compassion, empathy, being just simply feeling together with and compassion being the motivation to do something about it. So the motivation to act, and that motivation can take many forms. Sometimes we can't act in a particular thing we feel compassion with empathy with that Compassion feel feeling compassion can be one of the powerful sources of motivation to do spiritual practice. In Tibetan Buddhism, in particular, some of you know, it's the primary motivation, you're constantly trying to rev up and cultivate, to really get a really good kind of engine of motivation going to practice. You want to cultivate as much compassion as you can. For the sake of it's motivating, it's motivating power. But I find tremendous. I don't know the right word is but

that

when I see suffering in the world that I can't respond to. I'm moved by that. And my and my response to that is not taking care of that particular thing. But rather saying, Okay, I'm going to try to take care of this world at this particular corner of the universe I'm in here. I'm going to motivate as motivates me to practice more thoroughly. do teach better to support other people here and you know locally. So suffering might be half the world around half the world away. But my response is local. This is where I can make a difference. So there's some kind of selection process, where there's limited amount of energy and time that I have, where that's going to flow.

So peace and compassion. I think I would like to think of the two as being inseparable. In Mahayana Buddhism, where compassion is so important. They express a paradox of the joining together wisdom and compassion, and it's expressed this way. A Bodhisattva is some a person who's dedicated to save or liberate All beings, while at the same time realizing that there are no beings to save. How do you make sense of that? So they're completely dedicated and saving all beings. At the same time, there are no beings to save. So it doesn't mean that they sit quietly kind of means they're engaged in this motivation is very powerful in shaping what they do. But when they relate to people, and they're suffering, and trying to save them, they're not taking that person as an object that they're going to cling to, or hold on to some tight way. Very spacious about how they present for that person. So it's kind of like to holding it's like holding two things at the same time. It's like light particle or wave. And a good scientists needs to have both views. So there are beings to be saved and there's nobody needs to be



saved. So it's kind of common esque language. So I don't know if that works, but but the other Mahayana sutra says, a bodhisattva, who thinks that the Bodhisattva path is difficult is not a bodhisattva. So here's a path of compassion, developing, being motivated by compassion, motivated to save all beings. But if you think that's difficult to save all beings, if you feel oppressed by all this is going to be really hard. How can I ever do it? And then your logic comes in and says, How can one person make a difference? You know, there's all these billions of people if you think it's difficult, you know, to bodhisattva and what it means for me is that the compassionate activity is something that is a capacity we have that bubbles up naturally is not a heavy burden or something we need to do, but rather something since we get out of the way of and it becomes as natural as another sentence in koan as adjusting the pillow at night as we're sleeping. I told the story before. There's a Zen koan where two monks, two Chinese monks are talking and they say what's your understanding something this is very vague. A little distant paraphrase, but what is your understanding of Apollo cache for us compassion? A little bit as far as the embodiment personification of compassion. And the answer is, it's like fluffing up a pillow in the middle of the night, or adjusting the pillow middle of the night. And I think most of us, you know, we've probably had the experience of being half asleep or whatever and Feeling little bit like the hardly even known recognizing that there's discomfort there, but there's some discomfort there we have the pillows and the hand just easily goes up and adjust the pillow and then we go back to sleep. There's no thought about it, there's no self in me not doing it for any body. You're not, you know, you know, hoping someone sees how good a good pillow up, you

know, fill up where you are.

It's just, you know, us doing the pillow. And so in the same way, the compassion of all the comments flows out as easily as that it's just a natural response of an open heart. Just what comes and if you're thinking it's a burden to respond compassionately, then it might not be compassion that arises out of the deep sense of peace or well being or emptiness, sinner, you know, the wonderful, lovely emptiness that is like looking into the great cosmos, just you in the cosmos. Nothing there but fast, fast intergalactic space and your happiness to be in the middle of it. So there is a beautiful, I think acidic story where someone did a school and on the wall of school, no classroom they have they have a sign that says, in this school, we place people's we placed the truth, I guess the truth teachings on people's hearts. Some student acts Sunday. Why did you place it on our hearts? Why don't you put it in our hearts. And the teacher says, oh, only God can do that. We place it on your hearts. So when your hearts break, the teachings fall in. So don't be afraid to have a broken heart. Don't be afraid to experience your suffering and your pain. There's a way of experiencing which can feel a bit Right. To be afraid to experience the suffering of the world, there's a way of being with it, it can feel very right. It's not pleasant and feel very right in that rightness, there can be a feeling actually of great peace. You all have the capacity for peace. You all have the capacity for compassion and love. And it's one of the most beautiful, most beautiful things you can do. And it's not dependent on what you understand. It's dependent on how willing you are to risk being present. So those are my thoughts this morning. On compassion and what are your thoughts?

You're telling a nice story. About Michelle and he reminded me of something that is more than a day.

As many of you can you are in mourning, an extra cup of coffee

with lots and lots of traffic. so stressed out and you're sewing that to turn left

lane and really noticed that moment later with my rearview mirror into somebody's two feet in my bumper, swinging a little nervous and might, you know, get into some problem and so I sort of slowed down when you first came by outside the person will go over and what happened to me at that point was very surprising because first thing I saw was his face. In the window car next to me. It was a cartoon character. Wait thing

In my head all of a sudden I was the piece that when I realized let that person

know that that was something that I was

very appreciative of that person

for changing the attitude about the rest of my day

memory memory that reminds me of this this fellow has been changing my attitude a little bit in the morning that was different story but the no that's not why you're laughing. Now my kids the so sometimes now I take I take a different route because we carpooling out to my son's kindergarten I think different route and I'm going down Alameda over here I'm gonna meet near Massachusetts there's a school near there. And they had these you know, these these cross core they call the guard crossing guards. These Guys, women and women who kind of you know have you signs stop signs and they wear these vests and stuff and you guys should drive if you live in this area go you know, you know like eight o'clock in the morning actually I'm usually about 10 to eight so I know he's there at 10 eight and drive down Vesta drive if you go aggressive you can drive south and Alameda does bogus. And like between Jefferson and Massachusetts, I'm not sure exactly the cross street of the school is but you should take that dude, it's worth it's really worth it. And there's a guy there who's a crossing guard. And I never see them actually helping kids across the street. They must be there because the school is nearby. But he's just has this tremendous enthusiasm and joy. Big Big smile You can imagine in your world and, and he's waving at everybody. And he's like, he's like, he's like, you feel like he just completely happy to see you. You know pletely delighted like you're like his best friend he has any you know, and he really wants the best in you want you to have a happy day and he's like every time I go by feel happy. So if you need a little hit,

you can either go drive by, or you can go out in your corner of your street and do the same.



So, we talked about when we did suffering in our spouse.

I had the image of kind of like shining, shining a light or

maybe gentleness or

patience.

On, on that

works for me in terms of time taking time

for that arises, but I noticed

doing some of it, your

the way your image of your shining light on it reminds me sometimes I've, when I'm working especially on retreat with people who have very hard time being present for their pain or their suffering, they kind of recoil from it or ricochet off it or whatever all kinds of you know, or, or they react to it and it gets really tight or judgmental. There's all kinds of ways in which mix we can relate to our suffering makes it harder and worse. I've used the image of soft cotton gauze Imagine that your awareness your mindfulness is like soft cotton gauze, like kind of gauze you would use if you had a wound and you're gonna clean it and just use it to even bring a soft cotton gauze is gonna tap or just gently pat, that place of suffering. You're not gonna do anything more than just just very gently, padded padded, with a soft cotton gauze can only be That's enough, and they all have you. Discover, discover, find or give space for your wonderful refreshing capacity for being at peace. And let that joyful Peace be a place of compassion also for yourself and the world around you. So thank you. Enjoy your potluck.