

2015-11-23 Compassion

Thu, 9/17 11:23PM • 37:53

SUMMARY KEYWORDS

compassion, suffering, people, person, compassionate, pity, breathe, abuse, enlightenment, feel, empathy, conceit, important, present, resist, buddhism, care, relaxed, understand, situation

SPEAKERS

Gil Fronsdal

So Good evening. Can everyone hear okay? Yep. Nope. Anybody there? It needs to be louder. Is it? Maybe it's is it on out there? It's on up there. You can hear now. Okay.

So I wanted to talk today about compassion. Compassion is one of the really important wings of Buddhism, Buddhist practice to witness that makes it fly our wisdom and compassion. And for me, I came into Buddhism without any interest in compassion and came out of it with compassion being one of the most important kind of consequences of doing this practice. Many years ago, I was living in San Francisco. And I lived on the corner of Haight and Laguna in the lower Haight for a time when there was a fair amount of crime in that area. And one day I was outside in the corner, and this old car came swerving careening down the hill, Haight Street. And it's kind of dramatic. And I kind of wondered whether the brake was on the same time as it was racing down the hill. And then it came to careening kind of curving stop right in the middle of the intersection. And maybe even before it was stopped, the back door opened up and a woman stumbled out to the car. And she was kind of disoriented. And then these two big guys came, tumble came jumping out of the front curtain the car front seats. She clearly wanted to get away from them, and they currently seem to want to get her. And so I went up there and stood between her and them. But they were bigger than me. bigger and stronger. And so I try to remember what I said. But I said, you know, what's this about or something and, and they would step take a step closer to me. And so my response was just take a step back away from them. And so for fiddleback, there was a stance going on, they were approaching me and I was looking back and I was between her and these, this woman. And it wasn't seemed like we were getting anywhere. And I didn't know what to do. And so then, this other man came walking off into the intersection, the middle of it, and he addressed these two other guys. And he said, he said, You know, if I was in the same situation as she is, I hope that you would stop and check to find out what's going on. That's all he said. And the whole thing diffused. And, you know, with me and me and those guys that were maybe a little bit like conflict, right? But he kind of called in our common humanity, you know, that, you know, we'd all want this, we all want someone checking on us someone's distress. And so then the whole thing diffused and the thought came out, okay. So this idea of, you know, to put ourselves in other people's shoes to understand each other from a point of view of our humanity. There's so many forces in our society that dehumanize people. And now with the terrorist bombings in Lebanon and Paris and Mali. This adds fuel to the tendency to demonize the opponent other people And it's gone that this demonization has happened down through the ages and in all kinds of ways where the other is not seen as a human being, and sometimes treated as subhuman is animals sometimes and horrible things people do to each other. Compassion is an antidote to that because to have compassion is to, for other beat her the humans is to really be in their shoes kind of have some some empathy to take them in as full human beings and with, you know, human lives that are very much like your own family and maybe children, parents, childhood and all kinds of things, capacity of heart. And I think that it what gives hope to

humanity is compassion, to cultivate compassion, to have compassion the There's a wonderful quote along these lines of dread read by George Washington Carver. And he wrote, or said, how far you go in life depends on your being tender with a young, compassionate with the striving and tolerant of the weak and strong. Because someday in your life, you will have been all of these.

So one of the so compassion is held up as a beautiful ideal, you know, Dalai Lama goes around champions and talks important about his other people, other religions talk about it, so wonderful ideal. And as an ideal, sometimes it's easy to lose sight of the fact that compassion has a certain messiness to enter certain challenge to it. And that is Compassion arises primarily for most people arises in relationship to encountering suffering and sufferings unfortunate, unfortunate people suffer. It's important, unfortunate, you suffer and. And so it's the encounter of other people's pain. That is the prompt for compassionate concern. And so you know, that's not the ideal that people suffer. So how could it be ideal to have compassion, you know, like this beautiful ideal and this unfortunate thing, but these two things go hand in hand. And so our ability to be present for suffering in the world is essential for our capacity for compassion. And so part of what this practice of mindfulness and meditation does is that it helps us learn how to be present to our suffering, in such a way that compassion has a chance to arise in response. So compassion is not ever policy that we use logic to think about, you know, it's a good idea to be compassionate, but can arise in a, in a, in a beautiful way actually, in us in response. And this is what I learned through my early years of practice in Buddhism. I had a lot of suffering in my early years of practice. And I was doing Zen practice where I wasn't told to, I wasn't giving any instruction except to sit there with what what is and just be with what is fully as you can be, don't, don't go away just fully kind of be present for the experience and kind of accepted in a certain kind of way. Breathe with it. And I had a lot of suffering. And so being with things as they are in a meant to be with a lot of suffering. And so I would sit for, you know, just not just hours, but days, months, you know, with all this stuff. Bearing in mind, and you know I was and because I didn't have any instruction, any instructions of what to do about it, I just lived with it. And what I learned to do what happened was I would breathe with it just breathe and relax and open to it and allow it to be there. And of course, I didn't want to do that, but to not want to breathe in a relaxed way, not want you know and to resist something is tiring, is difficult is adds more suffering. And so as I sat there slowly, I learned to just be present and open to it and just breathe and allow it and just let it be present in a very simple way to allow my own suffering to be there very simply without any resistance, any defense any need to fix it. Without any judgement about it, without having the suffering and using it to define myself. This means I am this kind of person. Just to be Very simple. And the simplicity of it opened my heart the simplicity of allowed for kind of a heartfelt connection to it. And at first, that heartfelt connection, I didn't understand what was happening to me. Because compassion wasn't really kind of something I was concerned about. And so what happened to me was I started seeing compassion all around me. And I even saw things that weren't compassionate as being compassionate. I was like, there was like this, you know, I had this tremendous need for compassion. And so I would just kind of gravitate to compassionate people, images, anything as a way of and sometimes I even felt that literally that the breeze of the wind against my cheek was a stroke of compassion. I started feeling it everywhere, seeing it everywhere. And that was that was the beginning of my awakening to the realms of compassion, and kind of slowly kind of become it became my own first I kind of project it it outwards. And then it started to awaken. And so rather than getting enlightened in those early years of practice, I became compassion. I thought that was great.

I kind of started Zen practice to get enlightened, I ended Zen practice being compassionate. What would you rather have? You don't have to answer.

And so with that, and this is why one of the reasons I became so valuable was then I was able to be present for other people suffering, I be able to to it I was able to tune into it to see it be present for it. And they're also learned how to breathe in easy way and not resist, but just be open and take it in, not despair, not get anxious, and not get up in any kind of kind of conceit around the whole suffering thing and, and especially in the form of pity. Pity and compassion are a very different Buddhism we say that a pity is an enemy to compassion is called the near enemy. Because pity can look like compassion, but pity is differences, compassion is, is to share in the suffering or other kind of empathy that you're kind of like your see others as yourself almost in yourself and yourself as others. Whereas pity is the ideas, you're a little bit elevated, you're looking down at someone and feeling sorry for them. And then there's, it usually doesn't feel very good to be the recipient of pity. So, all these kind of ways of not being open and resisting suffering. I learned through meditation to let go of, and then the ability to be present in this world for it became easier and easier. And so I think that's one of the tasks of Buddhist practice at least is to be able to be precedent for suffering without anxiety about this may without discouragement, without worry without fear, without running around in circles trying to fix it, without judging it as being a problem in and of itself. But to learn, just repeat with it. And the idea and Buddhism of being able to breathe easily with it is kind of a wonderful touchstone or a reference point for how to do this. It can your breath, be smooth and easy, relaxed in the presence of all kinds of challenges in your life, or do you tense up? If you tense up it changes your breathing. If you get alarmed, it changes your breathing. So can you be present in a way the breath kind of the teacher for how you're reacting and how you're getting off center or how you're, you know, losing your ability to be, be relaxed and at ease? And so can you sit with suffering and breathe and eat way. So meditation is one of the great places to learn how to do this. One of the requirements is to edit if you want to learn this in meditation is to not be in a hurry. And it's very inefficient. People who want to be efficient, you know, show me the quickest way to compassion, you know, quickest way to enlightenment usually end up going the wrong way. Because there's something about you know, once we tried to go fast, it belonged. Direct efficiency sometimes belongs to the very place of contraction of conceit, of selfishness, of wanting, that is the very opposite of that open, soft place that can where compassion can arise. As this compassion was getting born in me went once for a nature walk in some wilderness area, just a day hike person with a guided tour where we weren't walking around. And it was kind of difficult place to hike. And it was difficult. I mean, there were some big boulders you had to climb over. And canyons were walking through when people need to walk help. There was one woman who had trouble doing the walking, and especially over the boulders, she had trouble getting climbing over the boulders and up these little clip walls we have to go. So as soon as I noticed that she was having trouble, I stayed behind with her. And we're just ever ready to be with her when she needed. And so when she needed a hand up, I gave it to her and I didn't think about it much, you know, just seemed like a pretty simple matter of fact thing to do and she was, you know, she would seem it's quite gracious about just receiving support to do it. But what surprised me was how good I started to feel. I started feeling kind of warm and tingly all over my body and saw What's this? You know, she's struggling and I'm feeling good. Is that Is that allowed?

And, and, you know, I don't know if it was 100% compassion I felt you know, she wasn't exactly suffering, but this movement to his movement of caring for someone in this very simple, kind of pure way. It wasn't like to any concern. I don't I don't think it was much conceit on my part. I don't think I was, had too much expectations. I wasn't, I just did this simple thing brought me this sense of well being. And this is what many people have discovered is that compassion, like Dalai Lama goes around the world and says, if you want to be happy, have compassion for others. If you want to be happy, have compassion for yourself. compassion, the Dalai Lama is the key to be happy. But if you are, if you if you see the world through the filter of what's For me, what I want, and what gets in the way of what I want, if you get caught up in desire and always wanting things, if we're caught up in trying to, you know, defend ourselves or protect ourselves, avoid, resist, Judge, be afraid all these things. And it stands in the way

of this easy, relaxed, kind, caring, flow of compassion to be there. So, if you suffer, if it should happen one day one of the things I recommend is you sit down meditate and meditate without any attempt to get rid of it without any attempt to somehow solve it or to penetrate it or to kind of understand why it's there. But as we go Simply breathe with a suffering. See if you can just be present and open to it. See if you can be a kind of open channel to it. So it just kind of flows through you. As opposed to it doesn't get blocked by anything. It doesn't get resisted by anything. There's no self pity. There's no no resistance, which is just there. See how simple you can be with the suffering. And a, certainly the other approaches are okay to do. It's okay to go and try to understand the cause of suffering. It's okay to kind of see let go of whatever the causes are all cats okay to do those things. But the advantage of not doing anything, and just breathing with it, is that you might learn something more valuable. You might learn how to be present for suffering without where it's okay you're comfortable with a suffering. You can breathe easily with it. Your body stay soft with a suffering And then it's a lot easier to work through, it's a lot easier to, to allow something to well up inside, which can meet it. That suffering that maybe we can call compassion, warm, caring tenderness, that's very different than if you're kind of in your head trying to negotiate it and do something with it. And more important than how it is for you is then sooner or later you'll encounter some other person who is suffering. And if you have learned how to stay relaxed with an open, relaxed, smooth breath with that, then you can offer your presence to your friend or to your person. And that at your presence where you are probably be more useful than if you're fixing it. If you're feeling sorry for them if you're trying to come for them too much. You know it there's something about the simplicity of just feeling and being with someone sharing the space. I love the prefix for compassion. Part, meaning with, and to breathe with, to be with, to suffer with, to love with others, to have this, this sense of being with not being isolated, happy, to be connected to be with.

And with that to allow our, or your heart to be with others as well. So we with them as fellow travelers as fellow humans and as close fellow as people who have challenges all kinds of we all have challenges, and to then have certain kind of healthy sympathy and care and empathy for the challenges people go with. To appreciate that we're kind of all in this together. We're all in this life together. And probably we all need each other much more than we realize. And perhaps the person that you're most likely to close your heart to, not that person. You know, that person doesn't deserve My compassion, you know that the person doesn't deserve my care. That person doesn't you know, it's just too bad or to something. It's possible that that's the person that you have the most need to open your heart for. Because it hurts you to close your heart It hurts you hurts you to kind of close down, you limit yourself that way. When we treat anybody, anything short of being our brothers and sisters or our full humanity, you know as being humans, I think we really shortchange ourselves. So to sit quietly, upright, still breathing and let the winds of suffering just kind of be present. Until you're comfortable, you're at peace, you're relaxed, without suffering. We hope that the suffering doesn't last forever. There is in Buddhism, that deeper work of insight that can get to the root of our suffering and kind of kind of, you know, help release us from a lot of it. But when it doesn't, what a things like enlightenment or deep insight, when it doesn't release and free us from it really Buddhism says it frees us from suffering. But it doesn't release us from pain. And this distinction is very important. So of course, it can be physical pain. But the empathy we feel the suffering of others, is a kind of pain and discomfort. So we wouldn't call a suffering. And this is going to add another thing is, quite importantly, is we feel the pain we feel that empathy. But in the Buddhist terminology, we wouldn't call that suffering because it's not a problem. It's not something that has to be fixed inside of us, but rather it's it's feeling the pain. feeling pain or discomfort or a little last week I talked about the broken heart. That that just comes from being present with somebody else who's suffering and, and to find that your that doesn't disturb your peace, it doesn't disturb your love, disturb your love your care that you can breathe easily. Even that situation is, is one of the great discoveries, great goals, I think of a spiritual life so that they become compassion.

And then someday, if you get compassion, you'll begin liking it. So, those are my thoughts today about this topic. And if you have any comments or questions or concerns you'd like to raise you're welcome to. Yes, please, if and if you can use the mic, that would be helpful.

So how do you use compassion? What you were describing today to deal with a situation where you are actually abused or bullied?

Oh, so the famous There's a famous teaching stories in our tradition, because that's religion A long time ago. One thing is one of our early teachers, when she went to India, she was somehow mildly accosted when she was driving, taking one of these rickshaws in some city. And so she got away she broke away from the person who was trying to maybe take her purse or do something and But she was kind of distressed Of course. And then she went to her because a teacher and said, What should I do? And he said, with all the loving kindness that you can muster, I hit him over the head with your umbrella. And, or, or you know, it's more the principle or use another example. So, Buddhist monastics are known for being non violent, they are not supposed to have any weapons and not supposed to fight they're supposed to just, however, there is an exception to that. And that is Buddhist monastics are allowed to strike out some of their hands on the right in order to escape. So if someone attacks them, they're not they don't have to sit there and just kind of like smile and you know, breathe and have compassion for the person who's attacking them. They're allowed to strike out in order in order to escape in order to get away. However, there's one requirement. And that's, they have to fulfill if they're going to do that. And that is they have to have loving kindness for the person they're striking out for. So that's a high requirement, right? So print this idea is that for your answer is that it is possible to have some kind of compassion for a person who's abusing you. It's possible. It's a challenge to do that. It's possible to understand a little bit maybe sometimes we understand their background, and the suffering they went through, maybe they went through horrendous abuse. And sometimes there's a way in which abuse people abuse just kind of perpetuated down through generations. And it can kind of can be heartbreaking to know that where someone has come from, so you can feel for them. So you can have so it's okay to have compassion. It's okay to get away. It's okay to call the police. It's okay to take care of yourself. And so you don't have to sit there, you're not you're not expected to just compassionately sit there and allow someone to abuse you. That doesn't make any sense. Make sense?

That if it's not like calling the police for its verbal abuse, where you can say that if you continue this way, I you know, I'm leaving. I'm not gonna be part of this. This is not working for me. And if it's a family member, sometimes it's you know, you have to decide whether this is something that that you want to live with, and whether the cost benefit analysis is and you know, what, we're where you come out, but if you feel afraid, and and, you know, and it's causing causing the stress for you. Why, why keep living in it. So, you know, sometimes you have to give put down ultimatums and say, Look, this is this is not working anymore, and I'm happy to try to be in relationship with you, but not with this kind of behavior. If it doesn't stop, you know, then I'm leaving or I'm not not gonna see you anymore or something. And if you're living with a person, then ideally you would, you know, one of them either you or that person would move out if it's really bad. And if it's an it can be very hard hard with the computer, especially for people who were close to a partner or something. And sometimes it's really helpful really important to get a support then for someone else, a therapist or someone so you're not alone with it so you get support and can find your way. So I don't know if that addresses your concern but but so if you know if you have confidence that you can take care of yourself. If you have confidence, you can say what you need to say if you have confidence, you can just take care of yourself in whatever way it is, then it's a lot easier to have compassion. But you don't have to. I think it's unrealistic to think that you're supposed to sit there and figure out how to how to have compassion while they're abusing you. You know, that's just a burden to view unless you have it. But if you don't have it, I mean, I think that it may be you know,

you're still being abused. I don't think that take care of yourself first. Especially this gentleman here. Yeah.

Can you elaborate the difference between pity and compassion a little bit more? And also, why does it matter if your your action afterwards is to help someone whether it is pity or compassion?

Yeah. I suppose it depends. I guess. It depends. And what the need is, I mean, if someone is starving and you save their lives that's what's important whether you do it out of pity for them out of compassion for them, maybe that's a minor issue. But if the you know, but in some situations you have pity demeans people kind of kind of kind of creates a status difference where they're kind of lesser than you were, you know, more unfortunate than you and, and you're the special one, you're the one who kind of somehow has it together is, you know, has has the wisdom to, you know, offer them something, do something for them. Pity pity is kind of and one of the reasons that matters is for the person who has pity. Pity doesn't pity, at least in the Buddhist analysis. Pity is is an unskillful state of mind. And so it's not really doesn't really feel good for us. It's not really it's kind of as kind of a suffering for the person who has it. So if you really want to not suffer yourself, You wouldn't have pity. You just breathe with someone and be with them as kind of like equals and kind of sharing it rather than be better than them or something. And it's a way of preserving people's dignity, dignity. You know, there's a lot of people you know, you, like, for example, homeless people, sometimes they have a greater need sometimes for human contact and sense of dignity and being valued than they do somebody feel sorry for them. That can feel kind of demeaning and like, you know, let they're not really being seen only. So it makes sense. Especially saw the hand over there in the back if you can pass the mic. People have hearing system devices needed.

Going back to the first issue or question about a situation of abuse or being hurt. Can you talk about the role of compassion for the person who's observing someone else? Be be hurt or abused? Where Where is the role of compassion and in that situation for the person who's observing it?

I think compassion is relevant for anybody, anybody we know who's suffering. So if you know someone who's observed, suffering being caused or and there's they're struggling because of the pain, the distress of experiencing that we can we can feel we can feel their pain there and offer our heartfelt care and connection to them for that. That would you mean

it seems seems that compassion is so is not an is not of help or have not a value in a situation where you're observing someone else be hurt or abused you can have compassion for them. But if you're not doing anything to help relieve the suffering, the compassion seem a little how oh that way.

Oh, I see. I understand misunderstood you. I thought you meant mean the world right now. full of people who are, in a sense have observed these terrorist bombings right. And they're not going to do much about it, you know, but, but a lot of people are distressed so we can have, we can have compassion for all the people who are distressed and some people traumatized by this whole thing, but has a competent. If you're watching, if you're watching something, and you have compassion for some abuse that's happening, some harm is happening. What good is that? Compassion with compassion, the definition of compassion is is it's not just empathy. We're in the sense of feeling the suffering of someone else. It's feeling, experiencing, feeling, the suffering of someone else, and desiring to alleviate it, to do something about it. That desire that has to be there as part of compassion. Whether you can do something about it is another question. And sometimes occasionally, when you can't do anything about it, someone who is suffering, just appreciate it. Someone else feels what they're doing. knows what's going on. They're not alone in it. Thank you here in the front

subject, I wonder if even if, you know, let's say someone's using bullying or it's or verbal dumping on someone and maybe it's you. I wonder if even though you might not be feeling compassion as you say, no, that's not working for me or that needs to stop, or I'm leaving, that maybe that act is compassionate to that person because they need to learn not to be doing that.

Absolutely can be yes. That's how they're going to start. Maybe that's how they're going to change. Maybe straight back there, back where it came from.

You mentioned early in the talk, that we could have wisdom or enlightenment, which would we want?

I would think I wish, I wish both of them on you for you.

Thank you. But I just in my own experience, it's seems like wisdom is part of enlightenment. Not that I'm enlightened, but I think it's process.

Yes. I agree. The wisdom, enlightenment, compassion all kind of work together and support each other. And so I think that the more free we become enlightenment basically is a word for the movement towards inner freedom. We're not contracted or caught in something and the less caught we are Then the more the heart, our empathy, our capacity for feelings can operate more freely. And so the more compassion there is, the more compassion is there. The less we're contracted, and the more free we are. So they go hand in hand, they support each other.

But I was having trouble with a relationship probably 10 years and, and I'm often meditating with this person. And I knew I was off center. I knew there was it was a hindrance for any growth, but I couldn't let go of it. And then, just this last week, I was listening to Jack Kornfield. And that big thing that's going on, and he said, look for the beauty behind the eyes of the person. And it's it made sense to me, and I don't think it would have made sense Six months ago, huh? Fantastic.

So you now have the capacity to see something deeper and rather than the surface and the ideas and the resentments that might be there.

It doesn't matter that this person doesn't act the way I think. So, it really is it doesn't matter at all. Yeah,

that's that's an interesting observation. How many times do we somehow judge someone, resist someone, avoid someone when it's completely unnecessary to do so. Yeah. It serves no good purpose for you or anybody else. But the instinct to do it operates and so. So you might you might consider that as you go through your week. That Are there times when you judge people or close yourself, close your heart to people where it's really not necessary. And if you because if you don't know Siri, you know who's harmed? You are. So compassion. And as we enter now into what's called the holiday season it's actually a time for a lot of compassion. It's a time when actually a fair amount of suffering arises in our communities and families and situations in all kinds of ways. And, but to be able to call on compassion to consider compassion to kind of say no salt, the soup with compassion can make a big difference. A compassion be your companion to help you breathe easily. Okay, thank you.