

Brahmavihāras: Compassion (2 of 5)

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Let us continue with the second talk on compassion – *karuṇā*. As I said yesterday, there are many different definitions of compassion. There may be as many forms of compassion as there are people. As wonderful and profound as compassion is, we should be careful not to put it into just one box, as if compassion is just one thing. The Buddhist idea of *karuṇā* has its own flavor – its own particular way of being. It is quite worthwhile to learn and understand this flavor of compassion.

I have been told or read that the word *karuṇā* comes from the same root as the word karma (action). Before the time of the Buddha, *karuṇā* referred to something called “sacred action” or “special action.” Perhaps the Buddha and the religious world of his time used *karuṇā* to mean something close to what we call compassion.

The Buddha primarily talked about *karuṇā* as something that is cultivated and experienced in meditation. He uses another word, *anukampā*, to express care (maybe compassion) for how we act in the world.

For many of us, *karuṇā* is primarily cultivated and discovered in meditation. Meditation is a place where we settle in to discover how to be free of the hindrances, among other things. We discover how to be free of ill will, compulsive desire, sloth, torpor, restlessness, anxiety, regret, and doubt. We also discover how to be free of clinging and to rest deeply in ease and peace.

Encountering or being concerned with the suffering of oneself or others – when the hindrances and clinging are neither in the forefront of meditation nor complicating it – gives compassion a unique flavor. It is compassion free of tension, clinging, and the distress that arises from clinging.

One form of distress – that’s born out of contact with suffering – is related to all the ways we cling to self. This distress is related to the ways in which the self is wounded, hurt, easily triggered, or frightened. When the sense of self gets rectified, harmonized, or softened – dissolved in this wonderful field of goodwill in meditation – then self, self-concern, self-preoccupation, and egotism do not get tied up in compassion.

Compassion, then, is free of what’s called the near enemy of compassion. The near enemy looks like compassion, but it is not compassion. Sometimes it’s pity. We feel pity for people or a kind of distressed feeling of horror or alarm. We feel strongly motivated, concerned, and caught in the experience of suffering and the suffering of others. We worry about people. We might call that compassion. It looks like compassion, but it’s not quite compassion. It is not *karuṇā*, where the reference point is a deep sense of inner well-being.

If we have the sense of well-being and happiness that comes from letting go of clinging and self-preoccupation, then a confusion might be that if we’re compassionate, we’re altruistic. We don’t have any concerns for ourselves. We give ourselves completely over to caring for other people as if we do not matter. It’s fine for us to stay up all night and exhaust ourselves – do whatever we can – because we’re supposed to be compassionate. But when the sense of well-being in meditation is our reference point, then it becomes obvious that we’re harming ourselves when we do not give any attention to ourselves.

Compassion – this *karuṇā* in Buddhism – is not altruistic compassion, but it’s also not selfish compassion. I like to think of it as compassion glowing outwards from one’s heart. Compassion glowing from one’s heart takes care of the first human it encounters. And the first human this compassionate care encounters will be you – everything from the center of your heart outwards.

A sense of care, love, goodwill, and well-being for ourselves is also warranted. It flows out from us because, as we get centered, nothing gets stuck. Our feelings and attitudes are not limited. There’s an openness that includes the world around us and others. It’s not an inclusion or concern for others where we lose touch with what’s here because *karuṇā* flows from the heart through us and into the world. The sense of well-being in

meditation – that allows us to connect to the heart – is the very well-being or openness that allows our compassion to flow outward.

One of the characteristics of *karuṇā*, which I mentioned yesterday, is that it's not tied up in sorrow or distress. We don't take it on as a burden. There's a feeling of lightness or sweetness in this – even though the heart might be broken. My heart gets broken regularly from the suffering of the world, from what people tell me they've experienced in their lives, or from what I read in the news.

After reading the news, there have been times when I've sobbed because of what I saw there. But I don't feel distressed. I don't feel upset or sorrow exactly. I feel my heart is broken – maybe sad but without sorrow, or sorrow without sadness – a kind of poignant feeling that has no clinging. It's not self-preoccupation. It's not feeling sorry for myself or distressed. I'm quite welcoming and willing to have my heart broken – to feel this poignant sadness for the world. But it has no weight. It doesn't feel as if I'm suffering with it.

This compassion – *karuṇā* – is neither altruistic nor self-centered. We are as important to care for as anyone else. There's a balance in our compassion between self-care and care for others. Buddhists tend not to use the word self-care because it's such a magnet for self-preoccupation. The idea of self-centeredness is so powerful that we should be careful with the language we use. We don't want it to become a magnet for self-concern.

We begin to discover this inner capacity for compassion (*karuṇā*) that comes from letting go of distraction, clinging, and the hindrances. As I keep saying, for many of us, this starts in meditation. Compassion itself – along with a degree of freedom, ease, or an absence of clinging – supports all kinds of transformations.

With compassion, and this deep letting go of the hindrances and selfishness, resentment can turn into forgiveness, hostility into friendliness, and anger into kindness. Compassion is a force that prompts or encourages the movement of letting go of clinging. Why hold on to anything if by holding on, we keep hurting ourselves? Jealousy is a holding on. Hostility is a holding on. Ill will is a holding on.

The combination of this connection to deeper well-being and compassion is like a medicine or balm that transforms those places inside us that are hard. Our suffering can come in many forms – hostility, anger, self-criticism, criticism of others, being deeply afraid, or being hurt. We meet that suffering with softness, compassion, kindness, and non-clinging. We meet our suffering with that part of us that's not self-preoccupied. We are present for our suffering in a loving and careful way.

Meditation helps us meet our suffering. Knowing our suffering helps us to better understand the suffering of others. This helps us have compassion for them.

As we understand ourselves better, we understand the complications that can arise when we encounter others, giving birth not only to the near enemies of compassion, but also to the far enemies of compassion – horror or deep distress – or even to the far, far enemy – cruelty. Some people respond to distress in the world by pushing it away. It's so painful and unacceptable to be present for it. Sometimes people respond with forms of cruelty.

The reference point for *karuṇā*, this particular kind of compassion in the teachings of the Buddha, is meditation practice. Hopefully, over time, we discover the freedom that comes with meditation, and how it can give rise to a kind of compassion that is very clean. Maybe compassion is like purified gold. It's purified of all the dross and impurities that come with it. We then understand that compassion doesn't diminish us.

Compassion is not stressful in and of itself. It's not sharing or feeling the suffering of others so we feel it the same way. Rather, it's being with their suffering with tenderness, care, concern, and empathy. We bring a soft, tender attitude of care and love to meet them. We care for and support others. We bring friendship – to simply be with them.

It's said that if you want to be happy in your life, be compassionate. This is easier said than done. This saying refers to the *karuṇā* we discover, evoke, or develop when there's freedom from clinging – freedom from the hindrances. Meditation can lead to this if we can really be present – just here.

If we can't be fully present, then it's a wonderful thing to be compassionate about that. We try to be caring and loving for all of our challenges. Sometimes, it's through compassion that we finally learn how to be present here for our lived experience.

I hope you'll spend some time thinking about, exploring, and reflecting on the relationship between compassion and the absence of clinging – the absence of self-centeredness. But do that with the presence of self-love.

Thank you all very much.