

Brahmavihāras: Compassion (5 of 5)

December 18, 2020

SUMMARY KEYWORDS

karuṇā, meditation, nourishing, freedom, blind, clinging, impermanence, tenderness, caring, absence, self-preoccupation, liberation, generosity, goodwill, empathy, humanity

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This is the last talk on the Buddhist concept of *karuṇā*, often translated as compassion. In the early Buddhist tradition, the reference point for *karuṇā* is meditation practice, where we become free from the hindrances, from clinging and hatred, and from preoccupation. With that, we become free from obligation, idealism, and everything else that keeps us locked in, limited, closed down, or agitated. So what gets born out of that that has to do with caring for the suffering of oneself and the suffering of the world? What is the flavor and character of compassion that has a quality of freedom?

Many of us have experienced compassion and care towards others. In this movement of compassion, something opens up that is different from self-concern (where the habitual reference points of me, you, and others operate).

I don't know if this story touches on compassion for you, but it does for me. I don't know if it is a true story, but maybe that does not matter. It took place in Washington, DC, on a beautiful spring day, with blue sky, crisp, clear air, and trees covered in big, beautiful, white flowers. Everyone was delighted by the freshness of it all.

Every day, a person on his way to work walked past a blind man sitting on the sidewalk begging for spare change. One day, the passerby noticed the man's cup was empty. They asked, "Can I make a sign for you?" "Yes," said the blind man. So the passerby made a sign, propped it against the cup, and went on to work.

Later, the passerby noticed the blind man had money in his cup. The passerby asked, "How is it going?" And the blind man said, "Oh, it's going great. I've never received so much before. What did you write on the sign?" The passerby said, "I wrote, 'Today is a beautiful day, and I'm blind.'"

Our sense of common humanity, empathy, and understanding tells us that many sighted people are enjoying something special, unique, vibrant, alive, and uplifting – a beautiful day. Someone who is blind may be able to smell the freshness of the day, but they can't see the blue sky and flowers. Knowing this touches something in us. We want to extend ourselves to support the blind person – make a sign, offer some help or money.

Something in that movement of caring is no longer about self. This is especially true if we are coming out of meditation and are not preoccupied or caught up in ideas about what should and should not be. Something opens in us: "Oh, of course. I feel for this person. I have compassion. I'm with this person."

I propose that for this movement of caring to be *karuṇā*, it must be nourishing for the person it is offered to and for the person who gives it. Nourishing and being nourished are the same thing. We can use nourishment as a reference point for compassion. We look for this reference point and are careful if it is not present. If we do not feel nourished, we are probably operating under obligation, duty, or a big "should." There may be a kind of inner harshness: "Gil, you're supposed to be compassionate. Better do it now. Otherwise, you'll somehow be a bad person."

We can recognize and deeply know in ourselves what it is like to be nourished and nourishing. This nourishment is for us and our relationships in the world. When we are generous, our generosity can nourish us. Our goodwill can be nourishing for us. Our compassion can be nourishing for us.

In Buddhism, *karuṇā* has a very close relationship to liberation or freedom. The freer we become, the more we have a reference point for understanding the simplicity, clarity, and beauty of compassion. That beauty, simplicity, and clarity help us become happy – a specific kind of happiness.

With the tragedies of the world, happiness may not seem appropriate, but we can still respond to those tragedies. Maybe we do not feel happy, but there is nourishment. There is a radiance of goodness when we do not get caught up in thoughts of horror, dismay, anger, or agitation, or when our response does not come from a place of self: “I have to do something. I’m confused. What should I do?” Instead, we see the sign, “Today’s a beautiful day, and I’m blind,” and something in us opens. “Oh, let me offer something here. Let me share something with this person.”

Compassion practice can be a formal meditation practice as well. We intentionally develop our compassion so we do not leave it to chance. It has been one of the great gifts of my life to watch my sense of compassion develop. When I started meditation, I had no idea that it was so fantastic to have compassion awakened in me.

With meditation on compassion, compassion becomes a form of freedom, and compassion teaches us about freedom. Compassion teaches freedom from self, our stories, and opinions; freedom from clinging; freedom from hatred, sensual desires, and comfort.

As we go deeper with meditation on compassion and are nourished by it, we experience a nourishing alternative to the pursuit of sensual pleasure and getting caught in stories and opinions. It is an alternative to self-preoccupation. It is not as if we let go of self-preoccupation and are left with nothing. We are left with a place of tenderness and nourishment within.

As our compassion deepens and strengthens, and we become more concentrated, the compassion sets the stage for the deepest liberation of Buddhism. When the mind is peaceful, at ease, and settled on itself, there can be insight into the nature of compassion: even compassion is impermanent, inconstant, and changing. Compassion also arises out of the constructing forces of the mind and heart. There is something beyond the constructing forces of the heart and mind – outside of that which is inconstant and impermanent.

That which is beyond and outside of the heart and mind is not a thing. It is the absence of all clinging and all self-preoccupation. This radical absence really gets our attention. “Wow! It’s possible. It really is possible to experience and live this life without any clinging or attachment *whatsoever*.” To know that is phenomenal.

Freedom from clinging clears the dust from the windows of our hearts so that it is much easier to have compassion. It is much easier to have love because there are no smudges. There is no dust. There is nothing in the way of that tenderness and warmth. Nothing is in the way of our being touched by the world and our hearts touching the world.

We find a whole new level of compassion after some very deep letting go happens. Compassion can be part of the path to letting go because it supports letting go and relaxing. It can be very compelling to settle into a strong sense of compassion. It can be the stepping stone for deeper release.

Once a person has experienced deep release, the heart is open, and compassion has awakened in a greater way, the Buddha’s instruction is to go forth into the world for the welfare of humans and gods – for the welfare and happiness of all beings. In other words, live caring for this world – live for the welfare of the world. Not because we should, but because that is what the heart wants to do.

Acting from compassion is an extremely important thing to do. To not act on our compassionate impulses is a kind of restriction, closing down, diminishing, and sometimes even wounding of ourselves. If you have a compassionate impulse, act on it. There is a feedback loop: the more we act on compassion – as pure a compassion as possible – the more that compassion feeds back to us and supports us.

Simply thinking “I am compassionate” or meditating on compassion – doing just that can shortchange us. It is in the enactment of compassion that it comes to fulfillment and completion.

Sometimes the practice of compassion means to practice acting as if you have compassion, knowing full well you are acting. But sometimes, acting as if you have compassion evokes, awakens, and clears the space for our innate capacity for compassion to grow.

The *brahmavihāra* of compassion is one of the great gifts and treasures of this tradition of Buddhism. May it be that you treasure whatever capacity for compassion (*karuṇā*) that you have hints of and have touched into. Treasure it. Value it. Make room for it. May it have a strong place in your life. May you benefit from it. May you benefit all beings from that compassion. Thank you.