

# Aspects of Compassion (5 of 5) Action

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## SUMMARY KEYWORDS

suffering, care, attuned, burrito, poem, beauty, natural, tension, awareness, attunement, appreciation, aspiration, clarify, pleasure, agent, benefit, Dharma, clarify, cleaning, refining, hindrances, obligation, empowering, self-concern, accompanying, autonomous, selfless

## Gil Fronsdal

Today we have come to the fifth element of compassion, which is action. It is actually very important that we act. There is something empowering, freeing, and enlivening in action, rather than wishful thinking while living under the weight and burden of feeling the challenges and suffering of the world. Even small acts count for our hearts. Who knows how much small acts might benefit others? Sometimes small acts of kindness and compassion have the biggest impact.

It is always important to act, but we have to be very careful what that means and how we take it in. If we live under the obligation that we have to go and help someone else, then it is very easy to add stress and tension to that effort, and imbue it with something that might not be beneficial for us or others. In fact, one form of action is to keep purifying ourselves – to really clarify and develop ourselves.

There are times when we feel the suffering of the world, and maybe we can't do anything. If you read the news, there is so much suffering, and we're not going to be able to reach out to all of it. But we can still be moved by it. We can still do the first four elements or aspects of compassion. As we move into action, the action is not necessarily doing things directly for the people who are suffering. Sometimes it is simply going through the cycle of awareness, attunement, appreciation, and aspiration again.

That cycle is like a cleansing, a refining, a smoothing out, and a growth of the clarity and fullness of compassion and care. The compassion becomes stronger and is less and less mixed with tension and suffering. Many times when there is a quick impulse to be compassionate, we do not realize how much we bring along our conceit, our ideas of self, ideas of others, our pity, our tension, or our feelings of obligation that mess up compassion in some way.

There is something like a natural compassion that can well up. I feel very fortunate because my discovery of the beauty and the wonder of compassion happened when it found me through my repeated meditation practice. It welled up just by meditating day in and day out for years. It was as if I made space. The hindrances to compassion settled, and, lo and behold, a beautiful feeling of compassion, care, and love was there. It was there without a need to do anything at first, without a specific direction that had to be addressed. Compassion was just there. I appreciated the beauty of compassion.

The action is to go back and go through the cycle of mindfulness again, maybe when you're meditating. One of the reasons to be recursive, to go back, is so you can start to discover a natural compassion that is quite beautiful.

Sometimes the aspiration for suffering to end for someone leads us to say: "Well, I can do something. It's not just wishful thinking. Yes, I can do something for them. I can do something for the world." But we do it on a foundation of the first four elements, which hopefully means that there can be beauty, attunement, and naturalness in the action that we do. This way, the action is not done with a sense of heavy responsibility, a sense of bearing down and having to do something, or doing something because we are angry and we have to fix something in the world. ("Yes, I have compassion, but I'm angry and I'm going to do something.")

There is beauty and pleasure in the natural compassion that can well up when we are really centered in ourselves and we have this autonomous awareness, agency, and deep attunement that clarifies it all. This welling up is a source of happiness that is not intentional, because it is not about us. Because of the purity, the clarity, the simplicity, the absence of dust, the absence of tension, and the absence of doing, when we get ready to act, there is a naturalness and a beauty to the action, and a kind of pleasure – it feels good.

I was so surprised when I began to discover how good it felt just to have very simple acts of care, attention, and compassion for other people. At first, I thought: "Is this okay? Are we allowed to do this? Am I doing it for selfish reasons?" because it felt so good. But I found very quickly that as soon as I tried to do it for myself, that messed it up. There had to be a kind of absence of self in the action, in the care. Something deeper than self-concern and self-preoccupation was motivating the whole thing.

This natural compassion, natural action, is attuned to oneself and the situation. Even if it is only sending a check for a good cause, there is delight and joy in being able to do it. There is a deep satisfaction, a kind of pleasure and happiness in being able to do that. It isn't like, "Oh, I should do more." It is, "Oh, yes, this is good."

Maybe a friend is suffering, and what seems right is to just go over and sit near them. You don't have to get more involved. Sit near them and see what happens. "Near them" might be ten feet away. Sit there and be available and see what happens. Sometimes people find it so meaningful that someone was there with them as they suffered, accompanying them from a distance. Or maybe you sit closer. Maybe you don't say much because just sharing the space with them is enough. Maybe the action is getting someone a glass of water. You see they are distressed: "Can I bring you some water? Are you hungry?" There are so many small ways that compassion can take form.

I know this is not necessarily so small, but I had a wonderful experience with my son when he was small, maybe five years old. We were going out to a Mexican restaurant to get a burrito. In front of the restaurant, a homeless person was asking for money for food. I said, "Well, come with us and I'll buy you something."

So he came in, and he just ordered the simplest thing, like a burrito. I said, "Don't you want more?" And he said, "No, this is enough." I thought, well, maybe this was just his choice. Anyway, we invited him to eat with us, but he said no, and he left. I didn't think too much about it until I left the restaurant.

He was waiting outside for us. He had no paper, but he had found a brown shopping bag, and he was a poet. He said, "I wrote a poem, and I want to read it to you in thanks." Then he read this beautiful poem to us. He didn't give us the poem, but he read it, and that was his thanks. I said, "Wow, who gave who a gift here?" It was pretty simple for me to pay for his burrito. But wow, what a beautiful thing to take the time to write something.

So we ask, what can we do? How can we do it in a natural way? How do we act so the action benefits us? If an action is only about benefiting someone else, it is too easy for it to get messed up. If it is only about ourselves, it will certainly be messed up. But there is a way of caring for and being attuned to both.

Being attuned to oneself is not being attuned to our concept of self or our ego. To be attuned to self is to be attuned to our motivations, our sensations, our suffering, our joys, and our pleasure. We are attuned to where the selfless beauty is, so that when we act, that is what flowers in us, rather than our selfishness.

So compassion is a profound and wonderfully natural aspect of the human heart. It is kind of a birthright. At some point, you realize: "This is who I am. This is what I want to orient my life to because it feels so integral and so right." It is not a duty or an obligation. It is an expression of some of the deepest understandings and deepest ways of being centered here in a selfless way. To be able to come into the world to express this deep, beautiful, inspiring part of our hearts is one of the greatest things to do in this life.

Until you really discover that and can live that, don't underestimate that one of the greatest actions you can do is this practice of mindfulness and awareness. Really cultivate awareness, attunement, appreciation, and aspiration. These four things are part of the profundity of who we are. Practice them, go through them, deepen them, and clarify them. When the time comes for action, you will know when the time is right. Sometimes the action occurs when nothing else makes sense.

May we all be agents of change, to change the world and make it a better place. I teach the Dharma to help and support individuals. My aspiration and my trust are that, as we individually blossom in the Dharma, we benefit this world. I would like this Dharma to really flower and benefit the whole world. This process of clarifying our compassion is one of the profound ways we can become agents of peace, joy, support, and compassion. Thank you very much.