Core Teachings Pt 2 (4 of 5) Natural Love

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Gil Fronsdal

Hello, everyone, and welcome to the fourth talk on the five core principles or foundations of the way I offer Buddhist teachings. Today, I'd like to talk about the social emotion of love as an umbrella term for all of these: friendliness, kindness, goodwill, compassion, sympathy, empathy, appreciation, appreciative joy, empathic joy (sharing others’ joy), and a profound form of equanimity, peace, non-assertive, non-wavering love in the face of challenges. In the face of our inability to make a difference for people, our love is unshakable and equanimous.

I said earlier that one of the foundations that I really appreciate in Buddhism is the idea of not having any fixed views or ultimate philosophy – not experiencing the world through the filter of our philosophies, our world views, our cultural views, or our religious views. Instead, we shed them as if they're a kind of filter through which we experience the world. The reason why I feel so confident of that is that in the naturalistic orientation to this practice, we have profound, wonderful, deep capacities that are often overlooked and submerged in the hustle and bustle and challenges of life – our suffering, pain, and betrayals, and the busyness of trying to survive.

If we can somehow put down our views, our opinions, and the stories we live in all the time, that allows a deep natural movement that is buried deep inside of us, which functions best when we're relaxed, at ease, when we feel safe. Then we're more likely to welcome the stranger as they come by. This is an ancient tradition – welcoming the stranger, not shunning them or being afraid of them. This doesn't necessarily mean that we welcome them into our home if that's not appropriate, but maybe we give them support and show them the way. The idea is to welcome the stranger, welcome the friend, welcome those we know – well come: everyone comes well into our tenderness, our love, and our capacity for friendliness.

When we're caught in views, opinions, and stories – including stories and views about who I am and who I have to be, and my identity that I've created and that I have to defend – sometimes that interferes with our capacity to feel and respond from someplace deep inside. This place is resilient and clear enough to not even get caught by insults and criticism. We don't lose touch with this resilient place that is not troubled by the challenges in our lives. It's free and doesn't need to be caught by, influenced by, and react to things. Then we have a fantastic capacity for love, care, and kindness.

In practice, I discovered the tremendous wonderfulness of compassion, metta, kindness, friendliness, and simple care and benevolence that we can carry with us. This was not because I was told I should, or felt I should engineer it, pump it up and dutifully try hard to be friendly and kind. Rather, kindness was a byproduct of doing first Zen meditation practice, and then mindfulness practice. Something settled, relaxed, showed up, and became alive from deep inside. In that living sense of depth within, the crust around my heart softened and fell away. That's how it felt when I was doing Zen practice – all the crustiness, defensiveness, and hardness around my heart softened and was chipped away.

All of that fell away until the heart was soft and tender enough for me to feel the suffering of the world around me without fear or reactivity, without feeling others’ suffering as a burden, and without being oppressed by it or dismayed by it. There was a beautiful feeling of compassion. No matter how uncomfortable it is to feel the suffering of the world, I think that healthy compassion has beauty to it. For some people, it's hard to imagine that compassion can be beautiful when there's so much ugliness in the suffering of the world. But it is possible.

Compassion arises from the depth. It's not something that has to be done. With mindfulness practice, I discovered the same thing with friendliness, kindness, and metta. As things cleared away, as I felt quite settled,
at ease, and happy just to be alive, there was a welling up of this natural capacity for friendliness, love, and kindness. I wouldn’t characterize metta as beautiful, the way I do compassion. But it was sweet. It was joyful. If it was an adjective, I would call it “smilingly.”

As my practice deepened, compassion and love were less in the forefront. But there was greater and greater freedom from any kind of attachment. In the absence of covering over and interfering with life through the attachment, bondage, clinging, and craving that I’d had before, I was surprised by a very tender, satisfying form of care that was peaceful and not reactive. It didn’t succumb to distress, anger, hostility, or fear. This was a very simple and ordinary care, appreciation, and valuing of things.

For me, these things arose from something deep inside that was freed when there was no overlay and nothing interfered. It was like a flower that blossoms when the conditions are right. When the conditions are right, our capacity for social emotions can blossom, not because it’s a “should,” but because it’s our natural tendency when the conditions are right.

Buddhist practice (I’m sure other spiritual practices as well) helps us get out of our own way. We get out of the way for something profound within that we can trust. This is not personal, so it’s not directly tied to all the ways we think about me, myself, and mine, which are primarily views. Feeling the joy, the delight, and the freedom of a tender, loving, caring heart is the byproduct or consequence of a path of freedom.

These are foundational for me as a human being. First, there was compassion. That was augmented by metta and friendliness, and then they were augmented by this sense of care or anukampā. I feel that, in some ways, these are the primary organizing principles that motivate my life – the ending of suffering, and caring for suffering.

That caring for suffering now comes out of this same place of care and compassion, this tender heart. For me, this is the most important thing in life – caring in all directions, compassion in all directions, love in all directions. To the best of my ability, I have organized or guided my life around this. The motivation comes from compassion and love. So as a teacher offering these teachings, these are what drive and animate the teachings. Compassion and love are what give life to the teachings. Thank you very much, and I look forward to the fifth talk tomorrow.