

From Compassion to Care

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So I'll tell you what my main purpose or hope through this talk is up front, and then I'll kind of give the talk to support that. And that is for you to reflect on your life, review your life, like kind of your autobiography, through the lens of care giving emotions, feelings like, you know, emotion, kindness, compassion, love, care itself. That's the whole thing I'll talk about. And, you know, it's interesting to look at your own life, and understand it in new ways, and sit under new perspectives. It's going to be quite freeing or opening. Sometimes understanding one's life story, even from a new perspective, sets the foundation for further growth, me, Dharma, even.

Now, it's not that it's maybe that interesting for everyone else, but you could, for example, probably tell your life story from the perspective of your hair, and if you are old enough, you know, there has been a lot of history about how you've been with your hair, and maybe that would make a story, you know? It's different things. So your life, your life story, from the perspective of care. In that regard, then, I like to talk a little bit about my own, maybe as an example of this kind of way of thinking and orientation. It brings together some of the different things I've been thinking about lately. So it's not atypical for me to give a talk on this.

I don't think I gave a lot of thought to care giving feelings, emotions, motivations until I'd been a Zen student for a while, and then I reviewed a little bit my life at that point, and then I saw, Oh, there was probably some influences on me. The big one that I associated with being compassionate or the value of compassion was my mother, and I think she wanted to make a big impact on me. I grew up a little bit in Italy, and it seemed like in Italy, she was regularly stopping for strangers who were in car crashes, and that seemed to be a regular thing to encounter. She even bought a big first aid kit, so she'd be ready to help people and

support people who were in accidents. I would pull over and stop if I saw something like that, and I was kind of glad to see it began to happen to me that she would have this caregiving instinct for strangers and help them out.

I didn't realize at the time that it had an influence on me, but I think it kind of went in by osmosis somehow, and had an impact. Then I remember both my father and also a little later, when I was working for the Zen Center as a brand new student there, working at the bakery. In both circumstances, my father made a donation to some non-profit, I think it was to Save the Children or something. That's why people do such things, you know, why would you do that? Then, when I was working for Zen Center, they used to have a bakery called Tassajara Bakery over in Cole Street, San Francisco, where I used to work. One day I was up in the office, and the person who ran the bakery, a Zen priest, was sitting at his table, somebody sitting next to him. I got a letter from a local association for the Cole Street Association or something asking for a donation, and he asked me, Oh, now how much do we give?

I probably didn't say anything. I didn't like, what, you give money? And he said, Well, I think we'll do fifty dollars. I said, Well, you know, nineteen seventy-nine that was. So this idea that you would do such things was kind of novel for me, even though I saw a little bit growing up as well. But it had a big impact. That went in kind of deeply, and Oh, this is an interesting way of living.

As I practised in my first Buddhist practice, I suffered a lot. At least the way I understand myself was that at the Zen center there was very little instruction on mindfulness, or none, and so there wasn't any instruction for mindfulness of emotions and mindfulness of your suffering. They instructed me just to sit there upright, unmoving, and just keep showing up for the present moment in a kind of uncomplicated way. Just be there. So I didn't have any thought I should do any different. That's what I was told. That's what I did.

So what I meant was I sat with a lot of suffering. That had an impact on me to sit with a lot of suffering, and just sit and breathe, and not react, and not get caught up in stories and reactivity to it, and just feel it and be with it. I felt quite lucky that I didn't have a lot of instructions what to do with it, because then the suffering could go. The simplicity of suffering could somehow become like a tenderizer for the heart, and something shifted and changed. I don't know, the suffering so much definitely decreased, but it started to work on me. This idea that suffering can work on you, or that it has a chance to work on you, if you are not trying to solve it and fix it, and get away from it or something, but just be with it.

I didn't have a lot of psychological understanding or insight either about all this, and yet I was pretty naïve in many ways about my own suffering. Then I started recognizing suffering and

compassion in other people. Then I started recognizing compassion in objects. There was a statue at San Francisco, still there, that was positioned before where you would come out of meditation in the morning, and you'd go walk right up against it before you had to make a right turn. It's right there. It was five feet tall or so, kind of skinny, kind of narrow, kind of thing that kind of spirals up a little bit. I would see this as the embodiment of compassion, like Kuan Yin, an embodiment of compassion.

Many years later, I discovered that the artist thought it was of a flame going up, and it probably looks more like a flame than what most people think of as compassion. But I also started feeling compassion in the wind when it breathed against my cheek, and I would look for fine photographs. I started collecting photographs of Kuan Yin, of Avalokiteśvara, Kannon, and just that's what I did. The nights I was drawing them and different things. What I think was happening was I needed more compassion, and I was also beginning to feel something like compassion arising in me from all this sitting with suffering. So I was kind of like attuned into it around me, to receive it. But somehow tuning in around me, I was projecting it on the situation.

I remember telling someone that that person was so compassionate, and they looked at me, You've got to be kidding. So I don't know what I was picking up, but the fact that I was seeing it in the statue, I really needed it. So I was finding it and getting it. I don't know how enlightened I got in Zen, but I became compassionate in Zen, and that made a big, huge difference for me, that major shift. I'm so grateful for it. At some point, I decided to become a Zen priest, and it was kind of a culmination of that. Back then, it was called a monk. I got ordained as a Zen monk, and three months later, they changed the name to a priest, and I said, What if you sign up for a whole different feeling of what it was about? I am happy with the word priest. I don't mind it, but it starts you now technically still.

The reason to become a monk was in fact to respond to the suffering of the world. It was slowly, over time, especially in the monastic life, that something began to settle and open up, and that it seemed like it was just inherent in me to be—not even, you can't even say me—almost like inherent within me, this responsivity to suffering around me. That wasn't like I chose to respond to it, but kind of like this, you know, that's what you do. That's what happens. Did they take this form that I became a Zen monk? Really, the purpose of it was I thought that the deepest way, fullest way I knew to address human suffering, was through Buddhism. I didn't know anything else, and I wanted to have—I'd feel like I'd be dissatisfied if I did any other kind of care for the world.

I had other ideas in mind. I was to go to graduate school and was going to do a kind of thing

that was—and now. But I felt like I needed to be able to. I felt like I had to for who I am. I didn't want that dissatisfaction or that sense of incompleteness I felt if I didn't try to meet the suffering. I wanted to address it in the deepest way I knew how, which was through Buddhism. It wasn't like I was thinking of becoming a teacher. I just thought, you know, I would do. One memory I had was that I would have a little city, like a city storefront or something, where I had meditation as a zendo, meditation hall, and I have a key, and I'd open it up and keep it clean. I'd open it up, and people come in, they leave, and so who knew? Who knew? When I was spent a year and a half just opening it up, and what came?

So then, being ordained, the idea was that compassion was my most motivating force in my life, and that's how I saw it for myself. That's what I was all about. For years, I kind of still felt that was the case. But slowly something began shifting, and I was always kind of late to understand the shift. It's only retrospectively. At some point I left Zen Center from practicing there to practise *vipassanā*, first in Asia and then here in this country. Clearly something shifted in the meditation, because meditation no longer became about suffering and about compassion. As something began shifting, and I couldn't tell you what it was, but while things were shifting, I became, all along in this process, more and more acutely aware of how much suffering there is in the world.

What was, I think, really a meaningful or important cognizance is that because I was practising so much, there became more and more room in me to recognize suffering, more space for it, for me not to take it personally, or for me to touch my own suffering and irritate like salt in the wound or something. There was just a greater capacity to be with people's suffering and pain, and not somehow wilt because of it or be burdened by it. This openness is kind of—and so that, I think, was a lovely thing to have that. Then I went to practise in Asia, and it was a dramatic shift that happened there, where my own suffering was no longer the salient issue. The practice opened up in a new way. Something different happened to me. Again, this was kind of also a surprise, and it had this kind of funny kind of story that may be funny, sad, I don't know.

I came to practise in the United States, and I practised at a retreat center in Massachusetts, IMS, for a three month retreat. That was like another first time to practise with Western teachers, and to my surprise they started doing, some of them, beginning, some of the meditations with loving-kindness meditation, little guided loving-kindness. The first time they did it, it was just great. My thought was, This is the nicest kind of surprise. But they kept doing it. For a Zen student, you don't talk to people when you're meditating. Also, Zen is kind of like a plate, you know. Zen is more stoic and stern and likes to get to the truth directly, and noth-

ing sentimental, kind of make it, you know, whatever, something like that. At least that's the way I took it in. I'm not saying that's what Zen is about, but that's how I took it in. Kind of silly, but I did, and so I just did what a reasonable person would do. Maybe I was—when teachers would guide loving-kindness meditation, I just tuned them out then.

At some point during that three month retreat, I had this wonderful feeling of clarity and kindness and goodness, and it started welling up inside of me. Then one day they came to do the guided loving-kindness meditation and I said, Oh, that's what they're talking about. Then I had my own reference for it. It wasn't insincere. I wasn't trying to make something happen. I was just—and then when they did, it's like I just tapped into that and let go and built on what was already there. Then what happened in my practice, in my life, was that, and I still kind of called it compassion. I didn't know any better, but I think I was in—slowly it was realized I was more motivated by, day to day, a kind of overall mood of kindness.

Earlier it was kind of like there was a deep underlying mood that I recognized always there of compassion. But as it shifted to kindness as the underlying mood, I realized that compassion, as wonderful and profound as it is, involved a certain kind of little bit more activated internal state for me. Kindness turned out to be a simpler, a less complicated or less involved state. The difference here is very little, and so I want to be very careful—there is no disrespect or devaluing the importance of compassion. But I noticed that a shift happened. Now that shift happened, I still thought I was almost motivated by compassion, but in fact, over time, I realized it was a whole different sentiment, how to be, and it was simpler, and sometimes it would morph into compassion, for sure. But kindness became, or friendliness or goodwill became the salient kind of interesting kind of expression of what was happening to me in practice, and that kind of felt like the mood or where I was coming from.

That went along fine for a while, and then at some point in the last fifteen years or so—I have all these decades, you know, I could review, you know, such a slow process. You know, this is not likely to sit down and, you know, a three day process and get to what I'm talking about. For me, it was like a decades-long process of really simmering in the Dharma and letting it unfold. Then I started noticing that one of the salient features that was happening to me was that there was a kind of peacefulness associated with whatever caregiving, compassion, kindness, goodwill, whatever way I was involved in. There was a peacefulness in it where there was very little inclination to give in to clinging to anything, or reacting to anything, or being caught in anything, or to define myself with it or try to prove myself. Like when I was a new teacher, I felt like when people came to see me—this is long, thirty years ago—so we'd meet with people one on one. I thought I had to give them something. I can't just have them show

up and not, you know, have done something useful for them, and I had to show something for myself as a teacher. So that's a little bit crazy to have that attitude, but things—natural enough maybe at the beginning of a new job like that. The sort of peacefulness settled in.

I certainly wanted to support people, and meet them, and respond to them best I could. But that extra attachment and need to do something started to go away. There was peacefulness to it all. I thought this was kind of interesting. Sometimes I felt I was a little bit—people didn't like it, because some people are really aroused around all kinds of issues of justice and politics and all kinds, you know, even sometimes one on one suffering, someone suffering, and you know, they want you to worry for them. They want you to kind of be alarmed, or, you know, that's kind of the language of how we know we care for each other if we're, you know, angry or something or upset or something. Sometimes I could feel the tension of being in these situations where certain expectations of how I was supposed to be didn't match this peacefulness I had.

Some people might think I was aloof, or I was worried I'd be seen that way, but in fact I wasn't. I mean, I was certainly giving my life over to try to support people in all kinds of ways and do things. That's what my life is about. So it's kind of interesting to discover this peacefulness or non-attachment as a reference point for it all. Then the challenge of—and sometimes the inner debates and inner lawyers would come up, and tell me, Gil, you're supposed to be a little more, you know, upset here, or a little bit more attached or something. So I had to navigate that and wonder about that. I still felt, you know, wanted to care for people and all that.

Then I started, at some point, studying the Pāli Canon, the teachings of the Buddha, much more. In some ways, my real deeper study of these early teachings started about twelve, thirteen years ago. I really started spending a lot of time in it, and a few years ago I was interested in what the Buddha had to say about compassion. Partly it was so important for me, and I knew that the word for compassion is *karuṇā*. Many people know the word *karuṇā*. It turns out the Buddha, the Buddha and his early texts, have very little to say about it. In fact, the only thing he says about it has to do with how it's related to meditation practice, how in meditation you hold boundless *karuṇā*. It doesn't even define what it is. So we don't even know for sure that it is supposed to be translated into English as compassion, because if we were building on the evidence from the ancient teachings, maybe compassion is fine as a translation. But the fact I was so surprised to see—and it's not so obvious because some of the translators translate another word as compassion. So when I read that in the old days, I used to think, Oh, that's *karuṇā*. But it turns out that it's *karuṇā* that's not the word or the

concept that involves everyday caregiving. The word for that is *anukampā*.

So *anukampā*, and in all the circumstances where the Buddha is offering some kind of care to someone else, it's using this word *anukampā*, care. I now translate as care. As I said, some people translate it as compassion, and occasionally you see it translated as sympathy. But if the Buddha taught, spent forty-five years teaching out of *anukampā*, so it seems like a very important emotion, because it's the basis of why Buddha taught. If someone asked the Buddha to come and teach for them, or even come to their house to have a meal, they would ask, Can you please do so out of *anukampā* for me? The reason why this word is something different than compassion is that the way that it's talked about in the suttas, in the ancient language, is it's always in relationship to caring for the welfare and happiness of others. It's never talked about explicitly about suffering, you know, the people—you want people to be alleviated and freed from their suffering. It can include that, for sure. But it doesn't limit to suffering. It's a broad caregiving, a kind of emotional feeling. It's also used in the ancient literature for a much more ordinary, simple kind of care that people provide. Child care providers have care for their children. Teachers, you know, outside of Buddhism, have *anukampā*, care for their students. Parents have care for their children.

So, you know, what is it now? As it was yesterday, I think I talked to a friend of mine who has stage four cancer and is now starting treatment now. I asked him, I'll spend a lot of time in hospitals and stuff. I asked him, What would you prefer that all these people who are caring for you, the nurses, the doctors, and all that—would you prefer they have compassion for you, or they have care for you? He said right away, Oh, I prefer they have care. Exactly why, I didn't ask him why, but there's something very different with compassion, which, you know, I base my life on. So I don't want to disrespect or diminish its value, but it's a particular kind of caregiving. I've been thinking about this. As I was studying this word *anukampā*, I realized that if a friend of mine went along, we spent the day together hanging out, and every moment we were together, every conversation, they were expressing their compassion for me, like I'd start stepping further and further away, like, You know, give me a break. But if there was a continual feeling, or this person cares for me, there's care, I wouldn't feel troubled by it. I wouldn't feel like it's getting too much or a burden. There's a very different feeling to care than to compassion. So to overemphasize compassion as the primary way to be with people maybe misses something.

This care that involves a care for people's welfare and happiness—you can have that kind of care for someone who is not suffering. Someone is suffering, like the Buddha met people or practitioners who were not suffering. They were deep in meditation. They were filled with

joy and happiness, and he would then care for them by offering them further teachings. They could go further into a greater kind of happiness than what they're already feeling. I like this word care so much as a translation for *anukampā*, because it's a kind of humble word. It also has a double meaning in English, that it's to care for something is to value it. So to offer value, have value for the people you're with, or to appreciate them, and to care. Care also means to offer, like there's medical care, we say, or spiritual care, or child care, or elder care. It's a very common word. Also, my friend who is in the hospital, he said, I'd prefer to have care rather than compassion. He said, These nurses who are taking care of me, they are just inspiring by how much care they have. They care for everyone. You watch them, and there's so much care in what they're doing. But I don't think they're having compassion for all of us. They're just going around their job and doing a fantastic job caring for people.

I think it's possible to care for people whom you don't love. It's possible to care for people because love and compassion are kind of a high bar sometimes. So this care thing is a lower bar. You can do it for someone who you know. It's just a basic, ordinary human activity to care if you allow yourself to be a basic, ordinary human being, without preoccupations, attachments, being caught up. Finally, in the suttas, the motivation for *anukampā*—they don't talk much about why, but what motivates, what's the rationale you'd have. You can't just assume that people have it. When some of the Buddha's disciples were fully enlightened, he told them to go forth out into the world for the welfare and benefit for others, out of *anukampā*, out of care for the world. So that was the motivating force. But he just told them to do that, or expected it, just kind of assumed. But there's a few places in the suttas where this word for care is closely connected to the human capacity to have respect, to respect, to honour, to esteem, or to venerate other people or benefit each other. This idea of respect and veneration is a strong word, but some people in the West talk about appreciating the sacredness of other people, an inherent sacredness. Some people use the word in the West of divinity, divine in everyone. But is *anukampā* coming not from suffering? It's not quite friendliness, but it comes from a kind of place of deep respect, veneration. Some say something very, very honour-worthy of each person we meet, to have honour and respect and care. You can do that for people you don't like. There are people who are challenging, who behave in ways that are, you know, maybe even distasteful or something. That's not to say that that's not, you know, that was distasteful what the person did. But even so, there can be the space and care can still exist.

So go back to my story when I started reading about this *anukampā*. Then I recognized it, that this is a good thing. I think this concept, at least how I'm understanding it, that speaks

to this—the more recent change I've had, this peacefulness around caregiving, I think that I'm finding what I'm living from now is very simple: a care that is, for me, it's defined by non-attachment, by not clinging. It's just a simple, ordinary thing. It can go more into compassion, and more into friendliness, and all these things. But it has a simplicity to it, an ordinariness to it, and a sweetness to it that just seems like that's what is involved in it. Now, I look back to kindness, you know, loving-kindness or something, that seems like a more activated state, and it's nothing wrong to be activated. So if compassion is more activating than kindness, than *anukampā*, and kindness is more activated than compassion, than care, and to be able to go about a life without always being activated or by something, or having to evoke or to make something happen. You know, if the requirement is to always be kind, you have to gear yourself up a little bit sometimes. If the requirement is to be compassionate, you also have to kind of like, How do I do that now? And you know what to do and I'm supposed to be compassionate, maybe. But for me, you know, please listen to me a little, but this is a personal story, so I'm not wanting to say that it should be yours or a way. But anyway, finding this peace, this non-attachment in relation to caregiving, and finding it kind of resonating with this word *anukampā*, with care, has been really kind of inspiring for me. Feeling you witness is good. It's kind of, you know, if the lawyers in my mind were arguing about, it's rare to care for people without being attached, it's like I got the star witness, the expert witness, come on the stand, and, you know, made the case that it's OK. Yes, so *anukampā*, the movement towards care.

So that was my story, and I told the story for the purpose of hopefully inspiring you to think of your story, and maybe you can even find someone you tell it to. Maybe even the telling of it is not your discovery process. So you maybe find a good friend who you're willing to kind of stumble along. Why not? So what's been your relationship to care? Do you have no examples of it growing up, no one cared for you? That's what happens to some people. It's like the primary background for some people is the absence of it, or worse. Then has anything shifted and opened and changed? What were the influences on you, and the impacts on you, as you went through your life? What have you learned over your lifetime about your care, your kindness, your friendliness? Where have you received it? How have you been nourished by it from others and influenced by others by it? What is your story? Now, whatever your story is, let's respect it, let's honour it, let's venerate it because it's your story, and see it as a stepping stone for further growth. The more clarity you have about it, then maybe you're ready to kind of find something more or let it grow or evolve into new ways. It maybe wouldn't have evolved if you hadn't really kind of seen it clearly, what it is.

So those are my thoughts for today, and we have a couple of minutes. If any of you would like to ask a question or a comment, you're welcome to do so.

The question here is: Is peacefulness similar to equanimity, from the YouTube online? It overlaps a little bit. I think of them as different. I think of a peacefulness that is less complicated than equanimity.

Yes, I was thinking about empathy as a way of—it's not quite as intense as compassion, and it's a way of feeling into a person, another person's state, and that might be closer to caring for someone? Yes, it could well be. There is a word, another word that sometimes translates as sympathy, and the Pāli suttas often pair it with care. So empathy and care may be closely related, maybe one more.

So I think something that I've been struggling with, particularly, you know, in the events of the last two years or so, is exercising compassion for people where the root of their suffering seems to be something that I fundamentally disagree with, like that their suffering is due to not being able to engage in their own selfishness, for example. It's to a point that, you know, especially with so much polarization and discourse around that, that it's extremely fatiguing for me to—and I feel that the answer to it seems to be having compassion for those people instead of responding with more anger. But I'm not sure how to go about that.

I think it's completely reasonable not to have compassion for some of the reasons people suffer, but the reasons they suffer—only under that there's some kind of suffering, and it's what's on, what underlies it that's maybe you can connect to. So, for example, if I'm really upset and sad and I'm here crying, you know, and I've had a really difficult day today, and Gil, what's wrong? What's happened? Well, I just didn't win the California lottery today. So probably you just shrug your shoulders. Then it's like, What's going on here? That wouldn't elicit a lot of compassion. But if you listen to me more deeply, you might—you know, why is Gil interested in the California lottery? Maybe he's really kind of insecure or something. I can maybe feel for his insecurity. Is this idea relevant for you? Yes, I do think so. You kind of listen deeper than the surface.

So, my friends, thank you for being here. For those of you online, Helen and Peter are the hosts for the conversation group that happens after the Dharma talk. If you go on the website, and I don't know if they're going to put it posted there in the chat, but the website—oh, it's under What's New? or it's on the calendar too. It's on the calendar. You can see the time link, and they discuss a little bit the talk, and just hang out, the living community. So thank you all very much.