

## Dharmette: Sources for Caregiving (1 of 5) Non-Harming

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Hello and welcome to this Monday, where we begin a new series of talks this week. The topic this week is the caregiving instinct, the sources and the motivations within us for offering care to the world around us. One of the great capacities, maybe mammalian capacities of human beings, is the possibility to nurture, care for those who are born to us, their children, babies. From that basic instinct to care and to make safe and to keep—to focus on the welfare of small babies. It's no small thing that we're evolved to offer this kind of care, that we have the ability to offer care to everyone, with respect, with dignity, with love. And what is it that allows us to do this?

It motivates us, that wants us to do this. And that's a topic for this week. In the course of the week, I'll talk about five different caregiving instincts that we have that are sources for this amazing capacity to care for each other. Today I'll talk a little bit about the instinct to non-harming. Then tomorrow it will be on generosity. Then goodwill, *mettā*, compassion, *karuṇā*, and then on Friday, *anukampā*, care.

So these are five ways in which people are really motivated to live and care for others, that their welfare and happiness is important for us. What all of these have in common, I believe, is that they arise out of our ability to not be tense, that these are five different instincts that require a certain kind of presence for ourselves, a certain kind of subtleness in ourselves. So there's a place within that is not under pressure, not tense, where the attention is not narrowed in focus. More, there's a sense of being at home here, being at ease, being at peace, where there's a relaxed feeling, an open feeling, a global feeling of being present. I like to think of this as a kind of homeostasis. The whole being has the ability to come into kind of a harmony so all of us is included.

That is not possible when we live under tension, pressure, and we live under the emotions and instincts that lead to tension and pressure. To live with hostility means that there's tension. To live with greed means there's tension. To live with a lot of fear sometimes involves a lot of narrowing scope of attention, a lot of attention. These movements of hostility, of greed, of sometimes of anxiety and fear, lead us to activate our muscles, the musculature, to fight and flight, to fight. It narrows the harmony. It cuts off the kind of the wider, softer movement of hormones that course through our body, the neurochemicals that can come and support us when there's a sense of harmony, well-being, openness, and inclusion.

These are part of what allows for this deep instinct for parents or for any adult to offer a tender loving care for a baby. Some people have it for their pets. Some people have it for the people immediately around them who are their close family. The idea in meditation, Buddhism, is that as we become freer, as we become freer of tension, freer of suffering ourselves, that there arises within us an instinct to care for everyone. This is part of the great benefit of Buddhist practice: the awakening of the caregiving instinct that we have. I think it's a natural part of who we are.

It takes many different forms. There's many different ways people are constructed and different kind of balance of capacities how we work. So these different instincts come into play different ways. The fact that there is a range of instincts for this caregiving maybe allows different people to find themselves in a more healthy, personal way in caregiving for others. Often in Buddhism the emphasis is so much on compassion as being the basic caregiving instinct that for some people, that doesn't quite work. But these other ones might work really well or even better.

The idea is to have a wide palette. So in different circumstances, for different personalities, we find what's most useful for us, what's appropriate. So the first one is non-harming. This is maybe the most fundamental, certainly principle, but fundamental attitude arising out of the heart, arising out of the deep inside of us through Buddhist practice. As we become more comfortable, more at ease, more peaceful with ourselves, within ourselves, we're not divided, we're not upset with ourselves, resentful, afraid, but all the emotions of tension, all the emotions that narrow us to around a preoccupation begin to soften and relax, and we start feeling a sense of maybe harmony, a sense of peace, well-being, a sense of being at ease, maybe even a sense of cleanliness, being clean on the inside.

We have two things happen. One is we have a greater sensitivity, a greater alertness, awareness of attunement to the emotional state of others. In particular, we can be more attuned to how others hurt, how their pain, their emotional pain, and how in feeling theirs, it feels like

it's almost like it can become our own in a certain kind of maybe equanimous, available way. We don't have to be oppressed or challenged or tense because other people are challenged with feeling pain, emotional pain. But there can be a resonance where we feel, oh, this is not good, this is something I don't want to see continue, I would like this person not to hurt. In particular, what it can be is we can say, I don't want to be the one to cause harm.

This resonance with other people, the sense of who they are, of course we don't want to harm them. Because in a way we do, in doing so, we harm ourselves. That becomes clearer and clearer when we get more and more settled on ourselves, more and more at ease with ourselves, that you can feel that in order to intentionally harm people, we are engaged in these other instincts that narrow us, that tighten us, that tense us, that somehow harm ourselves. So hostility harms the person who's hostile. Hate harms the hater. Greed harms the one who is greedy. Certain kinds of anxiety, for sure, harm the person who's anxious. It's a little bit of a paradox sometimes that sometimes the very thing that an anxious person is afraid of arises—the feeling, what they're afraid of in themselves, what they're afraid of experiencing themselves, is almost caused by the high level of anxiety they have. So it's a self-fulfilling kind of prophecy, sometimes anxiety.

To realize that harming others harms ourselves, harming others causes anxiety of being caught, of being criticized, causes anxiety of not feeling clean and good about oneself, feeling proud of oneself. So there's strong movement in Buddhism to base one's life on non-harming. Recently I had a conversation with someone who wasn't so comfortable using the word ethical, but felt very comfortable using the word, the concept of non-harming as fundamental to Buddhism. Maybe because for that person, ethics and ethical suggests too strongly something external, external rules to live your life by. But the movement to non-harming in Buddhism really arises out of a deep personal experience, feeling, sense of wholeness, connection. It's not exactly a requirement. It is the first principle of Buddhism, but it arises because we really see it's obvious, of course, this is what we want, this is how we want to live.

In not wanting to harm others, to live a life of not harming, this is a way to care for others. If all human beings did was have this one principle as guiding their life, or if all the human beings did was live by the five precepts of not killing, not stealing, not engaging in sexual harm, not engaging in lying, not intoxicating themselves with drinking and drugs, if just that, this would be a radically different world. Right? It would be a world that was peaceful. People would feel safe and relax. Maybe through that, we would find creative ways to really care for the poverty and the challenges that are so huge in our world. We would find a way. There's

plenty of resources for everyone here.

It's not going to happen overnight, this thing of peace. But it can happen overnight in ourselves. We can become a person who is dedicated to not harming. One of the ways that can happen is that we're inspired to live that way. It becomes very personal to want to live that way. It is through a spiritual practice that allows us to become whole, allows us to heal all the ways we're divided, and to feel at home, feel comfortable, feel settled in ourselves, because then we'll have the inner reference point, the sensibility, the feedback loop, that will say, yes, of course, I don't want to cause harm. Then stay closely connected to that way of being. Don't be tolerant of getting too tense because that's when many people become ethically challenged with their words, their thoughts, and their behavior.

So may it be that you find the joy and the delight of being settled at home, at peace with yourself, in yourself. And with that, I appreciate an instinct to avoid causing harm. So thank you for today, and I look forward to coming back tomorrow.