

Dharmette: Aspects of Love (3 of 5) Compassion

Gil Fronsdal

December 25, 2024

Keywords: dukkha, compassion, mindfulness practice, Buddhist teacher, empathy, love, care, friendliness, suffering, appreciative joy

Hello and welcome to this third talk on the aspects of love, the different forms of love, or flavors of love, qualities of love.

And for me, I kind of feel that the first one I talked about, the simple, sometimes quite humble care, to offer care, makes the others a lot easier, makes the others less likely to be something we latch on to or get attached to. That the simple care that gets expressed as friendliness or care that expresses compassion provides the friendliness, provides the compassion with a little bit of ease or openness, or maybe in some ways supports it from being too heavy. And certainly compassion can be heavy. It can be a big thing, can be overwhelming at times. But that's because it's not only compassion we feel. Compassion, in my understanding, I don't want to make a claim for everyone, but my understanding is compassion always has something light, something feeling rightness to it.

Even if there's pain with the compassion, it's all happening in a field within us, in the heart within us, that feels, given that there's suffering, there's a rightness, there's a goodness to feel that pain. And sometimes compassion is held up in Buddhism as the most important social emotion. And sometimes that can feel that way, or it can be that way, when we realize the magnitude of suffering in this world. And one of the ways to understand the magnitude is not to read the newspapers and see how big it is in Somalia and Gaza and Ukraine and around the world. Certainly, that's huge. But to understand that in your own mind, how it's the way we think has stress in it, has suffering in it.

And then we realize these ordinary ways of thinking that have some kind of tension built into it, unnecessary tension, unnecessary *dukkha*. If this is true for me, then it must be true that the level of suffering is so much vaster than I ever thought, that the human beings carry with them every thought they have sometimes. It comes with stress, comes with fear, comes

with aversion, comes with greed. But to encounter the enormity of it all and have a humility or simplicity in it, to not be the savior of the world, not feel like we have to be responsible for fixing all the things, but to do something much more profound, and that is to be there to witness the humanity of others who are suffering. To witness it and listen to it and be present.

One of the big moments for me, with compassion, was in the early 1980s. I was living in the monastery, deep in the mountains, and we didn't get news very often. But one day, I think it was a *Time* magazine appeared, and I opened it up kind of randomly. And there was a multi-page spread and discussion about the Israeli bombing of refugee camps in Beirut. And I'd been to Beirut as a child. And I'd lived on the edge of the Mediterranean growing up, a good part of my growing up.

And so right next to what's now Yugoslavia, a town called Trieste in Italy. And so to kind of witness through these photographs the suffering of these refugees and how many of them died deeply moved me. And one of the strongest feelings I had was I had to go there. We had to bear witness. How important it is to bear witness and let people know that they're known. Of course, we should do things as well.

But that was such a big, I didn't feel like I, I wasn't motivated to leave the monastery. The work I was doing there felt very important. But this strong urge. And it was very clean. And I've learned in looking at compassion myself that it's not always clean. It can be burdened.

It can be entangled with shoulds, ideas of shoulds and shouldn'ts. It can be entangled with a necessary burden of sense of responsibility that I have to fix it, that I have a responsibility, that I'm somehow an unnecessary degree of kind of being attached to it, or reacting to it, or adding levels of attachment that take the form of despair, or discouragement, distress, or fear, or anger. And when those movements of the heart involve increasing suffering, we're actually causing harm to the suffering of the world. We're adding to it. We're adding to the distress. We're not showing or meeting things with the alternative, a different way of doing it.

And so some people have a lot of emphasis on empathy, how important empathy is. And I think that's, depending on what we mean by that word, empathy is really important. But if empathy is feeling what other people are feeling in exactly one-to-one correspondence, I don't think that's necessarily healthy. If someone else is suffering, if I'm suffering, I don't want someone else to suffer the same way I am, to feel my suffering and suffer the same way. What I'd like is someone recognizes the suffering. Maybe something inside of them is moved in that they feel a certain ache, they feel a certain heaviness or seriousness.

They feel something that tells them, yes, this is a human being suffering. Yes, this is unfortunate. Yes, I have some sense of what you're feeling. I know that you're suffering. But without taking it in myself. So if anything, other people suffering go through me.

I feel it and allow it to change me and motivate me and feel compassion, but it doesn't stick in me. It doesn't become more complicated. So a big part of Buddhist practice, mindfulness practice, is to disentangle compassion, disentangle love from all the ways we get stuck with it, all the ways we get caught in it and enticed around it. All the ways that we suffer because we love. We suffer because we have compassion. Because somehow it's gotten mixed up with other things.

So to sit in mindfulness meditation is part of this disentangling. Learning where the stress points are, where the tensions are, where the extra arrows are, where the belief systems are, that are all added on top of this simplicity of compassion so that compassion can shine. And when compassion becomes cleaner that way, or becomes simpler that way, then acting from the compassion is much less tiring than if we act out of compassion together with all the attachments and fears and entanglements we might have. So one of the great tasks of human life is to clarify, clean out love, clean out care and compassion so it becomes clean and direct and simple. And see it as part of it is not just, certainly not just the empathy to feel someone else suffering.

The key component of the form of love that is compassion is in fact the desire, the wish, the aspiration that others do not suffer. And it's good to act on that. Sometimes strong compassion is difficult because that aspiration, that wanting to support and help, has been bottled up. It has no outlet. We don't know what to do. There's always something we can do.

It might not be for the suffering we've encountered in the world, but maybe it's local. So one of the things that I do when I read about horrendous things in the world is that there's too much of it for me to think that I'm going to make a difference. I can't give enough donations to all these different places to help. But I take it in, and the aspiration to end suffering is stronger because of it. And then I try to do my work as a Buddhist teacher, even locally, better. I'm more motivated to do what I do.

And that's where it's channeled into doing this. For other people it might be channeled into caring for their neighbors, or having more care for their colleagues at work. It might be that they have a particular cause that we're motivated to support. And so experiencing suffering elsewhere and feeling compassion, that aspiration to end suffering gets channeled even more into the cause we already have. So compassion has a gift to the world. Compassion not as a drag.

Because if it's a drag, if we're caught in our attachments, it makes our life harder and more difficult and we're overwhelmed. But to have the gift of compassion for this world. We know that the world needs it. And compassion can be a present. And if that's too difficult or not clear, then being present becomes the present that we can offer. Being attentive, being understanding, being present in a full way.

May that be the present that you offer this world on this day that's often for many people associated with giving presents. So thank you very much and I hope that you spend this day staying close to either care, friendliness, or compassion as what is needed. Tomorrow we'll do appreciative joy. Thank you.