

## Deep Compassion

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A good number of years ago, there was a man who came to do our year-long introduction to Buddhist chaplaincy program. I asked him how he got interested, and he had no background in anything really related to chaplaincy. He said that he had a career that was very technical in nature, with a lot of time in his head, designing things, maybe in computers. He wanted to try to find another way, maybe, to be alive, to be a human.

So he went to a local hospital to offer to volunteer there. They assigned him to the neonatal unit to go, I think it was once a week for a few hours, and hold a preemie. These premature-born people ordinarily would stay in the womb all cozy and nice, with physical contact inside of their mother's womb. Before they're really fully developed, they lose that contact. So it's important for preemies to have physical contact, to be held.

He was assigned the job of going there and holding a preemie for a few hours. It was a volunteer shift. He did that for a year, and that changed him. It called something from his heart. It awoke something in him that showed him a very different way of being in the world than the way that he had been trained to do and how he worked in his career.

He decided to do more of this kind of caregiving in this kind of way and started going into local county jails to offer some kind of supportive training for inmates there. Then he came and did our chaplaincy program to continue that movement. And what was it that awoke in him? I'd like to call it his warm-heartedness, or the basic human, maybe mammalian, caregiving instinct or capacity we have.

If you want to get really reductionistic, you could say that holding those preemies released a lot of oxytocin in his system, which makes you feel really good. But it softens you, and it's a hormone that helps people be caregivers. It's pretty important to be able to have this

caregiving instinct for babies when they're born. To feel, to hold a newborn baby, is one of the great things in life.

I kind of missed a piece of it from my first son when he was born, because I didn't know how special it was. I didn't know that the smell of a newborn baby before they start drinking mother's milk is just heavenly. It's just like something out of this world. Once they start digesting stuff, things start changing. But this effect that it can have on a person to hold a baby, a newborn baby, is probably pretty important, because these babies require a lot of care.

The care that a caregiver gives for a newborn baby is generally one of tenderness, carefulness, gentleness, love, and warm-heartedness, regardless of what comes out of the baby, both out of their mouth and out of other places. It's kind of amazing to see the emotional range of a baby at some point. They certainly can express fury, anger, and desperation, and all kinds of things in different ways. Their primary vocabulary is different ways of crying. So you have to listen to all the different language of crying to know how to care for them.

But it can be kind of dramatic, and sometimes they don't stop crying easily. So, of course, they're kind of a nuisance then, and probably we just slap them across the face or throw them across the floor and stop that and yell and be angry. I mean, isn't that how we get our way? Some people do that to babies. Some kids grew up with a lot of anger and violent anger in their family.

I, as a Dharma teacher, meeting people on retreat where people are touching into some of the deepest places in their hearts, get a lot of stories of people who never remembered a time in their life that a parent wasn't violently angry, and they grew up with that. So a child grows up very, very differently if the parent offers unconditional tenderness, care, and love, regardless of the emotional expression, the challenge that little baby has, than if the parent responds with anger and hostility and yells or something like that. It makes a huge difference for the child, for how they spend the rest of their life. And that's the case as children grow up.

I had one mother tell me that her child, when he was three or four, came and said in the most endearing kind of way, "I want to marry you. You know, I love you. I want to marry you." Only 15 minutes later, he said, "I hate you." For both of those, she just held it spaciously. "Oh, is that so?" Because kids are changeable. They say all kinds of things.

So you have to kind of know how to hold it in a generous way. You can make a big mistake both directions. You don't just take the kid with you down to the county clerk and get married. That wouldn't be good. And you also don't get angry at the kid for saying, "I hate you." It's just part of the range of what children do.

The consequences are so huge for the child if they experience violence and anger, and if they have occasion to grow up with fear, sometimes because a parent is very afraid themselves. I've also known people coming on retreat to report that they never knew a time when their mother was not afraid, was always anxious. By osmosis, I guess, the child grows up and feels that there are reasons to be afraid. Some of the people who come and tell these stories to me can be in their 60s and 70 years of age. These things can stay for a long time.

So at the beginning of life, when the newborn is there, maybe it's easy to imagine caring for people. And with someone who's old, someone you care for, who is going through maybe a natural aging and dying process, and it's the end of their life, and it's been a good life, to be able to sit with them as they die is also a very tender time. It is also a time when people who are dying sometimes will say things that are not kind. A good hospice nurse will explain, "You know, when people are dying, biochemistry changes, and it's not uncommon for them to get angry at the people they're closest to."

That's a wise thing to hear, because occasionally it happens that way. Then they're told, "Oh, okay," and they don't take it personally. It doesn't mean that the whole relationship over a lifetime was ruined. It just meant that the chemistry had changed or something. So the family then holds that spaciously.

Or to sit quietly, like when my mother died in a memory care home not so far from here, in a little room by herself, and me holding her hand. It was very tender, very, very tender, sweet. As I was holding her hand as she died, I remembered her holding my hand, bringing me to kindergarten, first day of kindergarten, going across the school ground. It was kind of a very touching moment for me to be able to be there.

I evoke this here and then talk about compassion because the beginning and end of life sometimes are easy to imagine as being wonderful, heartwarming, heart-touching, caring kinds of times where we're gentle and caring. It's not a time to express our fury and our anger and hostility and yell at people. It calls for something very different. It's the time in between that, between birth and death, where people feel like the appropriate response is an angry one, a hostile one, even one of violence, to get their way and to make things right for them, or for them, you know, whatever.

We find a society that sometimes justifies this. Countries bomb other countries, produce war. My parents-in-law were Holocaust survivors. They're no longer alive, but I knew them very well. I saw the effect of them going through the German camps when they were teenagers continued for their entire life. It was something that had affected them deeply.

I've met people who were descendants of people who went through the Armenian genocide in Turkey in the 1910s or 20s. They didn't go through it themselves, but they were still living the legacy of that. It can be said that the United States is still living through the legacy passed down of the Civil War. Somehow the tremendous suffering of that time has continued, of that war. And the suffering of slavery goes on for generations and generations.

In some ways, the suffering of it gets kind of repeated and recreated in different kinds of forms in American culture. So these dysfunctional ways, or ways in which trying to get our way and make a better life for ourselves through violence and anger, actually make it worse. It works for short-term survival, perhaps short-term getting what we want. But it's not something that involves long-term care, long-term vision, of what can really create a good world for us in the long term, or good relationships in the long term.

That's a very different approach to how we live our lives. We've been designed to do both. We've been designed to be caregivers, and we've been designed to be warriors, to be fighters, to be reactive. The question is which gets prominence, which is the wisest in different circumstances. Different people make different decisions about this.

But I think what Buddhism emphasizes over and over again is the human capacity for compassion, and how compassion creates the conditions to bring out the best in everyone. It's not an easy thing to do, but to bring out the best in people, to help transform people and change people. One of the great movements that I feel in the 20th century, I don't know, it probably started in ancient times, is the movement of restorative justice. Someone who has done something bad, harmful, goes through a community healing process where they're changed, and they'll never do that crime again.

Maybe they did their crime because they grew up in a situation where they were ignored, they were abandoned. They themselves were the subject of violence and hostility and anger and isolation. When the community comes around to do restorative justice with someone, they experience the opposite. Sometimes it takes days for certain restorative justice processes, for someone to sit in a circle with people who care for the person, hearing their care, hearing their history, hearing the impact, hearing what happened. It can take a long time to do that.

It might be easier just to call the police and get someone arrested and locked up. That's easier in the moment. It's not easier in the long term. In the long term, we create the conditions for our future and how we live our lives. I think one of the messages of Buddhism is that the long-term well-being of ourselves and our world around us comes from the caregiving instinct that creates the long-term well-being of a baby, which is love, which is compassion and care.

That doesn't change throughout life. That instinct to care for is what creates long-term well-being, where we don't shape the babies who are born today to grow up and come back as our enemies in 20 years because of what their family had to go through. So compassion. Compassion is a deep wish for beings to be free from suffering. It's the deep wish, and then the caring response that can follow that. But the deep wish for beings not to suffer.

I really like the language of deep, because the reactive emotions, the reactive expressions that involve our muscles and violent actions and violent words, which might occasionally be necessary, are kind of a surface reaction. They need to be, because they're kind of dealing with dangers that are immediate. But the deep instinct, the deep place within where a whole different intelligence operates, a whole different emotional sensibility operates, requires a whole different approach to be connected to it and trust it and be able to listen to it. That's where compassion comes from, deep compassion. It comes from this deep place within, deep sensitivity.

For that to operate, we need to understand compassion well, and we need to understand what compassion is not. Compassion is not being troubled by the suffering of the world. It's easy to be troubled by what goes on in the world. It's easy to be afraid of it or upset by it. It might even be reasonable for that to happen. But that's not the source of where compassion comes from.

In a way, it actually prevents touching into something deeper. It can obstruct it. To be troubled and be stressed by what goes on in the world limits our capacity to touch into the depths of who we are. So to question our response is really healthy. It's really healthy to question how we're troubled or dismayed or despairing with what happens, even when it can feel so natural and the situation might seem so hopeless.

To realize how much it cuts out, shuts out, or closes us off from the full intelligence and compassion and kind of care that we can give the world, maybe we could put a big question mark around how we're troubled, how we're discouraged. Is this really necessary? Yes, the situation calls for it. Yes, but does that mean that we have to be that way?

So part of Buddhist practice is to take this deep look at ourselves, turn the light backwards onto ourselves deep inside, to really understand what's going on in there, what's motivating us, what the impact is on us. To really understand our own suffering, our own distress, or what's happening in there, our fears. To work with it and see it, so that we can begin holding it in a different way. One way that's different is that we might be able to hold our own difficulties with this beautiful thing called deep compassion.

Deep compassion is sweet. Deep compassion is not stressful. Deep compassion, when it's there, can feel quite beautiful, even when the situation is quite ugly. So to be able to find this place and to work through the things that obstruct and get in the way. The other thing that happens when we're no longer obstructing this capacity of compassion is to understand that compassion is not something we have to build or create or engineer.

Compassion is a natural capacity. Mostly it's a matter of getting out of its way, removing the obstacles, and then being able to trust and relax into this depth of who we are, to feel what's happening, and allow it to operate, allow it to arise. My friend who was sent to volunteer with the preemies, holding them, that was a natural capacity to evoke in him. Maybe it took a year of holding them. It's not necessarily automatic.

But he did the year of holding them and was changed by it. I don't know how long it's going to take each of us in different circumstances, but it's time well spent to learn, to discover how this natural capacity arises. I just finished teaching a two-week retreat, and most of the instructions through the retreat were, or none of the instructions through the retreat had anything to do with compassion or kindness. I don't think, right? Nothing, nothing at all. Yeah, he's agreeing.

Until when? Remember when that came? The very end. You're listening. The very end. Because the way, in the context of offering this retreat, was a context of really trusting something like the innate goodness, Buddha nature, that we have. So it was almost a two-week period of time of practicing in this.

At the end, people were ready to understand maybe the innate nature of this compassion that can arise in care and caregiving instincts we have. And that's the nature of the retreat. It kind of had to be offered that way, not as something to cultivate, but something that is there as a natural expression of our Buddha nature. What's beautiful, again, for me, about this approach to compassion is that it's non-obligatory.

Buddhism champions compassion tremendously, the invaluable emotion to have and the motivation to have to go through the world. Because it emphasizes it so much, it can feel a little bit that we're obligated. For a good Buddhist, we're supposed to be compassionate. Nope. There's no supposed to, and there's no obligation to be compassionate. It's not a crime not to have compassion.

However, it is a wonderful potential. It's a wonderful option, possibility for us. And it's as a possibility that can awaken and arise in us that it's presented in Buddhism. There's a treasure here, an amazing treasure store inside waiting for you. And not just compassion and kindness

and generosity and all these beautiful things, but we're filled with good-heartedness that is often submerged, lost.

Especially in Tibetan Buddhism, they talk about the jewel in the lotus. Jewel is something very precious. And the lotus blossoming is often presented as a metaphor for the awakened heart, the heart that opens and awakens to the world. And that's good enough, isn't it? And lo and behold, the treasure that's in the open blossom is the jewel, the *maṇi*, in Sanskrit.

The jewel in the lotus. And the jewel, the treasure, is compassion. It can feel like an amazing jewel, treasure, this. But not just compassion. A lot of these different ranges of caregiving instincts that we have can feel like some of the greatest wealth a person can have, the wealth that flows from this generous, open kind of treasure of a heart that meets the world with its caregiving instincts.

I put my trust in meeting the world that way, meeting the terrible things of this world that way, and appreciating that this is what creates long-term well-being for people. Long-term care. So this is one of the reasons now that I couldn't help myself. I tried not to do this one more program. But because of what's happening in the world these last few years, I feel this heart-mind is not capable of not doing something more.

So now I'm creating this Buddhist peace and conflict chaplaincy program, where chaplaincy is one of these very unusual kinds of professions in this world, where all you do is supposed to care for people's hearts, and everyone's hearts. And they're kind of religious, a kind of clergy. So all these doors open in a whole different way than almost any other peacemaking kind of work that people do. So it's a contribution to the world of peace and conflict work to train people to be chaplains in this world, a world that I'm setting myself up to do now, this next year.

So I'm mentioning it partly now because it is a little bit of an ambitious project, and as a demonstration to you that compassion doesn't have to be passive. Compassion isn't passive. It can be very motivating, and it can motivate us to respond to the world, sometimes not directly. Some people have been upset with me because I have not directly addressed some of the terrible, awful, horrendous things that are happening in our world.

There might be wisdom in my not talking about it directly sometimes, in this seat where I sit here. But the response is here. It just maybe looks indirect. So, caregiving. The world needs more caregivers. You have no obligation to do so. But if you awaken that instinct in you, I'm confident that you'll treasure it. Thank you.

So we have some time, and if anyone would like to have any questions or comments about

this, I'm very happy to hear.

It's a comment. You mentioned about the preemies bringing out your friend's heart, and I can feel that when I pet my old cat. She's lost her friends one by one, and so she's gotten clingy. I'm petting her, and she's looking in my eyes, and she's letting me pet her throat, which is the most vulnerable part, you know. And I can feel her trust in me, and that's kind of what brings it, makes me feel that.

Wonderful for that example. Yeah, I think we see it in situations like this. Where I was teaching just the last two weeks, there was also a cat story. There was a cat, a feral cat maybe, that just wandered into the place. I don't know how many people live there, maybe 20 people live in this place. And the cat took to one person.

It didn't really trust anybody else, but it trusted that person, and the cat followed her around, like a dog almost. Everywhere she went, it was following. It's a very touching relationship.

The chaplain program?

Thank you for being here, one. And just my curiosity is about whether, what modality, or what would you, when you say a chaplaincy, the chaplaincy, when you wind up with your chaplain hat or whatever you wind up with, what form are you offering, and what modality of Buddhism, or through what? When you wind up with your badge of chaplaincy, how do you propose that that is used in communities? I'm curious.

There's just a wide range of what people do. Our introduction to Buddhist chaplaincy is a very simple program, relatively simple. Some people have done it here. So who else has done it here? Martha, is that it? And Heather and Steve, and we have a lot of people at IMC who have done it.

Some people do it just because they want to be better caregivers for their family. Some people do it because they want to become professional chaplains, which requires more training. The most common place to work is in hospitals, sometimes in hospice, and there are people who are prison chaplains in different places. Some people are homeless chaplains. They work for the homeless. All kinds of places that people go.

Some people just stay as volunteers. Some people do it because they're going to be Buddhist teachers in their local *Saṅgha*. It trains them in some of the caregiving skills that a teacher should have that they don't usually get in their local *Saṅgha*. So there's a wide range of things.

Okay. So how does this new one differ? See? How does this new chaplaincy differ then? This

is a new one you're starting to learn.

Oh, the new one. Yeah, I keep creating them. It's kind of a remarkable thing that happened. The regular chaplaincy program, which has been going on now for 22 years, I call it a pyramid scheme for joy, because it's just such a wonderful thing to train people and then have them go out into the world and do this good work and help people and support people.

When I was in college, I was very interested in environmental studies and caring for the environment and natural world. I got kind of waylaid by Buddhism. So it has always been a very big concern or interest of mine. At some point I could see that, given my Buddhist training and the work we did in chaplaincy, there might be a whole other field that opened up with chaplaincy called eco-chaplaincy. People wanted to really be specialized in the area of the environment.

So we created one, an eco-chaplaincy program, and that's been going on now for, I think we're starting the fifth generation of this now, soon. That's been a really marvelous thing to do. It's also been a creative process to understand in the creation of it what this means and how to do it. And now the peace and conflict chaplaincy is to focus on a few places in the world where there's some conflict.

So is that thinking someone would do? Are you thinking people would go somewhere and work in conflict zones?

Oh, it's very important for me not to have too many ideas of what they'll be doing with it.

Yeah, okay. So you're just opening the door.

The delusions of grandeur, you know, that's... Some people are doing it because they just want to be able to help people in their local community with conflict that exists, or in very particular kinds of settings they want to address. It's kind of ordinary settings and very local. Other people are... so there's a wide range of what people want to do. But each person is going to have to find their expression, their application of it, for themselves.

Thank you.

Okay. Well, maybe that's enough. And thank you very much for being here. I hope a little bit that this talk I gave is an indirect way relevant for some of the things you might be reading in the news, an indirect way of responding to it. And maybe if you can read between the lines, you can see that it has implications in all kinds of ways in the wider world. So, thank you.