

Dharmette: Love (45) Intro to Compassion

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So hello and welcome. Today we continue the love series that we started in January. This is the 45th talk in that series. Now we're switching to compassion, to *karuṇā*.

Sometimes in Buddhism, compassion is considered to be the key central emotion, the motivation for Buddhist practice: to practice with compassion for the world, to practice in such a way that we can make a difference in the world through our practice. Sometimes it's *mettā*, loving-kindness, which is considered to be the primary motivating social emotion. Both of them, *mettā* or compassion, can lead to the same action, the same activity, and can care for a lot of people. Nurses in Thailand, apparently, their primary expression or understanding of their care for others is motivated by their *mettā*, whereas in Mahāyāna and other Buddhist countries, probably nurses would say it would be *karuṇā*, compassion. So the difference between *mettā* and *karuṇā* sometimes is not that great.

But in our tradition, there is a distinction. *Mettā* is a basic goodwill, wishing people well and wishing them happiness. *Karuṇā* is a deep feeling of attunement, or recognizing or understanding people's suffering, and the wish for it to be alleviated. And with that wish, acting on it, that wish, doing something for it.

So the word *karuṇā* comes from the Sanskrit word to-do, *karita*, *kar*, and *kur* is the very root syllable for it. So the idea of action is kind of built into the word *karuṇā*. It's not only just a feeling, but it's also a feeling that leads to action. Occasionally I've seen people try to associate *karuṇā* with ancient Brahmanical rituals, that one would do with a word for, maybe *karati*, that was more associated with sacred rituals than with other kinds of doing activities. And so then *karuṇā* becomes meaning a sacred action.

That elevates the activity of compassion to having a primary sacred religious function, which is a beautiful thing. If we have rituals, or if we have sacred rituals, it's in the ways in which we

offer care and compassionate care for this world. In our Theravāda tradition, in our insight kind of movement, especially how I teach it, there's very little ritual. But maybe when people ask us, what rituals do you do, we can say our primary ritual is compassion, for how we meet people with care.

And so compassion, *karuṇā*, is considered to be one of the four *Brahma-vihāras*. *Mettā* was one of them, in this family of love that we have in this tradition. There's *mettā*, goodwill; *karuṇā*, compassion; sympathetic or appreciative joy, delighting in others' goodness and success, *muditā*; and then there's equanimity, the profound balanced state of non-reactivity. That conveys a different kind of balanced, calm love in situations where we can't make a difference, where things are difficult maybe, but we're not in a position to help someone. But we can have a certain kind of compassionate, loving equanimity in relationship to them, non-reactivity.

So we're not troubled, we're not reactive, we're not anguished or despairing. And *karuṇā* is considered to be a profoundly beautiful state. In fact, it's the foundation for a *samādhi* called the *Karuṇā Samādhi*. It's possible to get deeply absorbed, immersed, and suffused with *karuṇā* in the same way one can be deeply immersed and suffused with *mettā*, with goodwill. Some people do a complete, thorough meditation on *karuṇā* to really fill themselves with the beauty of this emotion, this attitude.

And it's hard for some people to appreciate that compassion can be beautiful because we're encountering what, in a sense, is ugly. We're encountering something which is quite difficult and painful. And the sense of responsibility and obligation to do something can translate into feeling that we almost have to show people that we are upset, despairing, anguished. We are kind of sometimes angry, that we've been affected by it in a kind of negative way that shows them that we really understand.

And so some people, when they encounter the suffering of others, kind of have a certain kind of empathy where they kind of suffer themselves, thinking that that's compassion. But I think that certain kinds of empathies are not so healthy or not so helpful. If we become troubled, if we suffer, if we become diminished by the encounter with suffering, then there's less support and help that we can offer it. There's less care we can give. And of course, we don't want to be aloof or indifferent to it.

But the ability to connect to someone who's in deep suffering with a real sense of care, a real sense of understanding, a real sense of being with them and accompanying them, of not abandoning them, being present, while we have a sense of ease, while we have a certain kind of way that we're not suffering ourselves. Right. Of course, compassion can come with

pain. Sometimes it's painful and even heartbreaking to experience the suffering of the world. But it's a heartbreak, or I call it pain, because it just seems, of course, we're going to feel uncomfortable when other people are suffering a lot.

But that discomfort that we experience is also held in an ease. That's also held in a certain kind of beautiful compassion. Of course, this is how it is. And so we don't contract around it. We don't resist it. We don't get anxious about it. But more like, yes, this too, I'll feel this. I'm willing to feel my discomfort.

And this is why, for cultivating *karuṇā*, having this compassion, mindfulness is so important, so useful. To have cultivated a strong foundation in mindfulness so we know ourselves well. We know our reactivity. We know the kind of hindrances and obstacles that arise within us so that we get excessively complicated or resistant or contracted around suffering, around difficulties. To know those well and know how to release them, not be bothered by them, not be caught in them, to be able to be at ease with discomfort.

Comfortable with discomfort is one of the goals. And as I often say, if we're only free when we're comfortable, we're not really free. To really discover the full benefits of Buddhism and the freedom that the practice can lead to, we also have to learn how to be comfortable with discomfort, including our own. So certainly the encounter with suffering can be felt with heartbreak. But that doesn't diminish the overall sweetness or delight or ease of compassion.

So it's very telling that in the iconography of, at least, Mahāyāna Buddhism, they have an archetypal being called the *Bodhisattva*. That is the one that's the archetype for compassion. In Sanskrit, it's *Avalokiteśvara*; in Chinese, Kuan Yin; in Japan, it's Kanon. And the way that *Avalokiteśvara* is depicted often in Mahāyāna, as in statues, is with a body that's very much at ease and very fluid, relaxed, and very present and sweet and smiling. It's not a being which is contracted or tight or anxious or in a hurry. It is one that sits and gazes upon the suffering of the world in the most sweetest, relaxed way.

And then there's a Chinese Zen story of someone who asks the Zen master, what's it like to be *Avalokiteśvara*? What's it like to be the embodiment of compassion? And the Zen master says, like readjusting one's pillow in the middle of the night. So I imagine this refers to the idea that maybe you're half asleep and you're not really aware of what you're doing. It's a little uncomfortable, the pillow, and your hand goes up and gently shifts it. And there's almost no effort made into it. There's no self-consciousness. It's very easeful and simple.

It's that simple, the way that *Avalokiteśvara* responds to the suffering of the world, with a

certain kind of ease and simplicity and unself-consciousness and untroubleness. So we're talking about compassion for the next period of time. And I hope that this maybe even challenges you, the idea that maybe there's a way of having a profound sense of compassion as a form of love that has built into it a kind of ease, a kind of sweetness, and a kind of way that is very nourishing to feel it. It's part of our deep mammalian operating system to offer care, compassionate care for others.

And I wouldn't be surprised if some of our physiology is built to have this. They say that caring for others, especially like a mother for a baby, is motivated in part by the release of oxytocin, which creates a very pleasant feeling and relaxed feeling throughout the body. And so maybe this is built into us as mammals, this way of being able to respond. But to really, really feel the goodness of this kind of compassionate response, we have to overcome the ways in which we get anxious and tight and restricted and horrified by the suffering of the world. Because that overrides the sweetness of compassion.

So I hope that this challenges you a bit to explore this, to think about it, and consider ways that compassion works for you. And that might be the project you do over the next 24 hours, to consider how you've learned about compassion growing up. How was compassion presented and understood? And what were the beliefs, the attitudes that you had around compassion growing up and since growing up and in your encounter with Buddhism? How have you seen it?

And if you have people you can talk to and have conversations about the role of compassion, the understanding of compassion that you've had over your lifetime, I think this would all be very helpful now as we go forward to explore this amazingly wonderful topic. So thank you very much.