

## Love (46) Compassionate Witness not Victim

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**April 07, 2026**

**Keywords:** *karuṇā*, *Brahma-vihāras*, mindfulness, meditation, compassion, suffering, near enemy, far enemy, ill will, hostility

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So hello, and welcome back to this ongoing series on love. We're currently talking about the form of love known as compassion. It's one of the very profound capacities that contributes to so much of the goodness in the world, to the way that people care for each other and support each other. And it's one of those attitudes, states, motivations that is medicine for the world. Some people build whole careers out of their compassionate desire to alleviate suffering, to make the world a better place.

So in this beginning of this series now on compassion, one of the really important aspects of, at least Buddhist compassion, is that compassion does not make us a victim of suffering that we see in the world, or even our own suffering, the suffering of others. And it's easy to get contracted. It's easy to get reactive. It's easy to take the sufferings of others, even our own suffering, oddly enough, to take it too personally, to be too involved in it, to become a kind of victim of it, to suffer more because they're suffering.

And we encounter other people who suffer. We learn about suffering elsewhere through the news. And in the wake of that, we suffer more. And of course, you know, that's terrible, their suffering, the suffering of the world. And now we've contributed to even more of it being there because of our distress, our despair, our fear, our anger, our hostility that we might have towards feeling suffering itself, towards there being suffering in the world.

And in Buddhism at least, we don't want to encounter suffering and suffer more. We want to encounter suffering and contribute to the end of suffering. Right? We want to be able to learn how to be with suffering in a wise way, in a way that doesn't contribute to more suffering. We don't want to be a victim of suffering. And to learn how to be with suffering in caring ways, with spacious ways, with presence, where we learn a deep attunement to others and to what's happening.

And in this regard, it's important to maybe distinguish between the kind of compassion we'd feel when we're in the presence of others who suffer, and the kind of compassion we might have, or response we might have, when we're not in the presence of it, but we read about it or learn about it on news or on media or some other indirect way. When it's indirect, when it's learned, then there's much more potential that we're experiencing and seeing it through the filters of our imagination, where it gets larger than it is, or it gets smaller than it is, but some kind of imagination that involves feeling a certain kind of helplessness and hopelessness because it's so far away and we're not connected.

And so, to do it when we're in the presence of other people, that can also be difficult, because then maybe we feel like we do have to act. There's something immediate we can do, or think we should do, because we're directly connected to the situation. And in both circumstances, one of the things that's an important part of compassion is to give time to offer presence, give time to be a witness, take time to get to know the situation better, not to be reactive, not to be caught in it immediately, just because we hear it.

This, of course, is not an easy skill to learn. But this is what we have mindfulness practice for, meditation practice for, is to learn how to offer presence, non-reactive presence, non-judgmental presence, at least initially, so that we can somehow build up the rapport, the attunement, the care that's deeper than any kind of reactivity we have. Because the compassion that we're looking for in Buddhism comes from the depth of our being, not from the surface. It's not necessarily something that comes from our immediate reactions to what's going on, but rather from a deep availability we have, a deep capacity we have to receive, to be available, to really sense and feel and take time to know what is going on.

And so learning to trust the value of getting to know something, to really take time to feel and sense and hear, listen to people, find out what's going on with our care, with our kindness, with our goodwill, so that if there's going to be a compassionate response, it can grow, it can arise from a much deeper place than what the first instinct is, the first reaction might be. And so in this regard, it's helpful to know some of the ways in which, you know, some of the things that get confused as compassion.

Sometimes people feel like when they feel deeply disturbed, troubled by what's going on around them with suffering, they associate that being troubled with compassion itself. And so compassion seems like a very difficult emotional state, very unwelcomed. The opposite is true, that compassion in its cleanest, simplest state, that comes from this depth of our being, feels right. There's a rightness to it. There's an appreciation of it that can even feel sweet, or it can feel pleasant.

And of course, those are the kind of, you don't necessarily feel that when you're in the presence of something terrible, suffering. But there can be a rightness. Yes, it's right to be present. It's right to feel this and be present. I'm willing. I'm here.

So in Buddhism, we talk about what's called the near enemy and the far enemy of the *Brahma-vihāras*. So in this case, for *karuṇā*, compassion. And the far enemy of compassion is the thing that looks like compassion, but actually can be the opposite. I have that wrong. It's really the opposite, completely. The near enemy looks like it, but it's not compassion.

So the far enemy are things like cruelty, violence, hostility. In fact, compassion in Buddhism is meant to be the antidote to hostility that we might feel, to cruelty in the world, that we meet that with the medicine that somehow settles it. And over time, to learn to have confidence and skill in how to meet cruelty, how to meet hostility with a kind of peacemaking, compassion, care, love, presence, is one of the great skills to learn. Maybe not easy to learn, but certainly it's wonderful to have the motivation to take the time to learn that.

So the far enemy, the big enemy of compassion that sometimes makes it difficult to arise in us, is if we're caught in hostility, if we're caught in ill will. And so part of, again, the function of mindfulness is to help us see what we're doing, see that we are caught in these kinds of reactive states. And it doesn't really serve us well to look for the alternative.

The near enemy, and this is where people get confused around what compassion is, the near enemy is to be distressed. The near enemy can be to have a certain kind of pity for people, which is kind of looking down at people or diminishing them, diminished respect for them in their suffering. It can be that compassion gets mixed with anxiety and fear. Compassion's near enemy might be an activated kind of low level of anger, blame that goes into it. There's a variety of things that feel like they're part and parcel of compassion that are kind of painful to have, kind of makes it harder, and makes it more stressful to have compassion.

And sometimes compassion and these near enemies can coexist, which also makes it difficult. But compassion never makes us a victim. Compassion doesn't leave us helpless, doesn't leave us hopeless. There's always something we can offer, and the minimum we can offer with response, and minimum and maybe the first area, is to be the presence, to be a witness. In so many situations, learning more, listening more can be experienced by others as part of our care.

We stop. They're important. It's a form of respect, some form of offering value. It's an important way of showing that we care, take time to learn and understand more deeply what's going on.

And so to do that, to be able to do that, because of course it's going to be difficult and uncomfortable to be with suffering, one of the really important areas of mindfulness practice is to learn to be with our own discomfort, learn to be able to stop and be a witness to how we suffer. And to learn how to train ourselves to have a non-judgmental, non-reactive, non-hostile, non-hopeless attitude to staying with how we suffer as an individual, and maybe even see our own suffering as a laboratory where we're going to experiment in learning how to be with suffering in a new way.

Rather than seeing our suffering only as unfortunate, maybe sometimes we can get a little bit excited that, oh, look at this, I get to suffer. Now I get to train myself in how to be present for it as a simple witness, simple, available to feel it, know it more deeply, not rush to action, not rush to fix it, not rush to judgment, not rush to the imagination of what it means and where it's going and what this says about me. But experiment. Learn how to have a radically simple attention, witness for how we're suffering, we're difficult.

And part of the value of doing this, the reason I'm offering it here today, is so that we can offer that to others and learn how to offer presence, attention, listening, witnessing, what's going on really, know well, so that the compassionate instinct, the compassion to care for people, is well-informed. More important than well-informed, that we kind of begin feeling it comes from the depth of who we are, not from the surface reactivity of who we are. This is one of the great gifts.

So compassion, where we're not a victim, but rather we're medicine for the sufferings of the world. So thank you, and we'll continue on this tomorrow.