

Dharmette: Compassion Based on Knowing our own Suffering

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April 08, 2026

Keywords: mettā, karuṇā, mindfulness, compassion, loving-kindness, suffering, Buddhist practice, reactivity, agency, autonomy

So, my friends, welcome to our continued discussion about compassion. As we did earlier in the year, in talking about *mettā*, loving-kindness, goodwill, both loving-kindness and compassion are helped, supported, by learning how to cultivate them or have them toward oneself. The more that we can have kindness and goodwill toward ourselves, the easier it is to have it for others. We know what it's like. We know the benefits of it. And the same thing with compassion.

It becomes more important for us to have a wise, caring relationship to our own suffering. In fact, learning about our own suffering and being mindful of it in such a way that we're not troubled by it, we're not consumed by it, we're not avoiding it, we're not stressed by our own suffering, but we understand it, we know how to be with it, helps us to then be with others and understand others in their suffering situation without our distress around their suffering interfering with our ability to be present. So understanding ourselves well kind of helps us to be able to be present for others so that it's not a complicated presence. We don't feel distressed or angry or despairing or sad in such a way that the simplicity of our kindness and care is lost, where we simply are there to be with other people without tripping over ourselves, without projecting our own challenges onto them or onto the situation. It's so important.

And so to learn this simplicity of mindfulness of our own suffering, to learn to be present for our own suffering without needing to fix it, without needing to change it, to discover not the end of our suffering in learning compassion, but to learn the ending of our reactivity to compassion, our reactions to it, our for and against it, our calls to arms around our suffering, our shame around it, or embarrassment, or disappointment, discouragement, even feelings

of helplessness, hopelessness. There's many things we add on top of it. And it's such a radical thing to learn to be present for our own distress, our own difficulties, with simplicity, radical simplicity, where it's almost as if it's okay for it to be there. We allow it to be here for a time, maybe with a higher calling, that if we can learn how to be with our own suffering, both learn the nature of it, become more familiar with it, learn what it's like to be non-reactive to it, and hold it simply and softly and openly with a stillness of mindfulness, then we can be present for others without adding all those things that complicate our relationship to other people.

And for me, the representative image of a kind of simple, compassionate care for others is to go for a walk in the park with a friend where we're simply there to accompany our friend, to hear them talk about their challenges, to kind of show that we're paying attention, we're listening deeply, to ask simple questions, to not be there to fix our friend or do anything, but to simply be present, to listen well and carefully, and to accompany them, and how profound that can be for people. Some people will experience accompanying and listening like that as a form of compassion, as a form of love. And to learn that ability by first learning to be with our own suffering, our own attention.

And one of the benefits of this is that compassion can be a natural movement, naturally arising in contact with suffering, provided the contact is uncomplicated by all this reactivity we can have, uncomplicated by fear, by worry, by anxiety, what it means, and what's happening. And of course, there can be fear and anxiety, but the idea is to keep stepping back, keep opening up, to such a point where now you can just be there in a simple, uncomplicated way, to the messiness, the chaos of it all. And that gives room for compassion to be there. And I think one of the really great gifts of human life, certainly of Buddhist practice, is to prepare the ground in ourselves through practice to feel the naturalness of compassion, the natural arising of it. That it's not something we have to do, not something we have to cultivate anymore. It's just something that arises in such a wonderful way that it's without fear, without anger, without distress.

And it also makes our compassion for others easier because we don't have to immediately solve it or fix it or rush to kind of make it all better. That maybe comes later, that we can do something, that we can act on it. After all, *karuṇā*, the Buddhist word for compassion, comes from the root word of to do, to act. So an important part of compassion is the action to alleviate suffering, to make a difference. But sometimes we want to first be able to listen. The primary act first is to listen, to sense, to witness what it is, and to appreciate how witnessing is so profound itself.

And then to see, after we learn, we know, we understand what's going on, that then maybe

we have a better position to support people, right, or maybe to be able to ask them, what can I do for you? How could I be of support? Rather than rushing to our conclusions about what it's all about, what needs to happen, what I have to do, what I have to fix, to give people their agency and autonomy by asking them, what is your wish? What would you like me to do here?

So, mindfulness of our own suffering. And this, of course, is kind of one of the fundamental things about mindfulness and Buddhist practice in general. Many people, sooner or later, learn how important it is that we can't keep avoiding it. We have to really stop and take a really good look at it and be present for it. And learn the art, learn the capacity to be present for suffering without adding more suffering on top of it, to be present with suffering, to see it and hold it, and let go of the reactivity to it.

And in a certain kind of way that maybe is more said for emphasis than you take too seriously, what we're learning is we're learning to suffer better, not suffer more, not suffer so that we keep suffering, that's what life is about. But suffer better means to be present for our suffering in a better way, that we don't add more suffering to the suffering. We don't react, we don't give up, we don't feel ourselves being kind of depleted or diminished or shut down by our suffering. But to suffer better, to suffer more simply, in a more relaxed way, a more open way, with mindfulness, with clarity.

And one of the advantages with that in Buddhist practice is that there's a strong instinct for people to want to solve their suffering, whereas with mindfulness practice the suffering sometimes dissolves. So with a friend, with other people, if you're having a one-on-one relationship with someone that you're going for a walk in the park with who is suffering, your first instinct might be to figure out what to do to make them better and solve their suffering. But there too, if you listen really well and just spend time with them and give them a chance to explain themselves and get it off their chest, in a sense, something might soften and dissolve in their heart that makes the whole thing easier for them. So not to be caught in the idea of solving. There are other ways, especially when it's one-on-one and direct and personal.

If it's systemic, if it's institutional, if it's culturally wide, the suffering is, of course, that's not going to dissolve by how we attend to it. But by attending to our suffering with wider cultural or societal suffering and challenges, we can learn there too how not to add unnecessary secondary and tertiary stress, reactivity to our feeling of the pain of the world, and simply be able to feel that pain simply. And maybe it won't dissolve and go away. Maybe it shouldn't go away when there's suffering in the world. But maybe by learning to hold it quietly, peacefully, we'll see a way to respond that's personal, our own way, something we can do that

might be our gift to these times and this place.

So, learning about compassion, understanding it better, and giving ourselves time not to rush to what we think is a compassionate action, but giving us time to be mindful, to be with it all very deeply, including our own suffering, so that we can be aware of the suffering of the world in a wise, deeper, and effective way. And I hope that all of us will find the blessing, will find the gift of how important it is and valuable it is, and in a certain kind of way rewarding it is to be able to open to the suffering of the world with *karuṇā*, the Buddhist form of compassion. So thank you all. We'll continue tomorrow.