

## Dharmette: Love (48) Equanimous Compassion

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So hello, and welcome now to the fourth talk on compassion. And compassion is one of the *brahmavihāras*, one of the divine abodes, or unlimited ways of abiding in this world without any limit to the heart's goodwill, heart's generosity. And there are four of these *brahmavihāras*, divine abodes. There's loving-kindness, goodwill, *mettā*. There is compassion, *karuṇā*. There is appreciative joy, celebratory joy, *muditā*. And there is equanimity, a form of love that's balanced and non-reactive.

And the iconography of Buddhism, and not just Buddhism, but also I think to some degree Hinduism as well, has statues or images of one of the supreme gods of the Indian pantheon named Brahmā. That's why it's called Brahmā's abode, the divine abode, abiding like the great god Brahmā. And in the statues and images of Brahmā sometimes, he's depicted as having a single head with four faces, one in the front, two on the side, and one on the back. And each of those represents one of the *brahmavihāras*. And so, of course, Brahmā is one person, one head, and it's four ways of looking. And they all belong to the same person. They all belong to the same head or the same heart.

And so they are partners. They work together. They're not completely separated from each other. And they support each other. And equanimity supports compassion. Equanimity supports the other *brahmavihāras* so the other *brahmavihāras* are not caught in reactivity, not confused or compromised in any way. And in return, the other three *brahmavihāras*, including compassion, protect equanimity from being indifferent or aloof or maybe a little bit cold.

And so these work together. And when we come to *karuṇā*, compassion, the fullness of compassion, the full potential of compassion, comes out most easily when it's supported with both mindfulness, as kind of was talked about yesterday, but also with equanimity. And

thinking of equanimity not as only stability and balance, but as a warm-hearted stability and balance, a generosity of stability and balance that is offering support for compassion to operate fully. Just like we have human beings, people who are supported by others so that they can really thrive and do things in the world, so there are things, qualities within us that support other qualities within us. So I'm thinking of my own teachers, that my teachers supported me to teach and supported me to practice. Without support, it would have been much harder for me. And they did it warm-heartedly, generously, and I really felt their care and their love. So in the same way, we can have equanimity, warm-hearted equanimity, supporting our compassion so that compassion can really flower.

And as I said in the guided meditation, one of the qualities of compassion is the benefits it offers the world, or others, or to ourselves, not because it automatically does something to alleviate suffering, but that it's a warm-hearted knowing, caring, sympathy, empathy, concern, love, for people, for others in their suffering. So that compassion is willing to accompany and share time with and space with and share the challenges with someone else. And sometimes people are just so invaluable to be known and be accompanied and be recognized.

One of the first experiences of compassion that really made a huge difference for me was I had a family member who was quite sick and maybe even dying. We didn't know. And there was a Zen practitioner who eventually became one of the abbots of *San Francisco Zen Center* named Steve Stucky. And at that time, he didn't have, I don't think he was even ordained as a priest yet, but we ran into each other on a path. And he asked me how I was, what was going on. I told him about my relative.

And he didn't offer any help. He didn't try to go support my relative or do anything for me. But he listened, and with interest. He listened with care. He listened with this love, with compassion that I had never received before, never knew was possible. And maybe because by that time I was already quite involved with doing Zen practice, I was kind of open to receive it. And it really kind of changed me.

This is possible. Wow, you don't have to fix the problems of the world. There are sometimes, and I emphasize sometimes, when the most powerful thing we can do with the warm heart of compassion is to offer a clear sense, a clear sharing with people, letting them know that you know, that you're interested in what's going on. And to do that kind of clarity of compassion, this fullness of compassion, it really helps to be non-reactive.

And equanimity prevents compassion from burnout. Equanimity prevents compassion from us being overwhelmed by it because we are afraid, we're sickened by the suffering of the world, we are disturbed, we're angry. And of course, those responses are natural enough,

and a lot of care is needed to support people and support ourselves when these are so challenging. But the goal of *karuṇā* practice, the goal of this focus on the practicing of love, the growing in love, is to come to a place to understand how to have compassion in a full way that is non-reactive, in a way that's uncompromised by these other emotions that we have. And equanimity, which we'll talk about as we go along in this series on love, is offering today as inner stability, inner balance, so that we're not tipped over. Or if we are, we don't get tipped over very far.

Then the analogy or metaphor used sometimes in Buddhism for equanimity isn't that we're not reactive, but that we become—in Japan, there's something called the Bodhidharma doll. And it's a little bit, we have dolls like this in the United States, I think, or the West, but they're more like clowns or something. They're blown up and they have a rounded base, and you can push it over and it pops right back up again. So Bodhidharma was a famous monk who brought Zen from India to Japan. And so he's a very important figure in Buddhism and East Asian cultures. And so there's this Bodhidharma doll where he's, I don't think he's blown up, but he has a rounded base. And so if you push on it, he kind of gives in, but he always comes right back to the middle.

And so equanimity is that balancing force that, yes, sometimes we're reactive, but we recognize it, we know how to be present for it, we know how not to add reactivity to reactivity, and maybe even with the rhythm of breathing, knowing what's happening, we come back to balance so that the gift of compassion can be the gift we give, the gift of non-reactive compassion, the ability to just really accompany, attend to others. And as I've said now a few times, I think it's invaluable to think that the first aspect of compassion is not to actually, unless it's an emergency, do something, but rather to accompany, to know, to witness, to be mindful of what's happening. And so we really take in and feel and know and understand what's going on. Just that is deeply compassionate, deeply caring.

And then if it's appropriate, and we have the means to offer support, *karuṇā* is also not just the wish to end suffering, but it's the act of doing something to alleviate suffering. And sometimes people who do emphasize compassion emphasize a lot simply the aspiration or the heart's wish that there be no suffering, the wish to alleviate suffering, but then seemingly we forget that the wish can be translated to activity and to do something that makes a difference. And that'll be a topic for later, to discuss that more.

So for today, in what way, in what healthy, supportive way, can you stay close to an inner stability, a steadiness, a balance? Even if you do get pushed over, can you actually come back to be grounded again, to be stable again, to be able to metaphorically be upright and bal-

anced, so that your compassion for now is willing to be present in you without any reactivity, a warm-hearted accompanying or knowing or sensing? And you might experiment with it. You might bring to mind your own suffering, the suffering of others, maybe in the privacy of your own time alone somehow, and just kind of explore how do you do this? What is it like? Or maybe you can read some of the news, where there's no shortage of suffering in the world. And is there some way that you can hold or be present with that suffering?

And I'll end with a story, a very important story for my life around compassion. I was living at a Zen monastery deep in the mountains, kind of in the middle of my three-year time of practicing there as a monastic in a monastery. And back then in the early 1980s, we never got newspapers, we never got fresh newspapers, daily newspapers. The newspapers and the news always came in days late, sometimes weeks late. And there was a *Time* magazine that came that was maybe a week late or something in the mail. And I just randomly opened it, and there was a whole two-page spread of page after page of photographs of the Israeli bombing of Beirut back in 1982, I believe it was.

And being in the middle of a long practice period, of a lot of meditation, that struck me deeply. And I'd been to Beirut as a child. And the strongest wish that I had was I wanted to go there to witness the suffering. It felt it was very important for us to witness it, to know it, to not ignore it, to be present for it. And here we are again, tremendous pain, suffering in Beirut. The people of Beirut are suffering.

And regardless of any reasons, justification of bombing, children and mothers and grandparents and the people who are dying, there's a tremendous suffering, and suffering in their relatives that goes on and on, many people who are innocent. And can we be a loving witness? Can we be a compassionate care for them so that our reactivity, our justifications, our fears, our contempt, don't get in the way of accompanying them in their sorrow and difficulty, as a minimum? And back there in 1982, I didn't leave the monastery, but that experience of seeing those magazine pictures changed the trajectory of my life. It was a pivotal moment in my life. And I still haven't been to Beirut, but my whole life was changed by the compassionate response that I saw arose in me in seeing those photographs. So thank you, and we'll continue on the topic tomorrow.