

Dharmette: Love (48) Obstacles to Compassion

Gil Fronsdal

April 10, 2026

Keywords: compassion, mindfulness, Buddhist practice, five hindrances, ill will, aversion, restlessness, doubt, present-moment attention, Insight Retreat Center

Welcome, everyone, to this next talk on compassion. And I'm kind of delighted to have this opportunity to both talk about it, but also in the process of doing so, to kind of explore it with you or bring it forth more fully. Thank you.

Compassion and the other families of love that we have within us are some of the greatest treasures that we have and that are often overlooked, often submerged, covered over, ignored, maybe made inaccessible by how much we are preoccupied by things or afraid, or by how much we're tense and stressed, how much we have ambition or strong desires, or we have a lot of conceit where we prioritize ourselves in such a strong way that there's no room to feel and participate with the humanity of others. And so one of the important aspects of cultivating compassion, practicing compassion, understanding it well, is to understand the obstacles to it.

And one of the really important characteristics of mindfulness practice, I would like to say Buddhist practice in general, is that we are becoming experts, loving experts, kind experts, forgiving experts, in all the obstacles we live with that keep us from being free, that keep us from the radiance of our love and care, compassion. And I say that because for compassion to be realistic, it needs to not be some way to override or bypass all the kind of ways in which we are stuck or caught or preoccupied or attached, all the ways in which we are distressed and afraid and troubled. Right? For compassion to really have its full effect on us, its full potential, compassion itself helps us to meet the obstacles to compassion.

That we have some kind of care or forgiveness or permission or softness or kind of a simple understanding. Yes, this human life is difficult. And it's easier if we are present for it fully, if we see and know what's going on, and we hold it all lightly. We hold it all with the generosity of spirit. We hold it without adding suffering to this world by adding clinging, resentment, self-blame, shame to our experience.

It's enough just to bring and recognize and hold what's going on without using that as a basis to suffer more. And that's the gift of mindfulness, the mindfulness that can kind of hold everything in the kind of warm cups of our hands. Everything can be placed there, and we just hold it and gaze upon it kindly with soft, maybe kind eyes. And so learning to see the obstacles makes the practice realistic.

Now, some people emphasize love and compassion so much that they're overriding the obstacles. They're ignoring them. But you can't, because they're there. Then they get entangled with the compassion. And we find that there's compassion and it's mixed with anger, compassion and it's mixed with fear, compassion mixed with distress and discouragement and hostility.

And when that happens, compassion becomes exhausting. Compassion kind of drains us. And the idea is to free compassion from all these obstacles, from all these hindrances, all these kind of speed bumps for it, so that compassion actually enriches us. Compassion actually energizes us in a good way. But to do that, we have to really understand the obstacles.

And so one obstacle is that we're very preoccupied in the mind, very distracted. And so part of the function of mindfulness is to discover what this distraction is about and why we're distracted and what we're trying to do with the distraction, and to learn how to let go of it so we can really be present. Another obstacle to compassion is stress. And there's a lot of self-produced stress that we live in.

And to really take a good look at the stress we're living in and put a question mark at the end of it. Like, is this really necessary? Why am I living this way? Why am I giving into it? Why do I think it's necessary? And is what the stress is trying to help us accomplish, can it be better accomplished without stress, with being calm? Yeah.

Are we unconscious about our stress? Are we kind of so giving into it, so giving up into it, or assuming that it's necessary, that we never question it? We never take a good look at it. And the more stressed we are, the less we have access to love, to compassion. Or the love and compassion, kindness that we end up kind of prioritizing is a kind of way that's compensatory, where maybe we engage in something called loving relationships, interpersonal relationships, that are meant to be more of a solace or a balm for how stressed we are.

And maybe as a distraction from how stressed we are by the magic and the pleasures of love that, you know, are taking us away from it and distracting us from our distractions. But to really understand what gets in the way so that the obstacles no longer are obstacles, the obstacles no longer block, that we can hold the obstacles kindly. We can step back from

them and be mindful of them instead of caught in them. And that is the beginning of going underneath them or below them and really giving space for the compassion that's there.

But without a clear willingness to be mindful of the obstacles, to see what's going on, it's possible that the compassion is not going to be realistic, the compassion will be compromised, the compassion will be doubted, how effective it is and how useful it is. This is especially true if the obstacles are considered to be part of compassion. So if there's a lot of sadness and grief, distress, disappointment, discouragement, overwhelm, and somehow that is considered to be part of compassion, then of course compassion can be too much. Of course, compassion can even seem like bad news, or that we don't have much capacity for compassion. We have to limit it and do it in small dosages.

But if we can really begin understanding the obstacles and the hindrances, then we can begin freeing compassion, so it's enriching. And so one of the exercises that can be done to look at the obstacles that uses a basic and important list from mindfulness practice is the five hindrances. Is there a strong desire, selfish desire, that's involved with somehow mixed in with compassion or interfering with compassion? Is it some of the drive for sensual pleasure, the drive for recognition, for success, for status, for wealth, for, you know, is it for praise? Is it getting in the way?

Is it ill will, hostility? Are we angry? Is there blame? And is it towards ourselves? Is it towards others? Are we caught up in aversion in some way? And aversion is what keeps the compassion at bay.

Is there some way in which we shut down? We get resistant or we get lethargic because life is too difficult. And so the compassion arises, but it's just like, oh, it's too much, it's overwhelming, and we kind of shut down. And so that's what gets in the way of it. Or do we have a lot of regrets and a lot of restlessness that compassion touches something or that is agitating for us or troubling for us?

And so we get kind of worked up and jumping all over the place and agitated or restless. Or are we caught in regrets about what we did in the past that interfere with the present, really present-moment attention? And then the fifth hindrance is doubt or uncertainty. Do we have doubt and uncertainty about what compassion is and what healthy compassion is? And do we doubt its value because we see how exhausting it can be? What is the nature of that doubt? Is the doubt strong enough that the doubt is the very thing that interferes with our compassion?

So there's many other ways to kind of take a deep look into what gets in the way of compas-

sion. So that somewhat famous list of the five hindrances is one way to do it systematically. But there might be other ways of doing it and feeling our way into it physically, where the tension is in our body, where the closed-downness, parts of the body which might be numb. And so to begin having a sense of the obstacles we have to compassion, the things that interfere or make it more complicated, is a very important step to learning how to have the compassion become very simple.

Maybe it allows the compassion to exist and shine through the obstacles or next to the obstacles. And we don't necessarily have to get rid of the obstacles. We just have to not have them hinder anymore. So looking at what gets in the way of love is a way to help love shine better. So thank you very much.

And we have... So I'll be away for the next couple of weeks. I'm back at Insight Retreat Center, teaching a two-week retreat. And I'll be back then. I think I come back here on the 27th. Let's see. Yeah, 27th of April. And to continue this series on Compassion. And I certainly look forward to it. And thank you very much.