

# Compassionate Action (4 of 5) For the Sake of the Whole World

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## Gil Fronsdal

Welcome to this fourth talk about compassionate action. Maybe it is worth repeating that these talks about compassionate action are building on a whole series of talks from before. They include the role of developing awareness as a foundation for compassionate action, developing attunement with others and ourselves as a foundation for compassion, cultivating appreciation of others – a deep respect – as a foundation for compassionate action, and cultivating an appropriate aspiration or wish as part of compassionate action.

With all that background, we are ready to act compassionately. We don't want to be impulsive in the

compassionate action, or unconsidered, or necessarily think just because we identify something like compassion or a desire to help people or to stop suffering, that it's wisely considered. To consider wisely is an important part of Buddhist practice. To consider profoundly means to stop and feel and have access to a sense of a profound source within you. Take the time to know what is the depth of your being. How does that inform you? How does that help you understand the situation?

I like the expression, “depth of your being.” Some people might call this, “whatever is heartfelt.” But even the heart might not be the fullest or wisest place from which to act in the world. Really take time to come from someplace deep within. The deepest place is a place where we don't have divisions for our care. We're not partial. We don't make distinctions between those people who deserve our care and compassion, and those who don't. The deepest place inside has quieted the divisive mind, which many of us can live in, that is partial and preferential, where some people are excluded from our care because we don't think they deserve it or something.

But in the depth of our being, it is possible to care, to be concerned with the welfare of everyone. The Buddha referred to this as being concerned with the welfare of the whole world. He talked about being concerned with

the welfare of oneself, others, and self and others. This is what we've talked about the first three days this week. In addition, the Buddha talked about being concerned for the welfare of the whole world.

Certainly, to consider the welfare of the whole world is a big task. But when we come from compassionate concern and care, we can be careful to have no divisions, to have no “us versus them,” not asking: “Who justifies our compassion? Who doesn't?” That's what I understand “the whole world” means. There's no separation.

Certainly, we probably care for the people close to us, because we're there. We see them, we know them. We don't have to go and donate to every nonprofit that is doing good work throughout the whole world. But there's no division, no separation in our care. This is phenomenally important – that no one is cast away from our hearts. When we engage in this complicated interpersonal life, we are concerned about what is best for everyone concerned.

This was a very important approach that I took when I was the chair of an ethics committee. I had to deal with lots of conflict, and sometimes with transgressions and harm that was done between people. I would talk to everyone carefully and tell them that my concern was a search for the welfare and good of everyone concerned.

It was a little bit hard for some people to appreciate this approach when they felt that other people deserved punishment or something terrible. Certainly, some kind of serious consequences are needed sometimes. But we must understand how those consequences can work for the welfare of everyone, for the good of everyone, so consequences aren't just punitive, and that's the end of it. Yes, there have to be consequences; there has to be accountability; something has to change. But people need to know why it's helpful for them, why it's good for them, and why they need to do this. This gives them an opportunity to grow, to change, and to come to terms with what is important.

I found that everyone involved in the conflict resolutions that I was involved in came to genuinely appreciate that we were looking for the greater good of everyone. This didn't mean that we compromised the good of someone who needed more. We looked at how to benefit everyone so it was not a win-lose situation. Doing this takes a lot more attention, a lot more reflection and thinking, and getting a sense of the whole picture and everyone involved.

The quick decisions that, "This is wrong," "You're bad," "We're cutting you out," or "We're casting you out from our heart or treating you in a punitive way" do not take into account the humanity of everyone involved – the

fullness of their heart, their minds, their psychology – and what the impact of everything will be. Just take time to be in conversation with people, find out what's going on for them, and what their deeper need really is, so that they can grow, develop, and become better people.

That was my task when I dealt with these ethical challenges. And I think people came to appreciate it a lot. I think that even people who were hurt or felt that they were wronged in the conflict came out as better people. Because they understood that not only were they being well taken care of, their situation was cared for, and proper resolution was made, but also that the welfare of everyone involved was taken into account. Sometimes “everyone” means not only the parties in a conflict but also the people around it who know about it and are indirectly involved or connected to the parties involved.

So how do we care for everyone involved? I learned a lot about this while doing complex mediations and addressing these issues for many years. But I also think caring for everyone is a natural byproduct of a liberated heart – a mind that is liberated from divisiveness, liberated from attachment to thinking it has to be one way, attachment to oneself, or attachment to one's family or one's tribe, whatever it might be.

When we're involved in compassionate action in the world, we consider: Who benefits from this? And is there anybody who is harmed by this? Is anybody being left out of the picture? Are we perhaps focusing too much on the person who is suffering the most, and forgetting there are more people involved in the ecology of the community related to all this? How can we take into account the whole world – everyone involved – not just ourselves, not just the other in some very deep personal way, but take into account the whole community? That community could be a family or a place of work. It could be a sangha, a spiritual community we're in. It could be a neighborhood. What that whole is could vary from time to time. I see this in the world of politics, where the divisions are so strong that so many times other people are cast from our hearts. Then we don't ask the question of what would be best here for everyone, and how do we find a way.

The difficult thing about considering what is for the welfare of everyone is that it takes time. The conflict resolution work that I did was not an efficient process. It actually took a lot of conversations. I noticed that many people who tried to be involved in similar conflict resolutions tried to take shortcuts. I saw that when shortcuts were taken, often the conflict resolution did not work out very well. It might take a long time to find what is best for everyone involved so that the resolution is effective.

The other thing I learned is that, while it might take a lot of time to consider the welfare of everyone, it actually saved a lot of time in the future. This can happen when there are hurts and problems between people, and when compassion is not all-encompassing in its scope. So many times, the amount of repair work that had to be done later was much greater than all the inefficient time it would have taken to resolve it well the first time. So it might seem inefficient and frustrating to stop and consider the welfare of all, to have the conversations, to understand the situation better, and then do the creative thinking about how to benefit everyone. But down the line, this process makes it much more efficient, easier, and more time-saving in the future.

A very simple example comes to my mind. It doesn't involve conflict resolution. Maybe someone is ill, and it's nice to bring them dinner or some food. It would seem like just bringing them food is a good thing. But what is the bigger picture, the welfare of all? Well, maybe make enough food for their caretakers. Maybe there are paid caretakers who are often neglected, not seen, or ignored in the close relationships that we have, and maybe you can make enough for them as well. Maybe for their family. Maybe there are more people. It might not be so much extra work to make a bigger meal that can be shared more widely. It's a little bit more work to make more, but it might actually create a much better



world. Who knows what unseen benefits might come in the future? This is just a small example.

There are many examples of this. We can act compassionately, not in a rush, and not narrowing the focus to only the person who's suffering or challenged, but taking a deep breath, relaxing, and opening to the situation more fully. Take the time to reflect. What really brings welfare for this person? What do they really need?

In our process we can ask, how do I do this for my own sake so that I'm nourished and I become a better person? How do I do this so that it takes into account the relationships between us – self and others? And how do I do this so that it takes into account the wider scope of the community – the whole world, if you will?

If you protest that this is too much work, I'd like to emphasize again: I think that in the bigger picture, it makes life much easier. It addresses the welfare of all concerned, including oneself, because of how we benefit in return. So in that process, I hope that compassionate action helps you become happier, more contented, more nourished, and more inspired in a wonderful way. May it lead to your happiness and freedom.



We will continue this topic of compassionate action one more day tomorrow. I look forward to it. Thank you.