

# Compassionate Action (2 of 5): For the Sake of Oneself

August 1, 2023

## **SUMMARY KEYWORDS**

care, friendliness, well-being, happiness, altruistic, peace, calm, suffering, openness, non-clinging, receptivity, spaciousness, non-anxiety, kindness, non-dismay, equanimous, beauty, focus, abandon, barrier, compassion fatigue, equanimous, spaciousness, kindness, non-anxiety, non-upset, non-dismay, obligation

## **Gil Fronsda**

Hello on the second day of our series on compassionate action. Yesterday's talk focused on compassionate action for the sake of others. That's how compassion is commonly understood – that we're caring for others. But equally important is that our compassion for others should also include care for ourselves. Actions that help and support others should include actions for one's own sake.

As much as Buddhism might talk about not-self and not living from selfishness and self-centeredness, there is

an emphasis on being responsible for, caring for, and monitoring our own inner life carefully. Care for it. This too is important to have compassion for. This too is important to bring care and friendliness to.

In terms of compassionate action in the world – having compassion for others and acting on that compassion – the focus might be on doing things for others. But as we do that, we should also do it for our own sake. That means two things. One thing it means is not to abandon yourself as you do it. Don't give yourself away. Don't easily sacrifice your own well-being and welfare for the sake of supporting and helping other people. It's not necessary.

There are times when we become uncomfortable. Sometimes we sacrifice our comfort level for the well-being of others. Sometimes we *do* sacrifice certain things for others. But don't sacrifice or abandon yourself, or give up on staying connected to the practice. Don't give up monitoring yourself.

Don't give up knowing when you get attached, stressed, contracted, afraid, or overly anxious about what you're doing. Don't let despair, dismay, a sense of obligation, or fear of consequences if you *don't* do an action override compassion.

The principle is to have compassionate action in the world in a way that's also for your own sake, so you benefit from it – simultaneously caring for yourself and caring for others. Caring for others and caring for yourself do not need to be two separate things.

Many times, the idea of compassion is considered to be almost synonymous with being altruistic. And that's often synonymous with giving up and abandoning oneself. Sometimes Buddhist teachers will even say, as I said yesterday, that one of the purposes of being compassionate is for your own happiness and well-being through giving up selfishness or self-centeredness.

But that doesn't mean that you give up on yourself in some deeper way. It means that you don't get attached to self, you don't cling to self, you don't try to lock onto some definition of who you are or who you aren't. It doesn't mean doing compassionate action only for ourselves in order to make ourselves feel better, not really caring much about other people.

But, rather, we care about others. We try to act in ways that support them. But we do so in a way that doesn't compromise ourselves, without adding stress, abandoning ourselves, or allowing ourselves to lose touch with our own inner well-being, beauty, inner practice, and our place of peace or calm. One of the

reasons not to lose touch with that, to stay connected for our own sake, is so that our compassionate actions in the world are not stressful for us. We don't succumb to compassion fatigue or overwhelm. We don't wound or hurt ourselves by giving ourselves over to others in such a way that we're open and receptive to feeling the suffering of the world but aren't truly available because we don't know how to experience their suffering while caring for ourselves as well.

The suffering of the world can be very difficult for our hearts. It can break our hearts. It can shatter and wound us in certain ways. But if we know how to maintain a place of openness and non-clinging or receptivity, then things are received, but they pass right through. If we don't hold onto anything or resist anything, then compassionate care and contact with the suffering of others doesn't have to be challenging for us. Then, we can be compassionate for a long time. We don't get fatigued or overwhelmed by it.

More important than that, the quality of compassion and the quality of our relationship with other people is much higher if people feel we're at ease, peaceful, and comfortable in our own being. If we're uncomfortable, anxious, dismayed, angry, or upset in some way, that's the filter through which our compassionate action operates in the world. The people we're caring for will feel that. Maybe it's not exactly conscious on their part,

but they'll feel that something's off – perhaps by osmosis, or “the medium is the message.” If compassion is offered through the medium of anxiety, upset, or a kind of selfish self-concern, the medium through which it's offered actually skews and shapes the kind of action we do and its impact on others.

It's very different if people feel us care with spaciousness, open kindness, non-anxiety, non-upset, and non-dismay. They feel, "Oh, now I'm with a person who has the ability to be equanimous and present in a full way. I don't feel like I have to take care of them. I don't feel like I have to be nourished and fed by anxiety, upset, self-preoccupation, or whatever it might be.

I think the quality of compassion is much more significant and valuable when we act compassionately for our own sake as well. We have a sense that, for our own sake, there is something here to really care for. There is something valuable here within us – a valuable center, a way of being, a sense of inner beauty, inner peace, inner wisdom, or inner goodness.

How do we discover that center? There are many ways. One of those ways is to meditate and develop an inner focus. We really start tracking, monitoring, working with, and discovering what's deeper inside. We begin to settle our inner conflicts, resentments, hurts, and fears, and we drop down and discover something marvelous

within. Then, from this wonderful place of ease and peace, we can come forward into the world. So, meditation is one way.

The other way of finding that center is through compassionate action for the sake of others. If we do that in a healthy way, it reinforces the healthy side of ourselves. The action mirrors our healthy place and helps us tap into it – if we are monitoring ourselves and know we are coming from this healthy place.

Ultimately, there is a wonderful cycle of mutuality: by caring for others we care for ourselves. In this way of caring for ourselves, we end up caring for others as well. In this way, self and others are not separate. It's not as if it should be one or the other. They are mutually supportive to the point that, through compassionate care, we feel, in a marvelous way, that there's no difference between self and others for the purposes of our care. Some kind of barrier, some division – which many people live in – begins to soften.

It's not as if we merge with other people, but there's a vast sense of openness within which there's no difference between caring for others and caring for oneself. We're just caring for whomever our perceptions or attention lands upon.

Caring for oneself – compassionate action for one's own sake – is the next characteristic of compassionate action. Yesterday, it was compassionate action for the sake of others. Now, as we care for others, we include caring for ourselves – not abandoning ourselves, not giving ourselves away – so that there's more here in us to be able to offer others. When we abandon ourselves, there's actually less that we can give.

If you're interested in experimenting with this, you might look at situations in which you're doing something nice for others, and see how you can do it in a way that feels satisfying for you and feels like it's a good thing to do, a good way to be in the world. Maybe you can begin to do that in small ways. Maybe that's the best place to experiment. From there, you can learn to do it in more difficult places. Thank you very much.