

Compassionate Action (1 of 5) For the Sake of Others

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Gi Fronsda

Hello on this Monday morning. I'm happy to be here with you all. I'm very fortunate to be here today with all of you and to continue the series I've been doing for six or seven weeks now on different aspects of compassion and the foundations for compassion. I hope to expand for you the richness of compassion with all its dimensions and aspects so that you know how to be compassionate in the world and how to bring forth this beautiful quality in a way that is nourishing for you and others.

The Dalai Lama was the first person I heard teach that if you want to be happy, be compassionate and care for others. A profound aspect of having compassion and care for others is its association with personal happiness and well-being. To find that, I think it helps to understand more deeply the different things that come together to support healthy forms of compassion.

It's easy for compassion to feel like it's an obligation. It's easy for compassion to be a reaction to our own distress and pain. Sometimes the motivation for what looks like compassion is mostly for us not to suffer, even though we may be trying to help others not to suffer. So we're uncomfortable and are trying to make ourselves more comfortable. Compassion can come with an excessive feeling of responsibility. Or it can be a kind of an exchange. We want to be compassionate to others so that we can get something back from them such as their approval.

We want to have clean compassion – compassion that needs nothing in return, compassion that does not come out of our distress, our conceit, our fears, or a sense of obligation. Rather, it comes out of some wellspring within that is sweet, satisfying, and has a rightness to it. Sometimes the suffering of the world that we contact is so great that we can't really feel that the compassion is sweet or has joy or happiness in it.

But still, we don't have to feel distressed or obligated. Clean compassion doesn't trigger our conceits and self-concepts of who we are and what we're trying to prove. There is a feeling of rightness – a feeling of, "Yes, this is painful, this is difficult, this is terrible. And I'm here in a clear and clean way to do the best I can." That clarity, cleanness, and openness are what contribute in the long-term to stepping out of our own little inner dramas about ourselves. Stepping into the wider world of caring for the world and being open and available is one of the fantastic things that a person can do. Hopefully, these talks have supported this.

I'm looking at compassion through the lens of five different aspects or five different supports for compassion. We have done a week each on awareness, attunement, appreciation, and aspiration, and this week is action.

When they think about compassion, many people think of action first and foremost – we have to do something. We have to step up and save others or somehow take care of them. Certainly sometimes what's needed needs to be done immediately. But first, we need to have cultivated and developed a capacity to show up, to be mindful and present in a full, embodied, and wise way. This supports the possibility that when immediate action is needed, action can come along as second

nature with a capacity for wise awareness, wise attunement to the situation, deep appreciation of and respect for the people involved, and appropriate aspiration for what we want to do. These support the action.

Action may be one of the central features of compassion. Compassion is not just wanting people not to suffer, feeling their suffering, and having empathy for it. That's significant. But there's one more step, and that is action – to do something. For some of us, it's only by doing something in the world that we begin dissolving some of the crust, some of the hardness of what is sometimes our laziness, sometimes our indecisiveness, sometimes our hurt, sometimes our stubbornness, sometimes the way we're closed or afraid. There are all kinds of ways we get stuck. We might be frozen in despair sometimes. When we step forward and act, there is something about the movement of activity that begins to loosen us up and take us out of ourselves.

So we do an action that's beneficial for someone else besides ourselves, where the focus of attention is partly on the other person. Self-preoccupation can be almost an addiction, where we're centered on and concerned with ourselves maybe because our life has been very confusing, disorganized, disorienting, and very painful. Of course, in that kind of situation, it's almost necessary

to pay a lot of attention to oneself in order to find one's way, to survive, and somehow continue.

I don't want to belittle the fact that some people need to be focused on themselves as an essential first step. But it's easy to get stuck there. It's easy for that self-focus to build up in such a way that there's a wall between self and others, a closedness, a collapsing inward. So how do we loosen up that crust of self-concern? Action makes a big difference. We act for the sake of someone else to such a degree that there's some kind of self-forgetting, some kind of dropping of self-concern and conceit.

I keep saying “some kind” because we don't want to lose ourselves in the compassionate action. We don't want to lose touch with what's happening inside of ourselves. We want to be responsible. We want to be mindful and monitor what's happening in us. This is why the concept of developing awareness and attunement is such an important foundation for mindfulness. We need to have a strong foundation in awareness practices so we can track and know what's happening within us when we get stressed, caught up, afraid, or overly ambitious.

There is a way of tracking ourselves and being present where we are not exactly focusing on ourselves. We can be present and aware of the whole environment

including ourselves. This is kind of like turning on a small light in the middle of a dark room. The light radiates outwards. First, it lights up the part of the room that's closest to the lamp, then it shines outward until it gets to the walls of the room. This happens so fast that it seems instantaneous to our eyes.

But it is the same way with awareness. It spreads outwards from us. First, awareness touches us and knows what's happening here without being confused by self-preoccupation. We don't define or limit ourselves by what's going on, identify with who we are in the moment, or try to prove ourselves, protect ourselves, or defend ourselves. We want to be aware of ourselves, but in that awareness, the self part begins to fall away. We're aware of the emotions, feelings, and sensations in us and we're very aware of the people we're helping. We're extending ourselves, opening ourselves, letting the self almost disappear in the process.

In this way, the action of compassion is focused on supporting and helping others. But it is also supportive of our own inner freedom to offer our compassion with a sense of freedom, without resistance, and without attachments. We find our own freedom. *This* is where compassion can be the beginning of a source of

joy, sweetness, goodness, rightness, and a source of a deeper connection to what I call the sacred aspect of life.

Ideally, while being deeply attuned to and appreciative of other people and ourselves, with compassion we're not just putting band-aids on people's cuts. We are putting band-aids on people's cuts as a way of communicating a deep care for their hearts, their inner life, and their fullness as a human being. It's a way of offering our respect and our full love, appreciation, delight, and joy in the other person as a human being, in their humanity, no matter who they are.

Putting a band-aid on someone's cut is valuable, but the deeper form of compassion that brings joy is the vehicle for a deep connection to our own sacredness, the sacredness of others, and the meeting of those two in the act of compassion.

This week the idea is to talk about action, the fifth of these aspects of compassion. Over the next 24 hours until we meet again, if you'd like you might study the ways that you do nice things for other people, whether this is opening a door, letting someone else go first in the short line in the supermarket, smiling at a supermarket checkout clerk and being kind to them, helping someone with some little task, or offering to do a favor or an errand for someone.

There are so many different ways that we can do something for other people, for strangers, people we know well, and colleagues. As you do these small or large things for others, monitor yourself. See what's happening inside. When you are doing for others, is there contraction, is there fear, is there self-preoccupation, is there conceit, is there concern or the desire to be seen in a good way?

Is there a way to drop all that and to have the care be somehow a beautiful act of generosity, a beautiful act of opening and letting go of self-concern? Can you let go of self-concern appropriately so that there's a feeling of freedom and openness in the care for others? Maybe there can also be the sense that you're doing more than simply offering someone the shorter line in the supermarket or giving people the right of way on the freeway.

There is a deeper sense of these other people as being the depths of the humanity and care that we want to offer.

Thank you and I'll be here again tomorrow.