

Brahmavihāras: Compassion (3 of 5)

December 16, 2020

SUMMARY KEYWORDS

suffering, *dukkha*, *karuṇā*, resistance, meditation, tenderize, soften, tenderness, care, obligation, motivated, motivation, compassionate, chaplain

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When I give talks about compassion, I feel a little cautious. I don't want it assumed that compassion can only be seen in one way, or that the way I talk about it is the only correct perspective. Compassion is an integral part of many people's lives. It sometimes lies at the center of what they value most. I think each person will experience it very personally and in their own way.

So we certainly want to be careful. Compassion – whatever it might be to someone – is not a singular thing. Rather, it is a compound made from different aspects. It's possible to tease apart some of the most important aspects of compassion. That helps us look at it more carefully and find our own way.

I believe one element of compassion involves contact with suffering. The word “suffering” sometimes suggests that it only applies to big things. But in Buddhism,

dukkha can also refer to small forms of discomfort or stress.

Compassion has something to do with being in the presence of suffering. That's one of its component parts. For some people, it is an important part. There may be an exception that I will address as we go along.

Can we be wise about how we are in the presence of suffering – our own and other people's suffering? In the *karuṇā* that comes out of Buddhist meditation practice, one component of compassion is to have no resistance to suffering. This does not mean we do not strongly protest the suffering of the world or accept that it should have to happen. But in the heart – in our inner life – there's no resistance to experiencing and feeling that suffering. This is what happens as a consequence of meditation practice.

In meditation practice, we learn that the contraction of resistance – the hardness of it, the closed-ness of it – is, itself, a form of suffering. We learn that it is unfortunate to do it. We want to be able to relax and let go of it – to let go of all the different ways that we cling, and just be present in an open way for suffering. It is one of the great gifts.

This is something I learned in my early years of Buddhist practice when I had a lot of suffering. A lot of

meditation practice was about sitting with it, allowing it to be there. Being open to it, not being reactive to it or caught in any way. Just present. It was an unconditional acceptance of the present moment with the suffering. That was transformational for me. It was hard, but meditation practice was like a tenderizer for hard meat. My heart softened and softened just through showing up to suffer without reacting or closing down to it.

It might seem counterintuitive to do this because it hurts. It is kind of painful. But it allows something to soften and open. The idea is to have the suffering we experience be something that touches us. Rather than contracting, closing down, or making us hard, it expands something inside us. Something becomes more open. Something suffuses us.

I often think of this as tenderness – tenderness, softness – words I like to use to describe this inner feeling. That tenderness has no boundaries. It has no walls or sharp lines to delineate where the “tender” is. We can experience suffering and have this openness suffuse and pervade without boundaries. This feeling of tenderness – somewhere in the chest, somewhere inside – is a beautiful feeling, a wonderful feeling, even though the suffering hurts at the same time.

We can meet suffering without resistance. If we meet it with resistance, then it is easy to be distressed, upset,

dismayed, frightened, and angry. But we can learn to have the capacity to receive it without resistance.

Again, the reference point for this is meditation practice. This is a place where you're not expected to act on suffering or go help someone. You're expected just to learn how to sit and be present. In that context – in that process – you can discover a place of freedom inside, a place of softness and tenderness which gets evoked in the context of suffering.

It's a very strange idea for people who've never experienced it. Suffering feels awful, so why should I feel awful? I've known people who have gotten angry when I suggested that they should sit in mindfulness and open to their pain and suffering – really feeling and knowing it. Their whole life was about getting away from suffering, fixing it, and doing something about it. So, part of compassion is this place that's touched inside when there's no resistance – a kind of opening, a tenderness.

The second part of compassion is caring for whatever that suffering is – even the suffering itself – or caring for the person or the being who is suffering. “Care” is a special word. It doesn't necessarily mean that you're going to act to help them alleviate their suffering, or that you're responsible for their suffering. It means that, in some contexts, it is enough that we have the capacity to

just care – “I care about your suffering. It’s important to me that you’re suffering because I care about you. I want to let you know that I care. I sympathize. I’m with you. I’m your companion. I’m your ally. I’m your support. I’m here with you in your suffering.”

I’ve been the recipient of that from people. I felt that, in some ways, they cared for me and my suffering. I didn’t feel that they were asking for anything, doing anything, or expecting anything from me. They were not actively trying to fix my suffering or take it away. I just knew that they sympathized. There was this wonderful care, warmth, love, recognition, and appreciation of me as I had my suffering. It helped things relax and soften – feeling the human warmth and connection to someone else. So part of suffering is simply caring for someone – the kindness, openness, and sense of shared humanity that are independent of wanting to do something to alleviate it.

Another aspect of compassion is the motivation to do something about the suffering. This is where we have to be a bit careful. What kind of motivation is it? I like to think that when we’re in contact with suffering, two Dharma motivations can arise. One is wishing and wanting to help the person so they don’t suffer anymore. We hope for them not to suffer. We offer help and support. We’re being compassionate. It is a compassionate action.

The other response to suffering is recognizing when it doesn't make sense for us to offer a helping hand. The experience of our suffering and the suffering in the world can motivate us to practice more diligently, to be inspired to practice, and get to the bottom of our suffering. We can be motivated to find deep peace, a deep place of non-resistance and wisdom, and deeper compassion to go on the path of practice. And this is a very important part for me because there's lots of suffering in the world that breaks my heart. But I'm not going to do anything about that particular kind of suffering – not directly. What I can do is limited.

I direct my energy in another direction. I devote myself more to my practice. Now that I'm a teacher, I also devote myself more to teaching because I'm not necessarily helping somewhere else in the world. But I'll put more inspired effort into making a difference where I can.

To have contact with suffering gives birth to motivation of different kinds. I think it is very respectful of our hearts. There's something about acting – being motivated by something that moves us a lot. It keeps freeing or developing our hearts. Not acting sometimes can cause more suffering and more harm to ourselves.

The bigger the suffering we experience in the world, the more important it is for us to respond and act. But remember, it doesn't have to be that we respond directly to that thing. It might be that we do something different.

For example, 9/11 had a big impact on me. When it happened, I felt: "I have to change. I have to be a different person. This experience has to change me. How do I want to be changed by it?" So I decided to start training people to become Buddhist chaplains. I acted in the world. I felt like I had to do something, so I created a program that still exists. It's been going on for about eighteen years or so.

The idea is: What can we do, without being burdened by the idea that we have to do something directly related to suffering if it doesn't make sense for us to be involved? There is a tenderness that comes from non-resistance. There is simple care and caring-ness that doesn't involve doing anything but deep caring. There is being motivated to act and being wise about what direction we go. But again, the reference point is deep meditation practice.

It is best that these component parts come forward without any obligation. We can feel, in meditation, that any sense of obligation is a resistance, a heaviness, a burden, a closing down. It's not healthy to do it out of a

sense of duty – “I’m obligated to be compassionate.” You can’t be obligated to be compassionate, because, by its very nature, it’s something deeper than any obligation. You cannot manufacture it and act it out. It’s something deeper. Don’t feel obligated to be compassionate, but be motivated to be compassionate. Be motivated to develop your compassion because something deep inside wants you to be a different person – wants you to be someone who can respond to the world in effective and useful ways.

So there is no obligation to be compassionate. For some people, I think this may be a difficult and very important lesson to learn. Then, the compassion can be clearer and stronger and come from a deeply rooted place inside. Hopefully, that makes it more effective and meaningful for ourselves and the people we encounter.

You might have different component parts of compassion. Because there are so many different kinds of compassion – different people experience it in different ways – maybe the principle that your compassion is made up of different parts can help you look more deeply into what goes on within you when you have compassion. This can be very helpful to write or talk to friends about. Start teasing apart what goes on for you when you feel or act with compassion.

Thank you very much, and I'll see you in a couple of days.