

Dharmette: Empathy and Imagination

Transcribed and edited from a short talk by Gil Fronsdal on April 6, 2011

I have a topic, but not a talk. So I'm not sure where this is going to go. The topic that I'm thinking about today is empathy. And it's a very important topic for being human. The human capacity for empathy is a beautiful thing. In order to think about it a little better, I looked up 'empathy' to learn what the great world authority, Wikipedia, had to say about it [laughter]. One of the surprises in looking at the Wikipedia entry was that the person who wrote it clearly was saying that empathy – the word and the concept – has been coined relatively recently, and people in the last decades have been trying to come up with a definition for it. There are different definitions for empathy, but not one that is agreed upon.

But all the meanings have to do with understanding other people and their feelings in some way or another. Some people emphasize that it's feeling the feelings of others, not in a contagious way where you take them on as your own, but instead you sense them clearly as it's their feelings. Some people point out that empathy means understanding the perspective, life situation, and frame of reference of someone else. You put yourself in

their shoes, see their life experiences and what went on for them. So that's having more to do with cognition, rather than feeling. It means understanding the bigger picture of their life, and what it's like going through life like that. Some people point to the role of mirror neurons to pick up and sense the facial expressions and gestures of people. Something inside us feels what comes through other peoples' gestures. Other people talk about the role of imagination – that we use our imagination to imagine ourselves in their shoes, and we dare to understand how it is for them. So for different people, empathy is perhaps different.

Empathy overlaps with compassion. Similarly compassion – what it is, how it gets stimulated or invoked, how people feel it, and act on it – may be for different for different people. But whether it's empathy or compassion, one of the really beautiful things that can happen through meditation and Buddhist practice is that our capacity for it grows and develops. One of the reasons it does that is because the obstacles to empathy and compassion fall away. It's as if empathy and compassion are innate capacities we have, which mostly will operate on their own if we get out of the way. So when we sit and meditate, our distractions, fears, anxieties, inhibitions, anger, frustrations, and interpretations we have when we overlay on top of our experience begin to quiet down, and settle away. The

field becomes cleaner and clearer, and we're much more likely to either feel more fully, see more clearly, think in a more effective way, and use our imagination in ways that are much more immediate and valuable.

For example, I could be talking with someone, and I could spend my time imagining how wonderful it would be to have a red sports car [laughter]. That would be one use of my imagination. Or I could be sitting meeting with someone, and somehow my imagination is evoked by the person. They're telling me their story, and what goes on. I'm imagining what that's like for them. My imagination may not be completely accurate, but still it's engaged with their story, what's going on for them, their background and history, and what it must have been like to grow up that way, or to be that way. So one imagination takes me away from them, and the other imagination brings me hopefully towards them where empathy is more likely.

What I've found is that my capacity for empathy and compassion has grown with practice. One of the beautiful things in my life is to feel a greater sense of empathy and compassion – a connectedness to people. In turn, as the empathy grew, it seemed that it also fueled my practice. It became a source of encouragement or motivation to practice further because I wasn't practicing just for myself, but to also support and be helpful to other people, and to become a

better person in the world. I feel that this sense of mutual interplay of practice supporting the growth of empathy, and empathy supporting the growth of practice, has gone back and forth in my life in very important ways.

So when you come out of your meditation to start your day and go into the world, it might be interesting for you to look, see, and be open to feeling, sensing, being present for, and imagining the people that you'll encounter as you leave. Don't use your practice as some way to be self-contained, self-absorbed, or holding on to how you feel in a way that shields you from really taking in someone else. But instead, really come out of your meditation willing and able in a quiet way to feel, sense, and be connected to others. Then see what happens, and see what gets touched. I imagine a variety of different things will be touched depending on the person that you encounter.

Look at how empathy plays out in your life. Is it mostly body-based? Does something resonate in your body in relationship to them? Is it feeling-based? Do emotions get elicited in you in response to someone else where you're feeling similar things to them? Or is it imagination, thoughts, and perspectives? Are you interested in understanding other people's point of view?

There may be not much we can do about feeling other people's feelings or having a resonance in your body with what's going on with them. It either happens or it doesn't happen if we're open to it. But we do have some choice over using our imagination and thinking. So if you find yourself in a difficult interpersonal situation, from what perspective do you look at the difficulty? One of the perspectives to bring to this situation is, "What is it like for that person? How is it for them to be in this conflict, and how is it for them to be struggling? What's going on for them in their life that they're so angry? Let me take a moment here to try to understand the background of their situation. They're afraid, and so what happened in their life that they're so afraid?" It's a choice to take the time to think and reflect on what is the perspective and bigger picture under which this person is operating, as opposed to only maintaining the perspective that this person has had an impact on me, that they better understand my perspective, history, and what happened to me in my life, and I'm going to tell them [laughs].

So there are these two different sides to compassion and empathy. There's the side that gets evoked or awakened in us – that we're available. There's less of a filter between us and the world, and something can happen in a more intuitive or direct way. And then there's a side that is not automatic or natural necessarily. But we choose to engage that part of us

that allows for fuller, deeper understanding and empathy to occur. Some of that has to do with imagination. Some of it has to do with a shift of perspective, and realizing that there are different perspectives in any given situation. So, be willing to look at different perspectives. Stretch and put aside your perspective for a little while, and look at it from another perspective, and another one, and another one to get a fuller picture.

In the end, I think my approach, hope, and wish in any situation is to look for what is best for everyone concerned, and not just at what's best for me or for another person. Can we find a place that brings what's best, beautiful, helpful, and with the greatest sense of wellbeing to everyone concerned? I think that empathy and many of its forms is one of the great supports for helping us find what's best for everyone. Thank you.