

Compassionate Action (3 of 5) For the Sake of Self and Others

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SUMMARY KEYWORDS

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I'm happy to be here with you on this Wednesday, continuing with the topic of the week: compassionate action. I'm trying to offer some different perspectives on what being motivated by compassion allows us to do.

Monday's talk was about compassionate action for the sake of others. Yesterday's was about compassionate action for the sake of oneself, not distinct or separate from others, but in addition to others. This means compassionate action done both for our own sake and

for the sake of others – for the sake of others and for ourselves. There's a mutuality – a fullness of care in all directions.

The suggestion is that compassion for others, caring for others, is richer and more valuable when we know how to compassionately care for ourselves. We have more care and more love to give others when there's a kind of love here for ourselves.

Today I want to talk about the third form of action – or way of acting: action for the sake of both ourselves and others. This is a category the Buddha often uses. In addition to intentions for the welfare of oneself and of others, he also talks about the intention for the welfare of both self *and* others.

I understand both self and others as meaning the “we” that exists between us – the nature and quality of relatedness existing between us. That is distinct from the other person and from ourselves. It is the dynamic, the chemistry, and the quality of the interaction between two people.

When we do compassionate action for others, what relationship does that establish between ourselves and others? I'm mostly focusing now on compassionate action done in the presence of another person. If we send a check to support orphanages in Uganda

because we read about them in the newspaper, there's not that much of a relationship between us and the orphans in Uganda. But we are in a way establishing some kind of relatedness. Maybe it's a little bit self-directed, but it's still a relationship with the suffering in Uganda.

There's a bigger kind of “we” operating here as well. And what is that? Especially when we're doing something directly with someone else. It's easy enough to do what we think of as compassionate action when we're very strongly imposing ourselves on the other person, or so focused on the other person that we're completely ignoring ourselves. In ignoring ourselves, we also ignore what's being established between us because that involves both self and other – our relatedness.

I've known people who have done wonderfully compassionate things for others out of compassion, but there was no personal connection, even when it was one-on-one. It was kind of perfunctory or it was just, “Yes, I want to help this person, and here's something you can have, or do, or a way you can be helped.” But there's a kind of distance.

Some of that distance can be there when we hold ourselves apart, sometimes with the idea of pity, superiority, or “Here, let me help you who is so poor and

miserable.” It's kind of looking down at the person. The relationship, then, is not healthy – to be the one who has the power and the authority to do things, while the other person doesn't. In being compassionate with our power and authority by fixing things or doing things for them, we're perpetuating a power dynamic in the relationship. That's not really very healthy either. It's not the best vehicle through which compassionate love can flow. We're still helping people in a beneficial way, but it's not necessarily such a wonderful relationship to have.

So we ask, is it a relationship of mutual respect? Or is it a relationship of respect in one direction, even if it's not mutual? – this changes the nature of the dynamic between two people. Is there love? Is there friendship between them? Is friendship being offered? Are we contributing to a richer, more valuable relatedness between two people? Or are we holding ourselves at a distance? Are we being one-sided? Are we not open to the relationship? Maybe we don't want to be open to it or don't want the relationship.

Maybe we give some money to someone who's homeless, but we are afraid of the person or aversive to the person. Maybe we don't really want to have any more contact. We want to help them, but we don't want any more contact for all kinds of reasons. So the relationship is not a relationship, in a sense.

The importance of relatedness in relationships is that the kindness, friendliness, and mutuality that can exist even with strangers is like food for the heart for many people. For many human beings – not everyone, but many – who we are as a person – how we live and grow, and what makes us happy – has a lot to do with how we are in relation to other people.

A lot of our unhappiness also comes from how we are in relationships with people. There's often an over-concern with relatedness and with what people think – “Am I going to be rejected? Am I going to be liked? What can I do to have a good relationship? How do I get respect? How do I get love from other people?” There can be a lot of concern.

Through meditation, we learn how to be unconcerned, not worried, unopinionated, and without neediness in relationships. But we're open to establishing a healthy relationship between ourselves and others.

The simplest, healthiest way is one of friendliness. We don't want to have too high a bar – that we're supposed to love everyone. That can interfere. But we can offer simple friendliness. Even more simply, maybe we give respect. We can establish a level of respect between us in the relationship. We can offer appreciation, attunement, and awareness.

People thrive in being listened to and being seen clearly for who they are. Sometimes, if we can see someone and stop and listen, lo and behold, that gives them the possibility of doing the same for us.

What happens then? There can be magic – a specialness – that happens between people, even total strangers, just through seeing each other for thirty seconds. It can happen by being open and acknowledging, seeing, and knowing each other. We can meet with open-mindedness, open-heartedness, and open-handedness. And we see each other in that openness. We see each other in richness and fullness without needing to define, without having needs and fears.

Maybe the heart of compassion, the thing that is most beneficial for everyone concerned, is not giving someone money, giving them food, or driving them to the doctor. Maybe that is the vehicle for some deeper movement of care and compassion that creates a richer, more valuable connection, warmth, and love between people.

We ask, what is the relatedness we're creating? What are we contributing to it? Take someone to the emergency room, and they might remember that for a long time, but take them to the emergency room with

real love, care, kindness, and respect, and *that* might have a long-term benefit for them even greater than whatever the doctor does for them in the emergency room.

Compassionate action for the sake of self and others is something we concern ourselves with when we do compassionate action so that the action becomes more deeply considered and richer. There are more facets of compassionate action than simply doing something for someone else. Among them is the idea of establishing a good relationship, or offering one.

That's why what we talked about yesterday is so important. That is compassionate action for the sake of oneself, meaning that we take care of ourselves. We do something in a way that nourishes, supports, liberates, and opens us to love, care, and respect for others. Then more richness is possible in the relationship between ourselves and others.

So, compassionate action for the sake of self and others. If, over the next twenty-four hours you'd like to explore this in your daily life, you might give some attention to noticing what the quality of relatedness is like when you're with other people. No one needs to know you're doing this. What are you contributing to the quality of relatedness, the relationship between you?

Again, that relationship doesn't have to be dramatic; it doesn't have to be love. But what's the chemistry? What's the atmosphere? What dynamics are being established between you and others – even strangers like clerks in the store, people standing in line, or people you pass on the road? Is there a relationship? Do you just walk down the road and ignore whoever is passing you, or are you available to smile or say hello in a way that feels safe and appropriate? What is the relationship you have with people? What kind of relationship is established?

If you do this exercise, it's very interesting to see how it shifts relatedness in the course of a conversation or time together. We can see whether the quality of conversation – what we say, how we feel, and what we convey to others – serves to open up the conversation, connecting us more, or closes off the conversation, creating more distance.

We can sometimes see the effect of what we're talking about in other people. Now they're pulling away a teeny bit. They feel more closed. They're turning away a little bit, looking around. Or they are really opening up, present, and delighted. There can be very subtle energies that shift and change. But what happens when you start noticing the dynamics of relatedness? How does that affect the ways in which you want to be compassionate, caring, and helpful to other people?

Thank you very much. I look forward to continuing this tomorrow.