Anukampā (5 of 5) The Ethics of Care

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anukampā, care, compassion, Buddha, *karuṇā,* ethics, mindfulness, awakened, liberated, *kusala,* wholesomeness*, sīla,* awakening*,* Jīvaka, responsivity, suffering, greed, hatred, hate, delusion, kindness, welfare, action, world, respond, skillful, service

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Greetings. This morning is the last of the five talks on *anukampā*, a concept the Buddha used many times, and which I'm translating as 'care.' While it is sometimes translated as 'compassion,' I'm suggesting that 'compassion,' as wonderful and important as that is, has a narrower range of meaning than the word 'care.' 'Care' – in addition to caring for people's suffering – also involves caring for their welfare. We still care for people who are not particularly suffering. We have a general benevolence for all beings in all circumstances.

I'm suggesting that the word 'care' is simpler than attitudes and emotions like loving-kindness and compassion. It requires fewer concepts and ideas than

what is often associated with compassion and love. Love and compassion are not always accessible to us, because we don't necessarily feel this automatically for the people we meet. We can certainly try to develop universal kindness and compassion. But it's easier to do so if we recognize that underneath, we have a sensitivity and resonance of the heart, which is care – *anukampā*.

As I've been saying, one of the reasons for distinguishing this word from compassion is that the Buddha used the word *anukampā* repeatedly as the motivation for how we care for the welfare and happiness of others. The Buddha never used the word *karuṇā*, often translated as 'compassion,' as a motivation or source from which to actually support and help people in the world.

This is very different from how *karuṇā* came to be understood later in Buddhism. But in this early tradition, there was *anukampā* – a word which I think got forgotten, lost or subsumed underneath *karuṇā* over the centuries. By bringing forth the word *anukampā*, I find it very helpful to recognize something so simple, which may be the foundation for these things.

I'm interested in exploring this, because for a long time I've been interested in the ethics of freedom and awakening.

What does that look like?
What are the ethics of awakened and liberated people?
What are the ethics of mindfulness when mindfulness becomes strong?

To answer these questions, it might be best to drop the idea of ethics, because it has associations in English that might not be a very good fit for the teachings of early Buddhism, which is my reference point.

The closest word in the Buddha's language for the English word 'ethics' is probably the word *kusala*, which is usually translated into English as 'wholesomeness' or 'skillfulness.' So the questions in early Buddhism are:
Is what we're doing skillful?
Is it wholesome?

This gives you a different flavor than asking, "Is it ethical?"

Many people will say that the Pali word for ethics in Buddhism is *sīla*, (*śīla* in Sanskrit), but that's not quite right. It's okay to say that that's what it is. But again, if you go back to the early Buddhist texts, and see how the word *sīla* is used, it really means our behavior, what we do. This is so much so that, in his latest translations of the Pali suttas, Bhikkhu Bodhi now translates *sīla* as

“virtuous behavior and virtuous conduct,” where the emphasis is our conduct and what we do.

Action is important. Action has to do with how we live in the world and interact with people. Another way of talking about the ethics of awakening and non-attachment is to call it the conduct of awakening and non-attachment. I’m interested in what comes forth when our conduct is skillful and wholesome.

Certainly, one of the inspiring statements of the Buddha was when he used the word *anukampā*, speaking of the actions that come out of awakening, which he said to the first sixty students who practiced under him and became fully awakened. They were traveling together. They’d done what had to be done. They were liberated and free. And the Buddha said this to them:

Travel forth for the welfare of many, for the happiness of many, out of care for the world, for the good,

the welfare, and the happiness of gods and humans.

So this is the Buddha’s instruction to people who were awakened for what kind of behavior they should engage in – to go forth in order to support and promote the welfare, happiness, and good of others. Here we see that the idea of going forth out of care (*anukampā*) is intimately connected to awakening.

Care then is the source of enlightened behavior in the world. We see this in passages where the Buddha refers to *anukampā*. He visits people out of *anukampā*. That characterizes how the Buddha engages in his world, caring for the world in all his teaching. Maybe all his teaching was inspired by *anukampā* – care.

There's a fascinating story of a doctor named Jīvaka, who is talking to the Buddha. Jīvaka says that the great god Brahma, the overlord of the gods, lives with a mind of the divine abodes of *mettā*, *karuṇā, muditā,* and *upekkhā* (loving-kindness, compassion, sympathetic joy, and equanimity). These are the four flavors of love that characterized Brahma. Jīvaka says to the Buddha:

> *I've heard that the god Brahma is characterized by these states. Now I see this in the Buddha. I see that you abide in loving-kindness. You abide in compassion. You abide in sympathetic joy. You abide in equanimity.*

To my mind, the Buddha's response is very unusual. He says:

> *No, don't say that. However, if what you mean is that – if I abide without the greed, hatred, and delusion that give rise to ill-will, to cruelty, to displeasure, and to repulsion – then I allow you to say that I abide in loving-kindness, compassion, sympathetic joy, and equanimity.*

In other words, the Buddha is reluctant to be characterized as living or abiding in these four *Brahmavihāras*. But he is willing to say that he abides without the greed, hate, and delusion that give rise to ill-will, hatred, cruelty, displeasure, and repulsion.

Maybe, if there's no greed, hate, and delusion, then there is love and something that looks like care, compassion, and all these things. So what is that? The absence of certain things then looks like something else.

I want to give a small example. There are two people who look from the outside as if they're patient. They're both in difficult, challenging situations. However, for the first person, on the inside all their buttons are being pushed, and it's really stressful and challenging. They're constantly getting irritated, angry, and discouraged. For that person, it's a lot of work to keep breathing, to relax, to be mindful of what's going on, and to stay connected to oneself so they don't get caught in reactivity. They have very strong mindfulness. So with all the work of paying attention, they are able to visibly appear nonreactive. It looks like they're physically or behaviorally equanimous. Others would say, "Look, that person is equanimous."

The second person looks just as patient. However, inside they have no buttons that are being pushed. The second person doesn't get irritated, angry, or discouraged. No attachments, preoccupations, or worries are being triggered. For this person, patience is not something they have to do. They're not working at being patient. It's the absence of anger and irritation that makes them seem patient.

So in that sense, when the Buddha replies to Jīvaka, "You can refer to me as having abandoned greed, hate and delusion – and in that sense, you can say that I have loving-kindness and compassion," it isn't like compassion and loving-kindness are something to be done, or that the Buddha is working on it. But somehow, that absence of greed, hate and delusion looks like what we would call loving-kindness and compassion.

If Jīvaka had asked, "Does the Buddha abide in *anukampā?*" I suspect the Buddha said, "Yes, that I allow you. That I abide in." The Buddha really felt that someone who abides in *anukampā* has abandoned ill-will and hatred. It is said that to dwell in *anukampā* for all beings, one abstains from harming them. When one has abandoned ill-will and hatred, one abides with *anukampā* for the world.

So *anukampā* is primary for the Buddha. He's willing to say that *anukampā* is what's there when there's no greed, hate and delusion.

I'd like to end with a few things. One is that the care that seems to be there in the absence of greed, hate, and delusion is not an obligation. Sometimes when I hear teachings about compassion, it feels like I'm supposed to be that way. I need to cultivate it, and to be in the world in a compassionate way. I think compassion is fantastic. But the idea that it is obligatory feels a little bit oppressive, like, "Oh really, I'm not good enough? I have to do this now?"

But the idea that care is found through letting go of greed, hatred, and delusion, and the idea of awakening this deeper, natural sensitivity means that – rather than being concerned with ethical responsibility – we who practice can be concerned with ethical *responsivity*. We want to discover that place of ethical responsivity where we can respond skillfully and wholesomely to the world. Rather than discovering what our responsibilities are, we discover our capacity for responsivity.

My hope is that as we discover this, it is applied to actively learning about the world enough to understand when our lives cause harm, and how in our lives we can benefit and support the world. That responsivity can travel out through the circles of care and into the world

– so that our circles of care become all inclusive. In this place, we do not succumb to greed, hatred, or delusion.

I hope that this discussion on *anukampā* (care) has given you some food for thought, and a new concept to explore in yourself. Maybe it has some interest and value for you. I hope so.

In a couple of minutes, I'm happy to take a few minutes of questions for those of you who want to stay. I'll say in closing that I'll continue with these morning sittings. For the next four weeks, the theme for the talks will be the Four Noble Truths. Now that we've done beauty last week and care this week, maybe we're ready in a different way than we would have been otherwise to look at the very important teaching, practice, and insight of the Four Noble Truths. Maybe we're ready to look at and explore the topic of suffering. We'll spend one week on each, going deeper into each Truth as we go through the week.

Thank you very much for being a part of this. For those of you who are listening to this on Audio Dharma, thank you very much for being interested in following this series. I've had a chance to share something that's important for me. Thank you.

Q & A

“Can I speak about the Brahmavihāras?” Thank you, Sandy. Maybe that can be another theme for these early morning sittings. I can do one week on each at some point. That’ll be nice. Also IMC has a happy hour. I think they’re doing it every afternoon this coming week. At happy hours, they do the *Brahmavihāras* – *mettā* and so forth.

“Can you also say that care is a direct liberation practice, because it lessens greed, hate, and delusion?” Absolutely. I think that’s a wonderful thing. So if you want to be free of greed, hate, and delusion, go out there and try to care for people and the world. But do so paying careful attention to what’s going on inside of yourself, so that you can notice what gets in the way of care. You could notice how greed, hate, and delusion operate. There’s a whole different perspective on attachment and clinging that can come from being of service than if we just sit and meditate. It’s very valuable and important. Service is a path in itself.

It’s very heartwarming to see all the *Thank you*’s and *Good morning*’s. Very nice.

“If I understood correctly, you believe anukampā is a better foundation for ethics than compassion. Could you explain more about the relationship between mindfulness and ethics?” Well, is it better than

compassion? It's a tender answer to give, since compassion is a foundation for many people's religious and personal life and what they do. I can also say for myself that was true. For decades, I believed that compassion was at the heart of my ethical life. But over the last years, I discovered for myself – especially when I discovered the word *anukampā* as 'care' – that I had subsumed and combined two different feelings or attitudes that existed within me. I saw them as being the same. I saw them both as compassion. Just as some translators translate both *anukampā* and *karuṇā* as 'compassion,' I had no language to distinguish a very simple, quiet, tender care that has no object. Sitting quietly by myself and meditating, it just exists as 'caringness' without an object. I called it compassion without an object – that's how I saw it. Then there were other kinds of compassion where I encountered suffering in the world, and clearly felt empathy, wanted to alleviate it, and wished that suffering could go away. But now I've separated out these two, and the simpler, almost non-conceptual place of care, I call 'care.' It depends on how you define it. Compassion is the concern for the suffering of others and wanting to have that suffering go away. It is a little bit more conceptual. It involves self and other in some way. However, for something that is not conceptual and doesn't involve self and other – I used to call that tenderness 'compassion,' because I had no distinction between the two. But now I think I'd like to go along with the

distinction that the Buddha makes, and call this ‘care.’ This is a bit of a semantic issue, so we have to be careful not to treat this as some absolute difference.

LH, I think you said you’re from Iran,. If that means that you’re Iranian, maybe you’d be interested to know that I had a discussion with an Iranian Dharma teacher about the possibility of offering an intro online class in Farsi. If that actually happens, maybe you’d be interested. We’ll do it through IMC, and it will be on the website.

It is wonderful to have all this. I just love seeing you and the questions. I want to thank you very much. I look forward to more opportunities to be with you in this way. Thank you very, very much.