*Brahmavihāra*s Compassion (1 of 5)

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With this talk, I begin a five-part series on the *brahmavihāra* of compassion. It's hard to imagine Buddhism without compassion. It's one of the primary forces that has brought Buddhism to us down through the ages – one of the primary movements that, with awakening, are awakened within us. The more awake we become, the more compassion, care, love, and goodwill there is.

I'd like to think that awakening – this famous English word for liberation or enlightenment – includes the awakening of compassion. And certainly, for me, one of the big surprises and treasures of Buddhist practice was the slow and gradual awakening of compassion. It was so gradual and slow that I didn't really recognize

that it was happening. Even though I was changing, I wasn't oriented to notice it.

Looking back, after a few years of practice, I see that maybe I didn't get enlightened, but I certainly became 'compassioned.' I discovered this wonderful quality in myself. And to my surprise, it was a quality that was very satisfying to feel. It had a feeling of sweetness, settledness, and rightness.

In and of itself, compassion is not troubled by anything. To come to this untroubled compassion is one of the great tasks of a lifetime. It's certainly easy to experience one's own suffering and the suffering of others. It's easy to have alarm, upset and distress around it. It's also possible to have qualities of compassion, *together* with distress. But one of the great gifts we can give the world, a gift that comes from Buddhist practice, is to be able to have compassion without any distress.

What is compassion? I almost don't want to define it too much. Sometimes, I like to think that I don't really know exactly what compassion is, even though it's been one of the central organizing principles for much of my adult life. I can think of very few things that are more

important to me than the compassion that’s been awakened in me. It’s important for how I live, for what motivates me, and for how I orient myself in the world.

It's clearly very important for me. So, it may be a bit odd for me to say that I can't define it exactly. And, perhaps, it's because, over the years of my practice, what I’ve called compassion has changed. It may be that as I've developed, or as circumstances have changed, the quality, the characteristics of compassion, have not stayed the same. In fact, maybe there are different forms of compassion. In the course of time, we can tap into these different forms, shapes, and characteristics of compassion. We don't want to narrow it down to just one thing: "This is what it is."

Although I'm a bit reluctant to give a definition of compassion, it can be helpful to understand some of its classic definitions. The classic Buddhist definition – the one in our *Theravāda* tradition – probably doesn't come from the Buddha. Actually, he never defined *karuṇā*. It’s a bit a guessing game to understand what he meant by the word *karuṇā*, the Buddhist word for compassion.

Buddhaghosa, a teacher who lived about a thousand years after the Buddha, provides a wonderful description of *karuṇā*. He begins his definition with something he loves to do – something that many Buddhist teachers in Asia love to do – namely, he connects the meaning of a word with words that sound similar. It's not quite a game of etymology, but a game involving the correspondence of similar sounding words. *Karuṇā* starts with the letters 'k' and 'a.' So, as part of his definition, Buddhaghosa offers many Pali words that also start with the letters 'k' or 'k-a-r.' He sees these words as providing a resonance with *karuṇā*, the Pali word for compassion, as well as a reason for it.

So, for the word compassion, I will suggest some English words that start with 'c', 'c-a', or 'c-o' in order to go along with the 'c-o' sound at the beginning of the word. This is the closest in meaning to what the Pali words are.

It's *compassion* because it *causes* the hearts of good people to be moved by the suffering of others. What does it mean to be a good person? To be a good person might mean to be an ethical person, someone

who tries their best to not live from hatred, greed, and lust. But rather from qualities of friendliness, goodwill, kindness, and wisdom.

People who have discovered why meditation is so helpful, I think, is because meditation helps us to become good people. It helps free us from the forces of hostility, ill will, and from things that we do that can hurt other people. It helps us to be strongly motivated not to hurt. And, if we're a person who's able to be in the present moment– this is such an important place to be as a reference point, as a discovery of this life. Then, something inside of us moves, to be in the presence of other people's suffering and to know about it. Some people translate *karunā* as to tremble or shake. We're moved by the suffering of others. And the question is, “How are we moved?” How are we moved so there's no distress?

Then, the definition goes further and says, it’s compassion, because it *combats*, strikes, and destroys the suffering of others. It's a bit paradoxical or ironic to use such violent terms in relation to compassion, but it does speak to a strong motivation to really make a difference, to really try to overcome suffering in this

world. It speaks to the idea of not simply accepting suffering, but instead to have a goal, an idea, that suffering can be ended in one way or another.

And, it’s compassion because it *covers* or moves to cover those who suffer. Compassion can also mean in Pali,
 to move or to affect other people who suffer. So, compassion touches other people. It moves, covering those who suffer. Actually, here’s a different translation: "reaching out to pervade those who suffer." It’s compassion, because it covers those who suffer. It moves us. We reach out from the heart with the idea of suffusing or spreading compassion.

Is it fanciful to think that compassion can spread out from us into the world? Is there a force like electricity – like wavelengths of vibration – that spreads out? What is it? I don't know. And I'm disinclined to call it anything specific.

But we do affect each other. We do pick up the cues, the tone of voice, the mannerisms of others. We can feel, sometimes, the intentions of others. And we know that this spreads out. We know that, somehow, people

are touched by it. It resonates with people. And we open our hearts and spread loving-kindness and compassion to the world as if we're suffusing, as if we're touching other people who suffer.

There's a little bit more I want to say about this ancient definition: "Compassion is characterized as supporting what reduces suffering." I like this definition, because it's not necessarily saying that we work directly to end suffering, but that we can help reduce the support for suffering, the underlying causes for suffering. And those causes can be many things. Sometimes it's things in the external world. Sometimes it's things within us. But whatever it is that conditions people to suffer, these things are addressed by people who have compassion.

The idea expressed in the next quote is very important: "Compassion functions to not *carry* the suffering of others." Compassion has this quality. When we have this *karuṇā* kind of compassion, we're not burdened or distressed by the suffering of others. That's one of the key qualities of compassion – to not be distressed by or burdened by suffering, and to be interested in alleviating suffering elsewhere. "It manifests as the

absence of cruelty. Its proximate cause is to see the helplessness of those overwhelmed by suffering."

That can touch the heart in a deep way. People suffer. But there are some people who have no ability to help themselves because of their circumstances, or because of what's happening in the world. And that really tugs at the heart. If they can't help themselves, who's going to help them?

"Let me help them." People live in war zones. People experience tremendous oppression, and there's no way out of the terrible state they're in. The idea that sometimes people are helpless in their suffering tugs at the heart and awakens this kind of *karuṇā* – compassion.

"Compassion succeeds when it makes *cruelty* subside, and fails when it produces sorrow." So, when cruelty subsides, hostility subsides. It doesn't elicit sorrow or distress in us. Our hearts are moved in such a way that we're not burdened or distressed. There's an absence of hostility and anger. There’s a strong motivation to help and support people to suffer less.

Those are the general parameters of what compassion is. I think that, many times, this quality doesn't involve being burdened. There's no distress or sorrow involved in compassion. That is the art of compassion. That is the magic or the specialness of it.

Some people can’t believe or justify that. They feel as though there has to be sorrow and distress. They feel that there has to be a sense of the weight of the world being on their shoulders.

But to have this compassion is sweet. Compassion is one of the great sources of being happy in the world:

If you want to be happy, live compassionately.

The compassion of *karuṇā*, this particular kind of compassion that both the Buddha and Buddhaghosa emphasize, is a very special thing.

I hope that these few words about compassion will awaken a curiosity in you, and an interest in the question: "What is compassion for you?" What does your compassion feel like? What reference do you have for compassion that is sweet? Or, what reference do you have for compassion as a source of well-being –

compassion that is deeply moved by the suffering of the world, but is not burdened by it or distressed by it? What is that?

Do you have a reference point for it? If not, maybe you can reflect on these questions. Think about them. And, over the next day, talk to people about your relationship to compassion and how you understand it.

Thank you very much.