

Anukampā (1 of 5): Gil's Story with Compassion and Care

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Hello again. Today I begin another five-part series of talks for these morning sats. What I'd like to do this week is introduce one of my favorite Buddhist topics. I've been reading the Buddha's teachings for a long time, but I didn't really see this concept there. I didn't pull it out of the texts and understand that it was there, partly because it was translated in a way that made it more obscure. Translated by the word 'compassion,' it may seem on the surface, to be a pretty straightforward concept.

It turns out there are two words in the Pali texts that well-known translators will translate as 'compassion.' One is *karuṇā*, and the other is *anukampā*. By translating both these words as 'compassion,' we don't see how the two are distinct from each other.

When I started looking into this ,and seeing what's specifically said about *anukampā* in the suttas, it became quite meaningful for me. It touched something very deep inside that I came to recognize as having its own specialness. In the past, I think I would have identified it as a quality of compassion. That's fine, but now *anukampā* seems, in a wonderful way, to be something much more fundamental and broader in scope than compassion.

I tend to translate *anukampā* as 'care' or "caring for the world, for oneself, and for others." I like the English word 'care,' because of its double meanings. To care for others means to value and appreciate them. But it could also mean to actively do something for them – to help, provide for, and support them. These two meanings – to value and to provide support – are beautiful things to do.

Today I would like to say something about my own journey in the Dharma in relationship to three beautiful qualities of heart that can grow through this practice – compassion, loving-kindness, and *anukampā* or care. The way this came to me and became strong was in that sequence.

I've been doing Dharma practice for 45 years. So, to go back and look over how it's evolved over all these

decades, I see a slow change over what was salient and really important for me in different eras of my practice.

In the early years, when I had a lot of personal suffering and challenges, I was doing Zen practice. As I started to develop and deepen the practice, the language of Zen meditation and the way I described it to myself was tenderizing, in the way that meat can be tenderized. Because meat can be tough, you can put something on it to make it more tender. I felt that *zazen* – Zen meditation – was tenderizing my heart.

After some years of practice, I slowly realized in retrospect that one of the things happening for me in those early years was that I was becoming ‘compassioned.’ I was becoming attuned to my own suffering, and then to the suffering around me. The salient quality that met, responded to, and supported this was a quality of compassion, warmth, an extreme ‘caringness’ that was specific to suffering. At first, I wasn’t conscious of this actively happening. I think one of the first signs was that I found myself very strongly drawn towards Buddhist statues, drawings, and paintings of *Avalokiteshvara*, *Kuan-yin*, or *Kannon* – the *bodhisattva*, the great being of compassion. I would draw them, and put photographs of statues on my wall. I didn’t think about it much. I just found these images and put them up.

When I would see people or objects in the world, I would identify them as being people or objects of compassion. I remember saying to others, “Now that’s a really compassionate person,” and they were surprised that I would see compassion in that person, because that wasn’t their association. But I was seeing this around me. Even sometimes just the breeze of the wind against my cheek felt like a breeze of compassion. I think in Zen it’s sometimes called the golden wind.

In retrospect, I think I needed a lot of compassion. I needed the medicine or salve of compassion in order to meet and be with my own suffering. Or perhaps, rather than needing it, it just was the byproduct.

I think one of the reasons that compassion arose for me in Zen practice is that Zen is very simple. The way I understood and practiced it was as a thorough acceptance of the moment as it was. Since I had a lot of suffering, it became a certain kind of acceptance, just being with it, and allowing it. This allowing and being with the suffering that was there had a tenderizing effect. I would let go of all the resistance to and judgments I had about my suffering, and the discursive thoughts that would get triggered. I would come back, and just feel and be here with what was. And what was here was suffering – and that was tenderizing.

In those early years, one fortunate thing was that I didn't know very much about meditation. So I didn't have meditation techniques to try to work with suffering or fix it. I just sat in an open, somewhat simple way with experience, and doing so changed me. It changed me so much that this compassion grew. It became the orienting, organizing principle of my life.

At some point, I decided I would dedicate my life to Buddhism, Buddhist practice, and maybe teaching Buddhism, as my response to the suffering of the world. I never had any sense that I was going to be effective in doing so. But I did have a clear sense that that's what I wanted my life to be about. When I started this road, the image I had of myself wanting to respond to the world out of compassion was to have a little storefront Zen center, a meditation hall. I would get up in the morning. I would keep it clean. I would let people come in, and we would meditate together in the morning. That would be the core way in which I supported people. So now, many years later, we have this 7:00 a.m. sitting, which for me is the fulfillment of a goal I had many years ago.

I discovered some of the ins and outs of compassion. I discovered, to my surprise, that compassion can feel nurturing and sweet. A wonderful, pleasant feeling can come with pure compassion.

At some point, I started doing *vipassanā* practice. In United States especially, teachers would teach loving-kindness practice – *mettā*. When I was a young student with a Zen background, loving-kindness practice seemed to me to be too sentimental and artificial. And I would simply tune out the teachers that did guided loving-kindness meditations.

But in the course of sitting long retreats, especially the three-month retreats at the Insight Meditation Society, at some point, a sweetness and warmth started, and that again may have been tenderizing. Something began to open in me that had a sense of joy, delight, or happiness. Then when a teacher started to talk about loving-kindness and loving-kindness meditation, I said, “That’s it. I know what they’re talking about now.”

Then the idea of loving-kindness and loving-kindness meditation had a wonderful meaning and value for me, but it had a very different flavor than compassion. It still had to do with caring for people, and caring for oneself – but it came with a sense of delight and wanting them to be happy. To have this more open, relaxed experience was a very different affect for me. For a long time I wondered whether it was something about Zen versus *vipassanā* – one manifesting as compassion and the other as loving-kindness. Or perhaps it had to do with a particular phase of my life – what was useful, and

what came with this tenderizing and opening of the heart.

Certainly loving-kindness started to come when I didn't have so much suffering anymore. I had become a bit freer, and had real moments of suffering dropping away. Maybe what made loving-kindness possible as an expression of a caring heart was sitting there and practicing without suffering as a reference point.

As the decades went along, I noticed that there was a shift in my experience of care, wanting to respond to the world with this certain kind of love that I felt. I started to become simpler and simpler, in a way that I didn't quite associate with compassion. Even though I could call it compassion, it just seemed so simple. Also I didn't quite associate this experience of care with loving-kindness, because that seemed more active, energized, and relational in some more complicated way.

There was something simpler that I associated with the sense of freedom, ease, and peace that had come with the practice. It was this idea that there was very simple, caring responsiveness – wanting to support and work for people. But it was clearly connected to a sense of peace, well-being, and ease. Ease seemed to be almost part and parcel of it. But as soon as I would refer to it as loving-kindness or compassion, it seemed to get more activated, conceptual, and involved. There's

nothing at all wrong with that, but I like the peacefulness. At times I struggled a little bit conceptually: “Is it okay to stay that simple? Shouldn’t I be more actively concerned or compassionate?” But this way just felt so right.

Then I started studying how compassion is talked about in the suttas. I started seeing a distinction in the suttas between compassion and *anukampā*. The big difference is that *anukampā* is the primary word the Buddha uses for actively caring, supporting, teaching, and being generous to other people. In the suttas, that’s described over and over as being done out of *anukampā*. It’s never described as coming out of *karuṇā*. *Karuṇā* has a very different meaning in the suttas, and it’s certainly different from what it has come to mean in translation.

Anukampā is the active word and emotion for caring for others. It’s not defined in the suttas, but over and over again when someone has *anukampā*, they’re concerned for the welfare of others. This idea of welfare for others is broader in nature than compassion. Compassion is certainly about the welfare of others, but it is specifically not wanting others to suffer, or wanting to alleviate suffering. Loving-kindness is more about letting people be happy. There can be a lot of compassion there too and concern for people’s suffering, but it’s more specific.

What I came to understand in the suttas is that *anukampā* is the broad feeling that encompasses all the *brahmavihāras* – compassion, loving-kindness, sympathetic joy, and equanimity. It's more like this is the broad term for being involved with care for the world.

That *anukampā* is the foundation for the other forms of love is not from the Buddha, but rather my own sense of it. I associate *anukampā* with something very deep and peaceful from which my care comes. I've said, "Oh, that's probably *anukampā*." Having a word for it has really made a difference for me. It brought me delight and joy. It freed up *anukampā* to be there as its own thing, and now I've come to translate it as 'care.'

The fundamental capacity to care can be very simple and uncomplicated – coming from a sense of ease, peace, and freedom. That can be the foundation. Then, as appropriate, it can get expressed in different ways.

So that's what I want to talk about this week – *anukampā*. I hope that offering my own story of how I came to it sets the context for what we'll do for the next four mornings.

Thank you for listening, and I look forward to tomorrow.