Compassion Practice

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This evening during this period we will explore the brahmavihara of compassion.

The quality of metta, that open-hearted connection with other beings as well as with ourselves, has the feeling of connection and non-constriction—at least to me, those are some of the qualities of metta. When that open heart, that unconstricted heart, meets suffering, the natural response is compassion. And so we can say that compassion is a flavor of metta—the flavor of that open heart when suffering is present, whether our own suffering or the suffering of others.

Some describe the feeling of compassion as the quivering of the heart in response to suffering. And that quivering, to me, points to one of the qualities of compassion: it is very active. It wants to do something. It has this momentum or direction of the heart to alleviate suffering. So it is not a passive state of heart and mind; it is quite active. That wish, that movement of the heart to alleviate suffering, is not tied up with aversion or fear or confusion or desire. It is the simple heart that wishes for beings to not suffer and to participate in supporting that direction.

The proximate cause, one of the conditions that supports the arising of compassion, is seeing the helpless state of someone in distress. Perhaps you can evoke this quality for yourself. Just imagine a child that you know, one perhaps closer to you or perhaps not, but one for whom you feel some affection. Envision yourself going into their room one evening and seeing them sobbing. You ask them why they are sobbing, and they respond that the spider in Charlotte's Web has just died in the book. From the perspective of wisdom, from a perspective of age and experience, you can understand both the conditioned nature of that distress and also feel the heartbreak of it—without aversion, without pity, and without a feeling of lashing out. That is the kind of quality of this heart of compassion.

It connects to suffering. It does not resist connecting to suffering. Our work in compassion practice is to explore that connection with suffering and to recognize that the practice of compassion involves watching the heart that has some struggle in that connection—the heart that says no, that insists it is not okay for that to be happening. We also watch the heart that disconnects a little bit, that feels a kind of pity instead of really connecting. Pity is one of the near enemies of compassion. It is in the neighborhood of compassion, but it has a separation to it. It is kind of an "oh, poor you" with a little bit of "doesn't involve me" in the background. So there is a separation there.

The other side, the far enemy of compassion, is cruelty—the wish to lash out, to harm. Perhaps in the context of seeing someone suffering, it is the wish to lash out and harm the person or situation we see as responsible for that suffering.

In the exploration of compassion we will feel both of these energies. This is how our practice unfolds. We do not expect to find our way to the perfect balance of wisdom and love immediately. We head in that direction by seeing where we get caught, opening to that, opening to the feeling of pity with some measure of compassion for ourselves, opening to the feeling of cruelty with some measure of compassion for ourselves.

Actually, I think of our mindfulness practice—at least a significant chunk of it—as, in a way, a cultivation of compassion through the avenue of wisdom and mindfulness. Because so much of what we meet in our mindfulness practice is our own suffering. We are exploring what it means to meet those hindrances, those fears and confusions and desires and aversions. What does it mean to meet those with a heart that is not pushing them away and not holding on? In this way we can see that wisdom and compassion are interwoven. The heart of wisdom, as it meets suffering, naturally responds with compassion. And so the practice of mindfulness strengthens this openness of heart, and the practice of compassion can strengthen this quality of wisdom—the capacity to explore meeting suffering without constriction.

We explore compassion from many directions on this retreat. Tonight we will explore a little bit of the formal compassion practice. It has a form similar to the metta practice, where we call up or imagine a being or beings, including ourselves at times, and offer the wish of compassion, much as we offer the wishes of metta.

The compassion practice typically uses a very simple wish. The traditional phrase, or the translation of the traditional phrase, is "May you be free from suffering"—*dukkha muchantu* in the Pali. May you be free from suffering. This is the phrase we express in our hearts as the intention, the wish, as we call to mind beings and consciously orient to the ways in which those beings may be struggling.

Since compassion is a response to meeting suffering, part of this practice is actively calling up ways in which we are suffering, ways in which our families and friends are suffering, and exploring meeting that suffering with an open heart, expressing the wish: May you be free from this suffering.

Sometimes, depending on the situation and circumstances, that wish can feel impossible, or there's a little bit of a rub in the mind about expressing it. If, for instance, you have a loved one who is at the end of a terminal illness, expressing the wish "May you be free from this suffering" somehow feels not quite congruent with where you are, or feels like you're wishing for something impossible.

Two reflections on this. One: the wish of compassion is the wish for freedom from suffering. It's the wish that we're connecting to, not the demand that the wish be fulfilled. Sometimes I find myself in a situation like that, and I wish, you know, may war spontaneously cease—not that I think it's going to happen, but if that were possible, that is my wish. Can we connect to the wish itself? That's one way to explore the wish of compassion.

Another avenue, one that in some ways brings in the wisdom side of the situation, is to change the phrase,

perhaps to: May you be at ease with these conditions. Because that brings in the understanding, the wisdom, that suffering is a response to conditions, and that perhaps an ease with conditions is in the realm of possibility for all of us.

Classically, with compassion practice, as with metta practice, we begin where it seems easiest. The easiest is said to be someone you know but perhaps not that well, who you are aware is suffering. That would be where classically we might begin the compassion practice.

But this evening I'd like to explore it a little differently and see what it might mean for us to wish compassion for ourselves—to be at ease with the conditions of our life, connecting to and recognizing how we may be struggling or suffering. Remember, with compassion we consciously connect to how we are suffering.

The way I'm going to suggest we do this is as follows. As you sit here, allow your body to be as at ease as is possible in this moment. Relax the physical body and let the attention rest in the area of the heart. Just see how it is right now for you. How are you in this moment? However it is, is fine. Perhaps have a sense of breathing through the heart center.

Allow yourself to be surrounded, in your imagination, with beings that you know love you, care for you. As you recognize for yourself a way in which you may be struggling, allow yourself to receive from your family, friends, and loved ones their wish for you to be free from suffering—their wish for you to be at ease with the conditions of your life.

Receiving that wish: May you be free from suffering. May you have ease with these conditions.

And if for you, in your situation, whatever it may be, it feels like your family and friends share this situation, you might explore expressing it as a collective: May we be free from this suffering. May we have ease with these conditions. Recognizing that this wish of the open heart, the wish of compassion, actually doesn't have any boundaries, and so expressing it for one, another can also receive it. May we be at ease with these conditions.

Take some time to explore that. If the heart gets constricted, see if there can be an allowing of the constriction also—that's a condition too. May I be at ease with this condition. May there be ease with this.

For myself, I find it helpful to keep the attention in the area of the heart, perhaps having the sense that each phrase is a wind through the heart.

And explore: how is the heart, having made that wish? Or having received the wishes of your friends and family?

The heart can stretch to all the conditions of the world. If sometimes it feels like the experience is overwhelming, connecting with the suffering, sometimes it can be helpful to, rather than trying to stay with the compassion phrases, explore mindfulness of the feelings. Use your skills, your tools for working

with the arising of challenging emotions. Or if it feels simpler for you, reconnecting with the practice of metta—remembering a dear friend, a benefactor, and connecting with the wish for well-being for your friend or benefactor.

And as it feels appropriate to you, staying connected or reconnecting with the compassion practice for yourself, for your friends and family. As though at this point you're sitting in the middle of a sphere of that wish for compassion. Envisioning that sphere of wishing freedom from suffering to expand to those sitting near you.

Recognizing that as human beings, we all share even just the simple struggles of being human. We all have loss. We all know separation from that which is loved. We all know aging, illness. We are all subject to death. This human body experiences dukkha. This human mind experiences dukkha. And so connecting with the humanity of those near you, allowing your wish for freedom from suffering or ease with the conditions to spread.

You can allow it to spread as far as it wants. You don't have to try to push it.

And then perhaps envisioning that all of those spheres join together. They may make one big sphere of compassion, all of us together. This room filled with the wish for freedom from suffering. And allowing that wish to spread outwards from this room to other beings nearby—your wish for compassion joined with others.

As we explore the possibility of expanding outwards to other beings beyond this room, it's fine to let yourself visualize or imagine specific beings that you may know. See if you can connect to their humanity and wish them freedom from suffering.

And remembering too that you are in the center of this field. As if we are wishing: may all of us be free from suffering. May we all be free from suffering.

And perhaps even envisioning the planet cloaked with this wish. And any beings beyond this planet—may all beings be free from suffering. May all beings know ease with their conditions. And remembering that you are one of all beings in that wish.

And now bringing the compassion practice back to yourself. May I be free from suffering. May I know ease with these conditions. And recognizing that is not a selfish wish, because this heart of compassion is a gift to the world.

May the benefits of our compassion practice be shared with all beings everywhere.

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