Practicing Compassion

Andrea Fella · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Andrea Fella · 52:01

Today in our Brahma Vihara practice we'll explore the practice of compassion.

The other day Sally pointed to the connection between the various Brahma Viharas. The basic quality of care, of connection, openheartedness, kindness, friendliness—that's the quality of metta. And it underlies the quality of compassion, the quality of mudita, of sympathetic joy. When that caring heart, that experience of being present, connected, caring, feeling the sense of kindness, when that caring heart is in the presence of suffering, the flavor of the heart will have the flavor of compassion. And when that caring heart is experiencing or in the presence of delight or joy or appreciation, the flavor of that heart becomes empathetic, sympathetic, appreciative joy.

The shift in the formal practice of compassion is that we begin not just exploring the connection with our benefactor, our dear friend, the neutral person. In the metta practice, we're exploring the connection and opening the heart to connect, to have that sense of caring. In the compassion practice, we actively turn towards suffering. We bring the suffering of the beings that we're connecting with into our minds and explore how the heart is in relationship to this being who is suffering.

This can be a challenging practice in some ways in that we're actively turning towards suffering. With some beings this arises naturally—one question the other day mentioned that with the neutral person, the experience of the pandemic and how much suffering there is, just as we open to that connection, the mind naturally turns towards the feeling of compassion.

That's the exploration we're connecting with. The feeling of compassion has that connected quality, but it also is not resisting that suffering is happening. It's open. The feeling is one of openness and not pulling back, not barricading oneself from the suffering.

The phrase sometimes used to describe the experience of compassion—I don't know where this came from, but the first person I heard using it is Jack Kornfield—is "the quivering of the heart." The heart is soft, not hard, and it has this quivering quality to it. It comes with this wish to act to alleviate the suffering. Compassion has a very active quality to it. It comes with the movement to want to help, to want to do something to alleviate the suffering.

This is a beautiful feeling, that movement of wishing to do something. It can be that we experience it as frustrating when we aren't in a position to be able to act, when we can't actively do something to alleviate the suffering of that being. And yet what I come back to sometimes is remembering that the act of offering this wish for compassion is a form of action.

Being in the field with somebody who is suffering, when you are not resisting that suffering, when you're able to be with it and hold it—there's a way that can be felt as a great support.

I got a taste of this at one point. I was sitting with a friend who, we were just out at a park doing some qigong, and then we sat down to have a conversation, and my friend had a memory come up of something from a long time ago that created some distress. I said, "Well, I'm happy to sit here with you." And he said, "I don't know what to say." I said, "You don't have to say anything. I can just sit here with you while you're feeling whatever you're feeling." And I was not at all resistant to what was going on. Actually, I wasn't practicing compassion per se. I was practicing awareness, just being with myself, being with my friend.

A couple days later, my friend came back to me and said, "What were you doing?" He asked me, "Were you sending metta?" I said, "Well, no, I was just being there. I wasn't actively sending metta." And he said, "It was amazing."

So even just our presence, even just that openhearted willingness to sit in the field when somebody is suffering, that can be an action. Don't underestimate the power of that. It's quite lovely, quite beautiful to be one who can witness suffering without resistance.

There can also be this movement to do. And when we have that possibility, action may follow very naturally. It's a beautiful thing actually to taste that motivation coming from such a wholesome quality—to taste the feeling of wanting to do something, to act, to engage in the world that's not coming from greed or aversion, but coming from wholesomeness. This really gives our mind an education and helps the belief, the view that usually comes embedded with greed and aversion, that says, "I'm the only reason you do anything." Those states of mind think they have a lock on action in our lives, that they're the reasons why we act.

But when we get the taste of compassion and the feeling of the motivation that comes with it, we viscerally learn that different place action can come from. Action can come from wisdom, from love, from care.

And it begins to de-condition that belief embedded in the midst of anger and greed.

In terms of the formal practice of compassion, for myself, the formal practices of the Brahma Viharas were initially quite challenging. The way in for me was really the mindfulness practice—beginning to simply be with experience and cultivating the allowing of everything, the happy things and the difficult things. That began to open the heart to being able to be with suffering, to being able to be with joy, without fighting anything, without holding on to anything.

The practice of mindfulness does cultivate these qualities. It's not really a separation from the Brahma Viharas; it's just a different way in. Are we more actively aiming the mind, inclining towards metta, compassion, sympathetic joy? Or are we working through the allowing quality of mindfulness?

The formal practice of compassion unfolds in a similar way that the metta practice does. We choose beings

from various categories and explore the possibility of having that connection—feeling that personal connection to a being and exploring the possibility of wishing them to be free from their suffering. In that connection, we are also orienting towards whatever way they might be suffering or struggling.

For a dear friend, we might know specifically what they're suffering about, a particular thing they're struggling with. And as we've said in the metta practice, we don't have to pick the most difficult thing. We don't need to choose the friend with the most challenging situation at the beginning of our compassion practice. We could pick somebody whose struggle is lighter, where there's just a little bit of difficulty.

When we shift to the neutral person, we don't have the specifics, but we can know—just as Sally said the other day with the neutral person in metta—that they have the human experience. They have friends and family, and they also have human losses. This person too has their ups and downs, those moments of struggle. With compassion practice, as we connect with a being, we actively remember the struggles that happen with that being. This is counterintuitive in some ways, but this is where compassion is sparked. Compassion is sparked in conjunction with meeting suffering. We cannot ignore suffering when exploring the active cultivation of compassion practice.

The place to begin, the easy being for this particular category, is someone who is suffering but who is not necessarily the closest person to you. Sometimes it can be someone who cannot help themselves—a child in distress, for instance, who doesn't know how to help themselves. There's a very natural movement of heart when we see a child in distress, a wanting to do something to help, to support them. That's the flavor of compassion, and that's a place to begin.

The first being we would begin with is someone who is in distress but whom we're not that close to, because when we get close to somebody, the reactivity can intensify. We start wherever it's easiest to cultivate the quality without having extra things to deal with. When we're working with somebody close to us, often fear comes up—fear about what happens to me if that problem doesn't get solved—or there's resistance about knowing their suffering. These are the additional things we have to work with ultimately in compassion practice.

As with the metta practice, where I used the analogy of the washing machine pulling what's not metta out into the wash, similarly with compassion practice, as we orient to meeting suffering, the compassion is the quality that is not resistant to suffering, that is able to fully open and connect to it. What we'll see as we do compassion practice is all the reasons why we don't want to do that. That's how the practice works—it pulls those things out.

It pulls out pity, that quality of "oh, poor you," that subtle aversion that isn't a true connecting. It can pull out cruelty on the other side, the sense of "well, they must deserve it if they're suffering this much." These are the resistances in the way of compassion.

So we proceed as we would with metta. We bring a being into our mind, and when we do this together,

we'll start with someone you know—but perhaps aren't that close to—who is having some kind of struggle in their lives. Then we could move to the dear friend, the benefactor, ourselves, the neutral person, the difficult person, and then to all beings.

We're not going through all the categories today. We'll have just this one day with compassion practice, so you're going to get the flavor of it. We'll work with the easy being, then ourselves, and then all beings.

The phrase we use is expressive of the wish of compassion: *May you be free of this suffering.* That's the basic phrase, the basic wish. Sometimes we might have some struggle with that phrase, especially if we're offering it to somebody with a terminal illness, where we know they only have so long left in their lives, and we may be thinking of "may you be free of the suffering" as "may the cancer be gone."

We know that this is not possible, that this is the course of their illness. And so sometimes we can resist that phrase. At times it can be useful perhaps to use an alternative form, something like "may you hold your suffering with ease," or "I care about you with your suffering." Those are some alternative phrases that you could play with.

But I also want to point out that the wish for compassion is actually the wish regardless of the reality of the situation, regardless of whether the cancer or the illness could go away. The wish of compassion is the wish that they have freedom from that suffering. I sometimes connect with that by almost asking myself the question: if I had a magic wand and I could have that illness disappear, would I do that? Yes. That's the wish we're connecting to.

That wish—that all beings be free of suffering—does kind of run up against the reality of impermanent, unreliable, uncontrollable phenomena. But it doesn't invalidate the wish. We think it might. We might think it would invalidate the wish, that I shouldn't have that wish given the unreliability and uncontrollability of the world, that the wish is not valid. But the wish is the deepest wish of "may it be gone." That is the wish of compassion.

And so holding both of these truths—the wish, the deep wish that that suffering be completely alleviated, and understanding the truth of impermanent, unreliable, uncontrollable—part of the compassion practice is holding these two together. Opening the heart to hold both at the same time.

So let's settle into a posture that feels comfortable and relaxed, taking some time to connect with the body and relaxing the body. Perhaps allowing the attention to gently coalesce around the area of the heart, taking in whatever the experience is there in this moment. Sometimes at this point I just have a sense of breathing through the heart, almost letting the breath be like a gentle massage in that area.

Bring your attention to connect with a being, someone you know who's having a little bit of struggle in their lives. Recognize the struggle. And as you explore that, connecting and recognizing the struggle, how is the heart? What happens to the heart as you connect to that struggle? Whatever happens—you may feel a quivering, you might feel that flavor of the quivering, you might feel a little pulling back—just allow that

to be what it is.

However your heart is, connect to the intention of wishing they have freedom from that suffering. May you be free from this suffering. And how is it to have made that wish? Really, in an embodied way, checking in. Expressing that wish. May you be free from this suffering. What happens, particularly in the area of your heart, as you make that wish?

There is just this one phrase with the compassion practice. You're welcome to shift the phrase if it's supportive for you: I care about your suffering. May you hold your suffering with ease.

Sometimes I find with the compassion practice, with a single phrase, it's a little bit easier to really just connect with the experience that happens with the wish. I'm not needing to rush to get through multiple phrases. Connect with the being and their struggle. Offer the wish. And connect with how it feels to make that wish. Taking your time.

And remember that what's opposite, or what's in the way of that wholehearted wish for them to be free from that suffering—it's natural for that to come out. Can that be just in the field? Keep exploring the wish.

If the reactivity gets overwhelming, you could let go of exploring compassion for a moment and bring the easiest being with metta into your heart. Give yourself some time with that quality of connecting and caring with an easy being. I'll give you some time to play with that for the next few minutes with this easy being, offering them the wish of freedom from their struggles.

Now I'd like to invite you to connect with yourself. Taking yourself in as you are in this moment. Opening your heart to just how you are right now.

Turning compassion towards ourselves, again, we need to orient to some area of struggle, of unease, of stress. Perhaps there could be something slight in the moment—a slight difficult body sensation, or perhaps there could be a little bit of resistance to the practice of compassion. So holding yourself with this, whatever the flavor of unease is, and expressing the wish for yourself: May I be free from this suffering. May this suffering release.

In practicing self-compassion, if there's any resistance that comes up, or holding, or pushing and pulling that happens around the practice itself, that can be included. This too. May there be ease with this. May there be release of this suffering. May this release. May there be freedom from this suffering.

And remembering to check in: How does it feel to make that wish?

If it feels too challenging to offer this wish for yourself, you're welcome to step back to where it's easier again—the first being that we explored. See if you can hold that wish for freedom from suffering for another being for a few minutes, then come back to exploring it for yourself again, opening the heart to this wholesome wish that we ourselves be free of suffering. It's okay to have that wish.

Now, shifting towards an opening of this wish for freedom from suffering, allowing the mind to expand to take in other beings. In a shift to all beings, sometimes I find it helpful to just open the mind and let whoever wants to come in and have that wish expressed to them. Let them show up. May you too be free from your suffering.

Allowing a relaxation of a focus on a particular being and a sense of expanding—first to beings you may know, beings in your household perhaps, or around you. May you be free of suffering. Maybe expanding a little further to beings in your neighborhood that you see on walks. It can be helpful to let these images of beings just pop in, and as images come in, just wishing them that: May you be free from suffering. Knowing that all beings have their struggles.

Relaxing as you open. Opening out to express the wish for all beings. You can use that phrase: May all beings be free from suffering, distress, unease.

And remembering that you are one of all beings. Perhaps you can reflect that you're a recipient of the wish from everyone else, as well as a recipient of your own wish for freedom from suffering. May all beings be free from distress and unease.

As you open out in this way, if particular beings appear, give them a little extra wish. You too.

You can get creative with the compassion practice, like we've been encouraging with the metta practice. It can be helpful sometimes to bring in some support of friends and benefactors to send compassion with you, or sometimes to be surrounded by dear ones who you know wish you well, and explore receiving compassion for yourself, opening to that possibility.

The experience of compassion has a soft quality to it. The heart does not feel hard or constricted at all. But it does have that quivering flavor to it.

When I first felt a real sense of self-compassion, it was a little bit odd. In that first experience, I was suffering a lot at that point. There was something going on that was really hard. Life was pretty challenging.

And as I was going out to try to do something to take care of a situation, there was this funny feeling. I was just being aware, but there was this very funny feeling in my body. And I thought, what's that? Sometimes something feels like it's wrong—something feels wrong. But I just decided, well, let's just see what it is. What is that feeling?

And actually, when I fully opened to it and fully allowed it, it came to me that what this is is self-compassion. The self-compassion acknowledges fully that something is hard. It takes that in, it's available to know that something is hard, and it feels that difficulty, it feels that suffering fully—but it's not resistant to it.

When I recognized that the quality I was feeling was self-compassion, tears sprang to my eyes. I had not

really felt that for myself before—both the feeling fully the suffering and the wish to be free of it at the same time. It felt very impersonal in a way.

I share this because I had all these ideas about what it might feel like when it finally appeared. And in my own practice, a lot of the qualities of the brahma viharas began appearing in the mindfulness practice first. Then I began to understand them and could start to cultivate them, start to get a sense of them. So that was my doorway, that was my way in.

Sometimes in practicing these teachings, in practicing the practice of compassion, really opening to what is here—rather than looking for something, looking for some particular experience or some particular flavor to be there—that exploration becomes the teaching itself. In my own experience, that exploration of "what is this feeling that feels like something is wrong?"—I wouldn't have turned to that saying, "Well, that's compassion." It was really just opening to "what is this?" Just the curiosity: what is this feeling? And it showed itself to me as compassion.

The encouragement to land with your experience, your embodied experience in the compassion practice, is an invitation to see how the heart is responding without any judgment whatsoever. And it will reveal these things that are in the way of compassion too.

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