Karuṇā: The Practice of Compassion as a Brahmavihāra

Bhante Bodhidhamma · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Bhante Bodhidhamma · 28:30

Homage to the Buddha, the blessed, noble and fully self-awakened one.

I've chosen to look at compassion. This is the last of our four Brahmavihāras, the dwelling place of the gods, of the highest gods, by which we mean these are the most beautiful mental states that we can achieve. We've done love, done joy, done equanimity. So compassion is the last one.

I'd like to start with my own little story here. I went along the hippie trail around about the 70s, and I ended up in Calcutta during the Indo-Pakistan War, when Bangladesh got its liberation from West Pakistan. Every day for three weeks, when we were expecting bombers to come over, I used to go to this Sikh restaurant. On the opposite side of the road, there was a woman with a huge goitre under her chin. I passed that woman every day. I never gave her a penny.

One day I came back and just as I turned around the corner, there was a little girl there who must have been well over seven, undernourished, looked very young. She was squatted down chewing a dried out black banana skin. And she had this sort of self-possession, really, to cover her sex, because all she had was this little dress. I walked straight past her.

I've got these two images from this callow youth, and they're very difficult for me to remember without a certain sense of pain. The reason the pain is there is not simply because of seeing this sort of suffering, which I just had never seen before. There were sick people everywhere, lepers, people with elephantiasis. They were there on the pavement. What pains is that I didn't respond. I didn't put a penny in that woman's hand. She sat there all day, completely emotionless with her hand out like that. And I didn't go out and buy a banana for this little girl. Here we have what happens to us, what you feel when you haven't responded from a compassionate heart, for whatever reason.

It all begins with that connection, which we call empathy and sometimes sympathy. I just want to make a little distinction there. This is an arbitrary distinction because these words are used in different ways. Sympathy these days has some suggestion of pity, but sympathy, to make this distinction, is when you have to imagine in a way what the person is suffering. I've never been starving. I've been hungry, but then I've always had food. I've never been in a state where I'm actually starving. All I can do is imagine what it must be like because I've felt hungry. There's a sort of connection there.

But when it comes to refugees, I've never been a refugee. I haven't a clue what it means to suddenly up

and out of your home, to find yourself on the road without much money, having to buy your way, sometimes being attacked. Who knows? So there's a point where there's sympathy, where you have to imagine what the person is going through. And there's empathy, where you've actually had an experience which connects you. That's a little distinction I want to make so that we're clear when we're sympathizing and when we're actually empathizing. Sometimes we think we're empathizing when actually we're imagining. If it all leads to the same place, which is a compassionate act, a compassionate word, there's not really a problem, but I thought I'd hold on to that little definition just for clarity's sake.

The Buddha himself uses a word, anukampā. The prefix anu is a suggestion of movement, movement towards. And kampā actually means trembling. So he says, whatever a teacher can do for his students out of anukampā, out of this connection with his students, I have done for you. This anukampā is that point where you have that sense in your own heart of the suffering of the other. It's that connection, whether it's imaginative sympathy or empathic connection.

The other word we use is karuṇā, which actually has its root in doing. The word in Sanskrit, kṛ, means doing, but it was also used for what was holy; it was part of the rituals of the Vedas. So you get this word karuṇā, which is actually the action. You might call it the sacrifice or the sacrament.

When we have responded to somebody's suffering, no matter what it is, from the smallest to the most awful, there are two modes. One is passive and one is active. In the passive mode, it's often good enough just to be with the person, not even to say anything.

An obvious case would be when the person is either extremely ill and is just there in bed—all you can do is actually accompany them. And of course, when somebody is dying. But I think what we come across when we have that sort of situation is our sense of powerlessness. And that's very difficult for us because we want to do something. Yet if we are sensitive enough to the situation and to the person—and you don't have to ask them, for heaven's sake—often it's good enough just to be with them, just to accompany them.

When it comes to compassionate action, when you're actually going to do something, our tendency is to try and overdo it, to slip into the error of the do-gooder. We've all got it in us—when we want to do the good we want to do for your benefit, whether you want it or not. This, of course, really gets up people's noses. So it's a good idea to ask them what they want. Even if your suggestion is rejected, and even if you know that your suggestion would actually be the better thing to do, we've got to pull back a bit and let the person who's suffering have the last say. Often when we over-help like that, perhaps it's coming from some sort of inner feeling of wanting to be esteemed, to be loved—all the usual rubbish that we suffer from.

It's often easier to say what a virtue is by saying what it isn't. So we know it's not do-gooding. These are reactions that we have when we come across suffering. In an extreme case, where the person is really suffering, you've got to have that sort of sense of courage to be with them. It's very difficult if the person is in a lot of pain, especially when they're dying. I read a book about this poor woman who was screaming

every time—screaming towards the end of her life. Eventually the doctor decided to sedate her, obviously with the permission of the family. It often takes a bit of courage to be with somebody who's in real pain or suffering.

There are certain situations—perhaps a work situation, or somebody you're looking after—where you have reactions of disgust. They're sick, they're suffering from diarrhea, all the impurities of the body manifest. Somehow you have to recognize that disgust and yet still come from the heart of compassion.

We can often be caught unawares. Somebody has asked us to do something and we feel messed up. I had my day carefully planned and now they want me to do this and that—especially within a family—and you can feel yourself being angry about that. Again, it's being aware of these negative emotions that come up, these negative mental states, and still focusing on what you can do for the person.

Sometimes a person hurts themselves in an accident and you might find yourself wanting to blame them—so stupid, how could you do that? I remember I once had an assistant here who put a ladder up against the gutter on the decking and the ladder slipped and he just fell flat onto his face almost. Luckily there was nothing but a bit of a bruise. But I could hear myself saying, "Well, that was stupid, wasn't it?" I didn't say it though. No, I didn't say it. I went up and made sure that he was okay. But you've got to be careful.

If it's somebody close to you, you can feel quite overcome by grief. That can have an immobilizing effect. Again, it's just resting with that and trying to come above it, to connect with the person. That way we can keep these emotional states at bay. You might have to deal with them afterwards, but not while you're in the situation with them.

You can understand things like panic—when a child hurts itself and the parents just panic. Obviously that doesn't help the child. But hopefully we bring that mindfulness, that connection with our own hearts and that reaction, and then rise above it and respond.

There's pity. That's another one, which isn't particularly nice. It comes from a superior position, often because we're trying to guard ourselves against actually connecting with what's happening. "Oh, poor thing. I feel so sorry for you. I know how you're feeling." Often we find that this is because we're a bit afraid of facing our own possible sickness and eventual death. There can be a sort of sense of relief—when somebody has a serious illness, as we have in our family, you can first of all feel the fear. If it's in the family, I might get it.

And then comes a sense of relief—oh, it's not me, you see. So we have to understand that this is just basically coming from this false view of self, and not get all guilty about it. It's simply a reaction. But again, it's this ability to rise above it that matters.

There's what's now known as empathy bias—I've picked this up from various things I've read. If a nurse, for instance, is on a ward but has a particular connection with one of the patients, they might find

themselves not really heeding someone calling from the other side of the ward because they don't particularly like them. So there's always that going on.

Then there's codependency. This is a bit of a problem because if a person is getting a lot of self-esteem from helping, it's very difficult for them to stop. And so often they're feeding the person who's actually suffering so that they don't have to stop doing good. I knew a mother whose son was a drug addict, and she was always helping him—paying for his rent when he didn't have it, buying food for him. I said to her, "Well, what you're doing is just feeding his habit financially." She said, "Yes, but I'm his mother." She couldn't get over that feeling of guilt if she stopped helping her son. But it would have been the best thing to do.

I think you have to be careful when you are dealing with a long situation of looking after somebody. That's where your emotional boundaries come in—knowing when you're being taken advantage of, even perhaps abused. So that's something else to be careful about.

Sometimes we find ourselves becoming very involved in compassionate charity. I'm thinking of people who get very much involved with refugees, completely on the side of the refugees, and they can lack recognition of what it's doing to them. You get that burnout and then resentment—what they call compassion fatigue. I think that's easy to fall into because there's so much bad news. Everywhere you go, there's just bad news, and you can feel your heart going out to various situations and various people. But in the end, you've got to recognize that enough's enough. Stop feeding all the bad news and try to find some good news.

Sometimes overemphasizing that sort of helping and becoming too attached to somebody might blind us to the fact that we're not allowing them to reflect upon their own situation and take a moral stance about themselves. I'm thinking of something like ADHD—that hyperactive, impulsive behavior. Somebody might, for instance, get into gambling because of it, and we're being over-compassionate rather than addressing the real issue. The problem with medicalizing something is that the person then drops their moral responsibility towards themselves—"Oh well, I have ADHD," or "I'm on such-and-such medication." So it's also a case of recognizing that we might be making excuses for them, therefore avoiding difficult conversations. All these things are to be wary of.

It's not as though we have to go around with a great big list. Every time we help somebody, we don't need to have our checklist out just in case we're doing something wrong. It's more about recognizing that when we are being compassionate, there's probably some undertone going on, coming from this wrong sense of ego, this wrong sense of self.

But there are, of course, great virtues to be had from compassion. One of them is patience, which we've already dealt with. One of the telltale signs of true compassion, I think, is that you're actually deeply happy about it. This is not the happiness of joy or the happiness of buying an ice cream. This is a sense of inner worthiness, an inner sense that you're doing the right thing. It's a deeper sense of joy, which I think

you've all experienced at some point when you've helped people. So that's the sign of compassion—we're not supposed to be suffering. When you're being compassionate, you're not supposed to be suffering. That would be ridiculous.

In fact, this confusion came up when I was at a particular meditation center where lay people had been discussing and eventually came to the conclusion that the Buddha could not have been compassionate because he'd have been suffering. How ridiculous that is! So we have to be careful there.

I'll just mention it briefly because it's a whole subject on its own, but the Tibetan practice of tonglen is all about making that connection with others. Pema Chödrön has a very good introductory meditation on YouTube.

This will appear eventually as a tip—the next one, actually, the one for October. And there you'll be able to pick up these connections.

But I do want to mention this one point where the Buddha came across a monk who was actually suffering from dysentery. He was completely covered in his own filth. When the Buddha saw the sick monk and asked him who was attending to him, the monk replied, "Nobody." The Buddha asked why, and the monk said, "Well, I don't attend to other monks, so the monks don't attend to me."

So the Buddha and Ananda looked after this monk themselves. Then he gathered the monks together and said to them, "Look, you have no mother, you have no father who might tend to you. If you don't tend to one another, then who will tend to you? Whoever would tend to me should tend to the sick."

There he's getting them to make a connection—to the Buddha, to himself. Whoever is attending to somebody who's sick, you are attending to a Buddha. Now, you might not take that literally as the Buddha himself, but to the Buddha within—to that within us which is transcendent. He then goes on and gives a whole list of people who should be looking after the sick. So he was very much involved in that.

What I want to do now is just do a bit of compassion practice. These are the blessings that we do here in the morning puja. The idea is that as we go through this list, we bring up a phrase which expresses our compassion. The one that's normally used is: "May your sufferings lessen, may all your sufferings come to an end." This comes from the Visuddhimagga, the compendium of Buddhism written by Buddhaghosa in the Middle Ages. Or you can make up some other phrase that makes sense to you. But just for this, it might be good to stay with this one. Then as I go through the list, just keep repeating that. After that, we'll do the six directions, and then we'll slip into the meditation. You can continue doing the compassion practice or return to vipassana.

So if we just settle for a moment.

We can bring to mind anyone we know who's having a hard time. At this moment, there are people who are suffering from severe physical or mental disease. There are people in the process of dying, and those

who have died and left grieving family, relatives, and friends. There are people going hungry, homeless, and destitute. There are those struggling with personal and interpersonal difficulties. There are all the victims of prejudices, all those caught up in wars and repressive regimes, and those being tortured. There are all the criminals, oppressors, and all who willingly do harm. There are all those suffering from natural disasters and climate crisis, all sentient beings who have been cruelly treated and unnecessarily slaughtered, and all who find life meaningless.

Now we can continue with the ten directions. To all beings in front of us who are suffering. All beings behind us. All beings to our left. All beings to our right. All beings below us.

All beings above us.

And to all beings in all directions.

Feel free to continue this practice or simply sit in vipassana.

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