Afternoon Brahmavihāra Practice - Compassion

Guy Armstrong · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Guy Armstrong · 46:06

For the past two weeks, we've been developing the quality of loving kindness as the foundation for all the Brahmavihāras. In today's guided meditation, we're going to open into the second Brahmavihāra, which is compassion.

Sometimes you might make a lot of the distinction between metta and compassion, but they're very closely related. If you read Tibetan Buddhists, Mahāyāna Buddhists in general, they always talk about compassion and give it a very high place in their whole system. If you listen to Theravādins, we more talk about metta. So we could have a little inter-tradition conflict here. Which is more important? Metta or compassion? Love or compassion? Either one works.

But making this turn at this point, I think you'll get a sense of the beautiful and elegant architecture of the Brahmavihāras in the tradition in which we hold them, Theravāda. Metta is the foundation. And metta, as you all know, is the open heart that cares about any individual, any sentient being. We can wish for their welfare, for their happiness, for their safety, and it can be applied universally. Human realm, all other realms—all beings have the same wish.

So we take this open heart that wants the welfare of others and then in compassion, we turn it on to suffering. When the open heart of metta is turned on to suffering, the quality or the flavor that comes through is compassion. It's no different than that. The open heart of metta, looking upon suffering, moves into compassion. It's classically described as the quivering of the heart in response to suffering.

Just to continue the architecture one more turn, what happens when the open heart looks on happiness? You meet someone with a lot of happiness in their life. What flavor does that evoke? That's appreciative joy or mudita, sympathetic joy. Our heart resonates in happiness with their happiness.

So metta opens the heart. When it looks on suffering, compassion emerges. When it looks on happiness, appreciative joy emerges. And these are all held in balance. All three of these are held in balance by the fourth of the Brahmavihāras, which is equanimity. If there is not equanimity, the first three Brahmavihāras will tip into their near enemy if we're lucky or their far enemy if we're not lucky. Equanimity is what allows the Brahmavihāras to be held in a mind with strength and stay wholesome because it's very easy to fall into either the near or the far enemy.

So compassion is the response of the heart to suffering. That means that in order to cultivate the flavor, the authentic flavor of compassion, we have to come into contact with some form of suffering, different forms of suffering.

In the metta practice, we were encouraged to look on what's beautiful or lovable in someone. In the compassion practice, we're going to take different individuals and we're going to let ourselves feel their suffering. We're going to deliberately call to mind things in their life that are difficult. This could be physical difficulties, could be emotional difficulties, difficulties of finding one's way in the world, difficulties in relationship. Different things will come to your mind.

So this practice is sometimes sobering. It's not like metta where we can get—I'm sure you felt this at times—just very delightfully warm and loving and uplifted and cheered often by thinking of people's potential for happiness. That's a beautiful quality in metta and very uplifting. But in compassion, we're going to be looking moment after moment at the difficulties in life ourselves. And this is not to develop a gloomy view. It's to open our heart to the truth, the first noble truth, the second noble truth, as it manifests through our life and through the life of every sentient being.

In compassion, just like in metta, there's a very beautiful universal quality that happens when we realize that I have suffering, you have suffering, every sentient being that we turn to has some degree of suffering in life. So we let that really come in in the compassion practice. If we can hold it with equanimity, it really softens our heart, tenderizes us to what life holds for everyone. Every single being faces these difficulties.

The near enemy of compassion has two kind of flavors. Sometimes it's called pity. Pity is this sense of looking down on someone who is suffering. In that looking down, there's a holding ourselves above. So when compassion gets mixed with conceit or the comparing mind, and we hold ourselves as better than the person who's suffering, what comes through is looking down on them or pity. This is one distortion. The other one is maybe more common.

And that is, it's said the near enemy is grief. This doesn't mean the grief of loss, because that will happen naturally when the heart is open. If someone dies or a relationship ends, there will be grief. It's more grief for the world. Or you could say being overwhelmed by the amount of suffering we see in ourselves, in someone else, or in the world. The sense of being overwhelmed by the magnitude of suffering—grief in that sense. It's close to despair.

When we feel that the suffering in the world is too much for us to bear—either our own, another's, or the whole range of suffering—it's too much to bear. That's also the near enemy of compassion. We're in touch with it, but it's not held in the balance of equanimity, and so the mind tips into an unwholesome state.

And why is it unwholesome? Because if we're feeling overcome by the magnitude of the suffering, we're not in a position to help. We want compassion to be able to make our heart inspired to help. Compassion has an active component. It's not just enough to look on the suffering from a distance and let our heart get refined. In compassion there's an urge, there's a wanting to solve the pain, wanting to address the pain that we feel. So if this quality of grief is there—despair—we don't feel we have the capability to help, and that doesn't allow compassion to function. We want to keep that balance where we can feel the pain but not be overcome by it. That's the quality of compassion.

The far enemy of compassion is cruelty—when we see suffering and we enjoy it. That can happen sometimes with ex-relationship partners, for example, but we don't necessarily go there right away. So we want to be on the lookout for the true feeling of compassion. We want to be aware of these enemies, the near enemies or the far enemy of compassion, and just recognize them when they come also.

The compassion practice develops just like the metta. We bring individuals to mind and we say a phrase. In this case, in compassion, we only use one phrase—not so many to remember. If you remember at the beginning of your metta practice, this retreat or a long time ago, how long it took to memorize those four phrases, that was quite a challenge to have them flow easily. So compassion is even simpler. There's just one phrase.

The classical phrase, and I recommend you try it, is "May you be free from your suffering." Or "May I be free from my suffering." Or "May all beings be free from their suffering." That's a classical phrase. It's a good phrase. It's worked for centuries, and I recommend it to you. It has the essence of the feeling.

But some of us find that phrase brings in a little attitude of "get rid of." "May you be free from your suffering" easily goes into "I hope you can get rid of that suffering," and sometimes that brings in an aversive reaction, a suggestion of aversion. So it doesn't work as well for everyone, and it's not the phrase that I use.

The phrase I use is "May you hold your pain and sorrow with compassion." Or if you like, substitute something more specific for pain and sorrow: "May you hold your illness with compassion. May you hold your fear with compassion. May you hold your grief with compassion." Just tailor it a little if you want to the person, because it might evoke more feeling. But the general sense is pain and sorrow, and every sentient being has some. "May you hold your pain and sorrow with compassion."

Another one that some people like is "I care about your suffering."

Or I care about your pain and sorrow. That's also a very direct way to say it. Works really well for some people.

So these are the three I'll suggest. You can play with all of them. You might want to try to pick one over the course of this meditation today, the one that resonates most for you, that gets you best aligned with that feeling of compassion.

But notice in all of them, we're pointing to the person's difficulty. So this is integral to the practice. We want to come face to face with the suffering of life as it's manifesting through the individual we're with. I'll repeat the phrases as we get into the meditation so that you don't have to write them down now.

With the Brahmaviharas, we tend to start the meditation where it's easiest. So with loving kindness, we started with ourselves because we basically care most about ourselves. With compassion, we're going to bring in a new individual, a new category. It's a person we're going to call the suffering person.

So I'll invite you early in the meditation to pick someone in your circle of acquaintances who's going through a hard time right now, so that their difficulties will be really apparent to you. And again, it's helpful if the relationship isn't too complicated so that their difficulties aren't too tied to your difficulties. Like a business partner and your enterprise is going under or something like that. So that you can have the equanimity to look on their suffering and keep a sense of balance.

For today, we'll bring in the suffering person to start, and then we'll also bring in ourselves. So as you work with yourself, again, play with the phrase. You could use a little different phrase for yourself. You could say, "May I be free from my suffering?" But when you get to yourself, you may want to say, "May I hold my suffering with compassion," or "May I hold my pain with compassion?" Feel free to experiment a little bit with the exact phrase that you use.

So let's begin the compassion meditation. The way it will unfold over these few days—we'll do it over the next four days—is that we'll bring in the same categories that we brought in for metta with the addition of the suffering person. One new category, and then the rest will be the same.

Please sit comfortably, being relaxed in your body, being present just here and now. And to feel just a little bit of the mood of compassion, just taking a reflection that every being that takes birth faces some pain and sorrow. Either physical pain, emotional pain, facing loss, facing illness, old age, and death.

Wherever we look around the planet, here in the West or in the East, in the North or in the South, we can find this quality of suffering everywhere we turn. And everywhere we look, we can have that wish: may their pain be alleviated. May they be free from that form of suffering. May they be free from all suffering.

So we can begin with our expansive, boundless connection to life and wishing: may all beings that live be free from suffering. And may they hold their pain and sorrow with compassion.

And then bringing to mind someone you know who's currently going through a hard time. It could be in big ways—facing financial difficulties or loss of their home or loss of a job, relationship difficulties, aging parents, children in trouble, unhappy time in life, facing illness, facing old age, possibly dying. So take a few moments and see in your circle who you might like to bring in as the suffering person. Please take a moment and select that person.

And once you pick them, bring them into the moment with you so that you can really see them, feel them, hear them as though they're alive right now with you. And as you connect with them, remember your connection, any degree of warmth and friendship you've had with the person, times you've shared. Remember their potential for happiness, for well-being. So there's a foundation of loving kindness as you look on them.

But now they're going through some difficulties. And so let yourself bring into your mind the problems they're facing. You might imagine them in their home or the situation where they're feeling the suffering of it. Whatever the source of the difficulty, you can feel its impact on them, the weight of it that they carry,

recognizing that this is something that could happen to any of us.

And so as you hold them, connect with their difficulty, and send them your wish with a compassion phrase: May you be free from your suffering.

Or may you hold your pain and sorrow with compassion. Or I care about your pain and sorrow. Try these different compassion phrases. See what connects for you and just hold them in your heart and repeat this phrase to them.

Let there be a little space between the phrases so that you can just drop back into your heart center and feel their situation again. So that compassion like metta is felt through the body. Don't try to make any particular feeling come. Just connect with the person and say the phrase and then notice how you're feeling. And let the practice evoke whatever mood is going to fit.

If you find some difficulty in connecting with the person you've chosen, then you might try another being. Remember that you could try an adult, a child, an animal, a pet. Remember that compassion is a brahmavihara, a divine abiding and not a state of suffering. If you find yourself suffering with a person, you might just imagine how Kuan Yin might see them. How would the bodhisattva of compassion be able to look upon this being and see with equanimity?

And now bringing ourselves in for the practice of compassion. Coming into this moment, into your body again, feeling yourself as you sit here and now. Coming into your heart center and letting that be a connection to who you are. So in touch with yourself, some of your good qualities and your potential for happiness, your sincere wish for happiness. So that we begin by holding ourselves with the open-hearted attitude of loving kindness.

And then letting our attention bring to view things that are not going so easily in our life right now. Could be little things, could be big things. Could be we don't like tempeh for lunch. Could be we don't like the cold air coming in from the north today. Could be bigger difficulties in our meditation, hindrances or physical pain. Could be difficulties in our life outside—relationships or money or work, family. Could be our illness, our aging.

And as we recall the difficulties we're having, remembering that any of us could be having these. Our suffering doesn't mean that we've done it wrong or that we're an unworthy person. These are universal qualities. So connecting with what's difficult in our life and then embracing that with this wish of compassion. May I be free from my pain and sorrow. Or may I hold the suffering with compassion? Or I care about my suffering. Trying the different phrases with yourself, seeing which one best expresses what you want for yourself. And then as you stay in touch with your being, with your nature, aware of the difficulties, just continuing to repeat the compassion phrase for yourself.

Suffering can make us feel separate and isolated, but if we can hold it with compassion, it can make us feel united, joined and connected in the suffering that all sentient life experiences.

If you start to feel a little overwhelmed by the difficulties that you're facing, getting into that near enemy territory of grief, then change the focus a little. You could go back to your suffering person or you go back to something more uplifting like loving kindness for your benefactor. So check the development of the meditation and if it's in an area that feels a little uncomfortable, it feels a little too much, find another place in the brahmaviharas, probably in loving kindness, that can restore the balance of mind, can bring in some brightness and uplift. And then once you feel balanced again, you can continue the compassion for self.

And in the last minute of the meditation, extending this sense of compassion, of care out in a boundless way to all beings everywhere. Recognizing that all beings who take birth want to be happy and don't want to suffer. But every being has some degree of suffering in their life—having that sincere wish that all beings everywhere may be free from their suffering, that they hold their pain and sorrow with compassion. May all beings be free.

So I think this meditation of compassion for self is really, really useful as you walk the path. One person, one teacher said it's like finding gold on the path, because it really can give us a different way to relate to the pain that we run into. You know, mindfulness can hold things to a certain extent, but then mindfulness reaches a point maybe where it's not shifting things very much. And we can feel stuck, even with a lot of mindfulness.

Bringing in compassion for self at that point, whether it's with emotion or physical pain, gives us a new relationship to it. It's a new way to hold it. It doesn't deny it. Like metta can sometimes seem too idealistic. You know, we're really struggling and we go, may I be happy? That's like fantasy land. But this meditation touches, acknowledges the pain that's there and says, you can hold this with compassion. That's a possibility for you. And so it can bring in a real level of peacefulness.

in our relationship to it, where we're not having to have it go away, but we can hold it with a different spirit.

So I really encourage you to try this during these guided meditations—develop the compassion meditation—but also try it if you get into a hard place in your life or your practice outside of these guided meditations. It's really a tremendous tool.

The beauty of this practice is that it meets us exactly where we are. It doesn't ask us to pretend everything is fine or to bypass our genuine struggles. Instead, it offers us a way to be present with our difficulties while wrapped in the warmth of our own compassionate heart. This shift in how we relate to our pain can be profoundly healing and transformative.

When we learn to hold our suffering with compassion rather than resistance, we discover that we have more capacity than we imagined. We find that we can be present with life's challenges without being overwhelmed by them. This is the gift of compassion practice—it doesn't eliminate our difficulties, but it

changes our entire relationship to them, offering us a refuge of kindness even in the midst of struggle.

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