Morning Instructions: The Practice of Compassion

Guy Armstrong · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Guy Armstrong · 47:56

For today and tomorrow as you continue your meditation throughout the day, we suggest that you keep working with the three categories of individuals you've been working with so far: self, benefactor, and a good friend. We want to take advantage of the instruction times today and tomorrow to introduce two practices that are part of the brahma viharas and serve as helpful tools during any period of brahma vihara practice. These are the practices for compassion, which we'll introduce today, and for sympathetic joy, which we'll introduce tomorrow.

We're not suggesting that you move your entire practice to compassion or sympathetic joy. Rather, we want to give instruction on how to do these practices so that you can bring them in when they really fit. Sometimes they're very helpful. In a normal metta retreat of a week, we would introduce these in the afternoons. Since we're not having afternoon instruction sessions, we're introducing them today and tomorrow.

This morning we'll be introducing the practice of compassion. This is obviously so relevant to our meditation practice and our life in the world, because once we start to wake up to the way things are, what we see around us and what we see inside us is suffering. It's everywhere. It's part of the human condition and the foundation for the Four Noble Truths. We start to see the truth of suffering everywhere we look. We begin to understand more deeply the root cause of suffering—craving. We understand there is the potential for the end of suffering and the end of craving, and we walk the path toward that.

Nonetheless, many people in the world are not walking the path to the end of suffering. The suffering is visible, and in some cases not easy to remedy. So how does our heart meet that truth? How do we relate to all the unfixable suffering that we encounter in our life in the world?

As you go through the meditations on your benefactor and friend and also yourself, you'll come across areas of suffering. There will be ways that you review your own life where you realize you didn't act so skillfully, and you may have regret, remorse, or judgment. You'll come upon situations in your current life that are difficult and don't admit of easy resolution. You'll find conditions here as you're meditating on retreat—difficult emotions or bodily pain that are an immediate part of your experience and not easy to alleviate. Then metta can seem like a wishful fantasy when the truth is the immediacy of suffering in this moment.

In all these situations—the width of suffering in the world, the experience of suffering directly in our own

life—how can we meet that wisely with the brahma viharas? This is the role of the brahma vihara of compassion. Compassion is the wise response to the encounter with suffering, and it's not itself a state of suffering. Compassion is a beautiful state.

If you look at the statues of the Buddha, or even more to the point, Kuan Yin, who is the bodhisattva of compassion, she's not depressed. There's this beautiful balance of equanimity in the face of all the cries of sorrow and joy that she's witnessing. The response of compassion to suffering is a wise response that is not itself suffering. It finds a way to hold the suffering, whether of oneself or of the world, in balance.

In fact, in order to develop compassion, we need to meet an instance of suffering. Compassion is not some ideal state that we manufacture out of thin air. The proximate cause for the arising of compassion is the encounter with suffering. It may be our own; it may be another's. But we need to touch the suffering directly for compassion to be able to arise.

In the meditation on compassion, we always say that we start where it's easy. We're going to start with someone in your field of acquaintance who's undergoing some suffering. This is a person we'll call, for the purposes of this meditation, the suffering person.

As you think about selecting a suffering person for this meditation, don't pick someone with the most suffering you can imagine. Pick someone with a suffering that feels manageable for you. It may not feel manageable for them, but it should feel manageable for you. This means either it's someone for whom the suffering is manageable for themselves, or it's someone who's at a little more distance so that their suffering doesn't overwhelm you.

You'll start to see that the potential miss—the near enemy—with compassion is being overwhelmed with the grief of another, the grief of the world, the grief of ourselves. As we're learning a compassionate response, we don't want to call up a person that puts us immediately into more burden than we can carry. So pick someone whose suffering feels manageable for you but is apparent. This is the person we'll begin the meditation with.

As you come into this period of meditation, first sit comfortably, finding your own balance of body and mind. Remember that the wide intention of the brahma viharas is for all beings to be well, happy, and peaceful. May all beings be well, happy, and peaceful. Establish that wide view first with a short reflection on metta meditation for yourself.

Included in all beings is yourself. We begin with the simple wishes for our own welfare.

May I be safe and protected from harm. May I be happy. May I be healthy. May I live with ease.

And now taking a few moments to select and call to mind someone in your circle of acquaintances who's going through a difficult time. It could be someone you're close to, a loved one, someone a little more distant, a colleague at work, someone in the sangha whom you know.

And as you choose this person and bring them into the moment with you, feel their presence as clearly as you can. It may help to see an image of them. Or you might like to say their name. And as you connect with them, remember if you can what you've liked about them. Any of their good qualities, pleasant interactions that you've had, ways you may have seen their kindness. So that you approach this person from a foundation of goodwill and appreciation.

And as you connect with them, now bring to mind the ways in which they're experiencing some present difficulties. It could be in the area of their health, their close relationships, partners, parents, with children. It could be in their life circumstances. Difficulties in housing or finances or livelihood. Could be conflicts with family or friends. And as you touch into the difficulties that your person is experiencing, tune in also to how it's affecting their heart, how the difficulties are landing for them emotionally.

And as you connect with them from a place of appreciation, of goodwill, know that you really want for them not to have to go through the suffering they're going through. You really wish for them relief from this suffering. This wish that they be relieved of their suffering is the essence of compassion.

So we express this wish to the person with a phrase something like this. Classically, the phrase is, "May you be free from your suffering." In the formal compassion practice, we usually just take one phrase instead of the four of metta. See if there's one phrase that expresses what you want for this person. It might be, "May you be free from your suffering." It could be, "I care about your suffering." It could be, "I'm with you in your suffering." Or something like, "May you hold your pain or sorrow with compassion."

Try out a few of these phrases and see the one that resonates for you. May you be free from your suffering. I care about your suffering. I'm with you in your suffering. May you hold your pain and sorrow with compassion.

And so staying connected with this person and repeating for them your compassion phrase. Every so often putting the attention in the heart center, making it embodied and feeling whatever you feel there. Notice any emotion that comes as you connect with your suffering person. If you like, you can refer directly to the kind of difficulty they're experiencing instead of using the word suffering or pain or sorrow. You could say something like, "May you be free from this illness. May you be free from your fear. May you hold your grieving with compassion." If there's a word that speaks more directly to what they're feeling, you can make that part of the phrase.

If you feel yourself becoming too weighed down by this person's difficulty, then you can let them go for a few moments, return to loving-kindness for yourself or a benefactor. And then when you feel a little refreshed, you can come back in again in relation with the suffering person and try again the phrase for compassion.

Now letting go of this person you've brought in and their difficulties. Come back into the moment in an open and spacious way. Notice any feeling that's there after this meditation. See if it has that quality of

caring in response to the difficulty. See if that has any sense of the difficulty being too much for you to open to, tipping into some form of too much grief. Notice any other emotions that may have come with the meditation. Just making space for those.

Now we'll turn the practice of compassion toward ourselves.

So once again, connecting with yourself. This could be as you sit here and now—familiar body experience, familiar mood. Remember to look on yourself with friendly eyes, with appreciation, with goodwill.

As you connect with yourself, bring to mind any areas of your own life that are currently difficult. These might be in the inner world—emotions, balance. They could be connected with your health, welfare on the physical level. They could be in relationships with partners, family, parents, children, friends. They could be outward circumstances of safety, finance, home.

As you connect with the things that are difficult for you presently, take a moment to feel the impact of those things. They land as heart experiences. So become aware of the hurt, the hardship, the pain of these difficulties as they impact you, as you feel them.

In touch with that level of pain, begin to direct the phrase for compassion to yourself: "May I be free from my suffering," or "I care about my pain and sorrow," or "May I hold this pain with compassion." Just repeat the phrase for yourself, staying in touch with what's difficult for you.

Feel that you can kind of wrap your compassion around the experience of the difficulty, embracing it with comforting care, holding it gently. If it's helpful, use a word in the phrase that points directly to what you're feeling. It could be grief, worry, injury, fear, loss: "I hold this [grief, worry, fear] with compassion."

If it seems too much, take a break from the compassion, returning to metta for a bit. Perhaps bring in a benefactor or friend who you feel comfortable with, who you feel might even uplift you, reconnecting to them with metta.

Then, letting go of the focus on yourself, let the mind come back into balance and bring in either your benefactor or good friend. Connect with them, feeling the appreciation and goodwill you have for them. Then notice any areas that may be difficult in their life. If not too much suffering is apparent, just remember the small ups and downs that everyone experiences day by day—changing circumstances, pleasure and pain. Direct your thoughts of compassion to your benefactor or friend with this same phrase: "May you be free from your suffering. May you hold your pain and sorrow with compassion."

This can be a very useful form of brahmaviharas practice combined with the practice of loving-kindness. You may find as you're directing thoughts of metta to yourself or to one of your people, or especially when we get to all beings, that your metta is touching on areas of real difficulty in their life. Your recollections of them are touching on areas of real difficulty. As you're saying the metta phrases, what may be coming through for you is not so much safety, happiness, health, and well-being, but their opposites. You may feel

the person's lack of happiness or lack of safety or lack of health. Then the flavor that comes through may be more of compassion than of pure well-wishing.

If that happens, it's very helpful to turn directly to the compassion phrase. Make a direct perception of their difficulty, of their suffering. Within the brahmaviharas, you respond to it directly: "Oh, may you be free from that difficulty. May you be free from that pain and sorrow."

This is very helpful to do for others. It's especially helpful when you find yourself in a position of suffering in meditation. Whether it's here on retreat or in daily life, suffering will come. To be able to recognize it, turn our attention to it with compassion, say this phrase for ourselves—this can really shift the relationship to it. Even taking it as a practice for fifteen or twenty minutes, you can start to feel a shift. Maybe there's physical pain, there may be a strong hindrance that's up. Try it if that arises for you over these days and see where the potential is for this compassion practice for you.

There are a couple of teachers who are part of our sangha who have made a full offering out of this approach. Based on the Buddhist practice of compassion, they've expanded a little bit into what they call mindful self-compassion. Both Kristin Neff and Chris Germer, who have been students here, have done a lot of work in this area and led workshops and trained people to lead this work.

I want to offer one form of it that you may find on Kristin Neff's website. They call it mindful self-compassion. Anytime you run into a difficulty in life or in meditation, you can do this compassion practice for yourself. I've posted a brief outline on the bulletin board, but I'll go through it here.

The first step, which is a little bit optional but is nice, is to put a hand on your heart or make some physical gesture of comfort for yourself so that you feel, even physically, that you're being held in the moment. Touch does release some chemical transmitters in the body that bring comfort.

Then you simply comment. The second step is you comment: "This is a moment of suffering," or in whatever form that feels right for you.

It might be, "This hurts." Or "This is painful." Or "This ache is painful. This longing is painful." Whatever words fit to acknowledge the difficulty, acknowledge the immediate impact—"This is a moment of suffering."

The third step is to reflect on the universality, which is in one form: "Suffering is an integral part of life." It's the First Noble Truth. Or you might say, "Everyone has this," or "I'm not alone with this." One of the classical techniques in working with pain is to imagine all the people in the world who have the same difficulty that you're having, but much, much worse. This connects you to the human ability to bear what is a common experience of difficulty or pain. So that's the third step: "Pain is an integral part of life," or "I'm not alone in this."

The fourth step is your compassion phrase. It might be, "May I hold this pain and sorrow with

compassion." It might be, "I care about this suffering." It might be, "May I be free from this suffering." Whatever compassion phrase works well for you.

So play with this also. I find that sometimes going through the four steps of mindful self-compassion a few times draws out our whole relationship to the experience of difficulty. Then we can just go back to the one phrase of the classical compassion practice. So this can be kind of a warm-up to doing compassion for self.

Instructions for Today

Continue with the metta practice for self, benefactor, and friend. Bring in compassion as it seems appropriate, as it seems suitable to any of the individuals.

And then, as Sally was pointing to in the talk last night, if you're interested, spend some time doing metta for a neutral person and perhaps a difficult person. You might choose to do a neutral person today, just from time to time. Just occasionally bring in someone in this category. And tomorrow you might want to spend a little bit of time doing some loving-kindness for a difficult person. Not as a central practice, but maybe from time to time during the day.

Any questions this morning?

Thank you for listening.

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