Introduction to Compassion Meditation

Rebecca Bradshaw · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Three-Month Retreat (IMS 2012) · 47:05

Tonight we're going to move on to the Brahma Vihara of compassion, and I want to say a few words first before we begin.

Winnie mentioned last week that there are four Brahma Viharas: metta, compassion, appreciative joy, and equanimity. I love looking at these four together because to me they seem like a great package for how to relate to other people with sanity.

You start with metta, and metta is just developing this sense of friendliness, kindness. It seems like a good foundation—just basic friendliness. Then with compassion, we take that friendliness and turn it towards acknowledging and caring about suffering. And yet life isn't only suffering, so the third Brahma Vihara, appreciative joy, is when we take that kindness and orient it towards appreciating the success and happiness in other people's lives. Right there, there's balance—orienting towards the suffering and orienting towards the joy.

The last Brahma Vihara, equanimity, is basically letting go of any attachment we may have developed over doing the other three Brahma Viharas. Attachment to results, you could say, or to things being a certain way, or to people being a certain way. Letting go of fixing people, controlling people, taking too much responsibility for other people. It's an acknowledgement of each person's destiny and each person's responsibility for their own lives.

All four of those together—it's just so sane. It's so friendly, and yet it's balanced with the capacity of heart of equanimity that can hold that all lives include joy and sorrow. This equanimity is important underneath or supporting each one of the Brahma Viharas. It's important in metta. It's definitely very obvious it's important in compassion. It brings the balance.

Each one of the Brahma Viharas is primed by a certain orientation of the heart and mind. Metta is primed—or the proximate cause of metta—is seeing the good in yourself or someone else. When we're cultivating metta, we're orienting towards what's good about a person. You've probably heard the instructions to think of the good qualities in this person, think of why they're so easy to love, think of your own good qualities, touch into your basic goodness. All of that is orienting towards the good, and it's meant to bring up metta, friendliness.

With compassion, we turn that friendliness towards suffering. We pay attention to the suffering in our own lives or other people's lives. As you can see, this might be a bit harder. Most people find compassion a little more challenging. Though interestingly, some people are naturally drawn towards compassion and

notice they've actually been doing the metta practice as a compassion practice—they have been orienting towards suffering. For some people, the avenue into their heart is really through suffering or touching suffering. You may notice that for yourself. But there's a difference between the two: metta is oriented towards what's good, and compassion is oriented towards suffering.

There's just one traditional phrase for compassion practice: "May you be free of suffering," or "May I be free from suffering." There are some more modern phrases that people have used: "I care about this pain," "I care about this suffering," or simply, "I care."

The trick with "may you be free from suffering" is to elicit the care in the heart without eliciting attachment to the suffering going away. That traditional phrase has a kind of challenge to it. You're wishing for one to be free from suffering like this rather than like that. I guess that's the whole practice of compassion—understanding how to relate to, touch, and care about suffering like this rather than finding the heart starting to contract. You can use either phrase that you like: "May you be free from suffering," or "I care about your suffering," or "I care about this suffering."

Let's talk a little bit more about what compassion is and what it's not. We could say that compassion is the heart that can touch suffering with openness and with care. I experience it as a kind of bittersweet feeling, a sweet, poignant feeling. The sweetness is the connection, and the poignancy, obviously, is that we're talking about suffering.

The near neighbors—the experiences that can pass for compassion but aren't compassion—include, for example, pity. With pity, we have that sense that we are caring, but there's a separation there. There's an "oh, you poor thing over there," or "you poor thing down there," or "I'm so glad that's not me, you poor thing." It might look like compassion, but there's separation. True compassion is a relationship between equals. It's like, "I know that suffering." Or, "You could be me."

You see the difference, right? There's that connection.

Another near neighbor of compassion is grief or despair—a kind of drowning, a wrenched heart around the suffering. And please don't misunderstand me. This doesn't mean that grief is bad. Sometimes we go through a grief process, and that's part of being human.

I love this story that Sharon tells about going to teach in Russia. She had a translator, and she was talking about compassion, and she kept thinking there's something about this translation that's just not quite working right. So she asked the translator, "What are you translating as compassion? How do you understand it?" And he said, "It's a state of being terribly overcome with someone's sorrow, like having a stake through your heart and the burden of someone's pain burdening you too."

That's a near neighbor of compassion. We kind of laugh, but sometimes we—not other people, but sometimes we—have the idea that if we're not suffering horribly, we're not actually feeling compassion. Sometimes we have the idea that if we're feeling compassion, we ought to be suffering.

I was reading something by the Dalai Lama's translator. Somebody asked the Dalai Lama, "Does compassion hurt? Does it have to hurt?" And his answer was so interesting. He said that when you first touch the other person's suffering, yes, there is some pain in that moment. But after that, the feeling of compassion that takes over is sweet. He said that sometimes Westerners get confused about the boundary between the other person and themselves. They forget that that is actually a different person. It was really amazing.

And I think that's pointing toward the last Brahma Vihara of equanimity—understanding that this is another person with their own destiny, and holding that. It can help sometimes, keeping us from drowning in grief and despair.

The far neighbor of compassion is cruelty. We're not usually going to mistake cruelty for compassion, but it's the hard heart—the heart that maybe kind of wants somebody to suffer. Unlike cruelty, metta and compassion are natural for us. We don't have to dredge this up or manufacture it. We have hearts that naturally respond to suffering. One translation of the Pali term is "the quivering of the heart in response to pain." We have that natural capacity to empathize.

One of my favorite compassion phrases is from the Zen monk Ryokan. He says, "Oh, that my priest's robes were wide enough to gather up all the suffering people in this floating world." You know that big heart? But he says "this floating world," which I find so interesting. There's a certain lightness to the compassion. It's not heavy. It's light.

So with compassion, the first person we start with is somebody that we know who is suffering. It's meant to trigger that response of the heart. I usually recommend you don't choose somebody who's suffering too horribly much. When I first did this as an intensive practice here at IMS, the first person I chose was my very dear friend who was suffering from a pretty severe depression. And it didn't work. It was too much. It brought up too much grief for me, too much sadness. So I switched, and the first person I worked with was a co-worker whose husband was dying. I wasn't super close to her, but I liked her. That level was the right level for me to really start to understand what compassion was and how it felt.

So if we start with somebody who's too hard, we don't always get the flavor, because the grief or the sadness takes over too much. And by hard, I mean somebody you care about deeply or are very close to.

All of these Brahma Viharas are explorations of the heart. We're learning all the flavors of our heart and how they respond to life. And I want to emphasize that they're explorations. So as you do the practice, you're going to sometimes feel compassion, but you're also sometimes going to feel these other near and far neighbors—the other qualities of the heart that can come up, including the afflictive qualities. It's not bad. It's using it to understand.

So yes, if you're working with somebody and it's too intense and there's lots of grief and despair, that's a sign to move to somebody easier and see if we can cultivate the flavor.

The trick with compassion flavored with equanimity is the ability to touch and feel suffering while at the same time accepting it—to wish to alleviate it and to accept it. It's a delicate balance. When I first did it on retreat, I found it difficult. I was interviewing with Joseph at that time, and I went in and said, "I got an A in metta and I'm getting an F in compassion." You don't need to grade yourselves.

So we develop compassion as a Brahma Vihara, as we're going to do tonight, as a practice to encourage the quality very directly. And we also develop compassion in our own practice when we learn how to relate to our own suffering with kindness and care. We get to practice it formally here, but we're really practicing it informally this whole retreat—unless there's anybody out there who's not suffering at all. But if you're suffering, part of your practice is developing mindfulness and developing care. So you're developing compassion informally the whole time you're here.

I think that's enough introduction. I will lead you a little bit, and then I'll set you free. We'll start with somebody easy—well, somebody who's suffering who's easy. Then we'll do ourselves for a while, and then you can choose one or two other people. It's often helpful to have your four: your easy person, your good friend, your neutral person, your difficult person. You could choose a couple of them to do, and then we'll end with all beings.

So start by taking a comfortable posture or position. Allow yourself to settle into your body here, sitting. Perhaps you can feel your heart center if you wish. You can put your hand over your heart—this beating, feeling heart. Maybe even offer a couple of phrases of just wishing yourself well: may I be free from suffering.

You can call forth that quality of care, especially as you learn the flavor of it. If you want, take a moment to let it permeate your body, flow through your limbs, your torso. Just a sense of care.

And then if you wish, you can bring to mind somebody who you know is having a hard time. If you can, bring forth an image of them, or if that's difficult, just a felt sense of them. You can contemplate the challenge or suffering in their life. And you can see how the heart responds.

This is one way you can do all of these Brahma Viharas: you can do them wordlessly by noticing or focusing on the person and, in this case, their suffering. Let the heart respond. If you notice a sense of care, focus on that, sending it towards them. Very gentle.

And sometimes the phrases help prime this feeling: May you be free from suffering. A sweet, gentle wish. I care about your suffering. I care about this pain.

Relaxing the body, mind, and heart. Relaxing into compassion. Using the phrases if that helps prime the feeling. Connecting. Caring. Feeling the sweetness of the connection, the sweetness of the heart that cares. It's a huge gift in this world, a heart that cares.

And if you find that grief, sadness, pity, or other emotions arise, you can see if it helps to move closer to

the suffering or move back a little bit. It's almost like you play with the distance, how close you get. If it's too tricky, see if you can find somebody easier. You can audition people. Your heart knows how to care. You can trust that.

If it gets too intense, you can also come back and focus on the strength of your heart. Feel free to experiment. Your heart is strong enough to hold this suffering and to care about it.

If you find your attention wanders, you just come back to the image, the reflection on the suffering, the response of the heart, the phrases if they help support that response. If you're enjoying this exploration of the specific person, you can continue.

Or if you wish, now you can turn towards yourself. Take a moment to contemplate the challenges of your life, the difficulties—not in great detail, as we don't want to send you down thinking trains, but simply acknowledging perhaps the ways you suffer in heart, mind, body. And calling forth that quality of heart that cares.

Perhaps you can remember some of how it feels from the person you were just practicing with, or you can simply call it forth. Feel the compassion or the caring of heart spread throughout your body, from your heart throughout. Allow it to spread. Or if you prefer, you can use an image of yourself and send it to yourself, relaxing into the care.

May I be free from suffering. A very beautiful wish for yourself. *I care about this suffering.* Whichever phrase helps you connect with that caring feeling—receiving that care, showering heart, mind, and body in that care. Sometimes it might just be that simple wish: *May I be free from suffering.* That's enough. That simple wish is a sign of care. It's a wholesome thought.

At this point, *I care about this suffering* may be just an intention. It may not feel like a lot, but it's a wholesome intention, planting seeds that will sprout in their own time. Accept whatever your experience is here as you explore your heart. Perhaps you experience the compassion as a sense of softness towards the suffering, a relaxation with the suffering. It has that flavor of acceptance while still wishing to alleviate pain.

You can continue with the development of compassion for a person who is suffering or for yourself. Or if you wish, bring in some of your easier people, bringing them to mind, connecting. If you know ways that they are suffering, you can connect with those. Or if nothing specific stands out, you still know that all human lives contain this mix of pleasure and pain, joy and sorrow. You can connect with that truth—that there is suffering in our lives.

And again, exploring how the heart responds, encouraging that sense of care or softness, using the phrases if they help support. Some people even use the metta phrases but orient them towards suffering. You can try that too if it is helpful, easing your way into this kind empathy with this person's suffering.

Compassion is the great gift that we give ourselves and others—the gift of care which makes suffering bearable, able to be held.

Let us take a moment at the end of this sitting to send this sense of care throughout our meditation hall to each other. We all know that in even just a single yogi day there is joy and there is suffering, and that we all here are holding our own private suffering, the ways that we are challenged. Sending that sense of care out to each other, our fellow yogis: *May you be free from suffering. I care.* And if we wish, sending it out further, out into the universe, this sense of care to all beings.

I'd like to end with a beautiful compassion poem by Thich Nhat Hanh called "Please Call Me By My True Names." The poem reflects that sense of connection that comes from compassion, and that sense of equality with those who suffer—the humbleness of compassion, in the best sense of that word.

Do not say that I'll depart tomorrow because even today I still arrive. Look deeply. I arrive in every second to be a bud on a spring branch, to be a tiny bird whose wings are still fragile, learning to sing in my new nest, to be a caterpillar in the heart of a flower, to be a jewel hiding itself in a stone.

I still arrive in order to laugh and to cry, in order to fear and to hope. The rhythm of my heart is the birth and death of all that are alive.

I am the mayfly metamorphosing on the surface of the river, and I am the bird which, when spring comes, arrives in time to eat the mayfly.

I am the frog swimming happily in the clear water of a pond, and I am also the grass snake who, approaching in silence, feeds itself on the frog.

I am the child in Uganda, all skin and bones, my legs as thin as bamboo sticks, and I am the arms merchant selling deadly weapons to Uganda.

I am the twelve-year-old girl, refugee on a small boat, who throws herself into the ocean after being raped by a sea pirate, and I am the pirate, my heart not yet capable of seeing and loving.

I am a member of the Politburo with plenty of power in my hands, and I am the man who has to pay his debt of blood to my people, dying slowly in a forced labor camp.

My joy is like spring, so warm it makes flowers bloom in all walks of life. My pain is like a river of tears, so full it fills up the four oceans.

Please call me by my true names, so I can hear all my cries and my laughs at once, so I can see that my joy and pain are but one.

Please call me by my true names, so I can wake up—and so the door of my heart can be left open, the door of compassion.

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