

Karuṇā - Compassion

Bhante Bodhidhamma · DhammaBytes · 8:48

Namo tassa bhagavato arahato sammā sambuddhassa. Homage to the Buddha, the blessed, noble and fully self-enlightened one.

I thought I'd choose this word *karuna*, which translates pretty directly as compassion. Our word gives us some idea of how we should develop that virtue. Our word comes from the Latin, doesn't it? *Patio*, which means I suffer. The *com* is with, to suffer with somebody. You have to be slightly careful about that.

The first thing to say is that the direct enemy of compassion is cruelty. Cruelty is the desire to make somebody suffer. Compassion is defined as the desire to alleviate suffering. It's as simple as that. The desire to alleviate suffering - physical, mental, financial, existential. It's the desire to alleviate suffering.

And it's got a couple of very subtle enemies. That's how the commentaries would put it - near and far enemy. So the near one is cruelty. But the one that's more subtle, the one that we don't see, one of them is the do-gooder. So the do-gooder is somebody who's going to do you the good they want to do you, no matter what you want.

It may be that a friend has fallen ill or something, so you think to yourself, well, I'll go and visit. And I don't know whether people do it these days, but they've got some grapes and Lucozade or something. Some soup. And when you get there, of course, they say, "Oh, I've been really sick. I've just vomited all over the toilet. I can't possibly eat it." I said, "Oh, I'm sorry, it must be very bad." He said, "Could you do me a favour? Do you think you could clean the toilet?" And while you're cleaning it, he said, "I came here with soup and I'm cleaning a blooming toilet."

And what compassion is, is of course to stand in the other person's shoes and to ask them what they want. So you don't go there with some pre-set ideas, some set position of how you're going to help them.

There's a lovely case of that, of a charity in Totnes, that decided to collect clothes and send them to Africa, to this place in Africa. When they got there, the tailor trade collapsed. And with it, the local economy. So they had to pull all the clothes back. It was a case of compassion without wisdom.

So that do-gooding, you have to be careful of that. So it's the case of if you see somebody who needs help, your first question is, what do you want me to do? Then, of course, there can be some bargaining. "I want you to give me £100,000." There might be some bit of bargaining going on before. It's not because they ask something you have to do it. I mean, you've also got to take into consideration your own situation. But that's your starting position. You don't presume that you know what the other person wants. And that undermines this more subtle mistake that we make of being a do-gooder.

The other one is a bit more offensive in a way, and that's pity, isn't it? "Oh, poor thing, you must be suffering. I know how you feel." It's coming from this high position. I mean, consider yourself. If you've fallen over, for instance, and you're there with a broken leg, somebody comes, "Oh, poor thing, must be really hurting." All you want to do is call the ambulance. So this pity distances us from the suffering. It puts us, shall we say, slightly above it. It's a conceit.

So, to undermine that, again, one has to slip into the other person's shoes by way of just an imaginative force, like, if I was in that position, what would I want?

So these different positions, they're in us, all of us are a bit of a do-gooder, a bit of cruelty here and there. And it's a case of just recognising that these are conditionings within us. When they come up and if you find yourself blaming yourself, accusing yourself of cruelty and you could have been more sensitive and all that stuff, then you're being cruel to yourself, being compassionate to yourself. There's a case also of being able to forgive oneself and just to recognise these are all conditionings. And you learn from those mistakes don't you? So the next time we find ourselves in a similar position one remembers that. So then you make the right intention and the intention is to be with the person who's suffering and ask what they want of you.

In that way you can develop this *karuna*. And *karuna*, this compassion, remember, is one of the illimitables. It's indefinite as to how much it can be developed within you. So long as we're alive and breathing, you can develop *karuna*.

So, I mean, this particular time, it's a time of goodwill, isn't it? Often you get charities come. So there's a stepping into the other person's shoes. And then one does what one can. You don't have to give to every charity that comes along. There's hundreds of millions of them. But it's a case of doing what you can for the other.

There's limitations, aren't there? Just limitations. If you feel guilty about not being able to help people, that's ridiculous. You can only do what you can do. You've only got so much power, so much wealth, so much influence. If somebody is dying of a heart attack and you're not a doctor and you don't know what to do, you can't blame yourself for it. All you can do is witness it, is to be a companion in that suffering, isn't it?

So we have to be, there's all sorts of little mistakes we can make around this area of compassion and it's just a case of making that aware of, making that something that we're aware of and making sure that whenever we want to do something for somebody or give some of our wealth towards somebody, that we have a very clear intention in mind. That's all.

Remember that all our conditionings start with intention. Once you have the right intention, at least that's your main karmic line. *Kamma* here means conditioning. So even though the old stuff may come up, you've not actually reinforced it. So that's the point. And just very slowly one shifts, one moves over.

I can only hope my words have been of some assistance. May you be liberated sooner rather than later.

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