Sympathy, Empathy and Compassion

Bhante Bodhidhamma · Dharma Talks · 17:26

Namo tassa bhagavato arahato sammā sambuddhassa
Namo tassa bhagavato arahato sammā sambuddhassa
Namo tassa bhagavato arahato sammā sambuddhassa

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

So I thought we'd just have a little contemplation around these three words: sympathy, empathy, and compassion.

I want to quote the Buddha here, talking about himself and his relationship to the monks: "Thus, monks, I have taught you the unconditioned, the destination and the path leading to the destination. Whatever should be done, monks, by a compassionate teacher, out of compassion for his disciples, desiring their welfare, that I have done for you. These are the roots of trees, monks. These are empty huts. Meditate. Do not be negligent, lest you regret it later. This is my instruction to you."

Now, interestingly, whenever he talks about compassion, about himself as a compassionate person, he always uses the word *anukampā*. And this word *kampati* means to tremble. So the *anu* is just a reinforcement—shaking, trembling. And it's what we would, I presume, recognize as empathy. So it's a sort of resonating with somebody else's heart, with somebody else's suffering. The usual word that you'll find, of course, is *karuṇā*, which just means compassion. And he's often titled the Mahākaruṇiko, the great compassionate one.

If we look at these three words, sympathy gets bad press these days, particularly in the caring professions. Well, you can understand that if you're looking after somebody, sympathy doesn't quite make it. But even in psychotherapy, I think they have a bit of a downer on it. But frankly, if you were going to feel empathetic about all the suffering in the world, I think you'd burn out. At least I think I'd burn out.

The danger, of course, is that you're standing too far apart. You're not actually feeling anything. And this makes any expression of sympathy sound a bit false. And also, in that state, you could fall into the error of being judgmental about the person who's suffering. So if somebody fell off a ladder, you might say, "Oh well, you shouldn't have put the ladder there at all. I mean, you were just asking for an accident." It doesn't particularly help somebody who's just broken their legs.

So I think there's a place for sympathy. I mean, when somebody dies, you send a card with sympathies. You don't send a card with empathies. So I think it still has some role to play in our relationship to suffering, to people who are suffering.

If you hang about certain facts about the world and you allow yourself to become empathetic, then it's a big weight upon you because that empathy moves you towards action. So sympathy, I think, just has a place of a mild connection, a mild heart connection, just knowing that there's not much you can do about it.

At the moment, for instance, every day it seems around about forty thousand children die of starvation or hunger-related causes. If you were to hang on to that, it's a dreadful, awful figure. The Buddha in the Dhammapada actually says hunger is the worst of all diseases. I mean, we don't really feel hunger. We feel hungry, feel a bit peckish, but we're very quick to fulfill it. But hunger, knowing hunger—a something that really begins to make you worry about your life—that we've never, or at least I've never, had that hunger.

There was somebody who came to Kanduboda who said that he'd been out in the country and he lost his food. Something happened. This is in America. And he got so hungry that when he caught a bird, he just ate it. He ate it raw. I couldn't tell you how hungry you can get.

So this sympathy comes from the Greek, which just means to have a feeling with, a community feeling actually—a sympathy. Empathy, of course, comes from the Greek as well, meaning in, in feeling. So you're actually much closer to the person in your heart.

Now, I've got something from this social psychologist, Daniel Batson, who's researched empathy, it seems, for decades. And he says there are eight different concepts. So I'll read them through and you can decide which one you prefer.

The first one is knowing another's thoughts and feelings. That's how some people use empathy—knowing another's thoughts and feelings. Imagining another's thoughts and feelings. Adopting the posture of another. Actually feeling as another does. Imagining how one would feel or think in another's place. Feeling distressed at another's suffering. Feeling for another's suffering, sometimes called pity or compassion. And finally, projecting oneself into another's situation.

So people use this word with various meanings. That one about actually feeling as another does, I think is a dodgy one, isn't it? I mean, if you have some great sorrow and the person you're telling that to says to you, "Oh, I know exactly what you feel"—well, it's a bit of a jump, isn't it? And the other one about feeling distress at another's suffering sounds a bit like reactivity. It's like you're reacting to it.

So there's all sorts of definitions for this empathy, but basically I think it differs from sympathy in that there's a greater heart connection. One definition was the ability to appreciate the other person's feelings without becoming so emotionally involved that your judgment is affected. And I think that's the danger with empathy—that the emotional part overrides your rational part. There's got to be a balance there.

If you just think about this recent case of this poor five-year-old boy who fell down a well in Morocco, hundreds of people turned up, thousands watching online. It became worldwide news. And yet, as I've mentioned, every day forty thousand children are dying of hunger or hunger-related causes. So there's a

point where something touches you very greatly and it becomes a obsession, really.

Now, you might not feel empathy for various reasons. One of them is fear and aversion towards another's suffering that keeps you away from it. And if that comes to us, then really we have to do a bit of *vipassanā* on it and wait for it to pass and make that effort to connect.

I was once walking on a main road. This is going back many, many years. And a dog had been knocked over. It was dark at night and it was obviously in agony, and whoever had knocked it over had put it under a tree. And I was with my ex-wife at that time, and I went to try and make the dog comfortable. And as I lifted it a little bit to try and get it into a better position, it just grimaced with this dreadful pain. And I didn't know what to do, really. So we just left it. I mean, these days, of course, with mobiles, you'd have got in touch with the RSPCA. But it was imprinted on my mind, the dreadful agony that this poor dog was in.

The other thing is pity. Pity is feeling sorry for someone. It's really coming from a place of conceit, and it stops you really feeling what you're really hiding—your feeling for that person—by covering it over with a sense of being sorry for someone. Well, I mean, we've all, I'm sure, had that experience of somebody feeling sorry for us. It's not very helpful. But it's one way that we can, as it were, bypass that feeling of being connected to somebody's suffering if it's something that we find very difficult to be with.

And the final thing is moral outrage. People being outraged by the dreadful things that are going on in society and things like that. And I was just reading that there are recent studies where for celebrities, it's very good for publicity to be morally outraged. And then social media content loves it—sharing, retweeting it, expressing this tremendous moral outrage. But it often disguises a sense of insecurity about one's own moral standing, it seems.

So if you find yourself being morally outraged, just hang on in there for a minute and just ask yourself, "Well, where's this outrage coming from? And how is it helpful?" In Buddhist understanding, rage doesn't really help. It only clouds our minds, clouds our hearts.

And then, so finally, if the empathy has force behind it, then there'll be a demand really within ourselves to do something. And that's when we enter into some compassionate action. I just think you have to be very careful there, because often people get burnt out with this stuff, not recognizing that difference between what you can do and what you want to do, who you can influence and who you can't influence. And if you try to do something which is not within your power or your area of influence, then obviously you're just going to end up burning out. You're just going to end up feeling disappointed, disheartened, and all that.

I've used the word "depressed" there, which I don't like. It medicalizes it. More like disheartened would be a better word, I think. Down in the dumps.

Here's a little thing that might be of interest. If you're a bit down in the dumps and you feel a bit low, you might give yourself a little present. And that makes you feel happy. It lifts you a little bit. I suppose it

comes to what they call retail therapy or something. But how interesting it is that when you see somebody who's a bit down in the mouth and you want to give them a bit of a lift, doing a little kindness to them, your happiness stays much longer. And it tells us about how we relate to each other and how important it is for us to have that kind relationship.

So I just want to end with just this little occasion that happened to me and what responses I might have given. I won't tell you which one I did. That wouldn't be fair.

So I got on a bus once and I sat next to this elderly man. Again, this is going back years. And his face was very badly injured and scarred and bruised. And I asked him, I said, "What happened?" And he said he'd been worrying about his rent and he walked out in the road and got knocked over, got knocked down.

So I mean, I could have said things like, "Well, that's bad news." "Well, that's what happens when you get worried, you see." "Well, at least you weren't killed." I could say something like, "Well, you know, I'm very sorry to hear that. But you know, the Citizens Advice Bureau, they can really help you with money problems." That would be particularly helpful. I might say, "Well, that's really terrible. You know, I'm so sorry to hear it. I do hope you heal quickly." I might say, "I'm very saddened. I'm saddened to hear what you say. It's a pretty terrible experience. How are you feeling now? Are you getting treatment? Are your rent troubles getting sorted? And I hope you heal up quickly."

So I've had that little bit of conversation. I might leave him cheered up a bit. But then you might step over that line and you might be saying similar things. But then you say to him, "Have you asked, do you know where to go for help?" And then you suggest, you know, the Citizens Advice Bureau. And then you might go a step further, which takes you a little bit into do-gooding, where you say, "You know, listen, what I'll do is I'll get in touch with the Citizens Advice Bureau for you and I'll get you to meet them and I'll take you there and do this and do that," whether the person wants it or not.

So this is do-gooding. A do-gooder is a person who does you the good they want to do you, whether you want it or not, whether you need it or not.

So there's all these various ways that we can relate to somebody's suffering. Anyway, I hope that gives some food for thought and just allows us, I think, not to fall into—not to feel that we have to always do something about somebody's suffering. You know, we're limited by our circumstances. And not to feel that we always have to be deeply empathetic every time we hear somebody's suffering. I just think that burns out. And that there's a place for just ordinary sympathy.

Well, I don't know whether you agree with me or not. Anyway, I hope my words have been of some assistance and that by your wise choice between sympathy, empathy and compassion, you will release yourself from all suffering sooner rather than later.

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