

Compassion: To Care

Bhante Bodhidhamma · Tips of the Day · 4 min read

It all begins with empathy. I was going to write sympathy, but these days it has a touch of pity or insincerity about it, but I would like to use the word to say that even if we have not had a similar experience, we can imagine what it is like. The root words add up to feel-together. Whereas empathy means you have had a similar experience, the word can be used by someone who is actually imagining what the other is experiencing. I've never been a refugee. I can only imagine what it's like. The Buddha uses the word, *anukampa*. *Kampa* means to tremble or quiver and *anu* a sense of movement towards. So the Buddha says that out of this *anukampa*, the trembling of the heart resonating with someone, he has done all he can for his disciples. *Karuna* (rk karma), the word we usually translate as compassion, comes from a root Vedic word which means a holy action, a sacrament. So here we have the passive state of sympathising or empathising *anukampa* and then the action, *karuna*. If there is no action, no follow through, it is compassion unfulfilled which can leave you feeling ashamed of yourself and guilty, grieving even that you did not follow your heart's desire. Compassion then is a response to the empathic or sympathetic connection with another's suffering. And there are two modes, a passive and active mode. In the passive mode we are able to simply be with, accompany the one who is suffering. That can be a great solace to someone, especially if they are dying. This can be difficult for us because we always want to do something, understandably. I heard a story of an elderly woman in a hospital who late in the night asked a nurse to come and stay with her while she died. So, it takes a moment of reflection to accept our powerlessness – I can't do anything for this person in their suffering, but I can accompany them. Beware the Do-Gooder Syndrome! There are situations where we can do something, and this can lead us into the error of over-doing. So, it's important to ask the person what they want of us. We can make a suggestion, of course, but be accepting if they don't want it, even when we know that it would better their situation. Otherwise, we fall into the error of the compulsive do-gooder. That's when we do the good we want to do for the other whether they want it or not! Such a compulsion comes from the need to be loved, to be wanted, to be useful, connected to self-esteem. We may visit someone who is temporarily incapacitated with offers to cook them a meal, only to find someone else has been, leaving food. How do we react if the person then says, but there is something you could do for me. 'I'd be really grateful you would clean the toilet.' The do-gooder in us also has a tendency to volunteer help without reflection. A sort of reflex compassion and then we regret it. A friend says they are ill and you volunteer to do their shopping on Saturday morning. And then you find yourself grumbling that the last thing you want to do on a Saturday morning is go shopping! All sorts of excuses leap into the mind. 'I really don't feel well.' 'My mother is sick and I'll have to go and help her.' 'I can smell gas and have to wait for the engineer.' All to be preceded by profuse apologies. I had such an occasion, but out of friendliness to help someone decorate their flat. I

decided there was a lesson to be learnt here and made myself keep my promise. It stopped me being so impulsive in the future. Patience is often called for - patient forbearance, that willingness to bear. My mother was suffering the first signs of dementia caused by little capillaries bursting in her brain. One day I had reason to visit the elderly lady who lived next door and she told me my mother would come every day to talk and say the same thing! I thanked her for her kind patience. If the person turns their anger towards us because we didn't do this or that, or we did but we didn't do it properly, or we're more of a hindrance than help, then patience takes on a hue of tolerance. We are often angry with ourselves for being ill or incapacitated. Reminding ourselves of that helps us to bear with a certain amount of abuse, that is until we see the person is not just expressing their anger, but actually indulging it. And, of course, it takes commitment that demands a certain dedication to helping someone. Compassionate action arises more easily when we consider the assistance and support we have received throughout our lives. And it is a seeming paradox that the compassionate heart is a profoundly happy heart. Pope Francis puts it beautifully: "Rivers do not drink their own water; trees do not eat their own fruit; the sun does not shine on itself and flowers do not spread their fragrance for themselves. Living for others is a rule of nature. We are all born to help each other. No matter how difficult it is life is good when you are happy, but much better when others are happy because of you."

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