

Pity, Sorrow and Compassion

Bhante Bodhidhamma · Tips of the Day · 2 min read

Pity - feeling sorry for: I'm using this term in its negative sense. When we hear ourselves say, 'I pity Jack', how does this 'I' define itself? There may be a genuine sorrow for the person and their situation, but somehow this 'I' stands apart from it. It is saying to itself: he does deserve it; he's such an idiot; I'd never get myself into that situation; thank heavens I'm not like that. There may be somewhere a smug satisfaction. Indeed, there could be there, quietly ignored, a feeling of schadenfreude, a sense of joy in another's suffering. Just because we are not aware of these subliminal feelings, doesn't mean they don't have effect. I'm sure we've heard that false tone in another's voice, that overly affectation of sorrow on the face. But are we aware when we also 'pity' someone. It's often a case that in vipassana, if we honestly note what the mind is thinking, that we wake up to these hitherto quietly suppressed attitudes which don't fit into our esteemed self-definition. Sorrow is a genuine feel for the suffering of another. It can actually be felt as a direct resonance of the other's pain, both psychological and physical. I know someone who felt the pain of her daughter when she broke her arm. She had to have her arm in a sling. The daughter felt nothing. This sort of 'sorrow' is very rare of course, but all of us are touched when we see someone suffer, especially if it is a child or animal, for their innocence and vulnerability add poignancy to the situation. I was once in Calcutta and as I turned a corner there was a little girl, squatting in the dry, dirt road sucking on a black-brown desiccated banana skin. To this day I can still feel the shock in my heart. But did it move me to do anything? That to me is the difference between sorrow and compassion. Compassion is the desire to alleviate suffering. It moves one to do something. Anything – even if it is only to try to influence someone else to do something. I'm sorry to say I did nothing to help that little girl. And I'm left with an unrequited sorrow. That is the penalty when sorrow does not transform into compassion. So, since the delusion of self is always active, how might we proceed? It is to acknowledge the conceit of pity, but not denigrate oneself for it. It's enough to acknowledge it and determine not to act on it. To feel instead the genuine sorrow and to act on that. In this simple way, our pity diminishes and our compassion increases.

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