

Awareness, Compassion and Wisdom

Bhante Bodhidhamma · Tips of the Day · 2 min read

(Another angle – see earlier Tip: Pity, Sorrow and Compassion) There has been a clear example of the difference between awareness of suffering and compassion. For so long Europeans have heard and seen on screens the suffering of refugees from the war torn Middle East or coming across the Mediterranean. Nothing really happened save on the Greek and Italian Islands where these suffering people landed. It was only the photo of the lifeless body of a drowned toddler that suddenly made the connection. Awareness of suffering became compassion – a heart connection that demands action. An empathy and action – especially by Germany. And it continues in some effort to manage the crisis and not leave it up to Turkey, Jordan, Italy and Greece. It is quite simple really to acknowledge the distinction. Whenever we are aware of suffering of any kind, stay close to the heart. What do I feel? Is there fear or aversion or indifference or some other attitude? Now that may bring up feelings of guilt and shame. After all I'm supposed to be compassionate! All this, the negative reaction and the judgemental mind have to be acknowledged and felt. It's not pleasant. Then we have to put ourselves in the other's shoes. Or ask the question, if I was in that situation what would I hope people might do for me. It is the central human relationship – do unto others as you would have them do unto you. Consider the travail of refugees? They've probably been close to bombs dropping, perhaps lost family. They escape with little money – most spent on traffickers – and little food. The dangerous sea voyage. Arrive exhausted and in despair as to the future. What would it be like to lose family, your home, your livelihood – your life as you knew it? It doesn't take long to conjure up sympathy. Sympathy is what we can feel through our imaginary efforts when we ourselves have not had such experiences. Should we have had some such experience of loss, homelessness, penury, then empathy – a closer resonance in the heart arises. Either way, they both lead to action. But then we have to be careful not to overdo it! We can get caught up in the energy aroused by compassion. The bigger the group, the greater the energy. But then we find ourselves volunteering for work that is beyond our capability – physically, mentally, financially. It can begin to put strains on long established relationships, on work. In focusing too much on the suffering of one particular person or group, we become blind to the problems we may be causing for others, usually those near to us. We can make sacrifices for ourselves, but not for others. If we can't carry people with us, we need to accept our limitations. It may come down to either not helping others in an hour of need because those close to us or our work situation won't support this, or helping others with a detrimental effect on your relationship to those close to us or our work. We need to be clear about what we are prepared to lose. Compassion without wisdom also leads to suffering.

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