

Sympathy, Empathy, and Compassion

Bhante Bodhidhamma · Tips of the Day · 3 min read

“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, monks, do not be negligent, lest you regret it later. This is my instruction to you.” (Bodhi, Bhikkhu. In the Buddha's Words: An Anthology of Discourses from the Pali Canon.) The Buddha uses the word *anukampa*: *anu* reinforces *kampati* - shake, tremble, the heart resonates with another's suffering. The other word which translates compassion is *karuna* and that is the word used when the Four Illimitables are mentioned – love, compassion, joy and equanimity. The Buddha is titled *Mahakaruniko* – the Great Compassionate One. The Dhamma cannot be held as a secret, it demands expression, first in the heart as sympathy or empathy and then in compassionate thought, speech or action. One obvious reason is that as we practice, selfishness lessens and generosity grows. Sympathy, from the Greek *sym/ + pathos/feeling*, gets bad press as a sort insipid response to another's misery. Yet we still send cards expressing our 'Sympathies' and commiseration. It is a light contact, but need not be insincere. There is understanding and a feeling for the person's situation. It may be a situation which one has not undergone oneself and therefore we have to rely on our imagination. It may be a person we hardly know. And indeed, the circumstances may not need any more than our acknowledgement. The danger, of course, is not allow oneself to feel anything and yet feel it necessary to say something. Then the response may sound insincere and even judgemental. Empathy, from the Greek *em/in + pathos/feeling*, suggests a deeper contact with the other's suffering. And this will manifest in how we respond. But, as these definitions by the social psychologist C. Daniel Batson, who has researched empathy for decades, tells us; there are many types of 'empathy' (my comments in brackets): Knowing another's thoughts and feelings (a little intellectual?) Imagining another's thoughts and feelings (fabricated?) Adopting the posture of another (play acting?) Actually feeling as another does (I doubt this is really possible!) Imagining how one would feel or think in another's place (fabricated?) Feeling distress at another's suffering (a unwholesome reaction?) Feeling for another's suffering, sometimes called pity or compassion (this sounds like conceit?) Projecting oneself into another's situation (another fabrication?). None of these definitions really make it for me. I would say, understanding the Buddha's use of words, that we feel the suffering of another as a resonance, an echo in one's own heart. However, we define empathy for ourselves that will affect how it manifests in compassionate action. Too much empathy can also distort our judgement, for instance we tend not to see the big picture. The tragedy of the little boy who fell down a well in Morocco became worldwide news, but every day 10,000 children die of hunger and hunger related causes. I sat next to an old man on the bus and his face was badly scarred and bruised. I asked him what has happened. He

said he was worrying about his rent and walked out into the road and got knocked down. My possible replies: Bad luck! Hope you don't feel too run down. (Ha ha!) Bad news. Well, that's what happens when you worry! At least you weren't killed! I'm sorry to hear it, but you know the Citizen's Advice Bureau can help you with money problems. That's terrible. I'm sorry to hear it, hope you heal quickly. I'm saddened to hear that. It must have been a pretty terrible experience. How are you feeling now? Are you getting treatment? I hope your rent troubles get sorted. Hopefully it won't be too long before you're all healed up. I'm saddened to hear that. It must have been a pretty terrible experience. Are you healing OK? Are you getting help with the rent? Perhaps I can do something for you? I'm sad to hear that. Listen I'll get in touch with the Citizen's Advice bureau and see if they can help with your rent. The last is the 'do-gooder' who does the good they want to do to you, whether you want it or need it! Hope I did comfort him.

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