

# Compassion and Its Subtle Enemies

Bhante Bodhidhamma · YouTube Talks · 28:35

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*Namo tassa bhagavato arahato sammāsambuddhassa. Namō tassa bhagavato arahato sammāsambuddhassa. Namō tassa bhagavato arahato sammāsambuddhassa.* Homage to the Buddha, the blessed, noble and fully self-awakened one.

So I've chosen to look at compassion. This is the last of our four *Brahmavihāra*, the dwelling places of the gods, of the highest gods, by which we mean these are the most beautiful mental states that we can achieve. We've done loving-kindness, done joy, done equanimity. So compassion is the last one.

I'd like to start with my own little story here. I went along the hippie trail around about the seventies and I ended up in Calcutta during the Indo-Pakistan war when Bangladesh got its liberation from West Pakistan. Every day for three weeks, when we were expecting bombers to come over, I used to go to this Sikh restaurant and on the opposite side of the road, there was a woman with a huge goitre under her chin. I passed that woman every day. I never gave her a penny.

One day I came back and just as I turned around the corner, there was a little girl there who must have been well over seven, undernourished, looked very young. She was squatted down chewing a dried out black banana skin. She had this self-possession to cover her sex, because all she had was this little dress. And I walked straight past her.

So I've got these two images from this callow youth, and they're very difficult for me to remember without a certain sense of pain. Of course, the reason the pain is there is not simply because of seeing this suffering, which I just had never seen before. I mean, there were sick people everywhere, lepers, people with elephantiasis. They were there on the pavement. What pains is that I didn't respond. I didn't put a penny in that woman's hand. She sat there all day, completely emotionless with her hand out like that. And I didn't go out and buy a banana for this little girl.

Here we have what happens to us: you feel that you haven't responded. You haven't responded from a compassionate heart for whatever reason. So it all begins with that connection, which we call empathy and sometimes sympathy.

I just want to make a little distinction there. This is an arbitrary distinction because these words are used in different ways. Sympathy these days has some suggestion of pity, but sympathy for me is when you have to imagine what the person is suffering. I've never been starving. I've been hungry, but then I've always had food. I've never been in a state where I'm actually starving, so all I can do is imagine what it must be like because I felt hungry. There's a connection there.

But when it comes to, say, refugees, I've never been a refugee. I haven't a clue what it means to suddenly up and out your home, to find yourself on the road without much money, having to buy your way, sometimes being attacked. So there's a point where there's sympathy where you have to imagine what the person is going through, and there's empathy where you've actually had an experience which connects you.

That's just a little distinction I want to make so that we're clear when we're sympathizing and when we're actually empathizing. Sometimes we think we're empathizing when actually we're imagining, which isn't a problem if it all leads to the same place, which is a compassionate act, a compassionate word. But I thought I'd hang on to that little definition just for clarity's sake.

The Buddha himself uses a word *anukampā*. The prefix *anu* suggests movement towards, and *kampā* actually means trembling. He says: whatever a teacher can do for his students out of *anukampā*, out of this connection with his students, I have done for you.

So this *anukampā* is that point where you have that sense in your own heart of the suffering of the other. It's that connection, whether it's imaginative sympathy or whether it's empathic connection. The other word we use is *karuṇā*, which actually has its root in doing. The word in Sanskrit means doing, but it was also used for holy, it was part of the rituals of the Vedas. So you get this word *karuṇā*, which is actually the action. You might call it the sacrifice or the sacrament.

When we have responded to somebody's suffering, no matter what it is, from the smallest to the most awful, there are two modes: one is passive and one is active. In the passive mode, it's often good enough just to be with the person, not even to say anything. An obvious case would be when the person is either extremely ill and is just there in bed and all you can do is actually accompany them. And of course, when somebody is dying.

What we come across when we have that situation is our sense of powerlessness. That's very difficult for us because we want to do something. But if we are sensitive enough to the situation and to the person, often it's good enough just to be with them, just to accompany them.

When it comes to compassionate action, when you're actually going to do something, our tendency is to try and overdo, to slip into the error of the do-gooder. We've all got it in us, which is when we want to do the good we want to do for your benefit, whether you want it or not. Of course, this really gets up people's noses.

It's a good idea to ask them what they want to do. Even if your suggestion is rejected and even if you know that your suggestion would actually be the better thing to do, we've got to pull back a bit and let the person who's suffering have the last say. When we do over-help like that, perhaps it's coming from some inner feeling of wanting to be esteemed, to be loved, all the usual rubbish that we suffer from.

It's often easier to say what a virtue is by saying what it isn't. So we know it's not do-gooding. These are

reactions that we have when we come across suffering.

The first one would be in an extreme case where the person is really suffering. There you've got to have that sense of courage to be with them. It's very difficult if the person is really in a lot of pain, especially when they're dying. I read a book about this poor woman who was screaming every time towards the end of her life, and eventually the doctor decided to sedate her with the permission of the family. It often takes a bit of courage to be with somebody who's in real pain or suffering.

There are certain situations which might be a work situation, but it can be somebody you're looking after where you have reactions of disgust, where they're sick, where they're suffering from diarrhea, all the impurities of the body manifest. Somehow you have to recognize the disgust and yet still come from the heart of compassion.

We can often be caught unawares when somebody has asked us to do something and we feel messed about. I had my day carefully planned and now they want me to do this and that, especially within a family, and you can feel yourself being angry about that. Again it's being aware of these negative emotions that come up, these negative mental states, and still focusing on what you can do for the person.

Sometimes a person hurts themselves, an accident for instance, and you might be wanting to blame them. So stupid, how could you do that? I remember I once had an assistant here who put the ladder up against the gutter on the decking. The ladder slipped and he just fell flat onto his face almost. Luckily, there was nothing but a bit of a bruise. But I could hear myself saying, well, that was stupid, wasn't it? I didn't say it, no. I then went up and made sure that he was okay. But you've got to be careful.

Of course, if it's somebody close to you, you can feel quite overcome by grief and that can have an immobilizing effect. Again it's just resting with that and trying to come above it and to connect with the person. That way I think we can keep these emotional states at bay. You might have to deal with them afterwards, but not while you're in some situation with them.

You can understand things like panic when, say, a child hurts itself and the parents just panic. Obviously that doesn't help, doesn't help the child, but it's again hopefully bringing that mindfulness, that connection with our own hearts and that reaction and then to rise above it and respond.

There's pity. That's another one which isn't particularly nice. That's coming from a superior position, often because we're trying to guard ourselves against actually connecting with what's happening. It's all "poor thing. I feel so sorry for you. I know how you feel." Often we find that that's because we're a bit afraid of facing our own possible sickness and eventual death.

There can be a sense of relief, like when somebody has a serious illness, as we have in our family, and you can first of all feel the fear. Well, if it's in the family, I might get it. And then a sense of relief: well, it's not me, is it? We have to understand that as just basically coming from this false view of self. Not to get all guilty about that. It's just a reaction. But again, it's this ability to rise above it.

These I've picked up from various things that I've read. There's what's known as empathy bias. So if a nurse, for instance, is in a ward, but has a rather particular connection with one of the patients, then you might find the nurse visiting them slightly more often and not really heeding what somebody is calling from the other side of the ward because they don't particularly like them. So there's always that going on.

Codependency. That's a bit of a problem because if a person is getting a lot of self-esteem from helping, it's very difficult for them to stop. Often they're feeding the person who's actually suffering so that they don't have to stop doing good. I knew a mother whose son was a drug addict and she was always helping him, paying for his rent when he didn't have it and buying food for him. I said to her, "Well, what you're doing is just feeding his habit financially." She says, "Yes, but I'm his mother." She couldn't get over that feeling of guilt if she stopped helping her son, but it would have been the best thing to do.

I think you have to be careful when you are dealing with a long situation of somebody whom you're looking after, perhaps. That's your emotional boundary: to know when you're being taken advantage of, even perhaps abused. So that's something else to be careful about.

Sometimes we find ourselves becoming very involved in a compassionate charity. I'm thinking of people who get very much involved with refugees, on the side completely of the refugees, and they can have a lack of recognizing what it's doing to them. You get that burnout and then a resentment from it, what they call compassion fatigue. I think that's easy to fall into because there's so much bad news. Everywhere you go, there's just bad news, and you can feel your heart going out to various situations and various people. But in the end, you've got to recognize that enough's enough. Stop feeding all the bad news and try and find some good news.

Sometimes overemphasizing that helping people and becoming too attached to somebody might blind us to the fact that we might be, in a sense, not allowing them to reflect upon their own situation and take moral stance about themselves. I'm thinking of ADHD, that hyperactive impulsive behavior. Somebody might, for instance, just get into gambling because of it, and we're being over-compassionate. We're not actually... the problem with medicalizing something is that the person then drops their moral responsibility towards themselves. "Oh well, I'm ADHD" or "I'm on the whatever it is." So it's a case of also recognizing that we might be making excuses for them. We might be therefore avoiding difficult conversations.

All these things are things to be wary of. It's not as though we have to go around with a great big list. Every time we help somebody, you've got to have your list out just in case you're doing something wrong. It's more in the sense of recognizing that when we are being compassionate, there's probably some undertone that's going on there, coming from this wrong sense of ego, this wrong sense of self.

But there are of course great virtues to be had from compassion, and one of them is patience, which we've dealt with.

One of the telltales, I think, of compassion is that you're actually deeply happy about it. This is not the happiness of joy or the happiness of buying an ice cream. This is that sense of an inner worthiness, an inner sense that you're doing the right thing. It's a deeper sense of joy, which I think you've all experienced at some point when we've helped people.

So that's the sign of compassion. We're not supposed to be suffering when you're being compassionate. That would be ridiculous. In fact, this confusion came up when I was in a particular meditation center where they had eventually – it was lay people discussing – they eventually came to the conclusion that the Buddha could not have been compassionate because he had been suffering. How ridiculous that is. So we have to be careful there.

There's the Tibetan practice of *tonglen*, which is all about making that connection with others. Pema Chödrön has a very good meditation up on YouTube, an introduction shall we say. I just want to mention this because it will appear eventually as a tip. It'll be the next one actually, the one for October. And there you'll be able to pick up these connections.

But I do want to mention this one point where the Buddha came across a monk who was actually suffering from dysentery. So he was completely in his excrement. When he saw the sick monk and asked him, "Well, who's attending to you?" He said, "Nobody." And then he said, "Why?" He says, "Well, I don't attend to monks, so the monks don't attend to me."

So he and Ānanda looked after this monk and then he gathered the monks together and he said to them: "Look, you have no mother, you have no father who might tend to you. If you don't tend to one another, then who will tend to you? So whoever would tend to me should tend to the sick."

So that is making them make a connection to the Buddha himself. Whoever is attending to somebody who's sick, you are attending to a Buddha. Now you might not take that literally as the Buddha himself, but to the Buddha within, to that within us which is transcendent.

And then he goes on and gives a whole list of people who should be looking after them. So he was involved in that.

So now I'm going on a bit, I'm afraid. What I want to do now is just do a bit of compassion practice. And I'm going to actually share this with you.

Okay, so these are the blessings that we do here in the morning *puja*. The idea is that as we go through this list, we can bring up a phrase which expresses our compassion. The one that's normally used is "may your sufferings lessen, may all your sufferings come to an end." That would come out of the *Visuddhimagga*, this compendium of Buddhism written by Buddhaghosa in the Middle Ages. Or you can make up some other phrase that makes sense to you, but just for this it might be good just to stay with this one here. And then as I go through the list, just keep repeating that, and then we'll do the six directions. After that we'll just slip into the meditation. You can continue doing it or return to *vipassanā*.

So if we just settle for a moment.

We can bring to mind anyone we know who's having a hard time. At this moment there are people who are suffering from severe physical or mental disease. There are people in the process of dying and those who have died and left grieving family, relatives and friends. There are people going hungry, homeless and destitute. There are those struggling with personal and interpersonal difficulties.

There are all the victims of prejudices, all those caught up in wars and repressive regimes, and those being tortured. There are all the criminals, oppressors and all who willingly do harm. All those suffering from natural disasters and climate crisis. All sentient beings have been cruelly treated and unnecessarily slaughtered. And all who find life meaningless.

Now we can continue with the ten directions. To all beings in front of us who are suffering. All beings behind us. All beings to our left. All beings to our right. All beings below us. All beings above us. And to all beings in all directions.

So feel free to continue this practice or just sit in *vipassanā*.

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