

Compassion in Our Lives

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Good evening. Tonight's talk is about Compassion, about what it is and how it works in our lives. First, I want to briefly tell a story about compassion that shaped the history of Buddhism. A couple centuries after the death of the historical Buddha, there was a disagreement among the monks that resulted in a split in Buddhism.

The resulting Mahayana tradition dropped much of the rules and the suttas of the original Theravada tradition. Just so you're clear, I'm a Theravada teacher, although I initially practiced Zen, part of the Mahayana, for my first 5 years.

A few centuries after this split, a third great tradition developed in Tibet. HH the Dalai Lama often recites his lineage from the Buddha through Mahayana to his Tibetan lineage before he begins teaching.

At the time of the original split, there was a spiritual craze among Buddhists. It added a teaching which the Buddha seems to have assumed we understood, about caring for others. The Buddha said many times in the suttas that he began teaching out of compassion for the suffering, or *dukkha*, of humanity.

The Mahayana monks made compassion a crucial teaching and a key part of their practice. Theravada instead adopted the four Brahmaviharas, the first of which is metta. I teach that compassion is metta's response to the suffering of others, sympathetic joy is its response to their happiness, and equanimity keeps us in balance.

Here in the West there's a lot of crossover among the traditions of Buddhism. In my Zen years I chanted the Bodhisattva vow almost every week. It starts, "Beings are numberless, I vow to awaken with them all." This means that I vowed to keep returning to human life and not enter nirvana as long as anyone on earth suffers, in order to help them. This vow probably led me toward teaching, and I have not renounced it.

Many people in the Mahayana tradition consider Theravada selfish because it doesn't consider compassion the sole focus of caring for others. This is the reason for the name Mahayana, which means, "Greater Vehicle." Globalization has not entirely erased this prejudice.

Truly, the Mahayana does place a lot of emphasis on compassion, and I often think Theravadins should do so a little more, too. So that's why I wanted to give this talk tonight. Not in order to say anything new, but to remind us how important the capacity for compassion is for our wellbeing, and for that of others, and the entire world's.

The experience of compassion

Despite the traditional differences between the Mahayana's and Theravada's notions of compassion, it seems to work pretty much the same. Compassion isn't just a concept, but an experience, a key capacity we have as human beings to act outside of selfish motivations. When we feel compassion, we drop a lot of self-absorption, freeing an uplifting energy that enables us to approach things that would otherwise repel or daunt us – like the sights, sounds and smells of illness or great mental suffering.

When we feel compassion, we are totally present with another being, grounded in that moment. We are just who we are, with no thought of what we want or how we appear, just bringing all our attention to this being and how we can help. Compassion enables us to see others in their full nature, without judgment or preconception. It doesn't give us the power to read their minds, but when we are filled with compassion, the extent and intensity of our awareness does exceed our ordinary perceptions.

I took the Bodhisatva vow almost three decades ago and still live by it. Compassion feels like a magnet in my heart, pulling me toward the dukkha in others. It can be in the moment when I automatically hand people the change they're missing at a cash register, or in the decades I've devoted to practice, study and freely teaching the dharma.

I've been filled with compassion in prisons, hospice wards, living rooms, recovery homes – even when all I can do is acknowledge someone's dukkha and be present with it. There's something magical about being present with suffering, whether it's physical or mental. Compassion does not hurt us. Instead, it holds suffering in a field of lovingkindness that gives pain room to arise and eventually pass away.

I once spent several hours with a dying woman who was moaning or crying out in pain because the nurse couldn't reach the doctor to change this woman's morphine dose and give her relief.

The woman's nephew and his wife were with her, and they were suffering terribly at witnessing her pain, and their impending loss of her in their lives. This woman's cries bitterly pierced my heart. I felt her pain was a ridiculous cruelty perpetrated by the law and the medical profession so I, too, had a lot of dukkha.

But I was there to practice compassion. So, I consciously tried to open my heart wide enough to hold all that was true in that moment – the end of this being's life, her terrible pain, her relatives' anguish and my own frustration. It was a lot for my usually little heart to hold. But as I felt my heart begin to open to these terrible truths, it grew. My heart felt split wide open and huge, holding all these forms of suffering. There was nothing I could do to change the situation, but I could fit all that dukkha into my heart and hold it with calm, and peace and love.

The three of us sat around the dying woman, soothing her forehead and holding her hands while her nephew and niece talked about what a wonderful person she was. The whole scene settled down, including the woman's moans. When it was time for me to leave for the night, I kissed her goodbye and returned the hugs of her nephew and niece. We were all quiet for a moment, and I left with just as much sadness as ever, but it was held in a heart that felt it could hold all the world. My heart still can contract, but compassion always makes it expand and feel at peace, confident that I can hold whatever is true at any moment.

Not all situations that evoke compassion are as dramatic as the one I just described. It can go from being touched by a "lost dog" poster to standing near the widow at a funeral. We usually search for something we can do to help, but compassion gives us the calm to see and accept when there's nothing we can or should do, while still remaining ready to act if we do see some to help without causing unintended harm.

When I watch people observe others suffering, I can see on their faces the differences between horror, pity and compassion. Those who feel compassion might show sadness, but I can see they're also holding it with a kind of peace. Buddhist friends describe their experiences with compassion as times of growth, and surprising calm.

Compassion in Relationships

Often, when we have any kind of ongoing relationship with people, there are times when we annoy each other. We're such multifaceted beings. We're like rough-cut diamonds with pointy places everywhere, and we can easily get scratchy with each other. But these differences can also be the riches of a relationship. So, when we're at odds with someone we're fond of, it helps to reach into our compassionate hearts, because at those moments we are both experiencing dukkha.

It's important to remember that even though we generate our own dukkha, we aren't '*to blame*' for it. We are actually suffering *from* it, and we deserve compassion. That does not mean we can expect others to feel compassion for us when we're annoying them. But if we turn that around, we can see that when others bother us, we should try to be compassionate.

Why? Well, the short, easy answer is that compassion feels so much better than irritation. But when we remember that at least one of us, and probably both are having some dukkha, it lets us hold our relationship in the arms of acceptance and love. If we didn't care for those close to us, they couldn't annoy us so much.

Seeing this when we're upset with a friend, or lover or relative can let us to stay present with them and hold kind – or at least *accepting* – feelings in our hearts. The acceptance part of compassion gives us the ability to recognize when we cannot help others or ourselves. This is such a valuable lesson I've learned in working with the dying and people with addictions. You make the effort and then let go of expecting any particular result.

Sometimes being fully present means saying a heartfelt goodbye. This capacity lets us recognize when a relationship is just not working. We may need to be gently frank with the other person to seek a way to change our relationship, and if we cannot, then let it go. Compassion never requires that we abandon our boundaries, only that we maintain them with care for ourselves and others.

Relatives and co-workers can be especially annoying. We did not choose to have these people in our lives and we probably can't walk away from them. I've tried to be friends with people out of compassion, and it has never worked.

It does help to remember that just like us, difficult people suffer. In fact, most people who upset or harm others are acting out of their own dukkha. Opening to compassion for them won't change them, but it will probably make it a bit easier to be around them.

Compassion in Our Lives

Compassion is not limited to specific events and our responses to them. It's a capacity that's part of our being, like our muscles. It gets stronger the more we exercise it. In my hospice training I was taught to: 1) intentionally open to the suffering of others, 2) remain mindful of how I am affected, while 3) focusing on those in distress, 4) with an attitude of acceptance. We can also incline the mind and heart toward compassion during meditation by sending metta to those who suffer.

Compassion can become a guiding principle in our lives. It provides a powerful basis for commitment. Out of compassion, I wanted to help people who were dying and made a one-year commitment to serve as a volunteer with Zen Hospice Project. I ended up staying three and a half years, then helped various individuals in their final months for another year and a half.

I'm often asked to counsel people who are confronting death or loss and I always agree to. Even when it seems I haven't actually done them any good other than the comfort of my caring presence, the experience of feeling and acting on compassion fulfills me in a way nothing else can.

People in the helping professions often draw their determination and energy from compassion for their students, patients, etc. When we're motivated by compassion, our effort is its own reward, even if, for whatever reason, it doesn't seem to help someone.

Compassion is also at the root of our overall practice, as well as underlying most of the Perfections – those qualities that lead to Liberation. I know people who pursue meditation in order to be less annoying to others! Our practice makes us more considerate, more understanding and less impulsive.

We become active forces for making this a better world. This is why at the end of sangha meetings, we usually "dedicate the merit" of our practice to all other beings. Our meditation

and the way we live our lives should be beneficial to us, and to all those whom our lives impact in any way.

Thank you