

# 9

---

## COMPASSION

---

**L**ike all insights in Buddhism, compassion (Sanskrit *karuna*) is felt. The feeling of compassion brings a natural sense of richness that expands limitlessly. Accompanying that richness is an unconditional confidence, one that is not confident about anything in particular, but simply abides in confidence.

This state of compassion is unafraid to extend itself for the benefit of others. It appreciates others, feels their suffering, and cares about them without contrivance. When the compassionate mind sees another human, it feels a natural attraction to that person, like a plant turning toward the sun. Also, in advanced insight the question of worthiness never arises, so mind makes no distinctions about who it helps, much like good physicians aid anyone who requires their care.

In conjunction with compassion, wisdom plays a valuable role. Wisdom sees situations clearly, so it does not allow others to be smothered with too much care, or frozen without it. Together with compassion, wisdom provides the perfect complement for benefiting others.

We should not mistake authentic compassion for its counterfeits. Compassion without wisdom, for example, has been called “idiot compassion,” and the unexamined charity this phrase points to is quite prevalent in modern society. I remember a food fund that was soliciting donations at a table outside a food market I use. I paused in front of the table and shared with the lady that I didn’t trust charities. She said that I could simply give food rather than money, but not wanting to do the extra work, I donated money. Lo and behold, that same year the local news reported that the CEO of the food fund had stolen money from it. That was the last straw for me. Now, If I give to the needy, I donate food or goods, not money. I’ve been burned enough by idiot compassion.

Moreover, compassion is not a function of the amount of money given, or of any other such external metric, but of the purity of the giver’s intent. Egoless compassion is better than money, if it acknowledges the worth of others, smiles, says hello, and asks them how they are feeling. Caring in small, everyday ways is as good as gold.

Lastly, authentic compassion never has an agenda. Any whiff of ego-serving blights the benefits compassion provides. This is one reason why emptiness is so important. Only the total spaciousness of emptiness, without its concern for self and other, can lead to unsullied caring.

We all feel compassion from time to time, but for it to become wholly what we are, we will have to progress through a number of stages. The first inkling of caring emerges in meditation, where by calmly observing mind, we begin to develop a relationship with it. Gradually, we understand negativity to be just another occurrence in mind, rather than something that harshly defines who we are, and we relax more and become less rigid toward ourselves.

As we relax further, and begin to accept what occurs in mind, we find that its upheavals become more workable, and we begin to develop a relationship with it that naturally evolves into kindness toward ourselves. This is the beginning of compassion, and by our unconditionally accepting who or what we are, it begins to emerge.

As we continue to lose our fixed attitudes toward ourselves, we may even discover that the holder of those attitudes has disappeared. Then we discover the kindest thing we can do for ourself: see that we don't have one.

Making friends with one's self—and, especially, seeing that it doesn't exist—frees us to turn to the needs of others. Not until the experience of emptiness, however, can we do so completely. With emptiness, our heart, along with all else, becomes empty and free of attachments. As Reginald Ray says in his excellent book, *Secrets of the Vajra World*:

---

This empty heart has nothing to say for itself, nothing to assert, nothing even to hope for or—as the *Heart Sutra* says—to fear. However, such an empty heart is one that is ever available to others. It is one without an agenda, but with a ready tenderness and responsiveness to another person's suffering and confusion. A realization of emptiness, then, is the precondition for genuine compassion. And such an empty heart, though desolate from ego's standpoint, is an expression of the wisdom that sees the utter and unbreachable freedom of our essential being.

*Secrets of the Vajra World*, 96.

---

And so, with emptiness and an empty heart, the conditions are established for complete compassion. Empty heart has no bias, so it is not influenced by circumstances; as such, it remains open and responsive to the needs of others. Furthermore,

emptiness in general is endowed with complete freedom, and those who enjoy that freedom and the joy that arises from it naturally wish to share their good fortune with others. As an example, the sole reason why Buddhas devote themselves to others is to help them attain enlightenment and realize its benefits. The enlightened mind of a Buddha contains such immeasurable freedom and richness that simply being it fulfills all their needs, and they would never leave it except for their commitment to share it with others.

As mentioned previously, compassion is, along with wisdom, one of the two wings of the bird of enlightenment. These two wings are what we truly are when enlightened mind transcends its obscurations. With both compassion and wisdom, the bird of enlightenment has the wings it needs to fly, as the Kagyu master Khenpo Tsultrim Gyamtso Rinpoche explains:

---

When the unsound state consisting in the deluded state of mind has been eliminated, in other words, when the knowledge which realizes nonself has been brought to final perfection, this is buddhahood. Or we could look at it from the other angle, when great compassion imbued with loving kindness has been brought to final

perfection, the name “buddha” is used to describe the person who has accomplished this.

The result is that through the power inherent in compassion one works for the benefit of beings and through the power inherent in finally perfected knowledge one comprehends fully and in their infinite variety the ways of benefiting beings in individual cases.

*Indestructible Truth*, 443.

---

In this egoless setting, caring manifests in surprising ways. My son and I, on separate occasions, received teachings from the same Vajrayana guru. As a result of his blessings, we both then walked out of his talk and stopped to interact with strangers—myself a homeless person, himself a woman with a physical deformity—something neither of us does normally. The teacher’s compassion had transferred itself to us, revealing where we had to go next on the path to enlightenment.

Sometimes, compassion takes the form of a reprimand. This is unpleasant for the recipient, but truly compassionate people will employ censure when necessary. I remember one occasion when my teacher visited the meditation center where I lived. I had recently broken up with a girlfriend, and I was

not talking to her. As my teacher walked down our greeting line, where my ex-girlfriend stood next to me with perhaps a dozen people in line on either side, he shook hands with everyone before me and everyone after me, but not me. The reprimand was clear: “Do you see what it feels like when someone ignores you?” He could not possibly have known of my situation with my girlfriend, as he had just arrived by plane. What he did was spontaneous, just another indication of his magic.

A proviso is in order about compassion with an edge: we must be careful not to fall into justifying our own harsh behavior as compassionate. “Tough love” is sometimes trotted out in Buddhist circles, but I always have reservations about it. I suspect a lot of aggression is inflicted on students by teachers in the guise of “tough love.” In any case, corrective compassion must only be employed by realized beings. For all others, kindness should be the order of the day. And if it becomes impossible to avoid correcting another, we should do so with the knowledge that a sharp knife needs but a small amount of pressure to cut.

My own experience of compassion has developed over the years, in concert with specific events in my life. Over time, I have become more awake and less caught up in my mental feed, and as I see more clearly, I begin to penetrate the implications of situations.

Noticing two people sitting humbly at a lunch counter pierces my heart—not because of something they do, but because of their unadorned humanity.

Also, as I progress on the path, I become bigger—limitless, in fact—and caring about another no longer feels like it requires a piece of me that I can't afford. I have become wealthy enough, just existing, to share my benefits with others. None of this evolves intellectually but as a felt experience accompanying greater insight.

I have become a warmer person generally, but sometimes compassion comes to me in flashes that generate an impetus to do something. A small, crippled man walking along the highway prompts an immediate pull-over to give him a ride. Although my experience of compassion is growing through the years, I feel the process will never end, and that I will never be compassionate enough. Nevertheless, I persist, and I am pleased with any signs of progress.

Even the early steps of caring are a boon to ourselves and others. Those of us who don't like ourselves—burdened by our looks, lack of education, lack of love, money needs, prior traumas, or countless other problems—struggle with our pain, and so have little time for others. As a former physician, I know the time pressure involved in caring for others, and how easily we can slight people who would like to share

more of their lives with us. Sometimes, just a few more minutes away from our own needs and some attentive listening can mean a great deal to others.

More developed compassion is the fast path to nonduality, because it entails no division between the one who experiences compassion and the objects of it. What was once another's problem becomes ours as well. I saw this sensitivity develop in me as a physician on the Buddhist path. Initially, I felt my purpose was to diagnose a patient's problem and treat him or her appropriately. This was true, but as I progressed in both Buddhism and medicine, I realized there was much more to provide. I began to open more to my patients, and understand more of the nuances of what they felt. They immediately sensed that they were now people to me—not just diagnoses—and that I cared about them. What they felt then was often as helpful as what I prescribed.

Of the countless approaches that have been devised to make our lives better, compassion is one that actually works. When it is unconditional, it can change the world. If it were universal, problems like crime and destitution would cease to exist, and humanity would truly become one. Sadly, though, we often find compassion missing where it should be most abundant, such as in our religions. Despite having the examples of Jesus and Buddha, we

practice religion uncompassionately, to the point of killing others because of their beliefs. However, with a true understanding of the nature of reality, along with caring, the bird of enlightenment can fly to all spiritual traditions and peoples of our planet, bringing them the loving kindness and compassion they so badly need.