

Dharmette: Conditions for Compassion

Transcribed and edited from a short talk by Gil Fronsdal on November 2, 2011

I've had compassion on my mind and in my heart lately. A beautiful aspect of being human is our ability to meet each other with compassion, to be caring and empathetic with each other – with a certain kind of acceptance that receives another person with kind, caring attention. I think the world needs a lot more compassion. The idea of cultivating and expressing compassion in the world is one of the great ideals of Buddhism.

But then the question is, “How do we develop compassion? How do we make it more available, or have it be a place that we come from more often? How do we do it in a way that is not artificial, contrived, or insincere? How do we do it in such a way that we're not afraid?” Some people are afraid of compassion, so they're reluctant. We may feel like: “If we're compassionate, then we're being naïve, and we won't really see clearly what's here. If we're compassionate, then we open our heart and house to people who are going to take advantage of us. Or it's going to be too difficult. Or if we're compassionate, then we won't be realistic or have proper boundaries with people.”

How is it that we develop compassion? How do we make it more a part of our life? One important way is not to do it directly – not to try to wind yourself up and be compassionate, but rather create the conditions where you're more likely to be compassionate. There are conditions you can foster that make it much more likely that your heart and your empathy will respond.

One of the simple things is to be present for people – to bring mindful attention to others, and take them in. Often the simple thing is to be present, open, and pay attention. Then if the situation warrants compassion, it will come forth. But, if you're busy, distracted, keeping up a kind of surface banter with someone, and not fully taking the person in, then there's not going to be much space for compassion. It can be as simple as how we stand in line at the supermarket checkout counter. I can see in myself that there are different ways I can be there. I can be there, mostly focusing on getting out of there, and hardly notice the clerk. Or I can stand on both feet with the intention to really be there, and be present for the clerk as well. Sometimes the clerk doesn't notice me. That's okay, but I'm taking the person in. It doesn't take a lot of time to get a feeling, and let someone really register. But, it takes attention and intent. So, when we're present with intention or attention, our compassion is much more likely to be evoked.

You can go further in getting to know people. You can ask simple questions that aren't too probing to find out how they are, and perhaps they'll let you know. As you get to know people more deeply and find out what's going on for them, your compassion might arise. It's a very useful thing sometimes with difficult co-workers. If you have difficulty with them, you can see them only through the filter of the difficulty you have. “That terrible person. That person's a schmuck.” But, then for some reason you end of up in the snack area together, and you have a conversation. You say, “What's going on with you these days?” And they go through a litany. “Well, my wife is dying, and my father is in hospice care. My kid has leukemia.” Suddenly you realize, “Now maybe I understand why this person has been the way they are.” Maybe now in spite of the person being kind of a jerk, you'll be willing to soften a little bit around the person, be more accepting, and have some compassion. Trying to get to know the person is a really good thing. It's not like you have to become compassionate, but compassion is more likely to happen if you do that kind of homework.

Another thing that can be really supportive for the arising of compassion is that you feel safe. It's very hard to feel compassion if you don't feel safe. So the question is, “How do you best feel safe?” Sometimes the environment or situation is not safe, and maybe you have to get out of it, or change what's going on. For example, someone's yelling at you and you say, “I don't feel safe when you yell at me. Can you stop?” Or sometimes in terms of practice, safety has a lot to do with what goes on in your own mind – your own fears, anxieties, concerns, and projections. Is there is some inner work that you can do that will help you to feel safer? If you're anxious a lot, it's hard to be compassionate. Anxiety is mostly about inner work and resolving something. As opposed to fear, anxiety is said to be mostly about the imagination – imagining the future and what might happen. To be caught up in the world of what might happen because you're anxious is not that healthy or helpful. So to feel safe by resolving and taking careful look at our anxieties is important.

A third condition that supports the arising of compassion is to spend some time becoming familiar with all the obstacles you have to feeling compassion. That might seem like bad news, because you're supposed to be compassionate, right? But, are you afraid to open up? Do you have certain attachments that get in the way of feeling compassion? Is there self-preoccupation? In your relationships with other people, are you really caught up in yourself too much? Is your focus mostly on yourself rather than on the other person that keeps compassion from being evoked? Do you walk around with resentment, jealousy, or anger? Do you feel like life is a competition? All these kinds of attitudes can get in the way. So, by being mindful of these obstacles, and understanding and resolving them, then we're more likely to be compassionate when compassion is called for, because those things have been taken care of in some way.

Another condition for being compassionate is being relaxed, because being tense and stressed is not a helpful condition for compassion to arise. If you want to be more compassionate, relax. You may have a bit more control over your level of relaxation than you have over how compassionate you are. So, if you want to be compassionate, perhaps you can do it indirectly by becoming calmer.

Still another condition that supports compassion is spending time reflecting and thinking about compassion – appreciating it, thinking about situations where you've been the recipient of someone's compassion and it felt good, and thinking of times when you've been compassionate and it felt good. If you remind yourself to consider compassion, talk to friends about compassion, read books about it, then you're much more likely to have it close at hand. You might be in a difficult situation, but because you were thinking about compassion a couple of hours earlier, you're more likely that it's a habit to think about it and have it. So, if you'd like to be more compassionate, think about it, reflect on it, read about it more, and then it will probably arise at the right time.

What I'm trying to convey is that you don't have to be passive in regard to how much compassion you have. You don't have to leave your compassion to chance – that somehow you bumble through life, and sometimes you're compassionate and sometimes you're not. Who knows why? It's a mystery. You can have some say over the frequency or the presence of compassion in your life. It may be hard to evoke it intentionally – just making yourself compassionate. But, if compassion is an important quality you'd like to have more of in your life, you could explore what conditions you might put in place so that it can arise more often. There may be a lot you can do about the conditions. Is compassion an important enough value for you that you're willing to make other changes in your life, so that it has more of a chance to come forth?

What you'll probably find is that the more compassion you feel and experience, the more it benefits you. Perhaps even that reflection on how you benefit from compassion will be another spur to pursue it more in your life. It's a beautiful thing.

Those are my thoughts this morning.