

2020-04-30: Anukampā (4 of 5) The Continual Act of Care

Thu, 4/30 9:07AM • 16:30

SUMMARY KEYWORDS

care, caregiver, buddha, compassion, word, teachings, offered, people, fundamental, friendliness, heart, human, activity, translate, meditation practice, sense, talk, broader, suffering, spiritual

SPEAKERS

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I'll continue this morning, the fourth morning, to talk about the Buddha's teachings or discussion of 'anukampā.' I tentatively translate this word as care. In doing so, I'm bringing into Buddhist language a new English word, which is very rare. I don't really know or recognize that it's ever really been used, certainly not prominently in the translations of the Buddha's teachings from Pali and many other of the translations coming out of Asian Buddhism. Why English translators haven't chosen the word care is a topic in itself. I don't know the answer to that. But by translating 'anukampā' as care, I am connecting it consciously with a very simple, ordinary, common word used in the English language, which as I think about it has a humbleness to it. But it's really central and important in so many central places in our lives. We talk about health care. If you go to a hospital, there's all kinds of departments that have to do with care. There's the intensive care unit. There is palliative care. There is spiritual care where hospital chaplains work. We use the word caregiver. The word caregiver in English certainly can be someone who's a health caregiver. But a caregiver is also someone who offers childcare or a caregiver of the elderly in nursing home care. A caregiver can be someone who is unpaid, simply someone at home, a family member, who has become a caregiver of someone at home who needs care. The English word care often can mean to care for someone's needs. Those needs are physical, emotional, psychological, spiritual, and social. We have all these needs as human beings. To offer care for all of who we are. What's nice for me about the word care in this comprehensive way in which it's used is that it's not just caring for people because they suffer. And not just caring for people because they have the potential of suffering and to help them not suffer. But there's a much broader sense of caring for people, because they're people. They're humans. We have needs. We have possibilities, and we want to live in a world of mutual care. This idea of caring is so central to human culture, human societies, but it's often forgotten as people become adults. I've known people who only when they had children themselves were surprised to realize that their parents did the same for them. The tremendous amount of caregiving that's offered to a baby, caregiving that's offered for a child as

they're a growing up, hopefully that's what's offered. Sometimes the tables are turned. When parents become elderly, then it's the children who are the caregivers, who are offering care in return. A lot of this happens quietly within families. It's not big public news that the couple down the street have been staying up all night caring for their crying, sick baby. It's a remarkable act of care that this happens in all kinds of ways. We care for people when they're happy. We provide them with more opportunities. One of the great ways of caring for our children as they grow up in our communities are all the people who volunteer to be sports coaches, soccer coaches, baseball coaches, and volleyball coaches. It's offering care and creating a healthy environment to grow up in. The word care I see as being broader in application and concern than the word compassion. This is what we seem to see in the teachings of the Buddha. That as important as compassion is in Buddhism, in ancient teachings of the historical Buddha, the word 'karuṇā,' often translated as compassion, is really reserved for a very deep meditation practice and a state of mind and heart that's radiant, abundant, and expansive. But that word is not chosen, not used in terms of expressing the motivation for doing good in the world, supporting people in the world. The word that's used for that is 'anukampā.' As I've been saying, it has another meaning than just caring for people suffering and orienting around avoiding causing suffering. It's caring for people's welfare and happiness - a broader term. The Buddha never talks about cultivating 'anukampā.' It seems that he just assumes that it's there. In that sense, the Buddha in the suttas seems to suggest that 'anukampā' is what's there when one has abandoned ill-will and hatred. "One abides with 'anukampā' for the world," the Buddha says. "One abides having 'anukampā', having care for the world, when one has abandoned ill-will and hatred." This idea that we're letting go of something - ill-will, hatred. Those are big terms, powerful words, but they also represent in very subtle small ways in which that ill-will might be there or even hatred in little frustration, irritation or annoyance we have with people or ourselves. The slightest little bit can be there in aversion to people, things or ourselves, criticalness even. When the mind or heart has really shed its' ill-will, hatred, aversion, irritation, and tendency to complain, really becomes quiet and open from this, it's then that 'anukampā' for the world arises. In this sense, 'anukampā' is not doing something. It's not conceiving and thinking about "May all beings be well. May all beings be free of suffering." It's almost like the absence of something allows this part of our heart to shine, to be here. That's certainly my experience that the more I've shed, settled, been open through meditation practice, and quieter and become more sensitive to it, there seems to be arising a care that sometimes takes the expression of compassion and loving-kindness or friendliness. But that the caringness is more fundamental. The sense of caring, the capacity to care, the feeling of tenderness, of resonance with people and that movement is broader and more simple. It's a humble thing, because it doesn't come from active thinking and reflecting. So when someone is a caregiver in a hospital, someone comes into ICU and is sick, we don't ask or even expect that the health worker has to love the person who's there or has to have lots of compassion for the person. They might have lots of compassion. But we do expect them to care for the person. It's possible to care and be caring for people for whom one does not have a particular strong feeling of friendliness towards them. That's not automatic. Or that one hasn't cultivated or touches into compassion or reflects on compassion. Care can be a much simpler, more direct activity that doesn't require as much from us as compassion, friendliness or loving-kindness does. I don't want to diminish the value of compassion and loving-kindness. They're fantastic and powerful parts of

human life, but they do require a little more from us. To have it in the forefront all the time and call on it in different typical situations might be for some people more difficult to do than to simply have a very simple, ordinary caringness to care for what is there. Care is so much a part of human life and central that maybe we are not human beings, but at the heart, we're human carings. That care is so fundamental to what it means to be a human being. We're social creatures and social animals. We depend on the care of others. They depend on the care of us in some way that maybe care is the most fundamental thing of a life. Maybe it's more fundamental than the ideas of that we're either matter or spirit. That there's some essence inside of us. It's a spiritual essence or we're not spiritual. It's kind of a material aspect of human life. That this criteria and that approach is certainly not the way in which the Buddha talks about human life. But what if what's fundamental, is not some essence, not some core aspect of who we are that is a thing. But rather, the fundamental aspect of what it means to a human being is caring, is to care. Over and over again, we see in the teachings of the Buddha directly, but also mostly indirectly, he expresses care. He's caring. He's caring about the relationships between people. So much of the teachings of the Buddha had been interpreted to be ethical in nature, because they have to do with caring relationships, taking care of how we relate to people, that we relate to people so we don't harm them, and we don't harm ourselves. The Buddha said that one of the motivations for not harming people is not 'karuṇā' - not compassion - but in his teaching at least, the motivation for not harming people is in fact 'anukampā' - this caring. Perhaps caring is a little bit of an activity, an action. That goes along to the Buddha's tendency to understand human beings in terms of their actions, not in terms of some fundamental essence that we are this way. But, as if 'anukampā' is an activity, an action more fundamental to who we are, it comes from letting go of all the things that get in the way, including conceit and self-preoccupation. It's almost as if that 'anukampā' - caring - can be or this is my experience is not something that I do. But it's something that is done out of me and out of my heart when I'm most free, settled, calm, open, and present for the experience. 'Anukampā' is not a thing. It's the activity of being human when we're most grounded, centered, and quiet. It's simple. It's humble, because it's not connected to the conceptions and ideas of who we are. It's not a thing, but it is something we can allow for, to allow for the heart's capacity to care. To let ourselves become human carings, human carers. We become the caretakers and caregivers of the world. Not because we should, not because it's an obligation, but because it's the fundamental functioning of a liberated and free heart and mind. So to care. To care for the world. To care for our relationships to others. It's a beautiful thing. I hope that I don't have to convince you. What I really hope is that you're inspired in meditation practice or in just the practice of mindfulness to discover underneath the layers of reactivity, fear, tension, anxiety, desires, and attachments that we might have, that there exists a functioning, an activity, a movement, an action of flow out of us, which maybe is 'anukampā.' Maybe you'll choose a different word to translate it other than care, and that's fine. We're not sure exactly how these words are going to be translated. What's important is this fundamental, humble, beautiful qualities of being that we allow to operate from us, from this deep dharmic place inside. Thank you for the chance to talk this way and think about it. We'll continue with one more talk on 'anukampā' tomorrow. Thank you.