

Brahma Viharas IV : Compassion
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Good evening, bodhisattvas.

We've been talking for the last several weeks about the Brahma Viharas, the Heavenly Abodes or Boundless States of heart-mind in traditional Buddhism. So far we've gone over sympathetic joy and equanimity, which leaves us compassion and lovingkindness to talk about. I'll begin talking about compassion tonight.

I want to take a bit of a different look at compassion. When the word compassion is said we tend to think of something like empathy : the ability to either feel what someone else is feeling or to imagine what it must be like to feel what they're feeling. That's certainly true — there's no question that that's an aspect of compassion. There's something else : the passion part. Another way to think about compassion is as our willingness to bring our passion to the situation.

Here's what I mean. First of all, there are passions and passions. We're not talking about bringing everything we feel into any situation. There's a kind of passion which is any intense emotion, what we would usually call either positive or negative : anger, love, sexual desire, fear, or anything that gets a grip on us. It can be wild, chaotic, and out of control when we're what the Greeks called 'possessed' by someone or something in that moment. I think the way the Greeks thought about passion is helpful — that the uncontrolled, strong feeling was like being possessed by a god. So if you flash with rage, they would say, "Oh, you're possessed by Ares, the god of war" in that moment. Or if you're feeling an uprush of jealousy, Hera, the goddess of jealousy, is possessing you. The Greeks thought that there wasn't a whole lot you could do about that except tie yourself to the mast of a ship or lock yourself in a room until it passed, because in some sense you weren't there anymore but in the grip of something much bigger than yourself.

Probably everyone in this room has had a feeling like that once or twice in your life — a feeling bigger than yourself where you are suddenly not in control. That's a difficult situation which I don't recommend; instead we want to acknowledge that our compassion is often

called upon or invited in just those moments when things are most confused and difficult. Usually we're responding to that kind of passion — those kinds of deep, chaotic, and out-of-control emotions — in someone else or some group of other people. Situations of compassion can be bloody and muddy and confusing, just like those feelings that we're familiar with in ourselves. They can be much more like a painting by Goya than one by Vermeer. So it's not good to bring fire to the bonfire if what you're trying to do is to put the bonfire out.

There is another way of considering passion. One of the stereotypes of Zen that causes me the most pain is the one that says it's all about *not* having passion : somehow eliminating your passion or reducing it down so that everything is very smooth. I'm not so interested in that. What I *am* interested in is a kind of passion that doesn't have that quality of possession but has the other way the Greeks said you can relate to the gods, which is that they can inspire you. The gods can inspire you to do heroic deeds or write beautiful music, whatever it is, and that's a different kind of passion. It's a deep feeling state, full of energy and life, and it might be out of control in the best way, like when you're creating art and you have the feeling that *I'm not doing this, something is doing this with me*. How glorious that is.

So it's not about control or not-control, but it is something about being in it. You're there. You're participating. There is a collaboration between you and the gods. The result of that collaboration can be a deep feeling of passion, of caring for something, of something being really important that you're willing to commit to and dedicate yourself to.

That's the kind of passion that can be helpful to bring to a situation, remembering that situations which call for our compassion are often troubled ones. One of the old Chinese koan teachers said, "The ship of compassion does not sail on pure waves." What I think he meant was that if you have pure waves and smooth waters, you don't need a ship of compassion. Things are okay. It's exactly those moments when things get difficult that the ship of compassion is wonderful to see heaving into sight around a promontory of land.

So that's the first thing, to not necessarily think of it as a state of calm or lack of feeling. Maybe sometimes it is, but it doesn't have to be; it can be something we're bringing a lot of our own feeling and concern to.

That brings me to the second thing, which has to do with defining compassion as empathy. Surely there is a component of empathy in compassion, but if compassion is dependent on

empathy, dependent on our ability to either feel what someone else is feeling, or to imagine what they're feeling, then speaking for myself, I'm in trouble, because I don't empathize with everything. I look around the world today and I can't feel my way into everything everybody is doing out there. There are things I don't understand, things for which I don't find the corresponding place in me. So if my compassion is dependent on my empathy, I'm out of luck.

We tend to think of compassion as our ability to feel with the suffering of others; I want to suggest that the 'feeling with' is not just feeling with suffering; it's possible that it's something deeper that gets us out of that problem of whether we can feel empathy or not. That something is the ability to feel our common humanity with others. I can do that with anyone and anything anywhere. I can, in response to pretty much anything, find in me how it's so poignant being human; it's so terrible and so beautiful being human sometimes. That's not dependent on my ability to understand what that person is doing or feeling, or what's going on for them, because I'm connecting underneath that at the level of this being the poignancy of humanity; this is our shared humanness.

Here's a story that has all of these elements in it. A few years ago I was working with a man who was a very alive, powerful-in-the-world person, and he was feeling tremendous sorrow for the first time in his life. It really knocked him back; it was not a place he was used to being. We were working with the sorrow over a long period of time, and he was willing to stay with it, to not try to fix it or jump out of it, week after week, month after month. One day he said, "I was sitting with a group of people, I looked around, and I noticed that everybody's chest was rising and falling just a little bit as they breathed. I thought, *This is something that all creatures do.*" In that moment he could not get out of his sorrow, but could, from the depths of his sorrow, see the poignancy of all living beings whose chests rise and fall a little bit as they breathe, and something began to shift. It's not like he threw off his crutches, stood up, and walked. He saw that his sorrow was not something he needed to fix. Right next to sorrow in his heart, for the first time, was an understanding of the poignancy of life. Without the sorrow, he never would have felt the poignancy.

Was it wrong, was it bad to feel sorrow? Hard to say. Should we have patched him up right away and given him antidepressants? But there was something tremendously valuable there, because feeling the sorrow — lying down on the dark earth when that was the invitation, listening to the small voices he didn't usually hear — opened up a completely

different relationship with life for him. There's something in there about compassion. He didn't do anything. He wasn't trying to help anybody. He didn't particularly try to feel what anybody else was feeling. He just stayed with his own sorrow.

Because it's impossible for us to deal with other people's feelings if we can't deal with our own. That's self-evident, but in terms of compassion it makes it difficult, because if we are not at peace with our own tumultuous feelings, then in any situation where compassion is called upon we're going to be busy worrying about how we're feeling. If I'm not comfortable being afraid, if I'm uncomfortable not understanding, if I'm not comfortable with any of these states, then when I'm in this state when someone needs my help, I'm going to be worried about my discomfort or my fear or my judgment. *Again with this! Can't you do something different for a change?* All that kind of stuff. So we first have to have a comfort with our own feeling states and then an understanding that our own feeling states aren't the most important thing happening in this situation.

If there is a situation that's calling for our compassion, the most important thing is not how we feel about it. There's something going on that's more important, which doesn't mean that we ignore what we're feeling, it means that we recognize that we're complicated and capable of feeling anger and compassion at the same time, or fear and compassion at the same time. You can be upset with someone and still feel compassionate towards them, and still do something compassionate. We are capable of that. The simple thing there is that the fear, the anger, the impatience, whatever our reaction is, doesn't have pride of place. It doesn't become the most important thing. It's *one* thing rising and falling in the situation. We're aware of it, we acknowledge it, but we don't let it take over. We don't become possessed by it.

So we might think of compassion as something other than a matter of giving a commodity to someone who needs it. We're the giver and they're the receiver, so the compassion is located with them, but the thing we want to be compassionate about is them in their situation and us in our situation, so all of that is taken into account.

When I think about the way people talk about compassion, it's almost always the absence of compassion. We're almost always realizing, *I wish I could have felt more compassion but I couldn't.* It's interesting that we're mostly noticing it in its absence. That's because we have an unrealistic idea of what compassion is : it has to be pure; we can't have any negative feelings about it; we have to have a perfect empathy with the situation. If we're falling short of that, it's

not really compassion, we think. But we can feel compassion even when we don't understand the situation, even when the situation makes us tremendously uncomfortable. That doesn't destroy the possibility of compassion; our willingness to be there anyway is compassion. As soon as we think, *I'm willing to move with my discomfort, with my lack of understanding, with my frustration; I'm willing anyway to show up for this*, we have already stepped out on the path of compassion. We're already walking it. It doesn't have to be a perfect, crystalline object we hand to someone. It's our willingness to show up, stay open, listen, and be willing to have our mind changed — even despite our discomfort or our lack of empathy in the situation. This becomes possible when we change our sense of what compassion is from the ability to feel empathy to the ability to feel the humanness of the situation, to feel our common humanity. Then we can step out on that path anytime, because it's not dependent on anything. All it is dependent on is the recognition, the feeling with, our humanity.

Another theme of the summer has been noticing where we feel special, either in our virtues or in our sufferings, and the way we act or judge ourselves in terms of *How are we doing on the specialness meter? How special was I today? How special was I when I did X?*

Compassion is feeling with our common humanness, a way of not falling for that specialness delusion. It's a way of saying, *I don't always get it, I don't understand, some of this bothers me but I'm going to throw my lot in with life. I'm not going to keep myself back as special, either because I don't get it or I have to wait until I have the perfect crystalline object to deliver. I'm not going to wait. I'm going to throw my lot in right here and right now with human beings and trees and rocks and everything else and trust that there's something happening, and that all of us are throwing our lives in and not holding ourselves back as special.* When all of us are willing to take any step onto the path of compassion, then we're all in it together. And that's not a transaction; there's no commodity involved in that. There's only a deep, confused, sometimes uncertain but poignant commitment to being part of this life that we're in together.

I'll stop there for tonight and will be glad to take any comments or questions.

Q1 : I seem to be the giver and not the receiver. But I have a story. This summer something happened where I got to receive. My laptop computer was stolen and on it were all of my photographs. I was working towards an exhibition so it meant a lot to me. The first

person I told was a friend. And immediately when I said, "I just had my computer stolen," she responded, "Ohhhh!" She just went to that place immediately, no thought, just boom! I thought, *Oh, that's really powerful.* So I got a little hint of it there with that response, which was so beautiful and so present. Not "Oh, did you go to the police? Did you blah blah blah." Just "Aghhhh!" That's all! I thought, *I really have to remember that.* It was such a great response.

I was really sucker-punched by the loss. A friend I was staying with, when I told her about it, asked, "How are you? Are you OK?" And she actually cried. In that moment all the walls came down and it became more of a joyful experience. It didn't hurt in that moment. It was so beautiful to witness that she cried for my computer. For the loss that I had.

JIS : Thank you. Does it remind anyone of a particular koan?

Response : "What are you doing?" he asked. And she said, "I saw you fall so I'm helping."

Q2 : I think when we open up to the fact that we don't know what is happening in a situation where we're trying to offer help, when we just admit to the big mystery, it is opening ourselves up to the unwritten and unspoken solutions of the universe. The utter silence and community allows the universe to be unobstructed in its healing power. It's very moving. I'm a fixer. But when I stop fixing, that's when magic starts.

JIS : It's hard to tell September 11 stories anymore because the whole thing's gotten so corrupted, but I still think about the man in the wheelchair who couldn't get down and the person who stayed with him, and how, in that case, there wasn't a healing in any ordinary sense. But there was a profound healing way beyond reason, way beyond anything we can explain.

Q2 : That one's easy. But the ones that are hard are when someone's telling me something and I feel, *Oh God, I don't have anything for you.* And that's where I go, *Who am I? How can I empathize?* So it's wonderful to know, to hear, there's a thing to do with that, too. A way to hold it and still be compassionate. Thank you.

JIS : Good. And next time we'll look at how, if we think of compassion as feeling our common humanity, what does it look like, what can we do with that?

Q3 : If it's been our common *humanity*, what do we do with the animals?

JIS : Humanity is just a funny word we use. But it includes our common sentience, our common life. You know, animals don't usually mess things up. Usually animals aren't the authors of their own destruction in the ways that we are so good at.

Q4 : And they are the great initiators of compassion. They have that ability to just be with you in whatever you're feeling. I had a cat that could find me in any room in the house when I was upset. She didn't have anything to say, nothing to fix. Just a magic of being there with a quality of awareness. That was what was healing, comforting.

JIS : It's a common and comforting thing when a cat plops down next to you and gives you a purr.

Q5 : On occasions when I've felt tremendous fear, it can be like a call from the universe instead of *Oh, here I go again*. It can be a call to your heart that this is big. Anger — I'm not so sure about that. Anger tends to be consuming. But fear is closer to my heart than anger.

JIS : You've pointed to an important differentiation to make. Which is, is this the small fear of, *I can't handle this, I don't know what to do. This is going to be really hard. I'm going to have to stay up late for this*. Is it that small fear or is it that kind of transcendent fear that says, *This is a big thing. Pay attention to this!* The qualities of those are so completely different. You can open your heart to the really big thing. *Okay, here we go*. Which is different from *What does this mean to me?* — the small fears.

That's great if you can go from that self-centered, *what does this mean for me?* fear to an awe in the face of something complicated and really big that you can't yet wrap yourself around. That's a huge shift. So then, how do you proceed from the feeling of awe with a certain kind of care, with deep paying attention, listening, and humility?

Q6 : With deep breathing as opposed to holding the breath, which is the little fear. Really breathing that moment.

JIS : I'm thinking you could even get to a place of gratitude for just being there. *Wow! I get to do this*.

Q7 : I get hung up on *com*-passion, the Latin means 'with' passion. My mind goes to the Passion of Christ and the passion plays. And all of a sudden I realize I never understood what that means. I wonder if it's relevant here, the whole idea of Christ's passion as being the

definition of compassion. They say, for example, in therapy, that one of the struggles to be free is to have compassion for yourself. That means forgiveness, understanding, solidarity. Of course it's an impossible task. But I wonder, what is the meaning of passion in a passion play?

JIS : That's interesting. I was thinking about that as I was making this talk. That's actually something I think that Christianity has over Buddhism. They have the idea of the passion of the Christ, and the passion plays which are an invitation to feel that suffering, and we identify with the suffering of Christ, and we learn something about suffering through that identification and experience of his suffering. I was searching my mind for any story in Buddhism with that same invitation and I couldn't find it. It all goes the other direction. It's all about the letting go of passion, the dis-identification. There's something important about the Christian understanding, that there's a place for accepting that there is passion in the world, passion in the sense of strong feeling, deep feeling. That there is suffering in the world and we're not separate from that. Even God was not separate from that. God suffered.

Thanks for bringing that in. I think that's tremendously important. That would be my understanding of the Passion of Christ and the passion plays. For us to identify with and understand the nature of human suffering through Jesus' suffering.

Q8 : I was thinking of that story about the Zen roshi's murder and how he cried out in incredible pain in the temple as he was being murdered. He accepted his fate in a really human way.

JIS : Yeah. The story is about Yantou, a Chinese teacher, and the way it's come down to us is through Hakuin, the great koan master of Japan in the 18th century. When Hakuin was first a monk, he was obsessed with that story and he said, "What's the point of all this if it's still going to hurt when you die?" And he sat and sat and sat with that story and the moral of the story, the resolution of the story, was that one day Hakuin jumped up off his cushion and said, "Yantou is alive in me! Yantou is alive in me!" Which is true and beautiful and yet somehow it slips over the death. It's absolutely true from Hakuin's perspective, and how beautiful — and yet, can we pause for a moment as we're being run through by a sword before we transcend it and make it into "Yantou lives in me"?

Q9: Would you talk about what you referred to as the stereotypical notion within Zen of dis-identification; you're not saying that's an incorrect or small understanding of Zen teaching of the Dharma, because there is that emphasis through all of the stories. In a way, you're suggesting something different, or larger — that it isn't necessarily a part of the classic Dharma, this way of thinking about compassion in the Brahma Viharas?

JIS : I'm sure it's a version. I think that what can happen in Zen, using this as an example, is in teaching how to deal with the wildest, most out of control passions : dis-identify, detach, get some distance, put some space around it. When you're being possessed by something, that's tremendously important, but it gets generalized to all feelings anywhere under all circumstances, and that's an incorrect generalization.

Q9 : That's where the distortion comes in.

JIS : Yeah, that's where the distortion comes in.

Q9 : But then you're also suggesting a possibility that's even outside of that by suggesting that we focus on our common humanity, our common felt creatureness.

JIS : I think that's all the Chinese guys did. It gets down to that level of connection. But never, never in terms of *what I'm going to do for you*. It's never that kind of commodification, it's the identification. But even that's tricky, because there's also a profound appreciation of the you-ness of you, right? And a profound appreciation of the way in which you and I are humans together. That part — *I see you* — is really important. That's *tathagata*. I see the thusness, the suchness of you.