The Touchstone 14: Karuna

presented by Ven. Jinmyo Renge sensei
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In the previous Dharma Talk in this series of Talks, I spoke about “maitri”, (Sanskrit □□□□□□) which means “friendliness”. The practice of maitri brings together the recognition of states of hope and fear and confusion together with mindfulness and wisdom. When we do this, there is a kind of warmth or tenderness towards ourselves and towards others. This is simply opening to the vastness of our lives, not holding oneself separate from experiencing, but allowing ourselves to experience with an open heart. An open heart just recognizes, straightforwardly and honestly. And we realize this is something we can choose to open to, moment-by-moment. This is beginning to live in the space of maitri.

And now we can consider the maturation or ripening of maitri and so the topic is “karuna” (□□□□□), the Sanskrit word for “compassion” used in the Buddha Dharma. As Anzan Hoshin roshi has said, *compassion (or karuna) is the activity of (prajna or) wisdom.* It is recognizing and thus doing what needs to be done in each moment.

It is very important that we are very clear about what we mean by “compassion” as this is widely misunderstood to be a feeling tone that one ‘pumps up’ in response to a situation or a person.

In the teisho, “Zhang Drinks Sake”, Ven. Anzan Hoshin roshi says:

> *Karuna is a compassion that springs directly from wisdom, from seeing the emptiness, the tracelessness, the openness, the vastness, the limitlessness of your own experience, the vastness and limitlessness and openness and tracelessness of yourself and of each other.*
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> *It is a compassion which can be very ruthless, a compassion that is choiceless. A compassion that not only does not ask for thanks in reward for its actions, not only does it not ask for thanks, it often doesn’t say “please” first. It doesn’t even introduce itself. It simply does what it does. Because compassion is the manifestation of wisdom, of clear seeing, of insight, of mindfulness.*

A very big question that comes up for students goes something like this: “What is the relationship between mindfulness practice, the practice I do, and what is going on in the rest of my life, or the world around me? How is sitting on a cushion practising zazen related to compassion?”

Before we started sitting our thoughts seemed to us to be a kind of continuous streaming that seemed to make sense to us. But when we sit zazen, it is immediately apparent that they are actually a jumble of “stuff”. Before we started sitting we believed that to be aware of something we must have thoughts and feelings about it. And that we were the thoughts and feelings. Of course, this makes no sense because the thoughts and feelings arise within awareness of them. Thoughts and feelings don’t mean anything more about our experience than does the fact that the bird song is sweet or the passing dump truck is loud and not really pleasant. Thoughts and feelings are part of what awareness does, but awareness also presents itself in many different ways. Self-image is the presumption that awareness must be aware of something and that there must be something that is aware.

When we sit zazen, it is so easy to see that although thoughts and feelings might be present we are aware in all kinds of ways that have nothing at all to do with thinking and feeling. We can see how attention moves towards a thought or a feeling or a sound, an itch, an ache, a fly on the wall. We can observe how attention contracts, how it folds down, and how it can open up if we stop either trying to avoid what we are experiencing or stop habitually identifying with a feeling, a thought, a view, a strategy.

The path never ends. It begins again and again in each moment, and begins in this moment of being aware. It is only when we cannot observe experiencing openly that it becomes a contraction. We begin afresh in each moment of sitting zazen, by opening to the sensations of the bodymind sitting; by opening to seeing and hearing. and in doing this we are engaging in the moment-to-moment practise of the Four Great Vows.

Yasuda Joshu Dainen roshi used to say that, *Zen is the Four Great Vows with arms and legs and eyes and ears.* In other words, it is about living the Four Great Vows with the whole body in your actual life. To live the Four Great Vows with the whole bodymind in your actual life, you need to be able to open attention past habitual thoughts and feelings and storylines and reactivity in order to truly feel, to see, to hear, to smell and taste and touch and think and feel clearly. That is what you are practising when you practise mindfulness, which is the foundation of practice. And other practices can follow as our practice deepens. All of the practices we do which are part of the continuum of training within Zen practice, are about fulfilling the Four Great Vows. Your practice of mindfulness springs from The Four Great Vows and is part of how you work towards the fulfillment of them.

We live in strange times; very strange times.

Increasingly we are seeing reputable, peer reviewed studies that indicate that the earth's sixth mass extinction is already underway. One says that unless policies change, society will collapse by 2040 due to catastrophic food shortages. This is very scary stuff and it's not going to go away. So what about all of that? What does that have to do with your practice? What about the rest of the world and all of the difficulties and suffering that people experience, that sometimes you or the people who are close to you experience? What about the vast suffering that will inevitably come about through climate change?

What can you do about this? What can anyone do about this?

Back to the Four Great Vows, but this time I will read a quote from another student of our grandfather in Dharma, Joshu Dainen roshi. The student's name is Endon and he trained under Joshu Dainen roshi at Hakukaze-ji, when Anzan Hoshin roshi was also there. Endon said:

> *People really need to realize how bad the situation really is. Even so, though there's not much anyone can do we should do what we can. My late Zen master Yasuda Joshu roshi used to say, "It's no use, these Four Great Vows. But you must mean them when you chant them. Knowing there is no use. It is thinking the world is just stuff you can use that is the problem. So, although they are useless, the Four Great Vows have the highest use. But only if we know they are useless. Being human, being Buddhas, what else can we do but work for the best?*

Now I think this is very important, because it clearly conveys that chanting the Four Great Vows is not going to save anyone from anything. They're not a magic incantation that's going to make a benevolent "Buddha" smile down upon us and protect us and make it all alright. That's not why we chant them. But they are rather

like a summary of our practice – whether one is practising mindfulness as a beginning student or doing more advanced practices as a monastic. They are a reminder that we expose ourselves to regularly, that our practice is NOT just about us, it is about all beings. They remind us that we can be of no use to beings if our attention is clouded with obsessions; that we can and MUST practise in each and every moment; that right now matters; and that we must make the commitment to do our best equally in our practice and in our lives; that we must be living the Four Great Vows with the whole bodymind, in our actual lives, living the Four Great Vows with arms and legs and eyes and ears.

It's so easy and so habitual to contract, to fold attention down into negative patterns of attention. Finding new ways of responding to the questions about our lives that present themselves — from the very smallest of details to the really big, complicated questions — requires that first and foremost we make the effort to open attention past habitual patterns of thought and feeling. Otherwise we just go in circles. As Anzan Hoshin roshi said to me long ago, *You nail your foot to floor and turn in circles and think you're seeing the world. You need to pull out the nail and move freely to see beyond self-concern and see what is going on.*

As Joshu Dainen roshi said, *It is thinking the world is just stuff you can use that is the problem.* He said this long before anyone spoke about climate change or mass extinction because this has always been the problem. It is the root cause of ALL of the problems we have created that have caused such vast suffering all around the world. It is the cause of genocide and war. It is the cause of poverty and starvation. It is the reason global economies are in ruins. The world is not just stuff we can use, and we really need to do something about this sense of entitlement generated by self-image. Make choices with open attention, choices that make sense instead of continuously trying to prop up the sense of self that is 'this' or 'that', that always needs more to puff itself up.

A student wrote to Anzan Hoshin roshi about questions that he had following the falling of the Two Towers in New York City on September 11th, 2001. This correspondence was published on the internet as "No Consolation". In this, the Roshi said:

> *People who make money by buying and selling money move their money here and there and industries and nations and people lose money because of it; people can no longer buy rice to make gruel for their babies. This too is very real. There is also every likelihood that no matter what anyone does now, unless everyone everywhere changes everything that they do about everything (and most of us also just vanish magically from the earth without leaving the plagues and pollution that would result from so many human bodies), all wildlife on the planet will be extinct within twenty years or so except what can live in cities and between the ploughed rows of fields such as raccoons, crows, and so on. This too is very real. And it gets worse because the list goes on.*
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> *None of this can be remedied, no matter the depths of rage and anguish and horror and sadness we might feel. You cannot fix it. I cannot fix it. We can try not to break it further. But in any case, life will go on, as it does, doing what it does: birth, eating, shitting, death. This is a very beautiful world, but it is not a safe place. It is not fair. It is not nice. And yet the nature of all beings and of each being is, and always has been, and always will be limitless luminosity, beyond birth and death and all conditions. Realizing this freedom, embodying this, and making it available to others in every way that we can is the only thing worth doing at all. This has nothing to do with trying to make the world safe or wishing it was nice. It has to do with the continuous practice of radical questioning and the dynamic activity of releasing. So I cannot help you with your sadness except to say: Feel sad, if sadness is present. A broken heart is a reasonable*

thing in this world. But do not become the sadness but do not avoid it. Feel the hands, feel the feet, keep the peripheral vision open. Don't talk to yourself. Don't vent to others and encourage them to vent. If you are watching the news on TV, practise. If you are speaking, practise. If you are listening, practise. And follow the instructions you have been given. Sit when you can, as often as you can. From everything that I know and what all of the Buddhas and Awakened Ancestors have known, this is the most and in fact the only important or useful thing you can ever really do: practise the Way. This is the only light and wisdom I have to offer. It is not consoling but I think you do not really want merely to be consoled.

What you are seeing when you are sitting is how your attention moves; how it folds down, how it opens up; how it falls into habitual patterns of thought and feeling; how convinced you are by thoughts and feelings. And all of these details you are seeing are made up of the same movements of attention with which you do absolutely everything that you do. If attention is habitually contracted, that is how it will be when you get up in the morning, when you go to work, when you interact with coworkers, with your family, and when you make decisions.

We don't know what effect our practice will have on our lives or on the lives of others because that changes all the time. This is why everything we do matters. When you take a step in kinhin, it matters. When you hang your coat up, it matters. When you take care of something instead of leaving it for someone else, it matters. And what you are doing right now, sitting here feeling the breath, the sensations of the body, opening to seeing and hearing, it matters. Because all we have is right now, right here. The past is gone; the future hasn't happened. There is only now. There is only this and this is as good as it gets.

I think we would like to have a formula, something that tells us how to be compassionate in this or that situation so that all we need to do is remember the formula and we'll know what to do to be compassionate and other people will recognize our actions as 'compassionate'.

But reality has no formulas. We can devise formulas that describe aspects of reality such as chemical reactions or wave functions or particle and field actions. Mass, velocity, and other abstractions. But in our real lives, you can never predict how anything we say or do will be received or interpreted or what effects this will have. For example, I say this with deep compassion for you but you might think I am hectoring and wagging my finger at you. But as a Teacher of the Dharma I can only do my best to express what I know must be said.

And so just as reality is not a concoction of formulas, in our practice, there is no formula. But there is a touchstone: Are you open to your experience or are you contracted? Is it open, or is it closed? Are we open with the whole bodymind to the whole field of present experience? Or are we in recoil from it, crouched behind a contraction of thoughts and feeling-tones? So the touchstone is: If it is closed, then open. If it is open, open further. There is just this moment-to-moment practice of being alive to our lives, of choosing to open so that whatever the circumstances, whatever happens, we are already making that choice. And because we are making that choice, how we respond will be from the best we have to offer.