The Touchstone 15: Ceaseless Activity

presented by Ven. Jinmyo Renge sensei
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In the previous Dharma Talk in this series of Talks, I spoke a little about “karuna” (□□□□□), the Sanskrit word for “compassion” used in the Buddha Dharma. And as concepts about “compassion” are, in my view, fraught with so many misunderstandings, we will look into this further today.

Compassion is not a feeling tone. It’s not about how you feel about other people or about yourself. It is an activity. And in Buddhist iconography we have a wonderful depiction of this ceaseless activity in the form of the Bodhisattva Avalokitesvara.

Anzan Hoshin roshi tells an updated version of the legend of Avalokitesvara vowing before Buddha Amitabha that he would never attain enlightenment until and unless all sentient beings attained enlightenment. And so he worked, tirelessly, unceasingly, until one day he went to Amitabha Buddha and said “There, I’m finished” and Amitabha Buddha said “Good, good, O son of noble family. But you’ve only been looking in one direction.” And he moved Avalokitesvara’s head slightly. Then he saw numberless beings stretching to infinity in all directions, still bound by their delusions and suffering dukkha, waiting for instruction. At this moment, the Roshi says, it was like a cartoon character being shocked and their eyes popping out of their heads. Except that Avalokitesvara’s head exploded into eleven heads that could see into all of the ten directions — at once and more — just in case. And from his sides exploded a thousand arms, each hand holding a different tool: pots and pans, a saw, a broom, a needle, a bag of birdseed, a bandage, a zafu, a scrub brush, a serving tray, a fountain pen, a hansaku, a watering can — whatever is needed for the situation.

The term “bodhisattva” is commonly translated as “wisdom being”, with “wisdom” meaning realization of sunyata, the emptiness or Openness of all things. Avalokitesvara bodhisattva is one amongst many legendary figures that are symbols for different aspects of Awakened activity, of how someone who has woken up from the delusion self-image lives. Anzan roshi points to how a bodhisattva is not really a noun but a verb, a description of activity, by translating bodhisattva as “being open to Openness.”

Compassion is being ready to work with whatever situation arises. You’re not ‘trying’ to get ready to be compassionate, you’re just working with what’s actually going on, and moment to moment that changes. If your attention becomes invested in a feeling tone “about” compassion, then what happens is that you’re reducing reality to an image of what you think is going on that seems to fit the feeling tone. You cannot see clearly what is in front of you because you are too busy looking at yourself and your feeling tone. In one teisho Ven. Anzan Hoshin roshi likened this kind of self-absorption to walking about holding a hand mirror up so that you can constantly look at yourself. Makes it very difficult to get in and out of cars.

The contraction of attention into a sense of self is what distorts our understanding of what it is to be compassionate and prevents us from seeing the never-ending opportunities to practise compassion in each moment. Compassion springs from the ceaseless activity of opening to reality, of being available to reality. Opening attention is, itself, an act of compassion towards oneself and others because the only other alternative is to contract. Contraction leads to further contraction and that’s how things tend to go sideways in the first place. Contraction creates complexity and that in turn makes everything more difficult for

everyone. So if you don't contract, you're saving everyone else a great deal of trouble.

There is no self that stands apart and separate from anything else. Each thing is made what it is by everything else and each thing is what it is because it is an experience. Anything else we might think it is, is simply a thought. Forms do not possess a self.

If you look at the wall or your zafu or the floor, none of those forms possess a self. And if you look at another person, you might like or dislike them, but who and what they are has nothing to do with your feeling about them. They stand apart from your feelings about them. But if what they mean to you is tied up with your feeling of like or dislike about them, then that feeling tone and texture become how you will interpret experiencing. And this will happen to the point that when you are identified within a texture, then within the thoughts and the categories of like and dislike you have assigned them to, there is little room for anything else. That texture and that feeling tone is all that you will allow yourself to notice. And SO much of your attention can become invested in your liking or disliking of a person (it could also be a situation), that in addition to limiting their meaning in terms of whether you like them or don't, you're not feeling your breath or your hands and feet; you're not seeing other colours and forms that stand out vividly in the space around you, and you don't hear the sounds. Everything becomes limited because you are allowing this texture and feeling tone to colour and condition how you are experiencing experience at that moment. And since this is contracted, how you experience experience is contracted.

And I will stress here that a feeling tone about liking another person is often just as contracted as a feeling tone of disliking them is. Because both are constructs. You've invented them and they really have nothing at all to do with that person. But if we attend to these categories of like and dislike that we assign to people, we can see past them. It is just our category for them and there is so much more going on than just that feeling of like or dislike. We can see their facial expression, the colour of their eyes, their clothing; we can see them as a whole person together with the space all around them. When we open our eyes and look, we see that there is actually someone facing us and we need to meet them as they are. We can see that they and the space around them arise together as bodymind and walls and floor and ceiling and the rest of the objects in the room and all of these arise together with the sensation of our own breath and our eyes seeing and our ears hearing and there is no separation between any of this. Yet at the same time, each detail that is noticed stands out distinctly and independently of each other. Each of these are part of how experience is presenting itself. Each detail is what it is and is also intimately part of everything else. Each dharma interpenetrates every other dharma.

Compassion is a ceaseless activity that springs from opening to Openness. It isn't something we need to 'try' to do because if we practise opening attention to things as they actually are, we find that we are available to help in whatever way is needed — simply because it's needed and we can see that. It isn't necessary to have a feeling tone about what we are doing or why we are doing it in order to act. And if a feeling tone or a thought does come up about what we're doing or why we're doing it, that is simply recognized as a feeling tone or a thought and is released. It is of no consequence.

People tend to think that compassion must necessarily involve feeling tones, such as being "kind" in a certain "kind" of way – a way that other people will like. So compassion is viewed as having qualities of kindness, and softness, and tenderness.

Compassion might sometimes be tender. It might mean taking another person's hand or putting an arm

around them if that is what is appropriate. It might mean offering them words of reassurance if that is appropriate. Sometimes it might mean making them a sandwich. And sometimes it might mean telling them to get off the couch and go make themselves a sandwich. Or go look for a job. There's no formula — what is appropriate will depend on the situation. And the fact that you are practising does not mean that all of your relationships will suddenly become completely smooth and effortlessly harmonious in a "let's all be happy happy" way. Why would they? You can't predict how other people will behave, how they will understand or react to anything you say or do. You cannot control causes and conditions and other people's reactions. They are going to do whatever they do regardless of how you are. But if you do have to be firm or direct with other people, you need to first notice how your attention is and open around any anger or frustration by feeling whole bodily. Then be firm, but without anger.

All that you can do is your best and the best way to do that is to practise. Our practice is absolutely simple and absolutely practical. Practice doesn't ask you to believe in anything or to behave a certain way. It asks that you apply your practice and use it as a touchstone so that you can be honest about what you are experiencing. It asks you to open to what is most simply and directly true of your experience – that you can feel the breath; you can feel the sensations of the body; you can see and hear and taste and touch and smell and think and feel. And so can everyone else. By opening to your own sense fields, you experience a natural empathy towards all experiencing – your own and the experience of everyone and everything around you. You and everything else arise together, and at the same time, with no separation. And so you will find yourself taking care and giving care without having to think about being a kind person or being a compassionate person.

Compassion is the ceaseless activity of Openness. So now let's practise being bodhisattvas.