

“Living Meditation Living Insight” by Dr. Thynn Thynn

Love and Compassion

Student: What is true compassion?

Thynn: Compassion (karuna in Pali), as taught in Buddhism, is one of four sublime states (brahma vihara) that are inherent qualities of wisdom (pañña). The other three are unconditional love (metta), sympathetic joy (mudita) and equanimity (upekkha). An act of compassion is not isolated, but is also an expression of these other qualities of wisdom.

Student A: Suppose you have a friend who is an alcoholic, and you want to help her. What would be the right thing to do if she refuses to take your advice?

Student B: Even if my own son happened to be a victim, I would suggest that he go to the hospital. I would help him all I could if he wanted to go. If not, that’s it, and I would not feel angry or say anything.

Thynn: Yes, if what you are saying is that we can’t help someone who is not ready to be helped, that is very true. But we have to be very careful here. We have to examine our own minds very carefully. There is a fine line between equanimity and indifference. If we try to perform an act of compassion in a detached way, with no wisdom governing the act, there is danger.

Student: Why is that so?

Thynn: Because, first of all, only wisdom can differentiate between equanimity and indifference. A person can be very proficient in dissociating herself or himself emotionally from any situation or from people. But that kind of detachment is not true equanimity; it is only a delusion, and the delusion itself can lead to indifference and negligence. You can be led to think that so long as your duty is done, that’s it; the rest has nothing to do with you. You must also differentiate between fulfilling duty with indifference and acting with love and compassion. There is a very fine line between them.

Student: Then what is upekkha or equanimity if it isn’t detachment?

Thynn: Detachment is the opposite of attachment. It means disengaging or dissociating from somebody or something.

Equanimity is that which transcends both attachment and detachment.

It means seeing things as they are, without clinging or rejecting. It goes beyond attachment and detachment.

Student: What is the difference between equanimity and indifference?

Thynn: Indifference is the result of a lack of concern, a lack of love. But **equanimity is born from wisdom and love. It is not an isolated quality in itself.**

It is part and parcel of wisdom, love, compassion and joy. Likewise, compassion is not an isolated feeling. If it were isolated, then it could probably be induced by a conditioned behavior based on the idea of compassion.

Student: Then what is true compassion?

Thynn: True compassion and love are spontaneous manifestations of pañña (wisdom). If there is pañña, there is already love, compassion, joy and equanimity. They are all present in a single act of compassion. That act encompasses all these qualities.

For example, in the case of the alcoholic son, wisdom would give you the insight to look at the total situation — what alcoholism is doing to your son and whether it is affecting others; what it is doing to the whole family; and the mental, social and economic misery and suffering resulting from alcoholism. You may be detached and not be affected by his refusal to take up your suggestion, but your equanimity should not turn into indifference.

There is a vast and very crucial difference between detaching yourself from your emotions and detaching yourself from the situation.

You can still be genuinely concerned and actively involved in any situation without expending your emotional resources. Your own insight into the total situation and your love for the whole family leads you to the right action in that particular situation.

Student: So we could say that wisdom and love serve as checks and balances to equanimity.

Thynn: Yes, that's right. Love keeps you involved in the situation; compassion leads you to identify yourself with others; equanimity helps you to transcend emotional involvement and see things objectively; and wisdom helps you identify the right solution to the problem or situation for the benefit of yourself as well as of others.

Student: What about sympathetic joy? How would joy come into this integrated action?

Thynn: An act is joyless if it is done on the basis of pure duty. Joy is also lacking if you help someone out of pity. Duty and pity fall short of true compassion. Joy is present only when an act is born of wisdom, love, compassion and equanimity. Such action is joyful because it is not restrained by attachment nor burdened with worries and anxieties.

Love and joy bring perseverance to compassion. One does not give up easily until some good comes out of an adverse situation. An act of joy with no emotional attachment makes the involvement itself fulfilling. This is an act born of a free mind.

Student: What do you mean by a free mind?

Thynn: A free mind is a mind free from fixation on anything, free even from a concept of compassion.

Student: What do you mean by that?

Thynn: A free mind is a mind that is purely in the present moment. Because it lacks any fixations, it can view the total situation and adapt to prevailing circumstances — then you can act accordingly. Suppose the alcoholic is your friend. How you would act would be slightly different from your actions toward a son. For the latter, you have a far greater moral responsibility than for a friend. Furthermore, your behavior would change according to your standing and relationship with that friend, his attitude, receptivity, etc. Many factors would determine how much you could be involved. On the other hand, if you have a sick child, you would not hesitate to put the child in the hospital, whether the child appreciates your decision or not. Every situation is unique and no fixed rule can be applied to all situations. The only criterion that the Buddha set was that one should act on what would benefit oneself and the other person.

Student: So, there are no hard and fast rules for compassion?

Thynn: The real reason we are having this discussion is that I am very concerned that any generalization I make might be taken as a guideline for action, even in the name of compassion.

A fixed idea or guideline for action may not work for every situation.

Fixation leads to conditioning; every time you meet with a similar situation, you react in the same conditioned way, even though there may be differences in the situation. The mind must be free from any fixation; only then can true compassion arise. Every situation we face is unique and different from any other. Each situation has to be dealt with differently according to the needs and benefits of that particular situation. Without clear insight, if your action proves disastrous, you and others may suffer needlessly.