An Appropriate Response

When we practice compassion in it's purest form, we embody the impossible Bodhisatva vow that goes beyond perceived limitation and opens the heart to inconceivable possibility.

The vow of the selfless Bohdisatva is this:

Creations are numberless,
I vow to free them.

Delusions are inexhaustible,
I vow to transform them.

Reality is boundless,
I vow to perceive it.

The awakened way is unsurpassable,
I vow to embody it.

The bodhisattva vow describes, to some extent, a reality that we know is not possible—a cessation of all of the suffering in this world. At the same time, the vow affirms its own unachievability. We know it's not possible to alleviate all of the distress and affliction in this world, but we vow to act as if it is possible to do so. These vows reflect two primary orientations of compassion: the **receptive aspect** that is willing to listen to the cries of suffering of the world and the outward-turning aspect that is **willing to engage** with the world to alleviate that suffering.

Compassion is a broad-spectrum word: it includes meanings of patience, forbearance, tolerance, resilience, empathy, courage, and dedication. The Pali term for compassion is actually two words: anukampa karuna. Anukampa literally means "to tremble with." This meaning points to the empathic dimension of compassion that resonates with and is touched by the suffering of another, as well as to the quivering of the heart in the face of suffering. The other and perhaps more familiar word, karuna, derives from the Sanskrit root meaning "to do or to make" or, in one version, "to turn outward." Karuna captures the dimension of compassion that responds to the situation and seeks to alleviate suffering through action. There's a dynamic relationship between these two aspects of compassion, because our engagement in the world must be attuned to the situation, which requires us to be present and listen deeply.

There's a story in the Zen tradition: a student asks the Zen master (Yunmen), "What is the goal of a lifetime of practice?" It's a big question that we could ask of our own practice. The answer that comes back is this: "An appropriate response."

An appropriate response. What if our practice is all about developing our capacity to respond more appropriately to the whole spectrum of human experience? And these two Pali words, anukampa karuna, with their different meanings, point to the way that we can attune ourselves to respond more compassionately through deep listening—to people, to situations, to currents in our society, as well as to our own embodied hearts and minds.

Naturally, this deep listening includes the suffering that immediately affects others and everything around us. But we must also listen to the cries of our own heart and mind, where we encounter distress, dukkha [suffering], and our familiar, habitual reactions to meeting feelings that we don't know how to bear. The reactions we are so familiar with are to clench, contract, turn away, blame, become angry, or despair. The response that is asked of us, the appropriate response, is to touch this distress with care and empathy.

Fear of suffering shapes the choices we make and our sense of who we are as a person. We can easily come to believe that dukkha is a sign of our failure or unworthiness. However, if we can learn to find the confidence to turn toward dukkha, many of the agitations in our life will calm. This means learning to put down the arguments with the unarguables, and the hidden belief that we are exempt from the first ennobling truth that there is dukkha in this life.

Compassion is a commitment to both healing this suffering and uprooting the causes of suffering. Some statues of Kwan Yin [the bodhisattva of compassion] have a thousand hands and arms, each of them with some symbol that represents a different kind of response: a vase of ointment to soothe and heal, a willow branch to bless, and all kinds of weaponry dedicated to uprooting dukkha and its origins in confusion, ignorance, craving, and aversion. It goes to show that the range of appropriate responses is large and wide. Sometimes suffering can be intense and have no easy resolution. In those kinds of situations, compassion is bearing with the impulses to try to prematurely solve situations. Compassion becomes our willingness to keep showing up: to listen deeply, bear witness, and be with suffering.

In our time, one of Kwan Yin's hands may hold a banner that says "Black Lives Matter," or "We Ask For Democracy," or "Keep Fossil Fuels In The Ground." Many forms of suffering are systemic—not just personal and psychological. Our practice needs to acknowledge these forces, and sometimes we need to stand against structural forms of suffering. Compassion also lies in our capacity to say "no." To be able to accept and embrace what is does not mean that everything is acceptable. There is much in this life that is not acceptable—things that perpetuate, create, and recreate dukkha. We need to be clear about when to show up, when to embrace, when to say "no," and when to commit to healing and to liberating.

But when compassion calls for a fierce "no"—a fierce protest against unethical activity, against those who perpetuate suffering, racism, violence, or greed—can there also be the wisdom of not othering, not blaming, not turning people into an enemy? This is probably one of the greatest challenges of developing compassion—to know how to bring that same empathy to ignorance as we would to blameless or innocent suffering. It's not difficult to find compassion for a crying child or for the frailty of a very elderly person struggling to get through their day. But in our practice we are asked to leave no one out of our widening field of concern and care.

Ajahn Sucitto, a teacher in the Thai Forest tradition of Theravada Buddhism, recommends one practice called "Just like me." In situations of suffering, we practice seeing the common humanity and shared vulnerability we all have. We might hear a siren go by and be reminded of human vulnerability, and think, "Oh, just like me." When we see someone behaving in a way that we consider wrong, we practice recognition of the "just like me" vulnerability that we share, our common vulnerability to impulsiveness, reactivity, greed, hatred, and delusion.

It is not about what we feel or what we can actually accomplish, it is about the intentions that we commit to and embody in our lives. Compassion is a practice of seeing beyond the automatic reactivity of the heart, and a striving to achieve the goals of an impossible vow.

(This reading is an excerpt from Universal Empathy by Christina Feldman and Chris Cullen)

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What is then an appropriate response?