

Compassion

Excerpt from a talk given by Ringu Tulku Rinpoche
at Karma Dzong, Boulder, USA
April 23, 1999

This time I am to talk about compassion. I usually prefer to share the most basic things that I have heard from my gurus and teachers. I don't like to teach the high and profound things, because I don't know them myself! And I find from my own experience, that however many high and profound teachings we receive, after we have received them, we have to go back to the beginning to practice - from the beginning. We can't really skip those basic things. And sometimes I feel that when we go in search of spiritual paths, different kinds of practices, understanding, sometimes we go for very profound things. We want more and more teachings; we want more and more high and more and more deep things.

There's nothing wrong with that. It's a good thing, and very important to receive profound and high teachings. But sometimes, in the process of trying to understand and practice these we tend to overlook and forget the most fundamental thing. And if THAT happens, it is useless, because we don't stand on any ground; and the profound teachings are of little value! Because we don't have grounding in the fundamental simple important things. And we miss things which are quite obvious, you know. Like compassion, for instance.

There are very few people who don't think that compassion is a good idea or who reject compassion. But that doesn't mean that we generate compassion or that we work on compassion. We say, 'Oh, compassion, OK, very nice,' then we think that's all there is to it. That doesn't work.

So I think it is important to emphasize this: that we refresh our minds, think again and again and to try to work on these things which are easy to understand. Because when we appear to understand easily, we have this tendency to think, 'Oh, that's easy to understand; OK, I know about that'. Intellectually, perhaps, we understand it, we know it, but in another way that doesn't help, it's not enough. We need to work on it. We need to practice it. We need to integrate it into our life, and only then is it worthwhile.

From a Buddhist point of view, compassion is *the* most fundamental thing, the most fundamental practice. As His Holiness the Dalai Lama often says, 'I have just one simple religion, and that is 'kind heart'. There's nothing else but that.'

That's really a very Buddhist way of thinking. If there is a kind heart, if there is compassion, then it's OK. If there is no kind heart, no compassion, then it's not OK. We appear to judge a person by whether he is positive or negative, or whether any practice, any work, any action, is positive or negative. But we are really judging a person by whether he has compassion or not. And this is not only a Buddhist point of view: different paths, different religions, different doctrines, look to see whether there is compassion or not. If something is based on compassion, it's OK. Even if your view is completely different, even if your philosophy is totally different, it's still OK. But if there is no compassion, then whatever you say, however high, however profound, that view, philosophy or doctrine maybe it is not OK. That's the Buddhist way of putting it.

That's why His Holiness the Dalai Lama often says that his religion is kind- heartedness. This is what we try to develop. Because we know that it is not very easy to generate and to maintain, we usually express this *bodhicitta*, this compassion, in the form of a prayer.

We pray that those who do not generate this *bodhicitta*, may generate it, and that it may not degenerate in those in whom it is present. And that it may increase. We make this prayer a kind of practice in itself, to try to generate compassion with good- heartedness. Then we try to maintain that, not let it be overpowered by other ways of thinking or emotions or influences, and we try to increase it.

In order to generate it, it is important to understand what it is and to understand the value of it, the importance of it. That's why there are lots of teachings.

I have been told that you have been given lots of recommended reading, such as the 'Bodhicharyavatara'¹ and the chapter on compassion in 'Words of my Perfect Teacher', and so on. Maybe you know much more than I do! I don't remember any of those books at the moment! The first thing is to understand the importance of compassion.

I'm not sure how widespread the culture of generating compassion is in America. Some of you know that a few years ago, I wrote a comic book for children, based on a Tibetan folktale. The manuscript was sent to America, to a big publisher. They told me, 'The story is nice and the illustration is very good, but we are not going to publish it because there is no violence in it!' It's true. They didn't publish it. It was published in Europe by a very small publisher.

So perhaps there is not very much compassion in American culture, or not enough emphasis on the cultivation of compassion and how to glorify compassion. It's more violence and hatred that are glorified. When we watch videos and things like that, it's all this fighting. Even the games are always a matter of how many tanks you can destroy how many planes you can shoot down.

The main thing, I think, from the Buddhist point of view, is to try to understand that compassion is the most important thing for my own welfare, for my own good; for the good of society; for the good of the people of the world; for the good of everybody, all sentient beings. And if we want welfare and happiness and peace and survival in a nice way, there is no other way but to generate compassion and to generate a culture of compassion. That is what we need to understand. Sometimes it is easy to understand, sometimes not.

A misunderstanding of compassion can lead to it being rejected as something naive, just a kind of a goody-goody thing. Compassion is good to talk about but doesn't really work. That, I think, is based on misunderstandings about compassion, and it is very important to try to clarify those as much as possible.

Sometimes people think that to be compassionate means to be weak, to be excessively tolerant and to just take whatever anybody gives you. However much anyone puts you down, uses you, terrorizes you, you just have to sit there and smile.

Well, it's OK if you don't smile. That's a different thing. As Mahatma Gandhi used to say, compassion is not being weak. Compassion is being strong. Compassion is not cowardly, compassion is courageous. Compassion is not violence but neither is it surrender to violence. It's standing against violence. Standing against oppression - without violence, with compassion, with love. It is said that if we tolerate suppression we are worse than the suppressor.

Even when we talk about the *Bodhisattva*, the buddhist concept of ideal compassion, there is always this *sattva*, [Tib. *sems dpa'*] the Sanskrit word for one who has courage, heart, aspiration.

Sems dpa' (*sem pa*) is used in Tibetan for those who have bravery - bravery of the mind; courage of the mind. This courage, this bravery is something which is very much emphasized. Sometimes we call it *snying thug chen* (*nying tuk chen*). One of the names for the *Bodhisattva* is *Nying tuk chen*, the great courageous one. It is not feeble heartedness we are talking about when we talk about compassion.

Compassion is to do with aspiring, wishing well - for everybody, including myself - and working for the good and welfare of everybody. If I'm really compassionate, then I might sometimes do something that you don't like. I'm not concerned about whether you like me or you don't like me. I'm concerned about what is good for you. Compassion is based on the intention of well-being, the intention of helping and wanting good things, wishing well. That is the inspiration of compassion. It's not just being nice or merely tolerating what others are doing to me. It's not necessary that I just let everybody walk over me. It's not having no backbone. That's not the correct thing. Compassion is about making a stand.

I'm going to do something that will help myself and help other beings. I'm going to solve problems. Even if people don't like me, even if people do things bad to me, whatever happens I am not going to hate anybody, because hating is neither good for me nor good for anyone else. If I hate I burn myself; hatred brings suffering to me - the worst kind of suffering. And I destroy myself, because hatred does not bring about anything good in me.

Hatred cannot bring happiness to me, cannot bring peace to me, and cannot bring any kind of well-being to me. And in the same way it cannot bring any good to others because if I hate I will try to do something that is harmful to those whom I hate. And when I do something harmful to others they will do something harmful back to me; and so it goes, on and on and on until that is broken. If something bad happens to me or somebody does something to me which is not nice, I don't hate - not because I like this person, or because I think that compassion is just nice: I know that for my own good and for the good of others, if I go on with this hatred nothing good will come of it. And the badness that arises out of hatred and continues to breed hatred is not going to bring any good to anybody at any time.

So it's not because I like to be compassionate, it's because I see that there's no other viable solution which can settle things, which can change things in a better way for any of us. So it's the only way. Otherwise the hatred goes on and on.

For example, I harm somebody. He kills me, my son kills him, his son kills him and on and on like that. There is no chance of peace. It's going on everywhere. That's how wars start. That's the source of all troubles.

- to be continued -

Transcript by Ginny Lipson, Boulder, 2000
Editing by Shelagh Gardiner, UK, 2002