

## *Limitless Compassion, Limited Resources*

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When you develop the sublime attitudes—goodwill, compassion, empathetic joy—you can't forget equanimity. As Ajaan Fuang once said, equanimity is there so that the others don't turn into suffering.

You try to develop goodwill for all beings but you see that there are a lot of people out there who are suffering. A lot of people are doing the things that are going to cause suffering down the line. And you can't stop them.

You see people who are suffering and you can't help them. You see people who are enjoying the fruits of their past good karma, yet they're abusing their good fortune. And you can't stop them.

There are people you want to help but you have only so much energy. So that's why you have to develop equanimity along with all the other brahmaviharas.

It may seem strange. On the one hand, you're developing goodwill and compassion for everybody, and then on the other, you have to develop equanimity for the same people.

What this means is you have to practice developing all these attitudes so that whichever attitude is the appropriate one, you can call on it when you need it. In that way, the attitudes are appropriate. They perform their duties.

Because they're not ends in and of themselves. They're part of our motivation on the practice. They're part of our motivation in dealing with all other beings as we engage in our training for release.

So when you ask how much compassion should you develop, you try to develop lots of compassion for everybody. This is the attitude you try to develop.

But then there comes the question, "How much can you act on that?" And there are several things you have to keep in mind. When you act on compassion, it's actually a type of generosity. And generosity is a necessary part of the path, you can't simply think thoughts of compassion or goodwill and not act on them at all: That's hypocrisy. You've got to act to some extent.

But the extent to which you're able—in terms of your monetary resources, in terms of your time, in terms of your energy—you have to take into consideration the Buddha's principle on generosity, which is that you don't give so much that you're harming yourself. You give what's extra and sometimes you give enough to really feel it, that you are giving something up—but not to the extent that you're actually harming yourself.

That's one of the rules in the monks' rules. If they see that a family has newly gained faith and they're being extravagantly generous to the point where

the monks are concerned that they're going to burn themselves out, the monks are supposed avoid their house when they go on their almsround.

So generosity is something you have to protect by making sure that you don't overdo it. You don't adversely affect yourself; you don't adversely affect others.

In terms of the extent of compassion, you try to feel compassion for everybody. That's what makes it into a sublime attitude. But you have to realize your limitations. When you see that you run up against limitations that's when you have to develop equanimity.

There's another principle as well. When the Buddha taught his aunt, he said one of the things you can use as a test as to whether something is genuine Dhamma or not is: Is it entangling? Because the more you get entangled with other people, the less time you have to practice concentration, discernment, the direct training of the mind.

So this is one of the quandaries: How do you help without getting entangled? You learn from other people's example. And you realize that the best help you can give to other people is to teach them to learn how to depend on themselves. Remember that phrase in the expression of goodwill, "May we all look after ourselves with ease"—in a way that we're not harming ourselves, we're not harming other people. Is there some way you can teach other people to act that way? That's one of the best gifts there is.

As for people you can't teach in that way: To what extent can you help them?—given your limitations in terms of your energy, your time, and the need for your own mind to have time to practice, to find some seclusion. These are all things we have to balance out.

Different people are going to balance them out in different ways. But we have to recognize it is a balancing act. You can't drop everything and say, "Well now the world is in such a huge turmoil that we have to forget about our meditation and go out and straighten everything out politically." The world has always been in a turmoil.

There's that passage where King Pasenadi has been meeting with his council in the middle of the day. He finishes the meeting and goes to see the Buddha. And the Buddha asks, "Where are you coming from?" The king says, "Well"—and very frankly, it's amazing that the king speaks so frankly—"I've been engaged in the sort of things that a king obsessed with his power is engaged in."

And the Buddha says, "Suppose someone were to come to you, someone you trusted, and said there was a huge mountain moving in from the East, crushing everything in its way. And someone else were to come from the South and say, "There's a mountain moving in from the South." "There's a mountain moving in from the West," another person comes to report. Another person says, "There's a mountain moving in from the North." So you've got four huge

mountains moving in from all four directions. And considering that human life is so rare and that there's all this destruction going on, what would you do?"

And the king says, "Well, what else could I do but to calm my mind and practice the Dhamma?"

And the Buddha said, "In the same way, aging, illness, and death are moving in on you. There's no escape. What are you going to do?"

"Well, calm the mind. Practice the Dhamma."

So no matter how bad things get in the world, that's got to be your first priority: practicing the Dhamma. Now, of course, generosity is part of the practice. But this is where the limitless nature of the brahmaviharas meets up with the limitations of being a human being. You have only so much time, so much energy, so much strength. Your mind needs training.

So you have to balance these things out. The *amount* of compassion is limitless, and the range of people to whom you want to extend compassion is limitless, but the same thing also goes for equanimity. After all, your resources are not limitless. When you run up against the edge of your resources, the edge of your time, the edge of your ability, the edge of your energy: That's when equanimity has to be limitless.

So try to keep these things sorted out in this way. We're not here just for compassion or just for equanimity. We're here because there are a whole range of virtues and good qualities we need to develop in the mind: both in the way we deal with other people and in the way we deal with the mind itself.

And a large part of the skill we have to develop in the practice lies in learning how to balance these things out.