

Unlimited Compassion, Limited Resources

July 13, 2019

When we chant, “Praise of the Buddha,” one of the phrases states that he was the unexcelled teacher of those fit to be tamed. Notice, that’s not everybody. When he set out to teach, he said that “The doors to the deathless are open,” and he added, “let those who have ears show their faith.” That’s a qualification. Not everybody has ears. We all have ears, of course, but not everybody listens.

There was one time when a person came to the Buddha and asked him, “Doesn’t the Buddha have compassion for all beings?” And the Buddha said, “Yes. “Then why don’t you teach everybody the same?” He said, “It’s like being a farmer. You have three kinds of fields—the good fields, the middling fields, and the poor fields—and say you have only a certain amount of seed, where does it go first? To the good field. And if there is any left over, then it goes to the middling field. And if there is still some left over then you give it to the poor field. In the same way, the Buddha said, there are those people who are really receptive, those who are somewhat receptive, those who are actually antagonistic. He paid most attention to the first group, less to the second, and still less to the third. Why? Because he had only so much strength to teach.

So even though the Buddha had goodwill for everybody, he also had to have equanimity for everybody, and he had to balance the two. And the same with us: When we’re practicing the sublime attitudes, we practice goodwill for everybody, compassion for everybody, empathetic joy for everybody, but also equanimity for everybody. That last one is our grounding, to remind us that not everybody’s going to be happy. You may wish for people to be happy, you see someone suffering, you wish to see them get out of the suffering. Or see someone who’s already happy, you’re happy for them. But there are cases of people you’d like to help and it’s impossible. Either you don’t have the strength or they’re not cooperative. Those are cases where you have to develop equanimity.

A large part of the discernment we have to develop in the practice is knowing when goodwill is appropriate and when equanimity is appropriate. It’s like being a doctor. You have goodwill for all your patients, but some of the patients you realize you can’t help, either because the disease is too bad or because they’re ornery. They won’t take the medicine. So you need to have equanimity for the cases you can’t help in order to have the strength to focus on the cases where you can. And even with each individual, there are some symptoms you can’t help, but there are others you can, so you focus your goodwill and energy on the ones that you can. You don’t let yourself get

dragged down by the others.

So equanimity is there to keep us from suffering from our goodwill, compassion, and empathetic joy. As Ajaan Fuang once said, “If we don’t have the equanimity of concentration, then goodwill is suffering, compassion is suffering, empathetic joy is suffering.” So we work getting the mind to settle down to provide ourselves with a sense of well-being inside. Otherwise, we try to feed off of our own compassion. In other words, we feel good about feeling compassionate, but sometimes that leads us to help people in cases where they’re just going to pull us down. Or they get us really entangled.

Remember, one of the principles of the practice is that you’re practicing for unentanglement. There are a lot of people out there who are just pleading for help and they’d be all too happy to pull you down, to get you all entangled. And it’s not good for them, so you’re not really helping them. You’re certainly not helping yourself by allowing yourself to get entangled like that.

So you need a combination of concentration and discernment. The discernment is what allows you to see which of those attitudes is appropriate for which cases. The concentration gives you the strength, the wisdom gives you the insight into your own motivations about why you might want to help somebody else, whether you can really trust those motivations or not. The combination of concentration and discernment allows you to step back, view the situation with more objectivity, to view yourself with more objectivity, so that you can figure out: What are your capabilities? How much can you help somebody else? And how far do you go before getting to the point where you’re harming yourself?

Because the help you give to others comes under the principle of generosity, and one of the basic principles of generosity is that you don’t give to the point where it hurts. In other words, you don’t give in a way that harms you or harms others.

So even though our compassion should be limitless, we have to realize that we as human beings have our limits. And the help we give to others has to be viewed in the context of a practice in which we have to give our primary focus on the training of our own minds. As the Buddha said, he doesn’t praise people who help others to the point where they’re harming themselves. The ideal person is someone who helps him or herself and then can help other people. Next below that is the person who knows how to help him or herself, because it’s only when you can straighten out your own mind that you can really know, what it means to straighten out a mind, what it means to straighten out a life. Only then can you give reliable help to others.

Watch out for the conceit, the self-image that comes from going way out of your way to be helpful in situations where it’s not appropriate. You have to ask, why am I doing this? What inside the mind is getting fed by this? Again, it

requires concentration to get the mind still enough to see these things, and discernment to ask the right questions.

So all of the brahmaviharas have to be limitless—in other words, something you can apply to anybody in any situation. And they require the discernment to see when is it appropriate to apply goodwill together with compassion and empathetic joy? And when is it appropriate to develop equanimity?

There are no hard and fast rules for this, as with all the elements of this path which is a middle way. It requires a balancing. Not that you're half-hearted in your compassion, or half-hearted in your good-will, or half-hearted in your equanimity. It means figuring out what's appropriate for what time. When you can balance these different qualities in this way, then the people around you benefit and you benefit too. If you can't find the balance, then you can do harm in both ways.

So, work on your concentration to get the mind in a good solid position and work on your discernment, both into the situations around you and into the situations in your own mind, so that the help you give is genuinely helpful, both for others and for yourself.