

Compassion

Compassion, like all the brahmavihārās (illimitable heart expressions) is a natural and normal movement of the heart that can be lifted to inconceivable heights. Specifically, compassion (to be with suffering) expresses a caring, wise and skilful response to all that is painful and difficult.

At the core of compassion is empathy: resonating and attuning us to others. In Pali there is a word for this aspect of compassion: anukampa, the empathetic quivering of the heart as it contacts the pain of the world.

On an energetic level we can feel how we are like vibrating strings of a musical instrument: when one being vibrates at a certain frequency, be it stress or release something in us responds. The skill of being resonant is intrinsic to all brahmavihārā practices. But, compassion is not shrunken like pity, nor entangled like sympathy.

Although compassion can come as naturally as breathing, we also know that at times we do not respond to the calling of care. So one aspect of our practice is learning where and why the heart closes.

We may not immediately notice that we have emotionally shut down, raised our guard, or dulled our resonance. A willingness to check in is necessary, without judging see if the natural empathetic quivering of the heart has been overruled. Often this is for rational reasons: What do I know?; I shouldn't interfere; I don't have the time, skills, resources to help.

Can we not be so certain of this projection. Either recalling a time when we did act and how it helped in some way, or just being willing to try something. Doubt is a self-fulfilling hindrance, it is almost always helpful to try something else.

In this way we take our resonant empathy and bring it into activity. This is an essential element of a compassionate way of relating to life: for compassion is an action. The Pali word for boundless compassion is karuṇā, which means an act of care which liberates (unbinds) the giver and receiver.

The subtlest and deepest form an action can take is as an intention, and this is the territory of our practice. In compassion practice we use phrases, images, and/or felt resonances to learn the territory of the active heart. Some compassion phrases to try:

May **I / You / We**

be held in care
feel your difficulty ease
be free from fear
live in peace and safety