

An Appropriate Response

Christina Feldman May 10, 2020 Tricycle

...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 act as if it is possible to do so. These vows reflect the 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.

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.".....

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 (suffering/dissatisfaction) 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.

...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.

...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.