



## Dolpo Tulku Rinpoche - Teachings

### The relationship between Compassion and Wisdom

Today's topic is the relationship between compassion and wisdom. A certain kind of knowledge or wisdom facilitates the development of compassion, and moreover a certain type of compassion elicits wisdom. If we look at this more deeply, we see that not all variations of compassion are imbued with wisdom and not all wisdom is connected with compassion.

A few weeks back, I went on a month-long trek through the Himalayas with a group of doctors from the US, covering more than 300 km. I had some quite impactful insights during that time and I want to present a couple of them during this talk.

In one of the villages that we visited, the locals received me warmly and invited me to sit on a large bench. It was quite cold and took about ten minutes to warm my seat. But then someone asked me to move to a chair to make room for some other people who had just arrived. Again it took me a while to get comfortable and warm, but another person decided that a chair was not befitting for my position as a spiritual leader and carried in a bigger seat. Slightly annoyed I moved once more, exclaiming that from now on, I would not get up again. The villagers were a bit taken aback! Of course each request to that I move was made out of respect and love for me, but there was no wisdom concerning the circumstances. They wanted the best for me, but did not consider the cold and my struggles to feel warm. This is a small example, but it shows that compassion can be beneficial only if combined with intelligence or wisdom.

If a child falls ill, the parents will do anything to heal him or her based on their unconditional love. But without the proper medical training, they will not know how to help, no matter how strong their bond to the child is. On the other hand there may be doctors who have the knowledge, but might not help, because they don't want to devote the time, or perhaps the payment is not sufficient for them. The best case scenario is for the parents to be doctors! Then love and compassion is combined with the appropriate expertise.

What is the connection between wisdom and compassion? I want to explain this in a little more detail and invite you to look at your own experience as well. The first step is to discover what gives rise to compassion in our minds. What is its basis? Compassion rests on an understanding of others, in other words empathy. Without empathy compassion is impossible. We can all understand this very easily.

Lack of understanding can have many reasons. Sometimes we face religious convictions that we cannot comprehend. Or we may focus on differences between ourselves and others regarding issues like culture, political views, or judgements on what proper

manners and conduct are. Often we fail to even try to gain some insight into the diverging viewpoints. In that case, all points of connection are cut off. Some people might think that we need not take others into account. We can simply ignore those we do not agree with. Otherwise we decide from our own side on certain restrictions and rules, and when someone crosses them or does not conform with them in some way, we leave them out and feel no need to care for them. We simply do not look into what is going on with such people, because their behavior or situation does not conform to our values.

Such attitudes erect unsurmountable barriers between people and reinforce ignorance concerning others, their view points, and their way of life. In the worst case scenario this leads to feeling fundamentally threatened by the other, culminating in the wish to destroy them, their religion and culture, and/or to deprive them of a secure lifestyle. This completely contradicts wisdom and acts like an atom bomb for our inner peace.

If we value compassion, we need to be crystal clear about the importance of empathy. All empathy needs to be based on knowing about others, which leads us to a certain wisdom concerning their situation, their motives, what drives them etc. Compassion and wisdom are therefore intrinsically linked. However, we all can attest that gaining such wisdom is not always easy. Sometimes we believe we are well aware of someone else's mental or emotional state, and later on we notice that our understanding was very superficial. To generate true compassion, we must dig deeper than a mere 'I get you'. We need to gain proper insight into people's viewpoints on religion, spirituality, culture, politics and whatever else shapes their experiences. Curiosity concerning their belief system and values is crucial. We can easily relate to that when we think about how our views, upbringing, culture and so on shapes us as a person. If someone criticises them based on ignorance and a refusal to acknowledge their validity, we will also feel hurt. Empathy is rooted in accepting that fundamentally all people share the same feelings and that we are all equal in that respect. We should appreciate others in the same way that we wish to be appreciated.

Our pets provide us a good example illustrating the importance of understanding. If you own one, you know how much you needed to learn how care for it properly. What does it need to feel comfortable? What food does it need? What vaccines does it need? What does a certain kind of behaviour mean? We spend a lot of time and resources to answer these questions, because we love the animal and feel a deep bond with it. This bond stems from the good feeling we derive from being with the animal. Sometimes we get home in the evenings after a challenging work day almost too tired to put the key in the lock. But when our dog welcomes us brimming with joy and with a wagging tail, we suddenly feel refreshed and have the energy for a cuddle and some play time. Our pet is there for us and we want to reciprocate.

Our partners provide another example. When we are angry at them all connection shuts down and therefore all understanding is gone. Only our rage seems to be important, seemingly giving us permission to say and do the most hurtful things. Only when we calm down and literally return to our senses are we able to understand what we put our partner through. Understanding is the most effective remedy for ignorance. The moment we understand another person, it becomes easy to feel love and intimacy for them.

During my journey through the Himalayas this autumn I had a horse. One day we were to cross a pass that was around 5700 metres above sea level. I only had a small bag on me, but I still felt like I'd be too heavy a burden for such an arduous trek on the animal's

back. I decided to walk, fearing that the horse could not communicate to me if it was tired or hungry. If I rode, the horse had to follow my directions and could not decide when to rest. So I regarded my walk as a kind of practice and was really at ease with my choice. To inflict pain on the horse or to trouble it in any way was not acceptable to me. This empathy along with the willingness to endure some difficulty in order to give some respite to another being is based on an inner strength we all possess. We just need to know what to do. We all urgently need this kind of wisdom of the heart in our daily lives.

At this point, I want to introduce and explain wisdom from a more intellectual view point. Are you familiar with the term 'emptiness' as it is used in Buddhist philosophy? The classical texts say that a realisation of emptiness generates boundless love and compassion. Emptiness does not mean empty in the sense of the complete absence of something like an empty glass. What is meant is emptiness in relation to our worldly perceptions and projects, including the judgements we make based upon them.

We experience our environment through our five senses. Depending on how sharp they are, we discern forms, smells, tastes, touch, and sounds in a certain way, and we assess them to be like this or like that. Our assessments and the points of view that we consequently hold are influenced by many factors: the upbringing our parents gave us, the culture we belong to, the impact religion has had on us, and so on. Throughout our lives we build up belief systems which discern good from bad, true from false, acceptable from unacceptable behaviour, and the like.

Normally we don't consider that all of these beliefs lack a real foundation, that we have made everything up! Actually we are convinced that we what think is ultimately true and that anyone with another opinion about things is wrong. This is a complete misconception of reality and a huge obstacle for developing unconditional love and compassion. Once we establish immutable boundaries between and within our thinking, we simply cannot have boundless love and compassion.

An insight into emptiness helps us understand that no phenomenon has an intrinsic nature or essence, but that everything we perceive comes into being through causes and conditions or in relation to something else. Understanding this, we can easily comprehend that nothing can be good or bad, this or that, through its own nature, but that we have established these categories ourselves.

Let me ask you a question. Where am I sitting? For some of you I will be in front, for some to the right, and for some to the left. Maybe someone might even say I am sitting in the west or in the east. A whole range of answers is possible, and are all valid, depending on where you sit. If I were to say that I sit nowhere in particular, you might think I was crazy, but actually I'd be speaking the truth. No one can determine 100% accurately where I am located. Now before I asked this question, I am sure you all believed you definitely knew where I was sitting. You can all see me clearly. But if we analyse somewhat more, we can quickly determine that our impression is nothing more than just that—our impression. It is not true for everyone. This can literally take our breath away. At that moment an understanding of emptiness dawns.

To introduce us to emptiness, my teacher used several methods. One day, for example, he said to me: "Go get that big thing from next door." I darted out of the room, but the moment I arrived in the other room, I saw many things. Which among them was big and which small? Who made these distinctions? At that moment I understood he was testing

me. Big and small do not exist in and of themselves, but come about through some a relationship to something else, or through comparison. That is why it is taught that phenomena are free or empty of any truly self-existing nature.

When I sheepishly returned to my teacher's room, he was laughing. I was bit embarrassed, even though something had clicked in my understanding. It was actually a very powerful moment for me to realise that many different view points and classifications can be valid, even if at first glance they seem contradictory. Not one of them is ultimately true. This is an important point! Whenever we believe that something is exactly the way it appears to us and cannot be in any way different, we shut ourselves off from any other point of view or judgement. Then it becomes impossible to take another opinion into consideration. Empathy or even compassion are automatically out of reach. We believe that we are right and that anyone thinking something else is wrong. Almost all conflicts are based on such stubbornness. The worst case scenario is war.

If we familiarise ourselves with the view of emptiness and incorporate it into our daily lives, it will become very easy for us to gain a deeper understanding of the emotions and thought processes of others. Misunderstandings and disputes can be eliminated from the very beginning. This facilitates an easier life not just for us, but also for others.

I'd like to tell a short story in this regard. A monk walked down a road and saw a little Buddha statue lying in the mud to the side. This upset him and he wondered what he could do to protect the Buddha from the weather and the dirt. He looked around and saw a leather sole near by. He picked it up and gingerly covered the statue. A little later another monk passed by the same spot, and when he saw the sole perched in a funny position and lifted it to look underneath he saw the Buddha statue. This made him angry and he threw the sole to the side, thinking, "Who could be so disrespectful?" Had someone asked the two monks individually why they acted as they did, both would have said that they were acting out of utter respect for statue and what it represented. And even though their actions were completely opposite of each other, both of them were right when we take emptiness into consideration.

Here at the end, I'd like to dig deeper into the question of how the view of emptiness can be practiced in order to generate compassion in every day life. As I mentioned before the most important method is to imagine ourselves in the position of the other.

Most of us will have a colleague or someone who we do not get along with very well and whom we suspect of wanting to cause us trouble. We have often lengthy conversations with ourselves, analysing their behaviour: "Why are they behaving that way? Why does he speak to me in that tone? Why does he always get in the way?" Then we answer ourselves: "Oh, he just wants to upset me. He has no common sense." Sometimes we work ourselves up to the point that we have trouble sleeping and toss around in bed all night. But if we sit down in a quiet moment and try to take on the other person's perspective, we might be able to gain some new insights. We could also ask this person to have a chat with us and simply ask what the matter is, how we can improve our relationship. Maybe they have a family problem, or maybe we inadvertently upset them in the past and they are still hanging on to that, and feeling as frustrated with us as we are with them. Maybe they have another way of working that we haven't fully understood yet. The possibilities are infinite, and many situations can be solved easily, if we are willing to invest a little time and empathy. The best course would be to have genuine compassion, which usually helps others to open up to us.

I hope I've able to introduce to you the connection between wisdom and compassion in a way that you can take home and apply immediately. That would be the best outcome for tonight!

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