

To Care

by Gil Fronsdal

To care and offer care are fundamental expressions of Buddhist life. The Buddha himself was called “The Caring One” who taught out of his care for others. After his first students became enlightened, he instructed them to live for the welfare and happiness of others out of “care for the world.’ In the Buddha’s teachings “care” is the basic attitude and motivation for benefiting others. As such, it can be seen as the foundation for both compassion and loving-kindness.

The Buddhist word for “care” is *anukampā*. As *kampa* means “quivering,” we might think of it as the quivering of the heart that awakens the natural capacity to care for others. We might understand this “quivering” as being related to the emotional responses referenced by the English expression “being moved.” *Anu* is a prefix meaning “toward,” in this case toward others. Together, *anu* and *kampa* imply care that comes from being moved by others.

While *anukampā* is sometimes translated as “compassion,” it has a broader scope than compassion. *Anukampā* does not refer only to a sympathetic concern for someone’s suffering and for the alleviation of that suffering. It also encompasses the desire for the welfare and happiness of people who are not suffering. As such, the Buddha uses *anukampā* to refer to the care parents feel for their children and good friends have for each other. In wide sweeping ways, the Buddha instructed monastics to have *anukampā* toward laypeople. He also taught his students to visit the sick “out of care” for them.

Overall, the ancient Buddhist teachings give the impression that *anukampā* is the primary attitude that underlies actions of caring for others. It is an attitude of benevolence which spans the range of goodwill that later Theravāda texts associate with loving-kindness, compassion, appreciative joy, and equanimity (*mettā*, *karuṇā*, *muditā*, and *upekkhā*). However, *anukampā* is simpler than these four heart qualities, in that care doesn’t require consideration of the circumstances in which others are in. If loving-kindness, compassion, appreciative joy, and equanimity are forms of love, then ‘care’ is a more basic

human attitude that does not require love: it is possible to care well for people we don't love.

The Buddha does not indicate that *anukampā* needs cultivating, perhaps because it is the natural, underlying condition from which other attitudes can be developed. Some of the references to *anukampā* give the impression that, in early Buddhism, this form of care was an ordinary, everyday attitude people were simply expected to have.. That *anukampā* arises when ill-will and hatred are abandoned suggests that it is a natural capacity that is only inaccessible while there is hatred. That *anukampā* appears when ill-will is gone suggests that those who mature on the path of liberation will uncover increasing capacities for being caring of others.

Using “care” to translate *anukampā* associates it with the many ways we care for each other. Doctors and nurses offer ‘medical care,’ sometimes in ‘intensive care units.’ ‘Care-givers’ help the sick and the elderly. Chaplains offer “spiritual care,’ ‘Child-care providers’ tend to the needs of children. ‘Comfort care’ is sometimes synonymous with the ‘palliative care’ dying people receive. While loving-kindness and compassion are valuable in all these forms of care, they are not required for offering good care. To require caregivers to have compassion and loving-kindness could add unnecessary complications to their ability to care well for others.

The distinction between care and compassion or loving-kindness does not mean that care is cold-hearted or aloof. Rather it means that caring for others is a basic and ordinary way we can tend to the welfare of others. It is care that is instinctual like are the wishes parents have to nurture the well-being of children, the expressions of welcome and hospitality to a stranger traveling through our town, and the simple acts of generosity toward neighbors. It can also be actions no one sees such as picking up trash in a park so others may enjoy visiting. These ordinary acts of care can arise unselfconsciously as a simple expression of feeling connected to others.

For people who cultivate the Buddhist path to liberation, *anukampā* is associated with inner freedom. The more we are free from clinging, hostility,

conceit, and anxiety, the more we are motivated by the very ordinary human instinct to care for others. And the more we trust this caregiving instinct, the more we can respond to the world in caring ways without mixing it up with the burden of obligation, the need for appreciation, or concern for receiving something in return. When we are free, we simply offer care because we care.

