

Fostering Boundless Compassion: The Root of Connection

By Scott Tusa

Welcome back to our series on opening your heart. In today's session, we're going to work with boundless compassion. Just a quick note, before we go into today's topic, I just want to encourage you in your daily practice: keeping that consistency going with each of the boundless states as we move through. And if you lost some consistency, no worries, you can always start afresh and continue the practice. It's really important to practice these because, of course, learning what they are and understanding what they are is important. But if we don't practice them, then it's difficult to allow transformation to happen. So I usually recommend letting go of conclusion, and just putting more energy into showing up each day as long as we can, and working the practice. And if we put energy into regular practice, we're going to see transformation. So I just want to encourage you to keep up that consistency.

As we move from the practice of boundless lovingkindness to the practice of boundless compassion, some of you may notice that boundless compassion is a little more challenging. There's a reason that boundless lovingkindness comes before boundless compassion, and that's because in order to practice boundless compassion, we need to be willing to feel a little bit uncomfortable. Now, it's not that discomfort will always arise when we practice boundless compassion. But it may, because as we work with boundless compassion, we're working with a practice that aspires for ourselves and others to be free from suffering and its causes. And in order to work with that aspiration, we need to reflect on the various kinds of pain points, sufferings, moments of dissatisfaction, and stress that both ourselves and others experience. So naturally, when we reflect on these things, they may make us uncomfortable. And this is what can make boundless compassion practice a little more challenging.

I just like to say that it's a challenge that can be very worthwhile to work with, as compassion is really at the center of how we're able to hold ourselves in the world. So I view the aspect of encountering challenges in working with facing difficulties and discomfort in the practice of compassion, more as a boon. In this way, we need some courage when we're approaching the practice of boundless compassion.

I also like to point out that the practice of compassion is a practice of breaking open, not breaking down. So if we notice, we're breaking down in any kind of way with this practice, we need to take a step back and take a look at why that might be happening. And how to augment the practice of it, to really focus on the essence of what this kind of teaching on boundless compassion is pointing us toward. And so, as I said, there's a kind of breaking open that needs to happen, because in the world around us, and then, of course, in our own lives, we can't avoid suffering. It's a natural part of the world. As far back as we go in history, it's something that's been a part of history. And you can also see that many of us have an incredible resistance, to suffering, to pain, to dissatisfaction, and all kinds of stress that happens to ourselves and others in the world. It's also totally heartbreaking to witness the kinds of sufferings that can arise in the world around us as well as our own lives. So boundless compassion is the practice of allowing ourselves to break open with a broken heart, not to break down.

What this provides is so much wisdom and depth in our life, and so much interconnection that can happen. I see this happening to myself and others all the time, where we hear so much bad news going on around us, and we get caught up in that bad news. We repeat it in our minds, and it creates a lot of stress, anxiety, and overwhelm. Boundless compassion is a different way to work with those kinds of events we have to bear witness to, that are inevitable in our lives and the world around us. Again, compassion allows us to bear witness in a way that softens us, that opens us, rather than breaks us down. And out of that softening and opening, we start to encounter more qualities of boundlessness, of being able to abide in a less limited way of being with ourselves and others. And then of course, more compassion and action, more wise action, can come out of that. So just some food for thought here on not only what compassion is, but what the deeper purpose is, because I don't know about you, but sometimes I'm just spinning my wheels, anxious about a certain kind of pain point that I'm having or someone else is having, and it's not allowing compassion to come forward. Where when I practice boundless compassion, there's, an incredible shift, and that shift is opening us to genuine interconnection and relationship where positive action can come out of that—not anxiety and more pain.

I would say compassion is an absolute requirement for being a human being these days. And then of course, on our spiritual paths or on the Buddhist path, we can develop this more boundless quality that starts to break open into less fixation, less confusion, less misperception, and more insight and wisdom.

With that said, let's go ahead and practice. Again, find a space and a posture where you can be at ease yet upright in a learn. Feel free to close your eyes if you'd like or if you prefer them half open or fully open, that's fine. And again, just as we did with the previous practices, we're going to connect to breath and body. For some, breath at the tip of the nose feels just right for some, for some, allowing the abdomen to expand and contract and connecting breath to abdomen feels good. And also we can explore new ways. For me, connecting breath to Earth and feet, really helps to ground me into this moment, into a more easeful mindful awareness. So I breathe up from the earth into my feet on the inhalation, and on the exhalation, just allow my feet to settle more into the ground below me, allowing a sense of groundedness to arise. We'll just spend a few moments wherever you feel most comfortable with the breath and body allowing your attention awareness to connect through the body, through the breath, to this moment. It's allowing all other things to fall away. Or if they don't want to fall away, just allowing our attention to gather more at the feet, more at the abdomen, and more at the tip of the nose. We don't have to reject anything that's arising. We can allow thoughts, we just center our attention more on the body and breath.

OK, so just as we did in our previous two practices, we're going to work with either a visual image, a felt presence, or it could also be auditory for some of us. Or sometimes we're just working with a phrase toward someone in ourself. And again, we're going to work with a more circular process to develop these boundless qualities or these boundless states.

So to start, we're just going to invite in one of these three types of relationships. As I said before, if you're newer to this kind of practice, you might want to work with a close one. If you're more intermediate or advanced, you can work with a difficult person and or someone you are more indifferent toward. Just take a moment to invite that person or people into the room. Welcome them. Again you invite them in visually, more as a felt presence, or using one of your other sense perceptions. The main thing is to deliberately bring them to mind and to start to engage in that relationship through memory or imagery, through sounds that you remember, or just a sense of them, a feeling of them.

As I said as I was introducing boundless compassion, we need a little bit of courage to practice this because we're going to be reflecting on our own and others' pain. We're going to bring to mind a pain point, a memory where there was some difficulty that this person experienced.

And we're also going to bring to mind a moment of difficulty for ourselves. Now, if there can be some commonality here, that's really helpful for this style of circular practice. So again, we can take just a very human experience, like experiencing a cold or an illness. This is something in common. Or we can take something more every day. Just a bad mood or not getting our way. Or a certain kind of emotion that was difficult for us, that also we recognize this other person experienced or, you know, most likely experience, again, maybe not in the same way, but more the human quality of it, that commonality.

And as we start to reflect on this particular challenge, or pain point for ourselves and this other person, again, we start to play with the quality or meaning of boundless compassion, the essence being this aspiration that ourselves and others can be free from suffering and its causes. But what's interesting here is we don't seek that freedom by turning away from suffering. Actually, we turn toward it, and we embody this aspiration. So if you're newer to this, you can just repeat a phrase, like, "May you be free from pain, may be free from difficulty, may be free from suffering." And as you imagine them receiving that aspiration from you, you also imagine yourself receiving it from them. So as we reflect on the pain point, we offer this aspiration for a freedom from it. And here, we're going to start to encounter another flavor of what genuine compassion feels like, which is a deep connection with our pain and the pain of others, but also a sense of courage to uplift from that. So there's that connection point which doesn't feel good to reflect on or feel. But there's also this aspiration that doesn't break us down; it breaks us open.

Just continue in that linear process, offering compassion to them, receiving compassion from them. And just as we did with boundless lovingkindness practice, see if that linear process can start to break open into a circular process, less subject object, less duality between yourself and the other. All that's left is compassion and connection. And if you can connect with that, just rest with that place, your mindful awareness on that compassionate openness.

But, of course, if you need to just stay with that linear process, offering the aspiration for them to be free from suffering and its causes and receiving that from them, just stick with that. Just notice what happens as you offer a back and forth you do that enough. There's just this sense of

compassionate connection that starts to develop. And you can take a break from repeating the phrase and just rest with the feeling of what rests with the attitude of that. And then again, offer through a phrase or offer through a feeling. So we don't have to stay static in this meditation. We can keep it moving and creative. But the key is reflecting on the pain point and offering compassion toward the person and ourselves. It's experiencing difficulty or suffering.

If you'd like to continue this practice, feel free to go ahead. But just before we close the practice, we're going to let go of what we've been imagining here, what we've been sending and receiving. So allow yourself to come back to the body, allow yourself to come back to a sense of openness with the breath and body. Even this sense of compassion we may have connected with can also come along. And maybe we found a space where we don't have to reject suffering, but we also don't have to be hijacked by it, caught up in it.

We don't have to stay fixated and stagnant on the suffering that ourselves and others experience. Instead, we can work with a practice of boundless compassion over time to open up this aspiration, which eventually falls into action. But that action doesn't come from fixation, rigidity, closed mindedness, and anxiety. It comes from a broken heart that's able to break open into connection and therefore right response, or response that's going to be infused with insight and wisdom, and also pregnant with compassion.

When you're ready, feel free to open the eyes and just allow the gaze to rest in the space in front of you. Allow part of your awareness to stay with the breath and body for a few more moments.

OK, again, thanks so much for your practice. In our next session, we're going to be working with the fourth and final boundless state, boundless joyfulness. So in the meantime, I encourage you to work with boundless compassion. As I said, it can be a challenging practice, but it's extremely worthwhile to cultivate. OK, see you soon. Thanks so much.