



The Practice of Compassion

The Heart's Wise Response to Suffering

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Compassion is the turning of Lovingkindness (Metta) towards suffering. This means that Compassion is an unconditional and non-judgmental care and concern turned towards suffering. It allows us to see and hear the pain and suffering we normally turn away from in ourselves, others, and in the natural world.

With Compassion, we experience a profound shift in our understanding of, and enter into a new relationship with, suffering. The heart's wise response with Compassion is to comfort and support suffering without attachment or identification. It allows us to engage in skillful efforts to eliminate suffering with an open-hearted kindness and gentleness, rather than with resentment or anger. *With Compassion, we embrace pain and suffering, but this embrace is not the cause or condition for more suffering.* Compassion is not suffering.

Compassion arises from an experiential understanding that all of our lives are deeply connected as part of a single cosmic tapestry, and that opening our hearts to each other, and particularly those who are suffering and in need, leads to peace in our own hearts, and to peace in the world around us. It also arises from an understanding that behind each smiling face we see at work, at the grocery store, or at a social event is a heart that suffers in the same deep and painful way that our heart suffers. The facts that prompt suffering may differ, but the isolating, punishing, and disabling experience of suffering is the same for all of us. *From the standpoint of meditative psychology, suffering is the struggle that arises in the mind in reaction to the difference between the way things are and the way we want them to be.* None of us escape from this most basic and universal aspect of being alive.

You may have heard the saying that "Forgiveness is giving up all hope of having a better past." This would be a good description of one element of Compassion – giving up on trying to relive and recast events that have already occurred and are not subject to change. What a gift it would be if we could accept what has happened and stop beating ourselves up.

Compassion involves something more profound, however, than giving up the past. It asks that we give up all hope of

having a better *present*. Unless we are willing to be fully present with what is before us in this moment, we have no hope of growing beyond our current limitations and reactive habits of mind. Without this willingness, the mind is constantly caught in aversion, avoidance, denial, suppression, and rationalization – anything other than being with what is here in our lives, now. Being willing to be unconditionally and non-judgmentally present with the way things are in this moment is the foundation of both wisdom and compassion.

Compassion demands not mere tolerance, but acceptance. It demands a surrendering to the reality and the truth of our lives in each moment. This willingness, this acceptance, this surrender *in this moment* is the pre-condition for growth, change, and skillfully dealing with suffering *in the next moment*.

The Symbolic Model of Compassion

Compassion as a model of embracing suffering willingly, without attachment and identification, and without suffering, is embodied in the symbolic being widely known as Kuan Yin or Avalokitesvara. It is said that "She hears the cries of all those suffering in the world."

The story of this archetypal being doesn't say she hears the cries of suffering and flinches, or grits her teeth, or turns away, or becomes sorrowful and overwhelmed. It also doesn't say she hears the cries of suffering and tries to solve, fix, change, or make things different than they are.

Instead, she hears the voices of suffering and is present with them. She accepts and embraces the harsh truth of suffering, abuse, violence, injustice, unfairness, and hardship without judgment or condition. She does this as a precondition to listening deeply to the situation to intuitively assess how she can be of help, how the heart's wise response to ease the burden of suffering can best manifest itself in each new moment. This may mean bearing witness; it may mean continuing to listen deeply; or it may mean taking action.

And the story of Kuan Yin says that she *smiles* despite her embrace of suffering which seems limitless and never-

ending. This ability to be at peace with suffering arises from the wisdom of deeply understanding the nature of reality. Joseph Campbell, the mythologist, describes it this way:

The first step to the knowledge of the wonder and mystery of life is the recognition of the monstrous nature of the earthly human realm as well as its glory, the realization that this is just how it is and that it cannot and will not be changed...So if you really want to help this world, what you will have to teach is how to live in it. And that no one can do who has not themselves learned to live in the joyful sorrow and the sorrowful joy of the knowledge of life as it is.

All suffering – ours' and others' – contains within it a longing to be held and comforted. We normally greet the reality of suffering, and this deep longing, with aversion and resistance – bracing, holding, rigidity, denial, avoidance, anger. This is the understandable response of fear. Compassion helps us greet suffering in a new way, with care, concern, softness, and understanding.

Another unhelpful element usually present in our response to suffering is our reaction of being uncertain of how to respond and a related sense of helplessness. This frequently results in an urge to escape and fill the space of uncertainty and helplessness with nervous activity. Compassion allows us to be present with this uncertainty and helplessness without feeling compelled to feel, or say, or do something. Just being present, of bearing witness, of not turning away is not just suddenly okay, but is understood as the foundation for listening deeply to hear what is appropriate and skillful.

When we start Compassion practice, we start where we are, even if our hearts are completely closed to our own suffering and that of others. None of us should expect we are, or should be, measured against the symbolic model of Kuan Yin. But that is an ideal that we can skillfully aspire to over a lifetime of genuine and true-hearted effort and intention. Compassion meditation is a gradual, lifetime practice.

A Real Life Model of Compassion

One way of understanding Compassion is to understand it as being a *balanced response* to suffering. If Kuan Yin is the symbolic embodiment of compassion, it is helpful to examine the example of a mother caring for her baby who is sick, who is in pain and unhappy, as a real life model of compassion in action.

A mother is frequently able to be present with her baby with great kindness, gentleness, and composure, despite the baby's crying and lack of cooperation in her efforts to help the baby. She feels a deep connection with the baby's unhappiness and is moved to support and help the baby feel better. Because she has a balanced view of the situation, her role as a care giver, and an understanding of the baby's pain, she is able to be present with and comfort the baby's suffering without resistance.

If the conditions change slightly, however, the mother's compassion may subtly begin to shift into unhealthy and unskillful states of mind. If she loses her balance, she may slip into pity or sorrow and be overwhelmed or confused. Or she may slip into detachment, irritation, or anger as a way to isolate herself from and protect herself against her baby's pain and suffering.

In the case of a mother, her Lovingkindness – her unconditional care and concern for her child – provides a field in which the baby's conduct is held without judgment and reactivity. In compassion practice, Lovingkindness acts as a field in which suffering – ours' or others' – is held without judgment or reactivity.

Compassion does not involve likes, dislikes, or preferences relating to the person who is suffering, or the conditions that have led to suffering. Compassion is opening to the universal and punishing nature of suffering itself. The story at the end of this essay by one of our meditation students entitled "A Compassionate Friend" reflects compassion's selfless and non-judgmental nature.

The Formal Practice of Compassion Meditation

Compassion meditation is a concentration practice of cultivating one's pointed attention on unconditional and non-judgmental care and concern for suffering. It is helpful to remember that Lovingkindness (Metta) is the foundation of compassion, so that compassion embodies a selfless and open-hearted kindness towards suffering.

In formal practice, it can be used during both sitting and walking meditation.

The practice involves visualizing the object for the meditation (the selected person) in the heart/chest area or in front of you at the heart/chest level. If you have difficulty with this visualizing, hold a heartfelt sense or feeling of the person in your heart/chest area. Then feel a direct connection with the person and recite the Compassion

phrases directing their deepest meaning and intention to the person.

The traditional order for practice proceeds as follows:

1. A person who is suffering greatly
2. Oneself
3. A Benefactor
4. A Dear Friend
5. A Neutral Person
6. A Difficult Person

When practicing compassion towards a person other than yourself, you can use the following phrases:

I care about your suffering.

May you be free of suffering.

May you find peace.

When practicing compassion towards yourself, you can use the same phrases but direct them toward yourself and your own suffering:

I care about my suffering.

May I be free from suffering.

May I find peace.

You can also use your own version of these phrases that embody the foundational principles of compassion. Illustrations might include:

I embrace my suffering with care and tenderness or

Out of compassion for myself, may I open to and let go of this suffering or

May I embrace this suffering without judgment.

Remember that the practice involves *connecting* the heartfelt meaning of these phrases with the person selected and *sustaining* the connection. Watch for the mind to wander if you begin mechanically reciting the phrases. For compassion practice to come alive, you need to be in connection with both the intention behind the phrases and the object of meditation.

One helpful way to understand if we are experiencing compassion is to focus our attention on our experience of *what is happening in the body*. A balanced response to suffering will feel one way in the body. *Balance exists when conditions are stable, in alignment, and in a state of dynamic rest*. An unbalanced response, driven by either desire or aversion, will feel completely different. A lack of balance exists when conditions are unstable, not in alignment, and in a state of conflict. In this regard, the body can be one of the most reliable guides to understanding what we are feeling.

Also watch for the arising of mind states that are *not* compassion – pity, sorrow, sympathy, detachment, irritation, anger. When they do arise, acknowledge their presence *without* judgment, blame, or criticism, then return the attention back to the intention of the phrases. If non-compassionate mind states become so strong as to interfere with your ability to continue compassion practice, switch to Insight (Vipassana) practice to experience and investigate the mind state. When it has subsided, return to compassion practice with the selection of a *new* person to use as the object of meditation.

Understanding Our Role

It is critical for us to realize that we cannot eliminate someone else's suffering. Suffering is the struggle that arises in each of our minds in response to the difference between the way things are and the way we want them to be. Each of us needs to find our own path to finding peace and balance. *While we can't eliminate someone else's suffering, we can, and our role is to, comfort, support, and help others' efforts to deal with their own suffering.*

Practicing Compassion in Daily Life

Another simple, and powerful, way to begin cultivating compassion is to use the compassion phrases during your daily activities. You can send the phrases to the person who cuts you off in traffic; a co-worker who is having a difficult day; your child who is angry or frustrated; the bank teller or grocery clerk; or a person you see walking or jogging at the park.

This random, but regular, sending of the phrases to persons we know, and those we don't know, begins to connect us with the struggle in all lives and the wish inside of us for others to find peace, in the same way that we want to find peace. It begins to help us understand that the deep aspiration in our heart for happiness, peace, and freedom is present in every other heart.

To cultivate this realization, you might try modifying the compassion phrases, in both formal meditation and in daily life, as follows:

*In the same way that I wish to be free from suffering,
may you be free from your suffering.*

*In the same way that I wish for peace in my life, may
you find peace.*

Concluding Thoughts

True compassion is a powerful and transformative development in any life. It's cultivation and development happens gradually, slowly, bit-by-bit. It's development has its own time table and rhythm that can't be rushed. If you really want to have this quality of heart express itself in your life, it will require a clear intention, practice, and patience.

A COMPASSIONATE FRIEND One Meditation Student's Story

In my work, I meet with clients on a weekly basis. About a year ago, I began meeting with a man that has since become a dear friend. During our weekly sessions, we quickly discovered that we had something very important in common. We both have been meditating for many years, although in different traditions. Our discussions quite often turn to spiritual practice.

One morning, during a practice interview with my meditation teacher, I opened to a place of very deep pain. I started crying during the practice interview and couldn't stop in the hours that followed. I knew I needed to pull myself together to get to work. As I drove to my office, I was still unsure of how, or even if I would be able to, make it through the day without breaking down again. I thought of my first client that day – my friend.

I arrived at the office and was standing at the door, trying to look composed, when my friend arrived. He took one look at me and said, "What happened!?" I cracked. I began weeping and put my face in my hands.

He put his arm around me and walked me into my office. As I sobbed, he stroked my back and quietly said, "It will pass....this will pass...." I cried so hard that I couldn't breathe out of my nose. My tears soaked his shirt. I sat down to get a Kleenex and tried to pull myself together.

"Whatever it is – it must be really intense – I know how strong you are!" he said. I started crying again. My friend began to pray out loud. Gently and quietly he repeated, "If I have any light, let it pass to her – right now...Any light that I have, let it pass to her...." After a while, he said "I know! Pranayama! (Yogic deep breathing.) You do pranayama and I'll OM." And we did. I took deep, slow breaths to his soft and low OM for a period that seemed timeless....

He never asked me why I was upset. He just was there with me, being fully present for me and my suffering. I felt completely supported. I felt his complete respect for what I was experiencing. And at one point I realized that my tears had changed from tears of pain to tears of joy. I was so moved by the depth of his presence.

