

Compassion: Opening to Suffering

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Metta Matures into Compassion

Metta (loving-kindness) wishes friendliness and happiness to all beings. Compassion (or karuna in Pali) goes further. It is the capacity for sustaining heartfulness and good will when things become difficult and are not so pleasant.

Compassion allows us to be present to others in their pain and suffering without fear. It allows us to have balanced empathy and care. Loving-kindness is the ground of compassion, and over time it naturally matures into compassion. Compassion is linked to courage. It takes a brave and strong heart even to wish to cultivate compassion.

Compassion Fatigue

These days we hear so much about compassion fatigue and compassion burn out. Whenever something comes in the mail advertising an event for care givers, social activists, therapists, or counselors, there is usually at least one workshop included on the topic of compassion fatigue. But I think this is a misunderstanding of compassion. We usually experience a mixture of empathy and compassion at the same time, and the burnout is coming from intense empathy not from compassion.

Compassion and Empathy

So I would like to talk about the difference between compassion and empathy, and the importance of both. We may often use these terms interchangeably, but they are not the same. In my own practice, it has taken me a long time to begin to understand this.

Empathy is connected to what neuroscientists now refer to as mirror neurons. It is the capacity to actually feel what others are feeling. It is a wonderful capacity that all humans share because it's hard wired into us as a species. It allows us to say: "I know what it feels like." "I know what you are feeling." It helps us read the needs of others, especially of infants, and makes it possible for us to take on the pain of others. It is a survival response that keeps our species going. What may block an empathic survival

response is seeing someone as other—not a member of our tribe or group or perhaps feeling that they deserve their pain as punishment for something they have done.

Empathy and the Path to Compassion

Empathy is very important in the path to compassion. Without the ability to feel for another, it is very difficult to take the next step to compassion. With compassion we can see the larger picture of individual and universal suffering, which allows us to feel for others without overwhelming our circuits. Compassion helps us act skillfully to relieve suffering when we can or to just sit easefully with others in their pain.

But Empathy without compassion will quickly cause burn out. Matthieu Richard, a Tibetan Buddhist monk who has often been described as the happiest man alive, describes empathy without compassion in this way: It is “like an electric [water] pump that has no water flowing through it. It will quickly burn out.”

Too Much Empathy, Too Much I?

On a global level empathy can be overwhelming. I was doing an intensive metta retreat at IMS a while back. As part of the retreat, every day for an hour we did one of the other three Brahma Viharas for the same person we were doing metta for. One day, during an interview with my teacher, I said, “I want to be able to have deep compassion for the whole world.” Pretty lofty! And my teacher said “I” cannot have compassion for the whole world. The “I” is much too small to hold all of that. If compassion is coming from our tiny sense of self, we will experience burn out.

Not Just Me

Take for example self-compassion. Self-compassion is a wonderful practice, but when it comes from a small sense of self it can turn into “why me.” This will reinforce our sense of isolation and the feeling that no one understands our pain. With true compassion for ourselves a couple of things happen. First there is a genuine awareness that, yes, this is painful. Then second—and this is the key—it is not just me. Our distress connects us to others. It liberates us from our isolation.

A strong empathic response to pain can be a wake-up bell. It says, “It is time to open to something greater than me, my family, and my group.” After all, how can we look at

the world and want just one suffering person, a friend or lover or brother, to be safe and free of pain and suffering, when there are so many others out there in the same painful predicament, including ourselves?

Three Kinds of Responses

Let's look for a minute at the experience of being sick or injured. When you are ill and a friend or relative comes to visit you, what kind of response from them is helpful to you?

1. There is the helper who wants to fix things, who seems to expect a daily response that assures them that you are getting better every day. So maybe you start telling them you are fine when you are not fine.
2. Then there is the friend who is so distressed by your pain that it is causing them suffering. You feel like you need to take care of *them!*
3. Finally there is the person who is calm and able to listen attentively to your distress. Perhaps there is soothing touch as well. This person is not exhausted by your pain.

Compassion Does Not Overwhelm

This third way of attending to suffering is genuine compassion. Sometimes we resist having a compassionate response because we fear being overwhelmed by the other's suffering. So we turn away. It is interesting to observe the mind using our Vipassana practice—when does it go to blame, to rationalization? Sometimes there is a fear that, if we open to the pain and suffering of other beings, we will be overwhelmed and swallowed up by it. Compassion should not create more suffering. It is not about being overcome by the suffering of others. Nor is it being a martyr.

In order to be offered without these consequences, compassion has to be balanced with wisdom. This, of course, like everything else in practice, is a process of trial and error—trying to find a balance, finding the middle way.

Fritjof Capra, scientist and philosopher, says that our physical world is not a hierarchy but a very complex system of interconnecting networks. To be connected is the source

of both our biological and spiritual survival. Compassions allows us to be genuinely and safely connected to all the living beings around us. Thus it is the source of our deepest joy.

Quivering of the Heart

The classic description of compassion is the phrase, “. . .compassion is the quivering of the heart in response to others’ pain and suffering.” At the retreat where I was practicing compassion, my teacher suggested this classic metaphor. So I kept practicing and waiting for my heart to quiver, and wondered what this meant. I thought that maybe the word *resonate* would be a better translation than quiver. Now it began to make more sense. We hear this metaphor often, the quivering of the heart, but what does it mean? What experience does it describe? My teacher went on to offer another metaphor that was more helpful, one that compares compassion with a sitar.

A sitar is a stringed instrument, usually with 17 strings, only 7 or 8 of which are actually plucked by the sitar player. The other 10 strings are sympathetic, they vibrate on their own with the 8 that are played. Compassion is like that. The heart resonates with the pain and suffering of other beings, and that is all that is really required. We don’t need to take it on as a burden or a problem to solve. Compassion is a movement of the heart in response to the truth of suffering in ourselves and others.

To experience compassion, we need to start by opening a little at a time, as we develop the wisdom to judge our own capacity. Open a little, and if it is too much step back— not out of the denial of suffering but knowing that that this is all we can do for now.

One of my teachers said that he believed that enlightenment was the gradual ability to open to more and more suffering. Now, the paradox is that the more we are able to open to the suffering in the world, the more we are also able to open to joy.

Hindrances to Compassion

Apathy and Pity: It is obvious that compassion is not apathy, which just turns away and feels nothing. But it is also not pity. Compassion is not feeling sorry for people. Some may think that if we are compassionate, we are sentimentalists or what they call

“bleeding heart liberals,” who feel sorry for perpetrators and don’t want them to pay for their crimes. Compassion, like metta, doesn’t mean we have no boundaries. It means that we resonate with the suffering of all, both the victim and the perpetrator.

Pity is movement of the heart that does not connect with the other because the “othering” sense of self interferes. Pity is referred to as the near neighbor of compassion because it is often mistaken for compassion.

Something that comes up often for me is the question, “How should I respond to all the horrific images of pain and suffering I see on TV and my computer, and in the print media?” This is a personal reflection. I don’t know the answer to the question. We all have to make these determinations for ourselves. Often these images are just overwhelming and can’t be met with compassion. They are blasted at viewers in order to make us feel that the distress is happening out there somewhere and we are sitting safely in our homes far away from the carnage. It is a perfect set up for pity, the sense that “I am here and you are over there.”

What do we do with these images? Can we have compassion for an image? I don’t know. Often under those circumstances I turn my attention to compassion for the human plight—especially for those who cause pain.

Cruelty: The opposite of compassion, its far enemy, is cruelty. Until recently I assumed that cruelty was always caused by seeing the victim as other, and that is often the case. Cruelty can happen because other people or other species are not like us. But it was pointed out to me that the opposite can also be true in the case of cruelty. Causing pain can actually reinforce a perpetrator’s feeling of existence. Sometimes cruelty is *not* seeing the person as other, but instead seeing them precisely as a human—as someone the brutalizer wants to degrade.

A cruel person can feel power because they can try to make themselves superior. Jean Amery, who was tortured by the Nazis, says that inhumane cruelty is meant to prove the torturer’s existence by ruining the person who stands before him.

Of course no one here takes delight in causing pain. But we can sometimes fall into the lack of empathy that I described earlier, which may see pain or suffering as a just

punishment. We may experience this in relation to terrorists or people who have caused pain to us or the people we love. It's the "they had it coming" moment.

I have heard that in New York after 9/11 people put up signs that said, "Our grief is not cause for revenge." Such a beautiful awareness in the face of destruction.

So cruelty can be seen as a perversion of one of our deepest survival instincts as a species. It is an absence of empathy and on a deeper level a total denial that we all suffer.

How to Increase Our Capacity for Compassion

Compassion is not a quality some of us are born with and others not. Instead it is the result of how we choose to incline our minds. We choose to develop compassion. We choose to develop habits that embody love and connection, or instead we allow ourselves to settle into habits that create a sense of separation.

Compassion moves the heart to respond. It implies action. We don't all have to be Mother Teresa; compassion doesn't have to involve heroic actions. Small acts of caring are just as important as large ones. They can be very simple: listening to a friend who is in distress, rescuing an animal from the shelter. It is the openness and the motivation in our actions that deepen compassion and the frequency of our intention to act with kindness.

We can practice compassion in everyday life by simply staying open and present to suffering, by making our best effort not to turn away and instead to allow our hearts to open to the pain of others.

A teacher who I truly admire once told us that he had taken a vow to "never turn away from suffering." This may sound grandiose, but what a beautiful practice, to stay open to the first noble truth and to acknowledge that, indeed, life is vulnerable.

Practicing Compassion

There are several ways to practice compassion, both formally and informally. We can practice compassion in daily life, through awareness of suffering as we encounter it and

intentional acts of kindness in response, or formally on our cushions as one of the Brahma Viharas.

We can also explore compassion as part of our Vipassana practice. I have found that when I am quiet and my mind is clear, karuna will bubble up on its own. Compassion arises spontaneously from the depths of our Buddha nature. Like metta it is there as part of our birthright, but it also needs to be cultivated. For this reason, there is a formal, systematic practice of compassion. Its purpose is to strengthen and build an awareness of this aspect of Buddha nature.

Formal Practice

The formal practice of compassion consists in repeating phrases while we allow our hearts and minds to resonate like the sitar, we start with someone we know who is suffering mentally or physically. It is best to first choose someone we are open to and for whom it is easy to feel empathy.

For those who are not familiar with this practice, the possible phrases are:

- Out of compassion for you may you be free of this pain.
- I care about your pain and suffering.
- May your pain and suffering be eased.
- May you be held in compassion.
- May your pain and suffering be transformed into wisdom and compassion.

May we all hold ourselves and all beings with wisdom and compassion.