



Compassion

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Why do we suffer and get stressed out?

The short answer is that we are subject to the three poisons in life: greed, hatred and delusion. Rather than accept and deal with life as it is, we don't remember or understand how the mind works (delusion). This leads us to believing that we need more of what the mind wants (greed) and less of what the mind doesn't want (hatred).

Everyone is subject to suffering from the poisons. When we are mindful of the poisons we can turn to compassion as one of the antidotes.

What is compassion?

Compassion is the third intention of the Eightfold Path, the other two being letting go and loving-kindness..Compassion is the wish to relieve the suffering of others. It arises with the recognition of the universality of suffering and the realization that all living beings desire happiness.

"Compassion is the melting of the heart at the thought of another's suffering." Bhante Gunaratana.

The dew of compassion is a tear – Byron

What is empathy and how does it differ from compassion?

Empathy is generally defined as the ability to sense other people's emotions, coupled with the ability to imagine what someone else might be thinking or feeling. Although you can never know what another person is really feeling or thinking. When empathy gets overwhelming, it is called empathetic distress because it causes more stress. Matthieu Ricard notes from his research: "**So empathy is the effect that the suffering of others has on you, while compassion is completely turned to the other.** You forget about your sense of self. You're just completely a stream of love and compassion that goes to the person who is suffering. So, it's very different. So therefore, the more suffering in a way, the more courage. Like a doctor on the battlefield is not going to cry, he's going to do it again and again to the end of his strength. So actually, we found that compassion was the antidote to empathic distress. And that standalone empathy is like a water pump, that without water, it burns, so that leads to burnout and emotional exhaustion. While compassion is actually replenishing your strength. So, we also came up with the idea was there was no such thing as compassion fatigue, as is known in the medical world, but there is an empathy fatigue."¹

How does compassion differ from loving-kindness?

In comparing compassion to loving-kindness (metta), Bhikkhu Bodhi notes: "Compassion supplies the complement to loving-kindness: whereas loving-kindness has the characteristic of wishing for the happiness and welfare of others, compassion has the characteristics of wishing that others be free from suffering, a wish to be extended without limits to all living beings. Like metta, compassion arises by considering that all beings, like ourselves, wish to be free from suffering, yet despite their wishes continue to be harassed by pain, fear, sorrow, and other forms of dukkha (suffering)"²

You cannot generate compassion.

We need to express compassion **through our actions and not just hold it as a thought in our mind.** It is solely by experiencing your experience of another's suffering that leads to the appropriate action. Otherwise, compassion just remains as a thought. The action that you take varies depending on the circumstances. It can range from just being with that person to that person to providing care.

Nyanaponika Thera says it very well:

"The world suffers. But most... have their eyes and ears closed. They do not see the unbroken stream of tears flowing through life; they do not hear the cry of distress continually pervading the world. Their own little grief or joy bars their sight, deafens their ears. Bound by selfishness, their hearts turn stiff and narrow. Being stiff and narrow, how should they be able to strive for any higher goal, to realize that only release from selfish craving will affect their own freedom from suffering?"

It is *compassion* that removes the heavy bar, opens the door to freedom, and makes the narrow heart as wide as the world. *Compassion* takes away from the heart the inert weight, the paralyzing heaviness; it gives wings to those who cling to the lowlands of self.

Through *compassion* the fact of suffering remains vividly present to our mind, even at times when we personally are free from it. It gives us the rich experience of suffering, thus strengthening us to meet it"³

Compassion is not pity.

Pity, although defined in some cases as compassion, is really feeling sorry for someone from a distance. This is a separation as we feel that we are a separate self, viewing another. This does not allow the full experience of someone else's suffering.

How do you cultivate compassion?

It is important to start with yourself by reflecting on your own suffering. This may bring up painful memories. Allow them to be. This is the beginning of self-compassion.

Olivia Fox Cabane notes: "Self-compassion is feeling that what has happened to us is unfortunate, whereas self-pity is feeling that what happened to you is unfair. In this way, self-pity can lead to resentment or bitterness, and to feeling more isolated and alienated. In contrast, self-compassion often leads to increased feelings of connectedness.

Self-compassion is what helps us forgive ourselves when we've fallen short; it's what prevents internal criticism from taking over and playing across our face....In this way, self-compassion is critical to

emanating warmth. Self-compassion is how much warmth we can have for ourselves, especially when we are going through a difficult experience.”⁴

Tara Brach notes: “Feeling compassion for ourselves in no way releases us from responsibility for our actions. Rather, it releases us from the self-hatred that prevents us from responding to our life with clarity and balance.”⁵

Kristin Neff, one of the foremost researchers on compassion, defines self-compassion practice as a three-step process. I have added a fourth step (#2):

1. Mindfulness: We are mindful that we are experiencing difficulties.
2. Investigation: We investigate through mindfulness the thoughts and bodily sensations that have arisen.
3. Loving Kindness: We respond with kindness and understanding for ourselves rather than being harshly self-critical.
4. Connectedness: We realize that what we are going through is commonly experienced by all human beings and that everyone goes through difficult times.⁶

Holding Compassion for Others

After reflecting on your own suffering, be aware of the suffering of others by bringing to mind examples of those whom you know well. Finally, have the realization that suffering is universal. You are now making the connection between your suffering and others.

Ezra Bayda notes: “I realized that genuine compassion can never come from fear or from the longing to fix or change. Compassion results naturally from the realization of our shared pain. It manifests as we grow out of our own sense of separateness, isolation, and alienation.”⁷

Compassion Practice

The most basic Buddhist prayer is “may all beings find peace,” which expresses the positive mental state of lovingkindness. It is not a prayer directed to some higher power outside the meditator, but the articulation of an attitude; at a deeper level, an aspiration; and at a still deeper level, a commitment.⁸

In Loving-Kindness meditation practice, we can use the phrase “May _____ be free from greed, ill-will and delusion and may _____ continue to guide themselves to full awareness.”

In compassion meditation practice, compassion emerges when we know that actual suffering is taking place. Here are some specific phrases to use, first for yourself and then others, as in the loving-kindness (metta) practice (as always, feel free to compose your own):

May I, together with all those who suffer [condition], find peace.

May ___ find safety, even in the midst of pain (or misfortune, difficulties).

May ___ find peace, even in the midst of pain.

May ___ find strength, even in the midst of pain.

May ___ find ease, even in the midst of pain.

May ___ (my, your) difficulties [misfortune, pain] fade away.

May ___ find peace [ease, strength].

May ___ (my, your) burdens be lifted.

May ___ be free from pain and suffering.

May ___ take care of (myself yourself).

May ___ be open to feel the pain in and around (myself, yourself).

May all beings be free from suffering.

Perhaps the best practice is to just be with others, knowing that they are suffering, and the rest will follow.

¹ Matthieu Ricard [Compassion and Care](#) Original Air Date: February 23, 2023

² Bhikkhu Bodhi, [The Noble Eightfold Path: Way to the End of Suffering](#). Buddhist Publication Society, 1994, p. 39

³ [The Four Sublime States: Contemplations on Love, Compassion, Sympathetic Joy and Equanimity](#) (accesstoinsight.org)

⁴ Cabane, Olivia Fox, *The Charisma Myth* p. 84-85)

⁵ Brach, Tara Radical Acceptance P. 207

⁶ Neff, Kristin Self-Compassion: The Proven Power of Being Kind to Yourself

⁷ Bayda p. 138

⁸ Sparham, Gareth [Prayer](#): Venerable Gareth Sparham: An author, translator, and Tibetan monk explicates the historical meanings and uses of prayer in Buddhism