

The Practice of Compassion

Most people that I meet on retreats recently have an active practice of lovingkindness (*metta* in Pali), the first of the four divine abidings (*brahmavihara*), as a complement to their fundamental practice of insight meditation (*vipassana*). Vipassana practitioners often find that lovingkindness practice – developing a sense of friendliness to ourselves and all beings – is a direct pathway to the purification of heart and a broader sense of connection to all life.

Far fewer people that I meet have taken up compassion meditation as an active part of their practice. Compassion (*karuna*), the second of the divine abidings, is said to be the “trembling of the open heart in response to suffering.”

In the Theravadin tradition of Buddhism taught at Spirit Rock, we view lovingkindness as the foundation for all the beautiful qualities of heart expressed in the divine abidings. However, one could say that the Mahayana traditions, such as Zen and Tibetan Buddhism, view compassion as primary. We can understand this emphasis when we think about the significance of suffering in the Buddha’s expression of the Four Noble Truths. I would say that in Tibetan Buddhism, an even greater emphasis is given to developing compassion than we give to developing lovingkindness.

The formal compassion practice is very similar to the practice of lovingkindness, but even simpler. In *metta* practice one holds a sense of connection to oneself or another and repeats three or four phrases over and over, such as “May you be safe, may you be happy, may you be healthy, may you live with ease.” The phrases tend to be positive in orientation, emphasizing what is beautiful in life.

In compassion practice, we connect to ourselves or another and tune into the suffering aspect of the person’s life. It is the awareness of suffering that gives rise to compassion. We generally use just one phrase, which we repeat again and again. The traditional phrase is, “May you be free from suffering.” Another way to say it is, “May you be free from your pain and sorrow.” If there is a particular form of suffering for that person, the phrase can reflect this, such as, “May you be free from your grief,” or fear, or illness, or whatever.

Some people find that this form of the phrase – “may you be free from” – can lead to a subtle sense of aversion, as though we are really saying, “may you be rid of.” This is not necessarily what is meant in the traditional phrase, but some people may take it in this way. In that case another phrase we can use is, “I care about your suffering” or “I care about your pain and sorrow.”

As a formal practice, compassion is an invaluable ally in the journey of awakening. One vipassana teacher said that learning to practice compassion is like finding gold on the path. We can usefully practice compassion at any point in our meditation. It points us over and over to the First Noble Truth, that suffering is an inevitable aspect of life, and thereby connects us with all living beings. But the tremendous value of compassion – the “gold standard” of this practice – may be most obvious when we feel overwhelmed by suffering, whether our own or another’s.

Some months ago I answered the phone one day to find a distressed meditator on the line whom I had known from previous retreats. He was experiencing a very strong state of fear which had been present for two days. There was a high degree of identification with the experience, and he was suffering a lot. He explained that he had tried many approaches to relate with the fear, including the usual tools of insight and lovingkindness, but that nothing had made any impact on the intensity of the suffering. I asked if he was familiar with the compassion practice. He wasn't. I gave him a summary of the practice and suggested that he try it continuously for at least an hour. I asked him to call back later in the day.

When he called back, he was in a very different frame of mind. I could hear a calm in the tone of his voice that had not been present before. He said that the compassion practice had shifted something in his relationship to the fear. It had given him the ability to hold it with a much greater degree of acceptance – to hold it within the heart of compassion.

This has been my experience as well. When some painful emotion seems particularly strong and solid, I usually approach it first with the tools of insight practice: I name the emotion, feel it in the body and mind, try to let go of any resistance to it, and remember its impermanent, selfless nature. If I don't feel any lessening of the sense of identification with the state, then I often turn to lovingkindness practice. Sometimes just the touch of *metta* will bring in greater ease and acceptance. But often, if the emotion is strong, I might say a phrase like, "May I be happy," and then immediately think, "Happy? In this state? Who are you kidding?" Sometimes lovingkindness seems too far away, too different from my present-moment experience.

If that's so, then I turn next to the compassion practice. I have a great appreciation in these moments for the way that the compassion phrase connects directly with the truth of my present experience: "May I be free from this suffering." Or I may say, "I care about this suffering."

Within some time, I find that my heart starts to soften in relation to the painful state of mind. The state seems less threatening, less alien, less embarrassing. In fact, what starts to pervade the mind, in co-existence with the difficult emotion, is the flavor of compassion, which the phrase has started to evoke. It feels as though the most grown-up part of myself has just woken up from a deep sleep and started to look on the heart's pain. The thought occurred to me once, "This is like channeling Kuan Yin." As that mature, adult part of the mind joins with the clear seeing of the emotion, there is a profound acceptance of the situation just as it is, an acceptance of myself just as I am, and an acceptance of the human condition just as we are.

Compassion practice has worked equally well for me when I am deeply in touch with the suffering of another person and can't quite find the balance of mind in which to hold it.

After years of meditation practice, I've become more skilled at using the tools of mindfulness, concentration, spacious attention, and reflection on emptiness, to reduce the suffering of painful emotions. Unfortunately, over the years, I've also seen creep into my practice a slight corruption of my intention, which is to use the tools to defend myself from the impact of painful states so I won't have to feel them so directly. In one sense, of course, the reduction of suffering is the whole purpose of the Eightfold Path and therefore a noble aspiration. But actually our

mindfulness practice unfolds most gracefully when we can experience a mind state just as it is without *any* wish for the experience to be different.

When I practice compassion in relation to difficult states of mind, I find that that wish, for the experience to be different than it is, doesn't come into play so much. Compassion can then become an avenue for the transformation of the difficult experience through a deep acceptance. Of course, vipassana practice is still my primary avenue to this deep acceptance, but I find that compassion gives a slightly different flavor to the opening. I find that the compassionate heart can grow big enough to hold the pain without complaining.

Not only is that heart uncomplaining, it is actually filled with sweetness, because compassion is not a state of suffering. Compassion is a divine abiding. Because compassion is ignited by contact with suffering, it's not an exuberant or purely delightful state. One of my Tibetan teachers said that compassion is like the feeling at sunset: beauty tinged with a little bit of sadness at the passing of the day. If the sadness becomes too strong, then compassion can tip over into its near enemy, either pity or grief. But when the factor of equanimity is also present, then compassion can hold the suffering in a balanced way. Then we can feel on our own lips the half-smile that we see in the most beautiful statues of the Buddha.