

Cultivating Compassion

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The Buddhist monk Thubten Chodron wants us to imagine that “My enlightenment depends on that fly.” I’m afraid enlightenment could be a long way off for me. Just the other day, there was a wasp that had gotten in the house. It had somehow squeezed around or through the window screens and there it was flitting against the window — wacking into the window—trying to fly out again. Poor thing. I did not, however, pause to consider that my enlightenment might depend on that wasp. I get a little adrenalin hit when I see a good-sized wasp. Maybe some of you experience that, too? The story of what happened next — well, it doesn’t end well for the wasp. So what does that teach me about compassion? That I have a lot to learn about compassion? Maybe what it says is that compassion — being compassionate — is difficult.

One of the reasons that compassion is difficult is because it gets confused with things like empathy, pity, sympathy. Compassion isn’t about emotion.

Empathy is all about emotion. We all are more or less empathic. We can sense, if we pay attention to someone or listen even a little bit — we can develop a sense of how and what another person might be feeling. We can feel what we imagine someone else might be feeling. There are two problems with this. First, feeling all those emotions of other people, taking on the emotional experience of others as if it was your own, that will get exhausting. And you can lose yourself in those emotions of others, until you can’t feel happy unless everybody else is feeling happy. We *are* all interconnected. I do believe that, as MLK said, “I can never be what I ought to be until you are what you ought to be, and you can never be what you ought to be until I am what I ought to be.” And there is such a thing as getting enmeshed with another and losing one’s own integrity.

Second problem: No matter how good you might be at empathy or sympathy: It is almost always a lie to say to someone, “I know how you feel.” We may have had similar experiences, but how you experience dropping your ice cream cone on the sidewalk is not the way I experience dropping my ice cream cone on the sidewalk. Compassion means coming into relationship with our own feelings and knowing how they might affect my relationship with myself and with others. In a way, it seems like compassion is achieving a sort of distance from our own emotionality so that we might see it, hold it with tenderness, and set it aside so that we can truly be open to the pain — or even the joy — of another.

I recently came across an untitled poem by James Baldwin that goes like this:

Lord,
 when you send the rain,
 think about it, please,
 a little?

Do
 not get carried away
 by the sound of falling water,
 the marvelous light
 on the falling water.

I
 am beneath that water.
 It falls with great force
 and the light

Blinds
 me to the light.¹

I love a poem that contends with God. The question and concern of the poem sounds to me like a call for compassion. Don't get so wrapped up in the magnificence of the rainstorm you're able to conjure up that you forget you're not the only one in the room. There are others here, and we're affected by what you do. And as magnificent as that rainstorm you can conjure is, it can keep me from what you take for granted. If not for heaven's sake, then for my sake: be compassionate, Lord.

The Charter for Compassion, a project put together by Karen Armstrong after she won a prize from T.E.D. Talks, says "True compassion is to engage in the suffering of others." I like that word *engage*. Compassion is an action. It is a way of being. Jesus is a compelling religious figure not because he empathized with widows and lepers, but because he engaged in their suffering. There's the idea of the bodhisattva in Buddhism — one who has attained enlightenment, but stays with the world, engages with the world to help others.

That is a big ask: to engage in the suffering of others, to be with someone in their suffering, in their struggle, whatever it might be. Rather than being itself a feeling, compassion often means dealing with feeling awkward, feeling discomfort, uncertainty, anger, grief, fear as you attempt to meet someone where they are.

To help understand the ways that white people can behave when encountering people of color, the antiracist activist Robin DiAngelo talks about compassion as kindness rather than niceness. She calls niceness "fleeting, hollow and performative." In a white person's encounter with a person of color, we often perform niceness so that it is clear that we are one of the good ones and totally not racist.

¹ From *Jimmy's Blues and Other Poems* by James Baldwin (Beacon Press, 2014).

Niceness in these instances is conveyed through tone of voice (light), eye contact accompanied by smiling and the conjuring of affinities (shared enjoyment of a music genre, compliments on hair or style, statements about having traveled to the country the “other” is perceived to have come from or knowing people from the other’s community).

“Kindness” on the other hand

is compassionate and often implicates actions to support or intervene. For example, I am having car trouble and you stop and see if you can help. I appear upset after a work meeting and you check in and listen with the intent of supporting me.

Compassion means action and getting involved.

I like a story that the Buddhist meditation teacher Sharon Salzberg tells in her book *Lovingkindness*. She was traveling to Bodh Gaya in India to study meditation with a friend. At one point they end up on a rickshaw ride through “dark streets and down back alleys.” All of a sudden a man confronts stops the rickshaw, stops it and starts trying to pull Sharon out of the rickshaw. She is extremely frightened by this, as you might imagine! Her friend “managed to push the drunken man away and urged the rickshaw driver to go on.” Sharon Salzberg says

I was very shaken and upset when we arrived in Bodh Gaya. I told Munindra, one of my meditation teachers, what had happened. He looked at me and said, “Oh, Sharon, with all the lovingkindness in your heart, you should have taken your umbrella and hit that man over the head with it!”²

Compassionate action, full of lovingkindness, isn’t always hitting people with umbrellas. But what it never is is passive, uninvolved.

Salzberg teaches that compassion “is the strength that arises out of seeing the true nature of suffering in the world.” She explains that

The goal of our spiritual practice is to be able to understand, to be able to look without illusion at what is natural in this life, at what is actually happening for others and for ourselves. This willingness to see what is true is the first step in developing compassion.

Explaining what it means to “see what is true,” Salzberg explains that this involves being aware of one’s own feelings as well as understanding “the conditions, or the building blocks, of any situation”—personal, social, and political. The next step after seeing what is true is not to just acknowledge, but to be truly open to the pain that is part of the human experience. We need to cultivate our faith in the strength of our own hearts, faith in our capacity to be present to pain, faith that “Our inherent capacity for love can never be destroyed.”

² Sharon Salzberg. *Lovingkindness: The Revolutionary Art of Happiness*. 25th anniversary edition. (Shambhala, 2020 [1995])

I'll say that again: your capacity for love can never be destroyed.

Cultivating compassion is not itself without struggle. And to be compassionate all the time — all the time thinking about others rather than oneself — except: as much as compassion is about paying attention to others, acting for and with others, it is also about being compassionate with ourselves. If we have no compassion for self, our compassion for others will tire out. We need to be see “what is actually happening for others and for ourselves.”

We will make mistakes with compassion. We'll get carried away with the rainstorm we can conjure. And we need to cultivate our ability to respond with compassion to those mistakes—the mistakes that others make and the mistakes that we make ourselves. It's not about judging those mistakes. It's about seeing them truly without shame or bitterness. Salzberg asks us

Can you imagine a mind state in which there is no bitter, condemning judgment of oneself or of others? This mind does not see the world in terms of good and bad, right and wrong, good and evil; it sees only “suffering and the end of suffering. ... When we see only suffering and the end of suffering, then we feel compassion. Then we can act in energetic and forceful ways ...”

Compassion is action. Or, at least the spur to action. To be compassionate means we want the pain of another to stop. To be compassionate is to act to make it so that pain can ease, can cease. To be compassionate is to act to change or create conditions so that, as Sharon Salzberg says, “people can more easily be moral.” To be concerned with compassion isn't to ask yourself, What can I feel? It is to ask, What will I do? With whom am I willing to be? With whom will I work to build relationship? To what extent am I able to see without illusion what is happening for myself and for others? Nothing can destroy your inherent capacity for love.

May you be peaceful and at ease in this troubled world. May you be safe. May you be well. May you be fully open to see what is happening for you and for others without illusion. May you be filled with lovingkindness and always have an umbrella at hand. May you be a part of helping make some good trouble, as John Lewis (may he rest in power) as John Lewis might have said—in whatever way is your best practice, may you be part of making some good trouble that brings resolution to the trouble that makes pain for another, pain for yourself, pain for the world. May it be so.