Working With Compassion

The practice of compassion is integral to Buddhism (This is also the case with other faith traditions). The Four Noble Truths concept addresses the value of compassion directly: The truth of *dukkha* (doo-kah), the truth that *craving and clinging causes dukkha*, the truth that *liberation from dukkha is attainable* and the truth embedded in *the principles and practices of the Noble Eightfold Path which enables that liberation*. Dukkha is usually translated as suffering; my understanding substitutes this rendering: distress and confusion. Distress addresses the emotional element of dukkha, while confusion refers to the ultimate impossibility of the mind to reliably describe what is happening and the best way to respond. Every time we practice Right Effort, Right Mindfulness and Right Concentration we are empowering compassion.

In both the Theravada and Mahayana traditions of Buddhism, the word *Karuna* (kah-roo-nah) represents *compassion*. It involves clear awareness of dukkha in one’s subjective experience as well as another’s, with the intention to bring liberation from dukkha through skillful means. The awareness of dukkha in others is the consequence of our innate ability to empathize with other sentient beings, human or otherwise.

Recent research explores the effect of mindfulness meditation for strengthening the functioning of the anterior insular cortex, located in the areas on both sides of the brain just above the ears. These parts of the brain are associated with awareness of what is happening in the body, and neurologically are closely connected to the amygdala, the parts of the mid-brain associated with emotions. This research suggests that increasing the functioning of the right anterior insular cortex through mindfulness-induced introspective awareness enhances empathy, the ability to accurately interpret the emotional state of another, including any animals whose behaviors demonstrate reactions to pain. When this awareness is regulated through the Buddhist functions of mindfulness, investigation and enhanced internal discipline, the result is compassion.

In the classic Theravada understanding, two misrepresentations of compassion are described: the *far* enemy and the *near* enemy. The *far* enemy is *harshness and cruelty*. Harshness is a fact of nature—we suffer injury, illness, the losses from ageing, and from natural disasters such as storms, fires and earthquakes. Cruelty is in the realm of human behavior. Animals aren’t cruel from this perspective because they aren’t intending to induce suffering; their behavior can have harsh results, but that is in the realm of nature. Humans are cruel because they intend to inflect physical and emotional pain on others, including hurtful behavior regarding animals. The near enemy of compassion is pity. This may be a bit puzzling, as having pity for another is a common term in our culture. From the Buddhist view, pity operates from a *separation* perspective, that is, the other suffering being is less than, set apart, diminished in dignity— “you poor thing!”. At the core of Buddhism, there is no separation; we recognize dukkha in another being because we either have experienced dukkha of that sort ourselves or can empathetically imagine it. The concept of interdependence states emphatically that the dynamic interactions of causes and conditions apply in every instance, and that when one being is afflicted by dukkha, all beings are potentially afflicted by dukkha.

The antidote for the far or near enemy of any of the Divine Abidings involves the cultivation and action of three of the seven Awakening Factors: *Mindfulness, Investigation of Mental Phenomena* and *Energy*, manifested as *Right Effort*. Right Effort is the effective management of the flow of energy that activates emotions, cognition and behavior. Mindfulness and Investigation bring the enemies into clear awareness, while Right Effort disengages attention from the unwholesomeness of the enemies and reengages focused attention on karuna.

The cultivation of karuna begins with the simple act of disregarding distractions that occur while practicing mindfulness of breathing meditation and investing persistent attention to the experience of the in- and out-breath process. This stabilizes attention and calms the emotions that are activated when the mind is afflicted by craving and clinging--paying attention to the breathing process counters craving, because the sensations associated with breathing are neutral, so we must actively intend to investigate the experience, rather than be driven by the urgency of craving.

The further development of karuna involves becoming more and more clearly aware of the transient and impersonal nature of craving and clinging, and this inevitably involves becoming more empathetically sensitive to the appearance of dukkha in oneself or others, including nonhuman sentient creatures. One can also include a heightened sensitivity to the “suffering” of the environment, because that affects all the creatures of earth, directly or indirectly.

Ultimately, the realization of Nirvana, the Unconditioned, provides complete relief from dukkha, and this is the ultimate realization of karuna. This occurs as the experiences that are mindfully investigated and regulated by Right Effort reveal the transient and impersonal nature of subjective experience, and the belief in an enduring/autonomous self disintegrates and there is a clear awareness of how dukkha afflicts others—this awareness informed the compassionate teachings of the Buddha after his Awakening.

Here is a quote from an article in the Buddhist Publication Society publication in 1997 entitled “Detachment and Compassion in Early Buddhism” by Elizabeth J. Harris, on page 6:

…at least three strands of meaning in the term "compassion" can be detected in the texts: a prerequisite for a just and harmonious society; an essential attitude for progress along the path towards wisdom (panna) [pahn-yah]; and the liberative action within society of those who have become enlightened or who are sincerely following the path towards it. All these strands need to be looked at if the term is to be understood and if those who accuse Buddhist compassion of being too passive are to be answered correctly.

On page 7 of the same article, Harris writes that:

The Buddha's teachings about statecraft and government also embody compassion as a guiding principle. The Cakkavatti Siihanáda Sutta [chah-kah-vah-tee see-hah-nah-dah soo-tah] describes a state in which the king ignores his religious advisers and does not give wealth to the poor. Poverty becomes widespread and, in its wake, follow theft, murder, immorality in various forms, and communal breakdown. The culmination is a "sword period" in which men and women look upon one another as animals and cut one another with swords. In this sutta, lack of compassion for the poor leads to the disintegration of society. Lack of social and economic justice leads to disaster. In contrast, the ideal Buddhist model for society, as deduced from the texts, would be one in which exploitation in any part of its structure is not

In the book “Altered Traits”, Goleman and Davidson comment on the practice of karuna, on pages 250-252:

“Compassion meditation shows stronger benefits from the get-go; as few as seven total hours over the course of two weeks leads to increased connectivity in circuits important for empathy and positive feelings, strong enough to show up outside the meditation state per se. This is the first sign of a state morphing into a trait, though these effects likely will not last without daily practice. But the fact that they appear outside the formal meditation state itself may reflect our innate wiring for basic goodness…

…Lovingkindness and compassion practice over the long term enhances neural resonance with another person’s suffering, along with concern and a greater likelihood of actually helping. Attention, too, strengthens in many aspects with long-term practice: selective attention sharpens, the attentional blink diminishes, sustained attention becomes easier, and an alert readiness to respond increases. And long-term practitioners show enhanced ability to down-regulate the mind-wandering and self-obsessed thoughts of the default mode, as well as weakening connectivity within those circuits—signifying less self-preoccupation. These improvements often show up during meditative states and generally become traits.”

The *attentional blink* phenomenon happens when two differing visual or auditory stimuli are presented with a gap of a fraction of a second; the second stimulus is ignored. The *default mode network* is the normal process of the relaxed, non-goal-oriented functioning of the brain, involving daydreaming, planning, etc. Research suggests that the default mode network is weakened in the brain functioning of highly trained meditators—that is, they are less prone to absent mindedness and self-absorption.

Another manifestation of lovingkindness and compassion meditation is a decreased sense of separation from “the outside world”. In this way, a person becomes more sensitized to the subtle (or not so subtle) signifiers of another person’s emotional state through empathetic resonance. This is the basis for the universal adage *love thy neighbor as thyself;* in this way, compassion reveals that quality of awareness called *interbeing*. We are naturally sensitized to the emotional state of others, and socially conditioned to respond beneficially, unless a person’s early childhood experienced makes the socialization process toxic, which is the case for sociopaths. The intentional practice of lovingkindness and compassion provides beneficial conditioning for the empathic, yet unprocessed signifiers.

A person can misunderstand the actions of compassion as passively allowing others to do harm, but this is not the intention associated with compassion. When compassionate action is initiated, the intention is to be alert to dukkha and, when possible, intervene in ways that are beneficial. When confronted by another’s cruelty, one’s response doesn’t involve more cruelty, although there may be some action that causes losses for the perpetrator of cruelty. Allowing cruelty to persist when it can be interrupted actually reinforces the distress and confusion of the perpetrator, so it is wise to intervene, when possible, to reduce the karmic consequences of cruelty.

**Compassion Contemplations**

As mentioned above, the basic practice of mindfulness of breathing meditation activates compassionate action, by developing discipline in managing the flow of subjective awareness through mindfulness, investigation and Right Effort. From the basic ability to notice dukkha and disregard it in the crudest forms as it manifests in our immediate subjective experience, the development of compassion can enhance awareness regarding the dukkha of others and then determine the most beneficial actions to take. Sometimes we can actually intervene in relieving another’s dukkha, while at other times all we can provide is an attentive, benevolent presence. There are several effective ways to cultivate compassion.

One such method is Tonglen (tohng-len), a Tibetan Buddhist contemplation that involves imagining taking in the distress and confusion witnessed in another being, then generating a radiating compassion out into the world, either with a specific focus, or for the general benefit of all sentient beings.

A basic part of Tonglen practice is to first cultivate “Relative Bodhicitta” (boh-dee-chee-tah)—bodhicitta can be translated as “liberated mind”—which represents a mind that is not at that moment afflicted by craving and clinging. This comes about through the development and application of *samadhi/passaddhi* (sah-mah-dee/pah-sah-dee), *stable attention/tranquility*. The ability to maintain persistent attention focused on the in-and out-breaths stabilizes attention and reduces agitation in one’s immediate subjective awareness. This stills the functioning of the default mode network and enhances the introspective and empathetic functioning of the anterior insular cortex. This quality of mind provides clarity and the opportunity to transform the distress and confusion characteristic of dukkha into a benevolent compassionate intention combined with whatever overt behavior might be effective in liberating another being from dukkha. As samadhi/passadhi is activated one can be able to apply the following topical areas for consideration:

* Just as I have been hurt, so have you—may we both be free from pain.
* Just as I have experienced loss, so have you--may we both recover from loss.
* Just as I have experienced rejection, so have you—may we both experience loving acceptance.
* Just as I have experienced illness, so have you—may we both regain health.
* Just as I have\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_, so have you—may we both\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_.

These suggestions are meant to foster an awareness of the shared universality of human experience, accompanied by a willingness to actively provide support for dukkha whenever encountered, intra- and interpersonally. There are many effective compassion contemplations; all of them cultivate a repetitive phrase or image that conveys an awareness of distress and confusion along with a sincere motivation towards a beneficial action to bring relief, psychological and physical, to harshness and cruelty in the world.

Another application of compassionate awareness can support draining the energy from another person’s hurtful comments or behaviors, substituting compassionate action for aversive aggression or fearful self-denigration. One “mantra” I suggest is to remind yourself “I am witnessing suffering” when becoming aware of harshness and/or cruelty, to “depersonalize” the event, rather than taking it personally. A Tibetan monk was imprisoned and tortured by the Chinese and spent the years before he was released practice tonglen regarding his torturers. It was reported that his spiritual development was significantly enhanced afterwards, realizing non-self as his practice depersonalized the experience. We can apply this strategy less dramatically as we are affected by another’s rude or hurtful actions, recognizing the other person’s ignorance without making a “victim self”, and instead countering the aversion and ill-will with lovingkindness and compassion.