

The Key of Compassion

Compassion, we might say, is a subset of lovingkindness. It's the quality in the heart that responds to suffering. If lovingkindness is a broad expansive light shining everywhere, compassion is a spotlight zeroing in on suffering.

Compassion is expressed, in its essence, by the wish to find freedom from suffering.

In cultivating compassion for ourselves, we connect to our wish to be free from suffering (when we develop compassion for others, we connect to our wish that they be free from suffering). Like the wish that we have to be happy, the wish to be free from suffering is elemental, innate. It's a wish we all have.

Describing lovingkindness, the Buddha provides the example of the heartfelt action that a mother would take toward her infant child. In the same vein, compassion is exemplified by the concerned, caring action that the mother would take when her child is sick.

Like a doctor diagnosing an illness and prescribing treatment, the dharma student recognizes suffering and, in turn, prescribes compassion. It's important to cultivate compassion when it's called for. In other words, when there's suffering. If you try to cultivate lovingkindness when the situation calls for compassion, your efforts will be thwarted. Let's say you're struggling with loneliness. You're suffering. The right prescription, given that you're suffering, is compassion. If you try to cultivate lovingkindness, to connect to the wish you have to be happy, you'll hit barriers. It will be like trying to fit a square peg in a round hole.

In cultivating compassion, we recognize that we're suffering (or that another is suffering). The word "suffering" is an awkward translation of the Pali word "dukkha." Like many Pali words, "dukkha" has multiple meanings. Generally when we use the term "suffering" we're referring to mental suffering, the suffering we bring about by taking unskillful actions. The root of this mental suffering, as explicated in the teaching on the Four Noble Truths, is clinging, the way we hold on to desire, aversion, delusion. As the Thai master Ajaan Maha Boowa puts it, when we're in the throes of mental suffering there's a "squeeze on the heart." In developing compassion, we're asked to notice when we're afflicted with this form of dukkha, mental suffering.

We're also asked, in developing compassion, to notice when we're subject to another kind of dukkha: the dukkha that's an unavoidable aspect of being human, the dukkha inherent in sickness, aging, death, separation.

Recognizing suffering, we turn to it, face it, look at it. We open to the truth of our suffering (or another's suffering). This isn't, of course, how we typically relate to suffering. Our tendency, when confronted with suffering, is to avoid it, run from it. Here we're doing something radically different.

In order to open to our suffering, we have to be able to calmly, objectively observe it. We have to be able to observe our suffering like a person sitting on a chair looking at a person lying on the floor. We have to be able to move from "I'm suffering" to "there's suffering." We're able to create this kind of spacious relationship to suffering when we have a degree of concentration, equanimity. If we don't have sufficient equanimity, we'll get knocked off balance by our suffering, we'll get thrown by it.

We shouldn't try to open to suffering for too long. Otherwise, we'll get overwhelmed by it.

Recognizing suffering, opening to it, we cultivate compassion. We assert directed thought. We fabricate a simple intention: Let me have compassion for myself. Or: Have compassion. Something like that.

Bringing our attention to the heart, we connect to a felt sense of our wish to be free from suffering. We feel compassion for ourselves (or another).

When specific physical or verbal action is called for, we act, motivated by the heart, by compassion.

Let's say you've separated from your partner. You're anguished. You're in pain. Taking a step back from what's going on, you acknowledge that you're suffering. For a moment, you open to this truth. You establish the intention to have compassion for yourself. You say: Let me have some compassion for myself. Putting your attention on your heart center, you connect to a felt sense of compassion for yourself. You have compassion for yourself.

If you like you can try it right now.

Center yourself in your breath.

Allow your breath to be easeful, pleasurable.

Think about an area of your life in which there's suffering. Maybe you have a difficult physical condition. Maybe there's a form of mental suffering that you're battling. Maybe you're angry with a family member. Maybe you're dissatisfied with the way your job is going.

If it's helpful, bring up a visual image pertaining to your experience of suffering.

Acknowledge that there's suffering in your life.

See if you can open to truth of your suffering. Be with the truth of your suffering for a moment. Just for a moment.

Now cultivate compassion for yourself.

Assert directed thought.

“Let me have compassion for myself.”

Bring your attention to your heart. Incline toward your wish to be free from suffering.

Connect to a felt sense of compassion for yourself.

Stay with the heart, with the feeling of compassion, for a few moments.

Then return to your breath.

It's very important to learn to develop compassion for ourselves. Why? Because we suffer.

It's that simple. We suffer. We suffer a lot. The Buddha, well aware of the extent to which we suffer, puts it like this:

"From an inconstruable beginning comes transmigration. A beginning point is not evident, though beings hindered by ignorance and fettered by craving are transmigrating & wandering on. "What do you think, monks: Which is greater, the tears you have shed while transmigrating & wandering this long, long time — crying & weeping from being joined with what is displeasing, being separated from what is pleasing — or the water in the four great oceans?"

"As we understand the Dhamma taught to us by the Blessed One, this is the greater: the tears we have shed while transmigrating & wandering this long, long time — crying & weeping from being joined with what is displeasing, being separated from what is pleasing — not the water in the four great oceans."

"Excellent, monks. Excellent. It is excellent that you thus understand the Dhamma taught by me.

"This is the greater: the tears you have shed while transmigrating & wandering this long, long time — crying & weeping from being joined with what is displeasing, being separated from what is pleasing — not the water in the four great oceans." (SN 15.3)

It's imperative that you learn to respond skillfully to your suffering, that you learn to have compassion for yourself. If you're not able to develop compassion for yourself, you'll find it difficult to get further along the Buddha's path. Conversely, if you learn to open to your suffering and have compassion for yourself, you'll continue to advance in your dharma practice.

A phrase I like is: "the key of compassion." Compassion is the key to the door to the place of healing. It opens the door, leads us to the path to the end of suffering.

It's compassion that brings us to the path. We're suffering and we have the wish to end our suffering. Out of compassion for ourselves, we make an effort to follow the path.

As we continue forward, it's compassion that keeps us going. We stay with it, we keep practicing, day after day, year after year, out of compassion for ourselves.

As we've noted, there will be times when you'll veer off the path. There will be times when you'll fail, when you'll mess up. You'll set out to cultivate generosity, but you'll stumble into ruts of greediness. You'll intend to speak skillfully, but you'll end up speaking harshly and divisively. You'll vow to observe the uposatha, follow the eight precepts, but, failing to meet your objectives, you'll spend hours in front of the TV watching meaningless programs. You'll make a commitment to meditate every day but you'll go several days, or longer, without getting on the cushion. You'll sit down to practice breath meditation, but you'll find yourself constantly wandering off, going down dubious alleyways.

There will be times when you'll act unskillfully. You'll have the intention to practice heedfulness, to act with lovingkindness. But instead you'll act from a place of desire, aversion.

You're going to make mistakes. The Buddha knew this. He was a human being. He knew what it was to be human.

In the "Instructions to Rahula," the Buddha gives strategies to employ before taking action, while taking action, and after taking action. The third part, after taking action, is extremely important. In this phase, we review our actions. When we act unskillfully, we look at our unskillfulness. We respond with wisdom and compassion.

The Buddha includes this third set of instructions because he knows that making mistakes is part of the process. He knows that if we're able to respond wisely and compassionately to our mistakes, it will have a profound effect on our ability to move forward along the path.

After you've acted unskillfully, there are two ways to go, two roads from which to choose. One is the road of self-judgment. This may be the road you're most familiar with, the road you're most apt to go down. You may have a long history of judging yourself harshly when you fail. For dharma students this is problematic. The problem is, when you go down the road of self-judgment you move further from the path.

If you disparage yourself after acting unskillfully, you compound your unskillfulness. You compound your suffering.

The road of self-judgment leads to suffering. As a dharma student, you have to see this, understand this.

When you're in the habit of engaging in self-judgment, you foster a climate of self-aversion in your mind; you incline yourself toward taking actions informed by self-aversion, actions that

aren't in your best interests, actions that are harmful to you. There isn't any advantage in self-judgment. It's the wrong road.

The Buddha's road leads to the end of suffering. It leads to true happiness. When you've taken an unskillful action, the Buddha instructs, make it a learning experience. Acknowledge that you've taken an action that's brought about suffering for yourself and for others. Calmly, objectively, see the drawbacks in your unskillful actions. Think about how you might act differently in the future. In this spirit, you might ask: As I go forward, is this the sort of action I want to take? Do I want to continue to take actions that bring about this kind of suffering? What can I do differently next time?

Establish a resolve. Vow to make an effort to act skillfully.

Then have compassion for yourself.

As dharma students, we don't ignore or condone unskillful actions. We don't turn away after we've taken an unskillful action. In a misguided attempt to practice acceptance, we don't tell ourselves, "It's okay." No. We confront the truth. We confront our unskillfulness. We acknowledge that we've caused suffering.

Acknowledging our unskillfulness, we have compassion for ourselves.

The interesting thing is, if we don't open to our unskillfulness, we're not going to be able to develop compassion for ourselves.

Recognizing our suffering, having compassion for ourselves, we do what we have to do, to end our suffering, find true happiness.

It's compassion that puts us back on the path.

Compassion is the key.

The changes we make, in dharma practice and in life, come from responding to our mistakes with wisdom and compassion. When we attend to our mistakes with wisdom and compassion, they become the starting point for making changes in our lives.

For most people the movement toward compassion goes fiercely against the grain. Students often note that when they're suffering, compassion is the "last thing" they think about. When they make mistakes, compassion is the last place they think to go. For most of us, the place of compassion is remarkably far-off. We just don't go there. But we have to learn to go there. We have to learn to develop compassion for ourselves.

We have to make it a habit.

Consider the plight of the dharma student who's veered off the path. It's been weeks since she's practiced breath meditation. She feels sharp resistance whenever she contemplates the prospect of getting on the cushion.

How does she respond to this predicament?

She might judge herself, condemn herself for being a wayward student. She might doubt her ability to practice the dharma.

She might conjure up different schemes, ways she might "fix" the problem. She might think about going on a retreat.

But the most useful response is to develop compassion. Recognizing that she's involved in a painful process, the dharma student should have compassion for herself.

It will be compassion for herself that will drive the student's efforts to renew her practice. Remember, compassion is what compels us to practice. The student's relationship to her practice, the resistance she's grappling with, will never be cured by self-aversion; it will only be healed by love, compassion.

When we hit obstacles, the skillful response is compassion, compassion for ourselves.

Let's say you've had an argument with a friend. You've spoken unskillfully. You've used some harsh words. Afterwards, you reflect on your actions. You look truthfully at what you've done. You acknowledge that your speech has caused harm, suffering. You vow to speak more skillfully in the future.

Then you have compassion for yourself.

In cultivating compassion, you set the wheels in motion for bringing about change, for taking verbal action driven by the heart, for taking action in support of your well-being and the well-being of others.

There are many ways in which we might relate to our unskillfulness, our difficulty, by using the key of compassion. When students talk about problems they're having, struggles they're going through, I invariably suggest they have compassion for themselves.

A young woman in our group was involved in a painful dynamic with some family members. Apparently they'd chosen to ostracize her. The student was hurt. And she was angry. Trying to assume the posture of a model dharma student, she tried to let go of her anger. She tried to forgive her family members. But she wasn't able to do any of that. She felt awful; she felt like she wasn't being a very good student.

In talking to the student, the diagnosis I made was: she was suffering.

The prescription: she had to have compassion for herself.

She had to have compassion for herself because she was suffering. She had to have compassion for herself because she was afflicted with anger, resentment. She had to have compassion for herself because she wasn't able to forgive.

She had to have compassion for herself because she was being hard on herself, judging herself.

She had to have compassion for herself because her relationship with her family members had fractured.

She had to cultivate compassion. Her heart was closed, tightly; by having compassion for herself, she'd begin to open it.

Another student had lost his job. He had to look for work. But he wasn't able to take action. He was stricken with inertia. He was sleeping a lot, watching a lot of TV. He wanted, understandably, to know how he might overcome his lethargy. I suggested, first things first, that he have compassion for himself. He was suffering. He had to have compassion for himself. It was going to be compassion, the opening of his heart, that would inspire the student to move ahead, instigate a job search.

We have to remember to use the key of compassion.

Motivated by compassion, we take the actions we need to take to end our suffering.

Motivated by compassion, we make the path.