



Compassion

teaching for Inayatiyya UK, March 2021

What is Compassion?

Let's start with an understanding of compassion by asking the question what is compassion? I have a quote here from Thupten Jinpa, who is the principal translator for the Dalai Lama. He's also trained as a monk and is a leader in the field of compassion training. He says that:

'Compassion is the natural sense of concern that arises in us when we are confronted with someone else's suffering. And that sense of concern is accompanied with a wish to see the situation changed or wanting to do something about it.'

The key elements here are: awareness of suffering - which means being mindful of others and an active wish to help alleviate that suffering. So, it's not just empathy - feeling with but a wish to take action of some sort. It may not necessarily involve doing in the sense of intervening actively (although it could include that). It might be praying for someone or sending them healing from a distance.

The first few lines of a Rumi poem calls us to remove the blocks to loving from our hearts:

*'Listen, open a window in your heart
and look at the Beloved.
The task of love is to make that window,
So the heart can be illuminated by His Beauty.'*

What are the blocks to creating our window of compassion and what helps the window of compassion to open up:

- I'm imagining that most people present understand the value of compassion and probably, like I do, hold it as a guiding light in your interactions with others. It's what attracted me to the Sufi path - the idea of living from the heart and opening our hearts to others and this being a value that is *lived*, it's alive in our lives and we express it through our thoughts and our deeds. It's not just an idea. I've also no doubt that you would probably consider that you have no difficulty in being compassionate towards others who are suffering. And I'm sure for much of the time this is true. So, this touches on one of the factors that takes us *towards* compassion for others - compassion as a life value.



- However, as human beings we have instincts which may compete with one another and can then block compassion, so let's consider the factors that stop us from experiencing compassion and those that facilitate us to move towards others who need our compassion. Thupten Jinpa says there are 3 aspects to compassion:
- One, is *cognitive* which is about our perception and understanding of someone's suffering. So, we understand at a mind level because we see or hear another's suffering. We can observe it. An example of compassion staying at a cognitive level might be hearing of someone you don't know suffering. You empathise but somehow you don't fully experience the *connection* that is necessary for it to translate into compassion.
- Then there is an *emotional component*, which is where we feel moved or touched by a situation. With the cognitive understanding stage on its own - we may not be moved or moved sufficiently to prompt action. It's the emotional component that is important to inspire us to take action. Charities raising money for suffering groups of people or animals know this, which is why they use images and real human or animal stories of suffering to engage our compassionate hearts in order to motivate us to take action by making a financial donation.
- This leads onto the third component which is more *motivational*. This involves a wish to see the situation changed or we want to do something about it.
- Neuroscientific research has shown that compassion - a desire to alleviate another's suffering - is in fact a *natural instinct*. So, it's not just because we may hold it as one of our important life values but because it's linked to *care-giving* and this impulse ensures the survival of our species. So, at the instinctual level, it's driven by our biology and is hard-wired into our brains. And it ensures we not only survive, but thrive. If we see our child suffer, we want to relieve their suffering. If we see someone on the street without food, we want to ensure they're not hungry.
- Understanding this piece when I explored the nature of compassion was very helpful to me as it explains my own visceral experience of wishing to help someone who is suffering. This is what motivates a lot of people to choose healing professions or professions that are aimed at responding to human suffering, such as the emergency services...
- My own journey with helping to alleviate suffering: Maybe this natural instinct linked to care-giving explains why I went into human resources originally. I was strongly influenced by a sense of wishing to see justice and equality in the workplace (in the 1980's - the suffering that I saw was around inequality for woman and people of colour) and it's probably the instinct that



later prompted me to re-train as a psychotherapist. This time I wanted to facilitate people to heal their suffering at a deeper level than was possible through my interventions in the workplace.

- I mentioned earlier that connection is necessary for us to move beyond our cognitive understanding of another's suffering. Recent research has discovered - or we could say, has clarified - that a compassionate response arises from an awareness of *connection to others. It's about a relationship between those who suffer and those who want to help alleviate that suffering.* This is also linked to the care-giving instinct - as *the care-giving instinct promotes relationship. It requires a relationship in order to be able to give care.*
- Scans of the brain show that the prefrontal cortex of the brain is activated when we give or receive compassion - so, in other words, when we're in relationship with another. Whilst this is now proven at a scientific level, I want to offer you two quotes from men from very different disciplines - one spiritual and one scientific - that highlight that we have known this probably forever and science is now confirming it:
- Thomas Merton: *The whole idea of compassion is based on a keen awareness of the interdependence of all these living beings, which are all part of one another, and all involved in one another.*
- Einstein: *A human being is a part of the whole, called by us "Universe"... He experiences himself... as something separated from the rest - a kind of optical delusion of his consciousness. This delusion is a kind of prison for us, restricting us to our personal desires and to affection for a few persons nearest to us. Our task must be to free ourselves from this prison by widening our circle of compassion to embrace all living creatures and the whole of nature in its beauty.*
- To most of us being compassionate probably feels very instinctual and natural - I know it does for me. Yet, there are factors that block it and it can be cultivated and we need to know how to do this when factors arise to block us from feeling compassion.

A story to highlight what blocks compassion and what helps us more toward it:

To demonstrate what blocks compassion and what promotes it, I'd like to tell you an anecdote from my own experience that highlights the factors that promote compassion and create blocks to compassion.

A couple of Christmases ago, my husband Roger and I were given rather a lot of sweet things for Christmas - cakes, chocolate, biscuits. Far too much for just the two of us and so Roger had the idea of going into Oxford right after Christmas and giving it to the homeless.



I have a special place in my heart for those who are homeless. I feel deep compassion for those whose life experiences leave them on the streets. Our most fundamental basis for existence is to have a home and to belong to a community be it family, neighbourhood, friends, work or some other way of connecting and belonging. I think it must be one of the most isolating and frightening experiences, to live on the streets without a place to feel safe. So, I really welcomed Roger's suggestion. So, this was the cognitive component - I thought it was a good idea and it sat well with my values.

What I found though when we started to approach different homeless individuals or groups was that an *aversion arose, a pulling away, a reluctance to approach and even a slight revulsion*. I noticed that I no longer felt that warmth and compassion for their predicament and I was confused and shocked by my inner response. I began to question the sincerity of my compassion towards the homeless.

When I tuned in, I realized I was *frightened*. Being so close to people who were evidently high on drink or drugs and of course dirty from living on the streets, so what I was seeing visually was not encouraging me to approach. Consequently, my body and mind went into fear - it was an automatic fight/flight/freeze survival response. I was aware that at worse we could be physically harmed - or simply rejected. And I sensed that Roger too was holding back a little and appeared wary. So, my survival instinct here was to go into flight. This was beyond thought - it was a physical experience of pulling away and an emotional experience of fear - *and my survival instinct over-rode my compassionate intention*. So, *this is an example of where two basic instincts compete and this is one of the reasons why we may at times not feel compassionate - my instinct for care-giving and showing compassion to those suffering competed with my instinct for survival and without awareness of this, survival will win out*.

However, my wish to offer food to those in need and *being mindful of our compassionate intention and of their obvious suffering*, I was propelled forward. So that was the *cognitive aspect of compassion* that came up again and reminded me of my value system of helping others in need.

And I found that I could approach them and when I spoke to them, and they responded - although not always positively - some said that their teeth were poor and they couldn't eat the hard biscuits or chocolate and they were dismissive but then, after a pause, they changed their minds and took it, saying they could bargain with someone else for something that they *did* want. I felt warmth because *I was relating to them*. This helped me feel connection to them. I also smiled inwardly at their resiliency and creativity in getting their needs met by swapping food - and this also helped the sense of connection.

So, when I experienced them as not threatening but as suffering human beings, I was able to connect to our *common humanity* my heart opened and I noticed my fear and revulsion dissolve.



There were two things playing out here that research shows are important in mobilizing our compassionate instinct. One was I stopped for a moment and reminded myself of why we were there. So, I was *mindful* which meant I could stop being reactive. The Buddha said that being aware and being compassionate are intrinsically interwoven.

The second thing was that as I reminded myself of our aim here. This helped me to move towards the homeless men and then I could relate. Relating dissolved my aversion and my fear. So, I could connect to them in their suffering - one human being to another and that *activated my wish to alleviate their suffering*, albeit in this very small way by offering sweet treats.

Aversion and judgement in the face of suffering: Again, research shows this is a common feature. Doctors and other medical staff may experience aversion with patients. And judgement can be a feature too. This is a significant factor in those who judge people who suffer who are different in some way (because of race, religion, cultural background). In simplistic terms, the purpose of judgement is about *understanding why* someone is suffering and a wish to learn from it so we can change it and survive.

With these powerful negative impulses in the face of another's suffering, it's important to be mindful of what's happening within us rather than acting it out either by avoidance or unkindness.

Murshid Hazrat Inayat Khan said:

'One must always respond with compassion and sympathy to all who are suffering, even when they are the cause of their own misery. And, by rising above one's own egocentric viewpoint and the consequential suffering, one is then much better equipped to offer a greater quality of sympathy, compassion and healing to those who lack understanding.'

Practice: Developing Compassion for those we know

Introduction

This is a practice to enable us to feel for others' suffering with both a mindful awareness and with compassion. And it's important to know that this is a life practice. If you don't connect with compassion for another today in this practice, it's ok. It's a process and all that is being invited here is to set an intention to open your heart if it will and to feel some compassion for someone else who is suffering. If it doesn't happen today, it's an opportunity to be compassionate toward yourself and accepting that this is just how it is right now. Cultivating mindfulness and embodied presence takes patience because we naturally want to move away from others' pain. So just holding that sincere intention to relate with compassion.



The practice

So please sit in a way that allows you to be relaxed and alert. Let go of any habitual tension, relaxing your face, perhaps a slight smile at the mouth.

Letting go of any tension in the shoulders. Softening your hands, your belly. Taking a few full breaths and allowing your whole body and mind to settle...

Take a few moments to scan through those who are close to you in your life, family members, friends, and choose someone who you know is having a difficult time... As you bring them to mind, connect with your intention to learn, to stay, to awaken compassion toward this person.

Now, begin by honestly look at how you might typically relate to them and their difficulty... When you hear or see that they're having trouble, how do you typically respond? Perhaps you're believing they should be different or it's their fault... Maybe the blockage is more about you being distracted or preoccupied or maybe you think it's too much for you to handle... Whatever your reaction has been, regard that with a very accepting heart. See if you can nurture some kindness to whatever way that you've been reacting. And you'll find that if you regard your own reactivity with kindness, there's more space. There's more tenderness... And if you sense that there's some armouring, some distraction or some blocks to being present with this person's difficulty, begin by simply acknowledging this and by imagining breathing out that blockage on the exhalation... Just notice if your heart softens towards this person's difficulties and if your body softens and opens... breathing out the blockages...

Now, bringing your attention more fully to the person. And here we begin bringing the *RAIN of compassion* to this person by first *recognizing* that they're having a hard time. So the R of RAIN is to *recognise* the indicators that this person is struggling... Maybe you're recalling a look on their face or something they've said, the tone in their voice or some way of behaving that lets you know they're having trouble... So you begin by *recognizing* the signs of their suffering, their pain.

And the second stage of RAIN is to *allow*... so, allow their suffering... let your sense of this person, how they're living, feeling, being, let it be just as it is right now in your mind's eye... You don't have to imagine fixing it and you don't have to judge how they're dealing with their difficulties... just *be with* their suffering... as best you can...

And from this space of allowing, you can begin to move to the third stage of RAIN which is to *investigate*. So, begin to get more familiar with what's going on for them, *with gentleness, with curiosity, with interest*. You might explore what it's like being in their shoes. You might deepen your attention with some of the following questions. I'll offer the questions, and just imagine that you're listening to this person responding. You're sensing their response, and let yourself feel with them.



- Where does it hurt?
- What life circumstances are most distressing to you?
- What's really the worst part of all of this for you?
- What are you believing about yourself?
- What are the fears, or disappointments, or hurts that you're carrying?
- And what's it like in your body, your heart, to live with these hurts, with this woundedness?

As you're imagining what it's like being them, what's it like being *you*? Where does it hurt you as you listen to them?... And what does that vulnerable place in you most want or need right now as you become aware of this person's suffering?... Listening to that need of yours, and as you do so expand your awareness to your whole body, into the sound and space around you, to the whole field of listening, feeling, caring and mindful presence to your feeling *with* that person and also sensing the spaciousness of your own presence... If it helps, let your in-breath connect you with the feelings or waves of their vulnerability and let your out-breath release into that larger space, that ocean-ness of presence and care. And from that larger space, beginning to nurture them, feeling that in this heart space, this person is a part of you and you can offer what's needed.

Is it acceptance? Does that person need to feel held, forgiven, cared for and loved, understood?... And, if it feels possible, sense that you're offering a message of care to that person... offering that care energetically as a flow of warmth... You might sense or imagine you're putting your hand on their cheek or their arm or shoulder or embracing them in some way, surrounding them with light, offering your nurturing... And imagine this person receiving it... they're letting in your care... Envisioning them moving toward healing, happiness, freedom...

And now we move to a stage called After the RAIN, letting go of all ideas of the other person and just notice the qualities of heart and presence that are here within you... Is there a sense of openness, tenderness, love? Whatever you find, let go and rest in that. Get to know it as home...

Reflection

- What blocks you from feeling compassion?
- What helps you to move towards another with compassion?

Dalai Lama: *'There is no need for temples; no need for complicated philosophy. Our own brain, our own heart is our temple; the philosophy is kindness.'*

Practice

Ya Noor (Divine Light) - **Ya Rahman** (Divine Compassion) x 11/33.

On the fikr, breathe in Noor and breathe out Rahman.

Sit in the resonance of the practice



Small kindness by Danusha Laméris

*'I've been thinking about the way, when you walk
down a crowded aisle, people pull in their legs
to let you by. Or how strangers still say "bless you"
when someone sneezes, a leftover
from the Bubonic plague. "Don't die," we are saying.
And sometimes, when you spill lemons
from your grocery bag, someone else will help you
pick them up. Mostly, we don't want to harm each other.
We want to be handed our cup of coffee hot,
and to say thank you to the person handing it. To smile
at them and for them to smile back. For the waitress
to call us honey when she sets down the bowl of clam chowder,
and for the driver in the red pick-up truck to let us pass.
We have so little of each other, now. So far
from tribe and fire. Only these brief moments of exchange.
What if they are the true dwelling of the holy, these
fleeting temples we make together when we say, "Here,
have my seat," "Go ahead-you first," "I like your hat."'*

A Compassion in Action exercise: You're invited to spend time with someone you care about who's having a hard time. And with interest, ask them some version of the question, "Where does it hurt?" And listen deeply. Let yourself be touched, and actively extend kindness.

Prayer Nayaz

*'Beloved Lord, Almighty God!
Through the rays of the sun,
through the waves of the air,
through the All-peroading Life in space,
Purify and revivify me,
and I pray,
heal my body,
heart
and soul.'*

Hazrat Inayat Khan

Saida Taylor-Brook
teaching for Inayatiyya UK, March 2021