

## Opening the Heart of Compassion

By Peter B. Williams

If you want others to be happy, practice compassion.  
If you want to be happy, practice compassion.

– His Holiness, The Dalai Lama

If we could read the secret history of our enemies we  
should find in each man's [woman's] life sorrow and  
suffering enough to disarm all hostility.

– Henry Wadsworth Longfellow

In this essay, I start with a detailed description of the Buddhist view of suffering, which is important to know if you want to practice compassion wisely. I then address all the ways we deny suffering in this culture, followed by compassion meditation instructions, about two-thirds of the way down.

A stereotype of Buddhist practitioners is that they are passive and withdrawn from the problems of everyday life. In actuality, the Buddha emphasized that we must do whatever we can to alleviate the suffering of others. However, the Buddha was very clear that in spite of one's best efforts, one cannot make all the pain in the world go away. Therefore, one must learn to stay open in the face of suffering.

Compassion is the emotion that allows us to do just that. Vipassana teacher Sharon Salzberg says that the Buddhist definition of compassion is the "quivering of the heart" in response to suffering. It is a kindness towards pain, an accepting of it without judgment or fear. Becoming familiar with compassion requires becoming quite familiar with the terrain of difficulty. This can be hard for many of us, because our culture of "lookin' good and feelin' good" is devoted to avoiding the even slightest bit of discomfort. If we are suffering, then something must be wrong. But Buddhism says that pain is unavoidable, even for the most successful or most mentally healthy people.

Three Kinds of Suffering

The Buddha broke down suffering into three categories, all of which are unavoidable facts of life. The first is called the suffering of suffering, and refers to the ordinary difficulties we all face – aging, sickness, and death. It includes other obvious forms of suffering such as murder, rape, torture, and warfare. It includes difficulties such as starvation, homelessness, discrimination, unemployment and so forth. It includes more subtle forms of suffering such as stress, depression, alienation, and self-loathing. Add all this up and it seems preposterous to think one could avoid suffering.

The second type of pain, called the suffering of change, is less obvious. Our deepest wish is happiness. We want a happiness that lasts forever, that is not subject to change. And yet, every experience is subject to change. Happiness comes and goes just like everything else. Whether you examine your past on a time scale of minutes, days, months, or years, you will see that happiness has fluctuated. Contemplate a time in your life when you were really happy. Where is that happiness now?

I remember the highlight of my some 30 years of playing soccer. I have never been the star of a team, just a solid, but not outstanding, midfielder. However, I was the star just once. In an indoor soccer league championship game in Vermont quite a few years ago, I scored three goals in a 4-3

victory, including the winning goal with about a minute left to play. The rush of seeing my game winning shot arc into the upper corner of the net was an unimaginable pleasure. Now, unfortunately, as B. B. King sings, "The thrill is gone." The pinnacle of my soccer career is as present with me right now as the thrill of my first kiss or the sense of accomplishment upon graduating from college. Happiness does not pile up somewhere in our psyches, said the Buddha, any more than notes played by a lute player pile up at his feet. We get happy, it lasts for a while, and then something comes along to sweep it out of our lives. This is just the way life is and will continue to be, even for the most well adjusted person.

So while we may not have had our lives shattered by tragedy, we all still face this subtle but pervasive form of suffering. In fact, the Dalai Lama writes in his book, *An Open Heart*, that one should feel compassion for a wealthy person or a person enjoying some form of success because that happiness will end at some point.

If this sounds morbid, remember that the Buddha taught suffering not so that we would wallow in it, but so that we could overcome it. Recognizing the truth of change leads us to look for a more reliable happiness. Mindfulness is that more reliable happiness. Awareness is always available, in any circumstance. Mindfulness practice, brought to maturity, leads us to the most reliable happiness that exists – the natural peace and ease that is our Buddha nature. This Buddha nature is nothing other than a state of continuous, effortless, non-dual awareness.

The third form of suffering is called the suffering of conditioning, and it is the subtlest. The essence of this pain is that we want to be in control of our lives and we almost never are. We are not fixed, isolated selves, but interrelated beings. The events of our lives and our minds are products not of our individual will, but of past conditions coming to bear on the present moment. We do have control, but not in the way that our culture has taught us - we can choose to respond to the moment we just woke up to. We can wake up to irritation or fear

and, in our reaction to it, plant a seed that conditions a happy future - such as mindfulness or compassion - or one that conditions unhappiness - such as greed or aversion. Of course, we can plan and make the best decisions possible, and this affects the future. However, once the decision gets made and we set a direction, the rest is not up to us. I can choose to drive across three mountain passes to my former hometown of Paonia, but I can't control whether it snows along the way.

### Denial Ain't Just a River in Egypt

Our culture seems dead set on doing everything possible to deny this suffering. However, pretending suffering does not exist only leads to more suffering. One major way of distracting ourselves from the difficulties of life is through sense pleasure. Nothing is harmful about enjoying pleasures as they arise, but when we make acquiring pleasure the major activity of our lives, we are cutting ourselves off from the natural peace that we already are. The wanting mind is a form of subtle unrest; there is a sense of lack built into the wanting itself, a sense that the present moment is not okay as it is. We need that car or that mocha latte or that soak in the hot springs to complete us. But this is a major deception. Sense pleasures are so ephemeral. You eat a good meal and then it is done. Where does that leave you? Right back where you started.

The denial of the suffering associated with aging leads us to hate our bodies. We deify youth in our culture. In magazines, movies, TV shows and the Internet, we are bombarded with images of what sexy looks like, and it is always someone with the body of a 23-year old. No wonder so many people do Botox and get facelifts, tummy tucks, liposuction, breast implants, lip augmentation, and teeth whitening. This is not just restricted to women. Male plastic surgery is one of the fastest growing fields in medicine. This rejection of such a basic element of our being is a deep unease in the mind. Rather than just watching our body age, recognizing that the process is completely natural and out of our control, we fight against the inevitable. These famous Dylan Thomas lines -- "Do not go gently into that good night / Rage, rage against the dying light" -- epitomize the

command and control attitude we take towards our bodies. Such an attitude is just one more arena of self-hatred.

The fear of aging is really rooted in a fear of death. Our culture appears to be in turbo-denial about death. But how obvious can it be that death happens to everyone? So many people die around us and we live as if it won't happen to us. And yet it will, and maybe much sooner than we imagine. In a biography of Suzuki Roshi, *Crooked Cucumber*, he says that, "Life is like stepping onto a boat that is about to sail out to sea and sink." This sounds morbid, but is actually quite the contrary. This cautionary statement is a teaching about how to live properly. Contemplating the certainty of our death and the uncertainty of its timing will force us to get our priorities in order. It will teach us how to live fully, with a sense of spiritual urgency. If we just blindly follow along the cultural imperatives laid out for us, our lives could be the equivalent of rearranging deck chairs on Titanic.

The Buddha, in a startling set of instructions on being mindful of the body, suggested that one imagine one's dead body laid out on the ground and going through nine stages of decomposition. You visualize your body being ripped apart by jackals and ravens. Then you see all the flesh rot away. Then you watch the bones fall askew when the sinews decompose. Finally, you see the bones themselves disappear into dust. This is one of the main contemplations taught in the monasteries of the Thai forest tradition, and I practiced this a lot during my stay at a Thai monastery in 2004. Rather than being some awful and depressing experience, it was quite freeing to realize that this body will abandon me at death; that it really is an impersonal collection of matter that will return back to nature when my life force has left it. At times my mind would become quite still and luminous during this practice as it became less identified with the body. Buddhism teaches that there is a deathless state and it is awareness, mindfulness. While the body dies, awareness does not. It was never born and will never end. Our

attachments and lack of mindfulness obscure this reality. The huge cost of denying our suffering as it relates to death, is that we are robbed of a major motivator to step out of our complacency and dedicate ourselves to realizing freedom. This freedom is the only thing that is of help to us on our deathbeds.

### Compassion

All this talk about suffering might feel a little overwhelming. How can we open to the inevitable suffering in life without getting depressed? The answer is compassion. Compassion is the emotion that allows us to stay open and connected in the face of suffering. It is a tenderness in the face of suffering. Compassion means to suffer with – "passion" comes from the Latin root which means to suffer. But let's be clear that it does not mean we are drowning in the current of suffering. After all, a drowning person cannot save another drowning person. Compassion allows us to float on the current of suffering. Compassion fosters a caring for and connection with the person suffering and that is what keeps us buoyant.

Compassion is a tremendous aid on the spiritual path because it breaks the cycle of our suffering. All the difficulties we face in the three kinds of suffering are unavoidable. However, we add another layer of suffering every time we react to our difficulties. Our deepest suffering is reactivity--a non-acceptance of what is--because this reactivity obscures the natural peace that we already are. We can be with difficulty and stay within our natural peace. We don't realize that this reactivity is optional. Compassion helps us just accept pain. It helps us feel love for ourselves in the midst of difficulty. It is not our fault we suffer. It is just a fact of life. It is so freeing to just stop in the midst of our pain and accept it. Suzuki Roshi, in *Crooked Cucumber*, says, "The way to endure your pain is to let it be painful." Compassion is the first step in allowing the suffering to unwind. In the space of tender, compassionate acceptance, suffering slowly unfurls.

## Compassion Practice

The compassion practice instructions follow below. Rather than being a grim practice, compassion meditation, when done correctly, can actually be a joyous experience. This is because recognizing other people's pain helps us connect so easily to them. The three forms of suffering are universal, experienced by presidents, homeless people, corporate chieftains, happy people, sad people, whites, blacks, sick people and healthy people. We all share the same basic human predicament. Opening to this is a deep source of connection with all beings. The Dalai Lama is an inspiring example of what an effective tool compassion can be for achieving happiness. Compassion is the main practice of His Holiness, who is the spiritual and political head of Tibet. And yet, a man who has seen twenty percent of his people exterminated by the Chinese spends most of his time beaming happiness and love. His tremendous compassion and connection with others, even in the midst of their suffering, helps his heart rest in its natural peace and happiness. This is the promise of compassion practice.

Compassion is frequently confused with pity. But pity is an emotion rooted in separation. I'm here, you're there, and aren't you a poor thing. The context in which compassion arises is one of recognizing no matter how different we are on the surface, we are all suffering in the same basic way.

A key element of compassion practice is equanimity, staying balanced in the face of difficulty. We can open to suffering only if we know we will not be overwhelmed by it. In this practice we will conjure up an image or a felt sense of a person and the suffering they are feeling. Then we extend a simple wish or two of kindness towards their suffering. This is a concentration practice, and we avoid being overwhelmed by staying out of the story line and connecting again and again to the same phrase and image. The compassion we are cultivating is a balance of care and openness. Although we open to suffering in a very direct way by feeling someone's difficulty, we stay balanced because we hold the pain with

meditative awareness. We are both the holder and the held. We also maintain balance by centering our energy in the caring about the suffering and not in the suffering itself.

An important aspect of equanimity is that we accept the practice as it unfolds. Though we repeat wishes of compassion in this practice, and take in someone's pain, we are not in control of what emotions arise for us in response. The essence of this practice is that we are creating conditions for compassion to arise. We are planting seeds of compassion and watering them and making sure they get plenty of warmth and light, but we can't pull on the seeds and force them to grow. They grow according to their own nature. So just repeat the phrases, feel the pain, and realize that what arises in response is fundamentally out of your control.

Another key element is gentleness. It takes great courage to open to suffering. But we are warriors of tenderness and gentleness, not of grim determination. We approach the practice in the spirit of kindness. If you get overwhelmed at any point in the practice below, you can move back to an easier category. Furthermore, you can always stop the meditation completely and just stay with your breathing.

In this practice we will hold an image or a felt sense of a person, imagining them in a place of difficulty, and then extending our kind wishes towards them. It is very easy to get pulled into the story line of their circumstances, but this is just distraction. We rest steadily on the repetition of the phrases, and our image or sense of the person, letting everything else come and go.

Start by relaxing into the sensations of breathing. In. Out. In. Out. Then begin the compassion practice by opening to the pain of someone in obvious but not overwhelming difficulty. It might help to conjure up a being you know to be very compassionate to sit with you as you extend compassionate wishes, or to join

you in saying the phrases. I invite the Dalai Lama to join me, and I feel immediate compassion in his company. Imagine your subject's suffering, hold them in your heart and extend send some simple wishes of kindness towards this pain. Traditionally, the phrases are:

I care about this pain.  
May you be free from suffering.

I like to use both phrases. Feel free to make up your own phrases, just keep them simple, and limit them to one or two. If "I care .." feels too much like you are trying to trump up an emotion, you can use "I feel your difficulty, or I am aware of you pain." Breathe these phrases into your heart and your compassion subject in a relaxed and gentle way. Just keep repeating the phrases. If you get caught in thought or emotional reaction, just note the distraction as "thinking", and come back to the phrases and the sense of suffering that you are holding.

The next category is oneself. Then one follows the remaining classical categories – benefactor, dear friend, neutral person, difficult person, and all beings. The instructions for each of these categories are exactly the same for the easiest category. If you are drawn to doing this practice, I recommend keeping it simple and doing only one or two categories. As you get more familiar with the practice, you can move to other categories. Over the long term, it is best to stay with one or two categories per week. In my experience, the easiest way to work with the difficult person in the brahma-viharas is through compassion. Seeing the suffering in a difficult person's life humanizes them, helps us see their vulnerability.

It can be quite overwhelming to open to the suffering of all beings. One easier way to do this is to open to all beings that are suffering in the same way you see yourself suffering. You can relate to their pain and it might seem more manageable. If you are feeling really adventurous, you can expand to include all those suffering in the world for any reason. Those who are sick, starving, in intense pain. Animals being eaten by other animals.

I care about the pain of the world.

May the whole world be free from suffering.

Just come back to yourself if you cannot hold this much pain. Joseph Goldstein says that just as our mindfulness practice takes time to be able to be with more and more difficult mind states, so our compassion takes time to expand to include all the world's suffering.

At the end of your meditation period, come back to yourself and wish yourself well. " May I be happy. May I be free from suffering. May I be at ease." End the meditation by coming back to your breath. In. Out. In. Out.