

## THE HEALING POWER OF COMPASSION

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The last few weeks have been a time of seismic shifts in opening our hearts. For millions of people all over the world, it was heart-breaking to witness the suffering that George Floyd endured, and to see how much his family grieved. When the world grieved too, it caused a tipping and turning point. Our individual and collective hearts opened with compassion. The force of this compassion opened to the truth of deeply embedded structural violence and the social forces that have harmed our black communities for centuries. Of course this also connects to all peoples everywhere, all genders, and all those who have been affected by this particular kind of systemic injustice. Although very painful, it also opened a widespread awakening to the truth of this kind of suffering, and the healing of it.

As Van Jones, news commentator and author said recently, “A miracle has taken place. A continent of common ground has emerged from beneath the waves.”

In the Dharma, it is said that compassion is a powerful healing force that reaches out to alleviate suffering.

Reaching out with compassion can sometimes feel like the strength of courage to face what is difficult.

Reaching out can also feel gentle, like a soothing balm that offers some relieving kindness when we can sincerely say to someone, “I care about your pain.”

Sometimes it's helpful to train the mind/heart in compassion during sitting meditation, so that it becomes a supportive habit pattern easily accessible in daily life. Traditionally, to practice compassion during meditation there is a progression of individuals that we offer to, and phrases that can be used (see Sharon Salzberg's book, “Loving Kindness”).

In my own compassion practice, I keep it really simple. I choose someone who has shared their heartache with me, or whose difficulty is obvious. I take a few moments opening to how it is for this person, and at times compassion naturally arises. But there are times I need to use a phrase to help incline the mind/heart towards compassion, for example, “May you be free from your heartache”, repeating that phrase softly in a comfortable cadence.

There are times when we need to practice compassion for ourselves. However, sometimes we may feel so paralyzed, hurt, or upset that we can easily dismiss our own basic needs for self-care. Having raised four children, I remember this very well. It took time to establish a habit of offering compassion to myself. Some simple words would help to incline my heart towards compassion, “May my heart and mind be at ease.” Or even more specifically, “May I be more compassionate towards myself.” Even if it seemed impossible, I would rather repeat a wholesome intention than allow my unskillful thoughts to take over.

Knowing the terrain around compassion is important, so that we can be aware of what might be obstructing compassion. The far enemy of compassion is cruelty. This is when we strike out with angry words, actions, or even silently with our thoughts to hurt or harm.

The near enemy is apathy or indifference. It can manifest as not caring, a numbing distance, or a lack empathy. Awareness is like a solvent; when the near or far enemies arise, awareness can dissolve any entanglement or identification with it, allowing compassion to arise.

May our deeper understanding and the power of compassion be forces of healing for all beings everywhere.