

What is Compassion?

Com-*passion*.
Com – together with
Passion – to suffer

Compassion is the choice to suffer together with self and other. It is not to feel sorry for, it is not pity or sympathy, it is not even empathy, which is more about imagining (a head exercise about how you are feeling or another might be feeling). Compassion means to **fully feel** with yourself or another instead of defending against feelings, and creating barriers between you and your fullest experience of life.

So why is it that everyone is not completely aware of their feelings nor allowing themselves the full range of human emotion in every experience of life?

We were all taught to repress, deny, minimize, dissociate, block, rationalize, intellectualize our feelings at a very young age in one way or another. Each instance is quite unique and yet the same principle of being cut off from feelings and living in the head occurs for all of us. By the time we are adults we are semi conscious, walking ghouls, the living dead – we do not even know what our emotional needs and feelings are – and yet they exert an influence on all that we say and do, leading to defensive and superficial lives lacking in intimacy, meaning, connection, fulfillment or love.

Love means knowing ourselves fully. It means embracing every experience of our lives with full awareness. It means feeling deeply and immediately– whether this is sorrow, fear, shame, anger or joy. The awareness and lived experience of joy can only occur when one also has full awareness and lived the experience of all the pain and suffering that was buried deep in our souls, and left behind in childhood. Until we can love ourselves – that is, be fully aware of all aspects of self including our suffering, we will not know or love anyone else either.

Allowing ourselves to bring our awareness to the feelings is problematic. It is hard to break through the defenses, blocks and barriers that keep emotion stuck in the body and separated from awareness by the head. It is hard to integrate head and heart. As children there was no sense of self to be able to observe what the experience was – we just *were* the experience. If it was unpleasant we found a way to protect ourselves from an awareness of it. As adults we have a sense of self – and identity and it is this self that has to learn to observe, investigate and accept the suffering that was denied and repressed in one way or another in childhood. It takes practice. And how do we practice?

We practice first of all **noticing and recognizing** the behaviors that are designed to keep feelings locked down, hidden and denied from our awareness. This is largely our thinking and behavior – everything from platitudes and affirmations, to judgment and criticism, from addictions, compulsions and obsessions and perfectionistic tendencies to apathy and fatigue, our acting out and acting in. Our fight and flight tactics– all designed to keep the emotions at bay. These blocks and barriers are literally encoded into the body itself and each has it's own texture, density and complexity experienced as constriction, physical pain, tension, illness, etc. We have been taught to ignore even the pain the blocks create in our body – and yet they manifest all the time.

Then we try to **identify the feelings** these behaviors mask, and to **relax into them and actually feel them**. Naming them is not feeling them! If we can start identifying and feeling the suffering behind our defenses, then we will start being aware of the suffering behind the behaviors of others and compassion will naturally arise. **Full awareness is compassionate.**

We can start to practice truly listening to ourselves and others – deeply – not buying the surface words and actions, but wondering what motives them? ---- always, always unmet needs and feelings. It is about being fully present and noticing how your attention wanders, how you distract away from the conversation, become self referential or any other number of tactics to not be fully present to the whole person – you or the other. It is about noticing what triggers defensiveness – even when someone is trying to guide or help you - and searching for why this is arising. It is to practice curbing the tongue – no longer lashing out, blaming, aggressing, gossiping, but considering what is being triggered that is really about your own suffering.

It is important to recognize that “letting go,” does not mean letting go of feelings. It means letting go of the barriers and subtle ploys, all the wanting and not wanting –i.e. the function of defensive behavior. It means relaxing your grip and attachment to your habitual ways of blocking emotion and staying unaware. It means letting go of preference, resistance and clinging. It means allowing yourself to experience life nakedly, vulnerably and authentically without holding back or grabbing on to anything to protect your feelings. Start noticing how you want to resist when something challenging or painful arises. Notice how you want to grab a hold of, cling and possess when something pleasurable and enjoyable happens.

If you do this you will actually feel – you will suffer the feelings - until you do not anymore. They do not last forever when you accept and bring your loving heart to them instead of habitual judgments. You will also, then, feel the bliss of being in your body. You will feel joy which is so different from the feelings of pleasure gained from the petty distractions of addictions to power, wealth, status and substances. Suffering that is defended against will continue to wreak havoc on your life. Suffering that is suffered is short lived and brings freedom.

Compassion is just a natural and spontaneous expression and emergence, with no thought of “how to be compassionate.” It has no self reference – there is no one actually there to be compassionate. There is no thought or conceptualizing or theorizing about what you or another needs or what the effect of action might be on the self or other. There is no worry or concern about the outcome. There is no thought of doing, or fixing, or advising, or rescuing or changing, or controlling.

It is simply what arises, appropriate to whatever the situation or condition is. This might or might not concur with the well considered rules and norms of the culture or what other people *think* is the “good” or “right,” thing to do. There is no wish for anything as a result of the action, or non action. It means being so transparent that the light shines through – all the way through - to your darkest suffering and all the way through to the suffering of others. It means living life fully aware, fully present, fully engaged, and completely whole.

Compassion has many faces – tender, gentle, warm, kind, soft, passionately loving, protective. It might be deep sorrow. It might be sweet intimacy. It might be a fierce “no,” and wield the sword of truth, conviction and integrity. It might be deep sorrow.

The consort of compassion is wisdom. There is no compassion without wisdom and there is no wisdom without compassion – the two are integral to one another. We must understand and know the psyche deeply in order to love fully. We must love fully in order to see with gnosis. The two are inseparable.

And this is why any spiritual practice must include study of some kind, deep shadow work (learning to be present to your own suffering), and body work. A two legged stool cannot be used – it is unstable. Our practice must be at least be three legged. Consider what your three pronged practice will be this year.