

# Compassion and Happiness

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Do I act with compassion so I can feel good? Is compassion something to acquire in the name of happiness much the same way we acquire fame, recognition and reward? These are questions often thrown about during debate about human nature and compassion. Underlying the answer to these two questions are some basic assumptions about compassion, and not everyone will agree with these assumptions. Eight assumptions can be found on the website [www.CompassionSpace.com](http://www.CompassionSpace.com) and in some way they all connect to answering these questions, but here I will discuss just a few of them.

## Chasing After the “Feel Goods”

It is assumed that being compassionate toward another is instinctual, part of our human nature. Slowly, there is scientific evidence mounting that is shifting this from an assumption to scientific knowledge. If this is true then it is likely that demonstrating compassion toward another will have similar effects as having a good meal (eating is instinctual) – it will be enjoyable. This means that, like having a good meal, there is pleasure attached with the act of compassion. This is hardwired into our brain and on this primary level pleasure could be related to a form of happiness. But, as most people know, food can be abused in the search for a way to “feel good” which can turn to addiction and away from happiness.

This search to “feel good” can also happen when people are attempting to practice compassion. This happens when the desire to feel good connected to remembering past compassionate acts becomes the primary goal. This goal of “seeking the feel good” supersedes the intent to reduce suffering as the primary focus. We chase after the “feel goods” instead of concentrating on sitting with suffering. If the intent to reduce suffering is placed as the primary goal then the hope, or wish, or goal, to “feel good” personally is placed in the background. Yet this does not mean that we put ourselves into extreme situations without concern for our personal well being. In fact we are more attentive to our own addictive and habitual nature, and thus to our own well being.

The idea that one can “acquire” or “grasp” compassion is simply a transference of cultural ideologies, but it leads back to the same habitual path of doing to “feel good”. This is not something that many people often clearly see. Perhaps the most persistent example is when a person just has to give you some advice: “I think you should try...”, “Let me tell you what works best...”, or “This is the definitely way to go...” Now these are well meaning people, not out intending to harm, they just want to help – and they always just want to help. In fact they are, in a sense, habitual helpers and they may not know it. If you have run into one of these habitual helpers, then you might recognize how it feels to be on the receiving end. There is often a sense of distance, as if they are talking to someone behind you, or they are giving advice before being invited in, and they often hand out the advice quickly before gathering

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information about you. The habitual helper's goal is to do the act of "helping", or "fixing" and it is likely that most do not know this has become a habit and drifted away from compassion.

Another assumption about compassion is that it can be developed. The idea that you are either born with it or you are not flies directly in the face of the data suggesting compassion is innate, a part of human nature. There are some basic papers specific to this topic of personal compassion development on the above mentioned website. In these papers compassion development is connected to the following: giving compassion a voice, forgiveness, sitting with suffering, seeing the possibility of compassion development and the attitude of presence. Nowhere in these early steps of personal compassion development does it say that we should "look for the feel good". If one clearly reflects on these beginning steps it is clear that they may require some heroic work that WILL NOT feel good (from a certain perspective), but is necessary in order to develop a stronger compassion. Giving a voice to compassion may not be easy as people shout back, but it is necessary. Sitting with suffering may not feel good, but it is necessary to learn. Forgiveness can be difficult, but it is necessary. Reaching beyond our current compassion understanding and stretching our awareness can be difficult, but it is necessary. This is not the path of chasing after "feeling good", it is the heroic path of building a stronger compassion. But often habitual helpers do not follow this path and fall into habitual fixing as a chase to find happiness.

In the book "Faces of Compassion" (by Taigen Dan Leighton) writes: "It is all too easy to give someone what we feel he needs, or should have, rather than what is actually useful or appropriate" (p. 64). Trevor Hudson in "Compassionate Caring" writes: "Caring workaholics...frantic do-gooding dulls our responses to the Divine Whisper, depletes our spiritual resources and often ends up in cynicism and despair" (p. 105). Habitual helpers often do not know the trap that they have fallen into.

Consider the following quote from the book "Medicine and Compassion", by Choyki Nyima Rinpoche and David R. Shlim:

"When the doctor walks into a room with a patient, the doctor's true attitude toward the patient will be immediately visible, regardless of the attitude that the doctor attempts to portray. Something intangible is revealed that reflects the doctor's actual motivation or attitude." (p. 34).

This is what I call the attitude of presence and it is present before one even begins to offer the possibility of entering a compassion space. It is present before one even begins to think about what to do to help or fix something. The central focus of the attitude of presence is to offer the possibility of entering the compassion space – to open the door to compassion and then sit with whatever happens. This is clearly different than entering the room with the intent to give advice, to fix something, to give help, and hopefully "feel good" after.

The attitude of presence is fundamental to the development of compassion, but it is not necessary when the person is chasing "feel goods" along the path of habitual helping. The attitude of presence is one that says "I am entering the situation to offer the possibility of compassionate care, yet willing to sit in peace with whatever transpires". The habitual helper says (even though they may not know it) "I am

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going in to help, make things better, and try to fix things". The difference is subtle yet important – one leads to happiness and the others often leads to habitual patterns distant from compassion.

If you can think of the attitude of presence as opening the door to the path from suffering to well being then it is important to learn how to practice opening that door. Opening the door is not that same as walking through it and some people are not ready to walk because there is too much trash blocking the doorway. But when the attitude of presence is part of the process they may get to see this trash more clearly as you try to open the door OR they may just react and misinterpret. There can be some response to opening the door that is sometimes not easy to sit with, not pleasant. This is simply part of the path of developing compassion and has been historically connected to even the great heroes of compassion. Yet if you can hold the possibility of compassion as you open the door, hold the possibility of walking through the doorway, then sometimes people will walk past the trash with you. But if you follow the path of the habitual helper it is likely you will miss this – both the "holding" and the walking through.

But, although there appear to be many uncomfortable obstacles along the early path of compassion development, and we need to let go of seeking "feel goods", there is a deeper and more enduring happiness waiting for us. There is a glorious happiness that comes with following this path of compassion development. This is the happiness of becoming connected more deeply to our true compassionate nature. This is the happiness of walking side by side with one person through that door of compassion, past suffering and into well being. It is the happiness of sharing a unique compassion experience and of the possibility that compassion may be passed on from that point. And it is the happiness of discovering the infinite web of compassion touching every aspect of life, relationships, health, and spirituality into emptiness and on into infinity. Finally, it is the happiness of having the opportunity to sit in that sacred compassion space with another – regardless of outcome. This is a deep sacred happiness that compares to nothing the material world can offer.

### Compassion as the Best Path to Happiness

Making the statement that compassion is the best path to happiness is likely to be met with some disbelief and perhaps even heated argument. The first point to consider is that your definition of compassion affects how you understand compassion and thus affects how it could be linked to happiness. Second your definition of happiness affects how you understand its link to happiness. What follows is both my definition of compassion and my definition of happiness.

If compassion can be defined as both experiencing another's suffering (empathy) and acting to reduce that suffering (wisdom) then it is possible that both empathy and wisdom could be developed to a point of oneness. Oneness is a perceptual experience of being one with another's needs, really walking in their shoes (and knowing you have to take off your own), combined with a wisdom oneness that reveals precisely the actions needed to reduce suffering at that moment. True insight, that bears fruit, is always a part what transpires. This oneness also has characteristics like suspended time and vision across time simultaneously. Oneness has with it the lightness of being and is never heavy or burdensome. Oneness has the sense of being deeply sacred as if there was a connection happening beyond self, beyond the

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material and into what can only be called the mystery. There is awe in having a glimpse of this mystery that seems infinitely beyond, and yet at the same time within. Oneness has a deep sense of peace, which can be so deep that even the word infinity doesn't seem to describe the sensation. Oneness can have a sense of joy, bliss that will bring physical tears because it is so bright, so beautiful, that everything else experiences or seen before that moment was dim in comparison. Finally, and what may be considered the most amazing, is that all of this is shared. It is a MUTUAL experience. People are then able to witness back to each other to help keep such a moment fresh and away from delusion. This place of oneness is where I have found a depth of happiness that I cannot, and don't expect to, find anywhere else. It is a depth of happiness found in the mutuality of the experience for as far as that mutuality can be expressed. It has been personal experience and it seems to be supported by the works of compassion heroes throughout history. It is also where I experience my deepest sense of my "true self", where I feel connected to the deepest part of my inner being. There is a happiness here that is not like anything else I experience in the material world.

The experience of compassion need not be limited to sitting with others. It can be extended to sitting with yourself, and becoming "one" with your own nature. It can be extended to sitting with all living things, with the earth, and beyond – to become "one" with all that is around us. It can be extended to becoming "one" with our community, to humanity, to feel a sense of oneness or deep connection to their wellbeing. Compassion can be extended to sitting in relationship with the Divine (in whatever form you choose) as a part of our own relationship with personal development. When we allow ourselves to extend our conception of compassion to encompass our relationships to all things that are connected to our movement into a sacred peace, harmony and wisdom (which is in itself is a path to reduce suffering) then developing our compassion becomes a VERY IMPORTANT path into becoming more in tune with sacred peace, harmony and wisdom. Compassion is about relationship – hearing what is happening in it, and then knowing how to take the next step. This applies to everything that you are connected to, everything to which you have a relationship, every moment of the day. This is how compassion as a way of life becomes a path to happiness.

It is possible to follow the path of compassion further into what was mentioned above as "the mystery". But this is a more advanced topic and will be discussed in future writings.

The idea of sitting in all possible relationships, with the attitude of presence and compassion, can seem overwhelming. Yet it is quite an easy idea to understand. If you think of yourself as having a connection with another person, or a friend, or even a pet, that seems easy to understand. Now do you have a connection to your work? Consider that you might have a connection to what actions you do at work, the interactions you have with others, and the interactions you have with yourself. Now consider that what you do at work might have an effect on someone else. Have you ever had a real bad day at work and come home all emotional and then those emotions spilled out on others? What about having a great day at work and you came home really feeling good? Now consider that your positive actions might possibly have the same effects on others. And then these people who you encountered might in turn affect others because of how your relationship affected them. This is the ripple effect of relationship. It is why compassion is so important for happiness and well being personally. You never know when that ripple will circle around and splash in your face.

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So here is the simple idea:

***Compassion is first about sitting in all relationships with the attitude of presence.***

Once this becomes a way of life, or at least something you are attempting, then happiness will appear in ways and in experiences that gradually approach the oneness experiences described above. The experiences will be brief at first, and with time between them. But with attention they can increase in frequency, duration and intensity. Once that happens the door opens to becoming a radiant being of compassion. This is a path to strong compassion and happiness.

### Strong Compassion and Happiness

Strong compassion is a way to think about what happens when one works on developing compassion as a way of life. If you don't not believe that compassion can be developed then strong compassion is likely an impossibility. If you believe that you have learned all there is to know about compassion then strong compassion is likely an impossibility. If you feel "uncomfortable" when someone proposes the idea that strong compassion exists then it is also likely to be difficult. But if you are open to seeking and developing your compassion further then strong compassion is possible.

Strong compassion is when you become strong with the fundamentals of compassion. You develop a strong voice for compassion that speaks at every opportunity. You develop strong forgiveness that holds back nothing. You develop strong sitting with suffering that can experience a shared suffering without being overwhelmed by it because you simultaneously develop a strong attitude of presence. Strong compassion is more powerful than anger, fear or desire. Strong compassion is present every day and is always open to the opportunity to be known, yet it never pushes without permission. Strong compassion is more about being than it is about doing. As it becomes a way of being it can then be seen that a life of compassion is the "true self" and thus strong compassion is the path to strong happiness.

What is meant by strong compassion is that we move from compassion possibility, to compassion awareness to slowly maintaining the attitude of presence. Maintaining the attitude of presence is on the right hand and sitting with suffering is on the left. You can gradually learn to extend the frequency in which the attitude of presence occurs. You can gradually increase the duration in which you can sit with suffering simultaneously with the attitude of presence. It is also possible to increase the intensity of the attitude of presence so it matches the intensity of your sitting with suffering. Eventually the attitude of presence shifts from knowing about it, to doing it, and finally to becoming a way of being. There is divine sacredness about this way of being. This is the first indication of strong compassion.

What is quite amazing is that these early stages of strong compassion directly influence how you will experience sitting with suffering. As you develop these early stages of strong compassion you will experience fewer episodes of personal suffering. This leads to happiness. In addition you will be able to hold the door open to compassion (experiencing relief from suffering) longer and with greater matched intensity (matched to the moment). This will lead to more experiences where relief is witnessed. This also will lead to greater happiness.

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It is often good to have a teacher to help with the development of strong compassion. The development of strong compassion eventually spreads its web out in all directions, out into the “mystery” where even greater happiness can be revealed. But this is an advanced topic to be covered at another time.