

Compassion Fundamentals and Sitting with Suffering

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In the world today, in every place where people are helping others, compassion needs a voice. It should no longer remain silent. In most places we don't talk about compassion, we don't share our views, we don't learn from each other – except on that rare occasion when you get to spend time with someone who models compassion. There is this “hidden” idea that compassion just doesn't need to be talked about. Then why did all the great heroes of compassion talk about it? The voice of compassion is absent from most human service establishments in the Western world. It is time to change that.

If we agree that the voice of compassion needs to be heard then we need to become knowledgeable about compassion, develop stronger compassion, and hold on to the possibility of developing compassion to the levels of our compassion heroes. Compassion is the desire and willingness to relieve suffering. Compassion can be considered to be a combination of both empathy and wisdom. Empathy is the process of hearing suffering and it can be developed to the point of becoming “one” with another person. Wisdom is knowing how to act to decrease suffering, which can also be developed to a point of expertise. Highly developed empathy plus expert wisdom equals strong well developed compassion.

These ideas about the development of compassion do not mean that I think there are measurable stages that we can complete one after the other, or that we can rest upon our development assured that a stage has been completed. Compassion and spirituality are linked together and they are both ephemeral phenomena. They can be experienced, and sometimes mutually shared. The phenomena can be described and the processes experienced also described – from a point a view. And it is possible to say that certain experiences are closer to “oneness” with another person (compassion), or the divine (spirituality), than other experiences. But this is simply an indication of a process of personal development and not a hierarchical progression through some series of stages.

The idea of a personal journey of developing compassion which includes “states” (brief experiences) or “stages” (permanent shift in awareness) is useful only to the degree that it helps the person visualize the journey. This visualization can help us to hold in view the POSSIBILITY that there is “deeper compassion” and “deeper spirituality” ahead as we move to sit in “oneness”. This is not the same as saying “I have completed the third stage and I am now ready to move to the fourth” or even more dangerous “I see you are at the third stage, well I made it to the fourth”.

The point of possibility awareness is that it is a self directed PROCESS of personal development based on one's current “self” awareness (in what we have been discussing, how one defines compassion), one's awareness of potential to grow (in this case using compassion in a new way, or understanding it in a new way), and attention to the moment as connected to both (one's movement toward oneness). This process of possibility applies to us all, even though we may be blind to it sometimes. If there is a deep

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radiant compassion that can touch the fibers of all living things simply by being, if we can become this, walk this, live this every moment, then are we not also living the possibility every moment? The concept of infinite compassion is not new and not my idea. It has not been presented here yet because it is a very advanced concept difficult to grasp. Yet it fits well with the ever present, and ever shifting, focus of compassion possibility. It also doesn't fit well into stage theory. What is an infinite stage?

Stage theory is about putting things into categories. The more one breaks things down into categories and pieces the more risk there is to becoming attached to those categories, and then attaching others to those same descriptors. This is known as an explanatory system. There is a sacred mystery in the process of developing compassion and spirituality. There is a “cloud of unknowing” that can be experienced but is very difficult to describe. These are diaphanous phenomena, wisps of the intangible, and the more we seek to grasp them within an explanatory system the more we risk losing our union with them. I am trying hard NOT to write in that direction, but rather to describe phenomena associated with experiences. Yet I am fully aware that I too, like so many mystic writers before me, am tied to the constraints of language and my cultural heritage. Whatever I present will be another explanatory system, written for these times, for this culture, like it has been done over the past.

The basic fundamentals for preparing to develop compassion are; understanding its definition, giving it a voice, forgiveness and sitting with suffering. The process of “Sitting with Suffering” and practicing forgiveness apply to the often spoken comment, “You have to have compassion for yourself before you can have compassion for others”. But it is important to know this path of understanding one’s reactions to inner suffering is only ONE of two paths leading to a deeper sacred compassion. The other path is through a transcendence of “self”. This is the death of self, the movement toward emptiness, and then oneness. These are two paths leading to the same place – the compassion space where development of compassion occurs.

This conception of two paths can be considered part of how we have historically defined spiritual development. One path, sitting with one’s suffering, is linked to the old ascetic path of spiritual development. The other path, LETTING GO of “self”, transcending self, or knowing EMPTINESS, is linked to the mystical path of spiritual development. Both of these spiritual paths of development can lead to a deeper compassion development. A deeper compassion development leads to spiritual development. In harmony they can both lead to the same place - the compassion space where development of compassion occurs.

At some point in our lives each of us will have to face suffering. We will have to face our own suffering and face the suffering of our loved ones. How will we do that?

The first thing that often hits us is pain! There are many references, and practitioners, that address pain management. That is not the focus here because I think there is a difference between pain and suffering. Why do they always say in court, “You are awarded this money for pain AND suffering”? Consider the following posting I made in a cyber-community:

I am not “the stroke patient in room 4b”. I am not “that guy with the walker in the white house”. I am not “and how are we feeling today”, spoken as if we was some alien from another

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world. I am not my pain. I do have a name. I am not my pain, even on those days when the whole world speaks to it and not to me. I am not my pain even though there are days when it is very hard to find “me” behind pain’s constant bombardment – physically and psychologically. But in spite of this all, I still believe there is a ME. I am not invisible because of my pain. I am still here even though it seem like no one can see me anymore. I am not lost, invisible, consumed by pain, replaced by disease labels. There is a me. I know it is there... It has to be there... Every moment there... If only there were people who knew and would sit with me.

This speaks of pain, but it speaks more to some of the suffering that comes with pain. This is the suffering of loss, of losing some part of what used to be your own identity, of losing how people used to sit with you and talk with you, and losing the way relationships used to be. When there is pain experienced, whether to the body or the heart, there can be this experience of distance from others. There can be the experience of distance from our loved ones, and distance from our own identity. Sitting with suffering then is not about labeling pain. It is about sitting with that distance, sitting with the loss of identity, sitting with the loss of relationships, and sitting with all the changes to heart, mind and soul that may accompany pain.

We are not taught to sit with suffering. We are taught to “fix it”, “escape it”, “bury it” and “not pay attention to it”. This applies to sitting with our own suffering or sitting with the suffering of others. Even helping professionals are taught to “keep a professional distance”, which again is a message about not sitting with suffering. Also backing this neglect to sit with suffering is the mute voice of compassion. If we don’t talk about it, then we are supporting its absence.

Since we are not taught to sit with suffering, and our culture is not supporting this, then we are faced with a learning process. The first step in this learning process is to awaken that we are not doing it and if we are doing it we can learn how to do it better. This is one reason why compassion needs to have a voice everywhere there is suffering. The second step is to know that there is information available to us to help us learn to sit with suffering. We can break through our old habits of resistance to sitting. We can crash through the cultural walls that silence the voice of compassion. We can do this following along a path similar to any we have taken in learning any skill – one improvement at a time.

Steps to Help Improve Sitting with Suffering

- 1) The first step to sitting with suffering is to believe that it is possible to do it, and not just with your own suffering but also with the suffering of others. Not only is it possible, but it is possible to do so with an ever increasing skill. As we increase our skill we increase our compassion, which then helps to provide relief for suffering.
- 2) Understand that our development of compassion, and our development of spirituality, are both intertwined with this process of improving sitting with suffering. Learning about sitting with suffering is the first important relationship between compassion and spirituality. It is a part of the spirituality of most cultures. At the start it is as simple as learning to be patient with your own suffering so it doesn’t cause harm to others. It is also as simple as being quiet and listening to another speak of his/her suffering.

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- 3) When learning to sit with suffering, stop, and pause before reacting (including giving advice). During that pause reflect on doing no harm to others or to yourself. Make efforts to prevent your suffering to “spill out” on to others. This “spill out” is one of the central causes of suffering in the modern world.
- 4) Reflect on where you are, in the moment, in your environment when you are suffering. How is your suffering related to, or connected to, the world around you. This means looking at the present moment and the people close to you. But this process of reflection can also expand to the entire world. Allow this reflection process to deepen your humility and lessen your anger. Use this to help others develop a stronger voice of compassion.
- 5) Sitting with suffering can help you to genuinely deepen your humility. Genuine humility is important to both the development of compassion and the development of spirituality. This is not an “ego” thing, where one is “proud to be so humble”. Rather it is a genuinely deep inner sense of resonance with our connection, our oneness, with all who suffer. This is often combined with a deep sense of gratitude.
- 6) Use the time of sitting with suffering to re-examine what is REALLY important to you in your life. It is a way of “keeping death on your shoulder”. It is asking, “If I became very sick, and begin to lose the ability to do things and eventually faced death, would my life have meaning to me?” This re-examination process can also be shared when sitting with others in their suffering, when they are ready.
- 7) One of the hardest things to learn when sitting in suffering is to quiet down. There are so many pain signals, cultural signals, and even people’s advice, telling us to do something to make it go away. “Do something”, that is the battle cry of our training in response to suffering. But sometimes the best response is to do nothing, but be still as the moonlight on a motionless pond.
- 8) Sometimes when we are in suffering we need to ask for help, not just in a general way, but in a way specific to our suffering.

The practice of sitting with suffering is not an easy one. We are not taught to do this and in fact, in Western society, we are sent all the messages contrary to such practice. Yet for the development of compassion sitting with suffering is a fundamental. Sitting with suffering is also the bridge between compassion and spirituality. It is one of the most important things we can learn how to do well.

Part of learning to sit with suffering is to know that we can always learn more about practicing it. It is one of those skills that moves gradually toward the state of oneness – with others and with the divine simultaneously in a given moment. Yet it is also something that can be very simple. It is just genuine listening without judgment. Sitting with suffering means that we can learn to “sit with” any action,

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thought, feeling, that is connected to suffering. It means to do so without contributing to further suffering in any way. This is the start of sitting with suffering.

As we learn more about sitting with suffering we can experience a mutuality with others. We can literally share in their experiences as if we were living them ourselves. This is a deeper sense of sitting with suffering. It is a taking in of suffering, and an important part of compassion. We also do not get “lost in their suffering” because we are diligent with being open to the possibility of compassion – which includes the relief of suffering. A strong and healthy sitting with suffering is directly connected to compassion when we simultaneously maintain the possibility of relief. This is a sacred process and when held as such has deep meanings that can be revealed which are an important part of the relief process. This sacred process of sitting with suffering (or taking in suffering) and experiencing the possibility of relief (giving back hope or healing) is a sacred tradition found in most cultures. But, it may be something we have lost touch with in our modern Western civilization.

As we develop our ability to sit with suffering we are also developing compassion. The more we develop compassion the more we move toward oneness with others. As we understand this sacred compassion of oneness we others so it is we understand how we sit in union with the Divine. When we struggle to be compassionate with others it also is a struggle played out in our relationship with the Divine. Suffering can be a path to deep inner growth, personally and collectively.

Perhaps one of the most important aspects of sitting with suffering is to know that it is done with the strict vow of DO NO HARM. This includes doing no harm to yourself. So much suffering in the world comes at the hands of internal wounds unleashing their fierce jaws into the flesh of others. Then more wounds are created and the plague of suffering feeds upon itself. This is not a hard thing to see. A husband comes home from a bad day at work and emotions bust out at home. A group of people feel oppressed and attack another group. A religion feels like it is being undermined and thus facing a “social death” so they strike back at the enemy who done the wound. Somewhere the plague needs to stop.

This plague of suffering is spreading for the simple reason that we, humanity, have not learned how to sit with suffering and we are not promoting the voice of compassion. These two things, sitting with suffering and the voice of compassion, need to become as loud as the voice of freedom and the voice of our need for a healthy planet. It is time to break the compassion silence before the air suffocates us with the cries of those suffering.