

Developing Compassion – The First Step of Possibility

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The first step in the process of developing compassion is to fully accept that it is possible to do so. This means not only holding the possibility of compassion at any given moment, but also the possibility of developing our personal compassion to a level currently unknown to us. Compassion is basically about a journey from suffering into wellness. This doesn't mean that someone is necessarily going to be cured of something. It means that they are shown how to be in a place of increased comfort while dealing with whatever suffering may be on their path. In my earlier writings ("The Healing Relationship"), I suggest that there are guidelines describing the basic components of the wellness journey and, the basic elements of the helping relationship that can be used while providing assistance in this journey. There are four components of the wellness journey: discovering wellness possibilities, finding healthy ways of seeking wellness, enhancing wellness duration, and, promoting the types of relationships needed to support wellness duration. When using the helping relationship to assist with these four wellness components, there are two helping approaches that need to be balanced with each other: 1) support for wellness remembering, and, 2) offering the opportunity of experiencing wellness. These six parts (the four components of the wellness journey and the two helping approaches) have been called the six foundational components of the helping relationship. The six foundational components of the helping relationship serve as overarching concepts, guiding both practitioner intent and practitioner development, while learning compassion. Discovering possibility is the first of the six foundational components of the helping relationship and it is the first step we take at any point in our efforts to develop compassion.

Discovering the possibility of compassion development means that we are open to the idea that compassion can happen and also compassion can be developed in ourselves and in others. The first part of possibility is when we can say to ourselves "I am open to the possibility that compassion could happen here and now". The second part of possibility is that you say to yourself "I believe it is possible for me to have more compassion and to have deeper and stronger compassion". The third part of possibility is when we can say, "I believe there is a way I can follow that will help me to do this". These may sound like simple and easy to understand ideas, but they have deep ramifications. It is also important to understand that if this first step of possibility is not accomplished then it is very hard to personally develop compassion. Life presents to us opportunities to develop compassion, but we need to be ready to see these opportunities as opportunities to develop our compassion further. Yet it is impossible to recognize that a moment is an opportunity to develop compassion further if we hold no possibility that further exists. We cannot grow into nothing, into no possibility. So then the opportunity will simply pass us.

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The possibility of compassion development is something each of us can look at any point in our lives. Have we really accepted the possibility that compassion can be developed further? How much further? What might developed compassion look like? It might be difficult to accept the possibility of developing compassion further if you have no idea of what that might look like. It is like asking someone, “I would like you to think of going”, but not providing any more details than that. Where are we going? We can look at the idea of developing compassion, but it helps to have a model of more developed compassion to go with that idea. We then have some sense of where we are going. This then helps us to hold on to the possibility.

There are many ways we can find our own model of more developed compassion. The easiest way is to look around our lives, find someone we think has more developed compassion, and hold that within our range of possibility. Another way is to use a compassion hero (like Christ or Buddha) as a model. In either case the model helps us keep the possibility alive as we seek the possibility of developing compassion to higher levels.

In my writings I have attempted to describe in more detail what advanced levels of compassion might look like – from various perspectives. I am also hopeful that more authors will eventually contribute to this process of illuminating our lifelong path and not just the boulders in the way. It is quite difficult to hold the possibility of developing compassion over a lifetime, to think of it as a never-ending journey. It is difficult because we are then adding the idea of infinite compassion to our model. This is often what the heroes of compassion have told us. This is the ultimate possibility for each of us in our personal path of developing compassion. This is why possibility is the first step, because we are continually faced with redefining what is possible for ourselves while searching to develop our own compassion and to help others develop theirs.

The model “more compassion” that you hold within as a part of maintaining the possibility of compassion development need not remain static. Most likely it will have two components, the “*new me*” and the “*ideal me*”. The *new me* model contains that possibility of small steps in developing compassion. These are small steps you take, at whatever place you are in your current compassion development, toward a small improvement, toward a *new me*. The *new me* model remains very close in awareness, often containing habitual behaviors and thought patterns you would like to replace with new more compassionate ones. The *ideal me* model is one you hold out for the future. It is often movement quite some distance down the path of compassion development toward your visualization of a compassion hero. Both models are an important part of maintaining possibility and both are likely to reshape themselves as you progress on your compassion development journey.

People are at various places in their understanding of what is possible in terms of developing compassion. What is important as the first step is that we hold on to that possibility and let it develop as we continue the journey. How do we continue the journey? This is the second important aspect of possibility – we maintain that there is the possibility we will discover how to take that journey. There are many authors speaking about the journey. They are all needed because there are many different ways that people hear. The issue is not one of arguing about the best way for EVERYONE to take the journey, but rather the best way for you to take it. This is an important part of maintaining possibility –

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you hold within yourself an intimate relationship with the hope of discovering your personal path of compassion development. You hold on to the hope that this intimate journey will be revealed to you and help you to deepen your compassion. This is not a point that needs to be argued with because it is your personal possibility, interwoven with your personal needs, desires, weaknesses and strengths. It is also, at times, not easy.

The journey down the path of compassion development is not always clear. When it becomes dark and difficult to see, it is then that it becomes even more important to hold on to possibility. The darker it becomes the more important it is to have your own intimate possibility for guidance and strength. In the middle of darkness, it is extremely difficult to hold on to another's idea of what possibility might be. It is better to hold on to the possibility that is deeply intimate to your own well being. You may need help in experiencing this intimate possibility. Such experience has been part of the history of compassion development and "passing it on" from experienced teachers. Unfortunately our Western culture has lost some of its respect for this tradition, even to the point where some people say, "It is not possible to teach compassion".

As with the model aspect of maintaining possibility, the journey aspect has two components. There is the "**step view**" and the "**horizon view**". As you hold the possibility that your intimate journey for developing compassion will be revealed, you hold out the possibility that you will become aware the next step you need to take – the *step view*. At the same time you also hold the possibility that you can have some sense, even if in the most broad and general way, that your journey is going somewhere. This is the *horizon view*. The *horizon view* has also been known as a calling. It should not be confused with the concepts of goals or plans. As you seek to develop compassion you hold on to the possibility that your next step will be clearly revealed to you (however that might happen) and hold on to the possibility that a hint of your calling, purpose, connection to life, will also be revealed. Both views (step and horizon) are deeply personal and intimately connected to your own well being.

This idea of maintaining possibility is important because we all get lost, lose our connection to compassion. In addition, there are also those who are very distant from compassion, who are very distant from the possibility of compassion development. When the possibility of compassion development is absent then interactions with life must occur using some other possibility. Often this is the possibility of either "What benefit is possible for me?" or "What harm is possible for me?". Compassion development is about replacing these with "What is the compassionate possibility?". This is the first step toward a culture of compassion.

At any point in your development of compassion you can examine how you are holding the possibility of compassion development for yourself. You can examine your compassion models and your conceptions of the developmental journey ahead. Ask yourself how you define your own possibility. What possibility do you hold for your own intimate journey along the path of compassion development?