

Compassion

In other traditions demons are expelled externally. But in my tradition demons are accepted with compassion.

— MACHIK LABDRÖN

*J*ust as nurturing our ability to love is a way of awakening bodhichitta, so also is nurturing our ability to feel compassion. Compassion, however, is more emotionally challenging than loving-kindness because it involves the willingness to feel pain. It definitely requires the training of a warrior.

For arousing compassion, the nineteenth-century yogi Patrul Rinpoche suggested imagining beings in torment—an animal about to be slaughtered, a person awaiting execution. To make it more immediate, he recommended imagining ourselves in their place. Particularly painful is his image of a mother with no arms watching as a raging river sweeps her child away. To contact the suffering of another being fully and directly is as painful as being in that woman's shoes. For most of us, even to consider such a thing is frightening. When we practice generating compassion, we can expect to experience our fear of pain. Compassion practice is

daring. It involves learning to relax and allow ourselves to move gently toward what scares us. The trick to doing this is to stay with emotional distress without tightening into aversion, to let fear soften us rather than harden into resistance.

It can be difficult to even think about beings in torment, let alone to act on their behalf. Recognizing this, we begin with a practice that is fairly easy. We cultivate bravery through making aspirations. We make the wish that all beings, including ourselves and those we dislike, be free of suffering and the root of suffering.

We use the same seven-step aspiration practice to soften our hearts and also to become more honest and forgiving about when and how we shut down. Without justifying or condemning ourselves, we do the courageous work of opening to suffering. This can be the pain that comes when we put up barriers or the pain of opening our heart to our own sorrow or that of another being. We learn as much about doing this from our failures as we do from our successes. In cultivating compassion we draw from the wholeness of our experience—our suffering, our empathy, as well as our cruelty and terror. It has to be this way. Compassion is not a relationship between the healer and the wounded. It's a relationship between equals. Only when we know our own darkness well can we be present with the darkness of others. Compassion becomes real when we recognize our shared humanity.

As in the loving-kindness practice, we start the compassion practice where we are and then expand our capacity. We start by locating our current ability to be genuinely touched by suffering. We make a list of those who evoke a feeling of compassion. It might include our grandchild and our brother and our friend who is afraid of dying, beings we see on the news or read about in a book. The point is simply to contact genuine compassion, wherever we may find it.

To start the formal compassion practice, we begin as before with a period of silent meditation. Then we begin the seven aspirations. Starting with ourselves, we make the traditional aspiration: "May I be free of suffering and the root of suffering." In order for the process to feel genuine, we can put this into our own

words. It's important that the aspiration doesn't feel sentimental or contrived.

Thich Nhat Hanh suggests these alternatives: "May I be safe and free from accidents. May I be free of anger, . . . fear, and worries. May I not fall into a state of indifference or be caught in the extremes of craving and aversion. May I not be the victim of self-deception."

After cultivating compassion for ourselves we move on to someone on our list: "May laboratory animals be free of suffering. May my teenage nephew free himself from heroin addiction. May my grandfather in the nursing home not be so lonely and afraid." The point is not to become overwhelmed but simply to contact genuine compassion.

The third step is visualizing a friend and cultivating the intention that he or she not have to suffer. This can be the formal aspiration that our friend be free of suffering and the roots of suffering, or it can be something more specific: "May Jack stop holding a grudge against his brother. May Maria be free of her unrelenting physical pain." Then we up the ante by moving on to the neutral people and those whom we dislike.

The neutral people of the fourth stage present an interesting challenge. Many of us come to this point of the practice and go numb. We say the aspiration but can't connect with people we don't know. We might be shocked to find how indifferent or even fearful we are toward so many people. Particularly if we live in a city, there are thousands of people whom we ignore every day. For this reason, I find it particularly important to make aspirations for the so-called neutrals. When we look at someone on the street and wish her to be free of suffering, that person begins to come into focus. We can actually feel the barriers come down. By making this compassionate aspiration, we start to free ourselves from the prison of isolation and indifference.

In the fifth stage, when we generate compassion for the difficult people in our lives, we get to see our prejudices and aversions even more clearly. It can feel completely unreasonable to make a compassionate wish for these irritating, belligerent people. To wish that

those we dislike and fear would not suffer can feel like too big a leap. This is a good time to remember that when we harden our heart against anyone, we hurt ourselves. The fear habit, the anger habit, the self-pity habit—all are strengthened and empowered when we continue to buy into them. The most compassionate thing we can do is to interrupt these habits. Instead of always pulling back and putting up walls, we can do something unpredictable and make a compassionate aspiration. We can visualize this difficult person's face and say his name if it helps us. Then we say the words: "May this person who irritates me be free of suffering and the roots of suffering." By doing this, we start to dissolve our fear. We make this gesture of compassion in order to unblock our ability to hear the cries of the world.

The sixth stage is where we make a compassionate aspiration for ourselves, the loved one, the friend, the neutral, and the difficult one all together. This is how we train in lightening up the opinions and prejudices that set us apart from each other. We voice the aspiration that all of us equally be free of suffering and its causes. We then extend our wish further and further, wishing that all beings without exception be free of suffering and the root of suffering—wishing that all beings no longer be captured by their prejudices.

As a result of compassion practice, we will start to have a deeper understanding of the roots of suffering. We wish not only that the outer manifestations of suffering will decrease but also that all of us could stop acting and thinking in ways that escalate ignorance and confusion. We aspire to be free of fixation and closed-mindedness. We wish to dissolve the myth that we are separate.

It is said that all beings are predisposed to waking up and reaching out to others and that this natural inclination can be nurtured. This is what we are doing when we make the aspirations. If we do not cultivate these inclinations, however, they will diminish. Bodhi-chitta is like a yeast that never loses potency. Any time we add the moisture and warmth of compassion, it will automatically expand. If we keep it in the freezer, however, nothing happens.

I find it particularly helpful to take the compassionate aspirations into the marketplace. I like to do these practices right in the midst of this paradoxical, unpredictable world. In this way I work with my intention but I also begin to act. In traditional terms, this is cultivating both the aspiration and the action levels of bodhichitta. Sometimes this is the only way to make this practice feel relevant to the suffering we continually witness.

Standing in the checkout line, I might notice the defiant teenager in front of me and make the aspiration, "May he be free of suffering and its causes." In the elevator with a stranger, I might notice her shoes, her hands, the expression on her face. I contemplate the fact that just like me she doesn't want stress in her life. Just like me she has worries. Through our hopes and fears, our pleasures and pains, we are deeply interconnected. I do this sort of thing in all kinds of situations—at the breakfast table, in the meditation hall, at the dentist's office.

When I practice the aspirations on the spot, I no longer feel so separated from others. When I read in the news that someone I don't know was in a car crash, I try not to just pass on to the next article. I generate compassion for her and her family as if she were my best friend. Even more challenging is to make these aspirations for someone who has been violent toward others.

The aspiration practices of the four qualities are training in not holding back, training in seeing our biases and not feeding them. Gradually we will get the hang of going beyond our fear of feeling pain. This is what it takes to become involved with the sorrows of the world, to extend love and compassion, joy and equanimity to everyone—no exceptions.

A teacher once told me that if I wanted lasting happiness, the only way to get it was to step out of my cocoon. When I asked her how to bring happiness to others, she said, "Same instruction." This is the reason that I work with these aspiration practices: the best way to serve ourselves is to love and care for others. These are powerful tools for dissolving the barriers that perpetuate not just our own unhappiness, but the suffering of all beings.