

Compassion is the second of the Brahma Vihara practices to keep the heart open in the face of the suffering inherent in the human condition. Brahma Viharas are always practiced in conjunction with mindfulness to keep our minds clear. So, clear mind, open heart, can respond to all the vicissitudes of living with wisdom and compassion, two wings of the dharma.

Compassion (Latin roots) means to feel with. I want to quickly run through resonance circuit in the body-brain of each of us to provide the neurological support for compassion. We are hard-wired in our brainstem by evolution to resonate, to pick up unconscious physiological and emotional communication from other living beings. That's for survival. One person in a group goes into alarm and the rest of the group goes on alert, too, just in case. Resonance is the basis of emotional contagion. We walk into a room and pick up the vibe of people already there; here tonight peaceful, but could be joy at a party or sadness at a funeral or anger as a demonstration turns into a riot. We are hard-wired to feel what other people feel, whether we want to or not, doesn't have to go through conscious processing.

Next step – attunement – we intentionally consciously tune in to our own feelings or to another, a higher parts of brain limbic system emotional centers. But also many parts of the higher brain cortex. The anterior cingulate cortex focus attention, mirror neurons see display of emotion of others, evoke similar emotional experience without our own body, insula lets us know what we're feeling in body feeds back up to pre-frontal cortex. The pre-frontal cortex can know and name another's feelings, can manage our feelings in response. Attunement: Connected emotionally and reading the signals don't have to be any words, 93% of emotional communication without words.

Use our words in next step empathy, now pre-frontal cortex - the executive center or wiser self - is fully engaged, making sense of the story what's going on here awareness insight understanding so cognitive component we understand as well as feel.

Besides empathy, making sense of what's happening accurately empathy is always checked out corroborated I see you're feeling this, is that right? Other functions of the pre-frontal cortex include attunement, feeling and managing emotions in our self in response to that attunement, insight or awareness, making sense, you are you and I am I. I can feel what you're feeling and I can make sense of what you're feeling and I know I don't have to be caught in what you're feeling. I can keep my own ground, my own center, very important in empathy and compassion. Includes response flexibility, having choices in how to respond.

Next step is compassion we feel with, we have clarity and insight into what's going on through our innate interconnectedness with other creatures, we care, we are hardwired to care, we are also hard-wired to move, to act from that caring. When Ritchie Davidson at U. Of Wisconsin scans the actual patterns of neural firing the brains of Tibetan monk adept at compassion practice, while they are practicing compassion practices in the scanners, the motor cortex of the monks lights up, even though they are lying absolutely flat and still in the scanner. If you've ever had an MFR you know you can't move at all, these monks are moved to act even though they can't act in that moment.

So, capacities for compassion are innate in our body-brain system and thus in what we experience in our practice as our mind and our heart.

The reason practices of loving kindness, compassion, joy in the welfare of others, and equanimity work is that they are anchored in or taps us into the felt experience of our own true nature, Buddha nature; we can feel or sense or trust or believe in the essential true nature of all other living beings, including people where that true nature is mightily obscured and our hearts can be mightily contracted or disgusted.

So, experience our own true nature or, knowing that the true nature is there in the heart, mind, spirit of the other even if we have to practice really hard to see that, that is what gives these practices of the Brahma Viharas their power, what makes them even possible at all.

There are traditional phrases used in compassion practice taught in vipassana tradition: may your suffering ease; may your suffering cease; may my suffering ease; may my suffering cease.

I got intrigued and looked up ease in dictionary; delighted to find:

#### EASE

Freedom from labor, pain, or physical annoyance	relaxation or comfort
Freedom from concern, anxiety	solicitude
Freedom from difficulty or great effort	facility
Freedom from financial need	plenty
Freedom from stiffness, constraint or formality	unaffectedness
Free from anxiety or care	mitigate, lighten or lessen
To render less difficult	to facilitate
To abate in severity, pressure or tension	become less painful or burdensome

#### CEASE

To stop, to end

In the definitions there's an implicit movement from pain or concern to comfort and relaxation. So when we are sending wishes of compassion to someone or ourselves, we are sending wishes for the movement into ease.

Tonight I actually want to teach a similar compassion practice from the Tibetan tradition called tonglen. You may already be familiar with tonglen from Pema Chodron. Tonglen is not taught in the vipassana tradition per se; it's from the Tibetan tradition that focuses so much on compassion. I learned tonglen at Spirit Rock from a visiting teacher Ken McLeod. The idea of tonglen is simple; and the practice of it is made easier by anchoring first in a sense of true nature, anchoring first in that sense of vast spacious benevolence so that we are not offering care simply at the personal level but allowing all the care and compassion of the universe to flow through us.

So in the practice of tonglen we anchor in our own awareness of the desire of the universe for suffering to ease and to cease. Then we bring to mind someone we know who is experiencing pain or physical annoyance, anxiety or concern, pressure or difficulty. We can do the practice of tonglen for ourselves, too. Hold them in our mind's eye, our heart space. Then breathe in a little bit of their suffering, let that suffering be eased, shifted, purified, held in the vast spaciousness benevolence of loving presence of true nature. (Last week in loving kindness practice we learned we can experience that the heart has no limits, we can develop a heart as wide as the world, just as awareness has no limits and can hold anything, anything at all.)

Then we breathe out the suffering with our intention that it lighten or lessen, that it move toward comfort and ease. And then breathe in a little more suffering into the heart that sincerely wishes for an ease, a shift, and then breathe out again wishes for that shift, that movement into ease. Even may you rest more easily in your suffering is part of this intention of compassion practice. We can do the exact same wishes in the practice of self compassion, may my suffering ease, may my suffering shift, as we draw on knowing that all things are transient, they arise and fall way, may I rest more easily in the arising and falling away of my suffering.

Exercise of Tonglen; [De-brief]

In the Buddhist view, all Brahma Viharas are anchored in wisdom, in the wise view of the interconnectedness of all living beings, all of life. This practice, all practices of compassion, meant to lead eventually to compassionate action. We can't act on everything; there are physical limitations to our actions. But there are no spiritual limitations to the caring behind the actions.

In Buddhist tradition, practices that quicken the heart in the face of suffering; we are moved, and in Tibetan tradition as we are moved in our hearts we are moved to action. Compassionate action. Tibetan Buddhism has tradition of bodhisattvas – beings who embody qualities of Buddha nature and vow to work ceaselessly for the awakening and enlightening of all sentient beings. Avalokiteshvara is seen as the bodhisattva or embodiment of compassion and acts in the world to save sentient beings from suffering. In our modern day, HH the Dalai Lama is seen as the embodiment of Avalokiteshvara or embodiment of compassion and compassionate action in our world.

Here is a collection of quotes about compassionate action that can guide and inspire us about our own wise and caring efforts of compassion:

One cannot live with sighted eyes and feeling heart and not know the miseries which afflict the world.

- Lorraine Hansberry

We are all connected to everyone and everything in the universe. Therefore, everything one does as an individual affects the whole. All thoughts, words, images, prayers, blessings, and deeds are listened to by all that is.

- Serge Kahili King

And because, as sentient beings, we all share the reality and the experience of the reality of true nature or Buddha nature, we can quicken our hearts in the face of suffering and be moved to act in caring compassionate ways.

Do not be daunted by the enormity of the world's grief. Do justly, now. Love mercy, now. Walk humbly, now. You are not obligated to complete the work, but neither are you free to abandon it.

- The Talmud

The difference between what we do and what we are capable of doing would suffice to solve most of the world's problems.

- Mohandis K. Gandhi

Every moment brings a choice; every choice has an impact.

- Julia Butterfly Hill

You don't need to do everything. Do what calls your heart. Effective action comes from love. It is unstoppable, and it is enough.

- Joanna Macy

I long to accomplish great and noble tasks, but it is my chief duty to accomplish humble tasks as though they were great and noble. The world is moved along, not only by the mighty shoves of its heroes, but also by the aggregate of the tiny pushes of each honest worker. - Helen Keller

It is I Who Must Begin

It is I who must begin.  
Once I begin, once I try –  
here and now,  
right where I am,  
not excusing myself  
by saying things  
would be easier elsewhere,  
without grand speeches and  
ostentatious gestures,  
but all the more persistently  
--to live in harmony  
with the "voice of Being," as I  
understand it within myself  
--as soon as I begin that,  
I suddenly discover,  
to my surprise, that  
I am neither the only one,  
nor the first,  
not the most important one

to have set out upon that road.

Whether all is really lost  
or not depends entirely on  
whether or not I am lost.

- Vaclav Havel

## LOVE DOES THAT

All day long a little burro labors,  
sometimes with heavy loads on her back  
and sometimes just with worries  
about things that bother only burros.

And worries, as we know,  
can be more exhausting  
than physical labor.

Once in a while a kind monk  
comes to her stable  
and brings a pear.

But more than that,  
he looks into the burros' eyes  
and touches her ears

and for a few seconds the burro is free  
and even seems to laugh,  
because love does that.

Love frees.

- Meister Eckhart

[Love Poems from God: Twelve Sacred Voices from the East and West  
By Daniel Landinsky]

Exercise: Turn to a neighbor and for a few moments each share a moment of compassion you've experienced, where you were moved to act by resonating and caring about someone's suffering. And reflect on what you notice as you share this moment with your partner. [De-brief.]

Closing meditation: May our sincere practice of compassion and compassionate action help alleviate suffering, our own and that of all living beings.