

SR Sitting Group

Self-Compassion

12/26/12

Opening Meditation

Rick has come down with a cold and asked me late last night to teach the sangha this evening. The focus of the teachings this evening will be compassion and self-compassion. You may wish to use this period of quiet and spacious stillness to focus on the compassion, clarity, and courage we need as we turn into a new year of practice:

May all beings be safe from inner and outer harm.

May all beings be free of suffering, from all causes of suffering, from causing any suffering.

May all suffering ease.

May all suffering cease.

Dharma Talk

Rick has come down with a cold; he e-mailed me very late last night asking me to teach the sangha tonight. I just taught at Spirit Rock last week on the Healing Power of Self-Compassion and will teach about that tonight. I don't record my talks here, but that talk was recorded at Spirit Rock last week and is available on Dharma Seed.

We've just come through celebrations on the pagan, Jewish and Christian calendars. On our secular calendar we're about to turn from one year to another, a time of deep retrospection of events of the last year, how our practice helped us meet those events, how we want to deepen practice to meet the events of the new year with more wisdom, more compassion.

Wisdom and compassion are considered the two wings of the dharma in our tradition. And the recent events in Newtown CN remind us how essential wisdom, compassion and self-compassion are to help us find

the clarity and the courage to know how to respond from our inner wisdom and innate capacities to care and care deeply.

Both wisdom and compassion are necessary. In fact, they are intertwined on the path of awakening. We practice clearing our minds and opening our hearts to bring us to a true release from suffering for ourselves, for those we love and care about, for all beings as we come to love and care about all beings.

To truly free ourselves and others from suffering, we need to be able to look, see clearly, reflect on what is happening in the moment, as it is happening in the moment - we are taught - without judgment and without resistance. Allowing, accepting what is, as it is, so that the wisdom, wise intention, wise action, wise effort can inform how we respond.

Compassion – the deepening practice of keeping our hearts open in the face of suffering, loss and grief, our suffering or other people’s suffering, is what allows us to look – without turning away, without repressing or denying, without moving too quickly to fix or to move on, without missing the moment to deepen our wisdom about how to respond.

In our tradition, compassion is considered one of the four Brahma Viharas, one of the four sublime attitudes or heavenly abodes – the natural steady state of mind and heart when we’re not contracted in fear, anger, hostility, when we’re not overwhelmed by grief or shame.

Like loving kindness practice, another of the Brahma Viharas, we are taught to send ourselves similar wishes for our own well-being as well as for others:

May I be safe from inner and outer harm.

May I be free of suffering, from all causes of suffering, from causing any suffering.

May this suffering ease.

May this suffering cease.

And, as with metta practice, it is honestly sometimes easier to send those wishes to other people than it is to ourselves. We might believe wishing that our own suffering ease or cease is selfish or self indulgent. There are so many people all over the world who are suffering more than we are, right at this moment. How can I focus my attention on myself when other people are dying, or losing loved ones, or who have less resources to cope with dying and loss than I do?

This evening I want to address some of those concerns and encourage you to experience for yourself that when we are able to remain open-minded and open-hearted in the face of our own suffering, that is an essential and primary step in remaining open-hearted and effective in dealing with the suffering of others.

I'm somewhat inspired to focus on self compassion from having read Kristin Neff's book on Self- Compassion. Kristin discovered self-compassion practice 15 years ago in a meditation group in Berkeley oriented toward the teachings of Thich Nhat Hanh. She was already researching the benefits of self-compassion practice at the University of Texas Austin when her 4 year old son Rowan was diagnosed with autism. Hell on wheels. Uncontrollable tantrums many times a day that would last for hours, incontinence, no verbal language, no socializing with other kids or eye contact with his parents. Suffering. And Kristen learned she had to put her own oxygen mask on first if she was going to be able to deal with and comfort and soothe Rowan. To deal with her own pain and doubt about herself as a mother if she was to have compassion and care for Rowan.

Now Kristin is developing an intensive training with Christopher Germer on Mindful Self-Compassion, similar to Mindfulness Based Stress Reduction.

In that training, Kristin offers a 3 part model of self-compassion practice, not necessary in this linear order, but with all three parts.

1. Mindfulness. As we pay attention to our ongoing experience, we pause and recognize: this is a moment of suffering. This sucks. Or “Ouch, this hurts.” Not a judgment, but a realistic appraisal, a wise discernment: this is suffering. When we pause and notice, we give our minds the precious few seconds it needs to notice and name the suffering. I’m upset. I’m furious. I’m scared. I’m lonely. I feel sad. I feel rejected. Noticing not just the experience, but our reactions as the experiencer. Noticing and naming keeps our higher brain on line and functioning, which keeps us mindful of our reactions. We may have a chance to not over-react to this experience of suffering. When we’re not hijacked, we’re present, we’re engaged; we can deal.

I was deep in a worrisome thought one day, not paying attention to where I was walking, when I blithely stepped ankle deep into the wet cement of a freshly laid crosswalk. I was startled, then horrified. Negative reactions started cascading inside me, including, “How careless! How could you have been so asleep at the wheel!” I was just about to fall into an all-too-familiar pattern of berating myself for being so clumsy when another inner voice piped up, “Wait a minute! So I was preoccupied! I’m sick and tired of winding up feeling lousy about myself when I was just unconscious for a moment. For once I’d like to just deal with something and not make it all about my being clumsy.”

I stood there in the cement, noticing all these different reactions cascading. Years of practice by then helped me realize I *did* have a choice about how I was going to handle the situation. I lifted my feet out of my stuck shoes and stepped onto dry ground as construction workers headed over to help me. As I lifted my shoes out of the cement, I tried for a little bit of compassion for myself. “Shit happens! I’m probably not the only person on the planet who made a mistake today because they weren’t paying attention. Sure, I’m a little embarrassed in front of these

guys, but that doesn't mean anything more about me than I just wasn't paying attention."

I walked over to a convenient outdoor faucet on the wall of a nearby apartment building to wash my shoes and feet. As I began to have some hope that I might even save my shoes (I did), I noticed feeling some pride that I was coping well—with the outer event and with my inner reactions to it.

By the time one of the construction workers gave me some paper towels to dry my shoes and feet, my prefrontal cortex got it together and it dawned on me: "Yes, shit happens. Life is happening in this way in this moment. But 'shift' happens, too." I could open to the lesson of the moment: choosing to shift my perspective allowed me to cope resiliently. The experience also taught me, once again, that shifting perspectives and responding resiliently is possible in any moment at all.

2. Another step is the moment of the wisdom of inter-connection – remembering this pain is not just my personal pain. This is one moment of the pain of the human condition. I am not the only person on the planet who has ever felt this pain; other people have felt, and are feeling, exactly as I'm feeling in this moment. This recognition allows us to hold our pain in a larger awareness, a larger compassion. We open out of our contraction to a larger view; we move from "me" to "we". We let ourselves be held in a grace larger than we can even imagine.

Examples of this:

I was present the evening Jack Kornfield and Pema Chodron were interviewed by Michael Krasny about compassion from the Theravadan and Tibetan points of view. 3,000 people were in the auditorium. When audience members were invited to ask questions, a woman stood up and asked how to cope with the suicide of a loved one. A hush fell over the entire auditorium. Jack asked anyone who had also lost a loved one to suicide to please stand up. 300 people stood up. Jack asked the woman

to look around and see how many people, in this one auditorium on this one evening, could understand her pain from their own pain, moving from the me to the we to keep our hearts open in the face of our own suffering.

A dozen folks in the deepening joy groups gathered last Friday for a solstice celebration. That was the day of the killing of 20 children and 6 adults in the Sandy Hook Elementary School in Newton, Connecticut. So, a coming together in community around deepening joy and celebrating deepening friendships had to create a space in our hearts large enough to hold the pain of the parents and families and teachers and community in Connecticut, all parents all families and friends who have lost loved ones, sometimes senselessly, and for all the people who couldn't come to the gathering that evening because they were with a mother-in-law who was dying or a sister who had just had surgery for breast cancer or someone who had to work late or someone else's arthritis pain was so bad she couldn't come. All the people whose names we called out earlier this morning at the close of our meditation. All of us who care for them, who care for anyone.

When one of my cats died a few years ago, I turned to a friend for comfort, apologizing that I was feeling so much grief for a pet when so many other people were in grief over the loss of a human loved one. My friend Paul said, Linda, love is love and loss is loss.

As Kristin quoted British novelist Jerome K. Jerome, *"It is in our faults and failings, not in our virtues, that we touch each other, and find sympathy. It is in our follies that we are one."*

So, we mindfully recognize the suffering that is happening in the moment, we don't avert our mind's eye or turn away. We bring loving attention to the moment. We hold the moment in a compassionate awareness: Ouch, this hurts. We allow that deep knowing to keep our hearts open so that we can feel with – com-*passion* is to feel with –

others who have suffered and let in their feeling with, with us. Then third step:

3. Self-compassion involves pro-active self-care. It evokes a moment of, “Oh, sweetheart! I’m so sorry you’re having to experience this! Aw, I understand; I care, I love you and accept you exactly as you are in this moment.”

Researchers are discovering that the original suffering – upset, startle-fear, loss, anguish, shame or embarrassment - activates the threat system of the lower brain but that compassion activates the attachment and caregiving system of the mid-brain and higher brain. That compassionate caregiving system is also hardwired into our brain; it’s part of our evolutionary birthright. Compassion and self-compassion activates the motor cortex in the higher brain to takes steps, like a good parent, or good re-parenting, to soothe and comfort, to care.

So, we take a moment in the pause to go beyond noticing and naming - this is a moment of suffering - to care, to allow ourselves to care about this suffering. This moment of caring primes the brain, primes ourselves, to take wise compassionate action to address the suffering.

Researchers like Kristen have discovered that people who practice compassion and self-compassion regularly, not just as a formal practice of well-wishing but in the moment, whenever pain arises, experience many important benefits, as we do when we practice other positive and pro-social emotions as well, such as kindness, gratitude, generosity.

We are better able to overcome the negativity bias of the brain and the contractions of negative beliefs, negative stories about ourselves, in the moment and in the long term. People who practice compassion and self-compassion regularly are, in general, more optimistic, better resourced with connections to other people and to their own Buddha nature, feeling less isolated or separate, more connected, belonging, loved, and cared for. People feel many other positive emotions in general, more interest

and curiosity, more joy and delight, even in the midst of hard times and real difficulties.

Researchers have even discovered among adept Tibetan practitioners of compassion, that there is a shift in activity in the brain. Brain scans show more neural activation in the left hemisphere of the brain than in the right when people are practicing compassion in the scanner. This left shift activates what is known as a more approach stance toward experience rather than an avoid stance. With self-compassion, we notice and remain open to experience in the moment. We activate the system of caring which keeps our minds and hearts open to the experience. We are priming ourselves to act in ways that will be wise and effective in caring for others.

We can get this compassionate caring and comfort from other people, and we do. That's a good thing. But we must be able to offer ourselves caring and comfort in the moment when suffering is happening. Because there's not always someone else around. I was preparing this talk last Saturday. My car was in the shop for an oil change and tire rotation. And when the dealer called to say there's also this and also that, more than \$1,000 worth I found myself saying to him on the phone, I'm going to take a moment to breathe and I said to myself, ouch, this hurts, and because in that moment I was by myself in my garden, I put my hand on my heart and breathed and opened to gratitude that they had caught something important that could be fixed before I killed myself or someone on the highway. I could even feel good about myself that I chose to notice and comfort myself before authorizing the repair work.

If so much good can come from self-compassion practice, why don't we do it more often? What would get in the way of doing this practice regularly? And developing, from experience, great faith in its efficacy.

Krsitin suggests even though we are taught in this tradition: Oh you who are nobly born, we may feel that we don't deserve self-compassion, self

care. Others deserve compassion more than we do. We need to be reminded, as my friend Paul reminded me, love is love and loss is loss.

We may not know or remember that we are not only worthy of self-compassion, but that self-compassion is, in fact, a powerful and healing practice. Because the negativity bias in the brain evolved to focus on danger and threat to keep us alive as individual and as a species, we register negative or dangerous events with greater intensity than we do positive or soothing events. We have to swim upstream a bit to prioritize the caring and comforting of self-compassion.

We may not have experienced enough comforting and caring in the conditioning of our growing up. We may have learned “big boys don’t cry” or “I’ll give you something to cry about.” Not only did we not learn self-compassion as a practice, but we may have learned that self-compassion was wrong or bad. We may believe that it is selfish or self-indulgent. That self-compassion is weak or sissy-ness, that we will get self-absorbed; that we will wallow in our misery.

But of course that’s not what happens with self-compassion at all. Self-compassion is not self-absorption; It’s self-awareness, self-acceptance, self-care and self-love. Mindful self-compassion is actually very empowering and mobilizing.

We may be caught up in trying to fill the hole in the heart with accomplishment and achievement that will lead to self-esteem. And of course a sense of competence and mastery is very important to resilient coping. Healthy adaptive self-esteem can work very well; we do have to have an adaptive healthy sense of self before we can let go of self. But we live in a very competitive, very comparative society that can leave us with a sense of less than, the trance of unworthiness that Tara Brach teaches about, an abyss of deficiency as a colleague of mine says. We can get focused on what Pema Chodron calls *shenpa*, getting hooked or getting triggered by worries of comparisons and competition, envy and jealousy, all forms of aversion, hatred, hostility, including self-hatred

and self loathing. Very negative self-absorption. Actually while healthy adaptive self esteem can work very well, maladaptive unhealthy self esteem can lead to narcissism, prejudice, and bullying, not so good.

And selfing, attaining or earning a self of self worth from external accomplishments and validation rather than from the inner experience of our own intrinsic inner goodness, our own innate Buddha nature, is contingent. While it works very well when things are going very well, but it falls apart when things are not going so very well. We can actually wind up feeling more isolated and disconnected when self esteem falls apart.

Self-compassion, of course, is the perfect practice to practice when things are not going very well. To care and comfort because we are vulnerable and imperfect human beings, nobly born, experiencing the suffering inherent in existence actually keeps our heart open, connects us to other people and resources. We can actually cope better. Researchers have found that self-compassion is more powerful to pull people out of anxiety or depression than is self-esteem. Self-compassion can hold our suffering in a large enough perspective that we can find care and comfort no matter what. We can keep our hearts open to everything that needs to be held, soothed and cared about. Self-compassion is never a bypass. It's always an opening, tolerating, accepting, honoring, embracing.

The Buddha taught about coping with the 8 winds of change: that no human being can escape experiencing success *and* failure, praise, *and* blame, pleasure *and* pain, gain *and* loss. In order to come to the equanimity (another Brahma Vihara) that allows us to experience these 8 winds, positive and negative, without reacting to our reactions to them, we need to be mindful and we need to be compassionate.

How to practice self-compassion. Self-compassion is never a passive practice. It's an intentional choice.

We can choose to do the formal practice that I mentioned earlier. To wish for ourselves and others.

May I be safe from inner and outer harm;

May I be free of suffering, from all causes of suffering, from causing any suffering.

May this suffering ease

May this suffering cease.

There's compassionate touch to soothe both the body and the mind and heart. I've taught Hand on the Heart probably every time I've taught this sitting group. Kristin teaches a version of it in the training. James and Tara Brach teach putting your hand on your cheek. We'll do this again here because it's one of the easiest and most reliable tools we have to practice self-compassion.

We come into the steady calm of an inner equilibrium by steadily experiencing moments of feeling safe, loved, cherished, and letting those moments register in our body and encode new circuitry in our brain.

1. Begin by placing your hand on your heart, feeling the warmth of your own touch. Breathe gently and deeply into your heart center. Breathe into your heart center any sense of goodness, safety, trust, acceptance, ease, you can muster. Breathe a sense of calm and peace into your heart center. You may elaborate this as you wish. Breathing in a sense of contentment, well-being, a sense of kindness for yourself, gratitude for others. Slowly gently breathing in qualities of self care and self-love into your heart.

2. Once that's steady, call to mind a moment of being with someone who loves you unconditionally, someone you feel completely safe with. This may, of course, be a moment with a beloved partner or a beloved child or parent, though the dynamics of those relationships can sometimes be complicated and the emotions mixed. So you may choose a moment of being with any True Other to your True Self - a dear friend,

a trusted teacher, a close colleague or neighbor - a moment when you felt seen and accepted, loved and cherished. It may be your therapist, your grandmother, a third grade teacher or a spiritual figure like Jesus or the Dalai Lama; it could be your Wiser Self. It could be a beloved pet. Pets are great for this, actually.

3. As you remember feeling safe and loved with this person or pet, see if you can sense in your body the positive feelings and sensations that come up with that memory. Really savor this feeling of warmth, safety, trust, and love in your body. Take a moment to allow the feeling to become steady in your body.

4. When that feeling is steady, let go of the image and simply bathe in the feeling itself for 30 seconds. Savor the rich nurturing of this feeling; let it really soak in.

Debrief.

The warm touch of your hand on your body begins to calm down your body. Deep breathing begins to calm down your body. Breathing positive emotions into heart center brings an equilibrium to your heart rate. Evoking the memories of feeling safe, loved, cherished, activates the release of oxytocin, the hormone of “calm and connect.” OT antidotes the stress hormone cortisol. This exercise is one of most efficient and effective ways we have to come to awakened well-being.

There’s a self-compassion break, many times a day. Checking in, how am I doing? Is there any suffering here? How can I be mindful and compassionate in this moment? How can I help myself here, feel safe, more at ease, more connected to my own experience and to others? How can I use the experience of this moment to remember my true nature, by innate Buddha Nature?

Let’s take a moment to sit comfortably, close your eyes if you wish, focus your attention inward, come into the present moment, relax into an

awareness of your breathing. Then begin to silently check in with yourself. How am I doing? Is there any suffering here? How can I be mindful and compassionate in this moment? How can I help myself here, feel safe, more at ease, more connected to my own experience and to others? How can I use the experience of this moment to remember my true nature, by innate Buddha Nature?

De-brief

Slipping One's Self into the Stream of Compassion

The 3rd practice is a more formal practice. We'll do this as guided meditation.

1. Bring to mind a moment when it was relatively easy for you to “feel with” someone else’s heartache or sorrow. Your neighbor struggles to carry heavy bags of groceries up the driveway with a recently broken ankle. Your cousin lost his luggage two airports back before he arrived at your house for a weekend visit. Your 8-year old was late for an after school meet-up and the school bus took off for the class picnic without him; he came home and collapsed in tears. Your cat sprained his hip jumping down from too high a kitchen counter, and has limped around the house for three days.

2. Imagine this person, child or pet sitting in front of you. You could even imagine a child or pet actually sitting in your lap. Notice any warmth, concern, goodwill arising in your own heart as you sit with them. Feel the “feeling with,” the empathy, compassion and love flowing from your body, your heart to them, sitting with you.

3. When the feelings of empathy, compassion and love are steady enough, shift gears a bit and remember a moment when you were facing your own difficulty, an “Ouch; this is tough; this hurts.” However big or small, let yourself feel the pain of your own pain for a moment.

4. Then return to the feelings of warmth, concern, goodwill you felt for the person or child or pet you were first “feeling with.” Without changing anything, simply re-direct this flow of empathy, compassion and love for them to yourself. Let yourself receive your own care and concern, your own empathy and compassion for your own pain, for whatever has happened, whatever you’ve done or failed to do, at any age or level of your psyche that needs to receive it. You may express this feeling toward yourself in words, “May this suffering pass...May things resolve for me....May I feel less upset over time.”

5. Let yourself take in feeling understood and nurtured. Let your own heart relax into a more peaceful sense of understanding, compassion, and forgiveness, letting the self-compassion soak in and settle in your body. Let it re-wire your sense of yourself in this very moment.

6. Reflect on your experience of this exercise. Notice any sense of openness or approach to your own experiences now. Notice if this approach stance opens up possibilities for change and resolution of the difficulties that have concerned or hurt you before.

As you cultivate an “approach” stance toward experience, you are creating more response flexibility in your brain, thus creating the conditions for more resilience.

De-brief.

To wrap up. Self compassion is self awareness, self acceptance, self embracing, soothing, comforting, caring. Self love in the largest sense of the word. Keeping our hearts open; compassionate loving itself is the healing. May not solve the problem or change conditions, but does change relationship to self, to problem, to conditions and creates the mindset and energy where change can begin to happen.

Wisdom teaches me I am nothing.

Love teaches me I am everything.

Between the two, my life flows.
- Sri Nisargadatta

Let's sit for a moment.

May our sincere endeavors to keep our hearts open in the face of suffering contribute to the easing of suffering of all beings.