

The Stretch and the Hand on the Heart ©

Ian Challis

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Introduction

Carl Jung wrote, “The most terrifying thing is to accept oneself completely.”

It is said that it’s the work of a lifetime to appreciate, investigate, love and integrate the diverse facets of our being — The shadows and the light — To come home to wholeness.

Can we make room for the difficult parts of our experience, with patience and kind eyes? Can we offer a compassionate response to this one who is so close and so deserving?

What would it be like to live in self-acceptance, or more self-acceptance?

More than ever we are being called, as people who believe in justice, compassion, generosity, peace — To stand up, to speak up, to take Action. The stakes are so high and the choices seem clearer than ever...

And we don’t know where we are going....the “arc of justice is long,” Dr. King said, and his promise is that “it bends toward justice”...but staying with that long arc demands patience and strength. Many of us are feeling “compassion fatigue,” in the face of so much suffering and reaction.

So this is why my talk today is titled the “The Stretch and the Hand on the Heart” to notice this place in between — reaching out, offering compassion, service, resistance whatever is needed for the benefit of many beings, and REMEMBERING, training ourselves to hold one hand on the heart. “I am here for YOU and I am here for ME.” — And really there is no separation.

Main Talk

On the cover of today’s program is an image of the Buddhist archetype of compassion Guanyin:

Guanyin, the mother energy of compassion.

Guanyin, the Bodhisattva of Compassion,

“She who hears the cries of the world.”

This sense of listening is the mindful heart of compassion. Can we hear the cries of the world? Can we listen to them? Pay attention to them? Can we hear our own cries? Guanyin is often depicted like this, with one knee raised, to show that she not only hears but is ready to respond, to stand up, to act.

Once we truly listen to, acknowledge and patiently hold our own suffering....when we meet it as a friend, letting go of blame, guilt, shame, self-hatred, we are ready to offer the same compassion in the world — to manifest the sacred energy of Guanyin.

DEFINING

In Buddhist teachings Compassion is one of the four Brahmaviharas — the highest abodes of the heart: Lovingkindness, Compassion, Sympathetic Joy and Equanimity. It is the same energy expressed in different ways. Lovingkindness — the heart of love, becomes Compassion when it encounters suffering, responds with sympathetic joy when it encounters joy, and rests in equanimity — the ability to hold both the joys and the sorrows.

Compassion has the element of patience in it, and interestingly the English words patience and compassion are related. They both come from the root *pati* meaning suffering or enduring — bearing.

And so we can see in the word “compassion” the sense of enduring with, being with.

Enduring with, being with, the suffering of individuals and the world.

And also our own suffering. Can I have compassion for this one?

Suffering is a word you’ll hear me use a lot today (Buddhists tend to do this). The Buddha said he taught one thing: Suffering and the End of Suffering. How do I lessen my reaction, my resistance to the way things are, and how do I live more in line with the basic facts of existence? This is what the Buddha wanted to know.

Why do we draw a distinction: Compassion and self -compassion? Because we need to. We need to remember, or be taught to be with our suffering in a kind and loving way.

Galway Kinnell writes, “Everything flowers from within of self blessing though sometimes it’s necessary to re-teach a thing, it’s loveliness”

It’s said, “If your compassion doesn’t include yourself. It isn’t complete. This is drawing our attention to something very important.

Our culture is often characterized as being individualistic, concerned with the person more than the group, and sometimes as “selfish”.

Yet, even though in comparison to other cultures we may be more self-concerned, this concern is often fear-based, this self-concern is often harsh and unrelenting, this self-concern is sometimes undermining and not at all patient.

It says, “Get all you can while you can.”

It says, “You should look this way, have this job, have this car, this body.”

“You have to be better than.”

It divides the world into Winners and Losers, a zero-sum game.

The message is, who you **are** is not enough. You must be more, you must win, and if you aren’t winning, exceeding, well then WE have a problem!

This is not self-compassion, this is bullying.

This is what we are seeing writ very large right now — so how do we disengage from self-concern and engage the practices of self-compassion?

SPHERES OF COMPASSION

So for a moment, let’s look at the spheres in which compassion can be expressed or experienced.

There is the **interpersonal**: at the relationship level. This is how most of us learn what compassion feels like and how to give it.

Perhaps we had a loving caregiver in childhood who was able to sooth our wounds and worries with a kind heart and maybe they had the wisdom and experience of age, coupled with the ability to understand how real our problems were for us.

Perhaps we learned to offer sympathy to our friend who skinned her knee or bruised his arm on the playground. Do you remember that awakening of compassion as a child? Maybe in simply recognizing a friend’s pain and sitting with them patiently. Remembering the time it happened to you. By your presence saying, “You aren’t alone. I’m with you.”

Maybe we have been able to give others this same compassion many times in our life... as caregivers... we know this feeling of patiently co-enduring the pain of a loved one...relieving it when we can, or wishing for as much ease as possible when there is no relief in sight.

Then there is the **universal**: in Buddhism this is exemplified by the Bodhisattva vow: (the vow of beings like Guanyin)

Sentient beings are numberless; I vow to save them.

Delusions are inexhaustible; I vow to put an end to them.

The dharmas (wisdom teachings) are boundless; I vow to master them.

The Buddha Way is unsurpassable; I vow to attain it.

The **universal** wish of the heart: Sentient beings are numberless I vow to save them.

This is the emanation of a **boundless heart**...the heart that sees no separation between beings. Only an infinite, boundless heart has the capacity to save infinite beings.

And then there is a very important and sometimes overlooked level here, **INTERNAL compassion**. Giving and receiving compassion, patience, & love from within.

And we can't **bypass** the step of giving to **this one**.

SELF-CARE NOT SELFISHNESS

We get interesting messages in this culture: Being all you can be, “Looking out for number one” is supported; but “self-care” is sometimes seen as weak, or a luxury, or self-indulgent, or maybe not a particularly socially responsible place to put our energy.

Fortunately, we're waking up to self-supporting practices: meditation, movement, lovingkindness practices, group work and beginning to see these as necessary — as a foundation for an engaged life — not as indulgence.

At a workshop I taught this year, one of the participants wondered how to distinguish between Self-care and selfishness. It was a question that immediately

sparked a lot of interest in the room and lots of ideas. Later it occurred to me how central this question is and how important it is to look at for ourselves.

For me, there was something in the question that doesn't work...the word "selfish" contains judgment.

Is it Self-care or Selfish? The question sets up a comparison that is unnecessary. It's more helpful to ask is this supportive, or is it not? Does this lead me to greater personal wholeness?

SELF COMPASSION AND THE BUDDHA

So where does Self-compassion appear in the Buddha's teachings?

The answer is: it really isn't called out specifically.

Compassion certainly is. Wisdom and Compassion are the two wings of the Bird of Awakening.

But the explicit teaching that we need to offer compassion to ourselves as well, seems to not be something that needed to be said in the Buddha's time.

Instead the Buddha said:

Searching all directions
with your awareness,
you find no one dearer
than yourself.

In the same way, others
are thickly dear to themselves.

So you shouldn't hurt others
if you love yourself.

The assumption seems to be that most people love themselves; and in the Christian tradition, it's similar: "Love your neighbor as you love yourself."

But, the Buddha and Jesus are assuming that we **have** self-love, we **practice** self-compassion and therefore we can use this as a model, as a basis or foundation, to offer love and compassion to others.

But many of us in this culture actually DO NOT have self-love and self-compassion, or at least don't have very much of it, so we actually may need to develop it as a practice. "It's sometimes necessary to re-teach a thing its loveliness."

SHARON AND THE DALAI LAMA

Sharon Salzberg, who wrote the book, *A Heart as Wide as the World: Stories on the Path of Lovingkindness*, about lovingkindness and compassion practices, was at a conference in 1990 hosted by the Dalai Lama for Western philosophers, psychologists, scientists, and meditators, and she had this very interesting experience. She writes:

"What do you think about self-hatred?" I asked when it was my turn to bring up an issue for discussion. I was eager to get directly to the suffering I had seen so often in my students, a suffering I was familiar with myself. The room went quiet as all of us awaited the answer of the Dalai Lama, revered leader of Tibetan Buddhism. Looking startled, he turned to his translator and asked pointedly in Tibetan again and again for an explanation. Finally, turning back to me, the Dalai Lama tilted his head, his eyes narrowed in confusion. "Self-hatred?" he repeated in English. "What is that?"

All of the attendees gathered at the conference with the Dalai Lama, "were from Western countries, and self-hatred was something we immediately understood. That this man, whom we all recognized as having a profound psychological and spiritual grasp of the human mind, found the concept of self-hatred incomprehensible made us aware of how many of us found it all but unavoidable. During the remainder of the session, the Dalai Lama repeatedly attempted to explore the contours of self-hatred with us.

At the end he said, "I thought I had a very good acquaintance with the mind, but now I feel quite ignorant. I find this very, very strange."

LOVE YOURSELF FIRST

So in our culture of the individual, of competitiveness, striving, of winners and losers, of always needing to be above average, self-compassion is something relatively rare — this accepting, patient attitude toward our own rough spots, struggles and suffering.

This is something that we need training for in this culture.

The perennial wisdom and so many wise teachers say that we must first love ourselves, before we can truly love others.

I think this means that our love for others reflects the love that we can offer ourselves.

If we have a little love for ourselves we can offer a little love.

If we have a lot of love for ourselves we can offer a lot of love to others.

If we have infinite love for ourselves there is no separation whatsoever and we share this with all beings.

SELF COMPASSION AND SELF ESTEEM

What about self-esteem? Self Compassion is not the same thing as Self Esteem...Dr. Kristin Neff, a Buddhist and Educational Psychologist, wrote an excellent book called Self-Compassion which I highly recommend if you are interested in working with this.

She describes how self esteem is often contingent on personal success, or of believing that we are **more** successful, **above** average, **more** attractive, part of a **better** group — and that at its most harmful this sort of self-esteem leads to narcissism. Feeling better because we put others down.

Looking at the term “self-esteem”, it’s interesting to notice that the word esteem comes from estimation — value or worth. So if we look at it as simply self-valuing, that’s one thing, but if the valuing is tied to comparing ourselves to others — there’s a potential trap here — and we may be better off with developing self-compassion which doesn’t rely **in any way** on comparisons or estimations of worth.

Kristin points out that when we encounter difficulty or failure, when we need support the most, that this is when self-esteem deserts us.

Always being better than, or feeling better than is not sustainable.

UNIVERSAL NATURE OF SUFFERING

Part of the wisdom of self-compassion is understanding that we are not alone with our struggles. Recognizing our common humanity and frailty. In other words, the understanding that all people are imperfect, and all people have imperfect lives: and so do I.

Sometimes, when I fail, I react as if something has gone wrong—that this shouldn't be happening. “I shouldn't have failed, I shouldn't have had this issue come up in my life.” A deluded sense of “this shouldn't be happening,” — as if everyone else in the world were living perfectly happy, unproblematic lives.

This can cause additional suffering, because I may feel isolated and separated from the rest of humanity.

So as we develop more self-compassion, when we fail or stumble or experience pain, it's not “poor me,” it's “well, everyone experiences suffering.” Everyone struggles, we all experience loss, sickness, grief. **This is what it means to be human, to be part of the human family.** Can I at long last forgive the world, forgive myself for being “of this world?”

This view radically alters how we relate to failure and difficulty. When we can say, “Oh, this is normal, all beings suffer, this is the human experience, I am not immune,” this is the hand on the heart that opens the door to grow from the truth of experience rather than taking refuge in delusion.

The Buddha taught, that if we choose, we can think of ourselves as Not Better, Not Worse **or Not Equal** to others...that we can give up these comparisons all together.

Compassion is unlinked from social comparison and it's not contingent, **because you have self-compassion both when you fail and when you succeed**, when things are easy, when things are difficult.

Knowing that we are as worthy of love as anyone else — that there is really no separation — how we treat ourselves **is** how we treat others.

THE SOFT SIDE OF HOW WE DO THIS

So how do we do this? How do I change a culturally conditioned habit of being less than kind to myself? How do I transform my view to one of not better, not worse, not equal...how do I drop comparing mind? How do I give myself the care that I need?

At the core of the Buddha's teaching is accepting reality, living with what is, letting go of cherished but false identities. Waking up is only possible when we see how we're suffering, and by having the love and patience to work with ourselves.

Thich Nhat Hanh speaks of holding our suffering like a baby. Can we let it curl up in our arms? Can we patiently look, listen and allow the suffering in our lives with acceptance?

This is what is called, "Stopping the War".

Jack Kornfield writes,

Genuine spiritual practice requires us to learn how to stop the war. This is a first step, but actually must be practiced over and over until it becomes our way of being. The inner stillness of a person who truly "is peace" brings peace to the whole interconnected web of life, both inner and outer. To stop the war, we need to begin with ourselves.

Mahatma Gandhi understood this when he said:

I have only three enemies. My favorite enemy, the one most easily influenced for the better, is the British Empire. My second enemy, the Indian people, is far more difficult. But my most formidable opponent is a man named Mohandas K. Gandhi. With him I seem to have very little influence.

Like Gandhi, we cannot easily change ourselves for the better through an act of will....

When we struggle to change ourselves, we in fact, only continue the patterns of self-judgement and aggression. We keep the war against ourselves alive....

The purpose of spiritual discipline is to give us a way to stop the war, not through our force of will, but organically, through understanding and gradual training.

MY VOICE OF SELF-DOUBT

We CAN learn to treat ourselves more kindly. Sometimes all it takes is permission and persistence.

I have judged myself a lot, and I have become more accepting of the judger. I even laugh at him sometimes, the reflexive voice of self doubt, comparison and just plain silliness, it's amazing what he comes up with! I'm learning to listen to my self-talk and substitute more wisdom, more love; and yet I still talk to myself in ways that I would never dream of talking to anyone else — anyone able to relate to that?

Last Spring, someone in a training program who I didn't know all that well wrote to me and said he was thinking of people he'd like to room with at an upcoming retreat and he thought of me. There were about 100 people in the cohort, And so my first thought was oh, how nice, he thinks we'd get along and be easy roommates...

...my SECOND thought, **however**, was he probably asked a LOT of other people (maybe 98 other people) who said no before getting to me.

And this kind of self-talk can be reflexive, unconscious and **so pervasive that it's almost invisible**.

But when we wake up to it, we can begin to stop the war and develop some self compassion.

So the Buddha and Jesus said treat others as nicely as you (naturally) would treat yourself, but in our culture we may need to treat ourselves as nicely as we would treat a friend or relative, or even a stranger!

INNER CRITIC

Negative self-talk, the Inner Critic, the inherited voices of some suffering relative or childhood caregiver....

We carry these within us, **mistaking them for our own**, until, with mindfulness, we hear them, know them and start to exercise our choice of whether to continue listening or not.

One of the best ways I think that we can do this is to become our own parent. Can we substitute the voice of judgment with the mature voice of understanding and compassion? Truly wanting what is best for this amazing being right here?

HAND ON THE HEART AND PRACTICE

So, this intention toward growth and wholeness, and willingness to make an effort toward that health, is the Stretch and it's balanced by the Hand on the Heart.

The warrior's inhale and the caregiver's exhale, both energies are necessary.

It's a balancing act, but when we develop both energies we are naturally more stable.

The Stretch — the intention to grow, to move forward, to challenge and inspire ourselves; And the complementary energy of the Hand on the Heart...that says "I am here for you, I know this might not be easy and I will be here for the ups and the downs."

COMPASSION PHRASES

A beautiful way of developing this hand on the heart, bringing self-compassion in your every day life is through the practice [that Kristin gives in her book], of working with self-compassion phrases.

This is a moment of suffering

Suffering is part of life

May I be kind to myself in this moment

May I (or how can I) give myself the compassion I need

The first phrase reflects **awareness** that we are suffering in this moment. "This is a moment of suffering"

The second **accepts** or acknowledges our universal connection: that suffering is part of my life, part of every life. "Suffering is part of life."

The third phrase brings a **sense of care and concern** to our experience: "May I be kind to myself in this moment"

And the fourth phrase is setting **an intention to act** on that care & concern, like Guanyin, ready to rise in support, "May I give myself the compassion I need"

ANOTHER PERSONAL EXPERIENCE

I'm very nearsighted and have astigmatism. I've been warned by ophthalmologists that I have a risk for detached retina, vision loss and so to be aware if I notice a lot of bright or unusual lights in my field of vision.

While I was working on a recent project, I started noticing what seemed like symptoms. At first I thought it was an after image from a bright light outside, but it continued for the better part of an hour, and there were geometric patterns of light that I'd never seen before.

It was kind of scary...and I didn't know what to do... I decided I needed to consult the Kaiser nurse, and so I spent about 40 minutes navigating phone menus, being on hold, waiting to talk to someone...all the while the lights continued.

But I was able to offer myself the phrases in the moment:

This is a moment of suffering and fear,
All living beings experience suffering, I am no different,

And I put my hand on my heart and reminded myself:

May I be kind to myself in this moment”

By this time I already felt quite a bit calmer, more cared for, not alone...

And then asking the question, How can I give myself the compassion I need?

Just this: the noticing, recognizing, committing to self-kindness, all of this allowed me to keep my center and treat myself just as if I were a friend going through a difficult experience. Being present, patient and taking wise action.

Eventually, I spoke to the ophthalmology nurse, she was able to consult with the doctor and he diagnosed it as an ocular migraine that is not harmful or as painful as it sounds.

But the point is the practice worked for me. A difficult situation was made much easier simply because I was able to be with myself, with kindness, with gentleness...I didn't feel alone because I remembered that all human beings, the whole human family suffers, and I knew that I was fully there for myself.

HENRI NOUWEN

To close I'd like to share these words by Henri Nouwen, a Dutch priest and social activist:

When we honestly ask ourselves which person in our lives means the most to us, we often find that it is those who, instead of giving advice, solutions, or cures, have chosen rather to share our pain and touch our wounds with a warm and tender hand. The friend who can be silent with us in a moment of despair or confusion, who can stay with us in an hour of grief and bereavement, who can tolerate not knowing, not curing, not healing and face with us the reality of our powerlessness, that is a friend who cares.

So the invitation is to explore my capacity to be that friend to all beings, especially to myself. Remembering to keep one warm and tender hand (as Henri said) on the heart as I reach out with the other.

Thank you.

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