

# Seven Factors of Compassion (2 of 5) Compassionate Effort

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## **SUMMARY KEYWORDS**

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The topic for this week is the seven factors of compassion and how these seven factors follow in the wake of compassion. When we live in a compassionate way, we find that a form of awareness or mindfulness comes along in the wake of or together with compassion. A quality of investigation also comes along with compassion, and we make distinctions. We distinguish between suffering and the absence of suffering in all the different ways that we experience distress, feel emotionally challenged, or feel things are difficult. Compassion is based on the recognition of suffering, which may be mild or big. This recognition involves a distinction between suffering and the possibility of the absence of suffering.

So along with compassionate care comes a sense of awareness or attention to what is happening because compassion has an object, or a way of living or attending to the world. Part of attending to the nature of compassion is to see a distinction between suffering and the absence of it. This fundamental distinction is what Buddhism is about. Buddhism grows, develops, and flowers out of making this distinction, because with this distinction, it is possible to move towards a greater and greater absence of and freedom from suffering.

So as we do this practice, there is deeper and more sensitive attention to suffering. Some of the coarser suffering might go away, but we develop an acute sensitivity to smaller and deeper kinds of suffering. This is not a mistake. This is a way to do house cleaning, to clean things up, in a sense.

With that distinction, all of Buddhism can be seen as arising out of the impetus to compassion. Compassion is central to the whole enterprise of Buddhism, the whole religion. Sometimes that compassion takes the form of kindness and friendliness, mixed with care. Sometimes in the forefront, it is not compassion, but kindness and friendliness – a sense of care for others and ourselves.

As compassion unfolds, once we see the distinction between suffering and the absence of it, then comes effort and the desire to do something, to make a change. The change in the guided meditation was that of becoming calmly aware. We can suffer unapologetically – just living in and captivated by our suffering, fully inhabiting it. Or we can, in a sense, step away from it and be aware of it calmly. Doing this involves a bit of disidentification with suffering, when “it’s my suffering and I’m suffering.” We can step away and say, “Oh, there’s suffering here.” We can be calmly aware and, in that calm awareness, see suffering more clearly.

One of the things we see is that there is suffering, and there is something that is not suffering so much: the calm awareness. That’s an important distinction. With that distinction, we are able to choose more often that which is not suffering – the calm awareness. This is not getting rid of the suffering – it’s still there. We are not fixing it, or condemning it, or ignoring it. We are meeting it from a place where we’re not identified with it or glued to it. This ability to see clearly and calmly is a powerful aspect of compassion. If the compassion is not calm, it might not really be compassion. It might be distress that we are feeling.

Finding that calm place is important. It is not easy to do, but it’s worthwhile and possible to do. For some of us,

the easiest place might be in the mindfulness itself. With the mindfulness factor of compassion, we see the distinction between suffering and the absence of it more clearly. As we start seeing this distinction and the possibility of being without suffering, then comes the effort factor of compassion – the engagement, the activity of moving towards, coming close to, and giving ourselves over to that place where there is less suffering, in order to do that which decreases the suffering.

If we build on what is already happening, the place of less suffering is not about getting rid of the suffering, but is a heightened capacity for attention. Awareness can blossom and become stronger while the suffering is there. Maybe the suffering doesn't get any better, but mindfulness gets stronger, which creates a very different context. As awareness gets stronger, maybe we can identify with or live in the awareness more than we live in the suffering.

So it's very significant to say that the suffering doesn't have to go away. It is being replaced in a sense. The ecology of the mind-heart is being changed. We are bringing in something that is stronger, larger, and more significant to be next to it, or part of it, or around it: the capacity to be aware, to wake up in the middle of it. We are able to shift the paradigm from needing to get rid of suffering to becoming bigger than the suffering, or

resting in a place that's peaceful in order to look on the suffering. This is a radical thing to do. This is living the investigation factor of compassion. It leads to the natural effort to engage in activity, to keep practicing, and to do something about it.

Yesterday I used the example of a little girl who got hurt on the playground with a scraped knee. There is compassion in the adult who is caring for her. Of course, the adult puts effort into care for the child. They bring a band-aid and water and very carefully clean the wound. The engagement is one of care and love. But it is engagement. It is effort being made, but that effort doesn't feel like work. The compassion is a motivating force for a relaxed, easy, maybe non-self-centered effort. It is an effort that's here to make things better.

Part of the difficulty people have with the concept of effort is that some people make effort that has suffering embedded in it. They're straining, pushing, expecting, anxious, disappointed, or hesitant. They feel hopeless in the effort. Then we come back to compassion:

*"There's the suffering."* Be mindful – suffering is in the effort itself. One reason to make an effort is to discover how the effort is off, then to see that distinction of suffering embedded in the effort, and in seeing it, to engage in the effort to find an effort that is calm and engaged but not agitated – effort that is engaged in

doing what needs to be done, but has no strain in it, and is caring, loving, and present.

The suggestion is that this effort is natural in the wake of compassion; in the wake of caring – feeling a sense of care for something; in the wake of kindness – feeling kindness for something; in the wake of love – feeling love for something. We start to make distinctions (the investigation factor), and from that comes a certain kind of effort.

The big effort would be to go out and save the world – to go out and really try to help someone who is suffering.

That is a beautiful and important thing to do. But as a way of discovering a compassion-informed effort that includes compassion for oneself – compassion for the very effort we make, maybe today we should not be in a hurry to be compassionate for the world, but have compassion towards ourselves. Have compassion for the particular ways in which our mind and heart are operating, the way that we're aware.

Are you aware in a way that's stressful, demanding, or expectant? Or can you be aware in a calm way? Are you making distinctions? Are you seeing the challenges you have, but adding to those challenges by judging yourself and being upset with things? Can you find a way to see that making the simple distinction between

suffering and the absence of it really is a path to freedom? As you engage in this practice with effort, can you have compassion or care for that effort? Can you recognize where there's strain and suffering there? Doing this very personal work sets the stage for bringing a healthy form of compassion into the world for others. We are laying down the foundation here. Thank you.